

## 1. Diasporic experience and the archival process: Reflections upon the initial phase of the Black Dance Archives project (UK)

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Some years ago I had a very vivid dream that at the time seemed supremely significant and even now I sense the feelings it raised still lingering somewhere in my subconscious: I was very young-around 5 or 6 - and I was in Africa, in a vast expanse of land, on the plains of some amazing landscape and I was running, happy and smiling, being called to my family by the beating of distant drums.

(drum sound)

I ran far over the hills and across water, with joy in my heart to reach the drum beat and the warmth of my family.

(Deborah starts dancing to drums)

J Deborah! Why as someone born and brought up in Muswell Hill North London were you dreaming about being a child in Africa?

D I guess we all want to make sense of our heritage so that we can feel we belong.

J 2 The British Black Dance Archives Project, that is the subject of our presentation, might be understood as a vehicle for recognising the importance of this sense of heritage and belonging. In our following dialogue we aim to reveal some of the issues informing this on-going project and to reflect on how at this stage we understand its significance.

D. 3 The stated aims of the British Black Dance Archives project were 'to capture, record and celebrate the contribution of British Black Dance to the wider dance ecology' and to British 'national, cultural life' (State of Emergency n.d.) The project came about as a result of research undertaken by my production company, State of Emergency (Baddoo, 2014). This revealed how changes in Arts Council England funding had resulted in the closure or reduction of activity of companies who had been key to the development of Black British dance during the later part of the Twentieth Century. Notably, in 2005 the withdrawal of funding from Adzido, the largest company that performed African People's dance, led to its performances coming to an end. Union Dance, who aimed to create work that promoted 'identity and inter-cultural understanding through a mix of Contemporary, Street and Martial Arts styles' had their funding cut in 2008, along with Sakoba and Robert Hylton Urban Classicism (Londondance.com, 2008). Key figures were also aging and had not necessarily recognised the importance of preserving records or felt unable to trust them to a third party. Even as the first stage of the project was under way a key potential contributor, Bode Lawal, director of Sakoba Dance Company, passed away unexpectedly (August 13, 2015) and the archival materials he had promised have not been found.

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In these circumstances information about individual artists and companies – documents related to their performances and their models of operation - risk becoming irretrievably lost. While the practices that supported their choreographic styles and related dance techniques are becoming dissipated. The result is a sense that both practices and artefacts that anchor the collective memory of a generation of Black British dancers are disappearing:

‘there was so much time invested into building this style of dance, and we don’t want it to diminish. It was a way of working that was built up over 21years and it’s disappearing into so many fractions. Now that Union is not here, there is whole body of people that may miss out on this work and its history’.

Dancer for Union Dance Company September 2010, cited by Baddoo 2014

The research also found how relevant reports were becoming more difficult to obtain. For example Herman McIntosh’s(2001) Arts Council England’s commissioned report *Time for change: A framework for the development of African peoples dance forms*, is no longer available on line from Arts Council England’s website and does not surface as a title even through a search of older materials that have been deposited with the National Archive (<http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20160204101926/http://arts council.org.uk/> accessed 16 August 2016).<sup>1</sup>

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This research thus made the case for supporting the collection of materials related to the work of Black British dance artists in the late Twentieth Century in order to develop resources that can inform understanding of their contribution to dance in Britain. In considering the value of such collections to future dance and cultural historians, it is worth noting that even the terms used to describe the artists and their work is significant. In post-colonial Britain debates as to how to categorise dancing and dance performances that drew upon a sense of diasporic heritage and/or articulated experiences specific to Black British communities reflected many of the tensions and concerns surrounding the identity of British subjects with an African or African Caribbean heritage.

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As a Black choreographer and dance artist, and now an artistic director and producer, I have had a lifetime experience of trying to negotiate the emotionally loaded terminology that exists to describe Black people creating dance in the UK. ‘Black dance’, ‘multi-cultural dance’, ‘ethnic minority dance’, ‘dance of the African Diaspora’, ‘diverse dance’ - Black British dance artists are often labelled according to agendas driven by the complex political debates around issues of ‘race’ and ‘nation’. I acknowledge the long dialogue the sector has had around terminology and associated issues of definition and aesthetics. For me the terms ‘Black dance’ and ‘Black choreographers’ refer to artists of African, Caribbean or mixed heritage who create and present work in any style or fusion of styles.

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<sup>1</sup> Similarly difficult to find is Diane Mitchel’s report, ‘Securing the Future: Building the foundation to recover and preserve African Peoples Dance heritage’, commissioned by ACE in 2002 (ADAD n.d.)

They are very broad categories that allow for artists to draw upon a wide range of dance styles and influences.

J 7 To detail the complexities of these debates is beyond the scope of our paper today but can be found in research undertaken by Funmi Adewole (2016) as part of a project led by Professors Ramsay Burt and Christy Adair. However, our reflections upon this project will reveal something of how questions of identity have been interwoven with the dancing of this period and certainly many issues of terminology are captured within the archives. A key question for Deborah is: Why do you feel that all these different people making work in a whole range of styles were a 'sector'?

D. I suppose by being visibly 'black' within the context of a predominantly white British society coming to terms with its post-colonial identity: There was a sense of a shared experience founded in the marginal experience of being Black in the field of British dance that made us feel linked together - as part of a family.

Perhaps before we reflect further about the archive we should say something about ourselves and why the project is important to us? Why did you become interested?

J My interest is fuelled by recognition of the limitations of what information is available to those interested in the histories of dancing in Britain. In addition, Kenneth Bindas' notion of 're-remembering' has led me to reflect back upon my experiences of studying dance in the 1970s and 1980s. What concerns me now is how, as a cultural field, much British theatre dance, and particularly ballet seem, at least in my memory of them, to have been quite slow to respond to changes in the wider field of British society and that at times the aesthetic priorities of dance institutions were sometimes problematic to Black British dance artists. My memories seem to cohere with Sandie Bourne's findings that while Black youths trained in ballet they were explicitly told major British companies would not employ them as they would disrupt the look of the corps de ballet (Conference paper 17th September). Moreover I recognise, in my recollections of this period, what Stuart Hall refers to as a 'profound historical forgetfulness' (Hall 1978, cited in Lawrence, 2005, p.70) which enabled some people to refuse to recognise immigrants from previous colonies' legitimate claim to be British subjects while, as Errol Lawrence (2005) has discussed, racist attitudes towards people from India and the countries of Africa that had shaped the colonial project continued.

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Well I trained in ballet- From the age of 4. But I was the only black girl in the class and in the 1960s this was very unusual in the UK. I adored ballet and my mother used to take me to see many ballets at Sadler's Wells in London. It was a magical experience. So ballet was my frame of reference for dance until I studied it as a degree subject when I then excitedly embraced the European contemporary dance idiom.

It was not until my twenties, in the early 1980s, that I became aware of Jazz and African and Caribbean dancing. I lived and worked in London raising funds and setting up an arts centre that was a hub for music in the East London-an area with a rich diversity of people of different 'races', from different ethnicities and with varied cultural traditions. It was here that I started my performance career. I let go of the formality of the choreographic structures I had been taught to find my niche working with live music and dance improvisation. I was particularly excited and exhilarated to work with jazz musicians and African drummers. I had that sense that the drums were calling me - that I had come home!

However, trying to tour our performances was a challenge. The European contemporary dance world at that time embraced a totally different aesthetic and we were often categorised as 'other'. The work of Black dancers was often viewed as more suited to community dance than a professional dance touring circuit. Or where Black dancers were recognised as artists, venues would act as if once they had programmed one Black artist in a season they had reached their quota, completely disregarding what genre or choreographic style of dance was being offered but rather seeing dancing by Black people as interchangeable just by virtue of their being Black.

I came to recognise that many Black choreographers had a similar experience so, taking matters into my own hands, I began a career as a producer setting up State of Emergency to champion the development and profiling of Black choreographers and their work.

My experience of a long and still ongoing 'struggle' for recognition made it important for me to leave a record of what has been accomplished and hence the aim to set up the Black dance archives project. At an emotional level the archives are important to me and to other artists because we feel that the contribution Black British dance artists have made to the cultural landscape in the UK is not **always** recognised. Moreover, because the materials available to students wanting to study dancing and dancers of the African Diaspora within the UK are limited and often not easy to locate, organisations such as State of Emergency find we are often responding to requests for information. **So what happens when we are gone?**

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One of the things that has struck me most about this project is it is driven by those who are all too aware of the fragility of the histories of their achievements and the dynamics of power that have an impact on what is placed in an archive and how it is situated in relation to other materials. Such issues are examined by Jacques Derrida in his oft cited essay 'Archive Fever' (1995) that offers a detailed consideration of the relationships of archives to the formation of historical knowledge.

In revealing the roots of the term archive from the Greek 'Arkheion' as being the place where the superior magistrate or 'archons' lived and where official documents were housed, Derrida further emphasises how the archons not only secured important documents but had 'the power to interpret the archives' (1995, 10) . For Derrida consignment to the archive is thus not just a depositing of documents but a 'gathering together' of signs with the aim 'to coordinate a single corpus, in a system or a synchrony in which all the elements articulate the unity of an ideal configuration'

(Derrida 1995, 10). This leads Derrida to recognise that the destabilisation of unified signifying systems is a challenge to the archival process which consigns documents to their place.

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So how do the Black Dance Archives fit into a gathering together of materials relating to dance in the UK? How in the words of dance artist and scholar Sheron Wray (2016) do we 'decolonize the archive'?

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Should we regard a collection of materials related to Black British dance artists as representing a challenge to the hegemonic aesthetic ideals of British theatre dance of a particular era? Or do they represent a challenge to the *idea* of a unified national artistic discourse? Attitudes to such questions perhaps underpin artists' decisions as to whether materials relating to their dancing belong to a national British archive or a Black one or indeed to any archive at all, in the traditional sense, if they agree with Diana Taylor (2006 p.70) that 'History-as-discipline has long served colonial masters' or that as Rebecca Schneider states "'archive culture" is appropriate to those who align historical knowledge with European traditions (Heathfield, 138).

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Our consultation process in setting up the archive revealed that some depositors felt that if their materials entered a national archive that their records could become inaccessible to them. For example ACE Dance and Music, RJC dance and Phoenix Dance Theatre were all strong supporters of the project yet they were reluctant to 'give up' their materials when they felt that their collections would be geographically too far away for them to access. As a result new relationships were brokered with the University of Leeds, who are located nearer to RJC and Phoenix Dance Theatre, and with Birmingham Libraries and Records who are better placed for ACE Dance and Music and Shaun Cope. The majority of depositors had developed their organisations and artistic work through networks belonging to both geographic and cultural communities and there was a sense that they wanted to give something back to the communities to which they felt they belonged. Hence in addition to geographic proximity many depositors also sought a certain 'cultural empathy' with the organisations receiving their records. Particularly for London based artists it was valuable to broker a relationship with the Black Cultural Archives in Brixton, South London. This relationship was a watershed for the project as some key depositors felt their collections were in a culturally relevant place and it became possible to secure more deposits.

J This 'de-centred' approach, while providing the means for artists to engage with the over-arching aims of the project without compromising their sense of cultural identity, raises issues of how to then ensure that people can find out where all these different archives are located, so that together as well as individually, they can become a useful resource to those interested in these histories.

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It is important that the materials are easily accessible, so we are now working with the Black Cultural Archives with the aim of digitising the material to set up a website that will enable access to materials and provide a useful portal.

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Another result of this approach is that materials have tended to be collected and organised in relation to individual artists or companies as opposed to categories of style or culture. This might suggest the dominance of neoliberal order that values individualism and/or an unwillingness amongst Black British dance artists to be identified according to categories that can too easily be accorded places in a hierarchy.

D 10 To me this suggests the significance of different individual experiences of how Black British identities become embodied in dancing, whether through ballet, hip hop, jazz African or many other genres and choreographic styles. For example choreographer Irven Lewis has described how he developed his unique style of fusion dance from watching 1970s disco championships combined with the Ska dance moves he learned from his parents who were of the 'Windrush' generation of immigrants from the Caribbean in the mid Twentieth Century (Roadshow workshop **date?**).

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So we might see the archives as a testament to the many different ways Black British individuals forged dance identities by drawing on the dancing around them. It is interesting that in developing these archives you have emphasised their relation to those living artists whose records you are capturing through workshops and personal testimonies.

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We termed this 'animating the story' with the idea of revisiting history in ways that bring to life the social context within which dancing took place and also fill in some of the 'gaps' not captured in more formal documents. This strand of the project aimed to 'animate the archive' through measures such as an outreach programme in schools and colleges and community groups, reminiscence and oral history workshops, performances and workshops, and a touring roadshow style exhibition that visited 10 National Dance agencies and other venues.

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Dancing, by virtue of its ephemeral ontology and relatively low status in relation to other arts, and Black British culture due to its marginality, are both understood as engaged constantly in a struggle for recognition. What is the effect on the notion of archives when many of those contributing were (and often still are) so taken up with such struggles? Do the narratives of the efforts of those involved become as much a part of the archives as the documents related to particular achievements? Certainly the materials I have so far viewed in the Brixton based Black Cultural Archive reveal the difficulties in developing an infrastructure that can support the activities of Black

British artists. Moreover the effort entailed in gaining support for their activities is evident in the lengthy applications for modest funding.

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Yes funding has been and still is a real issue. During the 1970s and early 1980s black dance companies were comparatively well funded but this was through 'community arts' and employment schemes. In particular African dance traditions were valued for their role in promoting community cohesion rather than for their artistic qualities.<sup>2</sup>

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As the project continues one of the issues may be how to represent in the archive the significance of the embodied experience of dancing. This is an issue for any dance archive but may be particularly important in this context. Recent developments in the fields of psychiatry and psychoanalysis (the latter that Derrida aligns with the theory of archives<sup>3</sup>) point to the need to address the cumulative effects of racism and the value of drawing on traditions from beyond traditional (western) psychoanalysis to help heal those negatively affected (Helms et al 2010)<sup>4</sup>. This leads me to wonder about the significance of dancing among Black British communities. Was dancing a means of **processing the challenges faced by Black British** communities, and if this was significant, how can it be captured?

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This is perhaps why personal testimony has a place alongside more formal documents. Yet while video images never capture the 'energy' and significance of dancing they do provide a valuable resource for those wanting to know about the work of the artists included in the archives. My understanding of these archives is that they will be experienced in relation with what in both dance and African traditions is an emphasis on oral histories and the embodied experience of learning dancing from elders. Not only have we attempted to capture some oral histories but I envisage that people will experience the archives in tandem with their experience of how both dance traditions and associated cultural narratives are passed on from one generation to the next.

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This reminds me of how within the wider field of history, academics such as Diana Taylor are suggesting how performance can itself be viewed as 'deeply historical'. That 'the againness of performance offers a different modality for thinking of the againness of history' (Taylor 2006 83). In many ways contemplating dance archives make us aware of the relationships of past, present and future and how they might be re-worked and embodied.

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<sup>2</sup> Naseem Kahn's *The Arts Britain ignores* (1976) and Kwesi Owusu's *The struggle for Black Arts in Britain* (1988) highlight many of these issues from the late C20.

<sup>3</sup> Derrida's analysis is specifically related to the records of Sigmund Freud. He proposes a kind of 'archive fever' as intertwined with the destructive subconscious drives Freud proposed.

<sup>4</sup> See also American Psychological Association Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5) will recognise cumulative effects of stress

D Yes that in my twenties, the rhythm of the drum awoke a sense of a history that I had not considered when younger and yet it became so important to me as an adult as part of my heritage that I dreamt of experiencing it as a child.

J 15 Certainly the project raises awareness of how our sense of the past shapes our hopes for the future while our sense of the future haunts our understanding of the past.

D The archives may help future British children explore their dance heritage and perhaps they will understand the significance of this project in ways we may not yet imagine:

Both 16 Thanks You!



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