



BRITISH DANCE: BLACK ROUTES

Edited by Christy Adair and Ramsay Burt

British Dance: Black Routes

British Dance: Black Routes re-examines the distinctive contributions made to British dance by dancers who are Black. Covering the period 1946 to the present, it presents a radical re-reading of dancers and their companies, placing their achievements within a broader historical, cultural, and artistic context.

The result of a two-year research project, *British Dance and the African Diaspora*, led by editors Christy Adair and Ramsay Burt, the collection looks at artists working with contemporary dance, African Caribbean dance, jazz dance, and dance improvisation. Chapters illuminate the commonalities and differences between sub-Saharan West African dance forms and hybridized dance forms from the USA and the Caribbean, addressing key themes such as rhythm, community, and spirituality.

This outstanding collection re-evaluates dancers' work in the context of cultural and aesthetic issues relevant to the African diaspora, looking afresh at over five decades of artistic production to provide an unparalleled resource for dance students and scholars.

Christy Adair is Professor Emerita of Dance Studies at York St John University.

Ramsay Burt is Professor of Dance History at De Montfort University.



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and Ramsay Burt

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Notes on contributors

Christy Adair is Professor Emerita of Dance Studies, York St John University. Her book, *Dancing the Black Question: the Phoenix Dance Company Phenomenon* offers a critique of key issues in performance. Her research interests, developed in *Women and Dance: sylphs and sirens*, continue to focus on gender and ethnicity in relation to dance studies and performance. Her recent research investigates contemporary dance in Africa and the Diaspora. She was co-investigator with Professor Ramsay Burt of the Arts and Humanities Research funded project British Dance and the African Diaspora, 2012–2014.

Funmi Adewole is a performer/writer, lecturer, and dramaturge. She worked in the Nigerian media as a presenter, producer, and radio actress before moving to England in 1994 where she began a performance career. Her credits include performances with Horse and Bamboo Mask and Puppetry Company, Adzido Pan-African Dance Ensemble, and the Cholmondeleys. She was chair of the Association of Dance of the African Diaspora and is co-editor of *Voicing Black Dance: the British Experience 1930s–1990s*. She holds an MA in Postcolonial Studies from Goldsmiths College, London, and is presently a PhD candidate in dance at De Montfort University, Leicester.

Thea Barnes performed with the Alvin Ailey American Dance Company and the Martha Graham Dance Company with Broadway and film credits that include *The Wiz* and the BBC documentary *Dance Rebels: A Story of Modern Dance*. As Artistic Director of the Phoenix Dance Company in Leeds, UK, she secured funding for their education outreach and choreographed several dance works. Ms. Barnes has taught, choreographed and directed dancers aged five to sixty-five, novices to professionals in West End and Broadway musicals, concerts, community settings, universities, and professional schools in the USA, Britain, and Europe. She has published web- and text-based articles and holds a BA in dance from the Juilliard School, an MA in dance education from Columbia Teachers College in New York, and an MPhil from City University, London.

Ramsay Burt is Professor of Dance History at De Montfort University, UK. His publications include *The Male Dancer: Bodies, Spectacle, Sexualities* (1995, revised 2007); *Alien Bodies: Representations of Modernity, 'Race' and Nation in Early Modern Dance* (1997); *Judson Dance Theater: Performative Traces* (2006), with Valerie Briginshaw; *Writing Dancing Together* (2009); and *Ungoverning Dance* (forthcoming). In 2012–2014, with Professor Christy Adair, he undertook a two-year funded research project into *British Dance and the African Diaspora*, which culminated in an exhibition at the International Slavery Museum in Liverpool. With Susan Foster, he was founder editor of *Discourses in Dance*. In 1999 he was Visiting Professor at the Department of Performance Studies, New York University. Since 2008 he has been a regular visiting teacher at PARTS in Brussels. In 2010 he was Professeur Invité at l'Université de Nice Sophia-Antipolis.

Jane Carr trained and worked as a ballet dancer before studying at Laban and later completing a PhD at Roehampton University. A founder member of the artists' group *quiet*, Jane also worked for over fifteen years at Morley College, south east London. More recently she was Head of Studies at the Central School of Ballet and lectured at Laban and the University of Lincoln, before moving to the University of Bedfordshire where, as Principal Lecturer in Dance, she continues to develop an interdisciplinary approach to exploring the significance of dance.

Anita Gonzalez is Professor of Theatre and Drama, Head of Global Theatre and Ethnic Studies Minor, University of Michigan at Ann Arbor. Gonzalez has authored two books – *Afro-Mexico: Dancing Between Myth and Reality* (2010) and *Jarocho's Soul* (2004) – and is co-editor of *Black Performance Theory* (2014). Her articles about multicultural and international performance appear in *Theatre Research International* (2014), *Performance Research* (2015), *Theatre Topics* (2009), and the edited volumes *Oxford Handbook of Dance and Theatre* (2015), *Festive Devils* (2015), *Community Performance Reader* (2007), and *Latinas On Stage* (2000). Gonzalez is also a director and choreographer whose work has appeared on PBS national television and at the Lincoln Center Out-of Doors, Dixon Place, Dance Theater Workshop, Tribeca Performing Arts Center, Ballet Hispanico, and other venues. For her individual scholarship and teaching she has been awarded a residency at The Rockefeller Foundation Bellagio Center (2003) and three Senior Scholar Fulbright grants.

'H' Patten is an experienced performer, choreographer, film-maker, storyteller, and university lecturer. A former principal artist in Danse de L'Afrique and Adzido Pan-African Dance Ensemble, 'H' has developed an international reputation in African and Caribbean arts over the past

thirty-four years. He has choreographed for the Ghanaian, Nigerian, Sierra Leonean, Malawian, and Zambian national dance companies and the Stella Maris Dance Ensemble in Jamaica. As Founder and Artistic Director of Koromanti Arts and the Korotech Professional Training Programme, 'H' has led professional artists and students to The Gambia and Jamaica. He was awarded the Jamaican High Commission's 50th Anniversary award for services in the field of Arts, Culture and Entertainment (2012). He currently teaches in the theology and religious studies and dance departments at Canterbury Christ Church University, where he is also a PhD candidate researching *Dancehall: a genealogy of spiritual practices in Jamaican dance*.

Bob Ramdhanie has been involved in the arts in the UK for over forty years. He established The Handsworth Cultural Centre, The CAVE Arts Centre, Kokuma Dance Company, Danse de L'Afrique, and the a cappella quintet, Black Voices. He has travelled throughout Europe, Africa, and the Caribbean researching and promoting Black artistes. He graduated as an electrical engineer, then completed an MA in social work, an MBA, and a PhD on African Dance in England at Warwick University. Bob was awarded the first Entrepreneur Lifetime Achievement Award by the Drum Arts Centre, Birmingham, UK. He is currently creative arts producer with mapz, an arts management agency, and Director of the Rupununi Music and Arts Festival in Guyana.

Sheron Wray, former Nesta Fellow, is an Associate Professor of Dance at the University of California, Irvine. She performed with UK contemporary dance companies Rambert and London Contemporary Dance Theatre between 1988 and 2001 and is widely known for her role as performer and legal custodian of *Harmonica Breakdown* (1938), choreographed by Jane Dudley. Whilst performing she was Artistic Director of JazzXchange Music and Dance Company, exploring improvisation with live music. In 2003 she began extending improvisation with digital tools in *Textterritory*, an interactive performance platform created with Fleeta Siegel. Her current PhD research, supported by the UK's Arts and Humanities Research Council, centres on improvisation within African performance. In 2013 she re-launched JazzXchange in the USA and was appointed guest curator of contemporary performance for the Monuments and Museums of Ghana. Recent publications include two chapters in *Jazz Dance: A History of the Roots and Branches*, edited by Lindsay Guarino and Wendy Oliver.



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In the early stages of the project we ran a Study Day at De Montfort University during which the contributors to this book delivered papers which have informed our research and been developed for inclusion in this text. We would like to thank them for their enthusiasm for this project and the many insightful conversations we have had with each of them: 'Funmi

Adewole, Thea Barnes, Jane Carr, 'H' Patten, Bob Ramdhanie, and Sheron Wray.

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Lastly, Christy would like to thank her mother Joan Baker and her daughters Bonnie Adair and Tansy Adair for their continuing support and to acknowledge her late father Jack Baker's unwavering interest in her research projects. Ramsay and Christy would like to thank all their students over the years whose interest in the work of British-based dancers who are Black has spurred this research.

Introduction

British Dance and the African Diaspora

Christy Adair and Ramsay Burt

This edited collection brings together new writing about the work of Black British dance artists. It arises out of a two year research project, British Dance and the African Diaspora, led by Christy Adair and Ramsay Burt. The historical scope of this book is the period from 1946 to the present, including the pioneering work of Les Ballets Nègres and the strong growth of dance activities between the 1970s and 1990s. Its aim is to celebrate the contributions that Black British dancers have made to the British dance scene, and does so through enlarging and clarifying existing historical information while focusing on cultural and aesthetic issues and concerns that are particularly relevant to British experiences.¹ The following anecdote illustrates the gap in knowledge about Black British dancers and their work which this book seeks to fill. In her introduction to the 2007 book *Voicing Black Dance: the British Experience*, 'Funmi Adewole recalls an incident when she had been invited to give a visiting lecture at a London Dance Conservatoire. She began her talk by asking the students what they knew about Black dance artists and they named a number of African American choreographers and companies. When she gave them the names of British dance companies, they had not heard of any of them, even ones that were touring at the time. British-based dancers who are Black have made rich and significant contributions to the British dance world since the middle of the twentieth century, but as Adewole's anecdote illustrates they remain largely unknown. The ideas behind performances by Black British dancers and companies were often misunderstood by dance critics at the time and their work has been largely ignored by those writing British dance history.

One of the aims of the British Dance and the African Diaspora research project was to write Black British dance artists and their legacies back into history. It was not the first project that set out to do this. Part of our aim was to consider why the dancers working within this sector have not received the recognition they deserve. As Adewole found, the abundance of information and resources about African American dancers has overshadowed the achievements of Black British dancers and companies. The poor quality of critical writing about the latter has made it difficult to recognise the

specificity of Black British experiences as these have expressed themselves in choreography and performance. This specificity, in turn, derives from the different routes through which African diasporic dance and music forms have come to Britain. This is the central focus of the present chapter which explores this specificity further as an introduction to the main themes and concerns of the rest of the book.

During the 1979 Arts Council documentary film about the pioneering British dance and drumming company Steel 'n' Skin, there is a significant incident during a performance in a community centre in Liverpool. George Dzikunu, who came to Britain from Ghana in the early 1970s and was later to become artistic director of the important dance company Adzido, dances a pulsing solo in front of the band. Then as the sounds from a steelpan emerge, an older man moves from the audience to dance. Is he re-living memories, does he find the steelpan irresistible, or is he just carried away by the energised atmosphere which is evident later when all of the audience join in with the dancing? Whatever his motivation, as he moves with undulating arms stretched wide to the side, his enjoyment is evident. When he turns, throwing his arms high and wide, there is a look of sheer bliss on his face. As he shuffles forward on one foot, the other slightly extended forward, he undulates his spine leading with one arm in front of his body and the other tucked behind his back. He embodies the music and clearly has moves which are very familiar to him. Yvonne Daniel suggests that there are

identifiable qualities within Diaspora performance. For example, Diaspora performers repeatedly rely most on soft or flexed knees, a gentle, forward-tilted back, polyrhythmic body-part articulations, and a cool or controlled approach within an extensive range of dynamics. They highlight movement that has an intimate relationship with music, visual art, history and cosmology.

(2011:14–15)

Some of these characteristics are evident within the man's dance, specifically, soft knees, tilted back, and a cool approach. Compared with the energetic, vigorous pulsing quality of Dzikunu's dancing, which is typical of sub-Saharan, West African dance, the older man moves in a gently wandering, undulating way that is characteristically Caribbean. Nevertheless the underlying African qualities that Daniel describes are common to both dancers. Through his communicative interaction with Dzikunu and the musicians, the man in a pullover seems to be coming home to some identification of defining importance within his body. This is beautiful on a purely aesthetic level, and also beautiful in its joyful collision of the need to wear a pullover in a cold climate, but respond to the rhythmic tunefulness of the steelpan, and to a solo by a Ghanaian-born dancer. British, African, and Caribbean histories and cultures collide and mix in this brief incident as

the man seems to be making identifications and inventing his own connections between them as he dances into view. This exemplifies the diversity of the routes through which diasporic African dance and music forms have come to Britain, and the complex ways in which British-based dancers who are Black experience these collisions and make these hybrid connections and identifications. The hybridity of Black British identities should not, of course, be set against the supposed stability of white British identities. Britain itself was initially an imaginary community arbitrarily formed out of England and Scotland by the Act of Union 1707, and subsequently modified through the absorption of successive waves of immigrants, including the 'Windrush generation' of Caribbean immigrants.

Although there have been Black people living in Britain since at least Shakespeare's time, the majority of Black British people are from families who came to Britain from British colonies in the Caribbean in the late 1940s and 1950s. During the same period there were also immigrants from Nigeria, Ghana, and other British colonies in Africa. This socio-political context makes the work of British-based dancers who are Black different from the work of Black dancers in the United States. Books about African American dance often position slavery and the chain gang as a point of origin. The Civil Rights and Black Arts movements in the United States are important for understanding the background for the work of artists like Alvin Ailey, Eleo Pomare, and others. The abomination of the transatlantic slave trade is not a key reference point for British dancers who came from African countries that were British colonies until the 1950s and 1960s. The social and political context of the work of Black British dancers has been the problems arising from the effects of colonialism. The education system in these countries was modelled on the same syllabi taught in Britain, and as colonial or, later, Commonwealth citizens, they looked to Britain as the mother country. While those who migrated did not have to fight for civil rights in the way African Americans had to do, they nevertheless experienced racism and discrimination. The marginalisation of Black British dance artists compounds these experiences. That is why, following on from the British Dance and the African Diaspora research project, this book seeks to celebrate the achievements of British-based dancers who are Black.

By initiating in-depth research on the dance forms used by Black British dancers and the cultural context of their work, the project began to address the nexus of aesthetic, institutional, and conceptual problems that have rendered these dancers and their work invisible. A key factor we believe is the inadequacy of existing frameworks to provide a suitable basis for analysis. While our project generated new research, it also investigated new methodologies. We did this through three public events – or Roadshows – involving different generations of professional dancers. As well as looking at practice, we discussed continuities and differences between dancers' experiences thirty years ago and today. We deliberately chose to hold these

Roadshows outside London, in Birmingham, Leeds, and Liverpool. An exhibition at the International Slavery Museum in Liverpool drew on our findings. This chapter discusses key themes that have come out of these events and which inform the rest of this book. These are: the problems caused by the label 'Black Dance'; the significance of the idea of Africa to Black British dance artists, particularly in the 1980s and 1990s; the importance of links with particular Black communities; and the creative reinvention in Britain of diasporic African concerns with rhythm and spirituality.

'Black Dance'

We titled this project *British Dance and the African Diaspora* in an attempt to move away from the problematic term 'Black Dance', which we see as a key barrier to re-reading the legacy of British-based dancers who are Black in a meaningful and productive way. This title also reflects our partnership with the London-based Association of Dancers of the African Diaspora (ADAD). When ADAD published *Voicing Black Dance* in 2007 they acknowledged that 'definitions and labels are a sensitive subject in the sector' (Adewole *et al.* 2007: 13), evidenced by the reports of conferences in the 1990s. Nevertheless, when publicising the heritage project about 'Black people and dance practices that reflected Caribbean or African culture', it seemed strategic to use a term with which people were familiar. The term 'Black Dance' seems to have come to Britain from the United States where it was used in the context of the Black Power and Black Arts movements. In Britain, for example, it is contained within the name of the Black Dance Development Trust, founded in 1985 to support the development in the UK of African Peoples Dance. In the US the word Black was used as a positive affirmation of Black people and culture in the context of African American struggles such as the Civil Rights movement. In the UK it carried similar connotations but within the context of colonialism. Because the Black Dance Development Trust received subsidies from arts funding agencies, Black British dancers were initially encouraged to contact them when they approached the Arts Council inquiring about grants. Thus Brenda Edwards, a member of the London Festival Ballet who was Britain's first Black ballerina, and Corrine Bougaard, a Black contemporary choreographer, both approached the Black Dance Development Trust in the late 1980s. The trust had only limited funds and felt its purpose was to support dancers working with African dance forms. There were more opportunities for ballet and contemporary dancers to train and perform than there were at the time for dancers wanting to work with African forms. But from Edwards' and Bougaard's points of view, there were very limited opportunities for Black dancers to gain professional experience. Some companies would have one or two token Black dancers. Many Black British dancers, at the time, moved to

New York because of this. They also suspected that there was a *de facto* quota within theatres, who would only show one company or have one short season of work by Black dance artists each year.

From the Arts Council's point of view, and for theatre and dance promoters, it was convenient for there to be a sector labelled 'Black Dance' that they could say they were supporting. From the dance artists' point of view, the effects have been divisive. The issue about terminology and the understanding of dance forms of the African Diaspora has therefore been an ongoing controversial debate among artists, critics, and funders. Peter Badejo argued in 1993 that

there is no such thing as Black dance ... African and Caribbean dance practitioners in this country and in the diaspora are fighting an ongoing battle to increase the understanding of our dance forms and of their cultural contexts. To draw together that multiplicity of dance forms and call them Black dance only serves to reinforce the impression that there is only one culture, only one dance form. It makes the colour of the artist more important than the content of the art.

(1993: 10)

In the Arts Council of England's 2000 Report, *Time for Change*, the authors noted that 'there is not yet a body of work that can be labelled "Black Dance". However, it is evident that a new vocabulary is being born out of Black British experiences, which might well dominate the choreography of Black British artists in the future' (2000: 15). Note here that the report hopes for 'a new vocabulary', as if the broad diversity of vocabularies and approaches that are proliferating are a problem, rather than a strength.

Since the 1940s, a number of British-based dancers who are Black have been teaching and producing performance work in a variety of dance styles that have come to the UK by the various different routes along which the Black British population have travelled. Les Ballets Nègres was founded in 1946 at the time of the post-war wave of Caribbean immigration. As the word ballet in their name suggests, these dancers aspired to become assimilated into the British dance world of that time, which was dominated by ballet companies, but nevertheless remained marginal to it. It was not until the 1970s, with the development of contemporary dance, that professional Black British dancers began again to form companies. The usual narrative of the development of contemporary dance during the 1960s in the UK starts with London performances by the Martha Graham Dance Company and the Merce Cunningham Dance Company, followed by the establishment of the London Contemporary Dance School and London Contemporary Dance Theatre (LCDT). It is useful to expand this narrative to include the Commonwealth Arts Festival in 1965, which brought in Rex Nettleford's National Dance Theatre of Jamaica, and visits around this time

from Professor Opoku's Ghana Dance Ensemble. While the role of Bob Cohan in establishing LCDT was important, so was the presence in the company of the African American, Graham-based dance artist William Louthier and the presence of the Jamaican-born British dancer Namron. Meanwhile in Essex, Felix Cobbson started teaching about Ghanaian dance and drumming in 1965. These additions make room in the story of British dance for the founding of Black companies working with contemporary dance forms, such as MAAS Movers in 1977 and Phoenix in 1981, as well as ones working with African and Caribbean forms, such as Ekomé (1972), Steel 'n' Skin (1974), and Kokuma (1977). Some of these started in order to counteract the lack of opportunities for trained Black dancers in the existing companies. Some, in tune with the Black Arts Movement, adopted a Pan-Africanist rather than assimilationist cultural outlook, drawing on music and dance traditions from Ghana, Nigeria, Senegal, and other post-colonial African States, and from the Caribbean. Other British-based dancers have worked within the genres of ballet, jazz, and contemporary dance from the USA, offering much needed opportunities for Black dancers to gain professional experience.

Companies like Adzido, Delado, and Lancel drew upon traditional African rhythms and patterns; others, like Greta Mendez of MAAS Movers and Beverley Glean with Irie!, fused contemporary and Caribbean dance styles; while artists such as Sheron Wray, Corrine Bougaard, and members of Phoenix and RJC Dance Companies explored styles of jazz and contemporary dance; still others, such as Jonzi D, have used hip-hop dance forms and techniques to create hybrid performance forms from the 1990s onwards. In a field dominated by men there are a number of female dancers and choreographers, some of whom are also artistic directors, whose contributions we celebrate, including Corrine Bougaard, Sharon Watson, Brenda Edwards, Beverley Glean, Cathy Lewis, Bunty Matthais, Greta Mendez, Gail Parmell, Judith Palmer, Hopal Roman, Carol Straker, and Sheron Wray. The specificity of the work which all these male and female dancers have created comes from the particular routes by which dance and music practices and traditions have reached Britain through the African Diaspora. It is the past legacies and contributions to these new vocabularies and current artistic practices that we investigated in this project, in particular in the three Roadshows.

Dance and the African Diaspora

We do not wish to repeat old debates, but point to the need to acknowledge that the terms we choose influence and reflect our thinking and our understanding. In attempting to map out new approaches in this research we avoid the problematic term 'Black Dance' and instead talk about dancers who are Black, and about dance and the African Diaspora. To speak of