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## Caribbean and Atlantic Diaspora Dance: Igniting Citizenship

by Yvonne Daniel. 2011. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press. xviii + 296 pp., 14 photographs, 18 charts, notes, bibliography, index. \$75 cloth, \$28 paper.  
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*Caribbean and Atlantic Diaspora Dance: Igniting Citizenship*, Daniel's third book on Afro-Caribbean dance, is a testament to her extensive knowledge, which has been accumulated over a lifetime devoted to ethnographic research on a variety of Afro-diasporic dance forms. This latest book is methodologically very different from Daniel's previous works, which are in-depth analyses based primarily on ethnographic research. Here, Daniel offers the reader a historical overview of the development of Afro-Caribbean dances, informed by ethnographic research, from the sixteenth century to the present. *Caribbean and Atlantic Diaspora Dance* is conceptualized as an introductory book aimed at teachers and beginning practitioners of Caribbean dance, which Daniel hopes will provide a "solid foundation on which African Diaspora dance genres can be examined as representative culture of related peoples" (xv). Daniel focuses precisely on the interrelatedness of selected Afro-Caribbean dance forms, foregrounding their shared Africanity and their ability to build local, national, and transnational Afro-diasporic

communities. Throughout the book, Daniel stresses the courage and resilience of Afro-Caribbean dancers who have endeavored to keep Afro-Caribbean dances alive. She also notes the beauty and sensuality of Afro-Caribbean dance forms, as well as their ability to foster "good physical health and psychological balance" (17).

The book is divided into nine chapters, which take the reader on a whirlwind tour of dances throughout the Caribbean, including areas Daniel refers to as "circum-Caribbean" or "related territories." (Brazil, as well as Uruguay and the United States are some of the countries included as related territories.) Her inclusion of places that are not usually considered part of the Caribbean draws attention to the commonalities among the experiences of Afro-descendants throughout the Americas. What I found puzzling about this extended view of the Caribbean, however, is the absence of Colombia, Venezuela, and Panama—countries that share Afro-diasporic dances and festivals very similar to those discussed by Daniel.

In her first chapter, "Diaspora Dance: Courageous Performers," Daniel pays homage to artists who are "recognized promoters of African dance heritage" (8). She expresses her admiration for choreographers and dance company directors from Haiti, Martinique and Guadeloupe, Cuba, Puerto Rico, Dominican Republic, Jamaica, Trinidad and Tobago, Curaçao, and the Virgin Islands. As promoters of Brazilian dance, Daniel acknowledges several U.S.-based choreographers, who are "uniquely responsible for promoting Brazilian forms; they use Afro-Brazilian and modern concert dance techniques on the concert, community, and educational stages to make Brazilian dance spectacle" (9). This statement exemplifies one of the book's grave omissions: a lack of critical analysis of the processes that transform Afro-diasporic dances into "spectacle"—racialized displays of difference and national identity, which are often tied to the promotion of tourism. The "courageous performers" Daniel lists seem to be, in the majority, professional transnational choreographers and directors involved in staging "folkloric" dances. In the case of Brazil, the selected representatives of Afro-Brazilian culture are in the majority U.S.-based choreographers and capoeira mestres

whose careers are intimately tied to “making Brazilian dance spectacle” on international stages, a choice that excludes other “courageous performers” living in Brazil whose work has remained peripheral to the international folkloric circuit.

Promoting “national dances” abroad (Afro-diasporic or otherwise) is not, in and of itself, a “courageous” or unproblematic endeavor, nor does it automatically ensure the “preservation” of these dances—an assumption that Daniel carries throughout the book. On the contrary, the process of staging “vernacular” dance is often accompanied by substantial choreographic intervention—curtailed improvisation, amplification, abbreviation, and often the addition of dance vocabulary from “high art” forms such as ballet—which in turn influences the performance of these dances offstage. While staged folkloric performances may be valuable for providing employment, respectability, and visibility to circum-Caribbean performers, they result in transformation rather than preservation.

Daniel’s analysis is couched in a model of loss and retention, a model widely disseminated through the work of anthropologist Melville J. Herskovits in the mid-twentieth century. Although Herskovits’s work was significant for shifting the focus of the discourse on race away from biological determinism, his model of “acculturation” based on loss and retention conceives of culture as measurable, as product rather than process. Herskovits charts the Africanity of “New World Negroes” along a continuum—his “scale of intensity” of Africanisms—which he used to quantify African cultural elements found in the Americas, from “very African” traits to “traces of African customs” (Herskovits 1966:49).

In Chapter 3, Daniel places Caribbean *contredanse*-related dances along a continuum, with “colonial dances that emphasize upright, and restrained body orientation, as in St. Lucian and St. Thomian *quadrilles* on one side, and a divided torso and abundant body part isolation as in Martinican *bele linó* on the other side” (67–8). Despite her insistence on establishing degrees of Africanity in Caribbean dance, Daniel nonetheless makes an important intervention in the now-canonic defining characteristics of Afro-diasporic dance (many of them derived from the often esoteric

categories proposed by Robert Farris Thompson in *African Art in Motion*, such as “ancestorism”<sup>1</sup> [Thompson 1974:28–9]). Drawing from these analytic categories proposed by Thompson, Kariamuwelsh-Asante, and Brenda Dixon-Gottschild, Daniel lays out her approach to movement analysis: Afro-diasporic movement consists of “soft or flexed knees, a gentle, forward-tilted back, polyrhythmic body-part articulation, and a cool or controlled approach within an extensive range of dynamics” (14–5). According to these categories, *quadrilles* would not be considered Afro-diasporic. However, she suggests that other elements must be taken into account: “First, African-descended bodies perform *quadrilles*. Percussion often dominates the musical ensemble ... even though violins, flutes, and accordions carry the song line” (69). In addition, she recognizes that polyrhythms and the interplay of music and movement expose the Africanity of these dances, which may at first appear to be entirely “non-African.” Ultimately, however, she concludes that the Africanity of *quadrilles* is restricted to its music, while its “dance movements ... are not characteristically African-derived” (69). Defining what is “African” and what is not may be useful in acknowledging previously invisibilized Afro-diasporic influences in hegemonic dance forms such as ballet (see Gottschild 1996). This same approach, however, applied to dances practiced primarily by Afro-descendants in the Caribbean may be less useful, and may, in fact, prevent us as scholars from moving beyond continuums, charts, and typologies, and towards more productive inquiries into the specificities of circum-Atlantic cultural exchange.

Although Daniel’s book begins with an acknowledgment of the “courageous performers” who preserve circum-Caribbean dances through staged performance, the remainder of the book occludes the work of these choreographers, directors, and dancers. Daniel’s dance descriptions are often brief, didactic, and focus primarily on footwork—such as “RLR hold, alternate” (94). Although some of these descriptions are linked to specific video-recorded performances cited in the notes, the main text often refers to dances without dancers: “general” descriptions that obscure both Daniel’s position as a participant-observer and the

circumstances in which these dances were staged, reconstructed, or performed. Furthermore, most dances are described as if there were absolute agreement among practitioners about the dance's form, smoothing over regional or generational variations. Among so many generalities, Daniel's writing comes to life when she discusses Cuban dances; these are the most detailed sections of each chapter and clearly her area of expertise. These sections offer a specificity (for example, the differences between *rumba* and *rhumba*) that is missing from the rest of the book.

There is no question that Daniel possesses vast knowledge of Afro-Caribbean dances, and that this knowledge goes far beyond the book's encyclopedic descriptions and charts, but the book's very organization seems mismatched with Daniel's deep personal investment in Afro-Caribbean dances. It is clear that she holds Afro-Caribbean dances in the highest regard. Her often hyperbolic praise of these dances, however, reinforces stereotypes of Afro-Caribbean dances (and dancers) as inherently "sensual," "sensuous," or "suggestive"; these adjectives are used amply throughout the book. Without problematizing the links between "sensuality" and racially marked bodies, Daniel concludes that "[o]vert sensuality and uninhibited proximity of dancing bodies proved to be core elements of the African contribution to *mulata*, Creole, or New World performance" (99). Her analysis of "black" and "white" dance trends in Brazilian *carnaval* also reflects essentialist notions of how different "races" tend to move: "[w]hite' Brazilians preferred dancing to the *trio* [sic] *elétricos* because no torso isolations were required" (127). The sections about Brazil, in fact, reflect a lack of rigor and depth in the author's research on Afro-Brazilian dances. The book contains several instances of misspelled personal names and terms [e.g., Jojo Grande (9) for João Grande; *samba do pé* (123) should read *samba no pé*, a small but significant difference]. In Chapter 2, "Diaspora Dance in the History of Dance Studies," the section devoted to Brazil lists almost exclusively books by U.S. authors, leaving the reader wondering why there is no mention of recent scholarship by Brazilian authors, such as Matthias Röhrig Assunção's excellent volume on *capoeira* (Assunção 2005) or Patricia de Santana

Pinho's insightful research on *blocos-afro* in Bahia (Pinho 2010).

An introductory book covering such a vast region over five centuries is bound to leave many questions unanswered. Specific case studies and examples, rather than lists and charts, might have better served the beginning student of Afro-Caribbean dance, to whom the book is directed. Although *Caribbean and Atlantic Diaspora Dance* covers a dizzying array of dances, some basic questions remain: How do Afro-Caribbean dances choreograph "racial" difference? How do they reproduce or challenge heteronormative values? What are the relationships between government agencies and national "folkloric" dance companies? How are dances selected to be included in standard repertoires representing Caribbean nation-states? Are performers selected according to certain physical features, such as skin color? How do Afro-Caribbean dance performances stage "the nation"?

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## Note

1. Thompson's ninth formal feature of African dance, "ancestorism: ability to incarnate destiny," refers to the ability of African ancestors to return through dancing: "We realize that Africans, moving in their ancient dances, in full command of historical destiny, are those noble personages, briefly returned." According to Thompson, these constantly "returning" ancestors are responsible for "preserving" traits in African performance that "have been in existence for at least four hundred years" (Thompson 1974, 28–9).

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