

VDC Interview Transcript

Subject: Denison University Dance

Informant: Ojeya C. Banks, recently hired faculty member

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Michael D. Eisner Center for the Performing Arts

240 West Broadway

Granville, Ohio 43023

Key:

CF: Candace Feck

OCB: Ojeya Cruz Banks

JC: Jessica Cavender (VDC film team)

MDB: Megan Davis Bushway (VDC film team)

JD: Jane D'Angelo: (Ohio Dance Director)

CF: I'm Candace Feck, and I'm talking to Ojeya Cruz Banks. Today is October 14th and we're at Denison University. Well, having read a bit about you in preparation for our conversation, I'm interested in how you found your way here following studies in Arizona and New Zealand and a great many other places, it appears. Yes, that's a question and perhaps this as a tag to it, that you are now Denison's newest faculty hire in Dance. Maybe you and Molly are sharing that, distinction. I don't know.

OCB: Yes.

CF: Yes? But she's been around...

OCB: Yeah, that's true.

CF: How would you describe the dance and cultural landscape of the university and department coming in from outside? So that's two questions: how did you find your way here and then how does the dance landscape seem to you coming in?

OCB: Well I think one of the bird's eye view perspectives on how I made it to Denison University is that there is a paradigm shift that's going on in the university dance world. There's an interest, I think, today more than ever, on different cultural trajectories of what dance is and how dance gets produced and how creative processes work from different cultural locations. When I was looking for a job, because I knew that it was time to leave New Zealand, there were lots of positions that were open in my wheelhouse and they were looking specifically for folks who had specializations in African diasporic dance and other indigenous perspectives. So I applied for the position and to be honest, I didn't think coming all the way from Aotearoa, New Zealand, that Ohio would be my next stop. But I did feel this real sense of comfort and sort of a *fit* for me in this space.

I really enjoyed the colleagues that I was meeting in dance but also in black studies and anthropology and yeah, they chose me and I chose them and the rest will be history. But I think that in terms of the cultural landscape of dance at Denison, I think that there is so much creative potentiality that's happening at the moment, especially with the opening of the new art center and this opportunity to

rub elbows with our colleagues in theater and music. — but I think also to create this performing arts space that not only teaches dance or music or theater as art, but also looks at the arts as a window into the humanities as well as the sciences. So I would say that coming in as a new professor of dance, and particularly leading the way for bringing African diasporic dance content to the curriculum, I feel like there's a lot of support and interest and recognition of the need for these alternative viewpoints of dance that students ... they need to see that dance is an art, but they also need to see the way in which dance is part of how we express our humanity and how we become better people and learn how to partake in community and get an insight into our history as a nation, but also to think globally in terms of dance.

CF: Yes! Fantastic. I was reading Gill [Miller's] nomination of Denison for this project and her description of the kind of paradigm shift that you're talking about here. I was thinking that really Denison has followed a dramatic trajectory from the Western trappings of so-called “aesthetic dancing” here as early as 1925, towards “world dance,” for lack of a better term at the moment — you may have a better one — in the 80s. I was talking to Molly [Shanahan] about Noel Hall's moment here because it seems like that was a turning point in some ways for the department towards the current focus — an absolutely clear focus on Africanist dance, or dances of the African diaspora. So in many ways you are the embodiment of that shift, it seems, and I wonder how it feels to hold that position and what you know about the changes in the department that led to your hire and to this decision. And I'll save my ... that's enough for the moment!

OCB: Okay. So one thing that I'll say is Denison University has been sort of cutting edge in its dance curriculum for quite some time. And I do feel like I've inherited quite a precious legacy in terms of kind of the politics or the political standpoint that Denison University's dance department made when they designed this African diasporic dance line. There weren't many other universities doing that. I came in after there was a really fantastic dancer/scholar, Stafford Berry,¹ who really, I think, illuminated the complexity of black dance in the curriculum and created amazing choreographies with the students. But he also thought about how this curriculum is relevant to the Black Student Union at Denison — or the Multicultural Student Center.² So he did a really good job of figuring out how to create those collaborations between dance and the broader Denison community.

That has been a really powerful sort of inspiration to follow and I'm thinking about, "Okay, how do I maintain that sort of precedent that he has set?" And I feel like because my particular position has a very strong affiliation with black studies — so that all of my courses are cross-listed with black studies — and I'm a dancer/anthropologist, so I would also like to create that link with anthropology and sociology. But yeah, I'm thinking about ways in which we can better coalesce with our colleagues across the departments. Dance is such an interdisciplinary powerhouse. While on one hand it is a knowledge that stands on its own as an art, as a science, a study of humanities, it also melds well with the cinematic arts and using physical practice to introduce students to ideas such as,

¹ Stafford C. Berry Jr. is director of the African American Dance Company and a professor of practice in the Departments of African American and African Diaspora Studies and Theatre, Drama, and Contemporary Dance at Indiana University Bloomington. In addition to his tenure at Denison University, he toured 12 years with Chuck Davis' African American Dance Ensemble for which he was associate artistic director, and he was on faculty at the American Dance Festival. He is a certified teacher of the Umfundalai Technique and has taught, choreographed, and performed African-rooted dance nationally and internationally.

² Founded in 1969, the Black Student Union celebrated its 50th anniversary in 2019, the year of this interview.

well, what is African aesthetics? What are African approaches to performing arts such as improvisation or free-styling or musicality? You really get to *feel* what that means, not just read about those elements of African diasporic dance. But also the politics, like what it means to engage in the practice of hip hop, to engage in the practice of other African diasporic dances. Because this is almost ... I like to call it a re-establishing of cultural transmission that has been *interrupted* as a consequence of the Atlantic slave trade and the cultural oppression of black African culture in this country. So there's a political significance financially, culturally and in terms of this beautiful building that we are supporting dance and particularly African diasporic dance at Denison University.

CF: It is indeed an exciting time! I was looking at your published works and perhaps filmed works — I can't remember what all the list included — it was a lot. But this idea you have about decolonizing dance pedagogy is fascinating to me and I wonder if you could talk a minute about how you would like to go about that, or how you plan to go about that, or are *going* about that. Is that a fair question?

OCB: Yeah, yeah. Okay. So decolonizing dance pedagogies has been a passion of mine since I was in graduate school. I had really great mentors that introduced me to indigenous scholars such as Vine Deloria³ of North America, and Linda Tuhiwai Smith⁴ of New Zealand who looked at the importance of really reclaiming and reinvesting in indigenous thought in educational spaces. This is already going on in indigenous educational spaces, but there is this call for really creating platforms for this knowledge within formal educational spaces such as universities, and even public schools. I've been thinking a lot about how dance has been a practice of education since antiquity.

You look around the world, almost every dance culture from France to Ireland, to Mongolia, to India, all throughout Africa to the South Pacific, dance has been a vital piece of the transmission of historical knowledge, of language, of chants, of ecological understandings of the world. And through the process of colonialism, there has been an erasing of those systems of thought. But there's also been these... what I call critical postcolonial dance recovery communities — all over the world that are revitalizing their performing arts as a way to revitalize their languages, revitalize their chants, revitalize their bonds with the environment, revitalize their creative processes. So when I'm talking about decolonizing dance pedagogy, particularly at Denison University, on one hand, I'm sort of inheriting this beautiful legacy that Denison has already established by creating this African diasporic dance line. But I think that what I also bring to the table is my experience traveling all over the world, engaging in dance field work, training in cultural dance styles from the Pacific to East/West parts of Africa, from the United States to the Caribbean. And having this exposure to global perspectives of dance really stocks me with understandings that allow me to use [them] in the development of curriculum, in the development of my own pedagogies, in the creation of my own performing arts and my mentorship of student work.

³ Vine Victor Deloria Jr. (1933 – 2005): a Native American (Standing Rock Sioux) author, theologian, historian, and activist. Among many other accomplishments, he served as executive director of the National Congress of American Indians, and established the first master's degree program in American Indian Studies in the U.S. at University of Arizona.

⁴ Linda Tuhiwai Smith is Professor of Education and Māori Development, Pro-Vice Chancellor Māori, Dean of the School of Māori and Pacific Development and Director of Te Kotahi Research Institute at the University of Waikato in New Zealand and is Chairperson of NPM's International Research Advisory Board.

So it's really about thinking about those standpoints, indigenous standpoints, that oftentimes have been historically dismissed when it comes to dance education or dance artistry — really bringing them to the table with me so that I can help to revamp and revitalize dance in culturally innovative ways.

CF: It sounds so great. I'm curious if you feel like you could offer a very concrete example of something that you've done along those lines.

OCB: Yes. So I'll tell you an example of decolonizing dance pedagogy that I did in New Zealand — because I'm still fresh to Denison. And then I'll tell you one of the things that I've done here. The first one is when I got to New Zealand, I recognized at the University of Otago,⁵ there was almost no consideration of Māori⁶ indigenous curriculum in their dance program. Now, there's a complex sort of reason for this that I don't have time to go into, but I decided that my curriculum contribution would be to basically interrupt that cycle of no Pacific content. So what I did was I started engaging with Māori indigenous dancers and did a few sort of workshops with them, with their company, and learned about their definitions of dance. I learned about their creative processes and one of the performance events that I was invited to participate in was called the *whare tapere*, which literally means “the house of arts” or “the performing arts” in the indigenous language in New Zealand.

This was with an artist by the name of Louise Potiki Bryant⁷ who is of the Kāi Tahu tribe⁸ in New Zealand, as well as with Charles Royal⁹, who is an acclaimed indigenous scholar in New Zealand. They revitalized some of the stories that have kind of fallen to sleep in New Zealand around the performing arts and how Māori engaged in performing arts. So there were lots of activities and chants and warm-up exercises that I learned under the sort of leadership of Louise Potiki Bryant and Charles Royal that I was then able to bring into my classroom at the University of Otago. And that was really amazing, the opportunity to kind of utilize some of that fieldwork that I did and that collaboration with indigenous artists, and also know that I had permission to share that information with the students really helped me develop a curriculum that felt very culturally relevant to New Zealand.

In terms of an example of decolonizing the pedagogy here at Denison, I must say that there isn't as much work that needs to be done as there was in New Zealand, mainly because there was hardly anything Māori going on in the curriculum when I arrived. And so here, because there has been this

⁵ a university based in Dunedin, Otago, in the southeastern part of New Zealand

⁶ The Māori are indigenous Polynesian populations of New Zealand, where they have arrived in successive waves since the 8TH century, and currently make up about 15% of the New Zealand population.

⁷ Louise Potiki Bryant is a Ngāi Tahu choreographer, dancer, and video artist. With her practice Louise aims to honor her *whakapapa* (genealogy), *kaupapa Māori* (Māori principles and practices), *mana wahine* (the intrinsic spiritual power of women), and our relationship with *te taiao* (environment). She is a founding member of Atamira Dance Company.

⁸ the principal Māori tribe of the South Island of New Zealand., occupying the largest tribal area in New Zealand.

⁹ Dr Charles Te Ahukaramū Royal is a New Zealand Māori musician, academic and Māori-music revivalist whose research interest lies with the ‘creative potential’ of mātauranga Māori/indigenous knowledge. Of particular interest is the use of mātauranga Māori in music, the *whare tapere* (performing arts) and the *whare wānanga* (indigenous centers of higher learning).

African diasporic dance line, there's also been a history of bringing in artists who have diverse perspectives and practices of dance whom Denison has invited into their classrooms. That tells you right away that there's an awareness of the importance of that diversity and that it's valued in the curriculum already. So that was like, "Whew!" That was a big sort of evolution for me, to kind of step into a space that was already in motion in that way.

But I would say that decolonizing dance pedagogies is not just about the cultural content, but it's also about creating dance curriculum that is culturally relevant to the environment that you're in. So that could be in terms of the indigenous voice or the indigenous perspective or story of dance that is relevant to Granville, Ohio¹⁰, for example. So, I've just arrived and I feel like that is something that I need to equip my thinking and my practices with, and I'm definitely inspired to do that work.

But one of the projects that I'm working on right now is a performance that pays tribute to the story of the Black Student Union that formed at Denison University in 1969 and it's basically the story of the civil rights movement on this land, on the grounds of the university. It's a really powerful project that I'm undertaking because it's teaching me a lot about not only the history of Denison, but how the story of the civil rights movement unfolded on this university campus. And it's introducing me to alum of Denison University who really had paved the way in fighting for social justice, equality and for the wellbeing of black American students on this campus.

So that's one example that I feel like is so important to me as a professor getting my feet in this ground, but also telling a story with the students that introduces them to a lineage, to a genealogy that they belong to at this university.

CF: Amazing. We're sadly out of our allotted time, which is so unfortunate. But ...and it almost feels unfair to ask this, since you've just arrived and in a way you have already articulated it, but I wonder if you have anything to say about your vision for the future of the department. I mean it's already off and running, as you said. The seed work has taken place. Now that's a lot for you to carry. You're not carrying it alone, but what do you hope for, perhaps, ten years, twenty years down the line, if you dare to conjure a vision for that?

OCB: Yeah, I guess I want to be a part of a few visions that I'm already walking into, being a new professor at this university, and that is figuring out ways in which the dance department can permeate the Granville community around us to celebrate the diversity that the university brings in through its faculty, through its students. How can we send our cultural diversity out into the community in uplifting ways? And that might be through creating a dance program that the children of Granville can tap into...

And I guess the other thing is ... one of the strategic priorities at Denison at the moment is about how do we create a culture of wellness and wellbeing. I would like to really see dance be a part of that leadership team, because I do feel strongly that dance has the ability when it's taught well and when it's conceptualized well in the classroom for the students, it has a way of providing students with a *felt* sense of wellbeing through the way in which it can naturally create community, creative collaboration, but also unleash what I call "a spiritual capital" or a sort of creative spirit in our students that really teaches them about who they are. As well, the way in which we need creativity to

¹⁰ The specific location and community for Denison University, a village in Licking County, about 35 miles east of Columbus, OH.

strengthen our intellectual, our social and our political affirmations, but also to understand the way in which the arts are not just a form of entertainment. They're not just art for the sake of art, and they *never have been*. When you look around the world, dance has always been about being able to speak to the aspects of ourselves that we can't speak in the verbal world, but that so much bring to the fore the deepest aspects of our humanity. I think in this time when we are really faced with a lot of mental health issues, we need the arts more than ever to find our vitality, our humanity, our courage and our hope for moving forward.

CF: Yes! And I'm very disappointed to say that we're out of the time we've been given. Thank you so much. It's been inspiring to talk with you, and I don't think that we have met, but I hope we meet again.

OCB: Yeah. Yeah...

CF: Best wishes to you!

OCB: I wonder at maybe a conference or something...

CF: It's possible!

OCB: Your face looks so familiar. That's why you got me talking — because I'm like, "I *know* this soul, I know this soul..."

CF: I feel similarly, and I'm so excited that you're here.

OCB: Yay! Cool.

CF: I'll be following your work, in whatever way I can.