

WHAT PEOPLE ARE SAYING

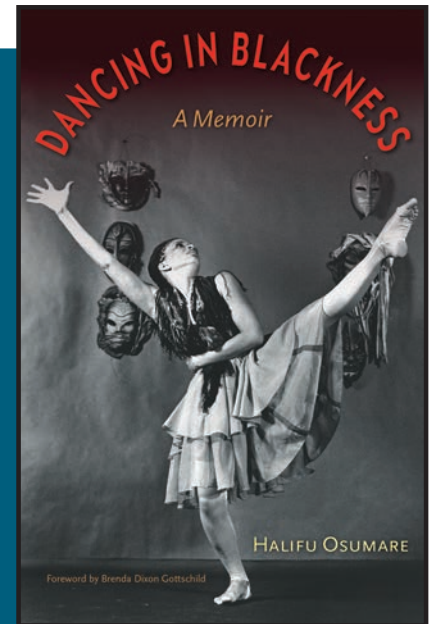
“ Finally someone who knows a dancer’s process and a choreographer’s vision that has tackled the mystery that is the magic of contemporary African American dance. In *Dancing in Blackness*, Halifu Osumare has extricated the fundamental influence of Dunham, the choreographic strategies of Rod Rodgers, Eleo Pomare, Chuck Davis, Donald McKayle, and Alvin Ailey, as well as illuminating the paths they created for Jawole Willa Jo Zollar, Bill T. Jones, Garth Fagan, and Diane McIntyre. What a wealth of treasure and scholarly and aesthetic understanding Osumare brings to this often misunderstood and woefully neglected American art. Bravo!”

—Ntozake Shange, author of *for colored girls who have considered suicide / when the rainbow is enuf*

“*Dancing in Blackness* belongs on every dancer’s and artist’s shelf. It is a wonderful personal telling of the black experience in dance, in art, in life, and of the dance world in Boston, New York, and the whole Bay Area. It is beautifully written—an engaging and fact-filled narrative where you meet the choreographers of the period, their work and visions, trials, successes, and triumphs.”

—Donald McKayle, choreographer of *Rainbow Round My Shoulder*

“Halifu Osumare is a relevant voice from the Black Arts Movement of the ‘60s and ‘70s. She has danced the talk, music, and history of that period



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and beyond. This is a must read for insight into a black artist's personal and professional journey."

—Kariamuwelsh, editor of *African Dance: An Artistic, Historical and Philosophical Inquiry*

"Coming of age amid the counterculture and Black Power in San Francisco, Osumare becomes a professional dancer in Europe and New York before returning home to realize her mission as an artist, activist, and thinker. Her memoir reveals an astonishing ability to evoke and to historicize her lived experience."

—Susan Manning, author of *Modern Dance, Negro Dance: Race in Motion*

"An unapologetic, rapturous travelogue detailing life, love, and an abiding mission to further the place of black dance in global histories."

—Tomas F. DeFrantz, author of *Dancing Revelations: Alvin Ailey's Embodiment of African American Culture*

"Osumare affirms the spiritual and tangible power for dance to teach, energize, heal, and inspire all peoples on this human journey."

—Joselli Audain Deans, consultant, *Black Ballerina*

DANCING IN BLACKNESS

A Memoir
HALIFU OSUMARE

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Credit: Elton King

HALIFU OSUMARE

is retired from the University of California, Davis, as professor and former director of African American and African Studies. She has been a dancer, choreographer, arts administrator, and scholar of dance and black popular culture for over thirty-five years. She is author of *The Africanist Aesthetic in Global Hip-Hop: Power Moves* and *The Hiplife in Ghana: West African Indigenization of Hip-Hop*.

Halifu Osumare

is available for interviews and appearances



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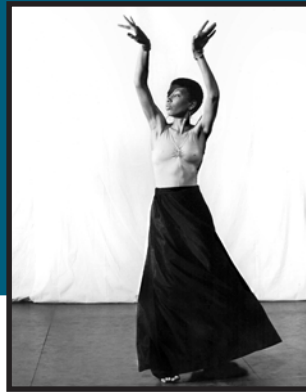
Q&A

with

HALIFU OSUMARE

author of

Dancing in Blackness



Why did you decide to write your memoir?

I know I have a unique life story, because as a woman I have danced and lived on three continents, many different countries, and throughout the U.S. I've also been on every side of dance that exists: performer, choreographer, administrator, producer, community activist, and scholar. I think people will enjoy, and maybe even be inspired by, my story.

How did you decide on the scope of time your memoir encompasses?

They say necessity is the mother of invention. I first wrote nine chapters, which brought the reader up to the current day. But it was far too long, and I realized that I actually had TWO books. Practicality made me conclude *Dancing in Blackness* at the beginning of 1994, just as I was moving to Hawai'i. Now I have the beginnings of a sequel.

Throughout your dancing career, who were your biggest influences and inspirations?

Without a doubt my greatest influence is one of the major doyens of dance,

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Katherine Dunham. I was blessed to meet her in the late '80s, after studying her technique since my teens. Her artistry, social consciousness, and fearlessness as a black woman dancer reinforced those qualities in me. We became close as I studied with her and her former company members, culminating in my producing two major Dunham residencies: 1989 Stanford University and 1994 Hawaiian Islands. Of course, others like poet-playwright Ntozake Shange and choreographer Rod Rodgers also had great influences on my multi-layered approach to dance.

What did it feel like going to Ghana? How was dancing there different than in the United States and Europe?

Early on in my career I chose to focus on using dance to tell the story of my ancestors. Therefore going to Africa, and Ghana in particular, for the first time was an epiphany regarding the source of my personal dance choices. Chapter 3: "Dancing in Africa" represents my *liberation* as an African American. Choreographing and performing yet another version of my "Evolution of Black Dance" at the University of Ghana, Legon in 1976 was a milestone in my career. I could not have gotten that kind of personal and career empowerment anywhere else but Mother Africa.

You reveal that your friend, poet Ntozake Shange, gave you the name Halifu Osumare. What did it feel like to accept and take up that name?

It meant that my destiny had caught up with me, and that my new name revealed my life's path. Since "Halifu" means to rebel against, my ability to define myself and **reject** the dominant narrative that negated my blackness as something positive was permanently established. My steadfast self-definition allowed me to develop my career in my own unique way. "Osumare," the Yoruba deity of the Rainbow, reveals my many colors and shades, which has allowed me to be at home anywhere in the world, and accept everyone for who s/he is. Africans believe that one's name is one's destiny.

How did you make the transition from dancer to professor? What made you want to teach?

I have always wanted to understand the history and culture behind the dances and movement styles I studied and choreographed about. I always took the time to do research and to read about dance, particularly in relation to Af-

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fricanist cultures. So, when thinking about developing a second career after my performing years, becoming a scholar and academic was an easy transition. However, that didn't preclude a lot of hard work (which I was already using in my dance training and dance administration), as well as the development of new analytical and theoretical skills.

You became the owner of Every Body's Dance Studio in Oakland in 1977, which featured Congolese dance, Ghanaian drumming, and Afro-Haitian dance. How were you able to create such a unique dance scene in the Bay Area during a time that was focused predominantly on white modern dancing?

Besides being my home, the Bay Area has a vision of itself as encompassing cultural diversity and social inclusion (whether or not that is true). The home of hippiedom, higher education free speech, ethnic studies, the Black Panthers, Gay Rights, and many other progressive initiatives was a natural region to reinforce a multicultural dance center. Every Body's Dance Studio was already in existence when I bought it and turned it into Everybody's Creative Arts Center in Oakland; so, I reinforced the Africanist focus in an already existing multicultural dance studio in the progressive Bay Area.

What changes have you noticed in the dance community regarding race and discrimination between when you first started dancing professionally in the '60s and now?

There definitely have been significant changes; but just as in the country as a whole, the more things change, the more they stay the same. Although the U.S. has changed significantly with the Civil Rights and Voting Rights Acts, we still have considerable racism and attempted discrimination in the country. The same exists in dance, where the ballet, symphony, and opera companies receive the bulk of the funding, and are still valued as the pentacle of high art. However, arts organizations representing communities of color are today getting more tax-based funding than when I first started dancing, because of some hard fought arts battles in which I participated in the '80s at the state and national (NEA) levels. We must always remain vigilant against inequalities in the arts. This is the one sector where we can potentially change hearts.

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What are you working on next?

I am planning the sequel to *Dancing in Blackness*. As I mentioned, I have the first three chapters from my original draft that will begin my sequel. My story in the follow-up memoir starts in Hawai'i, where I lived and danced for seven years while earning my doctorate in American Studies from the University of Hawai'i. The central theme of that book will be the transition from being an artist to a scholar, and how I see both as a form of "dancing." The task will be putting my second career and the latter part of my life into the increasingly 21st century complexity of contemporary issues of race and the arts.

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3



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.

Early 1970s Dance Classes and the New Black Consciousness

Dance classes accompanied by conga drumming became a primary tool for inculcating and developing black awareness. The drums played for certain African-derived movements awakened cultural memory in black communities in the United States. The *Bay State Banner's* emphasis on “cultural awareness and togetherness through emphasis on group dance” highlighted the collective approach of several black dance classes in Boston, particularly during the ending of classes, where community dance circles were encouraged, where individuals took turns in the center, creating a traditional African dance circle. Privileging *community* creativity over individual competitive skills was a *new* cultural method introduced in the late 1960s into professional black dance training. It was prompted by the late 1960s Black Arts movement initiating a creative new black consciousness that swept across black communities in the 1970s. This “new” focus on the communal learning experience, advanced in the black dance movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s, provided a particular *group* dynamic through dance.

Simultaneously, there was also a kinesthetic collective experience prompted by improvisational modern dance during the same period, such as the work of Anna Halprin in San Francisco and Steve Paxton in New York. Dance theorist Susan Leigh Foster engages the term “kinesthesia,” which she says psychologists envisioned as “a perceptual system that synthesized information about joint positioning, muscular exertion, and orientation within space and with respect to gravity.” She also notes that neurobiologists more recently have utilized the concept of kinesthesia to “explore how the brain senses bodily movement.” Importantly to my dance explorations, she also rightfully asserts that dance pedagogy has “consistently cultivated understanding of the existence and importance of kinesthetic awareness.”³

It is the kinesthetic experience embedded in *various* forms of dance that triggers individual and group resonances with particular movements and also links them to cultural memory and awareness. This is what I experienced in the Bay Area during my transition from (white) modern dance to (black) modern dance accompanied by drumming: an “inner ear” opened, allowing me to *hear* the drum and feel my body responding in a way that I had not physically and psychically experienced before. Yet this embodied experience was something I already *knew* within my own spirit and

only had to be awakened *mentally*; in the 1970s we only intuited this inner awareness that African-derived dance invoked. It would be thirty years before black dance *scholarship* would evolve to the point of researched conceptual links between the body, mind, and spirit. Yvonne Daniel, for example, has revealed that, “Embodied Knowledge—that is, knowledge found within the body, within the dance and drumming body—is rich and viable and should be referenced among other kinds of knowledge.”⁴ However, much fieldwork, research, and collaborative experiences by African and diasporan artists within their dance/drumming traditions would have to happen before we would have a researched knowledge base about what we were experiencing in those early days. But eventually an embodied understanding of the links between Africa, the Caribbean, and the United States would emerge and become common wisdom.

What I am exploring is not *essentializing* black dancers in the least. The black dance artists teaching classes for IDC in Boston taught a wide variety of classes that cannot be stereotyped only as “black dance.” Gus Solomons Jr., for example, taught Cunningham Technique with little or no emotion; Cunningham dance is about motion itself rather than movement narratives with emotional meaning. Solomons assembled his dance phrases in a very linear architectural mode, as Solomons had been trained at MIT as an architect before moving to New York. Consuelo Atlas taught the Ailey style of Lester Horton Technique, a dance technique inspired by groundedness in Native American dance, which Ailey had learned as a member of Horton’s Los Angeles company in the early 1950s. The technique remains the technical base of the Ailey Company until this day. As we were discovering our African dance roots and defining a new stage dance by U.S. black dance artists, we allowed all honest creative expression. We never limited what a black dance artist could and should do; everyone was free to create *within* and *without* black cultural traditions. Essentialism is confining and limiting; we were about broadening our embodied knowledge, moving past what I call the “slave mentality” that rendered Africa and its dances as primitive, while exploring the body and motion in all forms.

Foster highlights the late dance theorist Randy Martin’s (1957–2015) concept of a social kinesthetic that encompasses the cultural *zeitgeist* among black artists, and dancer-choreographers in particular, in the 1970s. She concludes that “Randy Martin posits the existence of a social kinesthetic, a set of movement attributes or traits that make evident the deeper affinities between movement and culture.”⁵ Indeed, the idea of a kinesthe-

sia that evolves from a social group dynamic was exactly what was happening among black dance artists and their students, as well as within dance companies directed by black choreographers in the 1970s.

Kinesthesia refers to the “sensation” of movement. The African-derived dances that we were exploring in classes and in performance were based on impressions in our cultural memory as a diasporic people. Even if we did not have a repertoire of African dances, such as mandiani, kuku, lamba, dundunba, and the sabar cycle that has become commonplace in the twenty-first century, we had the collective phenomenon of exploring a communal memory that we had been taught to *hate*, even though that kinesthetic memory had remained in our social dances throughout the centuries. In the 1970s, black dancers were beginning to decolonize not only our minds but also our bodies. Foster reveals Martin’s understanding of this trend contained in African diaspora cultural forms: “Martin emphasizes the politics implicit in a given kinesthesia. He posits a connection between a decolonized worldview and a preference for decentered movement, and points to the range of contemporary practices including capoeira, contact improvisation and hip-hop that celebrate an off-balance and risk-oriented investigation of the body’s capacities for movement.”⁶

Indeed, my cultural exploration through dance and drumming was celebrating “off-balance” risk-taking and was, both kinesthetically and socio-politically, bringing me in balance with myself. We were embodying risk through democratizing the body in my classes, and putting the center of different movements into different zones—shoulders, hips, head, and feet—rather than an autocratic center only in an uplifted center core in the solar plexus. Looking back at my community-based dance classes, I realize this decentering process implicit in African-derived movements helped open some to a decolonized worldview. In the process we began to shed the socialized politics of black middle-class respectability and engaged African-centered approaches to the body and our community. This collective exploration among artistic black communities in the early 1970s was diverse, but it simultaneously expressed common cultural preferences that shifted what it meant to be “black,” allowing us to end the twentieth century in a much better, self-empowered place than when we entered it.