

UC Irvine

Dance Major Journal

Title

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Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/90q1t5vs>

Journal

Dance Major Journal, 14(1)

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Publication Date

2026-09-25

DOI

10.5070/D5.69478

Peer reviewed

Finding inspiration and solidarity in a diaspora dance workshop

by Noraleigh Aubert

In a workshop called “Dancing the Diaspora” given by dance history guest Sakina Ibrahim, we considered contributions of African people and aesthetics to dance throughout time and throughout the world by way of the African Diaspora. I had learned about the diaspora and the transatlantic slave trade many times in various academic classes, but it has only ever come up in one other dance class throughout my time dancing and that was with Dr. Ama Wray in Jazz II last year. I found it amazing the way Ibrahim tracked historical migrations and evolutions through dance, because large historical concepts are so often spoken about but so rarely understood in an embodied way.

One part that was particularly impactful was when we were directed to walk around the space, and then to transition into a shuffling motion keeping our feet close together. While we were doing this Ibrahim reminded us that this kind of movement emerged from the experience of being shackled or chained at the ankles as part of the slave trade. It was a sobering experience to be informed of the grim origins of the movement that I was currently embodying. It brought about the idea of dance not just as a performance art form but as a survival behavior. It was a way of staying alive and exercising one’s agency.

In a situation where people’s ability to move as they pleased was largely restricted, where they were forced to migrate and work against their will, finding small ways in which they still had control over their own body and ability to express must have been vital. The shuffling motion also brought to mind the idea of a ring shout, a spiritual tradition with origins in Africa that was brought to North America through the transatlantic slave trade. It involves group movement in a counterclockwise circle with a shuffling of the feet. It was a practice that was key to allowing people to express their spirituality and feel religiously connected.

The workshop as a whole reminded me of a workshop I participated in last year with another guest, Dr. Shamell Bell, on the practice of Street Dance Activism that she created. Her practice grew out of experience she had protesting with the Black Lives Matter movement. She began teaching dance classes at protests as a way to garner attention but also transform the heavy, angry, frustrated energy into a collective sense of empowerment, inspiration, and motivation to make a difference. In a similar way, during Professor Ibrahim’s workshop I experienced how dance has the ability to cultivate positive energy within a space and among a group of people based on how I felt before we danced together, and how I felt after. This helped me to understand, in a visceral, lived way, how dance could have been used as a survival mechanism to find the energy to go on when it felt impossible.

Just a few weeks before, I had attended an anti-ICE protest on the UCI campus, where a ballet folklórico duet performed. They made the event feel celebratory and full of pride. Fighting for what you believe in is a lot more energetically sustainable when you harness passion and inspiration rather than letting despair and fear consume you. Throughout history groups of people, like African Americans, have been deprived of asserting ownership and control over

their own body in so many ways. Despite it all, movement and dance have been ways to express themselves and innovate, to make the very best of what they had.

Dance has always been, and will always be a way to assert agency, identity, and cultural pride, and also to create change in the energy and spirit of a group of people. The experience reminded me to be more conscious of the privilege it is to have the freedom of movement that I do, and the power I have to change how I experience my life, and the way other people experience life, through movement.

Noraleigh Aubert is entering her junior year at the University of California Irvine pursuing degrees in Dance and Anthropology.