

# Dancing on the Slash: Choreographing a Life as a Black Feminist Artist/Scholar

by Lisa B. Thompson  
*The Journal of American Drama and Theatre*  
Volume 33, Number 2 (Spring 2021)  
ISSN 2376-4236  
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If I do not bring all of who I am to whatever I do, then I bring nothing of lasting worth, for I have withheld my essence.

Audre Lorde, *I am Your Sister: Collected Writings*

Every year I return to August Wilson's powerful speech, "The Ground on Which I Stand." On the 25th anniversary of his groundbreaking keynote at the 1996 Theatre Communications Group National Conference, Wilson's words still resonate.<sup>[1]</sup> I want to honor this Black theatre milestone because Wilson not only delivers a scathing critique of systemic racism in US theatre, but he also insists that Black culture is a worthy and necessary source of artistic inspiration.

Although he criticizes the structural inequalities that Black artists face, Wilson also speaks about his personal journey as a playwright and a Black man. He confesses:

. . . it is difficult to disassociate my concerns with theater from the concerns of my life as a black man, and it is difficult to disassociate one part of my life from another. I have strived to live it all seamless . . . art and life together, inseparable and indistinguishable. (494)

Wilson's address motivated me to craft my own manifesto as a Black feminist artist/scholar. I'm celebrating the anniversary of "The Ground on Which I Stand" speech by crafting a manifesto which echoes Wilson's desire for a seamlessness between being a Black person and a theatre artist. As Black people throughout the African diaspora combat dual catastrophes, a global pandemic and the brutality associated with the "long emancipation," I feel an even greater sense of urgency.<sup>[2]</sup> I also feel a sense of urgency to make all of my conflicting identities seamless. I'm proclaiming to all that will listen that I'm not only a Black artist, but I'm also a Black feminist scholar. I'm a playwright and a professor who has choreographed a professional life that includes both the arts and the academy. I've learned to dance on the slash between the title artist/scholar. I must dance to remain both creator and critic because I refuse to live a divided life. I will no longer deny any part of my intellectual or creative gifts. I call on all Black artist/scholars to join me and do the same.

When I was a little girl, I didn't dance quite like my friends and family. It seemed to me that they were all illustrious dancers. I recall watching my older brother Robert dance. He was a member of the San Francisco Lockers and I loved watching those Adidas sweat suit-clad dancers move in lock step. They were commanding, rhythmic, defiant, and elegant. My classmates mesmerized me as they performed

stunningly choreographed routines at the school talent shows, decked out in matching psychedelic outfits. I never joined in when they perfected their dances on Saturday afternoons in a neighbor's rumpus room. Don't feel sorry for me. This is not one of those "I was smart but lacked natural rhythm therefore I was a mocked and ostracized inauthentic Negro" essays. I had plenty of friends and could throw down with the best of them, it was just that I preferred dancing alone. Standing in front of the sofa or the bedroom mirror, I would jam to songs by the Jackson 5, Sly and the Family Stone, Stevie Wonder, Donna Summer, and Prince. I despised group dances, but adored the Soul Train line because it was my stage: I could be the star dancing to my own groove.

Dancing alone and in my own way has led me to a life as a Black feminist artist/scholar. I define a Black feminist artist/scholar as one who works simultaneously within the academy, pursuing scholarly research and teaching, while also producing art in the public realm for wide-ranging audiences to enjoy. Black feminist artist/scholars often center the lives and experiences of Black women, girls and femmes in both their scholarly and artistic work. I use dancing as a metaphor because dance emphasizes free but disciplined movement. It requires both posture and poise. Dance allows improvisation and planning, creativity and expression. Dance can be done in a group or solo. Dance provides a way to socialize, to become and stay strong, to communicate, to develop self-esteem, and to increase your flexibility. It's also a way to curate a sense of embodied listening and speaking. After all, dancing around the question can be more about exploring a puzzle more deeply instead of avoiding it. You need all of those traits to survive as an artist/scholar, especially a Black feminist one.

The artist/scholar defies the old adage that "those who do, do, and those that can't, teach." Artist/scholars often prove some of the best teachers because they have immersed themselves in two worlds, the Ivory Tower as well as the theatre, or museum, art gallery or concert hall. The artist/scholar has many work spaces: the classroom, the library, the archives, and the lab or studio where we create. Some work in completely different realms so that their artistic and scholarly fields have little or nothing in common, while the scholarship and artistry of other artist/scholars is more aligned. No matter how one's artistic practice and scholarly interests are related, this duality helps us to become great teachers because we understand the work from two perspectives simultaneously.[\[3\]](#)

Black artist/scholars are certainly not a new phenomenon. I stand on the shoulders of those who came before me such as anthropologist, novelist, and playwright, Zora Neale Hurston; sociologist, novelist, literary journal editor, W.E.B. Du Bois; poet and comparative literature scholar Kamau Braithwaite; and choreographer and anthropologist Katherine Dunham. I rely on their examples for reassurance, for inspiration, and for guidance. Those tiny descriptors I shared about their work reveals only a fraction of the ground those giants cleared for us, only a morsel of their contributions to the world of arts and letters. Their pathbreaking interventions created the circumstances that allow many contemporary Black artist/scholars to enjoy the security of tenured positions in the academy—often in highly regarded and abundantly resourced institutions. I lean on the example of these precursors as I choreograph my own dance. Their brave work helps me to theorize about Black culture through my essays and books; their life stories inspire me to continue crafting plays about Black life. I draw on their wisdom to give me the confidence to claim my creativity and knowledge. This manifesto represents an attempt to leave some crumbs behind so that other Black artist/scholars who dance alone, but also in community with others, know that it's possible to bop down their own creative and intellectual path.

Toni Morrison, one of the greatest artist/scholars of all time, and a Cornell-trained literary critic, editor,

teacher, and Nobel prize winning writer, explained her work simply: “I know it sounds like a lot. But I really only do one thing. I teach books. I write books. I think about books. It’s one job.”<sup>[4]</sup> She was also a librettist who even tried her hand at playwriting. Why did she downplay the multiplicity of her gifts and the vast reach of her intellectual and creative labor? I suspect that Morrison felt as I do, it is simply *your work*. It is how you feel compelled to show up in the world as a creator and thinker. It is your purpose. All of it.

So, what does it mean to dance on the slash? It means identifying the spaces where the art and the scholarship meet. The powers that be insist that there is a line between teaching and doing, a line between artistry and scholarship, between creativity and criticism, that is not meant to be crossed. Dancing on the slash acknowledges that the line between being an artist and a scholar is a porous one. In the rare instances when that line is crossed or blurred, it’s certainly not meant to be transgressed by people like me, Black, woman, first generation college graduate, single mother. How does one dare to disregard borders in spaces where you are not supposed to even exist? There is a freedom in challenging the boundaries of disciplines—artistic and academic. To live an undisciplined life is dangerous, but it’s also thrilling in all the ways that make you whole.

In her essay “Sista Docta,” African Diaspora studies and performance artist/scholar Omi Osun Joni L. Jones pushes back against the artist/scholar divide by refusing to privilege one over the other. Jones argues that “performance is a form of embodied knowledge and theorizing that challenges the academy’s print bias. While intellectual rigor has long been measured in terms of linguistic acuity and print productivity that reinforces the dominant culture’s deep meanings, performance is suspect because its ephemeral, emotional, and physical nature.” She adds that “Performance. Then, subverts the binary of artist/scholar when performance exists as scholarship.”<sup>[5]</sup> Jones makes clear that part of the dance includes rejecting hierarchies of knowledge. In the most skilled hands, a piece of work is both art and scholarship.

Dancing on the slash means balancing the competing demands of two worlds that refuse to understand each other. Maintaining perfect equilibrium is impossible so there are times when artist/scholars devote more time and energy to one field or calling to the detriment of the other. It also means pushing back against those who insist that you must pick one and abandon the other. One must be careful while creating a life on a slash. The slash can be an aggressive and violent motion. You use it to cut out, diminish, partition, and destroy that which is not worthy, but also that which doesn’t serve the art or the argument. Living as an artist/scholar can be lonely because you must shuttle between two fields and feel that you are not fulfilling obligations to either field or community. As an artist/scholar, you have to accept that’s what it means to dance to the beat of different tunes. For me, it means writing plays, essays, and books all while trying to interest a producer in my latest piece. It means suffering the unspoken questions of college deans, artistic directors, department chairs, press editors, and theater boards. They wonder whether I’m an artist or a scholar? They ask is this play simply an essay placed on stage? Is this essay too theatrical? Dancing on the slash means trying to answer those questions and accepting that you can do too much and never enough at the very same time. This manifesto calls for academic and theatrical institutions to move beyond such simplistic questions and to allow space for all that artist/scholars bring to the table (or stage).

How did I arrive on this slash? Like August Wilson, I began as a poet after falling in love with the words of Black Arts Movement poets such as Sonia Sanchez, Amiri Baraka, and Nikki Giovanni. When Ntozake

Shange burst upon the theatre scene in the 1970s with her critically acclaimed choreopoem *For Colored Girls Who Considered Suicide/ When the Rainbow Is Enuf*, I discovered how poetry can fill the stage and unveil the concerns and dreams of Black girls and women like a rainbow. I was fortunate to find myself in Shange's classroom as a senior English major at UCLA. On the first day of class, Shange invited us to do a free write for 20 minutes and that's when I penned my first monologue. One day, Shange invited a friend to visit our class. He was working on a production of his play in Westwood. The friend was George Wolfe and the play was *The Colored Museum*. Little did I know that seeing Wolfe's work after spending a term in Shange's presence would change the course of my life and chosen artistic genre.

Wolfe's irreverent humor and deep knowledge of Black culture blew my mind. I couldn't believe that this outrageousness was possible! My turn from poetry to drama was complete. I remain inspired by both Shange and Wolfe's theatrical love letters to Black people's beautiful and powerful brokenness.

Wilson looked to his mother's pantry, his beloved Pittsburgh Hill District, Black history, and the slave quarters for inspiration. I turn to my home and working-class community in San Francisco, a rich and fertile place full of art, joy, beauty and books that made me into a Black feminist artist/scholar, a cultural producer and a cultural critic. It's where I learned about Black culture, Black history, Black life, Black womanhood, and Black love; I learned in the pews of the Third Baptist Church, the oldest Black church in San Francisco where I was baptized in the 1970s, in the barbershop in Lakeview that I visited with my father on Saturday afternoons eavesdropping on tall tales told by men on barber stools, from the books left behind by the Black Panthers who rented an apartment from my grandmother in Oakland, the quick tongued signifying women at the beauty shop my mother took me to on special occasions too important for her kitchen stove press and curl, and the fine afroed boys that played basketball on Saturday afternoons in March Banks Park in Daly City. Although the public schools I attended did not teach much about Black history and culture, I was blessed with young Black women teachers who encouraged a smart creative skinny dark-skinned girl who became a champion of Black culture, Black history, Black life, Black womanhood, and Black love in her work for the stage and in her scholarship, as well as a staunch defender of public education.

Suzan-Lori Parks's evocative essay "The Equation for Black People on Stage" implores Black theatre makers to craft narratives that "show the world and ourselves in our beautiful and powerfully infinite variety."<sup>[6]</sup> Those are the kind of stories I try to write, tales that present Black people, particularly the Black middle class and Black elites as neither the talented tenth or the sellouts. Interviewers often ask me who I write for and I want to say for me, all the ME's I've been, I am, and may be—me as a little girl in San Francisco in the 1970s, me as a Black graduate student finding my voice, me as a Black single mother, me summering on Martha's Vineyard, me facing the deaths of my parents, me facing the deaths of Black people murdered by police, me laughing with my homeboys and homegirls as we discuss romance after forty, me navigating the healthcare industry that renders me invisible, and me retiring someday in France, Costa Rica, or Ghana. I'm addressing the audience and telling the story that matters to me and I've never been overly concerned with the expectations or tastes of those who fail to recognize stories about Black people as worthy of a theatrical production on the main stage.

I have spent my life entering and conquering unwelcoming institutions in the academy and in the theatre that were not designed for people like me. Most of those spaces will never include the classmates I watched dance as a young girl, but I know they belong in every space I decolonize so I bring Tracy, Rolenzo, Nedra, Baxter, Jane, Teru, Priscilla, Barris, and Tina with me as I try to dance through doors

that continue to remain closed to Black, Asian, and Latinx people like them, like me. I'm known to leave the door unlocked so they or their children can slip in behind me and take back the stolen seats.

This has not been an easy dance to perform. I've faced repeated opposition from staff and administrators as I've choreographed a life as both a theatre artist and scholar. Those episodes of discouragement are the very reason I believe this manifesto is essential. I want the academy to understand that for artist/scholars, artistic pursuits are not a magnificent distraction, but a way towards knowledge. Art is a way for Black studies and other scholarly fields to engage in public-facing humanities that invite multiple communities into Black life and culture and into conversation with scholars, artists, policy makers and politicians.

It's important to acknowledge what this dance offers. I imagine that some consider pursuing a life as an artist/scholar as a way to avoid the crushing financial reality of the artist's existence in the US, especially for those of us who lack family wealth. I've joked in interviews that I picked academia because I wanted health insurance and food, but the life of a professor is not a safety net. While I never wanted to be a starving artist, I turned to the academy for another kind of necessary sustenance. I found a life of the mind and arts a rich place to research, teach, and discuss theories, ideas, novels, autobiographies, films, and plays about Black life. It allows artist/scholars to be paid for what we would do anyway—researching about craft, field, major and minor figures, genre and form.

Working in the academy also allows us to have a group of brilliant and engaged folks to talk to on a regular basis—colleagues and students. The beneficiaries are not just the artist/scholars but also audiences, fans, and even critics. The academy provides us with a lab to try out work and to build relationships, to invite other artists to the university to showcase their work or collaborate with them. This offers a way to support those who don't have a tenured job and may be living grant to grant, or artist residency to artist residency, but whose work deserves investment from academic institutions. I've hosted both local and nationally renowned artists so that students, faculty, staff and the community are in a room, workshop, lecture hall with folks changing the art world not only in theatre, but in film, television, dance, and more.<sup>[7]</sup> It's powerful alchemy. There's nothing more gratifying than inviting Black artists to the university to develop new work so that students get a kitchen island view of how the gumbo is made.

What does it mean to be in the academy—as a Black person, and also to insist on being outside it? What does it mean to be in the academy as a woman, and to foster a life outside it? What does it mean to be a theatre artist as a Black woman, and to craft another professional life outside of it? How does a Black woman carve a life in the arts while also claiming space for herself as a feminist critic? Theorist? Teacher? As one of the few Black women full professors at my university, it can be lonely and frustrating. How does one hold the act of creation and the act of that I picked academia because I wanted health insurance and food, but the life of a professor is not a safety net. While I never wanted to be a starving artist, I turned to the academy for another kind of necessary sustenance. I found a life of the mind and arts a rich place to research, teach, and discuss theories, ideas, novels, autobiographies, films, and plays about Black life. It allows artist/scholars to be paid for what we would do anyway—researching about craft, field, major and minor figures, genre and form.

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As a Black woman the fight to gain and maintain any status in either world is wickedly audacious, but to do so in two different worlds? Madness! But, for me it is also necessary. My art is theatre and performance and my scholarship is in the field of Black cultural studies. As an artist/scholar I'm drawn to exploring a question or idea in two ways: for instance, as a graduate student I examined representations of contemporary black middle class women's sexuality. My study eventually became my first book, *Beyond the Black Lady: Sexuality and the New African American Middle Class* (2009), and a two-woman show, *Single Black Female* (2012), my first produced and published play. In another instance, I considered the portrayal of Africans in contemporary US theatre, which resulted in the essay, " 'A Single Story: African Women as Staged in US Theatre,'" and my play *Dinner*, that explores cultural and class tensions within the African Diaspora. I'm writing a book that analyzes ways contemporary playwrights reimagine Black history, while simultaneously completing the last two installments of my Great Migration trilogy that traces African American migrants from the south to California and their reverse migration. These dual examinations, this dancing around questions or problems, allows me to thoroughly explore answers and present my findings for different audiences and through different means. All of my work as a Black feminist theatre artist/scholar is meant to present the complexity and delicious beauty of Black life and culture in hopes that it will help make Black people freer.

Why do I remain committed to theatre? I adore theatre for many reasons, but one of them is the ease of entry. You can stand on any street corner and recite your monologues or perform a one-person show for free. That's theatre. It may not be Broadway, but not every play or musical should be. Most importantly, it is the magic of theatre that keeps me mesmerized! Watching Viola Davis perform a scene with Denzel Washington in the revival of *Fences* on Broadway gave me chills. At that moment, it's clear that Wilson has presented the ground on which he stood growing up in the Hill District of Pittsburgh. When there is that kind of magic on stage, you can hear a pin drop. I'm sure you've felt it as an audience member because magic is not just on stage but also in the seats. A study at the University College London found that the heartbeats of audiences synchronize while watching live theatre, regardless of whether they know

each other.<sup>[9]</sup> Imagine a theater full of strangers beating with one single heart. As a Black feminist artist/scholar, I'm intrigued by the thought of the hearts of strangers from every walk of life synchronizing during a story that centers the lives and experiences of Black women. No study has determined whether the heartbeats of students synchronize when they read a play together in class, but I do know that I've felt that group heartbeat many times during the two decades I've spent teaching in college classrooms. The magic is real.

Lorraine Hansberry's informal autobiography *To Be Young, Gifted and Black* continues to inspire me. While I am no longer young, I find Hansberry's address to young artists poignant. She implores them to "write if you will; but write about the world as it is and as you think it ought to be and must be—if there is to be a world . . . Write about *our people*: tell their story. You have something glorious to draw on begging for attention. Don't pass it up. Use it. . . The Nation needs your gifts."<sup>[10]</sup> I urge Black artists of any age who also consider themselves scholars to avoid the debate that burdened my younger years. I say choose you; be an artist/scholar because you are both. In this challenging moment, our people need all of your gifts. So on the ground on which you stand, go ahead and dance.

<sup>[1]</sup> August Wilson delivered his remarks on June 26, 1996, at the Theatre Communications Group (TCG) National Conference at Princeton University. It was first published in *American Theatre* (September 1996) and reprinted in *Callaloo*, Volume 20, Number 3, Summer 1997, 493-503.

<sup>[2]</sup> See Ira Berlin's *The Long Emancipation: The Demise of Slavery in the United States* (2015), and Rinaldo Walcott's *Long Emancipation: Moving Toward Black Freedom* (2021) in which both scholars articulate the condition of unfreedom and the slow movement towards full citizenship and rights for Black people globally.

<sup>[3]</sup> Other contemporary Black artist/scholars dancing on their own slash include Elizabeth Alexander, poet, literature professor and President of the Mellon Foundation; Harry J. Elam, Jr., director, theatre scholar, and President of Occidental College; Monica White Ndounou, director, theatre scholar, Executive Director of the CRAFT Institute, and Associate Professor of Theater at Dartmouth; Guthrie Ramsey, composer, musician and University of Pennsylvania musicologist; and Deborah Willis, photographer, curator, photography historian, university professor and Chair of the Department of Photography & Imaging at New York University.

<sup>[4]</sup> Hilton Als, "Toni Morrison and The Ghosts in the House." *The New Yorker*. October 20, 2003. <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2003/10/27/ghosts-in-the-house> (accessed November 1, 2020).

<sup>[5]</sup> Joni L. Jones, "Sista Docta: Performance as Critique in the Academy." *TDR* (Summer 1997) 53-54.

<sup>[6]</sup> Suzan-Lori Parks, "An Equation for Black People Onstage." *The America Play and Other Works*, (1995) 22.

<sup>[7]</sup> The arts are an integral component of Black Studies at the University of Texas at Austin. The Art Galleries at Black Studies (AGBS) is comprised of the Christian-Green Gallery and the Idea Lab. Under the direction of Executive Director Cherise Smith, AGBS has had exhibits featuring the work of Dawoud Bey, Maria Magdalena Campos-Pons, Michael Ray Charles, Genevieve Gaignard, Jacob Lawrence, Deborah Roberts, and Charles White among others. The African and African Diaspora Studies

department, the John L. Warfield Center's Performing Blackness Series, as well as the recently re-named Omi Osun Joni L. Jones Performing Artist Residency has hosted artists such as Charles O. Anderson, Pierre Bennu, Radha Blank, Sanford Biggers, Sharon Bridgforth, Laurie Carlos, Florinda Bryant, Eisa Davis, Colman Domingo, Shirley Jo Finney, E. Patrick Johnson, Krudas Cubensi, Daniel Alexander Jones, Lorraine O'Grady, Rhonda Ross, and Stew.

[8] I've been cautioned against focusing too much critical attention on other playwrights who are more lauded than I, but I've rejected that advice. To ignore their work is to betray my responsibility as a scholar which is to analyze the innovative work of Black artists. More importantly, it dishonors my deep love for Black art and Black culture.

[9] "Audience Members' Hearts Beat Together at the Theatre." *University College London Psychology and Language*

*Sciences*. 17 November 2017 <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/pals/news/2017/nov/audience-members-hearts-beat-together-theatre> (accessed on Oct 28, 2020)

[10] Lorraine Hansberry, *To Be Young, Gifted and Black* (1969)

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