

DANCING IN BLACKNESS

A Memoir



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Dancing in New York

We seek balance! We are not of this insanity;
it's the cultural expression that allows us
to manifest ourselves as a different people.

BERNICE JOHNSON REAGON,
FOUNDER OF SWEET HONEY IN THE ROCK

After almost three years in Europe, I was ready to take on the United States again with all of what Bernice Reagon calls its “insanity.” American complexity is based on contradictions, ironies, cultural juxtapositions, the profit motive often as first consideration, and, most importantly, its black culture at the center of its national identity. This latter characteristic is taken for granted while being its saving grace. In Europe I was able to experience my individuality, as well as my blackness, in a way that only being outside of the peculiar U.S. “insanity” affords. But I was more than ready to jump back into my culture with a fierceness that I had never known. I was ready to teach, organize, and choreograph to tell my vision of the American insanity through dance. I wrote in my journal:

Being back in the States, I am viewing the complexity of this society from a more mature head; more understanding, or at least a new willingness and openness to bite into this thing called life in the United States, much more than before my flight away from the madness. This country forces one to examine and “dig” oneself because of all the chaos and contradictions of a frustrated and continually exploring so-called melting pot society.

But before I was willing to take on New York, the center of the dance world, I went to Boston.

Boston held not only the first test case for my new dance professionalism and reentry into black culture, but personally it held my first major love. I had met Donna Maynard on Ibiza, and as two of only a handful of black women on the island in 1968, we immediately tuned into each other, and, as the lingo goes today, “we hooked up.” I had had a few affairs with women during my S.F. State undergraduate years, but I considered those relationships as part of the hippie “free-love” exploration of the times; I was definitely into men. So this “thing” with Donna definitely took me by surprise, as it got deeper, moving me into uncharted territory since I had convinced myself that I could never go with a woman. We had traveled through Spain together and left each other in Paris when she came back to the United States. Because our feelings for one another were definitely not abating with distance, she returned to Europe to visit me for a month in Denmark when I lived in Vedbæk. Of course, my distant relationship with her was happening in between affairs with men in Scandinavia, but nothing was as serious as what Donna and I had. Therefore, coming back to the States to live with her in her hometown of Boston, I had to finally admit that I was definitely bisexual.

Getting to Know Boston before New York

Boston, as the largest city in New England and the capital of Massachusetts, is etched in the American historical memory with its seventeenth-century European Puritan beginnings as the center of one of the earliest colonies, as well as its eighteenth-century prominence in the American Revolution. Coming from the West Coast, I had a stereotypic image of Boston as the center of proper New England Puritan culture, where people said, “cah” for “car” and “cahn’t” instead of “can’t.” But in reality, particularly in the early 1970s, it was a predominantly Irish Catholic and very segregated city of about a half million people. In Boston, I was definitely back in racist America with its blatant intentions to continue Jim Crow segregation even in the early 1970s. I remember having to threaten a downtown Boston hotel with a NAACP lawsuit because it conveniently had no rooms on the arrival of my younger sister, Brenda, who came to visit me; the hotel had taken my legitimate reservation by phone a week earlier. Needless to say, she and her friend got the room.

I lived with Donna in the South End on West Springfield Street, still one of the poorest areas of the city, even with gentrification. We lived on the third floor of a three-story brownstone walk-up. The population of the South End has always been diverse, with the Irish, Lebanese, Jews, African Americans, and Greeks. I remember our neighborhood as a diverse group of poor and lower-middle-class folks, bordering the predominantly black Roxbury District, where the Elma Lewis School of Fine Arts taught dance to young black children, and where I would occasionally teach dance.¹

Donna was a black woman two years older than I, who was trying to find her life's purpose. She was a good organizational administrator and had entered into a business relationship with an arts impresario, Henry Atlas, and together they had formed the Institute for Contemporary Dance (ICD). This was a non-profit organization established to provide more professional diverse dance styles and teachers to the Boston area. Henry and Donna entered into an arrangement with nearby Harvard University, across the Charles River in Cambridge, to use campus facilities to hold their weekly dance classes. Henry was a graduate student at Harvard and had registered ICD as a student organization. Hence, I had a new dance platform, with dance classes held in the center of East Coast academia. I was able to begin teaching, making money, and training local dancers in my style of modern jazz dance, which always had an Afro-Haitian and Dunham focus from my early training with Ruth Beckford, and reinforced by Vanoye Aikens in Stockholm.

Teaching for ICD was my inroad into both Boston's dance and black communities. ICD and I were both new to Boston, and I helped establish its community profile for quality dance classes. Since ICD was a graduate student organization, Harvard loaned the group its gymnasium, not dance studios, so my instruction spaces were huge, hardwood sprung-floor venues without mirrors. Almost immediately the dance community responded by filling my dance classes in large numbers. Young, eager black and white dance students supported ICD because of their thirst for "modern" dance that was still developing, the style of which depended on who was teaching it. Coming out of my early training in the San Francisco Bay Area, my dance style was modern-based with a strong influence of Dunham and Afro-Caribbean dance, with live drumming as opposed to taped piano music. Young black people, exploring their newfound blackness on the heels of the Black Power and Black Arts movements, flocked to my classes.

Ever-shifting labels for the evolving black dance styles by Boston's African American teachers were abundant. Dance instructor Bill Mackey, a former New York dancer with Eleo Pomare and Rod Rodgers, taught "Afro-American Dance," while Danny Sloane, a teacher on loan from the Elma Lewis School of Fine Arts, taught "Jazz Dance." Gus Solomons Jr., formerly with Merce Cunningham and now directing his own company, came from New York to occasionally teach his modern dance styles for ICD. Consuelo Atlas, a solo dancer with the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater who occasionally came back to Boston, taught Horton modern dance, and the white teachers Becky Arnold, Martha Gray, and Beth Soll taught various forms of modern dance. At this point, I dropped the "Primitive Jazz Dance" title of my class and began teaching more delineated dance styles; for ICD I taught "Modern Jazz," "African," and "Haitian Folkloric."

The 190-mile distance between New York and Boston created a dance corridor for recognized dance artists to come to teach dance in New England. Although New York had studios with a diversity of dance styles under one aegis, such as the Clark Center and the New Dance Group, where I studied with Jean-León Destiné (chapter 1), the dance scenes in other eastern seaboard cities, like Boston, were not as progressive. It was a time when African American styles of modern dance were being positioned within the accepted forms of concert dance for the first time, and ICD was on that cutting edge in Boston.

The black press supported ICD's efforts to particularly augment the black dance classes in the Greater Boston area. The *Bay State Banner*, a daily newspaper serving the African American community, published a September 1971 story in the entertainment section called "New Dance Classes Offered." ICD's roster of black teachers and dance styles were emphasized, targeting me as one of the local anchor teachers who had recently returned from Europe. My European sojourn was becoming a marketing asset for me, but the creative black dance styles that I and other black dance instructors taught were augmenting a new cultural awareness in black communities nationwide. The article ended with, "Because these dance forms are a part of our culture as black people, classes will be designed to bring out cultural awareness and togetherness through emphasis on group dance, as well as individual awareness of one's creative self-expression through movement."² The black press "got it" and supported the collective efforts of the black dance teachers of ICD.