

# Theorizing Connectivities: African American Women in Concert Dance

by

Thomas F. DeFrantz, Ph.D.  
African & African American Studies/Dance  
Duke University, Durham, NC

*Thomas F. DeFrantz* (t.defrantz@duke.edu) is Professor of Dance and African and African American Studies at Duke University. His books include the edited volume *Dancing Many Drums: Excavations in African American Dance* (University of Wisconsin Press, 2002, Errol Hill Award) and *Dancing Revelations Alvin Ailey's Embodiment of African American Culture* (Oxford University Press, 2004, de la Torre Bueno Prize). He is the director of SLIPPAGE: Performance, Culture, Technology, a research group that explores emerging technology in live performance applications, in residence at Duke University. He performed the "Morton Gould Tap Concerto" with the Boston Pops conducted by Keith Lockhart and the "Duke Ellington Tap Concerto (David Danced)" with the Aardvark Jazz Orchestra conducted by Mark Harvey. He organized the dance history program at the Alvin Ailey School in New York for many years, and has taught at NYU, Stanford, Hampshire College, MIT, the University of Nice, and Yale. He convenes the working groups, Choreography and Corporeality, and Black Performance Theory, and is President of the Society of Dance History Scholars.

**Abstract:** This essay explores genealogies of Black women's presence in American modern dance to theorize connectivity as a methodology to appreciate their creative work. The legacies of more familiar dance artists, including Pearl Primus and Katherine Dunham, are discussed in relation to achievements and interventions by less-discussed, but no less important, African American women including Joan Myers Brown, Judy Dearing, Thelma Hill, Carole Johnson, and Edisa Weeks. The essay offers evidence of a radical creative tradition within these genealogies; one that has been less widely appreciated by mainstream histories of dance, but surely influential in the creation of American concert dance.

**Keywords:** American modern dance, dance theory, Judy Dearing, Thelma Hill, Carole Johnson, Edisa Weeks.

In the United States, African American women have continuously enlivened American modern dance as company directors, designers, choreographers, performers, critics, and scholars. Unfortunately, their contributions to American culture have remained shadowed and poorly documented. This essay will trace genealogies of Black women's presence in American dance to underscore the prodigious potentials that these artists have enabled. The legacies of more familiar dance artists, including Pearl Primus and Katherine Dunham, will be discussed in relation to achievements and interventions by less-discussed, but no less important, African American women. In all, these women's work offers ways to theorize connectivity in dance. This essay offers evidence of a radical creative tradition within these genealogies; one that has been less widely appreciated, but surely influential in the creation of American concert dance.

## **Essentializing Concepts of African American Women**

In the United States, African American women continually occupy a difficult status as "essential laborers" whose subjectivity has been scripted by dominant paradigms to have "no movement in a field of signification." According to performance theorist Daphne Brooks, the Black woman's body in the United States, "born out of diasporic plight and subject to pornotroping ... has countenanced a 'powerful stillness.'"<sup>1</sup> For Brooks, and many other Black feminist critics, African American women are too easily reduced to essentialized identities that stress their abilities to teach and nurture while operating outside the forces of power that define modern life. They are said to arrive in the circulations of industry and intellect only in ancillary, supportive positions. They are almost always discussed in relation to men, who recurrently employ rhetorics of domination to narrowly define their capacities and potential. They are considered sassy and mysterious, intriguing at times, but generally interchangeable. Unfortunately, confusedly, and far too often, Black women are heralded as the emotional backbone to the world, the mothers of us all, ready to serve and care for any in need, as well as those who act passively in terms of social momentum, and without recourse to dynamic subjectivity, sustained group agency, or charismatic leadership abilities.

These narratives diminish our capacity to recognize how African American women work in complex ways as creative agents in the processes of culture. Indeed, our impoverished discourse allows us to deny the interventions of Black women in the arts, and especially dance. It is still rare for researchers in dance to consider the gestures of women of color at all, and African American women in particular, so that we fail to recognize a continuous richness; a genealogy of committed creativity, radical intellect, and strategic resistance that are hallmarks of African American femininity. It should go without saying, but it does not: Black women in the United States create complex and sustainable gestures of culture, especially as a connectivity, even as they are routinely denied a centrality of presence in discourses of dance.

## Theorizing Culture and Connectivities

In order to appreciate ways that African American women have enlivened dance, it will be useful to re-imagine how culture operates. We might conceive of culture as a connectivity, a means by which people share information, approaches, stories and remedies, creativity, or taste among each other. This “sharing among” could be considered an action of culture that allows us to recognize it. As an action or a performance of the gestures of sharing, culture could be defined by the modes of exchange that allow people to connect. In this view, culture might be defined by its ethics of generosity and reciprocity, or the ways people find to support commonly constructed imaginings of communal living.

I begin here with a conception of culture that acknowledges gestures of connection, as African American culture surely does, in order to recognize *collective subjectivities* as a basis of analysis. Rather than focusing on the agency of individuated subjects, as the theories of Heidegger, Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze and Guattari, and even Merleau-Ponty might suggest<sup>2</sup>, I look here to acts of connection and coherence to appreciate a Black Feminist articulation of world-building in dance. Here, I pay attention to coalition-building and strategies of connectivity. I allow for considerations of the familial and its extensions across time and place. I note gestures of velocity and intuition. I emphasize narratives of action that offer practical methods to seek out common ground and shared objectives. These analytic paradigms are rooted in social connectivities; in the places where those engaged in communication recognize and acknowledge each other; where people converge to replenish.

Here are some paradigms of analysis that might allow a focus on these connective capacities of culture: *Radicalizing to Make Space; Vibrating Alongside; Attending to the Margins; Building a Center; Moving Outside the Periphery; Theorizing an Entirety of Exchange*. These concepts suggest methods of analysis that could allow for a nuanced appreciation of the gestures of women in dance. They emerge from a consideration of the efforts of six particular African American women and their resounding legacies. The six women under consideration here act as exemplars for many others even less documented or acknowledged; their achievements confirm our collective abilities to *\*do\** - to make culture as a connection among people - in dance. By acknowledging a discourse centered in these connective possibilities, we can begin to recognize the expansive abilities always already in our midst.

### **Carole Johnson: Radicalizing to Make Space**

Consider opening space for encounters to deepen. This is the labor of connecting disparate energies; energies who might imagine themselves to be in unresolvable conflict. Conflicting vectors of ambition or belief motivate people to fear; in this fear, communication shuts down. African American women are often called to these sites of rupture to mediate and connect in subtle, modest manner.

In the context of American dance, Black women who claim voice as curators and critics can radicalize the capacity of encounter to create productive space. Leadership in this area includes the important efforts of writer Zita Allen, who created a body of dance criticism in the 1970s that effectively defined the genre of dance created for and by Black artists. Writing in 1980 about the vexing persistence of an undefinable, and implicitly inferior, category of “Black dance,” Allen described the severity of a cultural divide in which white critics seemed to be “so totally unfamiliar with Afro-American cultural heritage and history” that they were “ill-equipped to either identify those roots or determine when they are being demeaned and denied or drawn from for inspiration.”<sup>3</sup> Allen often wrote about the impossibility of defining “black dance,” as in this excerpt from a 1988 pamphlet:

Is it a black choreographer’s work performed by black dancers? A white choreographer’s work done by black dancers? Or a black choreographer’s work danced by whites? Must it always have a “Black” theme? Is it ever abstract? Is it modern, jazz, tap and/or ballet? Is it found only in American or can this label apply to works performed by ...any ... company consciously trying to preserve its African heritage? Or, is ‘Black Dance’ just an empty label devised by white critics to cover that vast, richly diverse and extremely complex area of dance they know nothing about?”<sup>4</sup>

Allen understood that a category called “Black dance” could too easily become a tool to demean and disparage work by African American artists; therefore, in articles like the one quoted above, she worked to radicalize this difficult cultural encounter in order to open space for more complex aesthetic analysis. One can note that by the 1990s, Allen moved from dance writing to become a noted author of young adult books, including Black Women Leaders of the Civil Rights Movement.<sup>5</sup>

Other African American critics followed Allen’s lead to create resistant strains of criticism and curatorial vision. In the 1980s, Bernadine Jennings established Attitude: The Dancer’s Magazine, a Brooklyn-based publication that rivaled mainstream Dance Magazine with articles, book and performance reviews, and copious photographs. The magazine considered its topics from an alternative perspective of writing by dancers and dance artists rather than professional critics. Attitude has given many writers of color their start, as a publication venue willing to offer points of view beyond the mainstream. The prescient work of C. S’thembile West, who wrote as a dance critic in the 1990s, brought light to the complex ways in which stage versions of African dance enhanced recognition of a Black feminine in action. Latter-day writings by Eva Yaa Asantewaa on her blog “InfiniteBody”<sup>6</sup> comment cogently on a hugely-diverse array of performances. Yaa Asantewaa does not write exclusively about African American women or black performance; but she does write a great deal about the performances of women of color and, in the process, makes space for all of her readers to recognize each other more carefully within and outside of a theatrical space.

Preceding the efforts of these visionary writers is the legacy of Carole Johnson, who intervened in the curatorial and critical discourse of the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s. Johnson created the arts magazine The Feet and, in the process, effectively jolted an acknowledgement of divergent points of view around art making, social circumstance, and community. The Feet became the voice of Black dance in the 1960s, and a de-facto arm of the Black Arts Movement. It included poetry, reviews, announcements, and tributes to dance artists of color working enhance the aspirations and collective awareness of black people and those committed to civil rights.<sup>7</sup>

Johnson, a dancer who worked as a soloist as well as with choreographer Eleo Pomare, was affiliated with The Feet for its entire existence, as contributor, subject, and editor. The Feet was created as a project of MODE, the Modern Organization for Dance Evolvement, of which Johnson was founder and president. In the premiere, June 1970 issue of The Feet, MODE listed a two part mission: to be of service to professionals in dance, and to be an educational and informational organization for the general public and people in other professions interested in dance. A twelve-part list offered the organization's goals as follows:

1. Design programs and projects that will create more work for black companies.
2. Take dance performances into the black communities so that the people will feel and understand the importance of dance in their lives.
3. Provide information about black dancers, chirographers, companies, and schools.
4. Begin a picture file and act as a clearing house so that magazines, especially black ones, can get information and feature dance in their publications.
5. Develop more written material on dance by printing articles and pamphlets.
6. Develop educational programs that make use of audio-visual techniques.
7. Start a newsletter for communication of ideas and activities.
8. Help develop and maintain up-to-date archives on black dancers and choreographers.
9. To develop financial support from a greater portion of the black people.
10. Help create centers in other areas of the nation so that companies can have residencies of at least a week.
11. Help black colleges find teachers.
12. Design programs so the neighborhood dance schools in the various cities can establish relationships with each other as well as with professional dance companies.<sup>8</sup>

More than anything, The Feet intended to radicalize discourse around Black dance to make space for more dancing by, for, and about African Americans.

While touring with Eleo Pomare to Australia, Johnson decided to relocate there, and, not surprisingly, she took a leading role in that country's imagining of indigenous dance. She helped shape the dance and cultural arts programs that became the Bangarra Dance Theatre and the NAISDA, two essential outlets for aboriginal dance in Australia. By 2012, these are models of capacities for dance that can express the connections among people. Bangarra became an international, contemporary dance touring company that has appeared in opera houses around the world. Of less international note, but no less importance, are the programs of the National Aboriginal Islander Skills Development Association; the school that Johnson founded when she began teaching classes in Australia.

To radicalize the space for participation, Johnson worked first with Aborigine people in Australian cities. In an interview, she said, "I found out that urban Aborigine people were more separated from their traditional dance than African-Americans are from African dance." Things had shifted so much in the rush to industrialization, that "young people couldn't even feel the beat of their traditional music."<sup>9</sup> She received grants from the Australian government and the US government to work as an ambassador for dance, and to "act as a liaison and a consultant on urban Aboriginal arts programs for the Australian Arts Council." According to Johnson, up to that time, "very few lines of communication had existed between the Whites and the Blacks, and the arts were to be the starting point. Blacks had been invisible to the white citizenry who considered the country to be 'homogeneous,' not multi-cultural, even though several different racial groups lived there."<sup>10</sup>

Today, NAISDA operates in generous dance studios in Sydney, and provides a notable connectivity for artists of color throughout Australia and New Zealand. Its methods of study and gathering information about dances involve recruiting tutors from homelands to teach at the school in Sydney for four weeks, and then sending the dance students into the communities where they can practice the songs and dances in context of place and social circumstance for three weeks. In this model, connections between people are formed by way of an urgent regard for dance; one that involves inter-generational study distributed across place, and imagined to be work that is part of the world.

### **Judy Dearing: Vibrating Alongside**

Phenomenology suggests a reciprocal imaginary space; one that refers multi-directionally to the dynamism of experience. Drawing on the legacies of Heraclitus, phenomenologists, including Merleau-Ponty, acknowledge that all matter is in vibration and becoming. Attending to this "becoming" might imply enlarging our capacity for empathy, or beginning to register how people understand lives to be livable.

The best theatrical designers hone access to this empathetic space to imagine how people move, and how they make choices to move. Design involves making choices that can communicate in several registers simultaneously: for the performers; for the production and its collaborative team; for the viewers and spectators. Designers have to be humble and generous; they must be willing to labor alongside others whose work is inevitably compressed by time; they must vibrate creatively in tune to the needs and desires of real and imagined experiences shaped within theatrical exchange.

African American women who work as designers for dance inevitably work more for other theatrical situations, such as drama or musical theater. For example, lighting designer, Kathy A. Perkins, who has, for years, lit the large touring event Dance Africa in the United States, spends most of her career designing for theater and teaching at the University of Illinois at Champaign Urbana-Champaign. Perkins is also the editor/co-editor of six anthologies focusing on African/African Diaspora women in theater, and her labor is inescapable for any interested in women of color and contemporary performance.

Of note also is the rich work of costumer Judy Dearing, who lived from 1940 to 1995. Dearing's career is of particular interest here, as she began as a dancer with Chuck Davis and at the Ailey school, and later, married Ailey leading dancer, John Parks, with whom she had a daughter. Entirely productive, Dearing designed hundreds of shows, including many by the Negro Ensemble Company, the Public Theater, Lincoln Center, on Broadway, off-Broadway, and in regional theaters. Most importantly, perhaps, she designed consistently in the network of black theaters and theater programs of the Historically Black Colleges and Universities across the United States. Her resume is unmatched, and includes plays that essentially define thirty years of African American participation in professional theater. Her designs include seminal productions of "Black Nativity" by Langston Hughes, "A Soldier's Play" by Charles Fuller, "Long Time Since Yesterday" by P.J. Gibson, and the Broadway production of "Having Our Say" by Emily Mann, Sarah L. Delany, A. Elizabeth Delany, and Amy Hill Hearth. Her most noted designs were probably for the 1990 Broadway musical "Once on this Island" and the original 1976 production of Ntozake Shange's "for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf."

Born in Manhattan, Dearing graduated from City College, and began her career dancing with Miriam Makeba and the Sun Ock Lee Dance Company. She designed costumes for only a few concert dance works. For the Ailey company, she designed "Nubian Lady" (1972), choreographed by John Parks; and two early works choreographed by Ulysses Dove: *Inside* (Between Love ... and Love) (1980), and *I See the Moon and the Moon Sees Me* (1979). Unfortunately, little evidence of Dearing's earliest work as a dancer, or costumer for dance, exists. But one remarkable photograph from the Channel Thirteen Public Television archives shows her in action, seated on the ground with her leg raised in gracious extension, providing physical accompaniment to the singing of composer and vocalist, Miriam Makeba.<sup>11</sup> Viewing this photograph, one might bear witness to her prodigious empathetic imagination.

## **Thelma Hill: Attending to the Margins**

At times, all dance artists need help. Faced with training that reorganizes our very nervous system, we lose our way; we lose sight of how to recognize growth, or comfort in dancing; we feel frustrated by our inability to achieve a particular sequence of movements with just the right emphasis; we feel separate and alone. We find ourselves at the margins of our own existence, somehow unable to connect and replenish energy and creativity. As dancers, these feelings come in relationship to our understanding of our physical selves, wrapped up in our emotional lives, and our ambitions and desires to perform. These complex feelings become tangled and often contradict what our friends and teachers tell us about our progress and achievement.

This is when dance artists most need the counsel of a wise elder who has committed herself to attend to the margins, to helping others navigate those moments when connections to others seems to disappear. This counseling is the labor of being a great teacher and mentor; it is a willingness to pay attention to the edges of the stage, the classroom, or the dance center. It is a willingness to note the small, almost imperceptible shifts of energy that signal loss of focus in others. So many African American women, like so many women of every ethnicity working in dance, have bolstered others in these moments of doubt. This crucial aspect of teaching well is also the legacy of dancer, teacher, and mentor Thelma Hill.

Thelma Hill, who lived from 1924 -1977, was born and raised in New York City.<sup>12</sup> She became a leading dancer, company co-director, master teacher, and cherished mentor to scores of African American dance artists. An only child, she first studied music and painting, then turned to dance as a teenager. She studied tap dance with Mary Bruce, a noted teacher who ran a dance studio in Harlem. Apparently, Hill took to dance easily, and according to her contemporaries, would occasionally teach class to students her age or older.

As a young woman, Hill worked office jobs during the day, including a stint at the New York City Department of Welfare. She married, but the union dissolved quickly, and she rarely referred to her ex-husband in her adult life. She became serious about dance study around 1949 when she began concentrated ballet classes at the Metropolitan Opera School of Ballet. Her passion for the art outweighed her late start in training, and she focused on achieving a professional career in dance. Older than most of the other students at her skill level, Hill was always available for counsel. She became a mother-figure to other dancers, and a nickname emerged around 1950: from then on, she was affectionately called “Mother Hill.”

Despite her late start in ballet, Hill studied assiduously with Maria Nevelska, a former member of the Bolshoi Ballet, and assisted noted Harlem dance studio teacher, Sheldon B. Hoskins, in his annual dance concerts. She achieved a professional career as a ballerina in the short-lived Les Ballets Nègres, founded in 1955, which became the New York Negro Ballet Company in 1957.



Working with company founder Ward Flemmyng, Hill assumed an administrative role with the group, and became the rehearsal director responsible for maintaining the group's repertory during its landmark 1957 tour to England, Scotland, and Wales. Well-received by surprised critics and audiences, the company's tour proved the potential of African Americans to achieve classical ballet technique, a truth long denied by American balletomanes. Hill's invaluable presence as rehearsal director and dancer contributed greatly to the success of the tour. Unfortunately, an injury to her tendon precipitated the end of her career as a dancer *en pointe*.

Upon returning to New York, she performed in the pick-up companies of several artists who combined ballet technique with modern and social dance idioms, including Jean-Léon Destin  (1958); Louis Johnson (1958); Geoffrey Holder (1959); Talley Beatty (1960); and Matt Mattox (1961). She joined the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater in 1959 and traveled with the company on their US State-Department sponsored landmark tour of Southeast Asia in 1962. She quickly became a confidante to Ailey as his enterprise grew, and in the 1963 season, she served as rehearsal mistress for the Ailey company. Although she left the troupe to continue her teaching career in New York, she remained close to Ailey throughout her life, and served as an uncredited assistant to him on several engagements. She worked with Ailey on the Broadway musical *La Strada* (1969), which closed after one performance, and the Leonard Bernstein extravaganza *Mass* (1971), which Ailey choreographed, and which ran for several performances over two years. Both of these productions included dancers from Ailey's company, many of whom had been Hill's students.

In all of her performances, Hill provided an unassuming emotional maturity, layered with an obvious passion and enthusiasm for the art of dance. She rarely performed leading roles in any of the works she danced, but choreographers, audiences, and other dancers always noted her authoritative presence, even when positioned on the periphery of the stage space. Her contemporaries often noted that she did not have a conventional dancer's body, according to ballet or modern dance standards; but she created a thrilling physical illusion in motion suited to the theatrical moment.

Hill's most sustained teaching engagement began in 1960 when she collaborated with other artists including Ailey, Charles Moore, and James Truitte, to create a dance-training program at a New York City YWCA on Fifty-First Street near the Broadway theater district. In 1962, the program became the Clark Center for the Performing Arts. Besides studio and performance space, the center provided classes in a variety of techniques and choreographic approaches. In this productive environment, Hill trained innumerable African American dance personalities in dance etiquette, time management, and, remarkably, the Lester Horton technique. Hill learned the Horton technique from Ailey, Truitte, and others who had studied with Horton in California before his death in 1953. She became an expert in the technique, and by her death, had begun preparations for a textbook centered on the technique.

After her performing career ended, Hill devoted herself to her students' individual growth, as well as a larger social project to encourage more African Americans toward the mainstream of American concert dance practice. Her open personality tempered her serious demeanor as a teacher, and she was famous as one who, sometimes, intimidated her students toward heightened achievement. Although she had no children, some say that all of her students represented her extended family, and her sage guidance continues to be felt among dancers who came under her gaze. Her numerous teaching affiliations also included the American Dance Festival at Connecticut College, the University of Cincinnati, and the Davis Center for the Performing Arts at the City College of New York. She was also active in the Regional Ballet Association and the Delacorte Dance Festival in New York City.

Hill died tragically of smoke inhalation in 1977 during a fire in her New York City apartment. That same year, the Arts Center of Brooklyn was renamed the Thelma Hill Performing Arts Center in her honor.<sup>13</sup> Hill's performances, and her later mentoring and teaching activities, demonstrate the urgency of attending to the margins to reconnect those in need of guidance.

### **Joan Myers Brown: Building a Center**

African American women have engaged in the riskiest of Western enterprises, to build resource centers for dance that involve real estate and the exchange of economic currency. Katherine Dunham took this road when she established the Dunham school in 1944 in New York City. The Dunham School of Arts and Research (also known as the Dunham School of Cultural Arts) remained in operation until 1957 in New York City. Students there took courses in anthropology, music, language, philosophy, history, and dance. Working with faculty committed to her project of social education and transformation through the arts, Dunham school programs arrived under umbrella components of the Dunham School of Dance and Theater, the Department of Cultural Studies, and the Institute for Caribbean Research. After moving to East St. Louis in 1967 to place her considerable energies and experiences in the line of civil rights activism and community need, Dunham establishes another educational center: the Performing Arts Training Center.<sup>14</sup>

In its various iterations, the Dunham School always taught students to resist the consumerism and commodity fetishism that characterized contemporary life. The fact that the Dunham School could not be sustained should not surprise; after all, the marketplace does not actively support dissemination of information that could lead to a rejection of the marketplace. Still, Dunham's school became a model for dance studies as they are taught globally today. By now, many training centers include dance history and cultural studies among required offerings for students.<sup>15</sup> Dunham helped her audiences, colleagues, and students to understand that dance exists within a context of social behavior and exchange. In her numerous writings, she engaged cultural studies perspectives to underscore the spreadable capacities of dance.

In 1970, Philadelphian Joan Myers Brown established the Philadelphia Dance Company, fondly known as Philadanco, “out of a need to provide opportunities for Black dancers, who were then systematically denied entrance in many local dance schools.”<sup>16</sup> Philadanco grew from the Philadelphia School of Dance Arts, which Brown formed in 1960, and which became the parent organization for Brown’s company operations. The school is the umbrella for the mid-sized, internationally touring first company, Philadanco; as well as Danco 2, the apprentice company formed in 1977; and the Danco 3 youth ensemble, formed in 2006. The school also provided administrative support for the 1973 Congress on Blacks in Dance, and in 1988, founded the International Association of Blacks in Dance. This unanticipated resource connected Black dance companies located across the United States, including Dallas Black Dance Theatre, directed by Anne Williams; the Dayton Contemporary Dance Company, directed by late Jeraldyn Blunden; Denver’s Cleo Parker Robinson Dance Ensemble, directed by Cleo Parker Robinson; and Lula Washington Dance Theatre, directed by Lula Washington. It is important to note that these five foundational companies all emerged in the late 1960s; are each connected to a broad base of arts activities in their local communities; and have each been directed by African American women.

Philadanco’s achievements are Brown’s, in collaboration with many supporters and trustees committed to her vision of dance education and performance. These achievements include a “debt-free” facility, subsidized dancer housing, and a 52-week contract for first-company dancers. While these are surely the wages of successful involvement in the marketplace, they also speak to a coherent ability to build a center. Against long odds, Brown has garnered the good will of families, local and national funders, and civic administrators to build an arts center that is a welcoming, provocative space committed to African American artistry.

## **Edisa Weeks: Moving Outside the Periphery**

African American artists do not always move in step with the crowd; at times, artists have to be willing to form smaller collectives to explore the possibilities of fast, flexible invention. These movements, along and beyond the periphery, supplement efforts to build recognizable centers of study and exploration. Many African American women work in the resistant, peripheral spaces that challenge and re-define the contours of dance performance. It should be noted that periphery, like center, is a changeable, flexible concept that shifts over time. What seemed radical and peripheral in the 1920s may be entirely ordinary in 2012. So, this paradigm of analysis can include diverse artists who might have no cause to collaborate in other circumstances. It can include African American dancer Edna Guy, who organized the “First Negro Dance Recital” with Helmsley Winfield in 1931.<sup>17</sup> Guy’s flirtation with Ruth St. Denis and the Denishawn dance company in the 1920s placed her well outside the Harlem Renaissance world of arts that defined African American creativity at that time.

Working in the peripheral world of burgeoning modern dance, Guy imagined possibilities for herself and other artists of color to inhabit expressive dance.<sup>18</sup> Guy's interests in concert dance also led to the 1937 "Negro Dance Evening" at the 92<sup>nd</sup> Street YM-YWHA. Surely, these movements by Edna Guy "beyond the edges" of dance at the time created something of a "center" of dance for those who came after.

In this vein, consider the radical work of contemporary choreographer and performer Edisa Weeks. Weeks is the Brooklyn-based director of DELIRIOUS Dances, an unexpected, ad-hoc collective of artists who create unpredictable performances not only in theaters, but also in swimming pools, living rooms, and abandoned storefronts. Raised in Uganda, Papua New Guinea, and Brooklyn, NY; Weeks may be accustomed to traveling at the outer limits of identity ethnicity and performance.

Weeks has created many different kinds of work: dances, theatrical plays, and installations. Of special interest are her "Storefront Series" from 2002. Presented by the avant-garde presenter "chashama," whose mission involves "transforming vacant properties into spaces where art can flourish," the "Windows on 42nd Street" project featured visual art, performance, installation, video, music and interactive work representing a broad spectrum of ideas and aesthetic genres. All work in this project was presented in store front windows on 42nd Street, in the heart of Times Square.<sup>19</sup>

Weeks created two works for her installations; one entitled "Stripped" and another, "Teased." These titles refer to the history of 42<sup>nd</sup> street as a site of sex work; many of the storefronts along 42<sup>nd</sup> street occupied for the 2002 installation had once been part of a network of "red light" peep show venues. In "Stripped," Weeks examined this history of voyeurism, and explored what could be seen and sold in public venues. Working with a performing partner, Weeks nodded ironically to the linguistic trick that aligns "chicks" with women, by cutting the head off of a chicken, and then stripping it in the storefront window. Wearing sleeveless T-shirts and diapers, a costume that could suggest intimacy without a palpable "sexiness," Weeks and Jenni Hong taped feathers from the chicken's body to the window to spell out the word LOVE - with the "O" positioned as a peephole to see inside toward the performance.<sup>20</sup> The performance made oblique reference to African diaspora religious practice, in its inclusion of the chicken, even as it transgressed norms of public and private gestures of performance.

"Teased," an all-day performance, casts dance as an exchange among participants. In this work, Weeks dresses the hair of audience members in extravagant style, adding flowers, fruit, vegetables, plastic dinosaurs, toys, feathers, mousetraps, or strings of sequins. The unique design of each participant's hair, and the hand-crafted care that each exchange requires, are the performance. "Teased" has become a signature piece for Weeks and her company, DELIRIOUS Dances. This work nods tellingly at a history of Black women as those who tend to the needs of others; but extends this idea in unexpected directions that demonstrate the politic of personal exchange, as well as the whimsy of her canny creative choices, in the service of art.

## Pearl Primus: Theorizing an Entirety of Exchange

Surely the labor of theory involves actions of meditation and reflection, conducted with an expansive awareness of how people and concepts influence each other. The most helpful dance theorists are likely practitioners willing to extend their corporeal understandings to reading audiences far removed from the circumstance of performance. In dance studies, contemporary theorist Brenda Dixon Gottschild has galvanized engagement with critical race theory and the analysis of performance by and about Black people. Gottschild began her work as a performer in several theater and dance groups<sup>21</sup>; her magnificent offerings of the last decade encourage complex renderings of the practices of Black artists in varied social, historical, economic, and aesthetic circumstances. An essential theorist for any consideration of contemporary dance, Gottschild stands at the forefront of aspirations to theorize Africanist aesthetics.<sup>22</sup> Gottschild continues a tradition begun by Dunham, and of course, Pearl Primus (1919-1994).<sup>23</sup>

An outstanding artist and educator, Trinidadia-born Primus grew up in New York, where she excelled in athletics. She began study at the New Dance Group in 1941 with Belle Rosette, Jane Dudley, Sophie Maslow, and William Bales, as well as at the Martha Graham, Hanya Holm, and at the Humphrey and Weidman studios. Her debut on a shared program in 1943 launched her into national prominence with four exceptional solos: "Rock Daniel," set to jazz music; "Strange Fruit," performed in silence to portray a woman's reaction to a lynching; "Hard Time Blues," a protest work about sharecropping; and "African Ceremonial," a work celebrating traditional sub-Saharan dance forms. The latter three works became classics, exemplary in their subdued use of gesture to express narrative with the whole tied to her personal vitality and charm. Later, in 1943, she began performing as a soloist at Café Society in Greenwich Village, and caused great excitement in "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" (mus. S. Malament) drawn from the poem by Langston Hughes. New York Times dance critic John Martin dubbed her the most important newcomer of the season, whose "superb technique" matched her sense of drama and vivid power.<sup>24</sup> She appeared with Asadata Dafora at Carnegie Hall, and then, in 1944, turned to anthropological study of African Americans in rural areas of the American South. Her research invigorated her performances and choreography.

In 1946, Primus began touring the United States with a small company of musicians Alphonse Cimber, Helen Tinsley, and Kenneth Drew; technician Sturge Stenert; and dancers Joe Nash and Jacqueline Hairston. The group successfully brought her African-derived modern dance to regional audiences. In 1947, she performed the witch-doctor role in a revival of the opera "The Emperor Jones." In 1948, she received a grant from the Rosenwald Foundation allowing her to live and conduct fieldwork in sub-Saharan Africa for a year. Her experiences there led to her PhD in anthropology from New York University. In 1952, Primus premiered an evening-length work Dark Rhythm, which included her dance adaptations of African forms in "Impinyuza" (1952), "Dance of Strength" (1946), and the solo "Fanga" (1949), a West African dance of greeting typically performed by a group.

In 1953, she traveled to the West Indies and met Percival Borde; they married in the United States and performed together for the remainder of their careers. The couple began a two-year stay in Liberia in 1959, where they established and directed Liberia's Performing Arts Center in Monrovia. They collected dance material, taught, and organized professional performances, and, in the process, expanded interest in indigenous African art forms. Primus taught and lectured widely until the end of her life, and in 1991 was awarded the National Medal of the Arts by President George H. W. Bush.

Primus understood dances to be compelling documents of culture in their own right, and synthesized extensive fieldwork in Africa and the American South to create structures of bodily memory. In her remarkable essay "Primitive African Dance (and Its Influence on the Churches of the South)" written for the 1949 *Dance Encyclopedia*, Primus argued an unassailable aesthetic connection between African American dance practices and African musicality, and pointed out the absence of audience in the African and Afro-American traditions where call-and-response requires that everyone participate in the dance.<sup>25</sup> She wrote:

In Africa the dance was at one time all important. With very few exceptions the social, political, religious and esthetic life of the village centered in the dance. It expressed the very pulse of communal living and was an accurate mirror of the psychology of the people."<sup>26</sup>

In other words, the dance provided a way to measure the connectivity of culture as a constellation of actions engaged by the community.

This essay attempts to theorize connectivity as a method to invigorate an appreciation of African American women's presence in American dance. In imagining the ways that six remarkable Black women have created careers in dance, I emphasize their concerns with relationships among people interested in the performing arts. This emphasis broadens the range of analysis available to dance, to move beyond considerations of stage performance as a primary site of research, toward concerns that might affect larger numbers of Black people who move in and out of relationship to dance. For these Black women, concerns with connectivity have led to an expansive engagement with dance as performers, and also as company directors, critics and curators, social activists, designers, master teachers, and theorists. Their radically creative efforts enlarge the capacity of dance to extend culture as a reciprocity, generously engaged, and available to those who wish it.

\*\*\*\*\*

Many thanks to Ananaya Chatterjea, Director of Dance at the University of Minnesota, who commissioned this essay as a keynote presentation for the event “Continuously Rich: Black Women in Cultural Production, October 21 - 24, 2010.

## **Bibliography**

- Allen, Zita “The Great American 'Black Dance' Mystery,” Freedomways 20, no. 4 (1980), pp. 283-291.1980: 287.
- Allen, Zita “What is Black Dance” in The Black Tradition in American Modern Dance, Durham, NC, American Dance Festival, 1988.
- Babour, David. “In Memoriam: Judy Dearing.” Theater Crafts International Jan 1996, Vol. 30, Iss. 1; pg. 11.
- Brooks, Daphne Bodies In Dissent: Spectacular Performances of Race and Freedom, 1850-1910. Durham: Duke University Press, 2006, p. 5.
- DeFrantz, Thomas F. "African American Dance: A Complex History" in Dancing Many Drums: Excavations in African American Dance, Thomas F. DeFrantz, editor, Madison: Wisconsin University Press, 2002, pp. 3-38.
- DeFrantz, Thomas F. “Thelma Hill” in Notable American Women, Susan Ware, editor, Radcliffe Institute, 2004.
- DeFrantz, Thomas F. "To Make Black Bodies Strange: Social Protest in Concert Dance of the Black Arts Movement" in African American Performance: A Sourcebook, AnneMarie Bean, editor, New York: Routledge, 1999, pp. 83-93.
- DeFrantz, Thomas F. “Pearl Primus” in Dictionnaire de la Danse, Philippe Le Moal, editor, Paris: Larousse-Bordas, 1999.
- Dunham, Katherine. Kaiso! : Writings by and about Katherine Dunham. Edited by VèVè A. Clark and Sara E. Johnson. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2005.

Gatzke, Gary, "Alumni News Spotlight: Dance Pioneer Down Under"  
[http://www.juilliard.edu/alumni/spot\\_0409.html](http://www.juilliard.edu/alumni/spot_0409.html) accessed October 10, 2010.

Heidegger, Martin. Being and Time. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, (1927) 1962.

Johnson, Carole. "Modern Organization for Dance Evolvment" The Feet, MODE, New York, June, 1970: 2, 7.

Deleuze, Gilles and Félix Guattari, A Thousand Plateaus. London: The Continuum Publishing Company, 1987.

Derrida, Jacques. "Choreographies" by Jacques Derrida and Christie V. McDonald in Bodies of the Text: Dance as Theory , Literature as Dance edited by Ellen W. Goellner and Jacqueline Shea Murphy, New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1995, pp. 141-156

Foucault, Michel. The History of Sexuality: An Introduction, Victoria: Penguin Books, 1977.

Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. Phenomenology of Perception, New York: Routledge, (1945) 1958.

McDaniel, Eleanor H. "Philly native dances for Black rights: Carole Johnson takes her act `down under'" Philadelphia Tribune, March 20, 2001, np.

Perpener, John O. III African-American Concert Dance: The Harlem Renaissance and Beyond". Urbana: University of Chicago Press, 2001.

Perkins, Kathy A., editor. African Women Playwrights. Champaign, University of Illinois Press, 2008.

----- Contemporary Plays by Women of Color: An Anthology. Kathy A. Perkins and Roberta Uno, eds. New York: Routledge, 1996.

----- Black Female Playwrights: An Anthology of Plays before 1950 Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990.

----- Black South African Women: An Anthology of Plays. New York: Routledge, 1998.

----- Selected Plays by Alice Childress. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2011.

----- Strange Fruit: Plays on Lynching by American Women. Kathy A. Perkins and Judith L. Stephens, eds. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998.



Perpener, John O. III. African-American Concert Dance: The Harlem Renaissance and Beyond . Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001.

Primus, Pearl, "Primitive African Dance (and Its Influence on the Churches of the South)" in The Dance Encyclopedia, compiled and edited by Anatole Chujoy and P. W. Manchester, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1949.

Sinclair, Abiola "Media Watch: Costume Designer Judy Dearing Dead at 55." New York Amsterdam News. Oct 1, 1995, p. 28.

Sullivan, Ronald. "Judy Dearing, Costume Designer And Former Dancer, Dies at 55" New York Times Oct 4, 1995, p. B8.

## Notes

---

1. Brooks, Daphne Bodies In Dissent: Spectacular Performances of Race and Freedom, 1850-1910. Durham: Duke University Press, 2006, p. 5.
2. Please see Heidegger, Martin. Being and Time. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, (1927) 1962; Deleuze, Gilles and Félix Guattari, A Thousand Plateaus. London: The Continuum Publishing Company, 1987; Derrida, Jacques. "Choreographies" by Jacques Derrida and Christie V. McDonald in Bodies of the Text: Dance as Theory , Literature as Dance edited by Ellen W. Goellner and Jacqueline Shea Murphy, New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1995, pp. 141-156; Foucault, Michel. The History of Sexuality: An Introduction, Victoria: Penguin Books, 1977; Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. Phenomenology of Perception, New York: Routledge, (1945) 1958.
3. Allen, Zita "The Great American 'Black Dance' Mystery," Freedomways 20, no. 4 (1980), pp. 283-291.1980: 287.
4. Allen, Zita "What is Black Dance" in The Black Tradition in American Modern Dance, Durham, NC, American Dance Festival, 1988.
5. Allen, Zita, Black Women Leaders of the Civil Rights Movement (African-American Experience). Danbury, CT: Scholastic Library Publishing, 1996
6. Please see <http://InfiniteBody.blogspot.com/>.
7. Please see DeFrantz, Thomas F. "To Make Black Bodies Strange," for an overview of Dance in the Black Arts Movement.
8. Johnson, Carole. "Modern Organization for Dance Evolvment" The Feet, MODE, New York, June, 1970: 2, 7.
9. McDaniel, Eleanor H. "Philly native dances for Black rights: Carole Johnson takes her act `down under'" Philadelphia Tribune March 20, 2001.

- 
10. See also Gary Gatzke, "Alumni News Spotlight: Dance Pioneer Down Under" [http://www.juilliard.edu/alumni/aspot\\_0409.html](http://www.juilliard.edu/alumni/aspot_0409.html) accessed October 10, 2010.
  11. Photo at <http://www.thirteen.org/insidethirteen/tag/black-journal/> accessed October 10, 2010.
  12. Please see DeFrantz, Thomas F. "Thelma Hill" in *Notable American Women*, Susan Ware, editor, Radcliffe Institute, 2004.
  13. Notwithstanding her excellence and extensive influence, there are extremely few published accounts of Thelma Hill's life or times. Don McDonagh wrote her obituary "Thelma 'Mother' Hill, Dies at 53; Noted Teacher of Black Dancers" for the *New York Times* 23 November 1977. Dawn Lille Hurwitz details Hill's influence in the New York Negro Ballet in her essay "The New York Negro Ballet in Great Britain" included in *Dancing Many Drums: Excavations in African American Dance*, edited by Thomas F. DeFrantz (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2002). The evocative, short documentary film "Remembering Thelma" (1981, available from Women Make Movies) by Kathe Sandler includes still imagery and reminiscences by several dance associates including Truitte and Carmen de Lavallade.
  14. See Dunham Katherine "The Dunham Schools" in *Kaiso!*, pp. 479-480.
  15. The Ailey School and the Juilliard School are two institutions that include academic offerings among conservatory-styled training.
  16. See Philadanco website, <http://www.philadanco.org/>, accessed October 10, 2010.
  17. Please see DeFrantz, Thomas F. "African American Dance: A Complex History" in *Dancing Many Drums: Excavations in African American Dance*, Thomas F. DeFrantz, editor, Wisconsin University Press, 2002, pp. 3-38.
  18. See Perpener, John O. III *African-American Concert Dance: The Harlem Renaissance and Beyond*. Urbana: University of Chicago Press, 2001.
  19. See chasama website, [http://www.chashama.org/info/info-about\\_us.htm](http://www.chashama.org/info/info-about_us.htm), accessed October 10, 2010.
  20. Performances of Stripped were interrupted by the ASPCA amid complaints that Weeks had harmed a living animal. The complaints were unfounded, but the performance continued with replacement chickens purchased from a local grocery store. Personal communication with the author, June, 2010.
  21. See <http://bdixongottschild.com/about/> for the author's biography.
  22. Gottschild's remarkable books include *The Black Dancing Body – A Geography From Coon to Cool*, (Palgrave-Macmillan, 2003), *Waltzing in the Dark: African American Vaudeville and Race Politics in the Swing Era* (Palgrave-Macmillan, 2000) and *Digging the Africanist Presence in American Performance: Dance and Other Contexts* (Greenwood, 1996). She is reportedly at work on a study of Joan Myers Brown and African American presence in Ballet in Philadelphia.

- 
23. Please see DeFrantz, Thomas F. "Pearl Primus" in Dictionnaire de la Danse, Philippe Le Moal, editor, Paris: Larousse-Bordas, 1999.
  - <sup>24</sup> John Martin, "The Dance: Laurels – Award No. 2" New York Times August 1, 1943. Pp. X2.
  25. Please see Primus, Pearl, "Primitive African Dance (and Its Influence on the Churches of the South)" in The Dance Encyclopedia, compiled and edited by Anatole Chujoy and P. W. Manchester, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1949.
  26. Primus, 387.

African American Dance. Collection by Our Black Jewels. 56. African Hairstyles Black Women Hairstyles Hairstyles With Bangs Hairstyles Pictures Medium Short Hair Medium Hair Styles Curly Hair Styles Kate Winslet Reese Witherspoon. Alvin Ailey was an African-American choreographer and activist who founded the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater in NYC. Ailey is credited with popularizing modern dance and revolutionizing African-American participation in 20th century concert dance. His company gained the nickname "Cultural Ambassador to the World" because of its extensive international touring. Ailey's choreographic masterpiece Revelations is believed to be the best known and most often seen modern dance performance. This essay explores genealogies of Black women's presence in American modern dance to theorize connectivity as a methodology to appreciate their creative work. The legacies of more familiar dance artists, including Pearl Primus and Katherine Dunham, are discussed in relation to achievements and interventions by less-discussed, but no less important, African American women including Joan Myers Brown, Judy Dearing, Thelma Hill, Carole Johnson, and Edisa Weeks. The essay offers evidence of a radical creative tradition within these genealogies; one that has been less widely appreciated by mainstream 2011. "Theorizing Connectivities: African American Women in Concert Dance." *The Journal of Pan African Studies* 4(6): 56-74. Google Scholar. Dixon Gottschild, Brenda. 1996. *Digging the Africanist Presence in American Performance: Dance and Other Contexts*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press. Google Scholar. Dixon Gottschild, Brenda. 2000. *Waltzing in the Dark: African American Vaudeville and Race Politics in the Swing Era*. New York: Palgrave. CrossRef | Google Scholar. George-Graves, Nadine. Perpener, John O. 2001. *African-American Concert Dance: The Harlem Renaissance and Beyond*. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press. Google Scholar.