

## The Coalition for Diasporan Scholars Moving, part 2 -- A Conversation with A'Keitha Carey and Liana Conyers

Liana Conyers in conversation with A'Keitha Carey

To deepen the conversation around the issues addressed in Jaamil Olawale Kosoko's discussion with Brenda Dixon Gottschild, we asked two dancer-scholars to share and discuss their own encounters with systemic racism in university dance programs. Here they describe the way assumptions and stereotypes made about their bodies, identities, backgrounds, and interests have affected their research, careers, creative work, and physical and mental health, raising important questions and concerns about the way hierarchies of power and accessibility in higher education not only affects individual lives, but hinders the possibility for diverse dance faculties, curriculums, and dance pedagogies in programs across the country.

**Liana Conyers:** I entered a three year program in the dance department of the University of Oregon as an MFA candidate and graduate teaching fellow in 2009. I knew immediately that I was part of less than one percent of people of color on that campus. In my first year, a faculty member stated, without fully knowing my background in dance, that because I'm a black woman, I would have a leg up on him in the field. Without seeing any of my work, he told me I make "black art," inferring based on his assumptions about me, that he wouldn't respect the type of work I would make. Navigating this sort of stigma (for lack of a better word) ended up becoming a focus for me during the rest of my time in the program, though I originally applied to study improvisation. Students and faculty constantly made the assumption that because I'm black, I grew up with and perform a very specific aesthetic. Yes, I talk about my experience and my autobiography in my work, but I have a more global approach. I don't feel like my art or anyone's art should be defined by someone else.

That same year, I was assigned to teach the highest level hip-hop class even though other graduate students had more experience, and had been teaching and studying hip hop for years. I am not a hip-hop dancer. I do a little bit of house and some other things, but I didn't understand why I was given that class when there were others who were more qualified to teach it. When I approached the department chair about my reservations, she insisted I could do it; threatening to cancel the class when I offered to switch with another more experienced student who had been teaching hip-hop there for years. I was given the ultimatum to either teach the class or cause it to be canceled, so I went ahead with the

class because I needed the funding I received from teaching. In that class, I had to sit down on several occasions with students (the majority of whom were white) to discuss their behavior -- all of the sudden they would put on a persona, like, "we're doing hip-hop now." One student said the N-word in class, and I had to explain to everyone that just because they are in a hip-hop class, does not mean that word is suddenly okay to use. It's disrespecting me, it's disrespecting hip-hop culture, it's disrespecting all people of color.

Another professor repeatedly touched my hair, even after I told him not to because it makes me uncomfortable. I wore my afro all the time; when I am sweating and dancing, it's easier to have the afro without the twist, or whatever the case may be. This professor justified his actions by saying that I had hair similar to his wife's, and so, continued to do it. Students would even try to touch my hair and I would say, "Don't do that. This is *my* body." You don't put your hands on someone else. That can make you very irritated when someone is not respecting your boundaries.

Another professor liberally threw around the N-word in one of my first-year seminar classes, while discussing a new production on campus. The university theatre department was rehearsing for Uncle Tom's Cabin in. In the middle of our dance seminar he said to me, "Oh well, you can put your hair in cornrows, so how about you go audition for this play." That was highly offensive. And, being a dance MFA, why would I go audition for a play while I'm trying to get my degree? So, I went to the Bias Response Team (they did have that setup on campus). They addressed these issues and others with faculty members; however, this just caused everyone to avoid me. I received the stigma of "angry black woman". I think that is something that is thrown around for black women in general, but there is nothing wrong with being a passionate individual and standing up for yourself; that does not mean you are an irate, angry person all the time.

This all happened my first year, so that by my second year I was completely depressed. I felt down on myself all the time. I went through periods of being angry and periods of blaming myself, thinking this was my fault. "I chose this university and I'm enduring these experiences. What am I doing wrong?" I developed a rash all over my body, I was constantly sick, and there wasn't a month I didn't lose my voice, or need to take a sick day, when that has never been the case in my life.

In 2011, I was in my last year of the program. I initially contacted Brenda Dixon Gottschild for advice on how to apply her interview practices to my thesis; however, in the process of my final year I encountered several more instances of racism, which led me to reach out to her in other ways as well.

For instance, the most blatant example took place in a meeting with my thesis advisor, when he asserted that my work is considered “uppity, nigger work.” I did not know how to process that information or handle it. The pain and the outright racism that I was experiencing was overwhelming. After contacting Brenda, she formed a network of support for me that included Halifu Osumare, Thomas DeFrantz, and Sharon Wray. They formed a circle of scholarly support as well a network of friendship, encouraging and helping me through those last few months of my graduate program. All along, there was tension with the department chair who initially said she was there to help me. But, it became very clear that in my last two years, there was little support and that, according to her (and other faculty comments confirm this) I had done something to her. I was supposed to be a part of this community and look up to her. According to another faculty member, I owed her something.

**A’Keitha Carey:** I met Brenda in 2010 at a conference in London and then again in 2011 in Jamaica. Through those two encounters I started to build a relationship with her, and she would send me different job postings. At some point I felt comfortable with this legend, essentially. As I had my own difficult encounters within academia, I honestly did not know what to do or who else to turn to.

I was previously employed as Assistant Professor of Dance at SUNY Potsdam for two years. When it came time to begin the process for reappointment to my position, I became aware that there were deep issues within my department, particularly with one colleague who wrote authored my reappointment letter. Reappointment, for those who are unfamiliar, refers to the peer review process for academics that are on a tenure track. This process varies per institution. At SUNY Potsdam, after my first year I had to produce a folder/file that included all of the work that I had done since my hire date, like a formalized progress report. This folder/file is reviewed by your reappointment committee; comments, critiques and suggestions are made, and the Chair makes a recommendation for reappointment or not. This information is then forwarded to the Dean, who forwards their recommendation to the Provost/President. The reappointment process can be every year or every other year until the recommendation for tenure. So, this report is absolutely crucial to one’s career as it not only secures one’s position for the subsequent years, but it can also be used as evidence to support claims of incompetence, insubordination or otherwise. It serves as documented proof. This is why I found it imperative to address the false statements and allegations in the document because it could potentially ruin my academic career.

As I read the reappointment letter, I realized, this was the same individual, who in a previous informal conversation told me I was arrogant, rude, and that I had no problems

with self-promotion and all these issues pertaining to my time away. As a new faculty member this was my first full time position. I really didn't know how to handle or address the way his personal issues with me could seriously affect my career.

As time progressed, I had many escalating issues with this particular colleague, and no support. During a meeting with my reappointment committee, I decided to address the letter he wrote. They all just sat there as I went through each point. No one said anything. I felt like I was on trial. After presenting my case, this particular colleague realized he made a huge error in writing my report, and admitted to using the document to "vent." I thought the chair of the reappointment committee would have said something in response to his admission, but there was just silence.

Problems with this colleague ensued. He used his power and authority to make me feel inferior, he questioned my technique, he interfered in my relationship with my students by telling them I wasn't really teaching a particular technique, he complained about my music being too loud -- this office bullying (in my opinion) continued throughout the end of the year. In a meeting with the chair, I sought advice on how to deal with what felt like an unhealthy environment, even suggesting that I could move my office. She denied this request and inferred that because he was a highly respected senior faculty member with many awards, she was not going to reprimand him. In essence, she let me know that his position would supersede and override my complaints. After meeting with the provost, and again presenting my case, the chair finally allowed me to move my office; however, it then became clear that the chair now had issues with me -- perhaps she felt threatened that I went to the provost or that I undermined her authority.

At this point, I was physically getting very ill and had to go on sick leave in April. I was hospitalized several times, and transported to the hospital in Vermont, where they could not treat me. Finally they determined I had some rare disease called Vasculitis. I've never been sick like that a day in my life. But now, in the midst of this turmoil at work, I had a rash all over my body and my internal organs were shutting down. I was literally dying. Every time I went back to the doctor I was two pounds lighter. I lost twenty pounds overall. My doctor refused to let me go back to work, faxing a medical report to Human Resources. I didn't hear anything from them for two weeks later, when they informed me that they made an appointment for me to see a new medical physician in Syracuse, New York on September 11<sup>th</sup>. It was mandatory that I show up.

I found this action by the institution offensive because it seemed as though the institution was somehow questioning the reality and validity of both me and my physicians claims concerning my illness. I was following the advice of my physician who refused to clear me

to go back to work because he was concerned with my work environment and how it drastically affected my health. He told me he thought I was going to die. How could he send me back there?

The fact that weeks would pass before I got responses to emails concerning various issues from both the then chair of Theater and Dance and HR, further frustrated the situation since (a) it was a time sensitive issue to me, concerning my well being and a career I worked very hard for, and (b) my condition naturally would change over time as a result of treatment and being in a less stressful environment. By the time I was required to see their physician, my physical appearance was improving, so one might conclude that there was no apparent physical issue. My health concerns at this point were mostly psychological and emotional. It was not clear in the letter that HR sent me if the physician was assessing my mental or physical health. Honestly, I was in no psychological position to be questioned by "their" physician. Also, the letter had no specific information concerning where I was going for this medical exam. It was quite confusing and unclear and I was not comfortable going by myself. And, to insist someone engage in any activity that would include travels to NY on September 11 is insensitive. This truly was the biggest association to my psychological stress. I felt that I was being set up. If I had not shown up for the medical exam, I believe that I would have been fired for insubordination.

Psychologically and physically, I knew this could not continue and I made a decision to stop: I tried to regain control of my life and my situation by moving forward with a resignation. It seemed like the only way to regain my power and my agency. Essentially that's what I did. Nothing happened. I went through all of the particular courses of action, affirmative action, EEOC, the Dean, the Provost. Nothing happened. I left without any justice. That's my story.

**Liana:** As part of the coalition, we have an email network where people's stories are shared. Individuals -- from undergraduate students to faculty members up for tenure -- talk about what's happening within their department. The stories are baffling. I know of at least three individuals who ended up resigning and leaving their programs because they could not deal physically or psychologically with the abuse of their superiors who are often white. Students wonder why there aren't more African American faculty in their departments. These countless stories are part of the answer to that question. There is a big divide and I think it is something that needs to be discussed and addressed.

I'm sorry that you had to go through this, that any of us have to go through this. You would think that with the type of hierarchy that is put in place -- as far as having EEOC, affirmative action, the Dean, the Provost -- something would be done.

**A'Keitha:** As I sent my letter of resignation, I knew that the institution needed to be exposed. I sent a mass email out to all of the faculty and administrators, including Brenda and different organizations across the country with the hope that someone would look at it. Brenda immediately jumped on it, which was such a relief after dealing with the situation from April to September, when I resigned with no reprieve to course of action -- nothing. She connected me with a support system and within that small window the opportunity for healing began for me. But, this cannot continue to happen. We as women in academia should not continue to endure what we have to endure for our own safety and sanity and that of our students as well. The students where I now teach at TWU have truly engaged with me and informed me of the relevance and importance of having a faculty of color in the department. It is essential, not only for us, but for them, because they are our future. If we are not there then they are not encouraged to aspire for those positions.

When we entered into these institutions, there were certain expectations of us and we shattered those and therefore became the problem. We were punished for that. They thought I would fall in line with their expectations and assumptions of me, but is that what diversity is about? I tried to have this conversation with them. It's not about a person of color coming in and going along with what you are already doing. Doesn't diversity require the engagement of a process wherein certain hierarchies, distributions of power, and existing structures, ideologies, environments, pedagogies, and ways of being are collectively questioned and transformed to accommodate and support all people? Why are we being punished for doing just that? I think that is what happened with your chair.

**Liana:** Right, and I think we've confronted a very limited view of blackness. If you don't fit that mold or the assumptions based around that, it becomes a problem. I don't come from the Alvin Ailey aesthetic. So if that's what you were expecting, then you shouldn't have accepted me. You knew I came from an pedagogy based around improvisation. Here's what I do, here's what type of impact I want to have on this community, here's what I want to get from this institution and that not what's happening. You know that I don't teach hip-hop, so why are you giving me hip-hop? I can understand wanting me to grow, but didn't you give me ballet...

So, the coalition was formed by Brenda because many scholars and students were reaching out to her for support, and she finally said enough is enough, it's time to make this network happen. She partnered with Lela Aisha Jones and Saroya Corbett to start the network, and the email went out to as many individuals as possible to form this coalition and provide support. Recently at the International Association of Black in Dance

conference you and I shared a panel called “Troubling the Waters: Systemic Racism in Higher Education” with Brenda, James Frazier, and Charles Anderson, where we all discussed our situations with systemic racism. It was especially fitting for it to be at IABD (International Association of Blacks in Dance) because there were a large number of individuals coming to celebrate Black Dance. Those in attendance to our panel, just to name a few, were Onye Ozuzu, Jaamil Kosoko, Saroya Corbett, and several other scholars from around the nation. It was useful to hear other people stories, to discuss how we can give each other support, and how we can keep this going for the next generation of dance scholars of color.

**A’Keitha:** A lot of us are in such isolated situations, hundreds of miles away from any other person in color in higher education. The panel allowed us to see that there *are* others, even those who are administrators. It gave us the opportunity to hear other scholars sharing their stories -- many of which are unfortunately so common that all you have to do is insert your name. It is the same thing happening everywhere; our stories are intersecting and related, almost as if it were a formula. Five or ten years from now, I don’t want a student or a faculty younger than myself coming to me with the same problems that I (and many of us) are dealing with now. We need to get tenure so that we can be in the decision-making conversation that supports other faculty and students of color. This has to stop.

**Liana:** It has to stop. I love the fact that you are saying you want to stay in higher education and provide your knowledge and support to individuals. The shame of it is that there are so many people who don’t want to go into higher education. They are over it because they feel it is a broken system and that there is no mending.

**A’Keitha:** You have to fight and resist from within. The amount of information that I have within me and the passion and the drive that I have needs to be in higher education. In order for me to make a change, to see curriculum change, to see other techniques fit into core technique components, I need to be there to say, “*This* is what we need to be doing, these things are equal, and that hierarchy needs to be shattered.” The only way for that to happen is to have our strength and our voices working within higher education. bell hooks talks about patience, having that patience to continue to fight and to love. It’s not easy, but when I look out and see the transformation and the impact that I’ve made on those students of color at TWU, that is what inspires me to stay and fight this battle. Coming into this institution as a woman of color, I’ve witnessed my presence in this role affect other female students of color: they become interested in the Africanist aesthetic and they’re mobilized to find their voices within their own bodies. That is important, since

they do not often get that chance within current academic dance programs where that identity that has been removed. It needs to be reintroduced into higher education because students of color need to identify with themselves.

**Liana:** I completely agree. When you were talking about patience, it made me think of the issues of psychological health and self care that arise when confronting this sort of adversity.

**A'Keitha:** What are the coping mechanisms? -- this is definitely a conversation within our community. We are still struggling to get psychological help and therapy, but it is essential. After I left New York, I ended up in another situation by myself and with no support system. I ended up going to see a psychologist on campus and it was helpful for the brief time that I was there to find my strength again. I also sought out other opportunities to connect with other scholars and peers through public events, community organizations, and church. And, I found other ways to release the stress physically so that I didn't just internalize it.

I felt like I had no one to talk to and it just ate away at me, which brings on depression, and then you just close yourself off from everyone. You are not the same person. I found it very important to find a life outside of academia. It cannot be your soul [sole] priority. There are those that have been in these departments for twenty and thirty years -- it's their life! They feel as though they own everything in the department, in the building, the curriculum, everything that they've developed; there is an ownership that is placed on these things. So when you would like to see change happen, it's like you are attacking them. It's a personal thing for a lot of people. Overall, I think it is essential that you have a life outside of the academy. You have to for your own sanity.

**Liana:** That boundary between inside and outside the academy is tricky. There were numerous times when I just got out of a meeting where someone just said something highly inappropriate to me and racist, when a student approaches me crying because they were called the N word in town. What I found is that you are not only looking after yourself and your care, but also these younger individuals. When you give them advice to, say, do fun activities outside of school or talk to their friends, those also have to apply to you as well.

**A'Keitha:** For me, therapy was the last resort -- mind you I had been severely ill, I thought I was going to die, I left my job and relocated. Therapy was the very last thing that I did. I wonder if things would have been different if I had started earlier. I don't know. But, *it needs to happen*. We shouldn't be afraid to talk openly about these things that are



happening to us and we shouldn't feel ashamed either. We are silent either because there is no one to talk to or we are afraid of saying the wrong thing in these complex, confusing, stressful situations where our careers and livelihoods are on the line. For example, my colleague would, in the same meeting, use his position of power and authority to attack me, while calling himself my "mentor." He most certainly was not my mentor. He did not behave as one and I did not see him as one. A mentor would not do what he did to me. How is that a mentor/mentee relationship? It sounds more like oppressor/oppressed, colonizer/colonized dynamic to me. It was a situation in which power and control was wielded through language that did not accurately reflect the reality of the situation or our relationship. How do you speak to that?

**Liana:** Exactly. The same thing was said to me. Those faculty members have caused me anguish. I had to change my focus because of things that people were saying and doing. I was on my own in terms of the research it required -- most of the faculty had not read the literature I was reading for my thesis, though they made very blanket statements about the scholars. For instance, I was told that Brenda is militant. If you ever meet Brenda, she is not at all. Radical thinking? Yes. It's considered radical thinking because it's not fitting in that paradigm of the oppressor. But militant, I think not!

**A'Keitha:** Returning to your question about the roles or stereotypes of women of color who speak up: The radical is key. That's such a great observation and contradiction. Brenda is not, but she is not going to allow you to present information that is false. That's where her works come in.

**Liana:** What do you think are the roles of stereotypes given to women of color who speak up? Do you have a running list?

**A'Keitha:** The first two that this colleague assigned to me were: "arrogant" and "rude". "Bitch" is on that list as well, though I've not been directly called one. "Militant." On the other end of the spectrum, I was raised in the Caribbean, and I'm kind of old school, so I call all my teachers "Professor so and so". I have my students call me Professor Carey. In every situation that I've been in, it has been problematic for the student to make that adjustment. I was doing that before I encountered scholarship on academic racism, which basically advises women of color going into higher education to demand and claim respect in these sorts of ways. "Professor" is going to let those students know that we're not friends, I'm not your mammy, I'm not your caretaker, I am your professor, and you will acknowledge and respect me for that.

That's one of the main reasons that I do that, particularly because I am of color and I am

female and I'm younger than a lot of other professors there. I don't want those lines, those boundaries of respect to be broken. Yes, I am here for you, and I'm going to help you, but know what those boundaries are. For me that gives me a certain level of comfort knowing that as soon as a walk into this classroom, you have an automatic respect for me because you are addressing me as professor so and so. I just read of a similar instance on Crunk Feminist blog (<http://www.crunkfeministcollective.com/>). I think maybe that is where the old idea of "bitch" comes in because I demand a certain level of respect and militant because I am very passionate about the work that I'm doing. You are in the classroom, and we're going to work, and I'm going to teach you and I'm going to train you the best of my ability.

That is an aggressive way of working. All of my professors and teachers taught me in that manner, so that is how I present my information now, and if that's termed militant, then I guess I am. But I don't perceive that as a negative, for me. So when I read that in my evaluation, I kind of knew where that was coming from, but yes, "arrogant, rude militant and bitch".

**Liana:** For some reason proactive teaching or progressive teaching get's construed as aggressive, when women of color are in positions of leadership and authority. When those words are used, I think back on different experiences I've had where I've seen behavior from other professors that was never considered negative or aggressive, though it absolutely could have been.

**A'Keitha:** Right, it's seems acceptable for other genders and racial identifications.

**Liana:** You also brought up the flipside, which is the role of caretaker we are often assigned. As a graduate student, I taught many of my peers, so that was already a weird line to navigate. Everyone just called me Liana, until a student started calling me "Mama Liana." It spread like wildfire. I had to sit people down and say, "Do you recognize the significance of what you are doing? You can never call me that again". I am the only black person here and the population is 99.999 percent white. I'm not your caregiver. I'm not your mammy.

**A'Keitha:** How much can you take? How much of this can I take? Who wants to be thinking about these things, when they are just trying to do the job they love and are passionate about? The challenge is becoming tendured [tenured], so we can be in positions to make decisions and really deal with these issues, but as you were saying, people have left. So, that is the challenge.

**Liana:** And even with tenure, nothing is being done to correct the behavior in what I perceive as an unsafe environment. With tenure, you are asking someone to spend their life at an institution with most likely those same individuals. We know that faculty are protected by tenure, so why would you want to be in that environment when you can leave? I know so many people that have changed careers. It's sad because that light, and their potential to reach and inspire other students that need to see choreographers and dancers of color in that role has diminished because they can't handle it, and there is something gravely wrong with that. I also wonder as far as change, when a department comes up for review, when there are outside individuals reviewing, that's something I find interesting -- the network that's already been developed for that department chair or faculty members -- we are a small community, so most likely those people are your friends who have worked with you for 10+ years, so are those individuals from the same generation looking at how to really overhaul or add to an environment for the students' experience?

**A'Keitha:** Definitely, it's not for everyone. It's a huge commitment and often times a sacrifice in which you have to figure out the balance and prioritize. I think health should not be sacrificed for anything of course. That's kind of how you have to approach it.

**Liana:** This gets at the way institutional politics support and uphold racist acts and beliefs -- the culture or environment that is already in place. I've been told, time and again, when discussing these issues with faculty members, "Well this is just the environment, this is just what's here, and you can deal with it for three years, and then you'll be out and gone". Basically, they're saying, "This is the environment, deal with it." Yes, but, how about we change this environment? Why don't we put a committee together or some type of think tank to really investigate this kind of oppressive environment and start to work toward creating a more inclusive environment? That's one thing that Onye Ozuzu brought up in the conversation at the IABD panel. She has visited other universities to address, as an outsider, the kind of environment an institution is upholding. Based on what she observes, she gives them information on ways to change certain behaviors, power dynamics, language, etc. She can say, "Okay, well this is a racist environment, and it's something that's not conducive to any person of color, because here's what's been said since I've been here, here is the culture that I've noticed". I think that people do not want to do the work as far as addressing those really embedded issues with racism.

**A'Keitha:** There's a lot of looking the other way, and with that comes this rate of resentment. It's a toxic environment; I support everything you said. How about we address these issues and fix them so it's not an oppressive environment, because the

thing is, it's not just faculty of color that is being oppressed, it's the students as well. The same white supremacist ideology and theories and pedagogy affects everyone who is not white. This is a huge problem and it's not contained, it's happening across the country, so why are we not dealing with these things? Why are we not addressing them? Why isn't anything happening? I'm sure people are talking about it, but how do we put these ideas into a practice that is effective, because, as Brenda has pointed out, these are things scholars from generations before us have dealt with that are being re-addressed, revisited, and re-represented in different fashion in 2013.

I'm baffled, and it makes me think about are the specific ways it manifests in dance programs, curriculums, and pedagogy? It is screaming eurocentricity! Why is this still current and accurate? Is there nothing else it can stand next to? Is there no room for the presence of bodies and practices that have been continually left out of these narratives and histories? I just had a conversation about my interest in developing or changing curricula, and one of the faculty was very adamant, "but we can't CHANGE anything." Why? Why can't we look at what is already there and supplement or add to it? To say that a curriculum cannot change or shift is problematic. And these are people who have been doing the same thing for 20 or 30 years, these are the people we have to fight. They have done it that way and feel there is nothing else that can substitute, match, or is on par with what has been established as curriculum.

This topic "deconstructing curriculum in higher education dance programs" is the crux of my research. What I find problematic is that most (not all) dance programs only include ballet and modern (and depending on the institution, jazz) as core curriculum training techniques. If African or non-western dance forms and techniques are included at all in the curriculum, they are either only offered for a semester, or are only required for 1-2 semesters for completion of coursework/degree and are not credited with the same amount of hours as ballet/modern. The dance history and historical courses are another case altogether with the same or similar concerns. The systemic occlusion of people of color in dance curriculum is pervasive. I have encountered similar reasonings across the board concerning why curriculum has not changed: it's too difficult. Is this really a justification? I will accept that reasoning as part of the problems but there other factors that contribute to upholding the status quo, for instance, priority and importance. My observations and discussions with students show that there is a major disconnect with students of color in programs that do not reflect who they are (individually, culturally, historically, and socially). The running theme for students of color is identity and disidentification. I am concerned with the double consciousness that students undergo in these types of environments. Change is a big issue for a lot of people, but you have to want to move forward and be progressive because it's the students who are suffering.

**Liana:** There's this very vertical hierarchy set in place which is why I like Liz Lerman's book *Hiking the Horizontal*. Everything's on a horizontal plane, an even playing field. It's all valid, it should all be part of the experience and a few universities are trying to move towards that horizontal system because that's what works best in my opinion. Why would a student go into debt for a four-year degree in dance when they can go to a dance studio or community center and get hip-hop, jazz, African, tap for a lesser price. What are you actually teaching me in this program if you have such a limited view of what's considered technique or what's going to help me become a professional dancer or choreographer?

**A'keitha:** And that's the key -- the definition of technique has been prescribed for only two things. Somehow, it's understood that when you're speaking about technique, you're speaking about only ballet or modern, and nothing else. But every system of movement has a technique; going to the garbage, that's a technique, that's a system of organized movement that prepares you to do a task. We need to have that conversation for it to be impacted or impactful inside of higher education dance programs.

**A'keitha:** That's an excellent point. Who is coming in and doing these reviews? The people who are coming in have the same mindset about what is deemed important or what is technique. A shift needs to happen; does it start at the ground level, does it start up? I don't know, I don't have the answers to those questions, but we can't continue. In a new millennium, are we going to still be having the same discussion? We can't do that. I refuse to do that.

**Liana:** I hear you. The time is now to change, period. The more that people speak out, the more that individuals like yourself and CDFM-ers continue to work in higher education, the change will come.

**A'keitha:** I'm still holding on to the bell hook. I hope that within my lifetime I see significant change occur. I see the transformation of the students -- not only their bodies and their minds -- but in their spirits, when they have the opportunity to engage in another type of movement (males and females). One gentleman told me that to be able to move his hips and release he felt liberated.

**Liana:** That's a beautiful thing.

**A'keitha:** Mind you, he's getting ready to walk into a ballet company environment. These things are not separate. The diverse array of techniques and movement practices -- they work together, and they should! That's where we need to have that conversation. We all

need to be working together. My movement vocabulary is informed by each one of these things, by ballet, modern, movement from the African diaspora, fitness, somatic elements -- they all find a way to resonate into the technique and into the body.