

## Paloma McGregor in Conversation with Abigail Levine

**Abigail Levine:** it's August 8, 2014. I'm here in New York City with Paloma McGregor. Paloma, why don't you tell me the story of the creation of your project [Dancing While Black](#).

**Paloma McGregor:** Sure. Probably two years ago, 2012, I was having some regular meetings with a couple of colleagues of mine, both of whom had come through [Urban Bush Women](#) at different times, just talking about what work we were doing, the ideas or visions that we might be having, and also the challenges in how we saw ourselves navigating the landscape. And during that same year, Ishmael Houston Jones revisited his Platform at Danspace Project entitled [Parallels](#), and I was a dancer in one of the pieces and got to witness several of the others. [Parallels](#) was a revisitation of a similar curation that he had done twenty years before, and I just found it really compelling to be a part of this intentional showcase of the range of Black, experimental dance production in the city. And at the same time that I was excited about it, I wondered, like, *only every twenty years do we come together to showcase this particular aspect of the Black dance community?* And, clearly, that's not exactly true, but at the time I was feeling a little like, *wow, could we have more platforms more often?* It's not that there's a lack of work out there, so I wondered what could I do to contribute to a greater frequency of platforms. So, I decided to start [Dancing While Black](#), in part, because that same year [Bronx Academy of Arts and Dance \(BAAD!\)](#), who I've had a long relationship with since I moved to the city in 2004, asked me to curate a show up there. And I thought an opportunity had been put in my lap to enact something that I had been thinking about doing. So, the first [Dancing While Black](#) happened that year in May of 2012, and then I did a little bit of thinking about what was next. I asked some of the people who had participated what kinds of things they might be interested in, and then got busy. And then when I got the residency last year at the [Hemispheric Institute of Performance and Politics](#), I saw it as an opportunity to enact some of the other aspects of [Dancing While Black](#) that I was interested in, not just presenting performance, but creating spaces for dialogue, creating archival documentation around that, and thinking about what I might be able to do in terms of supporting process without product at the end of it.

**AL:** So, that first event looked like what?

**PM:** That first event was a performance. Because I was asked to curate fairly close to the date that was available, I started looking at who my home community was. And so that first event featured four choreographers who had come through [Urban Bush Women](#) as dancers: Marjani Forte (who collaborated with Nia Love), Samantha Spies, Maria Bauman and me. The name was a revisitation of a showcase I had seen during my second year in New York that was called [Voices from the Bush](#), with choreographers who had been members of [Urban Bush Women](#). It was at [Danspace Project](#), and just a wide range of choreographers—Nora Chipaumire, Christal Brown, probably about a half dozen of them. So, the [BAAD!](#) performance was [Dancing While Black: Voices from the Bush](#). And before the performance was a panel to talk about the dance landscape and politics and Blackness, and it included choreographers of multiple generations, folks who worked on the producing side, someone from the [People's Institute for Survival and Beyond](#), which does undoing racism training. So, it was a wide range of perspectives on the dance landscape over the course of time for Black choreographers, more specifically Black choreographers with a leaning toward the radical or the experimental.

**AL:** [Dancing While Black](#), as language choice, as opposed to [Black Dancing Artists](#) or any other configuration of the words "Black" or "African-American" and "dance"...

**PM:** Yeah. Well, a few things... I used to be a journalist, so this term "driving while black" being used a lot in the media... When I think about navigating any landscape as a Black body, and when you're a dancer, the sort of particularity of your awareness of your body, moving through whatever landscapes you're moving through, it felt important to be that explicitly political... And to tie this experience of, to a degree, policing or navigating that *driving while black* has come to represent, for this to be connected to the kind of navigating that Black dancers feel. The arts landscape is not separate from the landscape of broader structures that we encounter in this country, so it's not as though, oh, once you hit your artistic field then

all of the other structural oppressions that are built into the foundations of this place disappear. They don't. They just take different forms, and sometimes those forms might be very creative. But the institutions are not unlike other institutions that are critiqued by terms like *driving while black*. So, when we're looking at policing and the institutionalized race-based challenges within our justice system, I don't think that system is so dissimilar from our artistic infrastructures and systems. So, I think the title wanted that to be a part of it. I think that *Black* as a part of it is important. And Dancing *While Black* as a language choice also felt like it wasn't asking ourselves to collect into one common aesthetic identity. I think now the area of dance called Black Dance has become a set of aesthetic principles, and I'm not so interested in that as in showcasing the range of us and, maybe more particularly, the range of us within, for lack of a better word, radical or experimental forms because I feel like those forms have fewer platforms.

**AL:** Yeah, I hear this language as: it's a condition rather than a gathering around an identity... So, you've repeated the idea of the lack of platforms. What is both the need and the ideal of having more platforms that, in some way, point to Black artists within radical or experimental dance? What does it need to do? What could it do?

**PM:** Hmm, it's a great question. I mean, some of the answer I may not know till far into the future. I feel like part of what is fueling this is that people keep showing up in great number, which has helped to clarify that some of the way I was thinking or feeling, and some of the smaller conversations I was having with people, was having a greater resonance out in the larger public sphere. I think, broadly, I'm interested in equity, and I don't think this one effort is going to be the answer, but I think the effort is coming out at a really interesting time. And I don't ignore the happenstance that this is coming out as other folks are doing similar work. There's a group of scholars that are coming together over the last couple of years to support Black dancer scholars in academia called Coalition of Diaspora Scholars Moving.

**AL:** Yes, they're featured on Critical Correspondence's University Project.

**PM:** And Dr. Brenda [Dixon-Gottschild] and the other scholars who are working on that with her have been very present in some of my conversations around Dancing While Black, as it's figuring itself out. I feel like Camille Brown's The Gathering, as it's beginning to figure out what it's being, is another one. I mean, she was able to build a platform where, I don't know, I think a couple of hundred people showed up to be in the room together. That's significant. And Jaamil Kosoko produced the daylong Black Male Revisited platform at Danspace, which I was honored to sit on a panel for. So, I think there's definitely an interest in some community building and support structures. And I'm particularly interested in supporting more documentation and more development of a range of opportunities for Black choreographers, whether they self-identify as radical or experimental, those who might be making work outside the Black Dance aesthetic construct.

**AL:** That insistence on ownership of the experimental and on aesthetic range seems significant.

**PM:** There have been art forms throughout the history of the development of American art, for instance jazz, where experimentation is not a White aesthetic value. Experimentation, for me, is built into the root of Black making, work, and being Black in this place requires a great deal of experimentation. And, so, I don't know how we've come to be in this place right now where the representation of us seems so limited within institutions where experimentation is a centrally held value. How it is that more Black folks don't find themselves in those spaces? And I've talked already about structural aspects of race and racism and how they inform all of our institutions. I'm interested in equity, *and* I'm curious about some ways to support the work that don't require institutions that don't seem interested in us anyway. And how do I, and we, build relationships with like-minded institutions. I mean at, BAAD!, for instance, we are not the exception, we are central. BAAD! is always presenting work that is in line with the principles of Dancing While Black. So, part of how I'm looking to build the work is by looking for who are those key partners who put the work forward, and how can we as artists, in turn, support those spaces.

**AL:** Tell me what events happened during the residency at the Hemispheric Institute and how that helped crystalize your thinking.

**PM:** A big part of locating Dancing While Black at the Hemispheric Institute, at NYU, was rooted in being offered a couple of platforms in order to do, basically, whatever I wanted to curate, and being less interested in talking about my own work, and realizing the significance of being at NYU for other Black artists to gather. So, the first event was the story circles, which is a format I borrowed from Junebug Productions in New Orleans. That format really made clear... As Black people and other people showed up, it really made clear that there is room for Black to be at the center of a multi-racial group, and for everyone to be enriched by that, for folks to feel full. I haven't had that experience very often, and so, that was important for me to experience and remember for the future of the work because it's not about Black to exclude other folks; it's really about locating us more centrally. Then, the second event was focusing in on three artists in particular—Adia Whitaker, Rashida Bumbray, and Ebony Noelle Golden, whose work is compelling to me because their work is created in a variety of forms of collective. And I find it compelling that in a field, well and in a country, that so often rewards the sole, genius leader of something, these women are pushing and struggling with the idea of collective as a structure of artistic identity. And I feel that from them showing and talking at Hemi, and then from the later showcase of their work at BAAD!, it was important from me to look back at what has historically been the case in art-making in this country. The pre-show panel for their concert – UBW founder Jawole Zollar, cultural critic Greg Tate, and anthropologist Aimee Cox – talked about traditions of collectivism in Black arts, and I feel like that structure of having a forum in which the artists talk about their work and, then, having a preshow panel of Black scholars and artists equipped to contextualize the work is in a trajectory of feels like an important model for Dancing While Black. I'm interested in shaping the lenses, to the extent one can in a preshow panel, through which the work is being viewed. I'm still doing some thinking about how that functions as a part of Dancing While Black because the critical landscape is such a battleground, and I don't think the all critics who show up to see the work are necessarily qualified to talk about the work.

**AL:** Explain what you mean.

**PM:** I think there are some aesthetic understandings and principles that might be at work in majority culture work that might not be useful in viewing other work. I just feel like some people are doing their work to sharpen their muscles, or tuning their lenses, for viewing a wide variety of work that values diverse aesthetic principles. But just because you have a really big platform and have access to see and write about any work you want, it doesn't necessarily mean you're actually equipped to write about the work.

**AL:** Did you do any criticism when you were a journalist?

**PM:** I did some.

**AL:** And that informs some of how you think about this? ...because the language of all of this is very conscientious.

**PM:** I think it does. Yeah, I think it does. You know, I was largely a news reporter and a features reporter, so I feel like, for me, being a journalist and being a critic have their distinction, but I still always bring my journalist practice to any criticism that I do because I feel like that's part of the work. If you don't know the work you're going to see, if you don't know about where the work is coming from, it just requires level of investment. And I know from reviews that I've read about work that I've seen or been a part of, there are times when that level of professional investment is made and there are times when I don't feel like it's made. And that's not just in relationship to Black work, but that's what I'm concerned about.

**AL:** So, what's coming next for Dancing While Black?

**PM:** So, these three women – Adia, Rashida and Ebony – we're shaping an inaugural Dancing While Black fellowship, figuring out what each of them needs in relationship to the pillars of Dancing While Black—performance, dialogue, process and documentation. So, the process piece will look at ways that Dancing While Black can help support each of them in developing new work. And then the documentation, it's the hard piece sometimes for us as dancemakers. Sometimes it's the budget, things don't get done with the integrity the work was made with. So I want to support that.

And, then, the big project, which several significant people have said they will help with in some way, is to put out a journal, *Dancing While Black: In Our Own Words*. I think it will come out once a year. Some portion of the journal will be around the programming that happens that year—transcripts of story circles, interviews with artists, some reflections from events (Dr. Brenda may write a reflection from the first story circle), among other things. And I've got folks who are more tech and media savvy working with me to figure out how to design and package it all. Greg Tate and Latasha Nevada Diggs, who are good friends are mine, put out a journal called *Coon Bidness*. It was all Black experimental art. It was beautiful and very Afro-Futurist in its aesthetic, and there's something really magical about the moment that that journal came out. I'm interested in some of that aesthetic, I mean, that's one of the things I'm looking at.

And, then, continuing the programming we've been doing. BAAD! and the Hemispheric Institute are still interested in being partners in the work. And then Gina Gibney and I have been talking about what we might be able to do together. And I have an artist residency at the Brooklyn Arts Exchange (BAX), and we've definitely been talking about what makes sense to live there. I mean, I feel Brooklyn is another space we haven't really had events in.

**AL:** In terms of your project sitting within other work around Blackness and arts or dance as categories, has there been any friction or tensions? Have there been particular allies (you've mentioned some)? How is it finding its place?

**PM:** I mean, I'm not pretending that when I was a little kid and Ailey and Dance Theater of Harlem came to my tiny, little Caribbean island (St. Croix) and performed in an outdoor amphitheater, I didn't say: *that's what the fuck I'm gonna do*. So, I think there's a huge space historically and in our contemporary landscape for Black Dance. It has its amazing place within the landscape of what dance artists who are black are doing. But it's inaccurate to put that language on everything that is dance production that is Black because that language has become its own thing, and I think it does identify a particular aesthetic that does come out of that Ailey tradition; it has a specificity.

**AL:** Where does Bill T. Jones sit in that landscape?

**PM:** Oh, wow, that's amazing. I will say, and this is something that Jawole Zollar, the artistic director of Urban Bush Women, has been talking about, about dance as an ecosystem, and that there are these companies that are big-budget companies. And I think that Bill fits into a bigger budget company. But then there's also an Urban Bush Women, a Ron K. Brown, that's another part of the ecosystem, she sees, that maybe used to be a part of this third part of the ecosystem, the more radical, experimental. And she feels in this ecosystem, they all need each other because the radical experimenters push the middle guys. And without the big guys, there might not be a space for any of us. There was a trailblazing that was done. ...I'm avoiding your question a little bit because I'm trying to figure out... with Bill T. there's an aspect of the infrastructure, money part of things that's a part of this bigger end of things that Ailey fits into, but I think aesthetically, his aesthetics were never coming from this Black Dance aesthetic that I've been talking about in the tradition of Ailey. So, I think he's the rare highly funded radical Black experimenter. God bless him. I mean, really, I do not underestimate the complexity of what that road is.

**AL:** And, finally, how does this fit all in the larger picture of your work?

**PM:** I feel that all of my work feeds one another. When I'm focused in on one project, it becomes primary, but it's never life-long primary. There's not a life-long, *oh, I'm this or that or the other*; it's just not how I live in the world. So, being able to use *Dancing While Black* as a means for my own interest in equity and organizing, being a cultural organizer, being of some use to my colleagues in the field (in whatever way is accomplishable for me as one person who is good at partnership building.) I feel it is one effort I can do, and that I saw the opportunity to start. I hope it makes other people excited to do similar things wherever they're living or whatever their art form. And, then, the making the work, sort of feeds that other aspect of me that wants to dream and vision in other ways... There's the dreaming and vision that happens around "it could be better if we did, x, y, or z, things could improve or there could be equity." Then, there's another side to dreaming that's about enacting whatever that sought-after freedom is. I get to create a little bit more of what I want to see in the world in a different way that I don't feel like I'm pushing up against something, but that I'm falling into something, or floating above something. My poetic gets to live

in that space. My politic gets to live in one space, and my poetic gets to live in the other, and those spaces aren't completely separate from one another, but there's a driving voice in each one. Dancing While Black couldn't happen if it was all politic and no poetic, and the artistic work, like my project "Building a Better Fishtrap" couldn't happen if it were all poetic and no politic. So, those two things, the making and the making space for, feel like they let me exercise different parts of me that need each other.

**AL:** Anything else you want to add?

**PM:** Nope, that was my very Gemini answer.

**AL:** It was great. Thank you.

**PM:** Thank you.

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**Paloma McGregor** is a choreographer, writer and organizer living in Harlem. An eclectic artist, she has structured improvisation for a floating platform in the Bronx River, choreographed an Afro-futurist pop opera at The Kitchen and devised a multidisciplinary performance work about food justice with three dozen community members and students at UC Berkeley.

A collaborator by nature and practice, Paloma has worked extensively with her sister, director Patricia McGregor, as well as with Niegel Smith, multidisciplinary artists Mendi+Keith Obadike and LaTasha Nevada Diggs, musician/cultural critic Greg Tate and environmental educator Damian Griffin. Paloma is director of Angela's Pulse, which creates and produces collaborative performance work dedicated to building community and illuminating bold, new stories. Paloma's work has been supported by grants and creative residencies from the Jerome Foundation; iLAND; Earthdance; Wave Hill; Voice & Vision; Dance Exchange; Lower Manhattan Cultural Council; Foundation for Contemporary Art. Paloma is a 2014-15 Artist In Residence at Brooklyn Arts Exchange, where she will develop a solo iteration of her iterative performance project, *Building A Better Fishtrap*. The project, rooted in her 88-year-old father's vanishing fishing tradition, examines what we take with us, leave behind and return to reclaim. Paloma has also been creating movement work for theater productions, including *Spunk* and *A Winter's Tale* (California Shakespeare Theater), *A Civil War Christmas* (Center Stage) and the world-premiere of *The House that Will Not Stand* (Berkeley Repertory and Yale Repertory). This fall, she will choreograph *Amadeus* (Center Stage) and *Brownsville Song* (LCT3).

In addition to her creative work, Paloma has been developing *Dancing While Black*, an initiative that supports the diverse work of black dance artists by cultivating platforms for process, performance, dialogue and documentation. She does this work in partnership with like-minded institutions, including Bronx Academy of Arts and Dance, Urban Bush Women, MoCADA and NYU's Hemispheric Institute for Performance and Politics, where she was a 2013 Artist in Residence. Paloma has also written about dance and civic engagement for Surdna Foundation and Americans for the Arts, as well as facilitated numerous workshops for organizations interested in the intersection of arts and activism. Paloma toured internationally for six years as a dancer with Urban Bush Women, and continues to perform in her own work as well as project-based work with other choreographers, including Liz Lerman, Cassie Meador and Jill Sigman.

**Abigail Levine** is a New York-based dance and performance artist. Her works bring together dance's bodily specificity with performance art's experiments with time and human action. They have been shown in the US, Cuba, Venezuela, Mexico, Brazil, Canada and Taiwan, recently at venues including the Movement Research Festival, Mount Tremper Arts Festival, Center for Performance Research, Roulette, Art in Odd Places, Judson Church, Foro Performática, and SESC São Paulo. Abigail was a reperformer in Marina Abramović's retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art and has also performed recently

*with Carolee Schneemann, Pope.L, Clarinda Mac Low, Rebecca Davis, Larissa Velez and Mark Dendy Projects. She holds a degree in English and Dance from Wesleyan University and a Masters in Dance and Performance Studies from NYU. She is currently co-editor of Movement Research's digital performance journal Critical Correspondence.*