

“Look At My Arms!” – Editor’s Note

It has been my honor to work with the scholars, artists, and artist-scholars for this special-topics issue of *Dance Research Journal*. A number of intellectual, creative, and personal conversations inspired me to propose this intervention at the intersection of dance, race, and gender. It is a continuation of my larger intellectual mission to help us better understand the importance of work by Black women in the arts and in the world through the arts. We must attend to all of the nuanced particulars of these and other negotiations. This curation builds on my participation in conference panels, seminar room discussions, artistic collaborations, and scholarly working groups, where participants dive deeply into this intellectual history. This process is necessarily embodied knowledge—written on, with, and through the body.

One of the more prosaic conversations that inspired this inquiry for me took place at the beginning the last election season when a friend (a white man) told me that he was voting for Kamala Harris for president. Politics aside (if we can put politics aside), I asked him why, and he said because we just need a Black woman to fix this mess and Oprah isn’t running. I think there is more to this moment than a flip anecdote. I think we (meaning society) *need* something from Black women in the abstract. Perhaps we need “Black women” to be different things at different times to fulfill different social psychic goals. And because I live the colored contradiction of daily life as a cisgender Black woman in the US, I can simultaneously agree and take offense with my friend’s statement. I can be both inspired by and reject the burden of the “strong Black woman” image. I can deconstruct the assumptive myths of race, class, and gender identities that are simultaneously real and constructed, empowering and limited, while championing the importance of work that is decidedly Black, female, and queer. They are and they ain’t. I can be an afro-pessimist *and* an afro-futurist articulating both de facto social death and unapologetic Wakanda-fueled power and agency. The pieces in this issue work singularly and in concert to further scholarship about artistry at these junctures and to serve as epistemological models for knowledge production in the twenty-first century.

In 1851, 170 years ago, Sojourner Truth gave the speech at the Women’s Rights Convention in Akron, Ohio. Although we’ll likely never know if she actually uttered the phrase “Ain’t I a woman,” the phrase has gone down in history as a crucial question in the debate for the inclusion of Black women in the suffrage movement and in the realm of the human. *If* she did speak those words, we should trouble the assumption that it was a question. If it was a question, then it was a leading question. But perhaps it was a declaration or an exclamation. We also don’t know if she said, “Look at my arms” or “I have as much muscle as any man” or some other such phrase. Regardless of the exact language, all accounts confirm that she used *strength*, by calling attention to her arms, as one of the arguments for Black women’s rights. We can imagine the accompanying gestures. I imagine she commanded the room through her embodied presence, striking a power stance that was not contrapposto (*pace* Joseph Roach) but head-on frontal, with arms bent at the elbow and muscles flexed to draw attention to her (our) capacity.

We *want* power from Black women—think Michelle Obama’s arms workout and Gloria Richardson’s annoyed brush-aside of a national guardsman’s bayoneted rifle. Like my friend, we

look to Black women to save our souls and fix our broken world, which is both absurd and probably a good bet. *Why?* Because Black women have been at the forefront of era-shifting social change. Because Black women have been the targets of manufactured labels meant to control and destroy them both psychologically and politically and are still here leading the way. Because in the midst of impossible global landscapes, Black women have challenged dominant intellectual history and ideology, sometimes by speaking loudly from the mouth of the dragon and sometimes by putting their bodies on the line.

The orchestration of social change is a choreography that often relies on negotiations in terms of race, class, and gender. But what happens when we depend on Black women to move movements? What do we demand from the strong, Black, female body? What “power” is tapped, deployed, erased, ignored and/or exhausted? How are conversations navigated, pushed, short-handed and/or silenced? What happens to vulnerability, tenderness, and mental health? What sustains? What depletes?

And what role does dance/choreography play in effecting change at these junctures? Dance has always been more than choreography. Movement has always moved minds as well as bodies. Black women in dance traverse myriad aesthetics, skills, emotions, politics, epistemologies, and identities to produce vast and complex performance histories.

Because of all of this, this special issue takes up some of the most important conversations about the work of Black women in and through dance. It aims to push theoretical debates in critical race studies, critical gender studies, and critical dance studies. Recognizing different international definitions of “Black,” broadened contemporary understandings about gender identity, a wide range of dance aesthetics on and off stage, and debates around the efficacy of social change movements, this special issue interrogates the international history of and continued look to “Blackness” and “femaleness” within processes of change through the performing arts, social justice, equity, inclusion, etc.

Although the conversations that inspired me to propose this special-topics issue happened before the murder of George Floyd at the hands of a white policeman and the resultant surge in demands for social justice by the Black Lives Matter movement and others, this volume must be read as part of this historic moment for our field. Valuing Black women and Black feminisms in Dance Studies should *not* be a “special topic.” I offer this issue as an invitation to concentrate *some* discussions about the nexus of dance, race, performance, gender, class, politics, ontology, and value. At the same time, I reject and regret any institutional self-congratulatory moment this issue might portend. I hope it is taken as a small contribution to the larger project of dismantling the structures of white supremacy in our fields, most recently named as de-colonizing.

With this issue, the authors and I are calling attention to the aesthetics of protests, the embodiment of struggle, the dancing of dissent, the rhythms of resistance, the movement of the movement. This issue is also a willing of the world to make manifest respect for a wider range of academic methodologies and formats. As you’ll read, Maya Berry’s teacher tells her, “This is not dancing for dancing’s sake!” As part of the call to decolonize our field in form and content, these authors set the bar high for a range of scholarly methodologies for sophisticated analyses at the intersection of dance studies, critical Black studies, critical gender studies and queer theory.

We begin with a multiplicity of voices. The participants in the Afro-Feminist Performance Routes dialogues take on important intellectual and creative topics through a range of contemporary embodied perspectives and critical corporeality. From specific communities of discursive Africanist dance practices and a spectrum of identities, these artist-scholars discuss gender, femininity, womanhood, femme, and feminisms to deepen our understanding of the “contours of diaspora” to foster individual and collective growth. Through the drums, circle, rhythms, and movements of the African Diaspora, they theorize the ways in which their aesthetics are rooted

in the erotic, the dangerous, the divine, the warrior, the struggle, the uprooted, the precarity, the cool, and other realities and contradictions of daily life for people of African descent. They recognize the archival absence of our stories and our ancestors' stories as intentional and inextricably linked to the long colonial project and work to lift up these histories and legacies with their bodies in spaces of movement exchange. These are artists theorizing themselves as scholars without waiting for other scholars to recognize the value of their work. They highlight the many ways AfroFems are at the forefront of antiracist, anti-patriarchal, anti-colonial, and anti-capitalist practices.

Maya Berry further demonstrates the rigor of embodied scholarship through her participant-observer methodology, studying the Afro-Cuban *rumba guaguancó*. Arguably, this approach (as a student in this art of structured improvisation) best allows her to draw conclusions about gender roles, black working-class ontology, and new ways of reading the significance of rumba and *rumbieras* in contemporary Cuban society. Berry provides an important example of the work of dance practices that connect people with their African ancestry particularly through belonging to a sense of place, class, and national/international cultural politics. She relocates virtuosity in the hyper/invisible Black female moving body by detailing meaning as defined by the Black women dancers rooted in the particulars of their lived experiences. Berry claims a Black feminist choreographic aptitude in these traditional dance repertoires that values not only technical mastery, but also the generation of pleasure and spirituality within the increasing racialized class inequities of contemporary neoliberal Cuba. This important work locates Black feminist discourse in a practice often read as a reinscription of heteropatriarchal values. Without over-romanticizing the liberatory potentials of the dance as rehearsal for everyday life, Berry convincingly argues that this pleasure becomes an invaluable intergenerational tool for resisting race and gender oppression and affirming self-worth, despite surface readings of stereotypical gender roles. This essay models an approach to seriously analyze Black popular dance qua pedagogy and contributes significantly to our knowledge about the socio-political negotiations of power.

We then move to the concert stage. In "Myself, Dancing: Choreographies of Black Womanhood in US Dance and History," Ariel Nereson analyzes Bill T. Jones's acclaimed works on the subject of Abraham Lincoln not by focusing on the sixteenth president but rather on Jones's choreography of Black women to make claims about the essential role Black women play in the making of the Lincoln legend and (more importantly) the identity of the United States as a nation. Through detailed movement analyses of three duets (with emphasis on Shayla-Vie Jenkins's performance) in the aesthetic genre of postmodern sentimental affect, Nereson also takes up the topic of liberatory potential for Black women through choreography by examining the erotic at the site of national identity and historiography. Nereson privileges the experience of the Black female dancer as she draws conclusions rooted in Jenkins's personal articulation of the importance of dance qua history/historiography and dance qua theory. Recognizing the disavowal of movement as a historical methodology as a colonial tool of oppression, Nereson structures a compelling way of reading these dances and choreographic mechanisms like doubling, duets, and casting in support of the intellectual and creative interventions she claims for them.

Layla Zami's first gesture is to remind us of the ways in which we look to Black women (for better or worse) to understand what it means to survive, be alive and thrive despite adversity. By offering a case study of Nigerian-German interdisciplinary artist Oxana Chi, Zami adds to the conversations on liberatory possibility by positing a theorization of spacetime and circular epistemology for women of African descent. As with earlier essays, liberation is not treated as a romantic or pat concept but as a locus of complicated meaning-making. This essay offers yet another format for the dissemination of knowledge that is part and parcel of the implicit critique of this issue's subject. Along with the approaches of group dialogue, participant observer, and historiography, Zami is an artist-scholar conducting research as a matrix of performance analysis, critical theorizing, historicizing, auto-ethnography and creative endeavor. The resulting text is "choreographed" in a format determined by the subject. Oxana Chi's artistry is in conversation with Ghanaian-German feminist

writer and artist-activist May Ayim, and Zami's writing furthers this work by centering Black women's voices as intellectual artists and by underscoring how academic writing *is* creative writing. Rather than belaboring talk about de-colonizing definitions of academic excellence, Zami (like others in this issue) demonstrate the vast disservice to knowledge when Africanist, multi-cultural, and queer epistemologies are devalued. As in other conversations, activism and social justice are centered in the examination of this Black female choreography. Like Jones, Chi is uninterested in rehearsing conventional historical narratives. Instead, she uses choreography to access the past in new ways and perform recuperative analytical histories of female figures. Zami's intervention troubles our conception of performative memory and the stakes of race and gender.

When I witnessed Ni'Ja Whitson deliver the next contribution at the 2020 CADD (Collegium for African Diaspora Dance) conference, I took their charge to heart. Centrally placed, this piece takes on the fluidity of Black Diasporic traditions and the possibilities Blackness affords as productive flow to position Queer, Transgender, and Nonbinary as correctives to the charge of this issue. It is a pause to fathom what we cannot fathom (but must never dismiss)—the lethal physical and psychic pain our business has wrought on some of us. Fuck. Fuck. Fuck. (You'll understand when you read the piece.) Identities are not intellectual subject matters. They are us, cosmically and prosaically. This unedited piece qualifies the scope of the issue as we continue to understand darkness as "sacred magic" while we work to undo the myths of gender and race. This is yet another intellectual format working to dismantle colonized systems of the "peer-reviewed scholarly journal." It is part of the "new seeing" Whitson argues is demanded from Blackness. I hope it prompts other such interventions within and beyond my term as editor of *DRJ*. Whitson's powerfully cadenced words touch memory, repair, and healing and demand we change our teaching, thinking, and responsibilities. In particular, Whitson names the Black Trans women most vulnerable to anti-Trans violence as part of the stakes of our work. Ultimately, this contribution is a powerful mandate to uphold the superfluidity of dance specifically and identity writ large. Black Trans and Nonbinary, Black Queer dancers of the African Diaspora offer us a way to remake not only the room, but also the field and the academy. Fuck.

In the next piece, Charmian Wells analyzes the cultural work of subversive satire towards social activism in two works by Joan Miller. Again, a sharp aesthetic critique of social values by attending to queer desire and Black feminist choreographic strategies is shown to provide important humanist insight and affirm ontological multiplicity. Rooted in an embodied knowledge of the aesthetics, Wells analyzes the ways in which Miller's personal experiences influenced her distinct practice of signifyin' through queer desire and diasporic sensibilities. To counter the physical and psychological conditioning that develops, instills, and reinforces heteronormative assumptive logics for children of the African diaspora, Wells argues that Miller employed what she terms *diaspora citation* to aver a Black feminist ontology free from hegemonic disciplining. This analysis of embodied and over-embodied modes of signifyin' help us more fully understand the uses and abuses of the abstract category "human." Satire in the different sections of *Pass Fe White* prove to be a potent interrogation of some of the most important aspects of post-colonial Jamaican identity in US skin color-based racial politics (passing, colorism, property, nationally-sanctioned violence, etc.). Mixed media echoes psychic instability in a post-modern aesthetic that is form *and* function, abstract *and* specific. Wells details how, through her choreography, Miller delivers a powerful critique of the forces of unmarked normativity and the resultant violence of unchecked social desire. Ultimately, this is a persuasive argument for an unbound diasporic belonging where even "errors are correct."

Next, we represent another keynote address from the 2020 CADD conference. Artist-scholar Luciane Ramos Silva claims space for the importance of the Black scholars, activists and artists in Brazil who work to belie the fictions of national racial harmony and model alternative modes of being and belonging. As co-editor of *O Menelik 2º Ato*, Ramos Silva works to document and value the work of these contemporary artists. Reproduction of this intervention in these pages

further her mission to build recognition of this work. I hope readers of this issue learn more about these artists and bring their work into our classrooms for even deeper analysis. Assign them to your students. Build them into your lectures. Write about them when you are looking for examples of theoretical concepts. To that end, we've included links to artist websites for further consideration. This work amplifies artistic voices that deserve more recognition so we may better comprehend Black identity in the Americas, anti-Black violence and the struggle for social justice and equity. Ramos Silva highlights a few of the more than 100 artists the magazine has profiled represented a diverse range of genres and traditions. Together these artists and scholars challenge the hegemonic moves to push Blackness into subalternity, perpetuate inequity, and normalize violence. They theorize on history, memory, identity, space, time, gesture, the sacred, family, ancestral relationships, archetype, stereotype, diaspora, coloniality, power, social change, gender, race, culture, language, representation, health justice, love, healing, pleasure, and a host of other critical concepts.

In "Choreographing Social Change: Reflections on *Dancing in Blackness*," Halifu Osumare returns to her auto-ethnographic reflection on life as an artist, activist, administrator, producer, and scholar. Her unique experience (propelled by her "Black woman confidence") lends crucial insight into the mechanisms for the willing of a Black feminist world. As someone who simply did not accept the terms of her oppression, Osumare models an "arms akimbo" path for success. By connecting Black social dance styles through time and deepening our definitions of modern and post-modern dance, she makes a compelling argument for the centrality of dance as a tool of self-affirming survival for people of African descent and revisionist historicizing for the validation of Black existence. She details the development of her feminist awareness, her inspiration by other Black female choreographers, and her international training and performance experiences to eloquently explain the spiritual and physical affective impact for people of African descent made possible through dance. Her insider's perspective on the role of the arts and humanities in social justice movements sheds new light on the foundational work of twentieth century activism. These artists and scholars of Black dance studies worked to undo racism that clouded (and continues to cloud) aesthetic judgment and helped establish criteria for virtuosity on Black terms. Beyond the particular investigations in this essay, Osumare's project on the whole further proves the importance of valuing a wide range of methodological approaches that, when done well, provide valuable scholarly contributions to the field. It is important that we make ways for artists and artist-scholars to write about themselves, especially those from underrepresented identities. Her recognition of the importance of reciprocity in these artistic, humanist, and social pursuits reminds us of the high stakes of our work. We are because we are (to turn the ubuntu maxim). Like many other pieces in this issue, Osumare's writing is part and parcel of the social change she advances.

The next essay brings us back to dialogue. Inspired by Shamell Bell's leadership in Street Dance Activism Global Dance Meditation for Black Liberation, a community led by "Black, Indigenous, people of color and queer guides from multiple wisdoms, traditions, and healing practices," grace shinhae jun and MiRi Park host an exchange between Dianne McIntyre and Marlies Yearby. Undeterred by the global pandemic and facilitated by our new ease with virtual gatherings, these women come together to disseminate dance history that doesn't make it into our texts or classrooms enough. This work is rooted in ancestral and spiritual energy, manifesting Black love and joy with neither pretext nor qualification. Also practicing what they preach, their recollection of ways to build artistic lives for Black women make ways to build artistic lives for Black women. They write themselves. The reproduction of this unscripted meeting of artistic minds demonstrates the reclamation of our embodied practices at the site of race, gender and activism. Like Whitson, opening and closing with invitations to breathe, it is archive *and* repertoire. The fostering of community through dance is not to be taken lightly as this conversation shows. It is a precious glimpse into a healing sister-circle of the affirmation, love and support that drives the art of Black women. (Spoiler alert: Nia Love and Sadie Yarrington make cameo appearances!). I trust that even through reading this exchange (with laughs included) the historical legacy of this mission permeates.

The issue closes with Raquel Monroe's treatise on Beyoncé, HBCU dance lines, Black femme queer power, and the choreography of Black female protest towards Black liberation. She centralizes Black female and femme bodies in concerted physical articulations that propel social justice movements and counter oppression. Monroe keenly investigates the nexus of spectacle, queer labor, US football culture, Black "femme-ininity," and direct protest action. It is not a coincidence that Monroe (like Whitson, Ayim through *Zami*, and the participants in the Afro-Feminist Performance Routes dialogues) evokes Yoruba cosmology, the goddess Yemanjá and African spirituality in a discussion of Black female empowerment. Without inflating efficacy and with careful attention to the limits of spectacle to ignite change, Monroe provides a mode of analysis where theory meets practice towards understanding liberatory affective joy and pleasure. The result is a rigorous analysis of several moments of Black protest from her unique phenomenological lens offering potent examples of resilience and resistance. She closes by drawing connections with the more recent examples of anti-Black violence, including the murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor and Ahmaud Arbery which galvanized the world into what one hopes is lasting awareness and change. She also cautions against allowing hegemonic processes that co-opt Black liberatory energy to take hold.

Similarly, I ask the reader of this issue to keep your fingers on your pulse in order to gauge what we *need* from these articles. This issue is larger than the typical *DRJ* volume and is still insufficient in broaching the complexities of this scholarly and artistic conversation. It includes intellectual formats not typically found in *DRJ*. My aim is to task our field with following through on pledges to "do better" at decolonizing dance studies by not only attending to the level of sophisticated analysis needed in marginalized areas but also by recognizing a wider range of intellectual historiography and discursive embodied epistemology in the production of knowledge. I hope the reader agrees with me that these contributions provide invaluable insight across a range of subject matters and point the way to a more extensive scope of conversations for the future of dance studies.

Returning to why Black women (with all the complexities and limitations of identity politics), I evoke Anna Julia Cooper who stated: "Only the black woman can say 'when and where I enter, in the quiet, undisputed dignity of my womanhood, without violence and without suing or special patronage, then and there the whole Negro [human] race enters with me.'" Finally, I draw your attention to the illustrations in this issue and on the cover. What do these images provide? What do they afford? How do they give us what we need? And what can we "un-need" from people? What happens when Black women dance? Hint... Look at their arms.

Moving forward, looking back...

Dr. Nadine