

JULIE B. JOHNSON, PhD

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RESEARCH STATEMENT

My work as a dance artist focuses on the intersections of creative practice, community interaction, and social justice.

As a dance artist/scholar/educator, I understand dance as a way of being, a method of inquiry, a means of creating new knowledge, and a mode cultural production. As such, I am committed to practice-led research, bridging theory and embodiment by centering creative practice. My research comprises a web of intersecting practices, including 1.) exploring experiences and meanings of 'community' in dance, particularly in West African dance in the United States; 2.) developing a contemporary dance practice through the lens of African diaspora movement aesthetics; and 3.) examining connections between sense perception, embodied memory, empathy, and social justice practice in dance. Through this research I find opportunities to connect to perspectives outside of my own - to connect subjective, intersubjective, and sociocultural knowledge.

1. EXPERIENCES AND MEANINGS OF 'COMMUNITY' IN WEST AFRICAN DANCE

'Community' is a multivalent concept, subject to a plurality of contexts and constructs that can alter and shift its meaning. As a dance artist, I have encountered myriad understandings and manifestations of 'community' through dance practice, and perceive an intrinsic relationship between dance and 'community.' West African dance practices in the United States are commonly grounded in a discernible (yet difficult to define) ethos of community. These spaces, then, provide a rich opportunity to excavate the dance-community relationship. My dissertation, "Dancing Down the Floor: Experiences and Meanings of 'Community' in a West African Dance Class in Philadelphia," examines participant experiences and interpretations of 'community.' Methodologically, this study is situated in sensory ethnography, philosophically oriented in community based participatory research, and draws from phenomenological strategies towards gathering lived experience data. I do not attempt to fix any universal definition of 'community,' instead I gather a collection of perspectives. Lived experiences of 'community' are placed in conversation with literature concerned with theories and constructions of 'community' from a range of disciplines, as well as texts that interrogate the historical, sociocultural and political contexts which frame 'West African' dance within the United States.

I continue this research with the book chapter "From Warm to *Dobale*: Community Meaning in a West African Dance Class" in the forthcoming anthology, *African Dance in America: Hot Feet, Perpetual Motion and Diasporan Aesthetics* edited by Esailama Diouf and Kariamou Welsh, as well as in studio practice with my continued participation in West African dance in the U.S.

2. CONTEMPORARY DANCE AND AFRICAN DIASPORA MOVEMENT AESTHETICS

I am affirmed by my multifaceted dance lineage — including technical training in classical ballet, modern dance (Graham, Horton, and Limón), and African Diaspora dance forms — and the ways they intersect and diverge in my work. Through contemporary dance practice, I identify, examine, and amplify Africanist aesthetics inscribed in my body through African Diaspora movement, including West African dance forms (specifically derived from Guinea, Senegambia, Mali, and Ivory Coast), social and concert jazz dance, and hip hop forms. I use the terms ‘African’ and ‘West African’ dance not to homogenize the vast array of practices that have emerged and continue to emerge from the continent, but to refer to a realm of diverse dance forms associated with particular ethnic groups, cultures, and regions throughout Africa and the African Diaspora. ‘Contemporary African’ dance refers to dance practices by artists who work to honor the traditions of African dance forms while challenging to push beyond perceived traditional choreographic boundaries and constructs.

I am informed by this work, as well as by scholarship centered on African Diaspora dance practices, Africanist presence and aesthetics in dance practice, and Black performance that promotes the intrinsic relationship between lived experience and scholarly inquiry, and upholds African Diaspora dance practice as a theoretical lens by which to view and understand the world. I contribute to this discourse with my written scholarship on West African dance practice, as well as my studio practice (movement technique and choreographic process) which I term “Contemporary Dance and Diaspora.” It is grounded in contemporary modern and jazz dance, and amplifies movement impulses that I connect to African Diaspora movement practices. This may entail drawing inspiration from signature steps of particular West African dances, translating movement into hip hop-oriented body rhythms, and/or emphasizing elements such as polyrhythm, polycentrism, and grounded/pitched torso stance. Or it may entail making space for participants to connect movement to their own embodiment and/or vernacular movement experiences.

3. SENSE PERCEPTION, EMBODIED MEMORY, EMPATHY, AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

Sense perception is our first point of interaction with the world - what we see, hear, taste, touch, smell, and how we move all inform our subjective realities, and our intersubjective interaction with one another. One’s embodied movement experiences serve as a means to continuously reflect on, create, and/or re-imagine the meanings we associate with how our bodies operate in the world. I cannot truly know the experiences of others, but when I, for example, talk to fellow participants about a moment in which we danced together, we can find intersections and departures in our perspectives of that moment. We can recall how the movement began, where it took us, how it felt in our bodies, what challenges we had to solve to execute it and what questions it provoked - what we created together, and what we learned. These experiences open up opportunities to find connections; embodied participation makes possible the ability to ask questions and generate dialogue based on having danced this dance. Embodiment provides empathic opportunities - moments to share, relate, understand - in ways that disembodied participation cannot.

This understanding provides the framework for my work as Co-founding Editor for *The Dancer-Citizen*, an online, open-access, scholarly dance journal exploring the work of the socially engaged artists; and my independent project, *Moving Our Stories*, a series of movement-based multimodal workshops, community dialogues, and written scholarship exploring connections between personal and cultural narratives, individual and collective embodiment, and social justice practice.