

**Black Women and Dance:  
Creativity, Movement, and Social Justice**

*dance your anger  
and your joys.  
dance the guns  
to silence  
dance, dance, dance...*

--Ken Saro-Wiwa

What does it mean for black women to *dance your anger and your joys*, as activist-artist Ken Saro Wiwa put it: that is, to use our moving, creative, powerful bodies to respond to the violences of racism and sexism, and to envision new ways of being and moving in the world? This course journeys towards answers to this question by exploring women's participation in ritual, concert, and social dance in North America, Haiti, Cuba, and Brazil. We will work through readings, viewings, and stagings, and interweave text, movement, and action to encourage students' artistic as well as academic self-expression. Some of the questions we explore include: How can we view and create artistic work while still keeping social justice issues in mind? How do embodied practices become modes of organizing communities? How can we decipher the fragile histories that we carry and move through in our own bodies?

**Primary Texts**

Yvonne Daniel, *Dancing Wisdom: Embodied Knowledge in Haitian Vodou, Cuban Yoruba, and Bahian Candomble*

Estrela Alexander, *Black Fire: One Hundred Years of African American Pentecostalism*

Brenda Dixon Gottschild, *The Black Dancing Body*

Michaela DePrince, *Taking Flight: From War Orphan to Star Ballerina*

Katrina Hazzard-Gordon, *Jookin': The Rise of Social Dance Formations in African-American Culture*

*\*\*All other texts will be available electronically unless otherwise noted*

**Respectful Learning**

In this course, students engage texts that deal explicitly with (post)colonialism, slavery, racism, sexism, religious discrimination, poverty, state violence, genocide, sexual violence, same-sex sexuality, and embodiment. While the professor will provide historical contexts and academic frameworks for discussing these issues, many students may be unfamiliar with them and so may initially experience emotional responses as they confront their own privilege and oppression, ignorance and knowledge. The professor asks that students pay attention to such feelings and note where they challenge their ability to approach

texts analytically. I also ask that everyone come to class willing to discuss these difficult, complex topics with openness and respect. Expressions of First Worldism, racism, classism, religious intolerance, homophobia, heterosexism, ableism, or sexism will not be tolerated. Instead, I expect students to take seriously the responsibility involved in university education in general, and in reading works that document violence and social injustice in particular. As part of this responsibility, I ask students to consider carefully how social and geopolitical positioning shapes what they do and do not react to, and complicates their relationships to texts in different ways.

### **Appreciated Attributes**

1. Critical thinking—spoken and written statements reflect thoughtful, careful attention to subjects at hand; demonstrate independent, original thought; and include specific, properly documented references to all sources.
2. Inquisitiveness—classroom participation shows willingness to ask questions about aspects of readings/discussions that remain unclear, and to seek additional information.
3. Making connections beyond the classroom—spoken and written statements express when a reading speaks to your particular experiences, interest, or knowledge.
4. Creativity— spoken and written statements express willingness to engage new topics with imagination and flexibility. Imagining differently is the first step in changing the social injustices that we will engage!

### **Requirements**

#### ***Class Participation: 20% of final grade***

The goal of this course is to experiment with sharing and creating knowledge of multiple literatures, cultures, histories, identities, and experiences in an intellectual community—our class—that includes as many diverse, creative viewpoints possible. To build such community, the following kinds of class participation will be required of all students (each about 6% of final grade):

***Attendance:*** Please come to every class session on time, and take care of yourself through flu season to make sure this is possible. If you must be absent, notify the instructor and arrange to get notes *beforehand* in order to avoid lowering your attendance grade.

***Timely completion of readings:*** Finish assigned reading before arriving in class so that we can have meaningful discussions.

***Share thoughts and questions with the class:*** Speaking to a group is a skill benefits students not only in other classes, but in almost any career. For this reason, you will be asked to come to class with specific questions, notes, reactions, and analyses to share with the group, and to communicate these and other observations during our discussions. Everyone's input is valued!

***In-class writing:*** From time to time, students will be asked to free write or answer targeted questions in class. Please come ready to be creative.

***Small group work:*** Periodically, students will also be asked to consider questions or topics in small groups and report back to the larger group. Active

participation with your colleagues will be a vital part of sharing knowledge and creating community, and you are encouraged to talk freely!

***Response papers: 30% of final grade (10% each)***

At the conclusion of each unit, students will submit a 750-900 word written response to the readings that offer reflections on the readings and lectures for the unit. These responses will be critical analyses of the text, rather than emotional or autobiographical reflections. Responses must contain at least 2 citations from 2 different readings.

***Dance Journal: 15% of final grade***

Throughout the semester, students will explore their own dance practice. This dance practice can take the form of any of the dance genres we will be exploring over the course of the semester: ritual dance, concert dance, or social/popular dance. Students may choose to take an organized dance class; join a dance group; participate in social dance; or engage in any other form of dance undertaken in a group context. (In other words, dancing alone in your room won't suffice for this assignment). To record their dance participation, students will keep a dance journal. Each week, you will write an entry reflecting on your dance experiences that week, and on what you are learning about black women and dance through your embodied experience.

Suggestions for a successful dance journal include:

1. Talk to other participants. In group dance, no individual can accurately reflect the entirety of the experience. You will get more out of what's going on if you talk to your fellow dancers: ask them why they participate, what they find rewarding and challenging, how this fits into the rest of their life. If your practice includes an instructor or leader, take a few minutes to talk to them about their training and/or vision for their dance practice
2. "Talk" to your body. Pay attention to what hurts and what feels good when you dance; to which body parts you are self-conscious of, and which you are proud of. Think about how this might reflect or deflect messages you have received about black women's beauty, sexuality, spirituality, intelligence, and self-worth.

Please bring dance journals to class, as you may be asked to share from them.

***Final Exam: 35% of final grade***

Students will complete a take-home final examination that will cover the entire course. The exam will consist of identifications and essay questions.

**Course calendar** (subject to change)

### **Introduction: Imagining Dance and/as Black Women's Liberation**

July 16: Black Women's Right to Dance

In-class viewing: "Damas do Samba"; "50 years after civil rights protests, Birmingham class finally has prom"

July 17: The Problem of the Black Woman's Body: Combatting Stereotypes

Reading due: Patricia Hill Collins, "Mammies, Matriarchs, and Other Controlling Images" and "The Power of Self-Definition" from *Black Feminist Thought*. Available as e-book from lib.utexas.edu.

July 18: The Problem of the Black Woman's Body: Combatting Stereotypes

Reading due: Kariamuwelsh Asante, "Images of Women in African Dance: Sexuality and Sensuality as Dual Unity" and "Commonalities in African Dance"; Michèle Alexandre, "Dance Halls, Masquerades, Body Protest and the Law: The Female Body as Redemptive Tool Against Trinidad's Gender-Biased Laws"

July 19: Black Girls Dance to Breathe

In-class viewing and discussion: Anna Rose Holmer, "The Fits"

### **The Spirit of Movement: Black Women and Ritual Dance**

July 23: Black Women and the Ritual Dance Tradition: the Caribbean

Reading due: Yvonne Daniel, *Dancing Wisdom*, 1-50

In-class viewing: Maya Deren, *Divine Horsemen: The Living Gods of Haiti*

July 24: Black Women and the Ritual Dance Tradition: the Caribbean

Reading due: Yvonne Daniel, *Dancing Wisdom*, 51-93

July 25: Black Women and the Ritual Dance Tradition: African America

Reading Due: Estrela Alexander, *Black Fire*, 28-60

July 26: Black Women and the Ritual Dance Tradition: African America

Reading Due: Estrela Alexander, *Black Fire*, 293-341

July 30: "Folklore and Fishnets": Innovating Ritual Dance

Reading Due: Omise'eke Tinsley, from *Ezili's Mirrors*

In-class viewing: Adia Whitakeør, "Ezili"

**Response paper #1 due by 11:59 p.m.**

### **Dark Beauty Under the Lights: Black Women and Concert Dance**

July 31: Black Women Breaking Ground in Concert Dance

Reading due: Zita Allen, "A Tale of Two Pioneers,"

[http://www.pbs.org/wnet/freetodance/behind/behind\\_blackdance.html](http://www.pbs.org/wnet/freetodance/behind/behind_blackdance.html);

Thomas DeFrantz, "Theorizing Connectivities: African American Women in Concert Dance"

August 1: Staging the Black Woman's Body

Reading due: Brenda Dixon Gottschild, *The Black Dancing Body*, 2-80

August 2: Staging the Black Woman's Body

Reading due: Brenda Dixon Gottschild, *The Black Dancing Body*, 108-187

August 6: Blackening the Ballerina

Reading due: Brenda Dixon Gottschild, *The Black Dancing Body*, 188-221;  
Michaela DePrince, *Taking Flight*, 9-82

August 7: Blackening the Ballerina

Reading due: Michaela DePrince, *Taking Flight*, 82-238  
In-class viewing: *First Position*

**Response paper #2 due by 11:59 p.m.**

### **Where My Girls At: Black Women and Social Dance**

August 8: Histories of Black Women and Social Dance

Reading due: Katrina Hazzard-Gordon, *Jookin'*, 13-75

August 9: Histories of Black Women and Social Dance

Reading due: Katrina Hazzard-Gordon, *Jookin'*, 76-154

August 13: Black Women's Innovations in Social Dance

Reading due: Carolyn Cooper, "Lady Saw Cuts Loose" from *Sound Clash*;  
Beth-Sarah White, "Latter-Day Emancipation! Woman, Dance and  
Healing in Jamaican Dancehall Culture"

August 14: Black Women's Innovations in Social Dance

Reading due: Janell Hobson, "The Batty Politic"; Kyra Gaunt, "Twerking,  
YouTube, and You"

August 15: Black Women's Innovations in Social Dance

Reading due: Marlon Bailey, "Gender/Racial Realness: Theorizing Gender  
in the Ballroom Community"; Jafari Allen, "For the Children: Dancing the  
Beloved Community"

In-class viewing: Jennie Livingston, *Paris Is Burning*; *Pose*

**Response paper #3 due by 11:59 p.m.**

August 16: Course conclusion

**August 18: Final examination due by 11:59 p.m.**