

VDC Interview Transcript
 Ann Cooper Albright
 11.14.16
 Total Time: 1:07:16

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Key:

CF: Candace Feck

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CF: Oberlin College has certainly been an important player in the development of dance in this country — contemporary dance, in particular. I thought we could begin by talking about the historical framework that Delphine Hanna set into motion here: what she did, what she accomplished, who she was.

ACA: I think partly because Oberlin, right from the beginning of the college in the 1830s, included women as well as students regardless of race — now, that sounds maybe a little more utopian than it actually played out to be sometimes, because I think right at the beginning, women were kind of on one side of the room, and various things like that — but eventually, there was a real commitment to a co-ed education, and so very early on they hired Delphine Hanna, who was the first woman Professor of Physical Education in the United States. So that set up this kind of — you know, there was a *Woman's Gym*; there was a *Men's Gym*, but a *Woman's Gym* as well. And very early on, because of H'Doubler in Wisconsin — the Midwest is a kind of very interesting player in the development of Modern Dance: I mean, Iowa, Illinois Urbana Champaign, Wisconsin and Oberlin — so she brought in, of course, not only gymnastics — right? Swedish gymnastics, so the women were doing parallel bars — back then, the women *did* parallel bars — but there also was this move for natural dancing — it was called “Natural Dancing.” And one year I was teaching here, because I teach a 20th century dance history course, and a student brought me this phenomenal scrapbook that she had found in the garbage at the new gym. Apparently, they wanted to redo the wrestling room, and there was a closet there and they just took all of this stuff... Who knows what got thrown away? But she said, “I thought you'd be interested in it.” And here you saw kind of early 20th century — the Muses, the Graces — there were pictures always around a little pond or something like that — and it was amazing, it was straight out of Early Modern Dance — straight out of Delsarte, straight out of a Duncan kind of thing: you know, the tunics, and the “natural dancing” classes! And then there were some classes that had kind of an “around the world” approach — “Scottish Dance,” and so on — pretty amazing stuff. So you find these remnants of history all over. I remember on the second floor of the History Department, there is a big, old photograph of these women, again straight out of the kind of Delsartian poses, that is just amazing. And the Archives here also have a lot of material like that. One of the images we found when we were doing the *Accelerated Motion* [project]¹ — there's a section on “Modern Motion/Accelerated Motion” that is a kind of local history, and encourages people to look for remnants of early dancing in their own towns. And there's a picture on Tappan

¹ *Accelerated Motion: Towards a New Dance Literacy in America* (2009 – present) is a collaboratively developed online project designed to deepen dance literacy in high school and undergraduate populations.

Square, where there is this big archway, and in fact when I teach 20th Century, I make my students go out there and, you know, do the “Duncan thing” out there. There are pictures of them with scarves and the whole bit. It’s kind of amazing. So situating that early, early on in the history of Oberlin dance: very, very interesting — and kind of exciting because it’s one of those moments of primary source archives that include the *place*. I remember this from when I went to Bryn Mawr College, which was an all women’s college, definitely one with the history of movement and dancing and Physical Education, and when I went there, Dance was still part of Physical Education; it didn’t move on its own until the ‘80s. This is how dance early on in the early 20th century became very incorporated with Physical Education in a lot of Liberal Arts colleges.

Of course, when you look at that material now, it’s really important to recognize that there’s a history of whiteness embedded there, and that very often it’s white middle class women who are doing this kind of movement. And that history remained, I think, in place for a long time, and then as a radical and integrated college in the ‘60s, Oberlin College started to have much more of a push toward Black Nationalism and the Black Arts Movement. And there’s still actually in Africana Studies a course called Black Arts Workshop that is taught, and that’s a course that really reaches back to the ‘60s, and I think there are some images in the archives of African Americans dancing. I think there was at a certain moment in the ‘60s that sense of recognition that “We want an African Studies Department; we’re going to really focus on African American drama and dance and music” — right? — because that’s when the Jazz Studies program really started to have its own momentum — and there was a kind of segregation of arts disciplines. And Margaret Christian, who was here as a student during the ‘60s, taught a number of ExCo classes. Oberlin College — I’m not exactly sure when it happened, but certainly by the ‘60s — Oberlin College had created what are called ExCo courses, Experimental College Courses, and they are courses that are taught by students, for students. And they’re courses that still happen now — with huge, actually, *huge* enrollments — there are classes on Harry Potter or classes on cartoons or classes on gaming. But some of the classes — for instance, a Woman’s Health course that has been part of the ExCo curriculum for a very long time, or the program that I run, *Girls in Motion*, has recently been part of an ExCo curriculum. So Margaret Christian taught jazz dance as well as Caribbean dance, and an African American modern dance course. And there are a lot of images in the yearbook of the Black Arts Workshop or the Black Dancers.

Interestingly, in the 70s, as Civil Rights moved into the Anti-War [movement], and Oberlin — with being close to Kent State, there are many, many images of the anti-war demonstrations and Oberlin was very active in that. At the time, in the ‘70s, Oberlin had a president, Robert Fuller, who was a pretty radical president, the youngest president of any college in America, who really allowed things to get shaken-up: a little bit utopian, he didn’t last very long. One of the famous stories about him is that he decided that what we needed was just tons of bicycles around, and then you would just go out and grab a bicycle and ride it to wherever you were going and leave it there, and the next person would come out and — you know, kind of a precursor to the City Bikes, only no credit cards needed? Well, that lasted, I guess, maybe about six weeks until people started to realize there were all these unlocked bikes around and, you know, pick-up trucks started to come in and just haul them away! But that was kind of the utopian impulse at the moment in the ‘70s. So there was much more integration then in the Dance Department — the Dance Department at that point wasn’t actually Dance; it was called Inter-Arts. And this was a move by a man named Herbert Blau, who had come to Oberlin from CalArts, and he came with the likes of Julie Taymor as well as Bill Irwin, and created this Inter-Arts Department, which again, as part of the times, was pretty radical. They were interested in process-based work; they would allow people to see their rehearsals, but they also

refused to create paid-for evening events that the whole community could come to, so kind of really resisting the whole “bourgeois arts complex,” so to speak. And that’s when Brenda Way came, and Brenda Way was very much a part of that Inter-Arts moment, as was a man named Randy Coleman, who’s still here as a composer. So Inter-Arts had all the theatre, it had all of what is now TIMARA, which is Technology in Music and Related Arts in the Conservatory of Music, so all the composers were part of that. And apparently, it was a pretty wild time with people making work.... Also, Julie Taymor ended up after graduating going to Bali and doing a lot of puppet work, so she had a role through Shansi² as an English teacher in Indonesia, and so got a lot of that. And so there were a lot of that kind of — Bread and Puppet, anti-war demonstrations with big effigies and big puppets that were larger than life.

And then, of course, for me, one of the most significant moments in that whole Inter-Arts was when Brenda Way was here and invited the Grand Union. And Oberlin has a January semester, so during January, students can stay on campus and that’s very often when we have intensive workshops with guest artists in Dance: brilliant, actually, because very often during the semester, students have a hard time focusing on just dance because — perhaps they are Neuroscience majors and they’re pulled in a million different directions. Of course, they *do*, but there’s that pull. In January, nobody goes outside because it’s too cold, so you can have 8 to 10 hours of dancing a day, and it’s really a great intensive moment for performing arts in general. So, anyway, I went into the Archives and looked at Brenda Way’s files, and they were kind of amazing — what you could see, because, I mean, I don’t know if it’s even legal, but they had things like when Brenda Way was hired — a kind of remnant of the Depression era in Oberlin College—and it came out of a Socialist moment in a way, but at the same time, it ended up really being anti-feminist later on, but it was an anti-nepotism clause that said “If there’s one person with a job at Oberlin College, the spouse can’t get a job” — because they wanted to spread out the wealth, so to speak. What that meant, very often by the time you get to the ‘60s, is that the spouse was often a wife, and the husband got the job but then the wife couldn’t. And it took a while, but they finally got rid of it, so now all these great women who could also be teaching were allowed to apply and get jobs. But as a kind of a real remnant of that, there was, back before computers, when you were hired at Oberlin College, you had a cardboard card that had all your information: your name, where you graduated, your Social Security number — and it said “wife’s name,” but when Brenda was hired, they had to cross that out and write “husband’s name.” Those kinds of things really give you the historical reality of the moment that seems in some ways more open than our moment — I mean, culturally in some ways, more experimental — things were a little bit more free-wheeling, but then you realize that so many structures were in place where you had these “old-school” ideas. Anyway, I also found in that file that Brenda Way had applied, as many people did during that time — the National Endowment for the Arts had a whole program to bring dance companies and arts from the coasts into the Midwest, and these Midwestern colleges took advantage of it. So Brenda Way in 1971 got a National Endowment for the Arts grant for \$17,000.00. *\$17,000.00 in ‘72 money!* Can you imagine how much money that was? That’s a lot of money! She got \$17,000.00 to bring the entire Grand Union here: Gus Solomons, Yvonne Rainer, Trisha Brown, Steve Paxton, David Gordon — all of these really important people were here at one time on campus for a month. And they did all these crazy things — they all taught courses. You can see in the Archives, like “Dance Hootenanny: 50 cents.” Yvonne Rainer made a piece with like, 40 people in it. You know, it’s just *amazing* — a really amazing moment!

² Founded in 1808, Shansi is an educational exchange organization that seeks to link people in Asia and the U.S.

But Steve Paxton taught an early morning class, and Nancy Stark Smith, who was a student here and danced with Brenda Way in Oberlin Dance Collective, was here at the time and took Steve's early morning class. She recalls coming in, and it was dark still — I think this was probably a 7:00 in the morning class or something like that. He was doing a lot of martial arts and Tai Chi. So you walked into Warner Main Space, which is this gorgeous space — and outside, I think she said, there was a Kleenex and a slice of orange, and you were supposed to take one of each. And they came in and they did this kind of meditative movement, a lot of standing and feeling — you know, that kind of small dance that Steve's very famous for. So, she took that class, and that was the time that Steve made, with men dancers, *Magnesium*, which is what I consider the beginning of the kind of experimentation that later led to Contact Improvisation. And Nancy Stark Smith, who had done a lot of work in gymnastics before she started dancing at Oberlin — and Steve also had gymnastics training in his body — came up to him after she saw *Magnesium* and said, you know, "If you ever want to do this work with women, I'd love to join you." And so that summer — this was January, 1972 — that summer they went to the Weber Gallery with a group of people that Steve had collected when he had been around teaching at Rochester and teaching at Bennington, and they started this very raw kind of experience: "What happens if I throw myself at you?" "What happens if we kind of work together and stay in contact?" And that was the beginning, I think, for both Steve and Nancy, but Nancy really took that as a career arc, and then later became co-editor of *Contact Quarterly* and is still really involved in that; Steve was involved for about 12 or 15 years and then started to do more of his own solo work, and got interested in other things. So he was involved for a long time and is still honored as, you know, the "Father of Contact," but refuses that at the same time. So that was that '72 moment. Now, at the same time that that was happening and people were going to New York, Brenda Way had a year's leave and literally bought an old school bus — I kid you not. You hear these stories and you don't believe they're real — but did. Bought an old school bus, converted it, and they went and drove out to San Francisco and stayed at friends' farms in different places and performed in cities and outside, and ended up in San Francisco, connected with some artists out there and very quickly, with some of the students, including Pam Quinn and Kimi [Okada], then later established Oberlin Dance Collective, San Francisco. So that was *that* history, that Inter-Arts moment in Oberlin College: some of it went to New York, and some of it went to San Francisco.

And then there was a period in the '80s — mid-'70s to mid-'80s — where there was a Theatre and Dance Department, but there were no full-time dance people; everybody was hired on one or two-year contracts — there were no tenure-track positions, very few tenured Theatre positions; I think there was maybe one or two, but that was it. A lot of turnover, a lot of people coming out — Stephanie Woodward taught here for awhile, Wendy Perron taught here for a while, so people would come out for a year and then go back. So it kept up a lot of experimental work on some level, but there wasn't a real...there is a history written about this time, and I'm forgetting some of the details, but it's on the *Accelerated Motion* website, so you can see that, but there was a lot of turnover —put it that way. And then, I think, the departments decided that they really needed to structure it, because I think students loved having new people, but as a department it doesn't really work when you have to do other things in the department. So, in order to create a dance major, they decided to start to hire some full-time people. So in 1990 is when I arrived. And I was hired in the Theory/History position, but I was also hired because I could teach Contact, I could teach physical work. And so, when I started teaching Contact on a regular basis, it was one of the first classes that ever got taught in Contact in a university setting; Contact very often is taught in workshops or you go to jams, but it's little pieces — you get intensive moments, but they're little pieces. So I taught a course — and I still teach the class — it's three times a week, two hours a class, plus a Sunday jam.

So I'm seeing them six to eight hours a week, for thirteen weeks, and it means you can really take the form into a different level, because you have a whole group of people that are learning together and getting good together. And then I also teach a course that used to be called "Continuing Contact" — until about a decade ago or so, I came out of the closet as a "jock" and decided to call it "Varsity Contact." And so now we have a class called Varsity Contact, and we have tee-shirts that are like the sports teams that have OC on it, so we're doing that and that's kind of a fun continuation of that history. I should have brought it — didn't think of it — but there is a student who wrote this kind of amazing tribute to the floor of Warner Main; I teach in that space, which you'll video later, such a beautiful space. And so I oftentimes evoke this moment of lying on the floor and recognizing the history in that floor, and how all those years of Contact can inform your body. And he compares it to a grail. It's quite beautiful, actually. And because Nancy Stark Smith has been a leading figure in Contact Improvisation, and because I was here at Oberlin and had started to train what is now generations of dancers, for the 25th anniversary of Contact Improvisation, there was a big event here over the summer in 1997. We had over 300 dancers from sixty different countries, including a pre-conference event on Disability and Dance, so we had a number of South American companies — disabled companies — come and perform and teach, and then there was a lot of teaching and jamming, and there was an archival project, and workshops and different kinds of panels and things like that — an event that lasted for the better part of a week. It was kind of amazing to see, you know, in the summer, hundreds of dancers doing contact out in Tappan Square. But an interesting kind of fast-forward history moment there is that last year I had a first-year student come in to my Contact class, and she — about halfway through the class — came in with a tee-shirt that was from the 25th anniversary. I have a tee-shirt like that too, and I looked at it and she said, "Oh, yeah, my parents were here during that 25th anniversary." And I was amazed, because it was the first time I had a student — it made me feel old, of course — but a student whose parents basically learned Contact around the same time I did... So Contact is still alive and well at Oberlin, and in fact because I've been kind of evangelistic in suggesting that Oberlin College was the beginning — now, the history of this could change depending on who's telling it — but I am unabashedly willing to claim Oberlin as the start of Contact. So just yesterday we had a big jam, and these students from my class — because I'm not teaching this year — are teaching an ExCo Contact class, and they hosted this big jam. And this student's parents came, happened to be in town from California. So I got to dance with her parents, and it was just that kind of cycle of Contact renewing itself at Oberlin. And when you see the space of Warner Mainstage, it is probably *the* most beautiful space, and the floor is perfect for Contact: it's not sticky, it's not too slippery, you can roll on it, but you can still have, you know, *grip* when you're lifting people or pushing into somebody, so it's the perfect space for Contact. And it's made my experience here wonderful, because students really have an appetite for Contact — maybe more than in some Dance Departments — and it's beautiful. We also have an Alumni Commencement Jam, and now we're having the 10th year reunion, the 20th year reunion, and they're coming in with their little kids, and you know, maybe they haven't done Contact for awhile. In fact, one year, a student came in to see me — used to do a lot of Contact, hadn't done it for awhile — I was like, "Ah, yeah, sure, come on in!" And I was about to leave for Europe, and he broke a bone in my foot. It was like, "Well, maybe I shouldn't be inviting *everybody*" — Contact is so open, but there are some times, if you haven't been dancing for a while, finding where to put your weight and where not to put your weight is a little challenging. So that's kind of the story of Contact.

I would say to go back then to the 60s and look at the role of Black Dance and African American Dance and African diasporic dance traditions. The whole time I've been here, there is a woman named Adenike Sharpley who has been teaching and exploring diasporic African dance traditions, and she has a performing group named Dance Diaspora. She's half in Africana Studies and half in

Dance, and teaches a number of courses on West African dance, but also on Cuba, on Brazil and looking at dance traditions that come out of that. She also teaches a Jazz Improv class. She's actually about to retire this year, and we are looking to replace her with a full-time — she was never a tenure-track position, so we're looking to replace her with a tenure-track position. But that's a legacy from the 60s; Margaret Christian actually was her teacher – not at Oberlin, but in Cleveland, but that's a legacy that has kept going. Last year, we hired in the department for an international and transnational position. I think personally, I would like to see much more integration — like, *literal* integration – but also kind of ideological integration in a kind of global moment to ask where all of these forms have had an impact on one another. So, it's that moment when — the Society of Dance History Scholars and the Congress on Research in Dance just had a conference on appropriation and authenticity – and it's that moment of very strong awareness of social justice issues, marginalization of communities, so that kind of strategic essentialism of wanting to keep certain traditional forms alive, but at the same time recognizing that traditional forms are also changing, and who is dancing what forms is also changing, and to be thoughtful about that, but also recognize that sometimes in the histories of – at least my experience at Oberlin is that sometimes those forms can get separated out, so that African legacies are in Africana Studies and then the Dance Department gets figured as very white. I think that is changing now with some of the hires that we're doing, and we're starting to think of maybe moving beyond – because there's a lot of demographic turnover – moving beyond specific positions being tied to specific people, and thinking about the positions in terms of a larger culture of dance in the world as well as at Oberlin. I mean the other thing, I think, that's really important throughout this history – again, I'm not sure when ExCo began – they began with Robert Fuller, so in the early '70s. – but throughout the history of at least the last fifty years of Dance at Oberlin College, the ExCo classes have played a huge role. I mean, we have Rapper classes, a kind of Irish sword dancing, we have an ExCo ballet class, we have jazz and tap classes, we have three different ExCo group that teach hip hop — from Korean pop and different kinds of takes on hip hop — and if somebody wants to do an ExCo on folk dance or an ExCo on Contra dancing, or there's a blues ExCo – blues is a big deal — swing dance, those kinds of things. So there's a way in which dance has been both in a department or the college institution, but also thrives outside of those particular boxes, because students are interested: salsa dance, those kinds of things. So students will teach ExCos on it, they'll do performances, and it's great to know that there's an entire culture that the department doesn't have to create or actually sustain. It happens on its own.

CF: I'd like to go back to ask you a couple of questions about some points you've raised. I'm curious: to what do you attribute the vision of Oberlin College back in the 1800's to be so open regarding race, gender, and so on. Is that from a person? A religious perspective? Is it Quaker? What happened here?

ACA: It's not Quaker, actually. (She has found the document she was seeking, and prepares to read). This is a book that I did, actually to celebrate my 50th birthday. We did a whole year of Contact, and performances, and I did a Winter term on dance and writing with Kirstie Simson, a guest artist who came in, and my Varsity Contact class decided we were going to do a collection of essays on dancing Contact in college. We sent out calls for material, and I was getting really worried, and thinking, "Well, you know, maybe nothing will come in" — but our class was going, and I think that the deadline was somewhere in early April or something like that, and it was unbelievable, because literally within about 36 hours before the deadline until about five days after the deadline, this flood of material started to come in. And there was a kind of editorial posse, some of whom were in the class — we sectioned-off jobs in the class. But I had been collecting writing from my students for a

long time, and this is actually from a student, probably in the mid-'90s, but I included it because it was so beautiful. This is Nick Thompson:

“We were on our backs on the floor, doing our imagery exercise. Ann started to embrace the history of Contact in Warner Main, and explained how she feels that the experience of each dance coats the floors and walls of the space. I started to feel for the first time how loaded that room is, thinking of *Magnesium* being in the floor beneath me, of the injuries, of the joy and of all of the classes that have experienced the expansion I have been feeling all semester. I started to envision Warner Main as an ancient wooden cup or grail that is only used during a specific ritual and ceremony of dance. We are, and they have been, the wine or the nectar that swirls in the cup, and after it's emptied, its essence and flavor remains, shaded into the grain of the wood so that it can never be washed away.”

Isn't that beautiful?

CF: Beautiful!

ACA: Go back to your question again. I'm ready now.

CF: I'm simply curious about just how Oberlin arose, in the 1833, as this place that had such a broad vision of who is a legitimate student.

ACA: Mm-hmm. Well, it's very interesting, because the name Oberlin — the guy John Frederick Oberlin, never actually *came* to America. But he was a very important Protestant pastor in the Alsace-Lorraine region of France. And I spent a year — for a long time, Oberlin College had a study abroad program in Strasbourg, France, and it's so interesting because when you go over there, there's an Oberlin Street, there's an Oberlin Bookstore, there's an Oberlin High School — and one of the families who took students in was Madame Oberlin. And we thought it was just a joke — that she was just someone who took students in, so they had dubbed her, but no — that was her name, and she was, in fact, related to John Frederick Oberlin. So when I was over there, I read a biography of him. And he was one of the first people to really feel as if — you know, this was back in the days of peasants — they weren't literate and there was a kind of a sense of being really stuck in a certain lifestyle that was, frankly, unhealthy. And so he created these — basically, we would call them Community Centers, where he funded in the winter time — during the summer, of course, everybody was out in the fields and growing things — but in the winter, there was more time. And so he created — I think at first they were in churches, but in different places throughout the Alsace-Lorraine area — these Community Centers, where they would have a heater. He actually was an inventor, and invented a certain kind of heater that was very efficient — much more efficient than any of those enormous fireplaces that people had, which really didn't heat anything. So he invented a heater, installed that, and then would bring people over, and taught them how to weave, and set up looms — so that the kids would come, and they would be warm, and there would be some literary instruction for them, some schooling — very limited, but some school. And then for the women, they were taught to weave, and he had a whole system of selling their products, and giving them money and so there was a kind of utopian vision of really bringing people up who were marginalized in that culture. His followers were inspired by this, and they were the ones who actually came over [here] and settled, and named the town Oberlin in honor of him. And he was also a naturalist — I mean, he was very much a “Renaissance Man” and had his hands in many different things. But that vision happened at a time when Oberlin was, being right near the lake and near Canada, a surfacing area for the Underground Railroad, and had a real history of being integrated very early on, and a lot

of abolitionists. So the early movement of setting up Oberlin College happened in a place and at a time when there was a lot of strong belief that the way to raise up your fellow man is to educate people. And so a real belief in education: the motto of Oberlin College from that time is “Learning and Labor.” So, this idea that intellectual work and keeping a farm and actually working toward the betterment of humankind is a really important goal; there’s a kind of ethics-based belief as opposed to colleges that were founded to school the Brahmins — the Brahmin sons of people, you know, on the East Coast, or something like that. So this was founded in a cornfield as an institution that was trying to create an almost utopian community. I mean, not everything was utopian, but there was a Theological Seminary. And part of the less utopian aspects of Oberlin College were things like missionaries, right? There was what was at that point really important: “Do good, go out into the world” — so we have an entire program now that has changed, obviously evolved. But from those early roots, we have the program called Shansi that has sister schools all over South Asia and East Asia; we have sister schools in Japan and China, and we have a place in Indonesia and India — I’ve been to the sister school in India once — and we place English teachers there, but these are kind of remnants from early missionary settlements that were sponsored by Oberlin. Shansi now is a separate organization completely, although it coordinates with Oberlin, but it’s not actually part of Oberlin College. So I think that’s why the vision was, “regardless of race or gender, we will educate.” And there was last year a big symposium on some of the early African American women graduates of Oberlin College, who went and then established a high school in Washington DC that was known as an African American High School, and was — I think it’s now called M Street; I forget the original high school — like, the Normal School³ or something like that — but *big*, big figures in African American culture came out of that high school and were inspired by these little Victorian ladies — little African American Victorian ladies, who just really believed in the power of commitment and education to bring the African American race to their fullest potential — and really, really interesting histories there, many of which now have been written down.

CF: I want to follow up on a couple of things: just a quick question: the ExCo development. How do students fit all of that in with...there’s no credit for ExCo?

ACA: Yeah, there’s a little bit of credit. When Robert Fuller, who was the youngest president of Oberlin College — in the ‘70s I think there was a push as there was across many academic institutions, to really change the curriculum, and I think as *part* of this push to change the curriculum, there was a desire to have students teach courses. So this external college, or ExCo, was developed. Now, ExCo gives a little bit of credit, but there’s a limit to how many credits you can *count* of ExCo into your full graduation credit package. So you couldn’t spend your entire life doing ExCos and get your degree from Oberlin College, but you can do a number of them and teach a number of them. And I have confirmation now that that started with Robert Fuller’s presidency in the early ‘70s.

CF: I wonder if you’d like to talk a little bit about your own interest as it has affected things here at Oberlin in dance and disability. Is that a thread worth pursuing here?

ACA: Sure, but I’m going to package it a different way.

CF: Fine!

³ This may refer to Anna J Cooper, who was instrumental in the development of The Preparatory High School for Negro Youth in 1870, now M Street School.

ACA: What I find interesting about teaching at Oberlin — and this was, you know, the first job I ever got — I didn't actually even think I was going to get a job, because I hadn't finished my dissertation yet, but it kind of fell into my lap, and things worked out that way, and here I am. But one of the reasons I like teaching here is that throughout my *own* experience of higher education, I always had to choose either the body or the mind. My degree as an undergraduate, because there was no Dance Department, was in Philosophy and French Literature. And then I did an MFA in which the whole focus was composition and technique. And at that point in the MFA I was pursuing at Temple University, there wasn't really a lot of intellectual work done around the culture and context of dance, or the meaning of dance. This was a moment where I felt as if there was a real literacy gap in Dance. And then I did a PhD at NYU in Performance Studies, which for all of its rhetoric about embodied and live knowledge and live performance, never really gave you credit for doing any kind of dancing — so that was always on the side. And when I came here — not right away but pretty soon — I started to teach courses that really integrated intellectual work and critical analysis and reading and writing with performance work and embodied work. One of the first courses I taught in that vein was a course called Autobiography and Performance. There was so much work in autobiography — particularly feminist discussions of autobiography as a place where communities and people who did not have a voice in traditional history could tell their stories. And I felt that that was really important theoretical information and historical background to have. At the same time, we were doing work with body and voice and also creating work, and this was a moment when there was a lot of performance art, so sometimes that class would be part of the Performance Art Festival in Cleveland — depending on how energetic I felt that semester, because I would end up directing their work into a piece that went there. And more and more! Now I teach a first-year seminar called Bridging the Body/Mind Divide, where we read Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception*, and actual philosophy texts as well as a lot of somatic work and Eastern texts, so more and more my courses do include both of them. And I think that that has allowed me to really develop in an interesting way as a scholar and as an artist, as opposed to... You know, when I finished my PhD I had this weird nightmare. I finished my PhD, I defended it, and I took a workshop that week-end with Steve Paxton. So, I defended my dissertation and then I went and took the Contact workshop. In this nightmare, I was walking down this hall and I know exactly — it was this space in Temple University. I was walking down this hall and I was trying to get into a dance studio, and they were all locked, and I was like "God, all of these studios are locked!" And then somebody came up to me and said "No, no, no, no — you have a PhD now. You can't go into the studios anymore." And that was my fear, that somehow I would be kind of stuck in an academic position that wouldn't *allow* me to keep dancing, or to integrate that work with my theory and history work. So, in some ways I feel right from the beginning of my own scholarship, the fact that I have been able to do both of those has really had an impact on how I go about writing books.

CF: And you attribute that to Oberlin College.

ACA: Absolutely. The ability for me at Oberlin College to be able to integrate embodied knowledge the same way that we can also tackle the theoretical and historical and critical analysis — so, not separating those into separate courses or separate spaces. When I teach the First-year Seminar, which is to first-year students — it's a writing course, right? — so it's not necessarily to students who think of themselves as dancers. But I'm in that big space. I set up a seminar table at the corner of that big space, and they all have to take off their shoes and walk across this huge, cavernous space, and just the act of doing that forces them to be in their bodies in a way that they wouldn't have to if they could, you know, just look from their phone and sit down. So I think that that in some ways,

that and also the support I had with my — I developed an interdisciplinary study group when I was working on my dissertation — we were all finishing our dissertations and then also our first books: we were together. And I think that was helpful in really looking at the different issues I was looking at and getting an interdisciplinary take on them, and allowing me to open up how I think of these issues from a larger perspective than just dance-specific. And certainly, I would say the work I did in disability is part of that earlier work, and having a feminist group of scholars from a lot of different places helped me articulate what is sometimes, I think, so embedded in our consciousness that we don't bother to separate or look outside of. And it's one of the things I love about teaching at Oberlin that because students are not dance majors, all of them; I mean, we have dance majors but they don't have to audition in, and if they major in Dance, chances are very good they major in something else like Neuroscience or Politics or something. So, every class, many students bring in perspectives from outside of the dance world, so it really helps you move outside of a very insular focus sometimes. I think, in BFA programs where everybody is just trying to be a better dancer and make better dances, and there's so much time spent in dance, in rehearsals, and in training that sometimes we don't surface to say "Oh! And what does it all *mean*?" So I think that teaching here has really helped me keep an eye on that.

CF: Oh my! We have about two minutes remaining, and we could use about ten more hours. In the few moments we have, is there anything you would like to say that we haven't yet discussed?

ACA: Well, I talked about a demographic change, and I think this is going on in universities and dance departments across the country, but it was funny because I went to a retirement party of a Classics scholar, and he talked about how when he first came, he was the youngest member of the faculty and then within about five years, he became the oldest member of the faculty. And that's exactly what happened to me, although it didn't happen right away, but for many, many years, I was the youngest member of the faculty — like, until having gray hair, you know. But what's happening is that very quickly, within about three years, I'm going to go from the youngest to the oldest. And that kind of demographic shift allows you to think structurally about a department in a way you can't when people have what they teach, they're used to teaching a certain way, they may offer some new courses, but they're not going to teach something they don't know or something radically different, usually. And so we have the opportunity now to really say "What's important for our department?" To move forward and consider ourselves within, again, this changing landscape of higher education — but also, within a liberal arts college. So, maybe we don't have to worry about offering, you know, four levels of this and three levels of that. Rather, is there a way to rethink outside of some of the normal divisions, both of technique as well as, say, the theory, history, design — those kinds of things. We're still in a university: I have fantasies sometimes of if you had a whole morning and you could teach the technique and the composition and the history all together, but because we're in a university environment, we can't do that because students have to take too many other classes. But we still are able to think what those [faculty] lines could address and how they could cross over into serving other departments and other students from other departments, as well. So that's pretty exciting; we haven't made any decisions — we're still in the possibility, although as I said, we redefined a position two years ago as intercultural and transnational to speak to a global world, instead of one in which, you know, traditional/contemporary, western/nonwestern was all neatly packaged. But I'm also very aware of not wanting to do the kind of "Benetton" — you know, what some universities do where we have adjunct people teaching one of this and one of this and one of this as a way to add diversity to our department. I'm very aware of horizontal versus vertical education, I'm aware of moving outside of some of those structures.

CF: This could be a mistake, because it probably requires a longer answer than we have time for right now, so keep that constraint in mind — but what's next for you?

ACA: *Oooh!* You mean like my book projects?

CF: Yes.

ACA: Well, I'm finishing this *Gravity Matters* book, and what I realize now is that — so I think of *Gravity Matters* as on contemporary embodiment post-9.11, and it's all about falling. But now I realize it's going to be sandwiched between 9.11 and Trump, and the rhetoric of things falling apart. So, it's called *Gravity Matters: Finding Ground in an Unstable World*. And it's not really about dance, but it is about the body, and practices of the body. And that's a great project for me because it lets me go very micro, like I'm writing the chapter on resilience now: so the chapters each follow the stages of a fall: Falling, Disorientation, Suspension, Gravity, Resilience, Connection — and I write them as kind of steps down. I'm working on resilience, which is a lot about connective tissue. So I'm looking actually at the cellular level of connective tissue, and how connective tissue has — at the level of the cell — the cells kind of prod and push and resist one another in interesting ways: it sounds like a little Contact duet when you hear what happens at the cellular level. But I'm also looking at questions of resilience within a neoliberal framework, where resilience becomes the excuse not to put in social safety nets: “Oh well, people are resilient!” Looking at communities and resilience in terms of 9.11 and Katrina — big, broad sweeps as well as kind of micro level of how does the body...how do you train for resilience? And a lot of my teaching abroad these days is very much about how do I train for a responsive body, one that is both resistant and resilient. And given what happened with this election, I'm kind of really pushing that. But, I want to finish this book because I want to write a book on Simone Forti, and she has Parkinson's and is in her early '80s. So, I've been tracing and working with her, and have been doing a lot of stuff, but I kind of need to focus on that, so it's like “Get this book done this year so I can do that.” Then I'll come back because I *will* be the oldest member of the faculty very soon; I'll come back and chair for the foreseeable future. But I'm going to be in Berlin for four months at this Interweaving Performance Cultures, so I have a project there that is looking at the “Negotiation of Other in Contact, Capoeira and Queer Tango: Intimacy and Alterity.” And then I'm going to be at the Freiburg Jam in Germany, teaching — so I'm teaching a lot, I'm doing a lot of advocacy work in different areas. And what I love is people invite me to give a talk, and oftentimes mostly, just to tell you the truth, because I want to get into a dance studio...I mean, I just went to Seoul, and they invited me as the kind of (she adopts a mock-serious tone) *scholar, you know, the agent scholar*, and I always go (changing her voice back to a mock-pleasant one) and “I'd be happy to teach a Contact class!” And mostly because, as I said, I just need to get out of a hotel and a conference space and get into the [studio] space. But it's really fun, and I'm enjoying that a lot. I feel very strong — I don't know if it's this connective tissue work I'm doing, or what, but I'm definitely teaching a lot of twenty year olds who don't have the energy I do! So, I'm like “Get off the phones, put down the cigarettes, and come dance with me!”

CF: We'll have to end there, but it feels like we only scratched the surface. Thank you. Always a pleasure to talk with you.

ACA: Yeah. Thank you!