

Afro-Caribbean dance, critical thinking, and global activism

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Abstract

Dance educators at every level are aligning their teaching with wider educational goals. The general education movement in higher education, as well as the standards movement in the public schools, ask us to focus on student learning objectives that require analysis, critical thinking, multi-cultural awareness, and student engagement with social problems. This paper describes the pedagogical approach to Afro-Caribbean Dance at Bronx Community College, where the class combines a studio and lecture component. The integration of movement lessons, lectures, and writing assignments is discussed, focusing on addressing these broader educational concerns and motivating student activism.

Keywords: African dance, Caribbean dance, critical thinking, student activism, pedagogy

Course structure

Bronx Community College is a two-year community college in New York City where Afro-Caribbean dance is offered as an elective, open to all students. It is taught for three hours a week, with two hours spent dancing in the studio and a separate lecture hour in a standard classroom. During these discussions, students explore the underlying spiritual concepts, aesthetic values, and historical circumstances which have shaped African dances in traditional settings, as well as across the diaspora. The class is designated as "Writing Intensive" and is part of the college's "Writing across the Curriculum" effort. This combination of movement experiences, class discussions, and written assignments helps to create a powerful platform for teaching critical thinking and global activism. As students reflect upon shared spiritual values in traditional African cultures, they are asked to consider overarching thematic questions about changing societies. Lessons on the role of dance during the slave trade are followed by exposure to information on the widespread prevalence of modern slavery. Students are asked to research various types of modern slavery, and organizations that are active in the fight for universal justice. They are invited to get involved in this struggle. This paper presents the pedagogical approach in more detail.

Critical thinking

A key aspect of critical thinking is attempting to answer questions that are stimulating to the learner (Paul and Elder, 2014; Lewittes, 2009). The opening lectures for this class help students understand that although there were over one thousand different tribes in traditional African culture south of the Sahara, there were some common underlying spiritual concepts that were widely believed. As I introduced these ideas,

I asked students to consider what we have gained as society has become more modern and more urban, and what we have lost.

The traditional spiritual concepts we discussed start with the idea that God is the highest power and the source of life, health, vitality, and creativity. God can be expressed in many forms, including forces of nature, the ancestors, tribal leaders and respected elders. Mankind needs to live in harmony with all the manifestations of God, and the most productive lives are filled with spiritual harmony and vitality. Personal relationships are valued far above material possessions. This is crisply illustrated by the Wolof proverb, "A person is the medicine for another person" (Sallah, 1996 p.24). Family solidarity is extended to all members of the community. Rituals based on music and dance reinforce the strength of these personal relationships, inviting God to be present among the people, supporting their bonds. According to African dance scholar Omofolabo Soyinka Ajayi, in African cultures "No religious worship was considered complete in the past without at least one dance performance by the devotees" (Ajayi in Asante, 1996). Music and dance were used to invite God to uplift the people and to help them in times of trouble (Olatunji, 2005). Students reflecting on these ideas wrote about the loss of community we face in our modern societies. They discussed the omnipresence of materialism and the challenges to remaining connected to a more spiritual approach to life, and shared personal strategies for creating meaning and community. Students also acknowledged that modern urban cultures have made great advances in medicine, technology, and education.

In another critical thinking question we explored aesthetics. Once again, despite the many different styles of dance across traditional Africa, there are some aesthetic principles that were widespread and that are still important; for example, dance should create positive spiritual energy and unite the people (Diallo and Mitchell, 1989). Particular cultural purposes are achieved by specific dance rituals including dances that celebrate work, initiate different phases of life, honour the history of the tribe, and so on. To be successful, the dance ritual must achieve its stated purpose, and it must use the correct steps, rhythms, masks, and dress appropriate to that purpose. There needs to be a deep synergy between the dancers and the drummers, so that the steps are an embodiment of the pulse of the rhythm and are changed upon the drummer's signal. Dancers also need to be supple, drawing power from the earth and initiating movement with the pelvis and the torso. As well as being uninhibited and energetic, dancers are encouraged to use humour, satire, and improvisation (Thompson, 2011).

Students were asked to compare the aesthetic criteria for traditional African dance to the aesthetic demands of any other dance form they felt that they understood. They often chose hip-hop or dances from their own home countries such as merengue, bachata, salsa, or reggaeton. Their results were insightful, as they were able to link the new material with their personal experiences and prior learning. The most frequent conclusion was that although the ritual purposes are no longer the central focus in current dance forms, many of the earlier movement qualities are still visible and valued, particularly the emphasis on the rhythm and the use of the pelvis as the central initiator. As students were writing about these ideas discussed in the lectures, they were learning movements based on traditional African dances such as Frekoba

(a challenge dance), Palogo (originally a dance honouring fisherman), and Lamban (a dance that honours the Djeli, the drummers and keepers of tribal history).

The role of dance during the transatlantic slave trade comes as a shock to many students. One of the ways that slaves were rounded up for the middle passage was through trickery, involving the use of music and dance. Slave traders would capture a drummer, bring him onboard a ship in the harbor, and force him to play. Then they would lure other Africans onboard, saying they were inviting them to come to a party, to enjoy dancing to the music, or to be paid for entertaining. Liquor was served, and the ships took off. By the time the visitors realized what had happened they were far from shore with no way back (Emery, 1988).

During the voyages slaves were forced to dance daily. This allowed the sailors to clean out the slave quarters below the decks, which were foul from people living in hideously overcrowded conditions, chained, and forced to sleep in their own filth. Often the men were kept chained during the dancing, while the sailors had their way with the African women. Despite this brutality, the slave traders wanted the slaves to look physically fit when they arrived on the auction block, so that they could be sold for a higher price. This practice of 'dancing the slaves' would help those who survived the ordeal of the journey to look like they were still capable of hard work in the fields (Haskins, 1992). The same horrific justification was used when Africans were sometimes forced to dance on the auction block (Thorpe, 1990).

At this point in the semester we began studying Afro-Caribbean dance in the studio. We explored the use of dance in the new Afro-Christian religions that emerged in the Caribbean. There were severe restrictions banning African worship, so slaves disguised their traditional African gods and beliefs. Fooling unknowing onlookers, the slaves hid their own traditions within the religion of the slave owners. Some of the dances we studied included Haitian movements honouring Ezili, goddess of love, who was frequently associated with the Virgin Mary, and movements from Yanvalu, a dance honouring the serpent deity Damballa, god of creation, who has been associated with Christ, St. Patrick, and Moses.

Students learned how dance could be used to call upon God for the power to escape or to rebel. Vodou ceremonies in Haiti were widely feared by slave owners, who sensed that the dancing in these ceremonies could be used as catalysts for insurrections. Although details vary, it is widely believed that a Vodou ceremony was pivotal in emboldening the Haitian slave revolution of 1791 (Desmangles, 1992). Puerto Rican Bomba, which has been traced to a royal court dance of the Ashanti, was sometimes used as a diversion that allowed slaves the opportunity to set sugar cane fields on fire and escape to the mountains (Barton, 2002). According to Cuban *babalawo* and dance teacher Yoandy Marcos Fernandez, dance was used throughout the Caribbean to curse the overseers and slave owners, so that they would not succeed in recapturing run-away slaves.¹ In the studio we worked on movements with mimed machetes from the Cuban Palo tradition, and dances of liberation, like the Ibo Freedom dance that had been brought to Haiti.

In lectures, I used these lessons as the basis for a creative writing assignment. I was nervous that the material might be too upsetting for some students, the majority of whom were descendants of the African diaspora. However, I hoped that giving them

many writing choices would make it possible for everyone to participate. Here is the assignment:

In class we have been studying five ways in which dance was used during the slave trade:

1. Dance and the capture of slaves
2. Dance and the transport of slaves
3. Dance and the sale of slaves
4. Dance to empower slave rebellions or to thwart the slave owners
5. Dance as a vehicle for maintaining and disguising African worship among slaves

Pick one of these situations. Pretend you are observing and describe what you see. Make it clear to the reader who you are. (You can be anyone you choose, and you can write from any point of view. Since this is creative writing, you can stretch your imagination.) I know this is a difficult assignment, because this is such an agonizing history, but we will soon be considering the plight of millions of people around the world who are still enslaved today. Hopefully, we can channel the pain of these historical memories into meaningful action.

This homework gave rise to some of the most eloquent and moving writing of the semester.² Consider the following section of a paper written by BCC student Yvonne Thomas in spring 2014:

The men who have taken away our freedom have brought us to the deck of a very large vessel. They want us to dance. I want to dance. I want to dance to keep up my strength, in case I have a chance to escape I dance with vitality. I am not alone, my people dance with me for the hope of freedom With our fingers up and feet wide, we twist from side to side and jump We thrust our shoulders forward as we raise our hands to the sky. We bend our knees low as we bring our hands down The drummer beats the drum and it's powerful. The drummer makes us believe there is hope for our survival. The beats from the drum keep the energy flowing, as we dance back and forth across the large ship in unity. The slave owners look on as they think about the people they see as stock for trade. They don't understand that my will, and the will of my people, is not for them, but for our own survival. And so we dance.

That same semester, a student named William Dundon wrote as if he were a bat up in the mountains in Haiti:

There is a new animal here. They don't look like anything I have ever seen before. These creatures walk on two legs They are called humans They gather around something called a drum. They use movement as a sort of bonding ritual. It is wild, but it is deliberate. I don't know why they have come up here, but I feel as though they are running away from something. As soon as they arrived I could tell they had been through something truly frightening. Today seems to be a special day.

They have been making preparations for something big. Their numbers have exploded. More and more came from the lowlands each day. It seems they are preparing to go back down This isn't a celebration like the other times. They are preparing weapons and perfecting their skill. I believe that whatever drove them up here is their ultimate target. The ceremony seems to be geared toward aggression Although I fear for whatever they are going up against, these humans are too determined to lose.

Other courageous students adapted viewpoints that required them to imagine circumstances far from their own perspectives, including that of a white child who was taken to a slave market to pick out a slave for a birthday present, and the child of a slave trader who was first learning what her father's true occupation had been. Students were encouraged to submit their writing to the school literary magazine. When the assignment was over, I asked the class if they thought it was worthwhile and if I should continue to give this assignment in future semesters. The "yes" verdict was unanimous, supporting the view that creative writing helps students to experience writing itself as a rewarding process (Cummins, 2009; Bean, 1996).

Global activism

I hoped that this assignment, paired with the dances learned in class, would help motivate students to fight against conditions of modern slavery. The next series of lectures were devoted to raising awareness of the devastating circumstances many still endure today, with an estimated 21 to 36 million still suffering under conditions equal to slavery (About Slavery, 2015). While most of these people are not bought and sold in public, they are nonetheless trapped and brutalized. The uneducated, women, children, and others living in poverty are coerced or tricked into bonded labour, forced or child labour, trafficking, forced military service, forced marriages, and sexual exploitation. Slavery is illegal in almost every country, but governments are rarely willing to enforce the law or punish those who profit from slavery.

I utilized teaching materials made available online at freetheslaves.net (2010). This very important educational/activist website has a carefully structured set of teaching tools, which enabled me to help my students understand the different types of modern slavery and to analyse contributing factors. (These materials can be adapted for students of all ages.) We examined 'slavery case studies' which were told in the voice of enslaved people of different ages and races, from all parts of the world.³ The students discussed these very vivid and difficult descriptions and shared their reactions in small groups before reporting to the entire class. We also looked at the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which was drawn up by the United Nations in 1948, considering the interconnectedness of political, economic, and civil rights.

The final project for the lecture portion of the class had two parts. Firstly, students were asked to research one type of modern slavery which most concerned them. They explained what it is, how and where it occurs, and discussed political, economic, and social factors that contribute to its continued existence. They also reviewed organizations that have been fighting back and reported on what progress has been made.

Part Two of the project was to engage in educational activism on this issue. In spring of 2010, some of the students in my class joined the Bronx Community College Dance Workshop performance group in their annual spring concert. They performed a dance called *Breaking the Chains*, based on the Ibo Freedom Dance I mentioned earlier. During the intermission immediately following the dance, all class members circulated amongst the audience, explaining the plight of the millions around the world who are still suffering from slavery. Based on suggestions made in 'Slavery in the 21st Century', we circulated the following petition to President Obama:

Dear Mr. President,

We are deeply concerned by the continuing enslavement of over 27 million people in the world today, and the failure of the world to end this horrible abuse. Even though slavery is illegal, it is still tolerated. All over our planet people are still forced to work for no pay. Many of these slaves are woman and children. Even within the United States, people are forced to work in fields or brothels.

We would be proud to have the United States inspire all nations to unite and fight against slavery. Please use your leadership to coordinate and strengthen our efforts to end slavery within our own borders, and all over the world.

Students in my classes in 2011 and 2012 also circulated this petition. In the course of the three years we sent pages and pages of signatures to the White House. While I am under no illusion that we were the pivotal factor leading to President Obama's Presidential Proclamation in December 2013, I know that my students could be proud of their participation when they read the president's words, as he proclaimed January 2014 National Slavery and Human Trafficking Prevention Month:

My administration is cracking down on traffickers, charging a record number of perpetrators. We are deploying new technology in the fight against human trafficking, developing the Federal Government's first-ever strategic action plan to strengthen victim services, and strengthening protections against human trafficking in Federal contracts

As we work to dismantle trafficking networks and help survivors rebuild their lives, we must also address the underlying forces that push so many into bondage. We must develop economies that create legitimate jobs, build a global sense of justice that says no child should ever be exploited, and empower our daughters and sons with the same chances to pursue their dreams. This month, I call on every nation, every community, and every individual to fight human trafficking wherever it exists. Let us declare as one that slavery has no place in our world, and let us finally restore to all people the most basic rights of freedom, dignity, and justice (Obama, 2013).

As I taught this course over several years, I expanded the focus on activism. I brought in a guest speaker from a local activist group called The Collective Advocates for Social Change and Development, Inc.⁴ Founding Executive

Director Asha Tarry and her group were focusing on fighting domestic human trafficking. Ms. Tarry shared insights about using our purchasing power to effect change. She introduced my students to *International Sanctuary*, an anti-slavery activist organization based in California, which supports survivors of trafficking by employing them and by selling their handmade products. (More information is available on their website, getinvolved@sanctuary.org.) I followed this with a short homework assignment on the Fair Trade Movement, so that students would be more alert to buying products from workers who have been fairly compensated (www.fairtradeusa.org).

My most recent class (Spring 2014) went beyond the campus in their outreach efforts, including their families and communities. They distributed more extensive materials than in any previous semester, with handouts that described the problem, encouraging active involvement in the solution. We used web-based resources provided by the Polaris Project, an organization that works with government leaders and corporations to intervene in Human Trafficking, and provides services for victims (www.polarisproject.org). As they suggested, we asked people to sign petitions in support of pending legislation to tighten oversight and increase penalties against human trafficking. We distributed guidelines for recognizing the warning signs of modern slavery, including information on the National Human Trafficking Resource Center (NHTRC). NHTRC has a national toll free hotline offering support for victims of trafficking. It is available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, answering calls from anywhere in the country.⁵

As I prepared students for their final project during the spring 2014 semester, the terrifying abduction of 273 schoolgirls occurred in Nigeria. The militant group Boko Haram bragged of selling these girls into forced marriages to militants for \$12 per girl (Terrance McCoy, 2014). This vivid and horrible example of modern slavery resonated deeply with my students, several of whom came from African nations. We added information to our handouts explaining how to participate in the international outcry, and we shared hashtag #BringBackOurGirls. Tragically, at the time of writing, most of these girls are still missing.

Although this final project evolved in a different direction from a more traditional dance history assignment, it falls squarely within the goals of the General Education movement on college campuses today. At Bronx Community College, the general education objectives state that graduates from BCC 'will be well informed, globally aware, and engaged world citizens making a meaningful contribution to society' (General Education Objectives, 2010). I am further convinced that the students found this project to be valuable and empowering. Consider their words:

Valene Samuels: Though disturbing to think of, slavery is still in effect. Being an extremely lucrative industry, sex trafficking may seem like a tough industry to disintegrate. But, with a population of 7.046 billion people in the world today, there is no adequate reason why we cannot fight against this repulsive crime. Every effort to fight for a cause always starts with you. My fellow classmates and I are working on fighting against modern slavery by spreading word of what is taking place right before our eyes. I feel as though I have spread major awareness to my peers So

sign petitions, spread awareness, educate others, and maybe we can all put a stop to sex trafficking and modern slavery.

Yvonne Thomas: Researching and writing this paper really enlightened me to the ongoing abuse in the world today. It made me understand that freedom is not to be taken for granted, and to keep my ears and eyes open to help the voices that need to be heard, and the abused that need to be seen.

Dominique Holloman: This research helped me open my very own eyes to a serious matter like trafficking and commercial sexual exploitation of children I now want to do something about it, and will find a local organization to join to bring awareness to the world about these serious problems.

The challenge

Recently, I have read some scholarly discussion objecting to the use of the term 'modern slavery' to describe current exploitative conditions of forced labor. In an article called 'The anti-blackness of modern day slavery abolitionism', Professor Tyron Woods (2014) accuses this movement of belittling the racial and power dynamics that were central to the African slave trade. He further asserts that the current abolition movement is insensitive to the ongoing struggle of the Afro-American community.

I do not claim perfect 'political correctness.' It is incontestable that African-Americans are still faced with horrifying injustices directly traceable to the role of slavery in American history, as well as current deeply held prejudice and entrenched ignorance. Perhaps 'modern slavery' is not the best term we can use to fight back against coerced labor around the world today. Perhaps we should simply call it 'modern evil' when people are held against their will and are not compensated for their work. I am most concerned with the dangers of not fighting back.

It has been a privilege to teach this course, since in both the studio and lecture setting students can be actively engaged in their own learning. The very nature of African and Afro-Caribbean dance, so often performed in a circle with spontaneous solos and small group improvisations, invites students to bring their own interpretations to the movement. The exhilaration this engenders is palpable. Likewise, critical thinking questions and social activism projects can help to bring similar personal investment to the lectures. There is an enticing opportunity here for both teachers and students to shape a classroom experience that is personally engaging and filled with meaning. I welcome further suggestions for other paths of inquiry and social action projects connected to teaching Afro-Caribbean dance and other areas of dance pedagogy.

Linking this class to the fight against modern slavery has been deeply meaningful to me and to students at Bronx Community College. In that spirit, in addition to the organizations already mentioned, I recommend the following web-based resources, and encourage further teaching on this desperately important subject.⁶

Useful web-based resources:

www.againstourwill.org—This mtvU website is aimed at educating and encouraging college students to take action against slavery and violence against women. It has a particularly interesting section called ‘how to talk about it’ that offers suggested responses to conversations that are disrespectful towards women.

www.antislavery.org—Anti-Slavery International (ASI) was founded in England in 1839 and continues to work to combat slavery around the world through raising awareness, supporting victims, and lobbying.

www.castla.org—The Coalition to Abolish Slavery and Trafficking (CAST) provides direct support services to survivors of slavery providing social services, legal services, and advocacy training.

www.crin.org—Child’s Rights Information Network (CRIN) is a global network of children’s rights organizations sharing information about child rights and developing networking tools.

www.freethechildren.org—Free the Children is a Canadian organization run by children dedicated to eliminating the exploitation of children around the world. It encourages youth to volunteer and to create programs to relieve the plight of underprivileged children.

www.globalmarch.org—The Global March fights child labor through raising awareness and coordinating the efforts of their partners around the world.

www.goodweave.org—GoodWeave works to combat child labor in the carpet industry and to promote educational opportunities for children in South Asia. GoodWeave’s founder, Kailash Satyarthi, was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in December 2014, sharing it with educational activist Malala Yousafzai.

www.hrw.org—HRW is dedicated to protecting human rights around the world. It investigates and exposes human rights violations and holds abusers accountable.

www.protectionproject.org—The Protection Project is a legal human rights research institute focusing on eliminating trafficking, especially of women and children.

<http://www.slaveryfootprint.org>—This site provides information on the products we use that are connected to coerced labor.

www.stopchildlabor.org—Child Labor Coalition (CLC) is a network of organizations around the United States that work to end child labor.

www.stopthetraffik.org—This website is run by is a global organization that works in partnership with the United Nations to stop trafficking. It has information on activist groups around the world.

<http://teachunicef.org/explore/topic/child-trafficking>—UNICEF provides resources, including lesson plans, for teachers to raise awareness and encourage students to take action against child trafficking.

1. During the summer of 2003, I had the opportunity to travel to Cuba to study dance, under the umbrella of an organization called 'Global Exchange'. Yoandy Marcos Fernandez Gonzalez was my teacher for Cuban folkloric dance at Teatro America in Havana. As a babalawo he was a trained priest in the Yoruba tradition of IFA, which is widespread in Cuba. This heritage forms the basis for much Cuban folkloric dance.
2. All students quoted in this article were in my class during the spring 2014 semester and gave permission for their work to be used.
3. Updated resources can be found at www.freetheslaves.net/take-action/students-ending-slavery
4. More information on The Collective Advocates for Social Change and Development, Inc. can be found on their website at www.TheCollectiveAdvocates.com
5. The number is 1-888-373-7888. Additionally, they can be texted at BeFree (233733). They help find shelters, take tips on those who may be in danger, and provide more information and volunteer opportunities.
6. All the websites mentioned in this article were active and retrieved as of January 10, 2015.

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This article has not been published, submitted, or accepted for publication elsewhere.

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Biography

Dr. Suzan Moss is a dancer/choreographer teaching in higher education for 26 years. Her exploration of Afro-Caribbean dance and music has included study in Senegal and in Cuba, and work with acknowledged leaders in the field including Rose Marie Guiraud, Emmet McDonald, Baba Chuck Davis, Baba Olatunji, Frank Malloy, and Nafisa Sharrieff. She currently teaches several styles of dance and movement at Bronx Community College and supervises the student dance performance workshop. Previously, she directed the dance program at Cleveland State University, served as 2nd Vice President of the American Dance Guild, and practiced dance therapy in numerous social service settings.