

## Chapter ?

### ELROY JOSEPHS AND THE HIDDEN HISTORY OF

### BLACK BRITISH DANCE

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#### **Abstract**

This chapter gives a brief overview of the career of the black British dance artist and teacher Elroy Josephs and reflects on the reasons for his relative obscurity. Josephs danced with Les Ballets Nègres in 1952. From the late 1950s until the early 1970s, he appeared on stage and screen as a dancer, and sometimes actor, in Britain. In the early 1970s, in Camden, he started a community dance project and was appointed as one of the Greater London Arts Association's (GLAA) first dance animateurs. In 1979 he became the first black lecturer in dance in British higher education teaching at IM Marsh in Liverpool, subsequently part of Liverpool John Moores University. In 1993 he chaired an event "What is Black Dance in Britain?" There are largely unwritten assumptions about the British dance history narrative in which black British artists are largely marginalized. Josephs specialized in jazz dance, and spent his later years working away from the metropolitan center. By offering an overview of Josephs's career, this paper raises questions about how the de facto canon of British dance history can become more diverse and inclusive.

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## **Introduction**

This chapter gives a brief overview of the career of the black British dance artist and teacher Elroy Josephs between his arrival in Britain in 1950 and his death in 1997, and reflects on the reasons for his relative obscurity. Researching Josephs's career raises issues not just about the inclusion in dance historical accounts of once forgotten or marginalized artists but also the need to rethink the basis of selection that led to their being forgotten or marginalized in the first place.

In his opening address, in 1993, at an event in Manchester that discussed the question “What is black dance in Britain?” Elroy Josephs commented:

Of course those of us with a little more knowledge and experience of black dance in this country know of the wonderful tradition which has gone before but has not been built on—as we all pretend for one reason or another it never existed. For my part we should be celebrating 50 years of black dance in Britain and not asking “What is black dance in Britain?”—as someone said, “If you don't know by now you never will.” (Schumann, Kuyateh, and Harpe 1993, 4)

The Arts Council of Great Britain had initiated a forum in Nottingham called “What is Black Dance in Britain?” to engage with the dance sector about the kind of support they should be providing for black British dancers. The Manchester event was

initiated by artists in response to the Arts Council's forum to discuss its implications. At the time, Elroy Josephs was a lecturer in jazz dance at Liverpool John Moores University, probably the first black British dance lecturer in a British university. He had begun his career as a professional dancer in 1950 as a member of Les Ballets Nègres. This was a British company founded by the Jamaican-born choreographer Berto Pasuka in 1946 with West Indian, African, and mixed-race and white British dancers. For seven years they toured Britain and continental Europe and were said to be the first black dance company in Europe (Barnes 2017). Josephs himself, in 1950, had recently arrived in Britain from Jamaica. There is a certain bleakly ironic truthfulness in his suggestion that a wonderful tradition of fifty years of black people dancing professionally in Britain had not been built on and remained largely unknown to those who had not been part of it. In the twenty-first century, Josephs himself is in danger of being forgotten, and the wonderful tradition of fifty years of dancing, to which he referred, is still largely a hidden history.

It is necessary to ask how figures like Josephs have been left almost entirely outside accounts of British dance history. While dance studies needs to become more diverse, it is not enough just to write forgotten figures into existing narratives. It is also necessary to rethink the historiographical and methodological frames that led to their exclusion. This chapter aims to make a start at doing both of these things.

## **Researching Black British Dance**

British dance writers and researchers have approached the history of contemporary dance in Britain in a different way from their colleagues in the United States. A clear

narrative of American modern dance has developed, which starts with Loie Fuller, Isadora Duncan, Ruth St. Denis, and then passes by way of Martha Graham and Doris Humphrey to Merce Cunningham, Paul Taylor, and then the Judson Dance Theater and so-called postmodern dance. Variations on this genealogy can be found in books like Selma Jeanne Cohen's collection *Dance as a Theatre Art* (1974), Marcia Siegel's *Shapes of Change* (1979), Joseph Mazo's *Prime Movers* (1977), and Deborah Jowitt's *Time and the Dancing Image* (1988). British writers have not attempted to identify a comparable, overarching narrative of this kind. Instead, they have generally focused on particular areas. Thus Joan White's *Twentieth-Century Dance in Britain: A History of Five Dance Companies* (1985), as the title suggests, focuses on a few large companies. Stephanie Jordan's *Striding Out: Aspects of Contemporary and New Dance in Britain* (1992) focuses largely on the work of Richard Alston, Siobhan Davies, and Ian Spink but also covers other British dancers working in experimental ways. The Jamaican-born dancer Namron, who performed in one of Davies's pieces, is mentioned briefly, but no other black artists are discussed. In her book *Out of Line: The Story of British New Dance* (1992), Judith Mackrell names a few black companies in a list of companies who performed during the Dance Umbrella Festivals in the late 1970s and 1980s, as does Bonnie Rowell in *Dance Umbrella: The First Twenty-One Years* (2000). In these books, black British dance artists and companies are mentioned in passing or in footnotes, as if they are marginal to the histories these writers are examining. The best contemporary record of black British dance companies are the dance critic Bill Harpe's reviews during the 1970s and 1980s in *The Guardian* newspaper. Two accounts of black British dance history were published in the 2000s (Evans 2002; Ramdhanie 2007), and at the time of writing there have been three edited collections about black British dance (Adewole,

Matchett, and Prescod 2007; Adair and Burt 2017; Akinleye 2018). Christy Adair (1992) and Emily Claid (2006) both include discussions of black British dance artists alongside their white contemporaries, while Adair has also written a monograph on the Phoenix Dance Company (2007). A history of contemporary dance in Britain in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries is lacking if it does not take into account the important contributions that have been made by British-based dancers who are black.

In researching Josephs's life and career, the sources I have drawn on are mainly from the collection of his personal papers that Sue Lancaster and Steve Mulrooney, who studied with Josephs in Liverpool in the 1980s, saved after his death in 1997. From his newspaper cuttings, flyers, lecture notes, grant application letters, and, in particular, his personal CV, it is possible to put together the story of Josephs's career. Another source is Josephs's obituary in *The Guardian*, written by Bill Harpe (1997). For the broader context of his early career, I have looked at material about Les Ballets Nègres, including programs and interviews. And I have also drawn on postcolonial theory to interpret my findings.

One immediate problem is the question of when he was born. The earliest item in his CV is for training he received in 1961 (Josephs 1979). Harpe gives Josephs's year of birth as 1939 (Harpe 1997). This would have made him a young teenager when he danced with Les Ballets Nègres. As Harpe mentioned to me in an email on May 8, 2013, "when [Josephs] was taking up employment as a lecturer at IM Marsh College in Liverpool (now John Moores University) he cut some ten years (I don't know the exact figure) from his age in order to fit in with expectations/retirement age, etc." This means that the years given in the CV for his early training in the UK need to be

treated with suspicion. If he had been born in 1929 rather than 1939, he would have been twenty-one when he arrived in London in 1950. He was part of the Windrush generation. Postwar immigration from the Caribbean to Britain is generally believed to have started with the arrival of the ship MV Empire Windrush on June 22, 1948 (see Phillips 1998). Josephs gives most of the dates for his dance training as the early 1960s. Thus he says that between 1960 and 1964 he studied at The Actors Studio (presumably in New York), while taking ballet classes at the Astafieva Academy in London in 1961–66, and also Caribbean dancing with Ben Johnson in 1964–66. It also lists him studying classical Indian dance, and Spanish and Flamenco dance. He must, however, have begun studying classical ballet with Verishka at the Astafieva Academy when he first arrived in London in 1950. His papers include a program for a performance by Verishka's students on June 5, 1954, in which, since he kept it, one assumes he might have taken part. The other dance and drama classes he mentions would probably have been taken later when he would have been earning enough to pay for professional training.

### **Josephs's Life and Career**

Dance teacher Sue Lancaster told me that Josephs had told her that his parents knew Berto Pasuka and Richie Riley, Pasuka's close friend who was one of the main dancers in *Les Ballets Nègres* (Lancaster 2013). Pasuka, Riley, and his parents had all performed together in 1931 at Edelweiss Park in Kingston, Jamaica. This was an enterprise set up by Marcus Garvey, the Jamaican-born black nationalist political leader, publisher, journalist, entrepreneur, and orator, who founded the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA). Garvey presented popular variety shows and pageants at Edelweiss Park in order to promote his view that people of the black

diaspora should be proud of their race and need to return to Africa, their ancestral homeland (see Barnes 2017). Both Pasuka and Riley subsequently trained with Verishka in London. In order to emigrate from Jamaica to Britain, Josephs told Lancaster, he needed £100, a job, and an address. At his funeral, Lancaster remembers, Riley recalled that Josephs arrived on his doorstep and asked for a job.

The roles that Josephs performed in Pasuka's choreography can be found in the cast lists of Les Ballets Nègres program in 1952 for its last London season at the Twentieth Century Theatre in Westbourne Grove (Ballets Nègres 1952). As El-Roy Josephz, he performed some general ensemble roles together with some smaller named ones. He was thus one of the mourners in *Nine Nights* (1950), one of the dancers in *They Came* (1946), and one of the Black Keys in *Aggrey* (1946). He danced character roles in other ballets. He was the Thief in *Market Day* (1946), the Cripple who is healed in *De Prophet* (1946), the Victim in *Blood* (1948), and the Proprietor of a Harlem Nightclub in *Cabaret 1920* (1950).

There is a distinctly anti-colonial tone to some of the ballet synopses in this program. This is clearest in *They Came*. In the first part of this ballet, British missionaries arrive in a jungle village. Backed by soldiers, they impose Western medicine on the villagers. "The tribal chief resents outside interference on the part of the church, medical science and big industry" (Les Ballets Nègres 1952). The second part is set during the war that, in 1946, had just ended. Black and white people are depicted as equal and seeking common sanctuary. An African soldier is killed while directing them to safety. The fact that modern black soldiers are fighting alongside white ones implies that these colonies are capable of governing themselves. Riley told an

interviewer in 1996 that he knew people involved in anti-colonial struggles (Riley 1996). When he arrived in London in 1946 as a dance student, the Colonial Office sent him to a student hostel where students from the colonies were staying. In the evenings, he recalled, “Pandit Nehru, Nkrumah—quite a few other African exiles used to meet there [at the student hostel] at night and talk politics. But politics referred to the colonies, rather than in England” (Riley 1996). After India’s independence, Jawaharlal Nehru (1889–1964) was the first prime minister of India, and Kwame Nkrumah (1909–72) was the first prime minister of Ghana, having led the country to independence from Britain in 1957.

The ballet *Aggrey* also derives its theme from black British political consciousness of the time. James Emman Kwegyir Aggrey (1875–1927) was a Ghanaian-born academic who studied at Columbia University in New York where he specialized in education. In a lecture in South Africa, he used the keys of the piano as an image of racial harmony saying that to produce harmony you had to play both black and white keys. *The Keys* was the name of a journal produced between 1933 and 1939 by the London-based League of Coloured Peoples. In Pasuka’s ballet, the black keys were danced by male dancers, and the white keys by women. The League of Coloured Peoples included people from the Indian and African continents and the Caribbean, the term “coloured” embracing a wide range of identities.

The French word “*nègre*” in the *Les Ballets Nègres* refers to skin color, while also recalling the French name of Diaghilev’s famous company *Les Ballets Russes*. Postcolonial theorist Stuart Hall writes that in Jamaica in the 1930s and 1940s, “although everyone perfectly well understood what ‘black’ meant, the very word was



taboo, unsayable, especially for the middle classes” (2017, 14). This is something that Riley also commented on in 1996:

Black, at the time, was unfashionable—black people were, would not allow themselves to be called blacks: coloured we didn’t like, because coloured had links that weren’t really—although it was considered respectable by black people to be called coloured, we didn’t think it was right. Therefore we looked around for a name: negro was out of the question. We therefore decided that, if we made it French, or foreign, it would cover the question of black. Therefore we called it Les Ballets Nègres because it was, in every shape and form, ballet in a black idiom. (Riley 1996)

Coming to work in Britain, Josephs was moving from a Caribbean society where social hierarchy was grounded in graduated shades of blackness to a country where these shades of difference were no longer socially distinguishable, but there was a sharp and often brutal distinction between black and white. This then was the broader social and political climate that Josephs entered when he joined Les Ballets Nègres.

When Pasuka disbanded his company in 1953, Josephs became one of the groups of what Bob Ramdhanie calls “giggers” and “dance acts,” terms he invented “as short hand labels to categorize solo and informal dancers” (2005, 149) from the Caribbean making a living in Britain from the 1940s to the 1970s. In Josephs’s papers, there is a program for *The Jazz Train* at Blackpool Opera House in October 1955. This was a musical review written and directed by the African American artist Mervyn Nelson.

Josephs may have just joined the show, as he is not listed in the original London cast in April of that year. The significance of this is that Josephs would later specialize in teaching jazz dance. A newspaper cutting from the weekly magazine *TV Guide* in 1959 is about Josephs becoming a regular member of the cast of the Rediffusion TV music show *Cool for Cats* (Dalzeli, 1959). This was one of the early British shows in which The Dougie Squires Dancers, who included both black and white dancers, performed choreographed routines to current pop hits. In this article, Josephs comments that “aspiring dancers, actors and singers who are born here and complain because they don’t get a break have no idea how much harder it is to ‘get in’ when you have a black face” (1). This is suggestive of how Josephs was thinking about the position of black dance artists in Britain in 1959.

Publicity materials from this period for Elroy Josephz Productions (he seems to have spelt Josephz with a “z” for his professional dancing) show a small company who performed in cabarets in Madrid in the 1960s. He describes himself in his CV as a dancer, choreographer, actor, and producer, adding, “My career has always been a mixture of performing and teaching and I ran my own Dance Studio from 1960–67 and my own professional Dance Company which toured Europe 1967–70” (Josephs 1979). In Britain, Josephs continued to appear in live theater, film, and television drama. He was, for example, in an early TV series of *Doctor Who*, playing the role of Jamaica in several episodes of *The Smugglers*, which was broadcast in September and October 1964. In 1968 he was in the film version of *Quatermass and the Pit*. In 1979 he appeared in John Schlesinger’s film *Yanks* and the ITV dramatization of *Brideshead Revisited*. On stage he appeared in several productions in provincial theaters. These include *West Side Story* at the Belgrade Theatre Coventry in 1970 (see

figure 1), and *Robinson Crusoe* at the Bristol Hippodrome, Liverpool Empire, and Richmond Theatre 1970–72. Josephs may have been supporting his dancing through taking acting jobs. The ability to perform dramatic parts was nevertheless already hinted at in the character roles he had performed in Pasuka’s ballets. **(Fig. 1 near here)**

In 1973–75, Josephs was “Chairman of the Dance Committee and dance specialist for the British zone of the Second World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture in Lagos.” As Hélène Neveu Kringelbach (2013) explains, the politics around these African festivals is significant. The 1966 World Festival of Negro Arts in Dakar, under the sponsorship of then President Léopold Senghor and informed by his notion of *négritude*, was widely criticized for not including artists from the Maghreb—the countries of North Africa. The francophone concept of *négritude*, initially proposed by Aimé Césaire as an anti-colonial aesthetic strategy, stressed the pride in being-in-the-world as Africans and people of African descent. A rivalry developed between francophone ideas about *négritude* and English and American ideas about Pan-Africanism. Nigerian writer Wole Soyinka, whose *The Road* won the best play award in the Dakar festival, famously criticized the notion of *négritude*, saying, “The tiger does not proclaim its tigerness, it jumps on its prey” (Soyinka, quoted in Jahn 1968, 265). To include the Maghreb, the 1969 Pan-African Cultural Festival was held in Algiers. Senghor was disappointed that the 1975 festival, with which Josephs was involved, did not return to Dakar but was held in Lagos in oil-rich Nigeria. He and some of his Caribbean and African American friends like Aimé Césaire and Langston Hughes boycotted it (Neveu Kringelbach 2013, 43–53). This is the context in which Josephs developed the British contribution to the festival in Lagos. His involvement is

also significant for his later comments on the “wonderful tradition” of black dancing in Great Britain.

In London in the 1970s, Josephs became involved in what would become the community dance movement. In his CV he wrote, “I have extensive experience of working creatively in a multiracial community, initiating dance classes, workshops and performances” (Josephs 1979). He founded Dance Theatre Workshop No. 7 which, he wrote, “is community based and involves young people of many nationalities and their parents” (Josephs 1979). They gave performances at the Young Vic, the Cockpit Theatre, the “LUYC” Summer Festival in Camden, and the Islington Dance Festival. Other community projects, he wrote, included “setting up summer workshops involving up to 1100 children aged 5–13 years doing dance/drama culminating in performances” (Josephs 1979). He stated that he was also an advisor to the Commission for Racial Equality and the Minority Arts Advisory Service. When Josephs took up his teaching position in Liverpool in 1979, Carl Campbell took over this project developing it into Dance Company 7. Josephs’s CV also lists a Dance Fellowship in 1978–79 funded by the Greater London Arts Association. In a conversation on May 21, 2016 choreographer Fergus Early (2016), a key dance artist who helped develop independent dance in London in the 1970s and 1980s, remembers that, following the lead given by the Gulbenkian Foundation in funding Veronica Lewis as a dance animateur in Cheshire, GLAA decided to appoint some dance animateurs in London, and Josephs was one of the first of these. Animateurs worked in a community context to promote and stimulate all forms of dance by organizing classes, workshops, and performances. They aimed to bridge the gap between dance as art and the public at large and develop links with schools. Lancaster says Josephs

took a teacher training course at University College London, though this is not mentioned in his CV. One other interesting detail among Josephs's papers is information about his master of arts in ethnic studies and race relations, awarded in 1989 by Liverpool University. For this, he wrote about police and community relations in Toxteth, Liverpool, following the violent confrontations between the local police and the black community that flared up in 1981.

### **Josephs From a Postcolonial Point of View**

While Josephs lived a full and interesting life, and made a significant contribution to British dance, little of what he did fits into the kinds of events generally recorded in accounts of dance in Britain in the late twentieth century. This is largely a history of choreographers, dance productions, and companies. It is an approach to history in which there is a big gap between Les Ballets Nègres 1946–53 and the founding by black dance artists of British companies like Steel 'n Skin, MAAS Movers, Ékome, and Kokuma in the 1970s (for a timeline of the development of black dance in Britain, see Adair and Burt 2017, 184–8). Josephs was a member of Les Ballets Nègres but only at the end of that company's life. *The Jazz Train* would be counted as popular entertainment rather than as a serious artistic production. To understand the significance of the “wonderful tradition” that Josephs referred to in 1993, it is necessary to adopt methodologies from postcolonial theory and read his career through the lens of a critique of the methodologies that exclude him from the canon. A postcolonial approach is also, of course, relevant because Josephs, like many of those who Ramdhanie calls “giggers” and “dance acts,” had been born in British colonies.

Jamaica only became independent in 1962, so that, during his formative years in Jamaica and then London, Josephs was a colonial subject. Riley recalled that Les Ballets Nègres was not allowed to participate in the program of the 1951 Festival of Britain “on the grounds that this was a festival of British culture and not colonial culture” (Riley, 1996). Hall has written about “the colonial relationship and the distortions of living in a world culturally dependent and dominated from some center outside the place where the majority of people lived” (1995, 4). Dancers like Josephs and Pasuka were among the artists and writers from the Caribbean who, in the 1940s and 1950s, as Hall puts it,

felt at that moment that they had to migrate [to London] to fulfill their artistic ambitions. They came, of course, to claim their place as artists in a movement from which, as colonials, they had been marginalized but to which in every other sense they felt they naturally belonged and that, in a way, belonged to them. (Hall 2005, 5)

This is the context in which Josephs took ballet classes. Rex Nettleford (1933–2010), Jamaican scholar, founder of the National Dance Theatre Company of Jamaica, and vice-chancellor emeritus of the University of the West Indies, notes that “as soon as European classical ballet was accepted by the wielders of social power in the mother country, Caribbean cultural leaders immediately followed in their footsteps” (1993, 91). When Riley migrated to London in 1946, he came as a student who had already been accepted for a course at the Astafieva Academy. This suggests that he may already have had some ballet classes in Jamaica. Josephs may also have attended ballet classes before arriving in Britain. In his CV, Josephs wrote that he “studied

advanced Ballet of the Russian Imperial School and the Cecchetti method with Mlle. Verishka of Princess Astafieva's Academy under the patronage of Serge Diaghilev." Verishka, born Vera Jackson, taught at Astafieva's Academy, taking over as its director after Astafieva's death in 1934. Verishka was also the ballet mistress for the Markova-Dolin company from 1935 and briefly taught Margot Fonteyn ("Obituary: Vera Jackson" 1971, 83). Josephs, having studied, as a schoolboy in Jamaica, the same curriculum that was being taught in schools in Britain, would have felt entitled, as Hall suggests, to learn the same techniques as those practiced by members of the British Royal Ballet. The problem was that, as Nettleford puts it, "Until the independence arrangements of the 1960s ... [Jamaica] played the wily suntanned savage of a Caliban to the magisterial tutelary authority of Great Britain's Prospero" (1993, 92). And even after independence, artists from the former colonies found that they were ignored and marginalized by cultural institutions that they had been led to believe were enlightened and should therefore recognize and support artistic value wherever it appeared.

Notes from Josephs's course in jazz dance show how he developed his pedagogical approach from his knowledge of ballet. Harpe observed in Josephs's obituary that

Jazz dancing is perceived as commercial, high-powered entertainment. But it must also be—as Elroy would remind his students—spiritual, eloquent and expressive. "There is," Elroy would say, "the top of the tree, and that's Hollywood. But there are also the roots of the tree, and they go back to Africa—and I'm teaching you the roots of jazz dancing." (Harpe 1997, 18)

The documentation that Lancaster and Mulrooney have kept is evidence of the rigor with which Josephs developed this course and his debt to the grounding in ballet that he had received through his classes with Verishka. At the time of writing, Lancaster continues to teach Josephs's approach to jazz dance, and his legacy also lives on within all those who Josephs taught during his life time.

While he was teaching this jazz course, Josephs was also analyzing the appalling disconnect between police and members of black communities in Toxteth. This points to the disillusionment experienced by him and his generation of artists from the Caribbean. This disillusionment underlies Josephs's comments, at the 1993 forum, about the wonderful tradition that had not been built on but which "we all pretend for one reason or another ... never existed" (Schumann, Kuyateh, and Harpe 1993, 4). The event at which Josephs was speaking was one in which artists responded to the closure of The Black Dance Development Trust, despite the fact that, as 'Funmi Adewole points out, the Arts Council had received excellent reports about its work (Adewole 2017). With funds from the Arts Council and some city councils, the trust had provided summer schools in which international teachers of neo-traditional African and Caribbean dance and drumming taught classes to the young black British dancers in the African Caribbean dance companies founded in the late 1970s and early 1980s. They therefore represented the artistic aspirations of a younger generation of black dancers from that of Josephs and Les Ballets Nègres. Hall notes: "Those separated by migration from their original homes but profoundly alienated by racism from any sense of belonging to, or recognition by, British society, were haunted by questions of identity and belonging" (2005, 12). Whereas Josephs taught



jazz dance, The Black Dance Development Trust responded to the needs of a generation of dreadlocked dancers of Caribbean heritage who felt the need to reconnect with African roots through practicing and performing African and Caribbean dance and drumming. Part of the problem for the Arts Council, though not necessarily for the dancers or dance companies themselves, was that The Black Dance Development Trust only supported dancers working with neo-traditional African and Caribbean dance forms, and not those working with other dance styles such as jazz, tap, hip-hop, and Western contemporary dance, or indeed in hybrid or creolized fusions of dance styles. While these varying approaches made perfect sense to the dancers and their audiences, the Arts Council dance officers, and the majority of British ballet critics who advised them, seemed incapable of understanding or appreciating them, hence the question “What is black dance in Britain?” As noted at the beginning of this chapter, Josephs spoke at an event arranged by dancers and practitioners in response to one organized by the Arts Council.

The particular approach to Jazz dance that Josephs himself taught could perhaps be described as a fusion, and it is significant in this context that, as I noted earlier, he listed in his CV his professional training in ballet, classical Indian dance, and Spanish, Flamenco, African, and Caribbean dance. All of these identities are found in the genealogy of people in Jamaica and other Caribbean islands. This is because the original pre-Columbian Caribe people had their lands taken away by British, French, Spanish, and Portuguese settlers who then brought over slaves from Africa and, after the abolition of slavery, indentured plantation workers from India. The same year as the public forums were discussing the question “What is black dance in Britain?” Hall gave a lecture titled “Negotiating Caribbean Identities.” In this he said:

What I want to suggest is that despite the dilemmas and vicissitudes of identity through which Caribbean people have passed and continue to pass, we have a tiny but important message for the world about how to negotiate identity. (Hall 1995, 4)

Their message was that identity is not the rediscovery of roots, “but what they as cultural resources allow a people to produce. Identity is not in the past to be found, but in the future to be constructed” (Hall 1995, 14). When he goes on to speak of “the enormously rich and complex cultural histories to which history has made [Caribbean people] heirs” (14), Hall is surely in accord with Josephs’s claim that the wonderful tradition of black British dancing should be recognized for what it is and duly celebrated. In the second decade of the twenty-first century, many black British dancers are still waiting for this, while the rise of a xenophobic populist nationalism in Britain and other European countries means that questions about how to negotiate identities in inclusive ways are more pertinent than ever.

### **Rethinking Dance Studies**

Research into the careers of artists like Josephs does more than just fill in the gap between the closure of Les Ballets Nègres and the founding of companies like Steel ‘n Skin, MAAS Movers, Ékome, and Kokuma. In order to appreciate the contributions that black British artists have made to British dance culture, it is necessary to rethink the frames of reference on which dance studies depends. This requires recognition of the conditions of possibility for professional careers in the dance sector and the relations of power that define these. Josephs might have trained in the Cecchetti

method, but there was little hope of employment at that time for dancers of color in a British ballet company. It is therefore necessary to investigate what these dancers' aspirations were and how they negotiated the conjuncture of contradictory forces that determined what they could achieve. This goes some way toward explaining the difference between the relatively assimilationist aspirations of dancers of Josephs's generation who were influenced by James Aggrey's ideas—like Richie Riley and other members of Les Ballets Nègres—and the wider diversity of approaches and hybrid mixtures of dance styles that were explored by younger generations. Following Hall, all these generations of dancers have a message that is still important today about how to negotiate identities.

Josephs was clearly concerned about the problems that black people experienced in Britain, and this impacted on his work as a dance artist and teacher. I have noted, throughout this account of his life, his awareness of black political discourses. His parents had been exposed to Marcus Garvey's ideas. Les Ballets Nègres's ballets were informed by anti-colonial ideas circulating among black artists and intellectuals in London at the time, as well as the ideas of the League of Coloured People.

Interviewed for *TV Guide* in 1959, he hints at racial prejudices against black performers. In the 1970s he had firsthand experience of the debates around Pan-Africanism through his participation in organizing the Arts Festival in Lagos (Dalzeli, 1959). In the 1980s he wrote about the violent confrontation between poor black communities and the police in Toxteth. In his course on jazz dance he taught about its roots in Africa, just as his parents had danced in productions that aimed to make Jamaicans proud of their African heritage. In the 1990s he spoke out against the marginalization of the legacy of his generation of black dance artists. Though he was

not an activist, Josephs's life work as a dancer and teacher was informed by his black political consciousness.

To ensure that the wonderful tradition of black British dance to which Josephs referred does take its place within histories of theater dance in Britain, it is necessary, as I noted earlier, to rethink critical and historiographical methodologies. For the purposes of the present research, these concern the times, the places, and the hierarchy of styles. It is widely accepted that dance works belong to their times, coming out of and responding to particular tensions and contradictions within social and political contexts. The particular black British histories to which Josephs's career belong are not well known and need elaborating to an extent that would not normally be necessary if the research topic was a white dance artist. This is why there have been so many references to postcolonial theory in this chapter.

Dance scholars often seem to assume that important events only happen in leading metropolitan centers, and that dance artists who lived and worked elsewhere must have been minor or else they would have wanted and needed to take part in the artistic scene in a cultural capital. Josephs came from the colonial periphery to the capital of the mother country and then moved on to what opinion formers in the capital consider the provincial margins. Dance scholars sometimes need to expand the range of works and artists that they choose to investigate by blurring the boundaries between center and periphery, between 'high' and 'low' (i.e., 'serious' art and popular entertainment), and by recognizing the transformative agencies of artists from Africa, Asia, and the Caribbean who have contributed to metropolitan Western dance culture.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, the dominant forms of popular commercial dance since the early years of the twentieth century have drawn heavily on black cultural forms that have their roots in Africa. In some instances black choreographers deliberately choose to explore these popular dance forms in their work because these are more relevant to the communities from which they come than forms like ballet and contemporary dance. Josephs may have studied ballet with a leading ballet teacher but, as I've noted, the possibility of working in a British ballet company at that time was not open to him. One should not, however, assume that he only specialized in jazz dance because that was an area that was open to him, particularly in the light of his recognition of its roots in African aesthetic forms. It is these kinds of methodological approaches that need to be adopted if we are not to forget figures like Elroy Josephs and, in the end, by doing so, gain a richer and more diverse understanding of our collective histories.

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