

# Benign Neglect: African Dance and Music Placement in Academia

by

Marcia Ethel Heard, Ph.D.

1mdrmmdance@gmail.com

P. O. Box 6319,

Newark, New Jersey 07106

Marcia was born in Chicago, Illinois. She received the Bachelor of Science degree in Physical Education from the University of Illinois at Chicago in 1974, a Master of Arts degree in 1987, and a Doctorate of Philosophy in 2000 both from New York University. Since high school, Marcia has had a strong desire to serve the community in which she lives. This desire began in earnest when she co-organized a summer academic and arts program partnered by the South Side Community Arts Center on Chicago's South Side. Prior to that experience, Marcia served as a volunteer tutor as a part of her involvement in the high school club, Future Teachers of America. While a graduate student at New York University, she was recognized with a humanitarian award for her support of students seeking information about scholarships and the navigation of support systems with in the university.

Marcia moved to New Jersey in 1983. A dancer, teacher, choreographer, historian and writer, Dr. Heard has served on the Core Course Proficiencies Panel and the Standards and Test specification Panels for the Arts and physical education in New Jersey. Commissioned to choreograph and train parishioners by the Office of Black Ministry for the Archdiocese of New York, Marcia helped to introduce dance into the liturgy of the Catholic Church, culminating in the first liturgical dance performed at St. Patrick's Cathedral during the Pontifical Mass of February, 1996. She helped revive the Mead Street Association walking door-to-door inviting neighbors to meetings, informational gatherings offered by UVSO, and other community service institutions. She also helped organize and assisted in neighborhood cleanups of Smith and Mead Streets, obtained Block Watch cards, and street signs.

In 1998, Marcia embarked upon community service in Vailsburg, Newark, Arts in the Park, a program that provided free concerts to Newark and surrounding communities, Irvington and East Orange. Since that time, she has helped organize The Vailsburg Community Garden on Cliff Street, 2002. Marcia is an alumnus of the Neighborhood Leadership Initiative, Class of 2003. She has presented and written several articles on African dance and culture and the importance of outdoor spaces for physical education and recess.

Her thirst for knowledge, understanding and her willingness to share has resulted in the awarding of several grants, awards, certificates and fellowships. Retired, February 2017, Marcia formerly taught dance, health and physical education for the Montclair Public Schools. She is currently founding an emerging Arts Culture and Community Activism Center in Vailsburg, Newark, she resides in Vailsburg, Newark with her husband and two children.

**-0-0-0-**

In March 1970, Daniel Patrick Moynihan, then an adviser to President Richard Nixon, wrote a memo suggesting that the nation might benefit from a period of “benign neglect” on the subject of race, a brief respite during which “Negro progress continues and racial rhetoric fades.” *NYT* Benign Neglect Francis Wilkinson. June 11, 2008 5:10 pm. <sup>5</sup>

The time may have come when the issue of race could benefit from a period of "benign neglect." The subject has been too much talked about. The forum has been too much taken over to hysterics, paranoids, and boodlers on all sides. We may need a period in which Negro progress continues and racial rhetoric fades. Daniel P Moynihan. January 16, 1970. The White House. Washington. <sup>6</sup>

**-0-0-0-**

This article begins with the ideas of the separate words benign, and neglect giving consideration to their independent meanings as illustrated above with the several iterations of definitions. Further, this article seeks to observe the synergistic impact of these two individual words, benign and neglect, when they are brought together, “benign neglect”, in a discussion of Africana Studies Departments et al and the dearth of African dance, music, and their validity as disciplines of academic rigor and tools of academic research.

We will observe that across the country, that Africana Studies Departments et al have little to no dance, music, indeed the arts of Africa and its diaspora. We will observe the obvious fact that when African dance is incorporated on college and university campuses, it is in the form of the itinerant African dance class taught in the format of a typical modern, or ballet class anywhere in the world, in a word the focus is singularly on technique.

What happens when the two words, benign, and neglect, are combined and how the term “benign neglect”, their definitions and their usage in American society colloquially, via governmental policy, and in institutions of higher education, the public and private college and university systems, ultimately impact the inclusion of the rigor of African dance and music, as a discipline, that includes technique, aesthetics, the richness of the term, culture, and research tools associated with dance and music, i.e., notation, etc.

When the term benign neglect, came into being and was actively used as policy to withdraw from any national discussion that could have resulted in clearly discernable positive changes for African Americans specifically and all of the citizens of the United States of America in general, the overall effect was that of the withdrawal of any investment in African American communities which by and large continued to remain segregated up to and including the 1990s.

When we look at the word neglect, it becomes clear that the intent was/is to ignore, pay no attention, disregard or slight, to be remiss in the care of or treatment of African dance and music as a serious academic discipline from technique to the study of how dance impacts culture, informs culture, represents the culture of which it is a part. Ultimately to omit any aspect of dance and music through ignorance, or indifference, is ultimately to be indeed, negligent.

Further, when one observes the term benign neglect, a term brought into view during the Nixon Administration, a national policy used to withdraw any, as dictated by the Nixon Administration, interactions with African Americans particularly as it pertained to race relations, had and has a continued impact on race and therefore, this policy of benign neglect continues to impact African American communities. As a result, the discipline of African dance and music from an aesthetic discipline, a research tool, to the evidence of any and all aspects of the culture of a people is made invisible. Therefore benign neglect has a concomitant impact on African dance and music techniques, research tools, etc., as one studies the dances and/or music of a given ethnic group. In fact, the weight with which Africana Studies Departments et al lean on literature as “the” only form of communication, expression, research, analysis is indeed limiting and limited. The result from 1929 (Asadata Dafora)<sup>7</sup>, to the present, is that African Dance has found no place to develop and grow in academia.

In 1926, Margaret H'Doubler crafted the curriculum for an interdisciplinary dance major—the first in the U.S.<sup>8</sup> Why is it that in 2017, one can search far and wide and find Africana Studies Departments et al lacking a rigorous African dance/music research program? African dance and music is if anything, an afterthought, a weekly community class with few to no college credits, with little to no connection to the rigors of academia.

The University of Pennsylvania has a deep well of Africana Studies Scholars, 14 primary professorial staff members (specifically in the department) and 29 secondary full time staff members (shared with other departments). Among them, not one has the credentials to teach African dance/music nor discuss the history, politics, spirituality, etc., associated with the act of performing, studying, nor to explore its use as a tool of research. While all Africana Studies Departments present annual programs, that may include African/African-American dance, all include writers and thinkers, none of the thinkers present, perform, teach nor discuss in any form nor fashion the dances and music of Africa, nor is there a discussion of the dances of Africans in the Diaspora, its impact and critical aesthetics, nor its role in the survival of African peoples on the continent nor in the Americas, nor its impact on ballet, modern, and popular dance as they have evolved in the Americas. African and the dances of the Americas (the West Indies, the Caribbean, Central and South America), aren't neglected, for that would involve thought, the intent to neglect. African dance and the dances of the diaspora isn't even a consideration, a thought. The thought of possibly including African dance was never a thought to be ignored with benign nor any other intent.

Let's be clear there can be no African dance without African music. Neither can African dance and music be fully understood without knowledge of its language. Look at the Bamana language for example, "I ne sogoma." The translation of which means, "Is peace with you in the morning?" The rhythm of the sentence, "I ne sogoma", is the rhythm to which Mandiani is danced.

African Dance and Music is indeed the elephant, in the living room of academia, and specifically in the African and Africana Studies Departments and other such programs across the country.

When taking a survey of course requirements in colleges and universities across the country, one becomes keenly aware of the fact that there are few to no courses of study of the dances of any time period from pre-colonial-Africa to present day Africa, from "Before the Mayflower"<sup>9</sup>, in 1619 to the present in the United States of America.

There is a dire need to document the dances, the songs, the language, the oral traditions, and other spoken and unspoken aspects of a given culture, and all of the synergistic aspects of given dances and musics that contribute to the overall African, African American African Caribbean dance and music cultural experiences.

There is no dance major that includes any in depth study of African dance, nor its music. Indeed there is no evidence of collaborations between and among departments to share professors, i.e. music, language, dance, fabric arts, aesthetics, notation, etc.

There isn't even a collaboration between and among colleges and universities of a given city, state, region, not even across the country, so that a comprehensive Africana Studies Department et al is established to include the full richness and academic rigor of African Dance and Music. Along with this dearth, near absence, is the erroneous idea that only Africans can teach these classes, hence, African Americans such as Doris Green, Imaniyea Payne, Andara Rahman, and Obara Wali Rahman among so many others find that their years of acquired knowledge is also at it's never fully considered and at it's worst, benignly ignored and neglected by academia.

Having clearly stated the above, there are a few colleges and universities that embody parts and pieces of the beginnings of a tenured full professorship in African, dances and musics et al (including African acculturated experiences wherever they are found in the Americas, Europe, etc.)

Princeton University's Department of African American Studies provides . . . and research about African-descended people, with a central focus on their experiences in the United States.

We embody this mission in a curriculum that reflects the complex interplay between the political, economic, and cultural forces that shape our understanding of the historic achievements and struggles of African- descended people in this country and around the world.”<sup>10</sup>

But where is the culture? What does the term culture mean to them? When the department was founded, and as it has matured, when and why did the founders think that they could say the word culture and never think that they should include tenured positions in dance, music, visual arts? They continue:

provides . . . and research about African-descended people, with a central focus on their experiences in the United States. We embody this mission in a curriculum that reflects the complex interplay between the political, economic, and cultural forces that shape our understanding of the historic achievements and struggles of African-descended people . . .<sup>11</sup>

Observe how Princeton University's Department of African American Studies offers dance and music. It is insightful, but there is no consistency, no tenured professor whose work it would be to insure patterns of curricular offerings that are broad and deep. They know that the "ring shout" put a protective hedge around African Americans and the "Cakewalk" bespoke the hope and desires of African American peoples. They know that African Americans were on the concert stage in the United States before ballet was home grown. Why hasn't Princeton University and the African American Studies Department offered a tenured position to put a floor under the dance offerings? Yes, Rutgers University has the Jazz Studies Program, but does that prevent Princeton from exploring the varying ways in which African Americans created, explored, expressed and performed the music unique to the mission the department claims to embody? Such examples abound across the Americas and yes, reach back like Sankofa to Africa maintaining parts and pieces of the cultural dances in the party, political, and praise dances. The Department of African American Studies at Princeton University states,

We write for a broad public, and if you are part of that public, we hope you build on our scholarship in many and varied ways, including (but not limited to) engaging with others in the form of these three modes:

- ✓ **Lay the path bare.** This is a call to reveal knowledge about the path you traveled that led to attainment of social and cultural capital. This knowledge should be made plain to others who do not possess that capital.
- ✓ **Share beyond your immediate concern.** Share with people who are not situated in the world precisely as you are situated.
- ✓ **Speak truth.** Stop pretending things are fair. Don't be defeated; be honest.

12

But where is the path for African dance/music and the dances/musics of the diaspora, not only at Princeton University, but across the United States? True, the path must be laid bare, shared and all must know that the body moving cannot lie. The path must include tenured positions in African American art, performing and visual, and one must practice SANKOFA, hence, Africana Studies Departments et al, must include courses on African dance and music history and culture that would include tenured professors, and visiting professors, scholars, lecturers, and artists in African and African American dances and musics of the diaspora.

In this article, information is shared and will hopefully be well received by colleges and universities across the country and around the world.

The truth is, dance is the first language. It is a feared language because the body cannot lie. Dance remains in the eyes of many “dumb” in all of its pejorative implications. Dance came out of that closet of a mute, dumb art form in 1926. Yet in Africana Studies Departments et al, few to none offer dance, music nor visual art a serious part of their programs and departments in any significant format beyond the invited lecturer and itinerant guest artist. By serious, the implication is to hire tenured Professors, Associate and Assistant Professors who are members of Africana Studies Departments.

On the continent of Africa, Doudou N’Diaye Rose lamented the fact that even in Africa, two presidents in Senegal didn’t know, see, perceive, understand the importance of the dance and music to Senegalese culture,<sup>13</sup> that it needed to be placed among academia, that it needs to be studied, maintained, reconstructed, researched used as research tools to understand more fully other aspects of in this instance, Seneglaese culture. African dance and music, needs to be studied for its aesthetics, its relationship to politics, its part in history, culture, fashion, resistance, etc., etc. In the United States, Doris Green is leading the clarion call for the inclusion of the disciplines of African dance and music, as it was/is experienced on the African continent and in the Americas to be counted among the ranks of tenured professorships offered in Africana Studies Departments et al.

The truth is things are not fair in academia. Dance is not even a serious consideration, while it contains such richness and contributes to the richness of all aspects of culture as we experience it. It is our physical memory. It is at the vanguard. It provides commentary. It teaches. It is conscious and unconscious. Dance speaks volumes.

Although the writer’s focus is a specific discussion of the dearth of the dances and music of Africa and of Africans of the diaspora, the work of visual artists and their products needs to be a part of a comprehensive Africana Studies Department et al. How can the inclusion of visual and performing arts be added to existing Africana Studies Departments? One need only look to Princeton and Brown. At both universities, there are collaborations between and among departments; there are employees from full professorships to lecturers, but not in dance and music. It would also be to the advantage of colleges and universities to collaborate to bring about tenure track positions in African and Africans of the diaspora’s dance, music and visual art by splitting their time between Africana Studies Departments et al, and other departments within colleges and universities and among regional colleges and universities. Brown for example, includes theater as a part of its Africana Studies Department.

Never the less, Brown needs to extend dance as a tenured addition to the Africana Studies Department. This idea is not new; women and gender studies is the proof that the idea of college and departmental sharing of staff is neither new nor untried. Below, are three examples of course offerings by Brown, Cornell, and Princeton Universities:

Black Popular Music Culture: Taught by Professor Joshua Guild An introduction to major historical, theoretical, performative, and aesthetic movements and trends in black popular music culture from the 19th century through the present day. <http://aas.princeton.edu/african-american-culture-and-life/> <sup>14</sup>

Art School at African American Studies: Process, Discourse, Infrastructure: Taught by Professor Nell Painter Combining actual making with art criticism and an examination of the circulation of contemporary art, particularly the of work of black artists, this seminar is structured around fundamental art concepts . . . Given the historical centrality in African American art of representations of black bodies, the course pays special attention to figuration and portraiture ... <http://aas.princeton.edu/african-american-culture-and-life/> <sup>15</sup>

The American Dance Experience and Africanist Dance Practices: Taught by Professor Dyane Harvey Salaam A studio course introducing students to American dance aesthetics and practices, with a focus on how its evolution has been influenced by African American choreographers and dancers. An ongoing study of movement practices from traditional African dances and those of the African diaspora, touching on American jazz dance, modern dance, and American ballet ... <http://aas.princeton.edu/african-american-culture-and-life/> <sup>16</sup>

Special Topics in Urban Dance Style and Traditions in Hip Hop culture <http://aas.princeton.edu/african-american-culture-and-life/> <sup>17</sup>

At Cornell University, “Africana scholars document the global migrations and reconstruction of African peoples as well as patterns of linkages to the African continent (and among the peoples of the African diaspora).” Cornell has no relationship with performing arts specifically African dance and music including their related disciplines such as aesthetics, notation, etc. Although Africana scholars can study African languages: Youraba, Ki-Swahili, Bamana, etc., none of these languages are connected to their dances nor their music.

African American Studies 2013: A National Web-Based Survey by the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign Department of African American Studies Fall 2013, led by Ronald Bailey, Professor and Department Head indicates that of the total number of institutions (1,777), 76% have some form of Black Studies.”<sup>18</sup> Of those with Black or Africana Studies Departments et al, how many have a tenured African and or of the diaspora dance, and/or music professor?

Not only is there negligence, there is an ignorance, a lack of understanding in not only the Africana Studies Departments et al, but the college and universities that allow and support their existence. It would appear that neither the universities, nor their Africana Studies Departments et al, can imagine, see, know how such studies in the performing and visual arts can and will contribute significantly in deep and meaningful ways to the intellectual and academic culture of Africana Studies Departments et al.

When observing private and public colleges and universities the similarities are that African dance and music and those of the diaspora are systematically left out of the formal organization and structure of Africana Studies Departments et al. When dance is included in Africana Studies Departments et al, they are ephemeral possessing no longevity, nor sustained impact, no formal research criteria. Aside from course offerings and programs by part time staff or in some cases, shared professorships, African dance and music has been given no standing in Africana Studies Departments et al.

In conclusion, Africana Studies Departments et al, in conjunction with colleges and universities in their city state, and region, need to collaborate to discover ways to create tenured professorships in African, African American, African Caribbean, etc., dance, music and the visual arts. These collaborations need to take place between and among departments on a given campus, regionally and nationally among collaborating colleges and universities. In the decades between 1926, the advent of dance as an academic discipline, and the present, dance as a performing art and dance education has grown on college campuses across this nation. During the advent of dance as an academic discipline in the United States, we also witnessed the world showing of the 1930 production of Asadata Dafora’s “Kykunkor”<sup>19</sup>, the first African opera. These two events were watershed events for African dance, music, and language in the United States of America. Universities and colleges with various iterations of Africana Studies Departments et al, must recognize the works of those part time professors and lecturers like those at Princeton and Brown, et al and meet with them and for those who have no dance must consult with professors in African dance to develop an organizational structure that will allow for a place in Africana Studies Departments. Let’s be clear, that it is time for the elephant to move into Africana Studies Departments et al. It is time to lay the path bear, share beyond former immediate concerns and speak the truth.

African dance and music of the continent and the diaspora need to be within these departments, working in partnership to make the understanding of Africa, and her diaspora known through every venue, media, and mode of communication: movement, spoken, written, notated, vocal and instrumental music, poetry, painted, sculpted, etc. No one vehicle can be left out. One must also consider the fact that the search for qualified, creative, imaginative, cooperative and collaborative personnel, who can teach technique, offer courses in criticism, an examination of African and/or African artist of the diaspora aesthetics and practices, focus on its evolution, analyze and critique works of scholars like Robert Farris Thompson's "African Arts in Motion"<sup>20</sup> and Kariamuw Welch's \_\_\_\_\_<sup>21</sup> and to parse the creative works of African American choreographers, search for and explore "major historical, theoretical, performative, and aesthetic movements and trends" in the dance and music of the diaspora and on the continent of Africa.

## Appendix

\*Africana Studies Departments et al - means to include all Black Studies, African Studies, African Caribbean Studies, African American Studies, Black Studies, etc., programs and departments on college and university campuses across the United States of America.

## Notes

1. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/benign%20neglect>
2. <http://www.dictionary.com/browse/benign>
3. <http://www.dictionary.com/browse/neglect>
4. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/benign>
5. Francis Wilkinson." NYT Benign Neglect. June 11, 2008 5:10 pm. <https://campaignstops.blogs.nytimes.com/2008/06/11/benign-neglect/>
6. Moynihan, Daniel Patrick. Memorandum for the President. The White House. Washington. January 16, 1970. Pg 7.
7. Heard, Marcia E. Dissertation 2000
8. <http://www.dance-teacher.com/2015/09/margaret-hdoubler-1889-1982/>

9. "Before the Mayflower" 8 page 4
10. Princeton page 5
11. Princeton page 5
12. Princeton page 5
13. Telephone conversation with Doris Green. November 2016.
14. Black Popular Music Culture: Taught by Professor Joshua Guild.  
<http://aas.princeton.edu/african-american-culture-and-life/7>
15. Art School at African American Studies: Process, Discourse, Infrastructure: Taught by Professor Nell Painter. <http://aas.princeton.edu/african-american-culture-and-life/7>
16. The American Dance Experience and Africanist Dance Practices: Taught by Professor Dyane Harvey Salaam <http://aas.princeton.edu/african-american-culture-and-life/>
17. Special Topics in Urban Dance Style and Traditions in Hip Hop culture <http://aas.princeton.edu/african-american-culture-and-life/>
18. *Bailey, Ronald.* African American Studies 2013: A National Web-Based Survey by the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign Department of African American Studies Fall 2013. Pg
19. Heard, Marcia E.
20. Thompson, Robert F. African Arts in Motion.
21. Welsh, Karimu
22. Mills, Glendola Yhema. African Dance. A Bibliographic Essay and Selected Bibliography of African Dance. pg.222.

## Bibliography

- Asante, Kariam W. 1993. *Zimbabwean Dance: An Aesthetic Analysis of Jerusarema and Muchongoyo Dances*. Diss. New York University.
- \_\_\_\_\_. ed. *African Dance: An Artistic, Historical and Philosophical Inquiry*. Trenton: Africa World Press, Inc., 1996.
- Asante, Molefi Kete and Kariam Welsh. ed. 1985. *African Culture*. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press.
- Felix O. Begho. (1986). *Journal for the Anthropological Study of Human Movement* Vol. 4.2. 114-23 (Autumn): 114-23. <http://jashm.press.illinois.edu/4.2/index.html>.
- Bailey, Ronald. (2013). Fall.  
<http://www.afro.illinois.edu/documents/BlackStudiesSurvey.pdf>
- COBUILD Advanced English Dictionary. Copyright © HarperCollins Publishers.  
<https://www.collinsdictionary.com/us/dictionary/english/benign-neglect>
- Green, Doris. 1993. *Greenotation: Manuscripts of African Music and Dance*. Doris Green.
- \_\_\_\_\_. Doudou N’Djaye Rose in conversation with Doris Green. Feb. 26, 2017
- Hutchinson, Ann. *Labanotation or Kinetography Laban: The System of Analyzing and Recording Movement. A Theatre Arts Book. 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition, Revised*.
- Heard, Marcia E. 1999. *Asadata Dafora: African Concert Dance Traditions in American Concert Dance*. Ph.D. dissertation, New York University.
- UW-Madison Libraries, Archives and Oral History: “Margaret H’ Doubler and the Wisconsin Dance Idea”: [archives.library.wisc.edu/uw-archives/exhibits/athletics/athletics16dance.html](http://archives.library.wisc.edu/uw-archives/exhibits/athletics/athletics16dance.html). <http://jashm.press.illinois.edu/4.2/index.html>  
<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/benign>.

Mills, Glendola Yhema. *African Dance*. A Bibliographic Essay and Selected Bibliography of African Dance.

Moynihan, Daniel P. 1970. *Memorandum for the President*. The White House. Washington. January 16, 1970.  
<https://www.nixonlibrary.gov/virtuallibrary/releases/jul10/53.pdf>.