

# **CONFIGURATIONS IN MOTION: Performance Curation and Communities of Color**

Hosted by  
**SLIPPAGE: Performance|Culture|Technology**  
at Duke University  
June 27-28, 2015

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CONFIGURATIONS IN MOTION:  
Performance Curation and Communities of Color

HOW DO WE IMAGINE twenty-first century configurations of performance curation and presenting that acknowledge the particular concerns of audiences and artists of color?

How does performance that relates to people of color fit into trends of contemporary curatorial practice?

As international symposiums, educational programs and publications increasingly turn their focus to issues of curating performance, SLIPPAGE: PERFORMANCE, CULTURE AND TECHNOLOGY at Duke University hosted a two-day event June 27-28, 2015, to address how curatorial practice and live arts presenting engages with and can further relate to the particular concerns of audiences and artists of color.



Configurations in Motion Position Paper Presentation  
Photo: Dasha A. Chapman

**Configurations in Motion: Performance Curation and Communities of Color** gathered performers, curators, scholars, presenters, funders and managers from throughout the United States to examine and discuss how their work involves, invests, and can further support the creative growth of people of color, with special attention to communities of African, Caribbean, and Latin@ interests.

With little agenda beyond mobilizing our shared interests and achievements, the weekend “imagining session” offered participants opportunities to share work and insights to produce a focused thinking about the growing future of performance curation in the United States, a field which is becoming increasingly institutionalized. The intention to convene a small group held with it an ambition to imagine what a larger structure or future initiatives might be, and how they might be nurtured and sustained through time.

Cover image: Screenshot from Ase Dance Collective performance at Dancing While Black: Collective(s) Action, NYU Hemispheric Institute, February 2014

The range of thinking and visioning that was produced energized us to collect and publish a record of our gathering and the visions it enlivened. May you too be inspired and further strengthened.

In motion,

Thomas F. DeFrantz, Chair, DUKE African and African American Studies Professor, DUKE DANCE|Theater Studies / Director, SLIPPAGE:PERFORMANCE|CULTURE|TECHNOLOGY

Jane Gabriels, Director, Pepatian (Bronx, NY) Co-founder, International Community of Performing Arts Curators CICA-ICAC (Montreal) / Ph.D. | Concordia University Humanities, Centre for Interdisciplinary Studies in Society and Culture (Montreal)

Dasha A. Chapman, Postdoctoral Associate | Duke AAAS / Ph.D. | NYU Performance Studies



Configurations in Motion Participants, 2015. Photo: Michael Anthony

“The idea leads. The idea is bigger than me. I’m able to hear that idea and facilitate its life. That is the work. And my spirit practices in those spaces.”

Paloma McGregor

“What if people of color are the idea for the presenting of live art? You start from there and work from there...”

Thomas F. DeFrantz

CONFIGURATIONS IN MOTION PARTICIPANTS

A. Nia Austin-Edwards  
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Program Director, Multi-Arts Production/MAP Fund

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Choreographer, teacher, performer, author, arts advocate

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independent curator and artist co-director of anonymous bodies

Nicole Martin  
Ph.D., Performance as Public Practice at The University of Texas at Austin

Paloma McGregor  
Choreographer, writer, organizer // Founder, Dancing While Black; Co-founder, Angela’s Pulse

Maryá Wethers  
Dancer/Performer // Independent Manager, Producer and Curator

Andrea Woods Valdés  
Associate Professor of the Practice of Dance, Duke University // Artistic Director, SOULWORKS/ Andrea E. Woods & Dance



CONFIGURATIONS IN MOTION

SLIPPAGE Lab, 1515 Hull Street, rear studio

Saturday, June 27

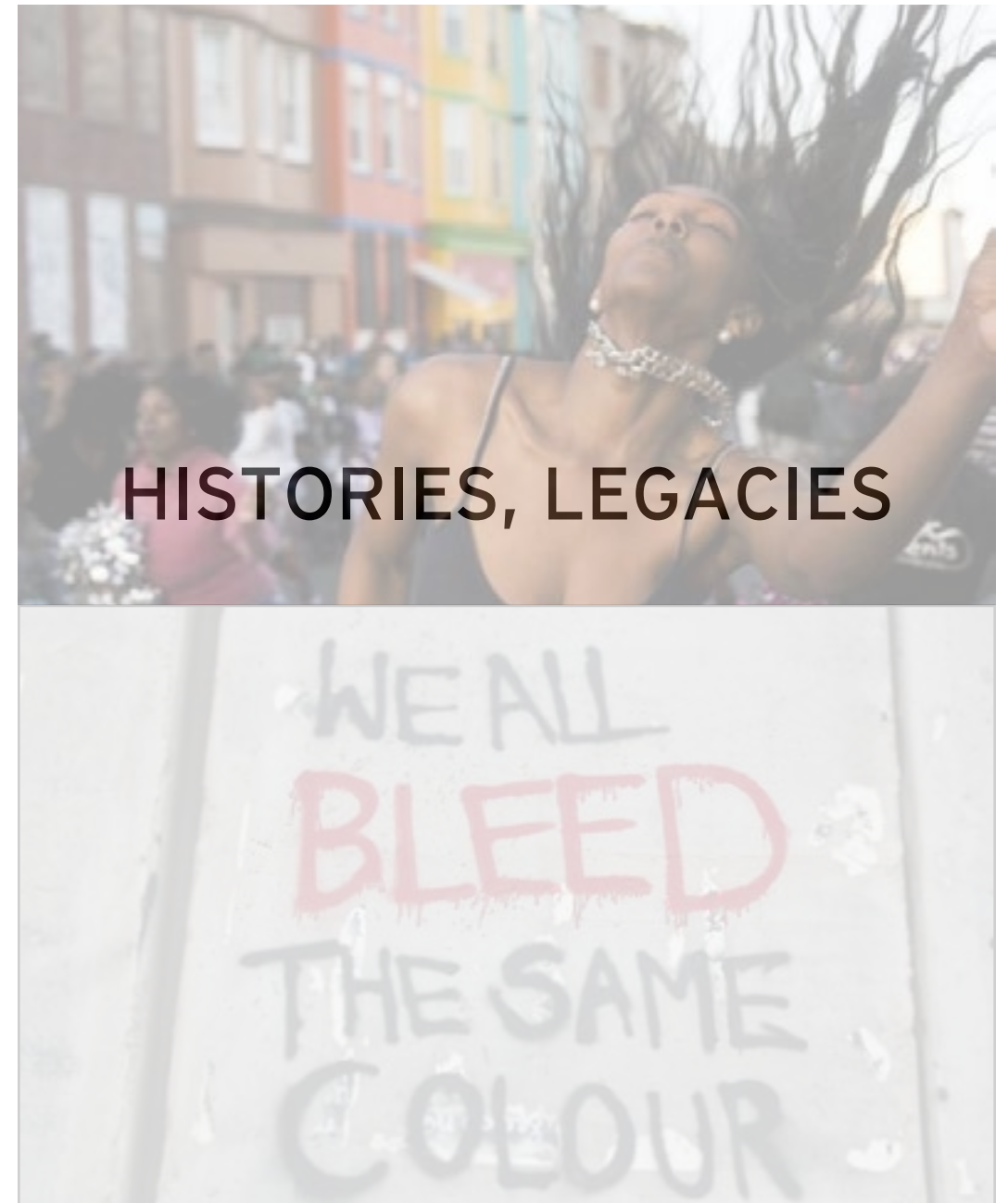
12:00 – 1:00	lunch and greetings	3:30 – 4:30	4 position papers Andrea Woods Valdés Joseph Jordan Moirra Brennan Aaron Greenwald
1:00 – 2:00	4 position papers Marya Wethers Jaamil Olowale Kosoko Ishmael Houston-Jones Nicole Martin	4:30 – 5:00	break with snack
2:15 – 3:15	4 position papers Christina Knight Rasu Jilani Paloma McGregor Jane Gabriels	5:00 – 6:00	group reflections
		7:00	<i>Antigona</i> (2014), Soledad Barrio and Noche Flamenca, American Dance Festival, Durham, NC

Sunday, June 28

9:00 – 10:00	breakfast and chats	11:30 – 1:00	group reflections future directions
10:00 – 11:30	last 4 position papers Dasha Chapman Levi Gonzalez Nia Austin-Edwards Thomas F. DeFrantz		



Scenes from Configurations in Motion, clockwise from top left: Andrea Woods Valdés; Jessica Knight, Joseph Jordan; Nia Austin-Edwards, Jaamil Olowale Kosoko, Ishmael Houston-Jones, Thomas F. DeFrantz, Moira Brennan, Paloma McGregor; Thomas F. DeFrantz, Ishmael Houston-Jones; Rasu Jilani, Jane Gabriels; the group at work. Photos: Michael Anthony and Eric Barstow



## HISTORIES, LEGACIES

# Dancing While Black

Paloma McGregor

Now in the midst of celebrating the 50th anniversaries of civil rights triumphs – as well as ushering in some brand new ones – I am recognizing how much the work that I do leans into traditions and legacies of old fashioned organizing and community building. I am the daughter of a union organizer, for whom I named Angela’s Pulse in 2008, and a fisherman, whose creative legacy I am examining in order to re-center my own voice. Angela’s Pulse, co-founded with my sister Patricia, creates and produces collaborative performance works dedicated to building community and illuminating bold, new stories.

I work for myself, and this vision. I partner with likeminded folks, in relationships that develop and deepen over time. I am not a part of an institution, so my personal values can guide all the work that I do.

I am concerned about Black communities because they are my communities of ancestry, practice and geography; even when they feel distant, my experiences of these communities – the ways in which I have moved with, toward and away from them – lives in my body. In a similar way, my creative and community-building practices are inextricably linked. (The dominant culture’s binaries and compartmentalizing have not served my way of working or being, though of course I have tried on these modes.)

I will talk about two current projects that are helping to push my vision about what it means for me to exchange and collaborate with communities of color, particularly Black communities.

In 2012, I launched Dancing While Black (DWB) to support the diverse work of Black dance artists by cultivating platforms for process, performance, dialogue and documentation. I produce talks, meetings, performances, master classes and a developing artists’ fellowship, all centering Black voices. It is a necessary time to center ourselves, though I could not have predicted several years ago how imperative it would feel today. I believe artistic practice is a necessary part of visioning a new cultural paradigm, as our current one is not working for the freedom of people of color, nor for the humanity of folks of any color.

With DWB, I work to document everything and share online so that ideas reach beyond the time and place of any one event. Future plans include launching a digital journal that values the languages and lenses that we create for our own work. I am interested in more intersection between artists, scholars, culture bearers, and organizers within the global Black community.

# History

In 2012, I was inspired to launch Dancing While Black, after experiencing “PLATFORM 2012: Parallels,” an 8-week dance festival curated by the pioneering Ishmael Houston-Jones which featured Black dance artists at one of New York’s primary experimental dance presenters, Danspace Center. It was a revisitation of Houston-Jones’ 1982 “Parallels.”

As both a witness and performer, I was delighted to experience such a broad assembly of Black voices, and was troubled by two things:

One was my realization that NYC’s experimental dance community may only have room for an assembly that centers Black voices once every 30 years. No one event can hold all of us, and the ways in which our work shifts over time and does so in relationship to cultural shifts. I wanted to create ongoing opportunities for us to gather - not just to perform but to build community, across practice, and particularly among artists interested in pushing the form.

The other problem was that the languages used by the white-dominant critical landscape (and by some Black artists themselves) played into a “post-Black” frame that seemed to diminish the significance of blackness in these artists’ work. Especially troubling to me at the time was a New Yorker article that essentially said that our mothers and grandmothers wouldn’t understand Black experimental work because we had gone to college, where we were “introduced” to concepts like modernism that now drive our work (ignoring the African roots of modernism, among other important contexts). I am interested in collapsing the space – both perceived and actual – between us as artists and Black communities, and in counteracting reductive labeling that diminishes our contributions, complexity and potentials.

It is essential for me that this work operates at the intersection of aesthetics and organizing. Central to the work is building partnerships – with presenters, organizers, curators and artists. We have ongoing partnerships with Bronx Academy of Arts and Dance (BAAD), NYU’s Hemispheric Institute of Performance and Politics, Human Rights Project at the Urban Justice Center, Brooklyn Arts Exchange (BAX), Purpose Productions and Urban Bush Women (UBW). Our partnerships are rooted in a



Screenshots from ‘What is Dancing While Black?’



mutual commitment to equity and serving the needs and visions of artists.

In a field that encourages individualism, DWB prioritizes community building. It is not lost on me that this work comes at a time when other like-minded efforts are activating space in Black academic, artistic and organizing circles – including Dancing the African Diaspora, Coalition of Diasporan Scholars Moving, Black Male Revisited, The Gathering, UBW’s Choreographic Center. I see all this work as part of a vital, necessary movement for equity. My commitment to equity requires my solidarity with others who are also doing the work, within and outside the dance community.

I wonder how – given the systemic inertia toward competition and individualism – we might envision a collectivism that identifies common goals and honors what we each bring to the broader movement. How can community organizing frameworks and practices deepen our understanding of being in, building, cultivating community? How can our process-based artistic practices help us to develop sustained partnerships that aren’t product-driven? How might we as a cohort of partners leverage strategic support not only from funding communities, but from the communities we are tied to in order to move this work forward?

## Future

2015-16 is an exciting season because we will be putting our models to the test thanks to funding from Surdna Foundation and Dance/USA. Chief among our plans, we will be partnering with longtime collaborator Stephanie McKee of New Orleans-based Junebug Productions and a 5-member Community Advisory Panel who will help shape three to four Dancing While Black engagements. This work is a pilot for an HBCU model of Dancing While Black concerned with making visible the past, present and future of black artistic experimentation.

I go into this work knowing that the community will shift the way this project is currently being visioned in significant ways. How can I/we task our funding sources with allowing us the flexibility to let communities drive the engagement in ways that may shift the proposed outcome, so that engaging communities is more of a generative, responsive dialogue? How can I/we be more bold and strategic about proposing such engagement AS the outcome?

These concerns about partnership, collaboration and community are essential to my artistic work as well, including my current choreographic project Building a Better Fishtrap.

Building A Better Fishtrap is an iterative performance work rooted in my father’s vanishing fishing tradition. I have been developing it since 2011, when I returned home to St. Croix and interviewed my father about building traps. Each iteration of the work examines the core themes: What do we take with us? Leave behind? Return to reclaim?



Scenes from Building A Better Fishtrap site-responsive performance iteration at Concrete Plant Park, Bronx, in collaboration with Waterwash and Bronx River Alliance. August 2013. Photo (top) courtesy of Hemispheric Institute of Performance and Politics, NYU; (right) Charles R. Berenguer Jr.



The process of developing the work has always intersected with broad communities. I’ve apprenticed myself to fishermen in St. Croix, mapped storm water with an environmental educator in the Bronx and led movement improvisation with a group of volunteers clearing algae from an NYC wetland area.

My artistic collaborators have been a part of much of this process, which I consider research in building the work and engaging communities in that work. The performance of this research has engaged a range of spaces in communities of color, from an abandoned nursing home to a community gallery to the Bronx River itself.

Building a Better Fishtrap/Part 1, an ensemble iteration of Fishtrap, premiered at Bronx Academy of Arts and Dance, with Bronx community members as facilitators in the final section. Future plans include an installation-based performance work at BAX, site responsive work in Red Hook, Brooklyn, and a major installation in 2017 on the Bronx River, visible from both shore and boats, with community docents.

With all of this work, I see my practice as one of facilitation. It involves checking the ego, deep listening, agility as a practice, responsiveness and faith. My work is always led by an idea that is bigger than me; this idea uses me as a channel. I do not have a singular spiritual practice, but this facilitation is where my spirit practices.

In this practice, I have been developing approaches that invite communities to find themselves in the work in scaffolded ways that begin long before an official “performance.” The practice of engagement that is building this work asks communities to do what I am asking of myself, to re-center their own stories, histories and visions. I hope that 50 years from now I continue to feel the reverberations of this work and the movement I am grateful to now find myself in today.



**PALOMA MCGREGOR** is a choreographer, writer and organizer living in Harlem. An eclectic artist, she has structured improvisation for a floating platform in the Bronx River, choreographed an Afro-futurist pop opera at The Kitchen and devised a multidisciplinary performance work about food justice with three dozen community members and students at UC Berkeley. A collaborator by nature and practice, Paloma has worked extensively with her sister, director Patricia McGregor, as well as with Niegel Smith, multidisciplinary artists Mendi+Keith Obadike and LaTasha Nevada Diggs, musician/cultural critic Greg Tate, composer Vijay Iyer and environmental educator Damian Griffin.

Paloma is director of Angela's Pulse, which creates and produces collaborative performance work dedicated to building community and illuminating bold, new stories. Paloma's work has been supported by grants and creative residencies from the Jerome Foundation; iLAND; Earthdance; Wave Hill; Voice & Vision; Dance Exchange; Lower Manhattan Cultural Council; Foundation for Contemporary Art. Paloma is a 2014-15 Artist In Residence at Brooklyn Arts Exchange, where she will develop a solo iteration of her performance project, Building A Better Fishtrap. The project, rooted in her 88-year-old father's vanishing fishing tradition, examines what we take with us, leave behind and return to reclaim.

Paloma has also been creating movement for theater, including productions of Spunk and A Winter's Tale (California Shakespeare Theater), A Civil War (Center Stage), the world-premiere of The House that Will Not Stand (Berkeley Repertory and Yale Repertory), and Brownsville Song (LCT3).

In addition to her creative work, Paloma has been developing Dancing While Black, an initiative that supports the diverse work of black dance artists by cultivating platforms for process, performance, dialogue and documentation. She does this work in partnership with like-minded institutions, including Bronx Academy of Arts and Dance, Urban Bush Women, MoCADA and NYU's Hemispheric Institute for Performance and Politics, where she has been an Artist in Residence since 2013. Paloma has also written about dance and civic engagement for Surdna Foundation and Americans for the Arts, as well as facilitated numerous workshops for organizations interested in the intersection of arts and activism.

Paloma toured internationally for six years as a dancer with Urban Bush Women, and continues to perform in her own work as well as project-based work with other choreographers, including Liz Lerman, Cassie Meador and Jill Sigman.

## Thinking from Within

María Wethers

### BACKGROUND: My context

In my 17 years working in the field of contemporary dance in New York City I've worked as a member of the staff at Danspace Project as the Marketing Associate, at Pentacle as Help Desk Coordinator and Booking Representative, at Dance Theater Workshop as Associate Producer then Program Manager, and most recently at New York Live Arts as International Project Director of the Suitcase Fund program. I've served on numerous local and international panels, including the NEA US/Japan Creative Artists Program, the Mid Atlantic Arts Foundation for US Artists International, the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council and the Brooklyn Arts Council, as an Advisor to NEFA's National Dance Project, and as a MAP Fund Evaluator. I am also a working artist as a dancer/performer, mostly in other people's work.

### STAFFING: "Inside the Onion"

The majority of my arts administration career has been "performed" at predominately white cultural institutions. Of course, these organizations do not readily define themselves as such, but it is true nonetheless. Through my experiences at these organizations, I define "predominant whiteness" as a phenomenon occurring like the layers of an onion, with some diversity displayed on the outside but greatly decreasing as you look more inward – from the programming on stage (some brown), to the audiences in the house (occasionally brown), to the administrative and technical staff and governing boards behind the scenes (little to no brown).

It seems to me that the field talks about diversity of programming but rarely about the reflection of those principles within their own organizations. I see this as a real problem, especially in the funding and presenting sectors, which only further increases the skewed power dynamics inherent in those relationships. I am particularly critical of the lack of diversity in the field of philanthropy, and although there is some excellent and conscientious work being done, I think it is deeply problematic that the governance and distribution of funds do not include people of color. (Of course, this is where curated selection panels come in, but again, the inside of the onion does not match the outer layer.)

Having an outward focus on diversity is of course important and necessary, but I believe it is detrimental to our field if there are not people of color in positions to make, or at least influence, decisions within arts institutions. I truly believe that diverse staffing is a necessary and critical resource and also provides support for those (select) artists of color who are engaged in institutional programs, and reveals a much deeper and more honest commitment to diversity *from the inside out*. Many arts organizations promote staff from within, which I think is a great practice



*in theory*. But this very well intentioned practice also serves to reinforce that arts administration is for those who are *already* on the inside. So, there is work to be done to create an organizational culture that necessitates, with urgency, the participation of people of color on the inside, central layers. Recruitment practices, distribution of job postings, and intern announcements also need to be put under review. Many NYC public schools have ethnically diverse student populations and regular arts programming. Perhaps a strategy is to prioritize recruitment at arts programs in NYC schools, both at the high school and college levels, and also cultivate relationships with Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). A tenet of our field is creative problem solving to make something transformative from limited resources. So why doesn't this apply to searches for new hires?

**APPROACH**

My approach to working in the field of contemporary dance in NYC has been “infiltration and immersion.” This is based on the belief that a single voice of advocacy at the table can change the conversation, and potentially the outcome of the process (and a multiplicity of voices is even more impactful). So I say yes to serve on every funding or selection panel I’m invited to join, knowing and feeling the importance and potential impact of that intentional advocacy being present in the discussion. It has been a relief in more recent years when others (who are not people of color) have spoken up and raised points for discussion that I have felt it was my duty to speak to.

**PROGRAMMING: Re-evaluating Experimentation**

These days, there is a broader awareness of the importance of diverse programming but it often remains undefined. What exactly is diverse performing arts programming? This desired diversity is still based around a core of whiteness, thus diversifying around that center. Certainly there are presenters with a more sophisticated and nuanced approach to curation. But attend any Arts Presenters conference and the lack of diversity in the field overall is highly (and painfully) evident. I have observed that a major barrier to the inclusion of work by artists of color has been an insular notion of aesthetics of experimentation. What exactly does experimentation look like? Who does it? Which bodies doing which forms? And can we consider if that aesthetic is based in and around “predominate whiteness”? This is a concept that I have actively challenged in the various capacities of my work within presenting organizations and on funding and selection panels to broaden cultural literacy within the context of the aesthetics of experimentation.

**MY WORK: Shifting from the local to the global**

It is quite a surprise to me that I am working on an international level. I always felt like I had so much to see and experience and learn about the United States to keep me busy for a long time. Underneath that, I wonder if my experiences of otherness in this country caused me to hesitate in seeking foreign contexts in which to be othered. Then I started working at Dance Theater Workshop (DTW). My first

exposure to the Suitcase Fund was offering basic administrative support without much knowledge of the history or depth of the program. But over time, and at the encouragement of my supervisors, I had the opportunity to travel to Eastern Europe. Fast forward four years later and I am unexpectedly revising a proposal to expand the Suitcase Fund into Africa and the Middle East, a new initiative that I have the privilege of developing over the next three years. The pilot year the program supported projects in two countries in Africa and expanded to working with or in a total of 10 countries in 3 of the 5 regions of the Continent, including West Africa (Senegal, Burkina Faso, Ivory Coast), East Africa (Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda), Southern Africa (South Africa, Zimbabwe), Central Africa (DR Congo), and Madagascar. This is some of the most inspiring work I’ve ever had the privilege of doing. One of the highlights of the Africa program has been supporting the Engagement Feminin Projet (EF Projet) in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso. Initiated in 2008 by Auguste Ouedraogo and Bienvenue Bazie of Cie Auguste-Bienvenue, EF Projet is a comprehensive training program for African women in contemporary dance to encourage the development of women artists in a climate that severely lacks female dancers and especially choreographers. EF Projet provides workshops in dance technique, improvisation, choreographic skills, and also technical and administrative training. Through the Suitcase Fund program I sent two US based artist-teachers, Nora Chipaumire and Cynthia Oliver, to teach and mentor the young women for a combined total of 4 weeks.

It seems that the majority of interactions between Africa and the West are mediated through white Europeans and Americans. Early on in my work developing the Africa program I recognized how important it was that Black Americans have the opportunity to travel and connect with our African counterparts. In my experience, traveling as a Black American in Africa is the inverse of my familiar experience of otherness (but not without a paradoxical other type of otherness in being easily identified as some type of Westerner and therefore “not African”).

Current ideas and goals in development:

Re-establish an African & US contemporary dance exchange program, including:

Creative residencies for development of new work and the possibility of international collaborations between African and US artists and practitioners.

Research residencies (pairing artists in residence with arts organizations and/or university programs).

Education/training opportunities for younger artists with mentorship to create more and deeper opportunities for cultural exchange in both African and American contexts as a method of addressing



Maryá Wethers (center), Samantha Speis, and Hunter Carter, “Black Jam.” Photo: Ian Douglas

larger issues of national and international concern that are relevant to the participating artists.

CONCLUSION

There is (always) too much going on in the world, and our country. This is of course nothing new, but there is increased media exposure and a slow national awakening to the systemic injustices of being Black and alive in a hostile world and the perils of being Black in America, evidenced by daily violent and lethal tragedies. And so I ask myself (again) - How/Does contemporary dance and performance matter in these times of increasing economic disparity and racial injustices? What are the potentialities of dance and performance to shift what can be (in my opinion) a passive verging on apathetic experience as an unaffected viewer (a position of privilege) to a catalyzing experience that inspires a palpable shift of cultural consciousness to ignite action? As black bodies are publicly brutalized and murdered (and caught on video for repeated mass consumption as its own type of sinister reality performance), can black and other bodies access and transmit embodied experiences towards individual and collective awakenings, and possibly even healing? I'm increasingly seeking some deeper knowing in the body, a consciousness that transcends this time and place, acknowledging a connection to the ancestors, perhaps a collective memory of a heightened experience beyond the physical realm but experienced through the medium of the body. But I do wonder - does that have a place in contemporary performance? How does contemporary performance, activism, and spirituality intersect and overlap and ultimately transform? These are some of the questions that are guiding the direction of my work/practice/life.

A parting thought - What would it look like if there was active advocacy for artists and cultural practitioners of color on an institutional level? A foundation of anti-racism work are the roles of non-compliant witness/observer and active ally. Is there an equivalent in contemporary dance and performance? And should there be? Certainly this is happening in informal and individual ways, but what about on a larger level with intention and actual resources addressing inequities in the field (and not just surveys and reports about it).

“How do contemporary experimental performance, spiritual knowing, and embodied knowledge intersect and interact?”

Marya Wethers



**MARÍA WETHERS** is a Dancer and Independent Manager, Producer and Curator based in NYC since 1997. María is currently the Director of International Initiatives at Movement Research and Project Manager for Angela's Pulse/Dancing While Black, David Thomson, and Olivier Tarpaga, and previously for Nora Chipaumire and nicholasleichter+dace. From 2007-2014, she worked in the Programming Department at New York Live Arts (formerly Dance Theater Workshop/DTW) as the International Project Director of the Suitcase Fund program, where she developed a cultural exchange program with contemporary dance artists in the USA and Africa, and managed the program activities in Eastern/Central Europe.

María was a guest curator for the recent Queer New York International Arts Festival, launching a focus on African artists in the festival. Previously, she curated the Out of Space @ BRIC Studio series for Danspace Project from 2003-2007 with a particular focus on work representing the perspectives and experiences of artists who are of color, queer, and/or female. She has served on selection panels for several presenting and funding organizations in NY and nationally, including the National Endowment for the Arts, Lower Manhattan Cultural Council, Brooklyn Arts Council, Mid Atlantic Arts Foundation, and as an Advisor to NEFA's National Dance Project program.

She has served as a guest lecturer for presenting/service organizations and college/university dance programs in the tristate area, including NYU, Ailey Fordham, Hunter College, Movement Research, Harlem Stage, and Dance/NYC, as well as Mount Holyoke College and ACDF at Connecticut College. María was a member of the New York Dance & Performance/Bessie Award Committee in 2006-07. Her writing, *UnCHARTed Legacies: women of color in post-modern dance*, was published in the 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary *Movement Research Performance Journal* #27/28 (2004).

María is a recipient of a National Performance Network Mentorship & Leadership award and two APAP Cultural Exchange Fund grants to support research and planning trips to Tanzania & Kenya and Bulgaria.

As a dancer, she has worked with luciana achugar, Deborah Hay, Daria Faïn, Faye Driscoll and Yanira Castro. Her own work has been supported by The Chocolate Factory, Danspace Project, Movement Research, BAAD, The Yard, and Kelly Strayhorn Theater (Pittsburgh, PA).

María graduated *cum laude* from Mount Holyoke College in 1997 with a Bachelor of Arts in Dance and a Minor in African-American Studies.

# Narrating Parallels

Ishmael Houston-Jones

Danspace Project was established in 1974 among a constellation of other artists founded not-for-profit dance presenters that in New York included The Kitchen, Dance Theater Workshop, Performance Space 122, and La Mama among others. Across the US there were other such organizations: Dance Place, in Washington; Diverse Works, in Houston, Texas; On the Boards in Seattle; Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions. Most of these organizations were led by White men who acted as the sole artistic or executive director and who made almost all curatorial decisions.

For over 40 years, Danspace Project has supported a community of contemporary dance artists in the unique environment of the historic St. Mark's Church in-the-Bowery, founded in 1789 in New York City's East Village. Since 2010, at the instigation of Executive Director Judy Hussie-Taylor, Danspace Project has produced eight Platforms, published eight print catalogues and five e-books, launched the Conversations Without Walls discussion series, and explored models for public discourse and residencies. The Platforms are series' of multi-week events comprised of performances, panel discussions, video screening, workshops and more. An artist curator, or a team of curators who make all programming decisions designs each platform. Of the first eight platforms, three were curated by African-Americans (Trajal Harrell, Ralph Lemon and me), and five by women (Claudia La Rocco, Jenn Joy, Juliette Mapp, Melinda Ring and Hussie-Taylor (with David Parker)). The platforms serve as an opportunity for Danspace Project to pose questions about presenting practices and processes. Some Platforms *may* focus on the work of one particular artist, some platforms concentrate on a specific period of dance history, and other platforms are organized by a theme.

In 2012 I took on the curation of *PLATFORM 2012: Parallels* on the 30th anniversary of the *Parallels* series I curated at Danspace in 1982, and the 25th anniversary of the *Parallels in Black* tour to Paris, Geneva, and London. The 2012 iteration was an 8-week series of events that interrogated the intersection of dance makers from the African Diaspora with the concepts of Post-modern choreography. It asked the questions: in the US does Black dance exist, and if it does who or what defines it. In 1982, I wanted to demonstrate that not all dance made by African Americans was derived from the Alvin Ailey lineage, or jazz or tap or Broadway. I wanted to show that there was a generation of contemporary Black choreographers who were creating work that reflected new ways of thinking about bodies moving through time and space. On mixed-bill programs the eight artists presented were Blondell Cummings, Fred Holland, Rrata Christine Jones, Ralph Lemon, Bebe Miller, Harry Sheppard, Gus Solomons Jr., and myself. Looking back 30 years, I was struck by how narrow my world-view had been. I did not know any contemporary dance makers from Africa or the Caribbean. I didn't know any Black choreographers born of immigrant parents. I had not considered dances that sprung from Black social dancing or "street" forms.

In 2012 it was time to reexamine some erroneous assumptions I had had about dances made by Black folks. *PLATFORM 2012: Parallels* was the product of this reexamination.

The first 2 weeks of the platform were filled with a series of introductory events: a screening of archival footage from the 1982 series and a panel of some of those artists, an interview with visual artist Wangechi Mutu and myself by Thomas Lax at the Studio Museum in Harlem, and a weekend of performances by Will Rawls and Isabel Lewis.



I gave over the curation of the next weekend to 3 established choreographers of my generation: Bebe Miller, Jawole Willa Jo Zollar, and Dean Moss. They were each given an evening to craft around any theme they wanted. While Zollar used improvisation in the Black vernacular for *Black Jam*, and Miller looked at the lineage of Black female choreographers in *Where We're Calling From*, Moss took an entirely different approach. He used Black as a metaphor for outsiderhood and thus created the most controversial evening of the platform, *Black Dance*.

*I'm interested in "Black" identity as it pertains to otherness and its association with the outsider. Pedro Jimenez, Young Jean Lee and Ann Liv Young are amazing artists with sincere and slippery relationships to identity... Each of them creates work that brilliantly pushes the boundaries of what is and is not performance, what is and is not the self. None of them are African-American but all of them are Black.* - Dean Moss, curator *Black Dance*

The controversy arose in part because the *raison d'être* of *Parallels* was to examine contemporary dances made by choreographers of the African diaspora and this program purposely did not do that. But the main debate was caused when performance artist/provocateur Ann Liv Young appeared in "brown face" and embodied an African-American character and began to quarrel with members of the audience.

Here I was conflicted about my role as chief curator of the platform. I had purposely ceded authority to Miller, Zollar, and Moss (and later Will Rawls and Ralph Lemon) so there would be a multiplicity of curatorial points of view. When Moss proposed this theme for his evening I was intrigued but wary. I am still struggling – should I have rejected Moss' *Black Dance* as he proposed it, thereby censoring him, or should I have allowed it to go forward (as I did), even though it contradicted my overall vision of the platform?

For the next weekend I presented the work of two mid-career artists, Dean Moss and Reggie Wilson. Wilson has done quite a bit of research in Senegal and the U.S. rural south. For *Parallels* he created a solo on the dancer/choreographer Souleymane Badolo from Burkina Faso.



For the next weekend I wanted to capture the energy of dancing that comes out of the clubs. There has been a long history of Black social dancing influencing what happens on the concert stage. The choreographers I chose were Darrell Jones, Niall Jones, Nick Leichter, and Regina Rocke.

As I said before, in 1982 I was unaware of any contemporary dance makers who were from immigrant or African upbringings. I wanted to pair 2 powerful female performers, one from Zimbabwe, Nora Chipaumire, and the other from the Bronx, NYC of Nigerian parents, Okwui Okpokwasili. This resulted in what I consider to be the most successful weekend of *Parallels*.

The following weekend I desired to give voice to some of the younger choreographers who are just beginning to come into their own. (Pre-MacArthur Kyle Abraham, Marjani Fortè and Samantha Spies who informed us that she was born in 1982 when the first *Parallels* series took place.)



Parallels 2012: Nora Chipaumire (top),  
Darrell Jones (bottom). Photo: Ian Douglas

The evening of March 27 contained an assortment of different events. Dr. Thomas F. DeFrantz, chair of African and African American Studies at Duke University delivered a paper while tap dancing; there was panel discussion with Danspace Project director Judy Hussie-Taylor, Henry Pillsbury and Barbara Watson who sponsored the *Parallels in Black* tour to Europe in 1987, and choreographers Blondell Cummings and me who were on that tour. There was a screening of contemporary videos largely from the Internet curated by Will Rawls, and throughout all of this Stacy Spence performed his conceptual/durational Trekking piece inside and outside Saint Mark's Church.

The End. 11AM -11PM: Ralph Lemon curated 12 performers, one every hour with 10 minutes of overlap. Interacting with Nari Ward's sculptures.

Most of the programs were at or near full capacity. However, they were largely composed of the typical Danspace Project audience of "downtown" dance

practitioners and aficionados with a small but noticeable increase of Black faces. While I didn't specifically curate *PLATFORM 2012: Parallels* for a Black audience, as the chief curator of such an historic event that dealt directly with a portion of Black culture that is not often depicted, I had hoped that more African-Americans would have attended. Was it a question of outreach, location, or some other factors or combinations of factors that didn't cause this to happen? Let's discuss.

### Excerpts from Ishmael Houston-Jones's curatorial statement in the catalogue for PLATFORM 2012: Parallels:

PLATFORM 2012: Parallels begins for me with a question—with a series of questions.

In her groundbreaking 2003 book on the eponymous subject, *The Black Dancing Body*, Brenda Dixon Gottschild interviewed a wide range of people in the field including Bebe Miller, Bill T. Jones, Gus Solomons, Jr., Jawole Willa Jo Zollar, Meredith Monk, Ralph Lemon, Ronald K. Brown, and Wendy Perron.

Dixon Gottschild asked them to use "memory, fantasy, dreams, mythology..." to answer the question:

"What images come to the mind's eye when the term 'black dance' is said?"

This has been my conundrum when curating this platform. How would I have answered her question? For me does "Black Dance" even exist? And assuming it does, what defines it? Is the term "mainstream Black Dance" an oxymoron? What would it mean to push beyond its mainstream if it does exist?

... I brought together two weekends of shared programming to declare, as I did in my program notes,

"I chose the name Parallels for the series because while all the choreographers participating are Black and in some ways relate to the rich tradition of Afro American dance, each has chosen a form outside of that tradition and even outside the tradition of mainstream modern dance."

It's been thirty years since Blondell Cummings, Fred Holland, Rrata Christine Jones, Ralph Lemon, Bebe Miller, the late Harry Sheppard, Gus Solomons Jr. and I performed on the first Parallels series at Danspace Project. It's been twenty-five since Jawole Willa Jo Zollar joined us on the Parallels in Black tour to Paris, Geneva and London. Now Bebe, Gus, Jawole along with David Rousseve, Cynthia Oliver, myself and others are

on the faculties of major university dance departments. In the first Parallels series I was making the case that to be a contemporary Black dance maker, one did not have to be a direct descendant of Ailey. We were coming from Cunningham, Nina Weiner, Monk, Contact Improvisation as well as African and American Black Dance traditions. Now many of those traditions are part of the Modern Dance canon; dance students have been exposed to those forms and to us as teachers.

For PLATFORM 2012: Parallels, I want to keep looking forward, while remaining cognizant of our shared pasts, (plural). Of course, it goes without saying, that all platforms, no matter how comprehensive a curator tries to be, will always exclude more than it includes. Some of those choices were determined by factors as banal as time and money—never enough of either in the arts, particularly with dance. Having lived and worked in Lower Manhattan for most of the last 30 years, I admit to a New York bias in what I've seen and thus chosen. And again (lack of) funds for travel determined some choices. But I forced myself to make some challenging decisions that reflect back on what my dance interests are and what I see as work that is advancing the form onward.



**Ishmael Houston-Jones** is a choreographer, author, performer, teacher, curator, and arts advocate known for his improvisational dance and language work. His work has been performed in New York City, across the United States, in Australia, Europe, and Latin America. Houston-Jones and Fred Holland shared a 1984 New York Dance and Performance Bessie Award for *Cowboys, Dreams and Ladders* performed at The Kitchen, and Houston-Jones, Chris Cochrane, and Dennis shared the 2011 Bessie Award their revival of *THEM*. The 1985 premier performance of *THEM* at PS122 was part of New York's first AIDS benefit. Other significant choreography by Ishmael Houston-Jones includes: *13 Love Songs: dot dot dot*, Houston-Jones' collaboration with Emily Wexler which premiered at American Realness in 2014.

As an author Ishmael Houston-Jones' essays, fiction, interviews, and performance texts have been anthologized in the books: *Dance, Documents of Contemporary Art* (White Chapel gallery, 2012); *Conversations on Art and Performance* (Johns Hopkins, 1999); *Footnotes: Six Choreographers Inscribe the Page* (G+B Arts, 1998); *Caught in the Act: A Look at Contemporary Multi-Media Performance* (Aperture, 1996); *Aroused, A Collection of Erotic Writing* (Thunder's Mouth Press, 2001);

*Best Gay Erotica 2000*, (Cleis Press, 2000); *Best American Gay Fiction*, volume 2, (Little Brown, 1997); and *Out of Character: Rants, Raves and Monologues from Today's Top Performance Artists*, (Bantam, 1996). His articles have also been published in the magazines: *Bomb* (magazine), *PAJ* (journal), *Movement Research Performance Journal*; *Contact Quarterly*; *Real Time*; *Mirage*, *FARM*; and others.

Ishmael Houston-Jones has been a guest or adjunct professor at Eugene Lang College The New School for Liberal Arts; New York University, (Tisch School of the Arts, the Experimental Theater Wing and Playwrights Horizons), University of the Arts (Philadelphia), Sarah Lawrence College, Hollins University, (Virginia), Hollins University / American Dance Festival MFA Program Bennington College, (Vermont), the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, University of Memphis, Wesleyan University, (Connecticut), University of California, Los Angeles, UCLA, and the California Institute of the Arts. Houston-Jones has also been on the faculty of several dance institutes and symposia, including American Dance Festival at Duke University.

“Where are the decisions to present black performance coming from?”

*Ishmael Houston-Jones*

## Movement Research as a NYC case study— my subjective view

Levi Gonzalez\*

*This reflection is in no way exhaustively researched or posited as an official history, but rather an anecdotal and subjective rumination on an organization and the ways my life and work has intersected with it around the issue of access and representation regarding artists and communities of color.*

My work in the field has been as a dancer first, then as a maker. I came to my role in arts administration later, largely through my passion for participating in dialogue around issues relevant to the field. Through multiple forums I've had the opportunity to engage with many artists of diverse backgrounds about what matters to them, and this has taught me immeasurably the value of making space for difference, and the importance of having multiple voices at the table. It has also highlighted inequities in opportunities in the field, and has compelled me to be an advocate for the artist's voice, and in particular less heard artistic voices, in larger cultural conversations. I'm going to talk primarily from the perspective of my current role as Director of Artist Programs at Movement Research (MR), but will also include some opinions and observations from my own personal experience. I also want to stress that MR is intentionally staffed, with the exception of our Executive Director Barbara Bryan, entirely by working artists and is not a presenting organization, but rather a provider of creative services and a facilitator of discourse and artistic process.

MR is committed to dialogue around diversity in our programming. The word “diversity” is also included in the organization's mission statement. Of course, committing to diversity through language and understanding how to make that manifest and materialize in a real and effective way are two very different things.

MR considers diversity in a number of ways, including generational, cultural, ethnic, race, gender, sexuality, ability, and aesthetic. That said, we operate from a specific history and perspective in the field — one that has been predominantly white. The majority of the founding artists of MR were white, with the exception of Bill T. Jones. It should also be mentioned that there is considerable controversy and disagreement over who the founding artists of MR actually were. These artists were a loose constituency who developed their work in the generation following the Judson Dance Theater. The organization was founded in 1978 under the name “The School for Movement Research and Construction,” and consisted of a self-organized collective of artists who wanted to combine their teaching and workshop efforts with a consolidated administrative structure, run initially out of Cynthia Hedstrom's apartment, I believe.

Since then the organization has grown considerably in the scope of its programs and the artists and audiences it serves. What started as a space for continued studio exploration of experimental dance



Movement Research Studies Project, “being a body out loud.” Photo: Levi Gonzalez

practices stemming from the Judson Dance Theater lineage, went on to become involved with some of the artist activist movement of the 80's and 90's, particularly around AIDS and gender issues. This was largely during Richard Elovich's tenure as director of MR, and was met with some controversy about what the mission of the organization was meant to be. Was it in service of the exploration of form or the politics around that form, and can the two be separated?

I think diversity plays a big part for any organization wanting to be relevant in the field today. I've noticed in the various panels that I

have run that artists themselves, particularly younger artists, have become much more conscious and concerned about making sure a diversity of artists are being given opportunities to present their work, as opposed to even 7 or 8 years ago. This is in part due to the artists invited to sit on those panels, but it is also a growing awareness of the inequities that exist, particularly for artists of color and gender non-conforming artists in the field and the society at large.

Experimentation looks different in different contexts. I remember an early MR at Judson panel I sat on with Trajal Harrell and Marya Wethers, in which we had a discussion after I dismissed something as not seeming “experimental enough.”. Both Marya and Trajal very passionately articulated that experimentation is specific to the context in which you are making, that what is experimental in one cultural form or environment can be very different from what is experimental in another. This has really stayed with me over the years. The idea of formal neutrality, while once radical and important, carries the danger of erasing cultural difference and reinforcing a white majority perspective. Erasing the author's subjectivity means not being accountable for the context in which one is making, and that context almost always favors and assumes a white author.

A recent beautiful experience I had with the power of diversity in curating came from watching the performances in this year's MR Spring Festival, curated by Layla Childs, Jaamil Olawale Kosoko and Samita Sinha. The festival was titled legible/illegible: opening beyond the space of identities. What struck me was that the diversity of representation in these events actually added meaning and resonance to already strong work, rather than “watering it down” or diluting the individual artistic voice. It allowed that individual artistic voice to have echoes and reverberations across a larger spectrum of ideas. This demonstrated the power of diversity in curatorial practice. And it is no surprise that it was a team of artist curators, with extremely limited resources, who managed to frame and



harness that power.

At the moment, MR is looking to expand our currently named “Artist of Color” program. You may not have heard of this program because it has never had a public profile. Initiated, I believe, by Trajal Harell many years prior to my involvement at MR, it includes an Artist of Color curator for our MR at Judson Church series. This artist curator selects three artists for the series that they think will benefit from the series format, and also introduces the Judson audience to work they might not normally be exposed to. It also connects these artists with a potentially new community and communicates to other artists of color that this program can be accessible and available to them. Traditionally, these artists have not been publicly identified as curated by an Artist of Color curator, so that they not be seen as distinct from other artists performing in the series. There have also been meetings for artists of color, as a means for these artists to get together and share concerns, and occasionally have the opportunity to invite outside guests to provide information and resources. Currently, under the guidance of former MR staff member Tara Aisha Willis, who is also a postdoctoral candidate at NYU’s Performance Studies program, we are rethinking this program with the input from a loose collective of artists of color in the field who have a history of engagement with MR. A working group is meeting this summer to create new language around this program that will be made public, in an effort to make more visible and transparent what this program is and does. There is discussion around making the Judson Artist of Color Curator public, and contributing language that we use with panels and curators in the future in terms of how we ask them to address diversity, and also how we as a staff can more actively address diversity in a real way. The program will also continue to provide services to artists of color through invited speakers and facilitators, as well as meetings to share knowledge and experiences. Our hope is to create a situation where artists of color can have an active voice in shaping how this organization can be relevant to these artists and to the field.

We are also seeking funding to support stipends for interns of color, who might not be able to afford an internship with us due to economic factors. It’s important to get young people of color in the administrative and institutional structures that support the field, and to build diversity from there. It is not just the artistic voices, but the entire ecology of the field that needs diversity in order to remain relevant to the larger culture. This is as true of a small organization like MR as it is of a large foundation or institution.

The more perspectives we have behind the scenes in the places where decisions are made, the healthier the field will be. The US will not be a white majority nation for much longer, and the arts and culture sector is a place where we can instigate change, share multiple narratives, and provide a space for voices that often go unheard. It is an opportunity to counteract the aggressive conservative backlash that continues to manifest in a society where those in power are doing everything they can to hold onto that power, where we are conditioned to think aggression is permissible towards people of color, and

where economic inequity and disparity continues to be on the rise. Can the arts really have an impact on this? I don’t always have the faith that it can, but I can think of no other field better equipped to affect hearts and minds without being didactic or reductive, and to touch people on a truly powerful, complex, and individual level. If I have any imperative, it is to increase the visibility of the artist’s voice, and that voice is necessarily a multiple one.

\*It feels important, particularly in print, to articulate my own racial identity here. I am an artist who identifies as mixed race. My father is of Mexican ancestry and my mother of white European ancestry, though both were born in the US. I do not identify as white nor do I identify as a person of color, since I feel, due to appearance and other factors, I essentially have received many of the benefits of white privilege in my life.



Levi Gonzalez-The Craft of the Father (with Eleanor Smith), 2014. Photo: Brian Rogers, Chocolate Factory Theater

“Privilege is the ability to afford a pause in the face of terror.”

*Moirá Brennan*



**LEVI GONZALEZ** is a New York City based dance artist living and working in the city for the past 17 years. He currently serves as Director of Artist Programs at Movement Research where he oversees the Artist-in-Residence Program, as well as various discursive events and artist opportunities, panels, exchanges and organizational partnerships. He was Artist Advisor for New York Live Arts Fresh Tracks Residency Program from 2007-2013, a position he helped institute and develop over those 7 years. He also served as Artist Advisor for the Brooklyn Arts Exchange Artist in Residency program in 2012-2013. He helped to facilitate an exchange with Movement Research and the National Dance Center in Bucharest between New York and Romanian artists in 2010-11.

Additionally, he was an artist member of the Movement Research Board of Directors from 2007-2009 and was a founding editor of Movement

Research's online publication Critical Correspondence from 2005-2009. He organized and facilitated an intensive workshop for dance artists at The Kitchen with Dean Moss called Form and Practice from 2005-2007.

He received a BFA in Dance from California Institute of the Arts in 1997. His choreographic work has been commissioned by The Kitchen, BAX, DTW, PS1, Danspace Project, Movement Research, The Chocolate Factory Theater, Abrons Arts Center, and more. His work has been presented locally, nationally and internationally. As a performer he has collaborated with numerous dance and theater artists including Luciana Achugar, John Jasperse, Donna Uchizono, Michael Laub, Daria Faïn, Juliette Mapp, ChameckiLerner and Jeremy Nelson. He has taught extensively in New York City, for various Universities, and in guest residencies throughout the US and abroad.

## Below The Radar: Visibility and Representation of Independent Artists of Color in Community, University and Other Performance Venues

Andrea E. Woods Valdés

Black Performance covers a tremendous amount of territory. Depending on who you ask it can be defined as ceremony, parades, church, weddings and funeral services, carnival, pre-carnival activities, homecoming, public holidays, Kwanzaa, MLK Day, Juneteenth, birthdays, pageants, step shows, Black Arts festivals, fine and visual arts, and/or cheerleaders and drill teams.

As a performing artist and choreographer, examining Black performance in relation to Black audience and its reciprocal relationship and tensions calls for self-reflexivity. I am a Black woman choreographer and I present dance in and for Black communities. However, it is a difficult task to question the nature of something I assume is a natural and obvious relationship. While the Black audience is not the only public concerned with or interested in work by Black choreographers, there is still a question of how Black artists, whether or not the work or performers are Black identified, navigate relationship with presenters, performance venues and audiences. With this consideration, I pose a series of questions to define and describe what it means to perform in and for the Black community. For starters, who is the black audience? What is the Black audience experiencing? What does the Black audience mean to Black performers? What is the relationship and the give and take between performers and community? Where is there tension in this relationship? What does this relationship mean outside of performance? How do performers speak of and represent the audience?

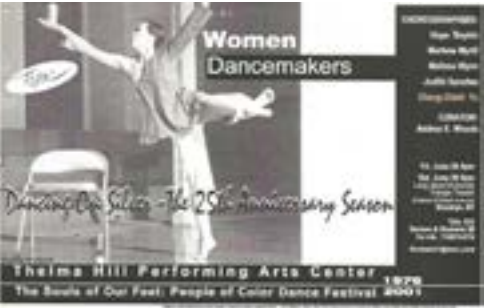
In my work I use dance as contemporary folklore. Everyone has a story to tell. The presence of Black women in America offers a rich and valuable landscape to explore. As a former dancer with Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane Dance Company, my creative process is strongly linked to identity and representation. My research is equally physical, creative and scholarly. My areas of interest include: women in the arts, creating representations of African Diaspora history and culture through performance, Afro-Cuban dance and music, and Dance for the Camera. Two current projects include family history performance pieces and creating a series of works that promote original music by women composers. I focus on intra-cultural, interdisciplinary dialogues and activities that happen between Black women artists beyond the boundaries of national and political identities. My creative process explores the intersections between dance, music and writing as my own brand of performed folklore. SOULOWORKS/Andrea E. Woods & Dancers is the vehicle for the performance work I create. My company exists as a creative hub where projects and performances invite collaborators and community to become part of the creative process. In addition, I have recently joined with Black women artist in the Durham area to initiate the Black Women's Choreography Collective, which serves to support

and nurture the creative process and our cultural identity.

In 2007, two years before I relocated to Durham, NC, I was asked to be the Artistic Director of the Brooklyn Based **Thelma Hill Performing Arts Center**. I had previously performed in several seasons and curated an evening of dance by women of color. The title “Performing Arts Center” is somewhat of a misnomer because there is no physical center or series of on going classes. There is however, an emphasis on the legendary summer series that presents artist of color with particular attention given to women and gay and lesbian choreographers and performers. As Artistic Director for three years, I had the opportunity to assist in curating the annual *Souls Of Our Feet* performance series as well as making suggestions and decisions regarding the direction and future of the series. Some of the artist I assisted in bringing to the series include: Cheng-Chieh Yu, Errol Grimes, T. Lang, Judith Sánchez Ruíz, Hope Boykin, Helanius J. Wilkins and Kyle Abraham. THPAC has been quietly bringing renown as well as cutting edge and emerging artists to the vivacious Brooklyn public. The digital age and social media have given THPAC great reach, however, every year I was involved with the 30 year plus organization, there was an uncertainty that the financial challenges would not be met so that the season would not be cancelled. This information was not conveyed to the performers but the Executive Directors dealt with the reality of seeing that Borough and State funds were applied for, confirmed and available before opening of each season.

The fragility of each coming season was disconcerting but my role was to act as liaison for the artists and to support the creative development of the season. Curating was a thrill. The sense of empowerment, not only for myself but also for my peer group, was something I had not experienced as a performer. I was determined to see more Black, Latina and Asian women represented and acknowledged by a predominantly Black audience. Both the former and later are an important relationship that I believe provide much needed affirmation of the value of women’s voices and points of view. The artistic work of Black women and their allies to be seen by Black audiences. I wanted to see dances performed parallel or adjacent to one another in order to create a cross-cultural environment in which work is seen as fresh, appealing affirming and/or challenging for viewers. I had the opportunity to contact female and male choreographers whose vision I knew was making an impact in a variety of venues. Other than performance fees, THPAC offers the support and solidarity of a predominately Black audience that was equally hungry for tradition as well as for innovation.

THPAC offers an unspoken invitation for artists to take risks. While some of the choreographers



were commissioned to create large or full evening length works, the THPAC series are showcases that consists of a variety of works sometimes grouped together by identity. The benefit of the THPAC showcase is that it offers an opportunity for a choreographer to be presented as company but without the pressure or producing a full evening of work. There is no singular vision or creative control. Artists define what they will perform. Many artists have been repeatedly presented and supported as their work and companies developed, or even while they faced artistic and financial challenges. Regardless of circumstances, work was still being made and work was still being presented.

THPAC continues to face space and financial challenges and artists are not always guaranteed a review from a major dance publication. However, there is a mighty long list of choreographers that can trace their early company performances back to a THPAC summer series. During my years at THPAC as performer or Artistic Director, what I observed and admired most about executive directors Marshal Swiney and Alex Smith Jr. was their insight into the black community and awareness of who was making work. They were not waiting to see who was performing at major venues in Manhattan but they were discovering and uncovering rich and vital dancemakers, many of who came from within the Brooklyn community and were flying below the presenter’s radar. Some of the artists were emerging but others like, Forces of Nature, were national and international touring companies with a longstanding presence in New York. Being a Brooklynite at the time, I felt proud and invested in the performance series that took place blocks from my home.

Being on tour, however local or international, is also the lifeblood of many companies. The work has to be performed and it has to reach people wherever they are. Each artist decides who the “people” are and how best to reach them. Although my company has toured internationally, for over 20 years I considered Brooklyn my home base. Performing there was essential to my identity and my company reputation. There is a vital Black community in Brooklyn and NYC and part of my company mission to respond and to reflect the very community that inspires and affirms my work. It does not make sense for me to be popular in Michigan when people on my block have never seen my company. National and international venues, while vital, don’t eclipse the need for and importance of reaching Black communities like the one I grew up in in Philadelphia. It was important for me to cultivate my local roots as well as to see my work as part of an expansive and global community of choreographers. Finding presenters and venues and building relationships is an ongoing struggle. Without formal representation or management independent artist and companies are challenged with lack of visibility and access to performance venues that could reach larger audiences and sustain the presence of their work.

I have contemplated this conundrum for years and decided that as the tide of performances ebbs and flows I have to be consistent and insistent with my productivity when the public and presenters are looking, and especially when they are not. I want my work to be sustainable. Without limiting the



possibilities, I also have an opinion about where I want it performed. After my THPAC experience and teaching at the participating in several Black Dance conferences, I am convinced that if I can be instrumental in creating a network between Historically Black Colleges and Universities and community and theater presenters in a range of cities, artists of color could extend our notion of home base and think of it as a series of connected communities rather than a singular location. HBCU's, the **International Association of Blacks in Dance** and the **Black College Dance Exchange** are all untapped resources for many emerging artists and small companies. While there are geographic disparities like North and South, university and non-university affiliations, and company and non-company affiliations between artists and organizations I can envision a more fluid relationship that fosters artists exposure to Black audience's and communities.

At the present my HBCU performance network idea is just that, an idea. I have begun to voice it out loud and receive enthusiastic responses. I am not the only artist thinking this way and many individuals are informally and formally invested in residencies, teaching and to a lesser extent performing in HBCUs. The follow up question is, "How am I/are we going to create a sustainable network of performance for Black audiences via HBCUs?" My plan is to start with a group of interested people for an invited think tank. Beyond the creative issues, there are several entities, like funds, communication and infrastructure that need to be fleshed out. Theater and music often operate in a network between universities, community, clubs and non-university theaters. Dance can also tap these resources for a sustainable extension to what it means to perform for and to be visible to Black audiences and thereby amplify the space above and below the radar that continues to thrive with tradition, innovation and originality.



Top: Black College Dance Exchange, 2015. Photo courtesy of Dance Mogul Magazine. Bottom: PHILANDANCO, International Association of Black in Dance Conference, 2015. Photo courtesy of PHILADANCO.



**ANDREA E. WOODS VALDÉS** is an Associate Professor at Duke University teaching modern dance and dance for the camera. She has directed Duke In Ghana summer study (2012-2014). Her company, SOULOWORKS/Andrea E. Woods & Dancers, recently celebrated 20 years of dancing and dancemaking.

Previous resident of Brooklyn, NY, and native of Philadelphia, PA, Woods has danced with Clive Thompson, Mafata, Saeko Ichinohe and Leni Williams dance companies.

She is a former dancer/rehearsal director of Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane Dance Co. and has a BFA from Adelphi University, an MFA in dance from Ohio State and an MAH in Caribbean Cultural Studies from SUNY Buffalo.

She has been a staff writer for Attitude: The Dancers' Magazine. Her work has taken her to: Cannes, Taiwan, Russia, Senegal, Morocco, Korea,

Poland, Singapore, Belize, Yucatán, Puerto Rico, The Dominican Republic, Ghana, Trinidad, Cuba and throughout the US.

She has been guest a guest artist at Medgar Evers College, Howard University, Ohio University, Rhode Island College, California State University Long Beach, North Carolina School of the Arts, Hollins University, Sarah Lawrence, Goucher College, NYU Tisch School of the Arts (faculty) and Spelman College.

She has received grants from The Jerome Foundation, New England Foundation for the Arts, The National Dance Project, and the National Performance Network and Arts International, and is a recipient of the North Carolina Arts Council 2012 Fellowship.

# Programming from the Soul

Aaron Greenwald

I am grateful for the opportunity to be at this gathering. I am humbled to be in the company of such brilliant thinkers. Yesterday’s session was for me eye opening, difficult and inspiring — I suspect that today’s session will be equally powerful.

It is worth saying, to start, that I am indeed a white curator heading a presenting organization nestled in an American institution of higher learning that sports a 7 billion dollar endowment. Moreover Durham, my home, is a city that has historically been 50% black & 50% white. The last census showed 40% black, 40% white & 20% latino. I have, over the last decade working here, attempted to program a series that, at the very least, reflects the demographic diversity of the place both in terms of the artists on stage and increasingly of the audience.

I think my strength as a curator is programming music, so I want to talk here about a cycle of programming that I made around gospel music. In 2008, shortly after I took over Duke Performances, I put together a series called Soul Power: From Gospel to the Godfather that ran concurrent with the Nasher Museum’s exhibition of paintings by Barkley Hendricks. I could talk about that series at greater length — but it included a series of concerts along w/ conversations & panels — the idea was to feature the folks who were around when soul music was ‘invented,’ to look back at the gospel and R&B music that informed soul, as well as to look forward to the impact soul music has on hip-hop and electronic music.

- Mavis Staples & Blind Boys of Alabama
- Questlove & 9th Wonder
- Solomon Burke & Dixie Hummingbirds
- Booker T. & Maceo Parker
- Don Byron Jr. Walker
- DJ Spooky
- King Britt Sylk Collective feat. Jaguar Wright and Lady Alma Horton
- Dr. Lonnie Smith feat. Lou Donaldson, David ‘fathead’ Newman & Houston Person

In the course of making this series I struck up a close friendship with the great soul and gospel singer Solomon Burke — a musician that Tom Waits described as “the golden voice of heart, wisdom, soul



King Solomon Burke  
Photo: Aaron Greenwald

and experience. He’s one of the architects of American music.” We presented Solomon as part of that series in one of the most raucous, strange and wonderful concerts I’ve ever shown. In the few years after that show Solomon and I struck up a close friendship — we talked weekly via phone (and Solomon was as great a storyteller as he was a singer), I visited him at his home in Los Angeles and we spent time together here in Durham when he came to town for the Duke diet and fitness center. Solomon’s passing in 2010 was a great blow to me. I had lost a dear friend, but also we had lost and are rapidly losing the great musicians from the 1950s and 1960s heyday of American soul music.

I don’t want to take anything away from the great genius in today’s music, but I mourn the rather quiet loss of a whole generation of seminal soul and jazz musicians. Of those I’ve presented: Ira Tucker of the Dixie Hummingbirds, Bobby Bland, David Fathead Newman, Bobby Womack, Johnny Griffin, Ben E. King, Wilson Pickett, Ray Charles, Isaac Hayes, Percy Sledge. On the jazz side, yesterday, Ornette Coleman was laid to rest.

Solomon sang a lot of gospel music over the years and in a kind of tribute to Solomon I began to more actively explore the gospel music scene. I was interested, I suppose, in the living tradition of sacred music that had fed soul music and had, curiously or not, outlasted it. In consultation with friends and colleagues in music ministry at Durham’s Union Baptist, White Rock Baptist, First Cavalry, Mt. Level Missionary Baptist, I began to conceive of a series of Gospel presentations that would feature exceptional artists currently working in the gospel music tradition. In addition to concerts, we featured conversations with these artists, pastors working in music ministry at local churches and faculty in the black church studies program at the Duke Divinity School.

Over the course of the series we showcased John P. Kee and the New Life Community Choir, The Mighty Clouds of Joy featuring Joe Ligon, and we closed the series with a presentation of Richard Smallwood and Vision. We presented Kee and the Mighty Clouds over two nights each in the sanctuary at Hayti Heritage Center, a deconsecrated AME Church on Fayetteville Street here in Durham. We showed Richard Smallwood on Holy Saturday at the Carolina Theater here in Durham.

A note: It is not uncommon for Duke Performances to make shows off of campus — we frequently employ a network of a dozen or so venues both on campus and in town. I liked the idea of presenting a couple of these shows in a sacred space — and the Duke Chapel, beautiful as it is, doesn’t handle



Alonzo King LINES Ballet performing at Reynolds Industries Theater for Duke Performances.



Richard Smallwood. Photo courtesy of the artist.

amplification well. For Smallwood, we felt it would simply be easier for an audience to access the Carolina Theatre. The Duke campus can be forbidding for audiences that don't make frequent use of the space. We do our best with signage, marketing and partnerships to overcome this feeling, but it persists.

In addition to the conversation I've mentioned, we partnered with local choirs to sing A&B selections prior to each headliner. We drew 900 folks for John P. Kee, another 900 for Mighty Clouds of Joy, and 1,000 for Richard Smallwood. We surveyed the

audience for this series — roughly 60% reported African-American, 20% as white, 10% as other, and 10% chose not to respond.

In the course of the Smallwood presentation we learned that both his maternal and paternal grandparents lived here in Durham. Smallwood wrote to me:

*Aaron,*

*I'm in Durham, NC today and tomorrow, and I couldn't be more excited. Today, I'm visiting the plantation where my ancestors lived. My great-great-grandfather was the owner of the plantation, then, when he died, it was passed down to my great-grandfather. That was always a great source of shame in my family and no one ever talked about it — but I want to talk about it. It will be an honor for me to stand where my enslaved ancestors walked. If it wasn't for all of them, I wouldn't be.*

We are currently working with Richard Smallwood and his management to make a time when he can come back to Durham for a residency at Duke, to talk about his music and explore his family history: to make an oral history, to speak at our chapel, to visit with local churches, and to spend time with students in Duke's Divinity School.

“What tools does a curator use to gain a sense of a place where they live?”

*Aaron Greenwald*



**AARON GREENWALD** has been the Executive Director of Duke Performances since 2006. The organization has a 2.2 million dollar budget and serves upwards of 35,000 patrons annually — roughly 8,500 of whom are Duke students.

Duke Performances has commissioned, developed, and premiered major new work from composers Steve Reich, John Luther Adams and Jason Moran; choreographers/dance companies Shen Wei Dance Arts, Alonzo King Lines Ballet, Urban Bush Women, and Donald Byrd Spectrum Dance Company; and musicians Bon Iver, Simone

Dinnerstein, Branford Marsalis, and The Bad Plus amongst others.

In addition to commissioning and developing new work, Duke Performances maintains an annual schedule of roughly 80 performances — these shows are staged in a network of more than a dozen venues both on campus and in town — and span every conceivable genre.

The majority of these presentations include an artist-in-residency component that engages both Duke's campus and the broader Durham community.



# Lessons from the South Bronx

Jane Gabriels

I recently completed my doctoral dissertation, “Choreographies of community: Familias and its impact in the South Bronx,” about the performing arts in the South Bronx. In this work, I focused on the 1994-95 collaborative work entitled Familias, created by award-winning artists choreographer Merián Soto and visual artist (MacArthur Fellow) Pepon Osorio with the participation of local residents from 10 families. I discussed how this work related to the non-profit arts organization Pepatián that they co-founded in 1983 (along with educator and artist Patti Bradshaw), and how this collaborative performance and their organization influenced curatorial projects that I later developed as the South Bronx organization’s Director. I argued that Familias continues to impact the work of artists in the borough through this generative looping of influences.

The South Bronx itself is the context for the artists work. In 1994-95, the Bronx was climbing out of the devastation of earlier decades. The Bronx was and is one of the poorest congressional districts in the U.S., and along with this vulnerability, the Bronx also has immense cultural wealth. As the birthplace of hip-hop and the home of Salsa, residents and artists of the Bronx have a creative, experimental drive that clearly knows how to “make something out of nothing.”

The poverty of the borough is most often what makes the news, not the cultural richness. In an effort to promote an alternative narrative of the borough, I included a chronology of non-profits to illustrate the immense energy of the borough’s local residents to create change in their borough. As many know, it’s not easy to begin and maintain a non-profit – there are many meetings, paperwork, documentation, and collective coordination needed to define and fulfill the organization’s mission and mandate. The range of non-profits in the borough shows intense interest and agency in improving the local quality of life by and for the people who live there.

In documenting and writing about curation of the performing arts in the South Bronx, the reality is that this material should have been written at least ten years ago. It’s an effort to “catch up,” and catch up quickly as more interests from Manhattan begin to look northwards to the borough and see it as the “new Brooklyn” to gentrify and own property.

I began working at Pepatián in 1999 when Soto produced a festival to celebrate Afro-Caribbean-Latino dance (Bronx Dance Fest ’99) at Hostos Center for the Arts & Culture. In 2001, I began a



Hip-Hop Academy, with teaching artist choreographer Violeta Galagarza and son Noah at BronxWorks Center, 2015. Photo: Marisol Diaz

two-week festival held at a diverse range of venues that developed into a twice-yearly performance series (Pepatián’s annual Bronx Artist Spotlight: Jump It UP and Fall Into It) as well as showcases during APAP/Association of Performing Arts Presenters annual conference (2003-present). Each year the performance series hosted approximately 75 artists in performance, teaching workshops, and panel discussions, among other community-based activities.

From 2001-06, the annual Bronx Artist Spotlight series supported the early works of a number of Latino and Bronx-based artists, and their multi-disciplinary collaborations, in addition to workshops, classes, panel discussions and other community activities. Artists included: Arthur Aviles Typical Theater, Christal Brown, Caridad De La Luz/La Bruja, Sita Frederick, Violeta Galagarza, Wanda Ortiz, Marion Ramirez, Charles Rice-Gonzalez, Antonio Ramos, Rokafella, Noemi Segarra, Awilda Sterling, Rhina Valentin, among many others. Pepatián also supported the work of co-founder Merián Soto’s Salsa Trilogy and the beginning of her seven years investigation with Branch Dances.

The range of venues who participated in Pepatián’s Bronx Artist Spotlight (2001-06) included: BAAD!/Bronx Academy of Arts and Dance, Bronx High School of Visual Arts, Bronx Museum of the Arts, Bronxworks and Betances Community Centers, Hostos Center for the Arts & Culture, Passages Academy-Juvenile Detention Center, Pregones Theater, The Point, C.D.C., among others, in addition to other sites outside the borough, with creative residencies Cornell University, Lexington Center for the Arts and Temple University.

In that continuous mix of artists and venues, work developed:

*“I remember pre-show, sharing the stage and warming up with an electric mix of artists at BAAD!/Bronx Academy of Arts and Dance. Jump It Up exposed me to community and new environments like The Bronx Museum of the Arts. I also made some cool friends with artists such as Rokafella and Antonio Ramos. Jump It Up helped me connect with a voice I never knew I had. I always felt at home. I always felt I was with family.” ~ Pedro Jiménez, dancer and performer*

Though we produced a lot of new work through this series, it was difficult to get presenters from other boroughs in NYC and elsewhere to the Bronx to see the performances. There were no formal reviews and little press. To support the artists, I invited writer-friends to attend and write about the performances, and we later published these articles in Bronx Dance Magazine. I was frustrated with the lack of documentation and awareness.

Part of the reasons why I entered the doctoral program was to start writing about our work and to bring the material (along with an accompanying DVD of performances) into larger conversations that could help offer sites from which more scholarship and writing could develop. I envisioned that the dissertation would help support and leverage visibility of artists making work in the Bronx. Now this

writing is housed in a library system for others to access. I plan to continue developing the material and publish a book.

In practical terms, writing the dissertation helped develop my understanding of the curatorial practice in the community of artists with whom I worked. From 2006 to now, Pepatián projects have been more intensely collaborative with a small group of committed artists with whom I could work while completing my dissertation (projects included: Hip-Hop Academy, Shadow Lands, Open Call, Bronx Moves, among others). My curatorial practice has very much evolved from working with the artistic community in ways generated through the performances. The network of venues that supported our different projects created another movement of artists and audiences. The Bronx Artist Spotlight series, influenced by the Bronx Dance Fest'99 and Familias, was the foundational work that supported these later collaborations with venue partnerships.

The dissertation was also linked to my artistic practice - I created a dance theater “solo” entitled Becoming a Boogie-Down Rican (presented, among other venues, at BAAD!/Bronx Academy of Arts and Dance, May 2014) based on my experiences working in the borough. I wanted to create a written document, DVD and performance as a way to move the research and material into different public formats.

In addition to this work, I was invited by Wally Edgecombe, then-Director of Hostos Center for the Arts & Culture, to work on the Young Roots Performance Series that featured Latino artists experimenting with African roots (2011-2013). I created other access points in that project series to offer artists and public further places of connection – artists attended each others rehearsals and performances, interviewed each other for the project blog, were involved in each others creative processes, introduced facilitators into the post-performance discussions, received photo and video documentation with the participation of our award-winning local cable TV network, BronxNet. To continue that work, one of the participating artists, Dr. Raquel Z. Rivera, and I are now in conversation about creating a book to include these artists and their performances in the ongoing dialogue about Afro-Latino cultures. These full-evening length works created during this series also prompted me to create the first Bronx tour for presenters and funders during the annual APAP/ Association of Performing Arts Presenters conference in January.



Out of La Negrura (Out of Blackness) with Sita Frederick, Ana “Rokafella” Garcia and Marion Ramirez at Pregones Theater, Bronx, New York, 2009. Photo: Marisol Díaz

Where did I learn how to create these sorts of tactics? The South Bronx, of course. The borough – its artists and communities - have been one of my greatest teachers. You can’t work in a community that can “make something from nothing” without realizing all that you have and all that could be possible in working with what you have.

The important thing to emphasize is that an arts scene already exists here in the Bronx; it is not something that is “discovered” when new people (artists, organizations) move into the borough. Shoring up home-grown narratives and sharing stories of artists’ works in the Bronx helps ground and reaffirm the legacy that exists in the borough for other up-and-coming artists. I hope that this work will also in its own way help support and encourage “artistic stamina” that’s needed for artists to continue growing and developing work that engages with publics eager to hear from contemporary Afro-Latino-Caribbean voices.

As the professionalization of curation in the performing arts continues to develop its framework, how can curators, artists and communities of color best work together to increase opportunities to have the artists and communities voices heard and recognized by those outside and also within the borough?

A closing thought -- etymologically the word ‘curator’ derives from the Latin ‘cura’, which means ‘care, concern.’ Judy Hussie-Taylor, Executive Director of downtown Manhattan’s Danspace Project (and founding faculty member at ICPP/Institute for Curatorial Practice in Performance at Wesleyan University) described the word curator as meaning “one who cares for the souls of others” (Hussie-Taylor 102). On the other end of the spectrum, curare is resin from a plant in the Amazon that can cause muscular paralysis. In medicine, it is used as a muscle relaxant and by indigenous Indo-Americans and aboriginals in South America as arrow poison (Ritsema 6).

How do we further ensure that curatorial practices re-enliven and support care, creativity, and healing rather than paralyze or interrupt agency?

*“As a Bronx artist who has never had the luxury of being just that, Jump It Up gave me an opportunity to rest my educator/executive director self and step into myself as a poet. Pepatián also fostered collaborations that would otherwise not have occurred: poets and dancers performing together, the publication of an anthology that featured photography by Marisol*



Caridad De La Luz/La Bruja in La Consulta at Pregones Theater, Bronx, New York, 2014. Photo: Marisol Díaz

*Diaz and included a CD of poetry and music that was recorded in La Bruja's home studio. Mari, Cari (La Bruja) and I all lived within a few miles of each other – on the same train line! – and Jump It Up gave us the opportunity to work together and merge our distinctly Bronx voices. I was honored to be a part of the Jump It Up experience, an experience I continue to be inspired by.” ~ Victoria Sammartino, poet, consultant, founder and former Executive Director, Voices UnBroken.*

Note: This quote: “making something from nothing” has many sources, but I first heard it used to describe artists in the South Bronx from Kwikstep (aka Gabriel Dioniso), co-founder (along with his wife Rokafella, aka Ana Garcia) of Full Circle Productions, a hip-hop dance theater and entertainment non-profit company, in 1999 when I first started working at Pepatián.

Merián Soto is also quoted in an interview with Arthur Aviles in Bronx Dance Magazine in 2004:

*“I was moved by the spirit of creativity and resourcefulness in the Bronx, the making of something out of nothing.”*

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**JANE GABRIELS** has a movement practice that incorporates her work as a poet and singer as well as a producer/curator. Based in the Bronx, and in Montreal, she began working at the non-profit arts organization Pepatián in 1999 and became its Director in 2006.

At Pepatián, she develops, produces and supports contemporary inter-disciplinary art by Latino and Bronx-based artists via multiple projects. For three years, she was the co-curator and Project Director for the Young Roots Performance Series at Hostos Center for the Arts & Culture (2011-13), and is developing a book project about the series.

She recently completed her doctoral work at Concordia University (Montreal) and theorized about the performing arts scene of the South Bronx, accompanied by a dance theatre solo, Becoming a Boogie-Down Rican.

In 2014, working with Dena Davida, she co-organized « Envisioning the Practice : Montreal International Symposium on Performing Arts Curation, » and co-taught a pilot course on performing arts curation at L'Université du Québec à Montréal (UQAM).

She is currently co-editing a book based on the symposium with other members of CICA-ICAC/ International Community of Performing Arts Curation. Jane also currently curates “aLIVE” – a performance series at sweet little venues throughout Montreal.

She has collaborated with numerous artists on performances as well as on three albums of original work and a book of poems. Her workshops “360 Creative” and “Urban Meditation: The Lost, The Found, The Fantasy” offer participants interdisciplinary approaches to their creative process through movement and writing.

She is currently developing a new dance theater solo about her family history in Montreal, Sh’or-e. As a consultant for artists over the past 15 years, she has raised needed funds for non-profits and artists through individual donations, institutional funding and corporate sponsorships, in addition to securing other professional development resources. She established janejane productions to create and support artistic projects, and offers consulting as well as editorial services. [www.janejaneproductions.com](http://www.janejaneproductions.com) | [www.janegabriels.com](http://www.janegabriels.com) | [www.pepatian.org](http://www.pepatian.org) | [www.cica-icac.org](http://www.cica-icac.org).

# My Foundation is A Legacy of Liberation

## A. Nia Austin-Edwards

*I am...*

the daughter of a mother who performed pregnant

the granddaughter of a teacher who saved all her extra materials to make sure her grandkids had summer activities

the granddaughter of an art teacher who trained art teachers

the daughter-student of Terrie Ajile Axam - founder of the Mojah technique and cultivator of smart dancers - dancer-doctors, dancer-lawyers, dancer-administrators, dancer-choreographers, dancer-people

the daughter-student of Dawn Axam who has built a company of choreographers creating work in a multigenerational methodology

*I have collaborated with...*

Adia Whitaker who creates worlds that tell the stories of people of African descent through dance, music, costume, props, makeup, spirit

Marjani Forte who always reminds me to ask WHY

Paloma McGregor who constantly invites me to interrogate and deepen my practice as both artist and human

Jesse Phillips Fein, a white woman born and bred in Brooklyn who is constantly questioning her privilege through art making and is never afraid to get it wrong, learn from it, and dig deeper

*PURPOSE Productions has collaborated with...*

651 ARTS who centers and creates spaces for art by African diasporic peoples even when they themselves might be feeling a bit off balance

Dancing While Black in supporting the manifestation of creative spaces that celebrate the Blackness that is the foundation of this dance we do

Camille A. Brown who continues to investigate her role and her voice as a “successful” dance artist.

*I move among the legacy of...*

Jawole Zollar and the leaders known as Urban Bush Women who are building nations and pushing boundaries across the globe

*I am...*

Sister to an environmental scientist interior designer with the sarcasm to slash a snail (if you met her you’d understand)

*Mama-Auntie...*

of Yaaxche, who said to me while watching a show, “I think she should listen to the drums. I think she should feel the rhythm and do what the drums are saying” (mind you, she’s 3) of Eko who roars like a young lion but also asked to paint his toenails of Ehze who seems to approach everything with a (soft) touch and Asali who is not afraid to hit back

*Caretaker...*

of Anaïs who gets her little shoulders bouncing when the Roots play on Pandora

of Naima who rocks her hips anytime she hears Janelle Monae Godmother...

of Olayinka who is mesmerized by dancing and drumming and ready to eat up the world (literally)

These are just a few layers in my legacy.

I also attended NYU and worked at the Brooklyn Arts Exchange and started my own business got a research fellowship with dance USA...whoop de do bazzle - but THAT LEGACY is my foundation - my roots, my trunk, and my long reaching branches. It builds my artistic (and human) stamina, as Jane Gabriels described it.

Now that research fellowship, well that might just be another reason I’m here. See I had to (yes, HAD to) investigate the relationship between the nonprofit model and dance through 25 interviews with artists, administrators, and historians (NOT presenters, NOT funders, NOT writers/critics). I can still hear Dr. Brenda Dixon Gottschild in my head saying “art is a measure of culture, a barometer of society,” and Tommy DeFrantz (who I am so grateful to for organizing this space) who told me quite simply that the middle men - presenters, managers, gatekeepers - well, many of them are like overseers on a plantation. They don’t own it, and they ain’t workin it, but they tellin errrrrrbody what to do. Those aren’t his exact words, but rather my ATL-ien interpretation.



And the more I listened to these interviews and tried to write some sort of reflection - the more I felt like I was on the plantation. And that legacy, all them folks that I called out, they ain't about a plantation lifestyle. They're about a liberation lifestyle.

My liberation begins with acknowledging this legacy. With understanding that people have BEEN presenting art “differently” and centering the voices of people of color, Black women, our children. We BEEN shifting the narrative and that's why we're all sitting here. So how do we continue to build resources that support our shifting? How do we hold each other up so we don't get sick and tired? You know what my research showed me - my soul ain't from round these parts. Looking and listening around the room we can't even name ourselves and our work because the titles don't quite fit. Nonprofit, for profit, none of that matters to me and to many of the folks I know. We're about the doing. The digging. The excavation and the liberation. And ain't no business model, no presenting model, no lifestyle model supported by the power structures in this country that supports what we do. That's why we're constantly creating spaces, building nations, pushing boundaries. Letting go of these structures that have been placed upon us is one of many first steps (Healing and self-care is another important one. I celebrate Nicole Martin and her vision of curation as radical care.) - from business, to cultural commodification, to even this academic space we stand in. Can we pull resources from it? Sure. Do we need it, eh, debatable.

So many of us are already working independently. Marya wrote about working within and outside of orgs. Jaamil posed the question of coexisting with an organization versus self-production. *Shifting the model requires shifting our thinking and our being* - as Adia would say, finding the intersection between your circular and your linear self. And it sounds nice to some folk, but it ain't comfortable. You WILL NOT be invited into some spaces. And you HAVE TO be ok with that.

I am also honored to be the life partner of an amazing brotha who offered this reflection when I shared my thoughts with him:

“What would it mean for more organizations to make that kind of shift in methodology to match an African Diasporic ideology? What would it mean for scholars and supporting businesses? What would that world look like? How do we create and fund and sustain methods of presentation/distribution of our work to the communities that need it? Art is healing work as much as it is cultural work, and our people are hurting. And now, they are inundated with a constant barrage of the devaluing of Black life while simultaneously demanding and asserting that Black Lives Matter, and are looking for actions and options and solutions. But we also need art to envision a world where that is true, and to help us heal enough to live in it and have it be enough. To allow ourselves to be enough. What is the role of a presenting organizational community in that? How do we eliminate “competition” and foster collaboration and community? How do we help artists whose work thinks beyond this system (like Adia) reach our communities?”



Ase Dance Theater Collective. Photo courtesy of SToops.

And amongst all this, I have chosen to do my work through PURPOSE Productions, supporting artists and activists in the manifestation of PURPOSE-full work that seeks to unify and develop our world community. It is my way of living in service. And with my growing staff I am cultivating people who will be able to support the vision that every artist has a support structure aligned to their identity and vision, one that is rooted in the facets of communities of color.

So I will continue questioning, studying, digging, in hopes that I too manifest this legacy of liberation.

Side Note: Mentions of press coverage also came up in the discussions we shared at the Symposium. As a writer who was recently invited by the generous and gifted Eva Yaa Asantewaa to speak on a panel titled “Dance Criticism in NYC” I could not help but be reminded of my reflection on this question of how and where we write about art by and for communities of color.

*“In the time since that panel, I have been told that it is hard to see me as marginalized. That I am successful and sitting at the center. Yet as I sit at the center, I watch the margins remain invisible or simply pass through...Our pain often seems to be only a hiccup in their sentence.*

It is easy to see me at the center in my fancy African pants and tall shoes. It is not easy to see that I carry children lost, cousins jailed, hunger pains, blood stains, mama’s tears, baba’s fears, grandma’s dreams and so so so much death. It is not comfortable to see my history as you admire my success. But that seeing is actually exactly what I was talking about.

*It does not take a side eye to see that the lens is distorted...I want you to see the violence we carry that shakes us into anxiety. I want you to see the pain behind addiction that brings us liberating tears. We are trauma survivors and ancestral thrivers. We are pain carriers and glitter wearers...*

*You cannot begin to understand how to process my cultural translation until you see I’m actually speaking multiple languages.*

*And while there is so much work to be done – perhaps we can start by simply questioning what we see. Maybe it is better to look through a side eye after all.”* - excerpt from <http://www.purposeproductions.org/seeing-through-side-eyes/>

“How do we hold each other  
so we don’t get tired?”  
*Nia Austin-Edwards*



**A. NIA AUSTIN-EDWARDS**, Founder of PURPOSE Productions, Writer, Caretaker, Supporter, Organizer, Lover.

PURPOSE Productions is a company that supports artists and organizers in the manifestation of PURPOSE-full work that seeks to unify and develop our world community. She is also an editor and contributor to The Dance Enthusiast and was the 2014-15 John R. Munger Research Fellow for Dance/USA.

Her performing career began in her mother’s womb, developed in Atlanta, GA, at Total Dance / Dancical Productions, Inc., and was further formal-

ized through Tri-Cities Visual and Performing Arts Magnet High School and New York University’s Tisch School of the Arts.

Since her transition from Marketing & Communications Director at BAX/Brooklyn Arts Exchange, PURPOSE Productions has had the pleasure of supporting dance artists such as Adia Tamar Whitaker and Marjani Forte, theater artists such as Melanie Jones and Latonia Phipps, organizations such as 651 ARTS and STooPS, initiatives such as Paloma McGregor’s Dancing While Black and Camille A. Brown’s The Gathering, among others. [PURPOSEproductions.org](http://PURPOSEproductions.org) | [anae@PURPOSEproductions.org](mailto:anae@PURPOSEproductions.org) | @KwanzaaKid



## Rep'ing Blackness: Curating Performance as a Practice of Radical Care

Nicole L. Martin

We are living in an extraordinary time. As a child of multiculturalism and colorblind rhetoric who attended schools where the discussion of black revolutionaries was limited to Martin Luther King, Jr. and Harriet Tubman, these are exceptional days for racial discourse. It seems to me that recently, and with alarming regularity, we have been given front row seats to what my mother referred to as “spectacular performances of white privilege.” We audience racial terrorism and feel the full effects of its historical trauma and lingering pain. When possible, and with as much effort as we can gather in our enraged and distressed state, we participate in and champion the counter performance of “Black Lives Matter.” We do so because we understand the politics of embodiment and how our activism is necessary to counter the narrative of subjugated black life in the United States.

The invitation to this symposium arrived months before the anti-black terrorist massacre at the Emanuel AME Church in Charleston. The urgency of our discussion developed long before a black teenager was pulled to the ground by her braids for attending a pool party in McKinney, TX, before Freddie Gray, before Rekia Boyd, before the SAE fraternity lynching chant at the University of Oklahoma, before Walter Scott, before countless unnamed, transgender people of color were subjected to vicious acts of transphobia. The loss of life and brutal assaults yielded from these acts of anti-black sentiment suggests that our call to convene is really an invitation to think about how curating performance for and by people of color becomes an act of radical care.

Playing witness to these moments of racialized violence has led me to think a lot about healing practices. The idea behind a healing practice is to develop habits that provide emotional, physical and mental stability in times of stress and affliction. While I can't fully say how we are going to move through our present state of racial trauma, I do know that our need for spaces that offer healing from this suffering is imperative. And this is where imagining curatorial practice as a habit of radical care becomes really invigorating. To curate performance for and by people of color is to formalize space for black humanity. In our radical care, we say black lives matter because we install black life in generative ways.

At the University of Texas at Austin, we are tasked with unveiling anti-black racism in an environment that is literally and figuratively structured to displace black bodies. Dr. Edmund T. Gordon, chair of the only African and African Diaspora Studies department in Texas, describes the architectural layout of the campus as spatially reflecting a Neo-Confederacy. The infamous tower where the “eyes of Texas” gaze out is positioned facing south toward a green lawn framed by statues erected in honor of Confederate “heroes”: Jefferson Davis, Robert E. Lee, and Albert Sidney Johnston.

At the end of this lawn is the Littlefield Fountain, named after George Washington Littlefield one of the University's largest benefactor's and a Confederate army officer. From the tower steps, you can see straight to the Texas State capitol which, at 308 feet, stands nearly 15 feet taller than the nation's Capitol in Washington D.C. At the University, blacks make up less than 4% of both the student and faculty bodies. A report released in 2014 found that even as Austin's population rose just over 20% between 2000 and 2010, its African-American population declined by 5.4%. And these statistics are just a sampling of the hostility within which most blacks in Austin and its surrounding areas navigate on a daily basis.

Easing the encounter with these environmental, structural and systemic antagonisms is the Performing Blackness Series (pBs). Launched in 2004 by the John L. Warfield Center for African American Studies, Performing Blackness offers two-week residencies to artists – both locally and nationally – whose work focuses on the intersections of race, gender, sexuality, nationality and class. Artists are provided with rehearsal space, a production team, publicity, housing, and stipends for food. Many of the invited guests offer public workshops for students, faculty, staff, and the broader Austin community tailored to developing or enhancing artistic practice. Some of the performers featured through the initiative include Sharon Bridgforth, Daniel Alexander Jones, E. Patrick Johnson, Grisha Coleman, Robbie McCauley, Stacey Karen Robinson, Ursula Rucker, Coleman Domingo, Fred Ho, Lenelle Moïse, and Florinda Bryant. The series provides visibility for a variety of performance traditions rooted in black aesthetics such as theatrical jazz, spoken word, hip hop performance, and Yoruba spirituality. Featured work explores a range of diasporic theories through critical performance ethnography, postcolonial narrative, and Afro-futurism. And as the Series responds to Austin's need for increased visibility and representation of its black population, it also acts as a critical channel for artistic resources. Through pBs, institutional support is directed to those who have limited access to such backing, thereby ensuring that the creative work for people of color remains viable. The Performing Blackness Series is a locus of expansive opportunity, bridging the divide between institutional privilege and community interests, between activists and allies, between artistic labor and spectatorial leisure.

As both an organizer of the Performing Blackness series, and as a witness, I can attest to the transformative effects of this type of sustained and purposeful curatorial care. I had the privilege of acting as dramaturg for Stacey Karen Robinson's workshop performance of her solo show, *Quiet Frenzy*, in 2012. I remember in the lobby area leading up to the performance space, the walls were lined with photographs of the Theatre Department's past productions, most of which reinforced the intentional erasure of its black actors. During the run of the show, however, we temporarily removed those images and replaced them with illustrations and poetry supporting theatrical jazz and Stacey Karen Robinson's artistry. Through the work of the Series, black bodies were literally reinserted into the narrative of the department. (And it should be noted that *Quiet Frenzy* was recently published in the edited anthology, *Solo Black Woman*.) In the fall of 2013, I curated the academic symposium



accompanying the Austin-debut of Dr. Lisa B. Thompson's play, *Single Black Female*. It was a daylong event featuring a range of panelists talking at length to themes threaded throughout the script. But, perhaps, the most memorable moment from the day came during a panel dedicated to the production team, where one of the local actresses attested to how important the show had been to both affirming her particular experience as a black woman and offering artistic opportunity in a city widely praised for its theatre scene, yet seemingly unapologetic for its repeated failure to produce black work. And in her profound disclosure, I discovered testament for my own discomfort and longing: My ability to convene with other witnesses in the space of *Performing Blackness* was often the only the time I found myself in a room with other black folks in Austin outside of the handful of Black studies courses I attended. What's worse is that in order to survive this psychic injury I had convinced myself that it didn't matter if I was the only visible/invisible black body in a room.

And this is where I begin to feel like a broken record: the stakes involved with curating black life are so clear to me. But too often, I find myself in spaces and communities dedicated to uplifting performance and theatrical work but only interested in attending to black life insofar as it demonstrates their liberal diversity or acts as a response to vocalized public criticism. Or, their interest is limited to a particular narrative of black life at the expense of honoring its multiplicity. This is why the practice of radical care in curating performance for and by people of color is so necessary. Radical care is invested in the way performance aesthetics – from the bodies onstage to the use of lighting – reinforces the invisibility of whiteness. Radical care, therefore, is self-reflexive about aesthetic biases. Radical care understands that it is insufficient to suggest that art exists independent of social, historical, and political influence. Radical care is discontent with closed social networks and actively seeks new introductions and new ways of seeing the world. Radical care does not shy away from the unfamiliar. Radical care is unamused with ego and considers community the cornerstone of practice. Radical care is gracious, healing, and affirming.

I will close with this: a few weeks ago, I met with curators who are developing a museum exhibit for African American history in the performing arts. It was an enlightening conversation; I asked how the museum's curators wrestle with this idea of curating black bodies through performance. One of the people I spoke with is a historian by training and openly admitted to feeling relieved that the work of performance is someone else's responsibility. Performance, as it was explained, felt too subjective in its methodology and analysis. Radical care in curatorial practice recognizes and embraces the nuance of subjectivity. Radical care leans into the messiness of performance. Radical care understands that any perceived difficulty in curating bodies through performance, particularly bodies of color, is directly proportional to the gravity of the stakes in our failure try.



**NICOLE MARTIN** is an artist-scholar committed to supporting aesthetic practices through theoretical frameworks at the intersection of black studies, performance studies, and black feminist studies.

As a solo performer and performing artist, Nicole explores black subjectivity and racialized mourning as embodied and ritualized affect. She has been a guest performer for *The Encyclopedia Show - Austin*. Nicole was also featured in the 2003 Showtime documentary, *Freshman Diaries*.

Her current research interests focus on the relationship between performance, visibility, gender,

race, historical archives, and state interests. Her dissertation investigates the emerging persona of the "black leading lady" through the figures of First Lady Michelle Obama, Olivia Pope from ABC's *Scandal*, and playwright Lynn Nottage's ingénue in *By The Way, Meet Vera Stark*. She is currently serving as an executive committee member for the Hemispheric Institute's Graduate Student Initiative to be held in Austin, TX, November 2015.

Nicole received her Ph.D. from the Department of Theatre and Dance at the University of Texas at Austin.

# Black Joy in the Hour of Chaos: Reflections on Movement and Social Movements

Christina Knight

In November of 2014, the artist Marc Bamuthi Joseph and I flew to a state that neither of us lives in to talk about migration. Bamuthi told me that he had been invited to create an installation in Central Park as part of **Creative Time’s Drifting in Daylight** project. When we met that day, we walked to the North Woods and looked out at the space that marks the difference between due north on a compass and the way the city’s grid maps north, which faces slightly eastward. On a hill, watching the movement and sounds of Harlem, we thought about northward migration from both the South and the global South; we thought about what the “North” has meant and still means to people who look like us. Thinking about migration helps us to ask, why is it that we move? What moves us? And perhaps implicit in the other two questions: who is this “us” we speak of?

The simple answer is black folks in the New World, whether our ancestors sharecropped their way through North Carolina (like mine), emigrated from Haiti (like Bamuthi’s) or just arrived from Senegal by way of Paris. Part of “what moves us” is coercive, of course. Global finance capital has been displacing black bodies for centuries. Now, a mix of oppressive conditions, increased transnational mobility, and plain old striving for better things lands us here. But by asking, “what moves us,” I also want to engage with what moves us to act, to push for social justice and real inclusion. That is, once we brown and black folks find ourselves here, in what ways do we take this nation to task for failing to meet it’s own democratic ideals?

These are questions that Bamuthi and I have been in dialogue about for more than a decade, and so it is fitting that they find a home in this project, a site-specific work rooted in the spoken word, a parachute-turned revival tent, and a second-line style procession that envelops the audience in a reflection on the park’s—and the city’s—evolving meaning to people of color. These thoughts I am going to share today reflect this project’s focus on issues not just of migration, but revolution, social movement, blackness and, most of all, joy.

## Notes on a revolution

I always wondered what it would be like to live in a time of revolution. Like when the streets of Memphis or Philly or Chicago were burning at the beginning of the 20th century. I always wondered what it was like to wake up every day, go to work, write an academic paper, look people in the eye on the train, dream of having children, buy groceries, write poems. Now I know. This isn’t an exercise in nostalgia or fantasy. It was surely hard to live then, as it is now in the midst of such terrifying asymmetries of power. And I’m surprised to find that uncertainty is the temporality of revolution. Veering toward displacement, a present without the comfort of teleological bookends. A rethinking

that is shot through with both a heady hope and a deep, rational fear. And time, as we live it, isn’t history; we aren’t “actors” in some grand scheme. We remake the world each day in tiny, often forgettable actions. It might seem, in this schema, that there is no outside to ideology, no way to alter a system that is always reproducing itself through our quiet consent.

But we know who we are. And when we feel an impulse, despite all rational inclinations otherwise, to stand up with and for one another against the annihilation of life, we begin to see ourselves in a new context, one that looks far beyond the present into a future that does not yet have a name. Black lives matter. Yes. As they did during the desperate times of the Middle Passage, plantation slavery, Jim Crow and into the mass incarcerated present. The litany itself exhausts, and the protestors press on knowing that we are both “in no ways tired” and born into a collective racial exhaustion. Blues, after all, is a feeling. But blues is more than that, too! I believe in the sacred, yes sacred qualities of black art: I’ve seen it save lives and call a community into being. Further, I know that joy is a future-facing practice and one of underestimated political efficacy. As Jose Muñoz writes, “the present is not enough,” a reminder that negotiating with a state premised on the systemic devaluation of our lives and communities can’t mark our horizon of possibility if we want a real revolution.

Thus, a proposal: let us do some consciousness raising around joy: how we make it and how we might document it. And as we move through these streets, in addition to taking over and shutting down (acts of supreme necessity), I hope we might also develop a new imaginative cartography. That is, as Robin D. G. Kelley reminds us, in a revolution, we have to both take the time to dream and make the time to write those dreams down. Or paint them, dance them, and most importantly, share them with one another. What does a map to the future look like? How can we ensure that it is made in our image? How might we make sure that such a revolutionary cartography makes possible a sacred space for all that is to come?

## Acts of surrender

Imagine a dance. Imagine two or more dancing, experimenting in weight shifts and lifts, calculated risks unfolding at an urgent pace. Bodies in time. You see, dance is instructive in thinking about social



Christina Knight, Creative Time's Drifting in Daylight Project, 2015. Photo: Brett Cook

movements. For instance, like in activism, most of the work happens at the front end, unseen. And the more flexible you are, the more you can take risks; the more risks you can take, the more breathtaking the potential outcome. Danger and beauty are kissing cousins. But more importantly, dance teaches us about contingency, something that opens us up to both accident as well as the sublime. And dance is, above all, social. It requires synchronicity and a rapt audience, co-creators in a moment that cannot be repeated and cannot be unseen.

Why ponder the relationship between movement and social movement? Imagine that much meaning making happens at the level of the representational. Imagine too that much world making happens in art making, where the stakes are ostensibly lower (though artists today—most of whom subsist sans health insurance or safety net—would surely disagree). Artist and entrepreneur Theaster Gates once asked me why it is that we expect people with the least resources to bear the responsibility of political torch bearing. And make no mistake, we should pay artists their worth. But the answer is this: ideas can't be bought. And further: the best ideas shouldn't be.

Another way to say this is that art making is both an act of world making and an act of surrender. There is much to learn from the ways that artists risk being taken for fools, daring to resist the conservative contours of common sense. There are even greater lessons to be learned from their need for an audience. In a world increasingly insistent on individual freedom and yet defining that freedom as ever-broadening and tailored consumer choices, we need people who need people. That is, we need people who unironically invite others into a community for the exchange of ideas and perspectives. We need subcultures that aren't centered on objects of desire. We need models of citizenship and democracy. We need art and we need artists.

### Social Choreographies

Recently, I saw choreographer **Kyle Abraham's *Pavement***, which begins with two men, one black and one white, engaged in a *pas de deux*. The dance plays with intimacy and how it manifests in masculinity—for instance, how quickly play can turn into violent one-upmanship. The duet ends with the white dancer laying his black counterpart on the floor, facedown with his hands behind his back. Abraham is an expert in telescoping like this—between movement as a graceful execution of form and gestures that collapse into the pedestrian, even prosaic experience of living in urban spaces.

But he gets at something more, still: how those gestures are ordered in a hierarchy of power that falls along racial lines. This is important because we can't think about the relationship between movement and social movement without also thinking about social choreographies. For example, how the carceral state proscribes the movement of black men, whether through Stop and Frisk-type strategies of terror or through a more subtle conditioning of the eye of fellow citizens to read ruin, a would-be fall from grace, onto the upright bodies of those men.

What does this have to do with a parachute? A revival tent? A second line? In using these objects and performance strategies, we acknowledge that people denied access to mainstream channels of legitimacy forge community in other ways. This is what director Melvin Van Peebles calls "Negro Make-Do." To acknowledge this fact is not to ignore a long history of racialized exclusion. As hip hop choreographer Rennie Harris once reminded me, "African American music started on the slave ship—a tea kettle is not a djembe." That is, loss was *productive* of the first strains of black American music, a fact that remains true in all the culture we have produced since.

In many ways, though, the objects we employ in *Black Joy* are less important than the people animating them: think one part 1960s protest theater, one part relational aesthetics, and one part site-specific installation practice. The protest element is important—Bamuthi envisions

41 people lifting the parachute after the 41 bullets that laid Amadou Diallo to rest. And we deal in social relations because with the bodies of our audience members, we mirror the body politic—social movements only happen in the living, breathing aggregate. But site-specificity is perhaps our best gift: we ponder the real migrations of people of color to New York City, and the global North more broadly, examining in our mourning and celebration, our claim to this sacred ground.

But *Black Joy*, like actual black joy, travels. We are an Exodus people, and our culture develops exactly when and where we do. For that reason, the parachute and all of the installation's artifacts can be folded up and carried by one person anywhere. Dark peoples, they say, *travel light*. So, back again to social choreography: it turns out anyone can do it. Any time, any place.

### Position

To conclude, when I think about what I want as an artist, thinker and curator, I try not to think of projects, or even dream jobs. What I want is the end of an economic system that crushes the many in favor of the few. What I want is a world in which people can access the sacred, both in themselves and in others. What I want is to encounter the sublime and the beautiful and for people like me—brown and black people, people who never owned anything—to be able to do the same. I want a future. *We* want a future. And I think that art is important in getting from here to there because it can enable us to imagine a world otherwise.



Kyle Abraham, *Pavement*, 2014.  
Photo: Carrie Schneider

Because every day we wake up to a new racial outrage. And to a slew of think pieces that we share within the closed circuits of our social networks, think pieces that are quickly and cleverly written and that are exactly of the moment. I am starting to see both phenomena as two sides of the same coin, a call and response that only reminds us, in clearer and clearer terms exactly where we are. But do we have enough energy, enough imagination to rethink the terms of engagement? How brave would we have to be? Every time I get to this place, I think of how freeing it is to not have a choice. We are at the brink of catastrophe. The reason I write about black visual culture and performance? Because what we envision in the realm of aesthetics shapes our future. But more importantly, because it won't save you to look away.

“We build communities of trust around our shared commitments, and the object/event comes out of that commitment.”

*Christina Knight*



**CHRISTINA KNIGHT** received her Ph.D. from Harvard's Department of African and African American Studies with a primary field in History of Art and Architecture.

The recipient of numerous grants for graduate study, including a Ford Foundation Dissertation fellowship, she is currently a postdoctoral fellow in Theater and Dance at Bowdoin College.

Research interests include the connection between embodied practices and identity, the relationship

between race and the visual field, and the queer imaginary. Her current book project focuses on representations of the Middle Passage in contemporary American visual art and performance. She is also a playwright, and is collaborating with her sister on a performance adaptation of the Orpheus and Eurydice myth that combines drag culture, Haitian funereal imagery and house music.

That project, titled *Eurydice Descended*, will premiere on November 20-21, 2015, at the Cordoba Center for the Arts in Durham North Carolina.



# BLACK MALE REVISITED: Imaging The Dark Divine

Jaamil Olawale Kosoko

*When we speak radically of the dark divine, the invitation is for each and every one of us to transcend race and gender, to move beyond categories into the interior spaces of our psyches and encounter there the ground of our being, the place of mystery, creativity, and possibility, for it is there that we can construct the mind that can resist, that can revision, that can create the maps that when followed will liberate us. ~ bell hooks, LORDE: The Imagination of Justice*

*At first, looking at the performance art landscape in America, I scratched my head struggling with this question of the absence of black males in the field...even I must ask where are the black men? ~ Homer Jackson, Where Oh Where Are The Black Male Performance Artists*



Photo collage: Jaamil Olawale Kosoko

As a nation we are still trying to heal from the traumas of segregation, and while many enlightened white contemporary curators and artistic directors know the importance of incorporating Black and other minority voices into their staffs, exhibitions, and performance seasons, much of the art world is still managed under a passé white supremacist's doctrine that ordains European aesthetics and creativity as holding the highest level of intellectual and/or conceptual rigor.

The Internet, however, has changed the way visual and performance art is experienced by the global market. The mainstream distribution of the world wide web has allowed the artistic playing fields to be leveled. Today, contemporary Black experimentalists can work online

and/or in video and film mediums to push their work towards greater public consumption. These artists have a digital platform that circumvents the curator as the middleman, connecting the artist directly with viewers and collectors.

Experimental artists such as Jonté, Discosean21, Starflow, IMMA/MESS, **Lawrence Graham-Brown**, Sherman Fleming, among others have created significant audiences for themselves online. The often hyper-afro-queer futuristic digital personas they portray in their works put them in situations that create structural, multi-layered, and sexually complex mystique. These artists use their bodies – sometimes as sexual subjects, sometimes as radical racial metaphors – to bridge the gap between “high” and “low” art, pop and avant-garde, all the while connecting their work to post-internet



Lawrence Graham-Brown, Visual and Performance Artist. Photo courtesy of the Artist.

audiences as a means to forgo the curator/museum relationship and distribute their work to the public regardless gallery or venue representation.

In a 2011 interview concerning the subject of Black art distribution, Philadelphia-based artist and jazz curator Homer Jackson says:

Currently digital technology provides powerful and inexpensive tools for the artist's tool chest. It allows us to cease the means of production and to reach for the means of distribution. That said, the advent of cheap digital scanners, palm sized video cameras, digital projectors, desktop publishing software, desktop media editing software, nonetheless the very internet itself, provide contemporary artists of all stripes with a critical choice that few artists in the past had: The choice to either co-exist with institutions/presenters or to go at it alone and self-produce.

Ultimately, entrepreneurship is the open door of which you speak. Right now, this is “the” door that is most open to black artists.

Jackson continues:

The situation of the non-profit artist is infeasible in today's complex social and economic climate. I see more and more young people, particularly young Black artists, avoiding the old school model of the working artist and trying something a little different. And to that end, the new technology provides easier access for everyone. And if that is the case then it's an even level playing field in America....meaning Black folks are right back to their traditional disadvantages.

With this statement, Jackson brings into focus the traditional stereotypes or disadvantages that continue to plague the minority experience in America, and even more specifically the Black male experience.

In the preface to her book *We Real Cool: Black Men and Masculinity*, the feminist scholar bell hooks argues that “black men endure the worst impositions of gendered masculine patriarchal identity.”

She writes:

Seen as animals, brutes, natural born rapists, and murderers, black men have had no real dramatic say when it comes to the way they are represented. They have made few interventions on the stereotype. As a consequence they are victimized by stereotypes that were first articulated in the nineteenth century but hold sway over the minds and imaginations of citizens of this nation in the present day. Black males who refuse categorization are rare, for the price of visibility in the contemporary world of white supremacy is that black male identity be defined in relation to the stereotype whether by embodying it or seeking to be other than it.

Today, more than ever before, I see a multitude of diverse representations of Black masculinity. From

popular iconic images of RuPaul to President Obama, we are living in a post-civil rights era where Black folks are rooted in (and far less restricted by) the construct of Blackness. The Internet, more than any other invention of the twentieth century, has given birth to a non-hierarchical approach to negotiate difference and engage with people who are other. It has also altered the ways in which the public interacts with venues as well as the curatorial practice museums and performing art centers must take to become more viable in the lives of art consumers.

In a time when financial and educational resources in the arts are scarce across the board, no matter one's race or gender, if contemporary institutions are to remain embedded in the criticality of current artistic concerns, then they must be in constant discourse with artists, producers, and curators who are on the horizon, self-taught, outsider, minority, and independent. More than ever before, modern individuals are in control of their experiences, carefully curating the cultural content which they ordain as most important to their lives (as displayed most concretely by social media), and so the role of the art institution of the future is to create more spaces for this kind of experiential, innovative, even-leveled, interaction to take place without judgment, prejudice, and highbrow critique.

As Audre Lorde once said, The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house, which is to say in order to diversify audiences, cultural hubs must meet Black and Brown audiences with new creative strategies. The tools and frameworks used to produce the work of the artists (and more specifically artists of color) need to be just as multilayered, dynamic, and radical as the work itself. What I'm saying is presenters are using passe systems of promotion to support work that is operating decades into the future. The American institution has spent hundreds of years mastering how to locate, intrigue, and attract white, wealthy audiences, now it's time to devote the same amount of energy in demystifying the dark divine, gain the trust and attention of more Black and Brown communities, and give them the artistic equity they deserve.

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Originally from Detroit, Michigan, **JAAMIL OLAWALE KOSOKO** is a Nigerian American curator, producer, poet, and performance artist currently based in Brooklyn, New York.

With his creative partner Kate Watson-Wallace, he co-directs anonymous bodies || art collective, a visual performance hub focusing on innovative approaches to curation, performance, and education.

He is a Co-Curator of the 2015 Movement Research Spring Festival and the 2015 Dancing While Black performance series at BAAD in the Bronx; a 2014 American Express Leadership Academy alum, a contributing correspondent for *Dance Journal* (PHL), the *Broad Street Review* (PHL), and *Critical Correspondence* (NYC); a 2012 Live Arts Brewery Fellow as a part of the Philadelphia Live

Arts Festival; a 2011 Fellow as a part of the DeVos Institute of Art Management at the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts; and an inaugural graduate of the Institute for Curatorial Practice in Performance (ICPP) at Wesleyan University.

Kosoko is a Founding Advisory Board Member of the Coalition for Diasporan Scholars Moving and has most recently been elected to the Executive Committee on the Board of Trustees at *Dance/USA*. He has sat on numerous funding and curatorial panels including The Map Fund, Baker Memorial Prize, the National Endowment for the Arts, Movement Research at Judson Church, and the Philadelphia Cultural Fund.

Visit [www.anonymousbodies.org](http://www.anonymousbodies.org) for more information.

# Inclusion-based Curation

Rasu Jilani

## Background

My background and creative practice is as an independent curator and social sculptor, which allows me the privilege to investigate the intersections between art, culture and civic engagement as a means of raising critical consciousness. The main objective of my work is to catalyze interaction between artists, cultural institutions, local community and the wider public, in order to promote cultural awareness and artistic literacy to communities of color through exhibitions, public programs, community dialogues and festivals. However, my work is not limited to only communities of color.

I am also interested in how institutions engage with communities beyond merely opening their doors. My ideas on programming are intended to hold the institutions accountable to addressing the exchange of values between the organizational mission statement and the communities they claim they serve. My *modus operandi* includes programming by inclusion - this means meeting audiences where they are, highlighting diverse cultural values, strategic community outreach, empowering marginalized voices, and engaging art spaces as community centers. My role and reputation in the field as a producer that attracts a nontraditional art audience further demonstrates my commitment to these ideals.

Over the years, I have worked with a wide variety of organizations that have had different engagement goals, but all wanted programs for young communities of color or “diverse” audiences. I started my career with my brand *coup d’etat BROOKLYN* and the Afropunk Festival as a cultural producer. As Co-Founder and Managing Partner of Coup d’etat Brooklyn/Coup d’etat Arts, a brand defined by its social commentary and community activism through artistic expression, I have produced dozens of art and cultural events ranging from pop-up galleries, seasonal exhibitions, public murals, performance and music festivals. From 2008 to 2012 I partnered with the Afropunk Festival as an art producer collaborating on an annual 150-foot mural created by artists from the greater New York City, New Jersey, DC and California Bay Areas.

My official arts administration career launched in 2011 with Pratt Center as a Senior Fellow of Arts, Culture and Sustainability managing community art projects for specific Brooklyn communities: Bed-Stuy, Cypress Hills, East New York and Williamsburg (via El Puente). These are all communities with high concentrations of brown and black populations. My work thus far has been hyper-local to NYC. However, each community offers its own set of rules, interests, nuance and culture. This is essential to understand when entering existing communities via programming and curation work.

## MAPP International Productions

MAPP International Productions is a unique performing arts organization that produces the work of artists who take risks with content, form and creative process. We connect artists with presenters and public communities to bring their works both to the stage and into peoples’ lives, provoking dialogue and inspiring engagement with contemporary culture. MAPP International’s Community Engagement and Public Humanities (CEPH) program is where art and civic dialogue converge through dynamic programming and thoughtful partnerships with community organizations. With CEPH, MAPP International is creating a sustainable forum of exchange among artists, cultural thought leaders, and a diverse public. CEPH Programs are designed to extend the experience beyond the performance, and allow for important dialogues to take place by inspiring imagination and exercising the power of democracy.

## Community Programs and Civic Engagement

In the context of the current conversation, four events stand forward:

- “*Triple Consciousness: Black Feminism(s) in the Time of Now*” at Brooklyn Museum was a discussion series inspired and refracted from Ralph Lemon’s Scaffold Room that address the complex subject of Black Female Identity.
- “*Days of Art and Ideas: Radical Citizenship*” at The New School brought a weekend of programming to the New School and greater New York community. The artists and panelists were 90% people of color who addressed issues that connected with the black and brown student, faculty, and local community activists.
- The *Radical Citizenship* Course at the New School – the course explored multiple and overlapping conceptions of radical citizenship and the research-to-performance methods of poet and activist Sekou Sundiata. Through a series of workshops facilitated by Lang faculty, as well as poet and playwright Will Power, students participated in critical conversations and reflections about identity, civic engagement, citizenship and “making as a way of thinking.” During workshops, students engaged in Sundiata’s improvisational methods; shared strategies about art making, activism and community building; and explored the “Intersection of Art, Imagination, Humanities, and Public Engagement.”
- “Blink Your Eyes: Sekou Sundiata Revisited” offered a 7-month city-wide retrospective of Sundiata’s work as reimaginations and restaging by former collaborators and contemporary artists.

Current Interests & Examples

My method, which is embodied in the MAPP CEPH programs, is to bring art to the people – to take it outside of the theater and move into more social spheres: public spaces or alternative spaces hosted by peer institutions, community organizations and interests groups. The world is opening up and performance has to adapt to this shift – people aren’t simply going to theaters, so where does performance live? MAPP tends to work with artists who introduce socially-engaged themes that encourage us all to go beyond the theater. Some of MAPP International’s current themes and interests include:

- Mass Incarceration
- Identity Politics
- Cultural Inclusion and Diversity
- Engaging Millennials
- Critical Dialogues and Storytelling
- Gentrification and migration

*How might we imagine twenty-first century configurations of performance curation and presenting that acknowledge the particular concerns of audiences and artists of color?*

I strive to create special events or scalable iterations of performance pieces to fit budgets, venues, and generally be more responsive to a community’s interests and needs. I especially value readings, excerpts, discussions and refractions that respond to interests of audiences and work outside of the format of traditional performance. Non-theater people might find a discussion-driven event more engaging - interactive events that can have more impact. MAPP’s residency activities such as art clinics and educational workshops connect audiences and foster appreciation of both the work and artists as thought leaders. The activities seek to bring audiences physically and conversationally into the piece as well. I also create alternative iterations of performances and creative work in a more “digestible” format.

Current Concerns in the Arts

My current concerns around curating include:

- Poor institutional communication and engagement with communities of color
- Lack of investment in cross-cultural connections
- Little to no commitment to advancing the arts to communities of color
- WHITES ONLY! Lack of diversity and inclusion in the Arts
- Entrenched ideas about art and its role in society by the public and media
- Risk averse culture: In the presenting and funding industries.

To address these concerns, I always try to present artists who are going beyond the genre and blending disciplines. MAPP’s CEPH programs suggest offsite collaborations in terms of programming and partnerships to nurture community engagement with non-arts organizations, so I am consistently reaching beyond the usual suspects.

I try to get everyday people to engage with the arts through projects that go beyond race and ethnicity. My most important mantra: “Market to and Listen to the Millennials!” They are telling us their value system and give us a glimpse of the shift toward our future.

Strategic Partnerships

MAPP’s practice, in partnership with presenters, strives to engage communities outside of typical arts goers and peer arts organizations—like college campuses, community-based orgs, etc.—not just with the shows but with humanities events. We seek to step outside of the insular arts community and into the greater public sector to affect social change and ways of thinking.

Methodology for Engaging Communities

ENLIST + EDUCATE + ENTERTAIN + ENGAGE + EXPAND

ENLIST: Initiate contact; Promote; Creative Programming; Go to where the communities are to bring them in; Curation by inclusion.

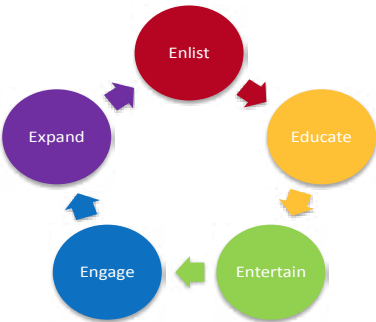
EDUCATE: Artist talks; Workshops; Explain the art form/practice; Give history of the Organization and its values; Demystify the creative process

ENTERTAIN: Live performances; Demonstrations; Keep Attention & Interest; Tell a Story

ENGAGE: Allow participation in the creative process; Improvisation; Create Safe Space; Trust; Take Art to the People; Amplify the experience; Audience becomes a part of the art process; Empower your audience to tell their own stories.

EXPAND: Listen and Respond; Adapt, Create a positive reputation; Grow your following; Find future collaborators; Provide take away content; Create Platforms for advocacy; Feedback is Gold!

In conclusion, this is my philosophy on how to approach art and community engagement while demystifying the creative process. Ultimately, I want to encourage the communities at large to be stakeholders in a shared creative evolution, imagination and to enjoy our shared interests in thoughtful programming.







**RASU JILANI** is an Independent curator, social sculptor and entrepreneur whose work investigates the intersection between art, culture and civic engagement as a means of raising critical consciousness. The objective of his work is to catalyze interaction between artists, the local community and the wider public, in order to promote awareness around social issues through exhibitions, humanities, community programs and cultural events.

As a socially-engaged art curator and community programming professional, Rasu Jilani joined the staff of MAPP International Productions in April 2013 as Director of Community Programs. His latest work at MAPP includes programming the humanities for *Blink Your Eyes: Sekou Sundiata Revisited* – a citywide retrospective, *Triple Consciousness: Black Feminism(s) in the Time of Now* at Brooklyn Museum, *Days of Art and Ideas* at The New School, artists’ salons, community discussions, and artists led workshops.

Prior to joining MAPP, he worked with over 125 artists to curate, design and manage artistic and community events addressing social concerns and civic issues. He served a two-year tenure as

Senior Fellow of Arts, Culture and Sustainability at the Pratt Center for Community Development, where he managed art and cultural programs designed to connect New York City neighborhoods with Pratt Center’s community and environmental sustainability projects. These projects included Arts East New York’s Summer Saturdaze at East New York Farms, Bedford Stuyvesant’s Retrofit Block-by-Block, Bedford-Stuyvesant Restoration Corporation’s Restoration Rocks and Youth Arts Education, Brooklyn Greens Sustainability Leadership Conference, Cypress Hill Verde Summit, and the “Amplify Action: Sustainability Through The Arts” exhibition.

Mr. Jilani is also co-founder of the art and socially responsible brand, Coup d’etat Arts, a platform for creative expression that transcends cultural boundaries. In 2008, he introduced the Coup d’etat Art Collective, a Brooklyn-based collaboration of highly respected artists to produce various art-related events throughout New York City, including the Afropunk Festival, BEAT Festival, Long Island University, Pratt Institute, Columbia University, The New School, Mighty Tanaka Gallery, Skylight Gallery. Mr. Jilani holds a B.S. from Syracuse University.

## Bodies in Motion, Moving through the University

Dasha A. Chapman, Duke University

### Lessons from Danced Ethnography

For over 5 years I have conducted PhD research with dancers in Haiti and in Haitian dance communities in New York and Boston. In my thinking this week about what perspective I could offer to this gathering, I kept returning to the value of the ethnographic for me—my experiences spending time with dancers as a dancer interested in their creative practices and how these practices speak to their daily lives, their memories, their suffering, their dreams. These years of ethnographic time instilled an awareness of what one learns in and through the body, as ethnography is an investigation of embodied knowledge and corporeal engagement with social life.

Dance anthropologist Sally Ann Ness has written of the similarities between ethnography and choreography because both require a person to learn another’s movements. Just as the dancer must teach herself how to inhabit the kinetic language and structured world of the choreographer with whom she works, the ethnographer must attune herself to the rhythms and velocities of the community with whom she studies. There is a necessary incorporation of another’s bodily way of being or cultural way of moving, and this has the radical potential to change how one understands the self. Rather than being self-contained and knowable, one begins to see herself as a changing body-in-relation: multiple, transforming, disassembled and re-arranged through a participatory process. This relationality that is so integral to being human is something to take into account when innovating models for performance curation attentive to communities of color.

At the same time, the ways in which I, as a white dance ethnographer from the U.S., could and could not inhabit another’s cultural ways of moving have taught me a lot about what forms migrate, which [physical and virtual] bodies travel, and how artists move brilliantly within and against constraint. My ease of moving between worlds repeatedly registered in stark contrast to the difficulty Haitian artists faced legally traveling beyond Haiti’s territorial borders.

Mobility seems to me to be the biggest obstacle one faces when working with artists and communities of color outside the U.S. Who and what gets to travel across which borders is unevenly regulated and this severely underscores the conditions of possibility for Haitian artists. In order to invite Haitian performers to the U.S., one has to secure significant funding and strong institutional backing in order to provide the appropriate letters needed for Haitian artists to acquire a visa. Then even with all these formalities correctly in place there is absolutely no guarantee that a visa will be granted—particularly in this current moment in our hemispheric and global context.

As I myself move within the triangulated positions of academic-ethnographer-dancer, and carry very

real connections to a number of different communities invested in black diasporic dance forms and the stories they tell, I am continuously working to figure out appropriate models that can facilitate performance events and also open up opportunities for the performers I have worked with and would like to share with a broader public. I offer here a few basic ideas with the hope that we can imagine together how to make them better.

### Alternative Investments

Performance curation: conscientious editing, an assembling, a gathering, an organizing. This group of thinkers and doers values curation as connectivity rather than exclusivity (which is perhaps an outdated mode of understanding the practice). “An act of radical care” Nicole Martin theorizes. Paloma McGregor speaks of her work as shepherding. We consider the position of the performance curator as one with the potential to catalyze events that facilitate urgent and necessary work, “the work that needs to be done,” and registers the social urgencies of our day. So how can we mobilize this position as a way of funneling or channeling resources rather than absorbing them?

My work for the most part has been located in and facilitated through university structures. The common way of utilizing the resources of the university – with its matrix of funding bodies, well equipped spaces, scholarly community, student body, and built-in audience – is by bringing artists into the academy to perform, teach, or present. This is often thought of as a gesture of reciprocity. A sharing of the resources to which academics have access. But what other ways can we think about the resources, connections, engagement but also investment that the university can offer? How to think beyond this somewhat standard mode of reciprocation? The standard model works, particularly for academic institutions, but it is one that nevertheless seems to create just a blip rather than new currents or branchings.

How can larger institutions, research centers and presenting organizations invest in performers and performance events that use their clout to help create work that extends beyond the usual reach of a performance at the institution? There are obvious ways—sharing resources in terms of rehearsal space or research facilities, opportunities for collaboration with scholars, historians, ethnographers, or artists, as well as an opening up of different venues and audiences. But in what other modes can these larger institutional structures elaborate on this equation?

One way might be to recognize the inversion of this equation and to acknowledge the ways performance is itself research. Performance can be an act of archiving, a history-telling or a counter-history-making. This is a building of worlds—a forging of worlds as Christina Knight calls it—worlds that cannot take hold without the creative efforts and imagination of the artist as catalyst. By recognizing performance as research, the larger processes necessary to bring an event into being and sustain its afterlives come into focus as integral parts of the performance itself.

I’m thinking this through two projects at the moment:

October 29-30, 2015, at Duke University where I am a postdoc in African and African American Studies, I convened a symposium called “Nou mache ansanm (We walk together): Performance, Gender and Sexuality in Haiti.” The two-day gathering brought together established and emerging scholars, students, and artists of different media (photography, performance, dance, literature) to galvanize a conversation around Haitian genders and sexualities as they relate to performance, broadly construed. The event commenced with a gallery opening for a photography exhibition of Josué Azor’s Noctambules series that documents queer nightlife in Port-au-Prince. Duke Sexualities Postdoc Mario LaMothe who co-curated the exhibition with me creatively presented narrative accounts of violence and hope by gay men in Port-au-Prince, and Azor the photographer was present from Haiti and engaged in an artist dialogue—the highlight of his week-long residency on campus. The following day consisted of presentations by a number of visiting and local scholars working on gender and sexuality in Haiti (Omise’eke Natasha Tinsley, Elizabeth McAlister, Erin Durban-Albrecht and others) as well as a performance and artist talk by Haitian performer/poet Lenelle Moïse. As an interdisciplinary gathering that aimed to extend beyond and through the academy’s hallowed halls, the event received enthusiastic support from numerous Duke programs. My hope was for an exchange that could vision where our art practices and critical scholarship can take the conversation (and possibly action) towards support of queer Haiti.



Nou mache ansanm (We walk together): Performance, Gender and Sexuality in Haiti.

In December 2015, the Gran Rue neighborhood of Port-au-Prince will be host to the 4th Ghetto Biennale—a biennale that asks, “If first world art rubs up against third world art, what happens? Will it bleed?” A group of international artists and thinkers, selected by curators Andre Eugene and Leah Gordon, will be working on projects with Haitians in the Gran Rue zone of Port-au-Prince for one to three weeks. The creations are thus simultaneously situated locally and transnationally. The project I will be working on proposes a collaborative performance directed by myself, Ann Mazzocca, another white American female dancer-scholar practiced in Afro-Caribbean folkloric techniques, Jean-Sebastien Duvilaire, a contemporary Haitian dance maker based in Les Abricots, Haiti, and Yonel Charles, a performer and queer activist based in Jacmel, Haiti. We will be working in the mode of critical performance ethnography, inspired by Dwight Conquergood and D. Soyini Madison who developed a mode of humanistic inquiry through creative performance work with their specific communities of study. We hope to engage a process by which a research question is pursued through the creation of a performance, guided by our collaborative team but developed with and alongside local people. We will be inquiring about the neighborhood’s popular memory of the Haitian Revolution and its associated

myths, figures, dances, rhythms and songs in order to imagine together new modes of unification, revolt, and embodied power.

### Polyvocality as Strategy, Polyrhythmic Events

Polyvocality is a concept that might allow us to conceptualize multi-modal frameworks for engagement. Drawn from the polyrhythms that are so central to African and Afro-diasporic creative expressions, polyvocality can be used as a guiding principle for incorporating different voices that express in multiple modes such that they work together to create a complex whole. A few ways in which this could be pursued: opening up spaces for artists and community members to dialogue, engaging the public in an artist's process and research shifting the value to process-oriented exploration, or local ethnographic questions pursued through the creation of a performance with a local community.

Polyrhythmic and polyvocal attention could also encourage a different sense of the temporality of any performance event. Of course there is the main event (that experience for an audience that a person is curating), but there is all this stuff that does happen and can happen before, after and around a particular experience that we need to consider as potential points of activation and engagement. How can "live arts presenting" or curating performance entail a concern with what happens before and after the so-called "event"? How can our role as facilitators of experience create more resonant processes and afterlives of any work so that the import of the event is carried through to other moments and activations?

This recalls the ways in which black performance is always already an activation of the embodied repertoires that speak of pasts, memories, and traditions of practices—practices that are life affirming and sustaining. So how can our presenting call attention to the histories both activated and embedded in the event, while at the same time encourage sustained attention to the ongoingness of these pasts once the event is over? At the same time, platforms that allow for continued connections to the work are needed, platforms that also recognize the importance of ephemeral, collective, time-based live experience of the performance thing itself.

Lastly, we must ask ourselves what forms of personhood, knowledge production and imagination our events are fostering and bringing into being. What types of configurations are required to foster radical forms of engagement? We must not only concern ourselves with whose work is being presented or who attends, but also think critically about what modes of becoming our performance events ask of people, of spaces, of history and of the future.

Attending to the polyvocal capacities of performance and performance curation is certainly messy and unpredictable, but it has the potential to nourish new modes of listening and open up creative spaces toward unexpected brilliance.



**DASHA A. CHAPMAN** received her Ph.D. from the Department of Performance Studies at NYU and is currently the Postdoctoral Associate in Duke University's Department of African and African American Studies.

As a dancer ethnographer and scholar, she is now at work on her book manuscript based on her dissertation, *Dancing Haiti in the Break: the Labors and the Grounds of Dance in Haiti and its Diasporas* for which she was awarded the Deena Burton Memorial Award for Outstanding Dissertation Research. This project examines the labor of contemporary Haitian dance artists, focusing on the political and ethical dimensions of the collectives they sustain through their teaching and performance work in both Haiti and its diasporas of New York and Boston.

Her broader interests are centered in Afro-Caribbean and African diasporic collective movement practices, historical memory, genders and sexualities.

She completed her M.A. in NYU's Draper Program in Humanities and Social Thought, and her B.A. in Boston University's University Professors Program with a concentration in Latin American Studies and Cultural Studies. She is a dancer of Haitian, West African, and Afro-Cuban techniques, and performs with contemporary choreographers in New York City as well as in Haiti.

# Thoughts on Curatorial Practice

Joseph F. Jordan

## Part One

**Perspectives on how performance relating to people of color fits (or not) into current trends in contemporary curatorial practice**

I feel we are in a yet unnamed era (Renaissance? Arts movement?) of artistic growth and creation that has benefitted from a number of converging forces and contestations: the growing transnational flow of Blackness in terms of people and ideas; increasing access to technologies of creation at all levels of sophistication; the expansion of capitalist logic and notions of humanity to all elements of social and political life, and the dialectical process that enables resistance.

I suspect that we all, as curators, are compelled to approach our work in the light of (or in the shadow of) these forces or social facts. Given the situation of people of color in the world, it seems to me that the most creative and innovative curatorial work may be performing admirably in addressing the subject (or the questions), but not necessarily doing well in engaging the subject(s) in ways that are broadly useful. This speaks not to the question of who I, or we, curate and create for, it speaks more so to the question of what audiences find our creations attractive, instructive, provocative or relevant.

## Part Two

**An anecdote about a curatorial and/or artistic-curatorial project you’ve worked on and how that moment is demonstrative of a concern or opportunity for curatorial practice that might inspire social connection or social change.**

One experience that is instructive is a project called Pepperpot, realized with Pamela Sunstrum, then a graduate assistant and co-curator of the Stone Center programming, currently a Researcher at Witwatersrand University. Most of the concept and execution of the project can be attributed to Ms. Sunstrum, who showed remarkable vision in constructing an artistic experience that included an installation component along with performance, film, and video.

I quote her at length because our conversations over the longer essay produced many changes and alterations in the project as well as her writing. But the result was a very important intervention in the ways I had approached curating previously. She wrote in the program catalog:

It is here that I like to introduce the analogy of the pepperpot—the inspiration for the title and concept of this exhibition. Existing in many forms across the diaspora—as gumbo, as callaloo, as fofou—pepperpot is a stew usually made from a savory arrangement of ingredients including seafood, meats, vegetables, and grains cooked at a daylong simmer within a bouquet of broths, coconut milk,

and spices. The parallel to African diasporic histories, cultures and socio-politics becomes evident particularly as essentialized ideas about Blackness (with a big ‘B’) and Africanity give way to pluralistic understandings of Africanity that allow for a shifting, unfixed and transnational notion of blackness (with a small ‘b’).

Returning to art, we see contemporary black artists relying upon the integrity and associative specificity of their materials in order to project meaning in their work. Art forms such as assemblage, shrine spaces, performance and installation ... Unlike the American “melting pot” which implies a generalizing of ingredients, an erasing of specificity, the pepperpot analogy in African diasporic art presents a synergistic concept of black identity in that each ingredient (medium) maintains its integrity and carries this power into the outcome.

## Part 3

**How does your work focus on the involvement, investment, and creative growth of people of color, and how does it or how it could connect further with other presenters, performers, scholars, curators, and managers?**

Over the course of the last twenty-plus years I have devoted a considerable amount of time contemplating a critical, self-reflective practice that is grounded in an informal, and yet unnamed, philosophy.

I recognize that my history, and the history(ies) I experienced, are important elements of my philosophy because my work with colleagues in and outside of the academy evolved from my need to remain consistent with and in conversation with those histories.

Today, my intellectual approaches, as well as my curatorial and programming approach, are deeply rooted in two very different, but deeply connected ideals: one derives from the ethos of a character that plays a central role in writer Barry Lopez’s Arctic Dreams. In this book, the writer speaks of the role of elders in Eskimo society, called luumantaag, in educating the young people of the village. He describes how they employ a methodology that can be described simply as creating the conditions for wisdom to reveal itself. This ideal, of creating spaces, places and moments where audiences can uncover elements of their own wisdom constitutes one of the two ideals, and an important part of my philosophical approach to curatorial practice.

The second is drawn from the thoughtful reflections of abstract expressionist artist Jack Whitten I first saw referenced in Richard Powell’s Black Art in the 21st Century. When asked if he was producing Black art, Whitten replied:

I can’t define what is Black in my work. I think it’s not necessary that I have to define it as much as I should know that it’s there...



I'm Black, and my sensibility derives from my being Black. But I'm also dealing with art...on the highest universal level. And that's what I want to be known for. I want to maintain that search for what it means to be Black, whatever it is...but at the same time, I must deal with this within the issues that have grown out of the history of art....

This is an important statement for me because it affirms the legitimacy of the singular importance of a practice grounded in notions of both identity and history, and the connected notion that searching beyond that grounding can, and often does, move us into broader searches for universal ideas and ideals.

### Active Engagement and Contingency

I try to follow this philosophical approach and although I must deploy more conventional methods to establish the conditions where learning occurs and wisdom unfolds, I still place significant emphasis on audiences engaging in “active engagement.” In this regard I agree with one writer who suggested that engagement can become simply become another catch-phrase unless it is “... grounded in the depth of meaning that attaches to its coming within urgent daily interests.”

This “articulation” model, I believe, provides a space for those revelatory moments I seek to provoke.

Therefore, my approach to staging/curating all Stone Center productions suggests, or expressly declares, itself as a performance. Whether on stage or other performance space, or in the guise of an exhibition in Stone Center's Gallery, or as the broad palette and stage of the Diaspora Festival of Black and Independent Film.

Approaching the programming of these spaces as possibilities for interdisciplinary exploration provides for alternatives to, and intercession in, the linear, repetitive or circular processes we can become accustomed to because of the limitations placed on us by institutions or audiences.

In my experience, audiences in general, as well as audiences of color, aren't generally prepared to allow for articulation between active and passive components of the performance experience. Therefore, in deploying my philosophical approach, I try to structure a process that is more contingent; one that is mediated by an array of contextual situations or 'problematics' that are generated both by me and by the audience.

These contingencies are rooted in both historical and contemporary concerns that may enter into the performance in a planned or random manner, are sometimes unpredictable and sometimes defy attempts to order them in uniform or successive steps. This approach to constructing challenging processes for audiences is not particularly novel, but I firmly believe that curatorial projects must not be limited by expectations for a particular process.



**JOSEPH F. JORDAN** has been Director of the Sonja H. Stone Center for Black Culture and History at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill since 2001 and is also Adjunct Associate Professor, African, African American and Diaspora Studies, and affiliate faculty member in Global Studies. He also directs the Venezuelan Aspects of the African Diaspora Study Abroad Program. His current work focuses on the cultural politics of race, identity and artistic production in the diaspora, which he explores through representations in visual and other creative arts. He serves as curator for the Stone Center's Diaspora festival of Black and Independent Film, and curator of exhibits and programs for its Brown Gallery and Museum.

Selected recent published work includes *Can the Artist Speak?* Hamid Kachmar's *Subversive Redemptive Art of Resistance in Bodies of Knowledge: Interviews, African Art, and Scholarly Narratives*, Joanna Grabski and Carol Magee, eds., (Indiana University Press 2013); a special issue of *The Black Scholar*, co-edited with Daynelli Flores-Rodriguez - *The Life and Work of Frantz Fanon*; and an essay entitled *Afro-Colombia: A Case for Pan-African Analysis in Transnational Blackness: Navigating the Global Color-Line*. Manning Marable, ed. (Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

His recent curatorial work includes: *Amiri Baraka: Meetings and Remarkable Journeys*; *This Story Has Not Yet Been Told: The Art of Tim Okamura*; *La Sombra y el Espiritu II: Women's Healing Rituals in the Diaspora: The Work of Toni Scott*; *Nina Simone: What More Can I Say*; and over 25 others in the last 15 years.

Previous positions include: Visiting Professor, Universidad Politecnica Argelia Laya, Venezuela, SA; Associate Professor, African American Studies, Xavier University of Louisiana, ; Director, Auburn Avenue Research Library on African American Culture and History, Atlanta; Visiting Professor, Instituto Superior de Educação, Cape Verde, West Africa; Associate Professor and Founding chair, African/African American Studies, Antioch College, Yellow Springs, Ohio.

He is currently a member of the Editorial Advisory Board of *The Black Scholar Journal of Black Studies and Research*; a member of the Editorial Board of *PALARA* - Publication of the Afro-Latin American Research Association. He also serves on the Historic Preservation Commission of Durham.

“Create the conditions for wisdom to reveal itself.”

*Joseph F. Jordan*

## identifying the end-game

thomas f. defrantz

when we talk about **minoritarian art**, we can too easily forget the basic assumptions of ‘by, about, and for’ that could surround its designation. this might be work that is simultaneously created by artists of a particular identity politic, but also **about** the imaginative possibilities shared among that group, and explicitly made **for** like-identified people who are its primary and particular audience. but so much of the work curated and created by artists of color these days seems mostly to be made for venues, curators and critics, and an unmarked yet unmistakably white public. of course artists need to feel ‘free’ to make whatever we like in response to the world we perceive, or our own imaginations, but we are also quick to bemoan that there are few apparent audiences of color out and about at MOMA or PS1 or the North Carolina Museum of Art. we create work possibly **about** experiences shared within communities of color, but not necessarily **for** them.

we all participate in this ‘white economy’ that elides or overlooks potential minoritarian publics for our creative practices and our curating. i’m thinking of the ralph lemon series ‘some sweet day’ at MOMA from 2012, in which he famously asked that the commissioned artists address the question, ‘what is black music?’ now, this series was in no way conceived as minoritarian art that might be by, about, or for black publics. but it surely seemed to stand in for that sort of gesture by MOMA, and possibly for lemon. artists who are commissioned to work outside of their areas of interest, but not necessarily for audiences who are any different from what they might expect considering the venue at hand, can make work that arrives odd, overwrought, and under-cooked. we all might remember deborah hay’s awkward invention for the lemon series that sparked conversations about curating and communities of color that continue with our gathering here at Duke three years later.

none of us want to be implicated in **using black people as props** to make art for white people. and yet, crassly, this is what seems to happen far too often when curators commission or present artists of color as part of their series.

curating, or presenting, is surely a remain of corporatization processes that began to surround the performing arts at the same time that limited government funding became available to artists. the establishment of the NEA in 1965 essentially insured that a managerial class of arts presenters would have to be formed in order for the arts to become standardized as other federally-funded projects might be. we can look to the genealogies of several social programs created in the 1960s including ‘Community Action Against Poverty;’ these programs required healthy numbers of administrators who could translate ideas from the service providers to the government and those being served. in some ways, curators and presenters might fill a similar function: building connections from artists to audiences and funders.

i wonder about a different model of curating and presenting; one that might center its efforts on creating relationships among audiences and sometimes artists. what if the gesture to create community through art were to be consistently narrated instead of the gesture to secure art and offer it up to an interested (but assumedly ignorant) audience? this is something that dance competitions do, especially the b-girl, house dancing, krumping and j-setting battles: communities form around the practice and interest in the arts, and micro-ecologies of celebrity emerge in these contexts. these sort of performance art events are not curated so much as administered, and the huge number of people involved in the production of these dance competitions attests to the abiding interest in performance artistry, even if that artistry is couched in the mode of sport. still, i wonder what would happen if curators focused on creating context for living in the arts by nurturing participation by communities in motion over time. this might be how many artist collectives imagine themselves to work, and possibly do function: creating supportive communities of people invested in process together. how could we imagine the action of curating as being directed toward the experience of the so-called audience, participating in the thing that we gather to celebrate/consecrate? if entry to the museum could require a drawing, couldn’t entry to a performance require a dance?

i am spinning here, in directions that have already been tried, in high-profile “white” contexts, such as the as in the ‘**move you**’ exhibit in london <http://move.southbankcentre.co.uk/microsite/> and in several of **tino seghal works** including *This Progress*. of course, even as they encourage participation, these works assume an intractable separation of artist and audience or viewer/witness/participant. the **direct address** of the work is simulated; the works don’t change form or their intention, given varied responses by communities of audience. also, the audience is designated to be responsible for its own experience within the work, whether good bad or indifferent. i wonder, what if we were to put our faith in the building of relationship in community, and direct our energy toward what people in that community actually value as engaged art practice? we might come up with models that service and inspire communities of color in unexpected manner. for example, the Philadelphia project that PEW and the Painted Bride have launched intends to be cast around the places that Philadelphians hold dear to their sense of its history; those unusual, neglected places become the site of performance, but also an occasion to remember place differently. because it is **The Bride**, the artists and consultants to the project are mostly black people, and the fantasy of the project as an in-reach sort of site-specific exercise will be to engage Black communities around sustained experiences of artmaking. this could be something like the institute that anna deveare smith ran at Harvard, with its engaged core group of audience who participated in the Institute for Arts and Civic Dialogues the entire three years of its existence, back in the late 1990s.

participatory work tends to lead to discussions of de-skilling, and concerns about the usurping of performance expertise - technique and virtuosity - as hallmarks of artmaking. the question might become, are we just talking about process-based materials that involve the audience as artmakers? i’m

not sure about this, but I do wonder at re-centering communities in formation, not as recipients of “great art” that is found and offered up by an expert broker/impresario. but what if the encouragement of the community to engage its dormant creativities might be the thing that curators explore.

in terms of creative work, though, and lining up my own interests in the archive and technology that is always already surrounding us, and performance as a singularity that might be available to communities in motion, i want to share a SLIPPAGE project in development (**the weight of ideas**: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vqzy\\_Ay2tTI](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vqzy_Ay2tTI)). this interface can be used for performance, as it is in this video, but we also strive to create a version that allows audiences to decide the words they want to ‘tether’ to their body, and the music that they want to hear as they work, physically, inside the interface. the interface works with a Kinect camera that tracks the performer, as it would in a video game, but with word choices that could certainly center complex considerations of identity. like many SLIPPAGE creations, the interface requires the input of the participant in order to activate it. it intends to be immediate-gratification sort of device that reflects back your own movement among an archive of ideas to create its affect. an ambition for Slippage is to create these sorts of devices that will allow for group communion, rather than only for solo performance structures that rely upon a silent and still audience.

talking about curating isn’t the same as talking about making art. somehow, i do want to get away from the focus on the artist or the artwork/performance as the measure of artistic experience and the thing that needs to be protected or enhanced by curators. i believe there are other possibilities for live art and performance, and i want to imagine giving that **power to the people**.

curating as it is widely understood now seems to me middle-management work, and as such might be greatly enhanced by emphases placed on its stakeholders. granted, the possibilities for live art surely need to be protected, and maybe curators are people who do that. but i’ve not really noticed that live art might be endangered, especially in contexts like MOMA or PS1; while i have wondered at the curation or creation of varied publics to experience performance. somehow, it seems a shame to me that we might create new structures that value the act of curating as art practice over the need to develop strategies to allow for **direct participation in the arts by, about, and for the people** (whomever they might be). white publics that are hipster-ish, or art-school-ish, ivy-league-ish, middle-aged executive, straight-ish, or retired-curious still tend to go unidentified and assumed as the foundational audiences for our curatorial exercises, even when we work in places where that is not the majority population who might participate in the events we create. what if we actually sought to create counter-publics, or particular publics that could create possibilities for performance that aren’t just slotted in to season-driven planning?

artists will continue to make unexpected work, and there will always be space for the unexpected, unanticipated performance that requires everyone to witness in stillness and reflection for a bit of time



Thomas F. DeFrantz, the weight of ideas, 2015

while something that has been rehearsed unfolds. but maybe curatorial process could be less concerned about protecting that possibility, and more concerned with the social engineering that is necessary for a community to recognize itself as stakeholders in the process, or venue, where art emerges.

for me, this is more like the **end-game of curating**: to create possibilities for artists and publics to emerge where they weren’t visible to each other before. it seems to me that we know the usual suspects of publics for live art and dance performance; where are the queer black communities invigorated by curators intent on commissioning and presenting work by queer black artists? are we working simultaneously to allow the emergence of public discourse that is actually for a particular public? it seems so easy to get to the ‘by’ and ‘about’ portions of minoritarian art and its presenting, but the ‘for’ portion of the equation calls for the development of trust and communication that arrive rarely among professional curators.

ultimately, i do think of curating as something like “social engineering” - rather than its own art practice, in no small part because of its emergence as a managerial practice, in the middle (somewhat elevated), that intends to create context for the urgent encounters with unexpected expertise - or art - that we all desperately need.



**THOMAS F. DEFRANTZ** is Chair of African and African American Studies and Professor of Dance and Theater Studies at Duke University. Born a Hoosier, his work focuses on theories of African diaspora aesthetics, intersections of dance and technology, and dance historiography.

He writes articles and essays about black dance in the United States, as they are practiced in the US and in global contexts.

He is the director of SLIPPAGE: Performance, Culture, Technology, a research group in residence at Duke that explores emerging technology in live performance applications that works to create innovate interfaces that help us tell alternative histories.

He currently convenes the working group Black Performance Theory and the Collegium for African Diaspora Dance.

He is past-president of the Society of Dance History Scholars, an international organization that advances the field of dance studies through research, publication, performance, and outreach to audiences across the arts, humanities, and social sciences.

His books include the edited volume *Dancing Many Drums: Excavations in African American Dance* (2002) and *Dancing Revelations: Alvin Ailey's Embodiment of African American Culture* (2004) and *Black Performance Theory* co-edited with Anita Gonzalez (2014).

A director and writer, his creative works include *CANE: A Responsive Environment Dancework* that premiered at Duke in April, 2013, and *where did I think I was going? [moving into signal]* from 2015. Current projects with the Detroit Institute of the Arts and an MFA in Live Art and Embodied Practice at Duke University.

“Black forms of art mine emotion as resource.”

*Thomas F. DeFrantz*

## THANK YOU

We extend our thanks to the Franklin Humanities Institute John Hope Franklin Afro-Diasporic Legacies series, the African and African American Studies Department at Duke, and SLIPPAGE:Performance|Culture|Technology for their support; Michael Williams and Eric Barstow for documenting the event; and the Duke Vice Provost for the Arts.

To learn more about Configurations in Motion: Performance Curation and Communities of Color, please visit [sites.duke.edu/configurationsinmotion](https://sites.duke.edu/configurationsinmotion), or contact Dasha A. Chapman at [dasha.chapman@duke.edu](mailto:dasha.chapman@duke.edu).





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