

Exploring the Educational and Social Value of Caribbean Dance in Collegiate Education Programs

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Abstract

The purpose of this research paper is to share my findings of the educational and social value of Caribbean Dance. While teaching Afro-Caribbean Dance at New York University, writing assignments and informal interviews influenced the approach to teaching cultural dances to novice and advanced dancers. The Dance Education program at NYU features an African Diaspora track for graduate students pursuing a teaching profession in African and Caribbean dance. This paper investigates the reasons why dances of the African Diaspora have been a miniscule fragment of dance study over the years in collegiate settings as well as the effects on community building and empowerment amongst college students. Research materials included historical timeline of the dances and how it relates to the movement vocabulary of African, Caribbean, and Latin dances. I used written assignments, informal interviews, academic journals, and texts on the history of Caribbean dance to investigate the ways students will be impacted while taking this course. My results demonstrate a counterintuitive effect of both education and social value based on the overall experience of the course and designing the curriculum for dancers to explore the richness of Caribbean dance. My study suggests that the reason why African and Caribbean dances have been categorized as unnecessary in dance education is due to the racism and cultural oppression that is exposed, making the course an act of social reform. I strive to provide a ritual and historic experience, personalizing the West Indian tradition and contextualizing it. Colonialism and slavery played a prominent role in the creation of folk dances that developed in the West Indies, in particular my study in Trinidad and Tobago. Learning a cultural dance is intended to recover the embodied knowledge that already resides in the people and the land it was created on. Therefore, the paper will include the method(s) for non-dancers and dancers to learn folk dances for educational purposes.

Key words: decolonization, Afro-Caribbean dance, social reform, higher education, dance history, West Indian, cultural dances

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Introduction to Afro-Caribbean Dance

Understanding that dance is a form of radicalism where human beings express themselves based on their experiences is an important introduction to Afro-Caribbean dance. Afro-Caribbean dance comes from several countries, including but not limited to Haiti, Jamaica, Cuba, Brazil, Trinidad. My study is focused on the dances in Trinidad and Tobago that have a distinct style based on colonialism; however students learn Jamaican dancehall, West African, Haitian folklore and Soca. The dance styles learned are broad and include a magnitude of information. Much of the historical background of the dances is independently researched by the students. Due to the course being a movement/studio class, I teach the historical background and purpose of the dance briefly before embodying the movement. At the end of class, students find the connection between purpose, expression and movement through student-centered discussions and informal performance assessments. It is important to include artifacts such as photography, videos, performance clips and songs because it furthers the understanding of how the body moves, the energy and dynamic of movement and the use of tradition in the dance. The movement aesthetics of Afro-Caribbean dance styles includes isolation, polyrhythmics, and articulation of the spine. However, the movement language is very intentional and has deep meaning. Circumstances and conditions during the Middle Passage's Slave Trade has resulted in the memory of dance and drumming being performed as a means of survival, and also a result of death. Despite the inhumane circumstances and removal from origins, African dance continued to be a tool for reform, resistance and rebuilding for the African people. Referring to the text *Black Dance* by Lynne Fauley Emery, students' initial reaction was shared in a class discussion and it summarizes these important points. Dance was used as a tool for communication and cultural preservation after the Middle Passage. Understanding the torment and inhumane treatment that African slaves endured during the Middle Passage, there was a strong attempt to destroy the dances alongside the spirit of the dances. Despite losing a sense of belonging there was a loss of cultural traditions. This forced relocation of enslaved Africans to the Americas and adaptation of a new way of life. Dance was the one thing that served as a means of expressing emotions, telling stories, building community, and resisting oppressors. Therefore it was important, despite circumstances, that enslaved Africans were able to preserve their heritage and communicate with each other when they were silenced.

The connection students begin to make between American history, Black history in America, and the many influences that contributed to African Diasporic dances is a critical phase in their learning and building the appreciation needed to conceptualize the dances. It is often overlooked that dances within the regions of Africa are stored in the body. Based on this knowledge, I value the rich content of movement and history in West African dance. I introduce the semester with a clear intention. The intention for students to experience joy and purpose within the complexity and beauty that resides

in West African dance, in particular from the regions of Guinea and Mali.

The beginning of this course begins with the understanding that African dance was brought into America as a tool to oppress and control the African enslaved individual. Emery (1988), Chapter 1 reading evokes strong emotion from students resulting in transparency and a higher level of compassion connecting to the history of African dance when coming to America. It is stated in Banks (2010), that one of the findings from choreographer and anthropologist Pearl Primus research is that originally West African dance practices were about setting proper emotional tones and acknowledging the cycles of life. In the beginning of the semester, Manjani (the rights of passage dance) is learned which includes repetitive movements that imitate labor from fishing to washing and a steady fast tempo that creates a high energy exchange between the dancer and drummer. In Banks' article, "The Relevance of West African Dance Education in the United States", there was a study on West African dance education and the observations it has on students socially, emotionally and physically. According to Banks' observations, students were learning to stretch their arms long, execute precise footwork, jump, keep their torso lifted and dance in unison. As the confidence increased, their proficiency became stronger and their faces grew brighter and their attention grew keener. Desmond (1994) shares the view that West African dance education has the potential to provide a decolonizing pedagogy through countering legacies of racism and cultural oppression. There is a segment in the curriculum where I teach West African dance and include an improvisation portion. I will have students imagining the land they are living on in Africa, creating a daily life routine including activities of sowing seeds, fishing, washing, cooking. Then the students develop those actions into a movement pattern, the beginnings of African dance. Applying imagery helps contextualize the dance and also establish a visceral experience for all the students, for all races and ethnicities.

Rituals and grounding experiences such as meditation and check-ins between teacher and student are common practices throughout the course. Afro-Caribbean at NYU is a studio class; therefore, the majority of their grade relies on participation and attendance to embody and practice the movement styles being introduced. I questioned what teaching methods would be most effective to build community, cultural acceptance, and a deeper understanding of the dances. Therefore, I often rely on the collaborative method where students share knowledge and apply it to class activities such as creating a dance phrase or building on a discussion question. Banks (2010) states movement vocabulary is often symbolic of a cultural worldview and aesthetics, hence embodies knowledge. In agreement with Banks' statement 'pedagogies that are morally informed and grounded in "arts based disciplines that help indigenous and non indigenous people recover meaning" (Denzin et al. 2008:13). Critical postcolonial dance pedagogy includes grounding learning and teaching in the cultural context of the dance which has the capability to address issues such as racism and cultural imperialism. After students

learn West African dance they begin to study folklore dances from Haiti and Trinidad. These dances require students to immerse fully. Nettleford (1968 pg. 128) mentions folk dancing is for participating, and not as theater dancing, which is for viewing. I agree there is a way to participate in folk dancing when studying Afro-Caribbean culture that requires full immersion. Students are in full regalia connecting to the tradition and rituals of the Caribbean dances wearing befe' skirts, bandannas, dancing barefooted with african lapas, and joined by live musicians.

Students' Responses and Reflections

As Daniels (2005) wrote, "embodied knowledge" describes the way music and dance embody not just physical information in the human body but also theoretical, emotional, aesthetic, and spiritual information. Below, I quote from one of my student's written reflections at the end of the Fall 2022 course and comments on the value this pedagogy and curriculum:

My view of African-Caribbean dances has been drastically informed through this class. I leave this course with a lens to understand dance, not just as a movement or performative aspect, but as a way of being and embodying history. While I am not from the region, I appreciate and have a deeper understanding of the origin of these dances. We are constantly bombarded with popular music, and dance moves such as 'Twerking' where most of the movement is sexualised, and removed by content. This class provided a context to understand the dance, and a historic perspective to locate the movement. I learnt more, through the research that the enslaved people also used dance to organize the revolution and I understood then the true power of dance as a way of organizing. (Student A)

In the beginning of the semester, it was mentioned for students to keep in mind their understanding of how dancing and drumming played a crucial role in the survival of African enslaved people during the Middle Passage. Incorporating a live drummer is an essential counterpart of the class to create an atmosphere of authenticity. It is also important because it shifts the energy of the students from being observant to submersive. The 'creolization' of movement is adapted through what I observed in class as changing the movement dynamic from Eurocentric to African centralized in grounded, flexed, titled, and rounded movement in the spine. Dance becomes, in Freire (1970) words, an important matter for "pedagogy of the oppressed". Therefore, students who identify themselves as descendents from South America, West Indies, Africa, and Cuba find themselves reflecting on the personal value

this experience of this course brings. Below is a excerpt of a graduate student reflection paper of the course:

My favorite experience in this course was taking Haitian folklore dance from Julio Jean. The dance moves we explored that day made my body feel liberating. As a trained dancer, there have been many times when I get in my head and start to worry extensively about whether I am executing the movement correctly with proper technique. Haitian dance however, completely allowed me to get out of my head and just feel my body. I love feeling moments like that when I dance, they're almost like out of body experiences. Another favorite day was when we did Trinidadian folklore dances. I was very excited when we started moving because the movement felt very similar to Cumbia and Colombian folk dance. (Student B)

During my teachings, I encourage students to use improvisation as a tool to extend the movement vocabulary. Similarly to jazz dance, improvisation is an Africanist element. This is the moment in the class when I notice the students take full ownership of their artistry. There is less judgment and self-consciousness in how the body looks and/or feels in the context of the dance being learned and practiced. According to Kerr-Berry, improvisation has been the vehicle through which invention occurred and the form evolved. My views on the improvisation segment of the bele' cultural dance was taken during the Spring 2023 course in my notebook:

Students showed a high level of openness as I continued to scaffold the lesson. I began with fundamental movement of the Congo bele', immediately added were formation and a sense of structure to the dance which is quintessential to the dance. After a couple of practice sessions with drummer Mike Ramsey, there was a shock from the dancers regarding the stamina that is required in the dance. Continuing I added a call and response between drummer and dancer using sound. This call and response element gave the dancers energy to continue practice. To conclude, improvisation was assigned to each dancer. I began to see the individual interpretation for the fundamental movement we began class with. The confidence of each dancer differed however all students felt safe to do a solo improvisation. I noticed each dancer held the skirt differently, their ability to articulate the pelvic area differed and use of space was larger or smaller. This depended on how comfortable the dancer was with the movement. (Professor, Careitha Davis)

Testaments

At the end of the semester, there is a consistent demonstration of appreciation and a higher level of understanding from the students. Undergraduates have access to a variety of elective courses. Based on class discussions, most students register for dance-related reasons. Some students leave the class feeling empowered, knowledgeable, and cultured regarding the variety of dance styles they learn and practice. Students also leave the course saying that they worked harder than expected due to the research papers included in the course. Offering a studio dance course in Afro-Caribbean dance can be a worthwhile experience due to the professor's knowledge of the dances and how much of an impact the students want to leave behind. The research process appears to be a challenge for students however the level of appreciation for the dance styles shifted. Dances that students may have conceived as 'basic', 'ghetto' or 'too ethnic' now are understood as a pivotal catalyst of cultural artifacts and radical reform. Student, Alexis Nwatu, shares her testament stating:

Through in-depth research, discussions, and the physical exploration of traditional dances throughout the semester, I have learned that African diaspora dance genres are a thriving culture of related peoples. Understanding the beauty of these dance forms and the significance they play in their communities as a representation of freedom, enjoyment, and positivity has been made easier for me by this course's exploration of Afro-Caribbean dance styles.

As the course continues to develop, research assignments continue to be altered. It is important that research methods continue to be explored to keep the students engaged while studying the dances.

Educational Value in Afro-Caribbean Dance

Studying dances of the African Diaspora is an act of decolonization and similarly to the Middle Passage, elements of African and Caribbean dances are adapted to American dance forms. Students learn the significance of African and Caribbean dances alongside the influence of American art forms. The legacy of jazz and concert dance in America includes elements that are studied in the Afro-Caribbean course. In *Rooted Jazz Dance*, George stated 'these forms are included in the family tree, and openly acknowledge the lineage from West African, Caribbean, and authentic jazz dance to the movement vocabulary, performance values, and social elements'. There is a connection between artistry and historical context in Afro-Caribbean dance that brings forth a clearer understanding of technique. The text *Rooted Jazz Dance* states 'its movement elements are aligned with the Africanist

characteristics of jazz dance, with emphasis on weight, rhythm, musicality, movement isolation, improvisation, and community.” The movement aspect of the class has a consistent reinforcement of the technique elements of West African and Caribbean dance which is dancing flat-footedness, call & response, improvisation, hip initiated movement, polycentric movement, ephibism and the aesthetic of cool.

Kathrine Dunham, pioneer in Afro-Caribbean dance and Beryl McBurnie (Nettleford, 1968) the Trinidadian high priestess of West Indian dance are two choreographers that applied the historical content and rituals surrounding the dances students enrolled in the course learn. Students begin to understand the religious counterpart that is imperative in the understanding of dances such as Haitian voodoo and Trinidadian Congo Bele and Shango. The Afro-Caribbean religions in the diasporic communities lie heavily in the Yoruba religion, feeding the symbolism and spiritual connection to the deities that are reflected in the dances. The history of carnival is also presented as a catalyst for a Soca dance segment in the curriculum; so, students understand the inspiration for the movement. Going back to the argument that adaptation of Africanist dance elements has influenced other dance forms in America but also the human migration in the West Indies. There is a statement referring to the human migration in the West Indies, “The Nation Dances of the Grenadine negroes were transplanted whole to Trinidad by these West Indian immigrants and the annual Carnival has proved a storehouse for the preservation of old dances as well as innovation for new ones” (Nettleford, 1968) that highlights the significance of preservation and adaptation in folklore dances.

There is also a healing ritual that students begin to learn and understand while participating in Afro-Caribbean dances such as bele’ and Afro- Haitian dances originated from the Benin regions. Nancy Herard- Marshall is a Haitian- American dance/movement therapist and an authentic movement practitioner. Maria ‘Mara’ Rivera, is a dance movement therapist from Puerto Rico who has worked extensively with children, adolescents and adults. Herard and Rivera propose that the following elements found in Afro-Caribbean movement informs DMT’s therapeutic and clinical interventions (Herard - Marshall & Rivera, 2019).

1. Self-Body Power - This refers to the activation of the healing energies, the internal intuitive resources and the symbolic imagery that asserts self-knowledge
2. Collective Power - The dance incorporates collective forms, circle formations, a collective voice and instills a sense of belonging.
3. Socio-political Power - The dances are grounded in a history of resistance and freedom struggle, and they continue to strengthen the collective political strategy and cultural revolution to fight the forces of oppression.

Dance movement therapy through African Diaspora is a valuable educational experience for BIPOC

students as well for LGBTQI students.

Recognizing that the arts, and particularly dance can be a driver for raising awareness of social justice issues, dance can serve not only as a form of communication but a source of knowledge and a conduit for lifting the voices of marginalized persons and groups, and for creating a vision of what DMT's future can hold (Hérard-Marshall & Rivera, 2019). This quote reinforces that therapy, located in the political context, builds both resilience and a deeper understanding of intergenerational trauma.

There is a connection between the social and political injustice that perpetuates African and Caribbean cultures. According to Daniels, dance in the Afro-Cuban, Haitian, and Brazilian cultures functions as a social medicine and this occurs when 'power, authority, community relationship are affected, rearranged and affirmed' (2005:55). Similarly, (Banks, 2010) finds dance to be a major element of ritual for creating community cohesion and shifting negative mental states. Dance is symbolic of the struggle to (re)negotiate oppressive race and gender-sex relations (Banks, 2010) This has been an observation within the studio where I notice students shifting in how they connect with other classmates and not allowing stigmas to get in the way of participation. The choreography of the dances consists of exquisite spatial composition and sequences (Daniel, 2010). There is also an interactive and improvisation component to the dance that constitutes both the social and celebratory aspect to the dance form. The interplay of individuality and tradition in the dance result in a striking performative element. There is a dialectic play between the aspects, improvisation and standard steps, spontaneity and skillfulness (Gerstin, 1998).

Conclusion

As an adjunct professor, it is essential to continue to be creative and innovative toward creating a final project for students in this course. Students apply dance composition tools to create a performance piece as a form of assessment at the end of the semester. However, there is a challenge with that because not all students are comfortable choreographing or creating a dance piece with a group. Field study helps students build confidence when they take open classes in New York from master teachers in the African Diaspora towards the final. The field study continues to build community and social awareness for the students. It also ties in the educational factors. There are keywords that research encourages to investigate: decolonization and reconciliation as a healing path. The hope is for students to challenge themselves in their research process by depicting decolonization and reconciliation about the dances derived from the Caribbean (Cuba, Puerto Rico, Dominican Republic, and the West Indies) and Africa.

Who created the rituals of these dances? How are these rituals being challenged in present times?

What are these dances acknowledging? Is humility being faced in these dances? The demonstration of Afro- Caribbean dance styles to increase awareness in reform from students regarding the historical context of Afro-Caribbean dance. Community building through spiritual experiences, promoting teaching moments from the students, establishing societal values of inclusivity, and dismantling racial stereotypes are all components of the class. This course is an ongoing research setting where Afro-Caribbean dance brings educational and social value to college students. As the curriculum design for this course continues to evolve, students' reflections and feedback remain essential resources.

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Received : February 28

Reviewed : April 17

Accepted : April 18