

AFRICAN DANCE IN AMERICA PLENARY

At the 2016 The Collegium for African Diaspora Dance's 2016 Conference

Dancing the African Diaspora: Embodying the Afrofuture

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On February 19-22, 2016, the Collegium for African Diaspora Dance hosted its second conference entitled, "Dancing the African Diaspora: Embodying the Afrofuture." This year's conference aimed to re-ignite the discourse on defining Black Dance on a global scale by bringing together scholars, practitioners, educators, and other stakeholders for three days of research presentations, breakout sessions, movement workshops, film screenings, and a performance by Kyle Abraham/Abraham.In.Motion. For more information on the entire conference visit: <http://www.cadd-online.org/2016-conference-information.html>.

The "African Dance in America" plenary took place at a very momentous time as the United Nations has declared 2015-2024 the International Decade for People of African Descent and the 20th anniversary of Kariamu Welsh's first edited volume, "African Dance: An Artistic, Historical, and Philosophical Inquiry." The plenary was also the launch of a new book project, as a part of the U.N.'s International Decade for People of African Descent, entitled, "African Dance in America: Hot Feet, Perpetual Movement, and Diasporan Aesthetics." This project was announced as paying homage to those that have kept African dance traditions alive both on the continent and in the diaspora and hopes to both document and demonstrate the relevance of African dance in the present and future. The volume will expand the conversation on African dance from historical and anthropological issues toward more immediate and impactful questions

about the role of the arts in education, urban redevelopment, social entrepreneurship, and in shaping contemporary narratives about the identities of people of African descent and their experiences in the Americas. There will also be an exploration of some of the longstanding debates about pedagogy, appropriation, categorization, embodiment, artistic integrity, visibility, funding, and sustainability.

While staged performances of African-derived dance appeared in the United States in the early 1900s with artists such as Edna Guy, Asadata Dafora, Pearl Primus, and Katherine Dunham, it was the political independence of numerous West African nations that allowed African government-sponsored companies such as the National Dance Company of Guinea, Liberian National Cultural Troupe, National Dance Company of Ghana, and National Dance Company of Mali and Senegal to tour the United States extensively beginning the 1950s.

African dance in the America is a field of study and practice that has grown organically and exponentially since the 1960s and continues to this day. Credited African Music and Dance Ensembles are within at least 17 universities and colleges throughout the United States. In the United States, over 62 professional dance companies, operating within the last 20 years, identify themselves as teaching and performing "African Dance." These companies are composed mostly of people of African descent who teach music and dance techniques rooted in the cultural traditions of Western, Central, and Southern Africa. In addition to performing, these companies also carry out extensive education programs that offer weekly and daily arts-in-education, community classes to thousands of adults and youth throughout 55 cities in the United States. Some of the companies are teaching and performing dances that are in danger of being forgotten in their countries of origin. This often is due to war, gentrification, generational disinterest, and/or economic hardships. Though not as widely known as it should be, the work of African

performing artists permeates the entirety of American culture, speaking to social conditions and becoming another narrative of African Diaspora experience in America. However, African dance in the United States remains under-documented and underfunded.

Despite its fundamental influence, there is very little recent comprehensive scholarship (chapters or books, specifically) in English that excavates these new explorations in the function, form, aesthetics and relevance of African performing arts as it is currently practiced (either in the United States or the Diaspora). There is great scholarship that came between the 1970s and 1990s about the aesthetics and influence of continental African dance forms in American culture, but since then, deep scholarship on the evolution of continental African forms fell through the cracks, even as African Diaspora studies became popularized and more and more scholars began to focus on Diaspora dance forms. Within the contemporary teaching, practice and performance of African music and dance styles, we find heated debates about pedagogy, appropriation, categorization, embodiment, artistic integrity, marketing, visibility, funding and sustainability.

In the United States, small arts non-profits with budgets below \$250,000 are more likely to specialize in ethnic and folk arts but often exist out of the purview of most philanthropic endeavors, particularly when they serve low-income communities of color. As such, they are precluded from achieving the economies of scale necessary to impact culture more broadly. Most folk and traditional performing arts companies are started by an artist or group of artists who have a specific aesthetic, clear artistic vision and a passion for the art form. These companies provide the training ground for new artists, the testing ground for new ideas and the point of entry for new audiences. These small ethnic and folk dance companies frequently produce world premieres that launch new careers, innovations in cultural tradition, music and dance techniques, and contribute to the American performing arts lexicon.

Within the “African Dance in America” plenary, all of the panelists spoke about their personal experiences in studying and practicing African dance yet spent significant time advocating the conceptual importance of establishing people of African descent in the Americas as cultural stakeholders for Africa. In the America, Africa is still largely represented as a place of misfortune, disease, and backwardness. Each panelist noted that by centering Africa in black identities and discourses, the reality of Africa as a place of creativity, intelligence, spirituality and productivity is revealed.

It was also noted that the word “movement” can have multiple meanings, and that people of African descent have an illustrious history of movements that are physical, political (Civil Rights Movement, BAM/BPM, Black Lives Matter), geographical (the Great Migration), and intellectual (Harlem Renaissance and Black Consciousness), as well as a traumatic history of forcible removal due to war, poverty, gentrification often combined with natural disaster as in the case with Katrina and New Orleans. Yet questions were raised and discussed as to how African and African-derived dance has informed black movements in the United States and how African dance can empower larger American movements, particularly related to education, prison reentry programs and social justice.

As its organizers had hoped and anticipated, the plenary proved to be a fertile environment within which to reignite discourse on the role of African dance within American history and culture. The participants were able to move beyond historical and anthropological issues toward more immediate and impactful questions about the role of the arts in contemporary movements and narratives about African descendant experience in America. During the plenary audience participants were energized by hearing fresh perspectives, considering new research, and learning about innovative programs and approaches for African dance. There was a

consensus that African performing arts are, just as Africa and people of African descent, not static, but historically specific and under constant reformulation. The criteria used to define concepts such as “Africa,” “Africans,” “African music,” or “African dance” have been given varied significance positioned in different geographic locations within different historical time periods. While the perception of African dance has historically differed between Europeans (African dance as only a form of entertainment) and Africans (African dance as a way of life), the existence of this difference does not itself lead to a problem; a problem only arises when one view is perceived as being superior to the other.

The **African Dance in America** panelists were:

KARIAMU WELSH, PhD: Dr. Welsh is a choreographer and a professor at Temple University in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. She received the Doctor of Arts from New York University and the MA.H. from the State University of New York at Buffalo. Widely published in both scholarly journals and book length studies, she is a scholar of cultural studies including performance and culture within Africa and the African Diaspora. She is the author of *Zimbabwe Dance: Rhythmic Forces*, *Ancestral Voices: An Aesthetic Analysis*. She is the editor of *The African Aesthetic: Keeper of Traditions* (Greenwood Press, 1994) and *African Dance: An Artistic, Historical and Philosophical Inquiry* (Africa World Press, 1996). She co-edited *African Culture: Rhythms of Unity* (Africa World Press, 1985). Dr. Welsh is the artistic director of Kariamu & Co.: Traditions. Kariamu is the recipient of numerous fellowships, grants and awards including a National Endowment for the Arts Choreography Fellowship, the Creative Public Service Award of NY, a 1997 Pew Fellowship, a 1997 Simon Guggenheim Fellowship, a 1998 Pennsylvania Council on the Arts grant, a Senior Fulbright Scholar Award and she is currently on the Fulbright Specialist Roster. She is also the recipient of the Leeway Foundation

Transformation Award for 2015. She is the founding artistic director of the National Dance Company of Zimbabwe in southern Africa. Kariamou is the creator of the Umfundalai technique, a contemporary African dance technique that has been in existence for over forty years and is taught in Africa and the diaspora.

NAOMI DIOUF, M.A.O.M.: Artistic Director of Diamano Coura West African Dance Company, a company which began in 1975 by Emmy Award winning musician Dr. Zakarya Diouf. As an expert in West African dance and culture, she has done extensive research and comparative analysis of dance forms from around the world and has consulted and choreographed for numerous performing companies throughout the United States, Netherlands, Singapore, South Africa and several others. She has a Master Degree in Organization Management with emphasis on change management. She is a strong advocate of Arts-in-Education, and has conducted and organized various projects that introduced the arts to youth and in a presentation that merges academics, music, and dance. For more than 20 years, she has worked with Arts-in-Education programs in school districts throughout California to promote cultural literacy and currently she teaches African dance and heads the African American Studies department at Berkeley High School. She has worked with the Cal Performances - Oakland/Berkeley Alvin Ailey Dance Camp, a camp for under privileged middle school students for the past nine years. She is coordinator of Collage, an annual international festival in Oakland for 20 years.

YVONNE DANIEL, PhD: Yvonne Daniel is Professor Emerita of Dance and Afro-American Studies from Smith College. She is a specialist in dance performance and Caribbean societies and has performed and produced professionally. After earning her Ph.D. in anthropology, she published: *Rumba* (1995), *Dancing Wisdom: Embodied Knowledge in Haitian Vodou, Cuban Yoruba, and Bahian Candomblé* (2005), and *Caribbean and Atlantic Diaspora Dance: Igniting Citizenship* (2011). She has produced four documentary videos on Caribbean dance and African Diaspora religions and is credited with more than 30 articles, encyclopedia entries, and chapters. Her book on sacred performance won the de la Torre Bueno prize from the Society of Dance History Scholars for best dance research of 2006. She is a Ford Foundation Fellow, a Rockefeller Foundation Fellow, and has been a Visiting Scholar at Mills College and the Smithsonian Institution. Dr. Daniel continues to do research, publish, and give presentations in both academic and community settings. She has four sons and 10 grandchildren.

AUSETTUA AMOR AMENKUM: Ausettua Amor Amenkum hails from New Orleans, Louisiana. She is the Big Queen of the Washitaw Nation Black Indian Tribe, Artistic Director and founding member of Kumbuka African Drum & Dance Collective since 1981. Queen Ausettua has studied extensively in West Africa, Haiti and the United States beginning with the late Baba Ishangi, Sundiata Keita, Alyo Tolbert, Baba Olatunji, and Adbdoulaye Camara. She has received numerous awards from the City of New Orleans including the Mayor's Art Award and recently inducted into the Mardi Gras Indian Hall of Fame. In addition to teaching African-derived dance at Tulane University she also coordinates an African performing arts program for incarcerated women at Louisiana Correction Institute for Women.

ASSANE KONTE: Assane Konte, a national of Senegal, West Africa, is the co-founder and Artistic Director, Choreographer, Costume Designer for KanKouran West African Dance

Company. Mr. Konte began his dance training at age 12, and in 1978, following a performance tour in Cote d'Ivoire, Mr. Konte came to the United States to pursue a career as an independent performer. In 1983 he founded Kankouran with Senegalese drummer Abdou Kounta. Since then Kankouran has toured internationally and performed with symphony orchestras, church based dance groups, tap- dance and ballet companies, theatrical productions and other professional performing companies from around the world. Mr. Konte is the recipient of several prestigious awards which include the Immigrant Lawyers Association's "Immigrant of the Year" award (along with other recipients including Madeleine Albright, Placido Domingo, and Abe Polin), and an award for "Outstanding Community Service" presented by WGMS, one of the most popular classical music radio stations in Washington, D.C. Mr. Konte has held faculty positions in the dance department at several prestigious universities in the Washington, D.C. area, including American and George Mason Universities, and presently serves on the faculty at Howard University.

CHUCK DAVIS: Dr. Charles "Chuck" Davis, artistic director and founding elder of DanceAfrica, is one of the foremost teachers and choreographers of traditional African dance in America. He has traveled extensively to Africa to study with leading artists. Davis founded the Chuck Davis Dance Company in New York in 1968 and the African American Dance Ensemble in Durham, NC, in 1983. He has been a panelist for several programs of the National Endowment for the Arts and is a recipient of the AARP Certificate of Excellence, the North Carolina Dance Alliance Award, the 1990 North Carolina Artist Award, and the North Carolina Order of the Long Leaf Pine. He has served on the board of the North Carolina Arts Council since 1991 and in 1992 he received the North Carolina Award in Fine Arts, the state's highest honor. In 1996, Davis and the African American Dance Ensemble were awarded a \$100,000

grant from the National Dance Residency Program, a three-year initiative launched in 1994 by the New York Foundation for the Arts and funded by the Pew Charitable Trusts. In 1998 he received an honorary doctorate from Medgar Evers College; he has received honorary doctorates from several universities, all of which mean a great deal to him. Most recently, Chuck Davis and DanceAfrica were cited as one of "America's Irreplaceable Dance Treasures: The First 100" by the Dance Heritage Coalition.

ESAILAMA G. ARTRY-DIOUF, PhD: Esailama began her professional career as a performing artist with Diamano Coura West African Dance Company in 1989 based in the Malonga Center for the Arts in Oakland. Diamano Coura West African Dance Company is a nonprofit cultural organization dedicated to the preservation, education, and appreciation of traditional West African music, dance, theater, and culture. Since its inception in 1975, Diamano Coura, under Emmy Award winning Director Dr. Zak Diouf and Artistic Director Naomi Washington-Diouf, has implemented its mission through ongoing workshops, performances, youth programs, touring engagements, lecture demonstrations, community outreach, and creative partnership programs with renowned artists and performing companies. In the last 15 years Dr. Artry-Diouf has also worked independently with choreographers and directors in the United States from various genres of African-derived performing arts including the late Dr. Pearl Primus and Kemoko Sano and theatre companies such as the Ballet Folklorico de Bahia, Les Ballets Africaines, and the Liberian National Cultural Troupe. Internationally, she has worked with director John Martin (London) and such performing companies as Le Ballet National du Sénégal (Senegal), Theatre for Africa (South Africa) and Abhinaya Theatre Research Centre (India). As a teacher she has lectured and conducted long-term workshops throughout the United States, in India, Barbados and Trinidad-Tobago. She works closely with actor/activist Danny Glover as his

Director of Communications and earned her Masters of Fine Arts in Theater and Dance and doctorate in Performance Studies from Northwestern University. She is a former three year board member of Good Work Network, a non-profit organization for 17 years helping help minority- and women-owned businesses start, grow, and succeed by providing business development services. In 2015 Dr. Artry-Diouf became board member of the Alliance for California Traditional Arts (ACTA), an organization that provides advocacy, resources, and connections for folk and traditional artists to thrive.



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