The Black Scholar

*Black Moves: New Directions in Black Dance Studies*

TBS Blog: Conversation with Special Issue Editors Thomas F. DeFrantz and Tara Aisha Willis

TAW: Tommy, as I understand it this special issue was your brainchild, coming out of the CADD consortium conference proceedings from two years ago. You’ve conceived a couple of different publication projects from that conference, and this is one of them. I’m interested in hearing you talk about the significance of having these pieces come out in this format, as a journal issue, at this moment, and in TBS.

TFD: Well first let’s start by talking about collective action. I was trained at a time that thought carefully about minoritarian action as being resistant and collective. This was back in the 90s, but I still abide by those ways of thinking. So I never conceive of these projects as being initiated or run by ‘me’ or coming from a single place. When we decided to gather together and form the Collegium for African Diaspora Dance, the idea at that moment was, “Let’s see what it could be,” and then as we moved towards the conference in 2014, the idea emerged that we should think about publications, because the field could use more written documents, or different kinds of histories or theorizations that can be circulated and shared. The astonishing thing was that when the conference happened, there was a dynamic and exciting space that allowed lots of people to get together, it was clear that there were lots of ideas circulating that didn’t have a way to reach a larger public yet. So CADD realized something should move forward. The three publications come from that abundance of new research that was emerging and wanting to get out, in relationship to itself and to other kinds of dance research in the field. So it wasn’t a single idea, it was more about letting the group figure out where they wanted to roll next. It feels like a collective action. Even though you and I are certainly doing the editorial work here; even that’s collective. Here we are working together, because we thought it would be an interesting thing to do across generations.

I guess I want to go there next... “Generations” always seems funny to me, because as we mature we start to understand that we’re talking about differences, because we start from different places even though we’re sharing the journey at this moment. Can you talk about being where you are in your research and how you feel that presence being mobilized by—however you want to talk about it—age, cycle of life, or your work as an artist? Can you talk about where are and how does it work in a larger frame of black dance studies as you understand it?

TAW: I feel so thrilled to have your mentorship while I’m smack in the middle of my degree, and through this process—which has taken so much time, as it does—I’ve gotten through my coursework, done my exams, and am finishing my prospectus this week, and preparing to teach for the first time this semester. I’ve really come of age during this process, in terms of figuring out what I’m doing within my doctorate. Working at *TDR/The Drama Review* and being involved with *Women & Performance* I’ve gotten to see the other side of making a special issue happen. But getting to have your guidance around how to be a guest editor—that more curatorial role of caring for the articles in a one-on-one way with authors—has been a really unique experience amongst my peers. And I think it’s exemplary of the CADD community, which is at an intersection of two fields, dance studies and black studies, where we’re always the one in the room representing. CADD felt like this incredibly joyful family reunion, of family I’d never met before. I’ve been to that family reunion, where you’re part of a branch of the tree that’s just been discovered by the rest of the Willis’s and suddenly you’re in the room with a hundred Willis’s. Even though I didn’t know very many people at CADD, even though my research is really different from a lot of the scholars there, even though I had different debates with people over the course of the weekend. It still felt overwhelmingly like we’re in such a crucial position, being there in a room with the relatively small contingency of people doing this same kind of work, caring about these same ideas and groups of people and cultural forms.

I also felt some real anxiety around the generational difference! I mean, I thought to myself, “How do I even write an email to Tommy DeFrantz?” My introduction to dance studies, when I realized in college that I could study dance theoretically and historically as well as do dance practice, was seeing you doing a guest lecture about Alvin Ailey, and I was studying at The Ailey School around then. I realized I could marry the dance practice and writing practice I’d had in my life. But I think that intergenerational work is very exemplary of this black dance studies community. We have to stick together in a certain way, and it’s crucial that we do so because we have to stand alone so often in our own departments when we’re not at that conference together. We can really support each other, bring up the next generation, and not be afraid to find mentorship where it exists.

TFD: For me it’s also about being willing to not know and to learn. It sounds so easy, but they’re actually pretty terrific feminist/womynist politics to engage. Working with you or with researchers who are still in graduate school or just out, I learn so much about how the world feels in different ways or in different keys. I like to tell the story that on the other side of getting a job, or on the other side of tenure, things keep changing. The river Styx keeps taking you and showing you new landscapes; it’s not the same throughout. If you stay on the route of an academic career—or you don’t, it doesn’t matter—as I did, you stay in this space that keeps changing. But then working with you I get to figure out or hear about new or different questions, or rethink questions with more care and particularity. And that makes such a huge difference and an opportunity to keep going across our differences.

TAW: It’s so fascinating to me to do this labor toward the degree, where it feels like you’re figuring out your whole life in one, tiny five year period. But I know that’s not true when I look at my professors and mentors, including you over the last couple years—and in a way I’ve sometimes communicated with you more than my advisor, because we’ve needed to have these long editing sessions. Because my mentors do so much vast work that’s not limited to what they studied in their doctorate years. Because it’s my first full article publication, and then for it to also be a co-editorship, this special issue feels like my first step into the academic scene, for posterity, putting my position and voice out there. But I’ve read a lot of your work over this past year for exams and whatnot, and seen the different directions your research has taken you over the years, and I realize that I’m also going to do those jumps. You and all my other mentors are inspiration for how to do that, but also my scholarly jumping off points: you’re the people I quote and then say, “and...” or “but...” So to have direct connection to the source of those words is really special.

TFD: I’m really excited that we’re publishing so much original work, new scholarship in this issue. Our issue is subtitled “new directions in black dance studies... This idea of “new” is something we all want to be skeptical of because what’s really new? What’s old, what’s ancient, what’s current? And maybe we don’t want to think in terms of linear time. But there is a way in which this is original research we’ve managed to bring together, and I think that’s pretty great and astonishing: that so many of the pieces are by folks offering up an originary research manifesto to their larger projects.

TAW: I think they’re each bringing different pieces of black dance studies together or to the table, which is really significant because it’s very new for TBS to publish so much dance research. It was really important for us in selecting articles to bring a group of pieces that are very different from each other to the table, that are working in different methodologies: we have archival research, historic, ethnographic; we have the pedagogy piece, and a lot of dance and performance theory, of course. All looking at “black moves” in different sorts of places, cultural contexts, and times. I think we were very conscious of selecting pieces to create a holistic issue that’s bringing the richness of the conference and the field to bear on the larger black studies conversation.

TFD: I do feel that when I dance, the variety of methods or starting places or ways to think about analysis or creativity are all present simultaneously. So I’m working through being born in Indianapolis but moving to San Fransisco, in a kind of ethnographic way. I’m working through theories of representation: who do I think is in the audience, and how do I think they’re seeing me, and what do I want to resist? I’m working through technique and what my teachers taught me or reminded me of, what I know about my body and what I can or can’t do, or how I can maybe stretch that. I’m working through family history. I’m working through my spiritual self—whether it’s Christian or not—and how it’s related to spiritual practice and whether that’s a memory of someone else’s spirit or my own sense of ecstasy or deliverance that I can manufacture or recycle through my body. These various methodologies that we think of as separate, we also know as artists that they’re all already present and constantly competing: all these things are happening at the same time in bits and pieces. I feel like the volume tries to remind us not that you can work in these seven different directions, but more that these seven ways of being are constantly implicated in our creative lives.

TAW: I think that’s a really beautiful way of putting it. The issue as a whole is illustrating—or is performing, is dancing—what already exists in the moment of movement. Of black movement in particular, always. My favorite word is “reverence.” For me, that’s the word instead of spiritual. I think of it in terms of scholarly work, this citational practice we’re always engaged in. Looking back to produce something in the moment, and for others to use it in the future. And again, to stay out of linear time, maybe we can think of that more in a circular way. Reverence allows us to revere things that already exist, but it refers to this present moment action. It has a physical manifestation, a spiritual manifestation, and intellectual and emotional ones as well. The conference these pieces come out of and the writing these researchers are doing and the editorial project is a kind of reverence for the field. And for the performances and the black moves themselves, most of all.

I was just reading the “Blacking Queer Dance” piece you wrote in 2002, and you ask the question I’m always asking myself: “But what about dance studies and black studies? Why do these areas consistently disconnect?” (104). And you go on to ask about black studies and queer theory as well. I think this special issue is an inroad into exactly that question. In the introduction we wrote, “...the capacities of Black Studies to accommodate nuanced, careful discussions of dance as a site and symptom of historical, contemporary, and future modes of black life.” Rereading it, I thought that was a really beautiful phrase. That’s what the issue is doing, performing, dancing: this capacity for black studies to consider dance, corporeality, and movement in a nuanced way in order to really get into black life even more richly.

TFD: This idea of “symptom” is interesting. With this issue and the other two publications that are coming from just that first conference—and CADD is having its next conference in February 2016—it just seems to me that there’s a wealth of material just now finding its way to different kinds of publics. The energy we’ve expended editing an issue—and anybody who has edited anything knows it’s real work—by the time we get through to be able to say, “Here’s the thing we made and we hope you’ll be able to engage it somehow, that something else is possible because the information is out there,” the information is already circulating, it’s in the dances, it’s in the way these seven researchers are thinking through the people they’re working with, and then that’s a much larger and larger community. The essays represent this kind of distillation of information and ideology but those ideas are already moving. I think there’s a ton of research happening in artistic practice and historical archival research around black people in motion, but we are trying to say, “Hey, it’s okay to publish that too.” Not that publishing is the most important thing at all, but that’s another place where the information can circulate, where it matters. I feel like this information is the tip of an iceberg. It’s not that this stuff isn’t around, it’s just that in this moment we’re finding ways to publish it that we didn’t do fifteen years ago.

TAW: Framing it together in anthologies or special issues brings things together that have been bubbling for years, for decades and centuries even, but haven’t been recognized as a coherent field.

TFD: But it’s also in the dancing. That’s the thing about black performance. The theory, history, and practice are so deeply implicated in and of each other that the translation into literary text is something we’ve been rightfully and smartly suspicious or wary of. Reverence doesn’t want to be fixed: it’s not adulation, it’s not cult-making. The reference is movable and needs to be. Black moves, black dance are about response, reverence, remembering, imagining forward. It doesn’t want to be fixed. Writing often seems to want to fix. That’s what I love about our issue. Our authors are not trying to fix but to offer strategies to engage.

TAW: I think that’s a really great word, “strategy.” And it comes up in a lot of the articles in some form. They each try to share with readers the ways that dance works for artists or performers or practitioners as a strategy for black life.

TFD: Now let’s get into nuts and bolts. What surprised you about working on this issue as co-editor?

TAW: One of the things, which might not be unique to our process, was how much we worked on the articles ourselves. We dug into them deeply, to the point that we were on the phone discussing sentence structure and how to streamline grammar. But I think that’s part of the beauty of the practice of scholarship and intergenerational co-laboring and mentorship. It was also about shaping the articles to fully fill out each piece of the puzzle that they inhabit so that the whole could be fully present, which I think it is. First digging into two or three articles each quite deeply and then to see the whole issue come together, looking at all of them for the last around of edits. To understand not just the articles I was most interested in focusing on, but the bigger picture of the issue in detail.

TFD: This was a normal length process I think, but I’m always surprised at how much it does take, because the editorial process always has these stages. There are these big gaps where you’re just waiting for other people to do things, but then there’s really intense work. I’m compelled by the variety of approaches that the seven pieces offer up. To think about the archive as the site where the creative labor is happening, but also a place where Haiti is in Boston, or New Orleans is in relation to this concept of the “natural”... These provocative ways to think through or be with dance are each so different and have so much propulsive energy in their own directions, even though they’re all related in their common core of thinking through how black movement is and what it can do.

If you were going to tell someone else to edit a volume, what do you want to see next in the world, in terms of TBS, and scholarship around black moves, black dance?

TAW: We have a beautiful sampling of the diaspora and it is an American journal, so a lot of the sites are in the U.S. One thing I would love to see more of is a contemporary read on dance forms from countries in Africa and African contemporary and theatrical dance. As in black studies, black dance studies can get very American-centric without always identifying itself as such, one of the symptoms of the strong influence black scholarship coming out of the U.S. has had on African diaspora studies. I think it’s easy for black dance studies scholars to unquestioningly slip into thinking of Africa as a past origin point, which is a crucial part of black American culture and history, but it would also be beautiful to see work—like what Jasmine Johnson is working on, and others—published together with more U.S.-focused black dance studies. It wasn’t able to happen in this issue, but I’d like to see that next.

TFD: Interestingly enough, for the CADD board that created the conference the main thing was to re-center Africa. The thing we started with was, we’re rethinking black dance studies, but we’re going to think of Africa as the concept and also as an actual place where people dance, and as the generative impulse for these neo-African dance that are taught all across the United States, too. That’s what we wanted to try to re-center. We had these amazing presentations by generative researchers like Fern Caulker and of course Kariamu Welsh was the final keynote at the conference. Interestingly enough, Kariamu and one of her mentees are co-editing a new volume of new research on African-based, neo-African dance choreography. So the conference was able to jumpstart more publication that is explicitly focused with dances on the continent with their particular diaspora. That said, we did have to make some hard choices to choose these seven articles. We had many submissions and chose these so they could speak to each other across different places in career, and especially across different methods, strategies, and different objects, if you will. Different processes being explored.

TAW: I do love that most of us are relatively early in our careers. It’s great, and also less terrifying for me as the earliest along in the batch. I think that’s really amazing for CADD to have kicked off this publication opportunity for relatively early career scholars.

TFD: It’s a good mix, but yes, mostly folks just getting started. What I would really love to see for dance studies... There’s a way that in black studies, performance is always referred to, and dance is always, always referred to, but usually with this quick passing motion. Those of us who are working in dance, black dance especially, understand that there’s so much more in that moment. There’s so much more when Malcolm X says all his Negro-ness comes out when he’s doing the Lindy Hop and he suddenly realizes he’s black in some deeper way. There’s just so much in there. And maybe what we’re trying to do collectively is inspire all of us to engage reverence for those moments when our embodied practices line up with our identities and our aspirations and our wonderings and our desires and our intellects. Maybe that’s something that we’re sharing with each other.

TAW: I completely agree. The sheer quantity of moments reading black scholarship in which I’m think, “Wait, but right there, you just hit the nail on the head, and if you dug into that performance or that movement moment it would actually contradict some of what you’re saying, or it would give you a whole other level of nuance that you’re not getting to.” The assumption that the entirety of black dance studies can be referred to in a quick passing glance... Correct me if I’m wrong, but I’ve been thinking that black performance theory, as a category that’s relatively newly defined, has been very articulated and influenced by dance theorists—like you and Anita [Gonzalez] put together the volume Black Performance Theory—but a lot of the tomes considered to be central to the budding field don’t directly take on dance studies. Many of them tend to focus more on theatre, music, visual arts. That’s another thing that would be beautiful to see: more work in black dance studies that’s taking on black performance theory as a mantel, or that comes to be read as central to black performance theory broadly writ. I get the sense that sometimes texts that could become central to black performance theory in general end up getting categorized back into dance studies, or seen as relevant to dance specifically.

TFD: I think our issue will help that process, because we’re affirming that by digging into a moment, or the larger structure, or the entirety of a choreography, any of these modes can open up or re-strategize how black lives matter, to use that kind of rhetoric. But also how we matter for ourselves through our dances. It’s such a huge part of how we understand what it is to be black. So let’s keep moving.