

A Terminology of Difference: Making the Case for Black Dance in the 21st Century and Beyond

by

Takiyah Nur Amin, Ph.D.
Department of Dance
University of North Carolina at Charlotte

Takiyah Nur Amin (TakiyahAmin@uncc.edu) is a native of Buffalo, NY and is the daughter of Karima and the late Abdul Jalil Amin. Currently, Takiyah is Assistant Professor of World Dance at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte. Takiyah earned a Ph.D. in Dance (with a concentration in Cultural Studies) and certificates in both Women's Studies and Teaching in Higher Education as a Future Faculty Fellow from Temple University. Previously, Takiyah completed degrees in Dance at SUNY-Buffalo and in Arts Administration at Virginia Tech. Her research has been presented at the Congress on Research in Dance, the African Heritage Studies Association Annual Conference and at other symposia across the country. Her work has been published in *Dance Chronicle*, the *Western Journal of Black Studies* and through the Community Arts Network. Takiyah's interests include Black performance aesthetics, contemporary Black feminist thought and activism, 20th century American concert dance and global dance traditions.

Abstract

The history of the term Black dance is explored with particular attention to contemporary and ongoing debates on its meaning, use and application. A summary of important historical and current uses of the term are engaged and explored in depth. A definition for Black dance and its application are provided in the context of an ongoing argument for its use given the experiences of Black people living in a postmodern global world within the context of a persistent and pernicious politicized, racist system.

Keywords: Black dance, African-American dance, Black aesthetic, Black performance

Debates over the meaning, relevance and value of using Black Dance as both a descriptive term and artistic category have persisted within the dance field since the onset of its wide spread use in the 1960's. As recently as July of 2010, the Jerome L. Greene Performance Space of New York Public Radio, in partnership with the City Parks Foundation, hosted "Dance Talks: Dancing Identity," a moderated dialogue with dancers and choreographers addressing the meaning and significance of Black Dance in this digital era, marked by globalization and inclusion ("The Green Space Events Calendar: Conversation"). In the February 2008 issue of *Dance Magazine*, contributing editor, former professional dancer and dance educator, Theresa Ruth Howard, openly challenged and ultimately dismissed the significance of Black Dance as a useful term of any kind. According to Howard, "Black dance is a term that sets the doers apart as separate and unequal in artistic validity" and "the work created by African Americans is too diverse to be compartmentalized and uniformly labeled" (137). Howard's commentary and the subsequent letters in response to it demonstrate that, as a concept, Black Dance continues to spark dialogue within the dance community, engendering deep feelings of both discontent and marked ambivalence.¹ This article proceeds, with these ambiguities and contentions in mind, to explore the ways in which the term Black Dance has been employed, defined and contested by scholar-artists in the dance community in order to develop and articulate a critical argument for the continued discussion of Black Dance as an artistic category and for the sustained use of the term as we move through the 21st century and beyond.

"Race" can be understood as a politically motivated system of labeling used to assign people of color to a position outside of hegemonic, mainstream (i.e. White) Western Civilization (DeFrantz 3-4.) As such, the term Black Dance can perhaps be understood as a label used to describe the movement-based, cultural production of persons of African descent throughout the diaspora who are identified as Black within the context of this racial system. To be clear, this article uses the term "African American" to refer to such persons who are living in the U.S. and the term "Black people" to refer more broadly to all persons of African descent who are identified racially as Black in both U.S. and broader global contexts. This article will use the *definitions* supplied above interchangeably with the aforementioned *terms* in order to support the ongoing use of Black Dance as an artistic category and meaningful descriptor.

Historically, scholar-artists have assigned different definitions to the term Black Dance. Notably, Emory University Professor Emeritus and dance/cultural studies scholar Richard A. Long provided a provocative definition in his groundbreaking text, *The Black Tradition in American Dance*:

The mere physical presence of Black dancers in a modern dance work or in a classical ballet clearly should not invoke the use of the term “Black Dance.” Clearly dance that arises in a culture or a cultural milieu which-for whatever reason- is called Black may be called Black dance (in the same way in which music so circumstanced is called Black music). Such cultures include those of sub-Saharan Africa, and the Africanized components of Western hemisphere cultures such as the Afro-American, the Afro-Brazilian, and the Afro-Cuban. *In other words, Black dance, Black stance and Black gesture are non-verbal patterns of body gestures and expressions which are distinctively Black African or originate from their descendants elsewhere* [emphasis added] (7-8.)

In this definition, Long asserts that there is a unified cultural aesthetic that links the Black non-verbal expression of people of African descent throughout the diaspora. It is significant to note that Long’s explanation is broad enough to include not only concert dance and theatrical performance, but also social dance and other movements more generally that originate within Black African culture. In the groundbreaking edited volume, *Dancing Many Drums: Excavations in African- American Dance*, scholar-artist Thomas DeFrantz further explicates the notion of Black Dance. According to DeFrantz, during the Black Arts Movement of the 1960’s, the idea of “Black Aesthetics” was linked to a “nationalistic reorientation” that “emphasized connections between everyday experiences and art-making to embrace multiple movement idioms and a range of approaches to representations of Blackness” (6-7.) As such, Black Dance was understood and articulated by many artists of the period to be about a political stance (i.e. Black Nationalism) as well as a personal expression through movement of one’s particular Black experience, contextualized by their interaction in the world as persons operating within a racially motivated system. As an extension of this idea, African-American dancer, author and activist Carole Y. Johnson commented during the period that the idea of freedom of expression should be central to any discussion or definition of Black Dance by saying, “Freedom is what all Black people are seeking...‘Black dance’ does not preach a particular ideology...Rather than a particular style of dance this expression ‘Black dance’ indicates the particular historical time and the conditions in which Black people find themselves” (DeFrantz 10-11.) Notably, Johnson situates the idea of Black Dance as being grounded within the historical moment, connecting it more to the shifting socio-political realities of Black people’s lives than to any particular dance form or ideology; her perspective is a departure from the explicit connection of Black Dance to a specific nationalistic philosophy or ideal. Notably, Johnson’s perspective stands in contrast to the work of author Lynne Fauley Emery who, in the preface to her text, *Black Dance: From 1619 to Today* describes Black Dance as “dance performed by Afro-Americans in the United States”, without explicit reference to a historical moment or the social position of the people in question (ix.) Emery’s idea differs even still from that of dance pioneer, educator and activist, Katherine Dunham, who, ironically, in the foreword to Emery’s text, defines Black Dance as simply “the dance forms of people of African origin” (vii). Dunham’s definition, like Long’s, suggests that Black Dance is primarily about the specific movement vocabularies that originate with people of African descent without confining the description only to the dances African Americans.

DeFrantz explains that during the 1960's and 1970's in particular, the term Black Dance was employed by many journalists (those affiliated with the mainstream and Black press) in order to *distinguish* the widespread emergence of concert dance by Black choreographers from mainstream (i.e. White) concert dance, using the term as an implicit, pejorative value judgment. He goes on to reveal that the use of the term in journalistic writing "seems to have been invented by white critics as shorthand for work they felt uncomfortable with or ill-prepared to address" (2-5). This meant that while not all African American dance artists working during the aforementioned era aligned themselves ideologically with the Black Arts Movement or Black Nationalism, the use of the term Black Dance became commonplace in labeling their work in the press without regard for those distinctions. Ironically, a term used during the period by some African American artists as a positive and decisive act of naming and self-determination had an array of definitions associated with it from the onset of its widespread use.

The use of the term Black Dance gradually fell out of use in dance writing due to its controversial, dubious invention and frequent use as a condescending label by journalists (15). The term later resurfaced in modern writing on dance during and perhaps because of the racially polarized culture wars of the 1980's and 1990's in the U.S.; examples include Alice Adamczyk's 1989 publication *Black Dance: An Annotated Bibliography* and Edward Thorpe's 1994 work, *Black Dance*. Importantly, Zita Allen's 1988 article, *What is Black Dance?*, published shortly before the death of African-American dance luminary, Alvin Ailey, probed the various definitions of the term and exposed it as not only a haphazard label employed by critics but as a perfunctory funding mechanism utilized to secure grant dollars for Black choreographers as well. Allen's piece concludes with the idea that to create a meaning for "Black Dance" is "presumptuous" and necessarily mired down in the "murky definitions" of the term employed by dance critics and scholars (22-23). In 2001, Dance critic Christopher Reardon revisited Allen's query in the article, *What is 'Black Dance'? : A Cultural Melting Pot*. In the piece, Reardon asserts that what complicates the definition and application of the term "Black Dance" is the "facility with which Black dancers and choreographers have absorbed and spread cultural influences" (4.) Reardon's perspective suggests that Black dancers have assimilated, performed and disseminated so many movement vocabularies that do not necessarily have their origin in Black African culture; as such, using the term Black Dance to describe their work is a useless and inaccurate descriptor because it lacks Black cultural specificity. Furthermore, Reardon's assertion implies that because non-Black people are also dancing movement that originates within the culture of people of African descent, it may not be accurate to consider it Black dance anymore because the bodies that are dancing are not racialized as Black. Similarly, in her book chapter *Don't Take Away My Picasso: Cultural Borrowing and the Afro-Euro-American Triangle*, Temple University Professor Emeritus Brenda Dixon Gottschild reveals the complexities of this cultural mash-up when she writes that, "Indeed, ours is a culture that is in an ongoing, contradictory process of Creolization-cum-segregation, a situation that is an extension of the European colonialism that brought Africans and Europeans to the Americas in the first place" (21).

The author goes on to explore the complexities surrounding Black Dance in her text *The Black Dancing Body: A Geography from Coon to Cool*. In the work, Gottschild mentions the genesis of Black Dance as a media phrase employed by white critics, but proceeds to deeply engage contemporary dancers and choreographers about their personal understandings of the term. African American choreographer Bill T. Jones provides a concise definition of Black Dance as “any dance that a person who is black happens to make,” ironically contesting Zita Allen’s assertion that any attempt to define the term is a supercilious undertaking that necessarily results in a nebulous concept (12). African-American Dance artist, actress and choreographer Marlies Yearby goes so far as to define all dance as Black Dance as a result of the African origin of rhythms used in ballet and modern dance and as such, states that dance is “as interconnected and mixed up as the blood,” underscoring the Creolization in Gottschild’s earlier remark (13.) The variety of definitions and perspectives explored in this article thus far reveal that ideas about what Black Dance is and what it does, can or should mean, reflect an array of political ideas and a diversity of opinions about the significance and potential application of the term.

Consequently, what is the relevance of the term “Black Dance” in the 21st century and arguably, beyond? If a single, cohesive and operative definition of the term does not exist within academic or popular discourses, what is its utility and proper application? Taken in tandem with politically charged and differing perspectives on race and identity, how might an ongoing dialogue on Black Dance be of use and to whom? This article posits that the realities for Black People in this period of postmodern existence, typified by the dissolution of cultural metanarratives, necessitates that the term Black Dance and all ancillary terms related to it are interrogated, but are not excluded from use. Moreover, this article suggests that the persistent realities of racism and White skin privilege in this postmodern age require that discussions on Black Dance remain a part of the agenda within academic, artistic, political, cultural, and historical dialogues.

In her book chapter *Postmodern Blackness*, bell hooks explains that while cultural discourses in this postmodern era have given way to include the voices of Black people and others who have typically represented “difference” and “otherness,” within academic settings and beyond, those dialogues continue to be exclusionary and typified by appropriation. According to hooks, it is a persistent truth that the majority of discussions around writing and scholarship related to life in this postmodern era often exclude any mention of or meaningful engagement with Black people or their experiences. hooks pointedly makes the claim that for African Americans in the present, the reality of post-modern existence is bleak because, “For African-Americans, our collective condition prior to the advent of post modernism and perhaps more tragically expressed under current postmodern conditions has been and is characterized by continued displacement, profound alienation and despair” (17.) If what hooks asserts about the conditions faced by African Americans can be taken for granted as any indication of the quality of life for Black people throughout the diaspora, her comments suggests a dire cause for concern.

Using the foregoing assertions as context, the fundamental issue begins to reveal itself as the ongoing exclusion of significant and critical engagement with the lives of Black people in both academic and popular contexts in this postmodern era. Taken in tandem with persistent racism, these omissions create a broad obscuring and denial of the narratives that emerge out of the collective condition of Black people historically, in the 21st century and beyond. If even in this postmodern, global era marked by varying degrees of inclusion, Black experiences continue to be ignored and/or silenced, choosing not to use Black Dance as a term to reference the movement work of Black people or to explore its potential for meaning as a category of performance does not help matters. Making the choice to disregard Black Dance as a term and category contributes to the further denial and marginalization of the ongoing, multiple and meaningful ways in which Black people have articulated themselves and interpreted human experiences through dance in popular, theatrical, secular and religious contexts. This perspective is implied by Gottschild when she writes, “Furthermore, I recognize with love and gratitude, the vast riches that peoples of African descent have brought to American dance, culture and life...Until racism and white skin-privilege are no longer an everyday issue in American life, I believe there is good reason to use a terminology of difference (black dance; black dancing body) that allows us to honor these contributions” (14). Gottschild’s comments suggest that as a term, Black Dance can be of use in providing a descriptive frame for the many ways in which Black people have communicated the human experience through the medium of movement within politically complex, racialized system that permeates both US and global contexts. Discourses that employ the term Black Dance in this manner will be helpful in highlighting and positioning the cultural production of Black people through movement as not only a contribution to, but as an originating and defining factor within the landscape of dance performance as a whole. Doing so will help ensure that the movement-based articulations of Black people are placed at the center and not marginalized as some kind of artistic or cultural appendage. The goal in encouraging this understanding and application of Black Dance is to make certain that the movement-based contributions of Black people existing in the context of a pervasive politically motivated system, will not be lost, ignored, maligned or otherwise concealed in the 21st century and arguably, beyond. If one wants to “do away” with the term Black dance, one must first dismantle the systemic, politicized racist context that makes such descriptors arise to begin with; the term Black Dance as a descriptor can be abandoned when - and only when - Black people’s experiences and creations are no longer overlooked, disregarded and/or suppressed.

Any argument for the persistent use of Black Dance as a term requires that a cohesive and explanatory definition accompany it; if this term is to be used, what meanings should it imply? Interestingly, in the July 1971 issue of *The FEET*, Founding Editor Carole Y. Johnson forwarded this definition for Black Dance which points to some possible solutions:

The term 'Black dance' must be thought of from the broadest point that must be used to include any form of dance and any style that a Black person chooses to work within. It includes the concept that all Black dance artists will use their talents to explore all known, as well as to invent new forms, styles and ways of expression through movement. The term demands that within a particular style, the dancer will constantly strive for higher levels of artistic consciousness and will communicate the truths he finds in his personal search with the people of the community who also share in his artistic evolvment. Since the expression "Black dance" must be all inclusive, it includes dancers that work in (1) the very traditional forms (the more nearly authentic African styles), (2) the social dance forms that are indigenous to this country which include tap and jazz dance, (3) the various contemporary and more abstract forms that are seen on the concert stage and (4) the ballet (which must not be considered solely European.)

Johnson works to define Black Dance, as first and foremost, movement that is not limited to any one particular technique, vocabulary or style. In this sense, Black Dance reflects the varied movement vocabularies developed and articulated through Black dancing bodies, not just the movement idioms that are generally understood to originate in Black African culture. Johnson's assertion suggests that even the varied cultural influences that Black people have assimilated which reveal themselves in movement can be understood as Black Dance because they are filtered and distilled through the varied particular and specific racialized experiences of Black people through the use of the body. This radically inclusive perspective suggests that there is no one single Black experience to be articulated through a set of specific movement vocabularies generally thought of as originating in Black African culture; rather, Black Dance here becomes a category that encompasses the many dance forms that originate in, are filtered through and arise out of Black people's dancing bodies in concert, social and other contexts. As a secondary but equally important point, Johnson's definition for Black Dance does not require explicit allegiance or adherence to any specific political ideology, therefore creating an elastic definition that expands broadly enough to encompass Black dance artists who do not find political alignment with Black nationalism for whatever reason. Rather than asserting that Black Dance requires a commitment to a particular political philosophy, Johnson is explicit that Black Dance requires an ongoing commitment to artistic excellence and a willingness to share what is learned through the dance experience with others in the larger society. Notably, this sense of Black Dance is not about limiting or negatively pigeonholing the work of Black Dance artists; this understanding of the term articulates a specificity that is grounded in the bodies and varied experiences of Black people while foregrounding the requirement for high quality and community engagement on the part of those who would seek to lay claim to Black Dance.

Out of the varied interpretations of and definitions supplied for Black Dance over the years, Johnson's explanation provides a basis for forwarding a cohesive, radically inclusive understanding for this historically contested term. Black Dance, then, is defined as the multiple movement idioms that both originate within Black African culture and those that emerge as they are filtered through the experiences of Black people as a result of assimilating various cultural influences.

Black dance is not a declaration of a particular technique, style or political ideology; rather it speaks of an ongoing commitment to artistic growth and quality while demanding a commitment to community responsibility and engagement on the part of the practitioner. This broad and expansive definition, by placing Black people at the center, makes plain that while others may choose to perform it, Black dance both originates and finds its full expression in the locus of the Black dancing body. This understanding of and case for Black dance is an offering to ensure that the lives, thoughts, feelings and experiences of Black people, articulated through dance as the chosen medium, continue to find voice, expression, respect and recognition in both academic and popular settings in this digital postmodern age and for many years to come.

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¹ For more information on the varied responses to Howard’s commentary, see works cited list for entries by Amin and Davis.