

BLACK WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP

A POSITION PAPER FOR DANCE IN THE UK



LEEDS  DANCE 
PARTNERSHIP

 Northern School of
Contemporary Dance

SERENDIPITY 

INTRODUCTION



The huge contribution of Black women to the dance sector in the UK is unquestionable. Black women have been prolific in founding and leading dance organisations across the UK, as CEOs and artistic directors, as principals, as teachers, choreographers, programmers. They hold and have held central positions as funders, developing initiatives, mapping and shaping the sector. Over the last 35 years we have seen the sector shift and change, the current picture demonstrates this. Of the 841 National Portfolio Organisations, there are 64 dance organisations, of which 17 have Black or Asian leadership or focus, of these, 6 are Black led and focus on Black dance, of these 4 are led by Black women. Yet, dance has one of the highest percentages of female workforce (55%) compared to other sectors and one of the highest representations of Black, Asian and Ethnically Diverse people across the workforce (19%).

The initiative is part of Leeds Dance Partnership's commitment to positively address issues facing Black women in the sector, giving time and space to give justice to the gravity of this theme following a year of crisis and uncertainty. Black Lives Matter, the Windrush Scandal, COVID-19, Brexit have all had an impact.





27 September 2021, a group of leaders, representing a cross section of the Black British Dance sector and beyond, came together to have an honest discussion about Black women in dance leadership at the Northern School of Contemporary Dance. The roundtable discussion, under Chatham House Rule, was hosted by Northern School of Contemporary Dance and chaired by Serendipity. The findings of this conversation have been composed to form this position paper which seeks to address;

- What is the current status of Black female leadership?
- What are the challenges that Black women face?
- What do we need right now?
- What do we want moving forward?

The aims of this position paper are to gather a benchmark of our present and presence. The paper is presented as a summary of the conversations that took place, collected under a series of key words or provocations. These highlight the issues that Black women in dance leadership face and propose potential resolutions or pathways forward, without rigidly specifying their implementation. Recognising where there may be gaps and have referred to these as part of this conversation. The ambition is to continue this conversation to develop a symposium in 2022 and in turn collaborate to make positive and lasting change moving forward.

PAWLET BROOKES

CHAIR

Footnotes

1. Arts Council England 2021, Equality, Diversity and the Creative Case: A Data Report, 2019-2020.

Cover Image Credit: Verve, Northern School of Contemporary Dance. Photograph by Nicole Guarino.
Image Credit: Northern School of Contemporary Dance Graduate Show. Photograph by Camilla Greenwell.

A PICTURE IN NUMBERS



24%

of Dance Artists at NPOs are from Black, Minority and Ethnically Diverse Backgrounds.

21%

of Board Members at NPOs are from Black, Minority and Ethnically Diverse Backgrounds.

11%

Managers at NPOs are from Black, Minority and Ethnically Diverse Backgrounds.

15%

of dance audiences describe their ethnicity as Mixed, Asian/Asian British, Black/Black British or Other. (Compared to 18% for visual arts, 10% for combined arts, 8% for theatre and 6% for music).

10

of 63 Dance NPOs have "Outstanding" Rating for the Creative Case for Diversity.

74%

of dance audience are female. (Compared to 63% for visual arts, 66% for combined arts, 66% for theatre and 52% for music).

48%

of Dance Artists at NPOs are female.

63%

Managers at NPOs are female.

55%

of Board Members at NPOs are female.

Mapping of types dance practice suggests

57.4% contemporary

28.7% hip-hop

32.6% traditional

24% fusions

10.1% Caribbean

15.5% jazz

Mapping the Dance of the African Diaspora in the UK.

50% identify their main practice as "African Contemporary" or a constituent of their main practice.

20% of practitioners who identified "African dance" as their main practice.

Footnotes

1. All figures are taken from data from 773 Organisations, 63 Dance Organisation as reported by Arts Council England for the year 2019-2020. The report refers to BME (Black, Minority and Ethnically Diverse). Changes to the use acronyms have been introduced since the reporting period. Leadership data was not show in the report in full as the Arts Council continue to explore how to more accurately collect and report of the make-up of the most senior positions.

Arts Council England 2021, Equality, Diversity and the Creative Case: A Data Report, 2019-2020.

Full report available at:

https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/sites/default/files/download-file/Equality_Diversity_and_the_Creative_Case_A_Data_Report__201920.pdf

Full data available at: [https://app.powerbi.com/view?](https://app.powerbi.com/view?r=eyJrIjoiMzA5MjM1ZmMtNGM3YS00OGFjLTlkNTgtM2U5MGY0ODE2MjBmliwidCI6ImM3YTZmYzMyLTc1MzgtNGlwZS1hOTZhLTA1Zjg1NTAwN2MxMSJ9)

[r=eyJrIjoiMzA5MjM1ZmMtNGM3YS00OGFjLTlkNTgtM2U5MGY0ODE2MjBmliwidCI6ImM3YTZmYzMyLTc1MzgtNGlwZS1hOTZhLTA1Zjg1NTAwN2MxMSJ9](https://app.powerbi.com/view?r=eyJrIjoiMzA5MjM1ZmMtNGM3YS00OGFjLTlkNTgtM2U5MGY0ODE2MjBmliwidCI6ImM3YTZmYzMyLTc1MzgtNGlwZS1hOTZhLTA1Zjg1NTAwN2MxMSJ9)

2. Findings from One Dance UK's mapping dance of the African Diaspora.

The research of over 180 respondents suggests that over 90% of practitioners in the sample identified "African", "Contemporary" and "African Contemporary" as part of their practice. The other styles were identified as part of their practice by a small number of practitioners including Jazz, Modern, Tap, Dancehall, West African, Black, Afro-Brazilian and Afro-Cuban. All with their roots in the African and African Caribbean Diaspora.

One Dance UK (2019) Mapping Dance of the African Diaspora. Available at:

<https://www.onedanceuk.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/DAD-Mapping-Final.pdf>

LANGUAGE



“Black Dance is life, the people I have grown up with, the people I work with. The culture that exists with what I do.”

“Black dance is a way of moving. Not just one way of moving but many ways of moving, many diverse ways of moving. There are so many definitions, and it is something that keeps evolving and growing with each generation.”

“Black dance is an expression of something that cannot be expressed in language. Dance is first what honouring life, celebrating life... It has the potential to shape things and shape things in you.”

“Black dance... what does the term mean? Life, water, breath. It is what I have been doing since I came onto this earth and is something powerful that can communicate to all of us.”

“Power, voice, reinvention, movement of people.”



Language is complicated and continues to evolve. The conversation started by exploring what we mean by “Black dance” and also how we might reclaim Black dance. Black dance can be a contested term and not always one that we have chosen for ourselves, being applied to us in marketing copy and press reviews or by stakeholders to pigeonhole work and practice. Frustration arises that race always has to come into the conversation when talking about dance, dancers and companies, the fact that something is Black-led comes before the art itself. It is always “Black dance”, “Black dancers”, “Black companies”. As the discussion highlighted;

“Who describes what Black dance is?”

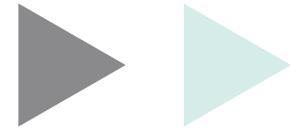
“Is it Black dance or a Black man dancing?”

“I am what I am, can’t I exist.”

Seeking to move the conversation forward and embrace it as a unifying term, Black dance is used throughout this paper to refer to dance by artists from the African and African Caribbean Diaspora and for techniques rooted in the African and African Caribbean Diaspora. Conversations around the use of “Black dance” will continue as this initiative moves forward to expand this definition. It was suggested that Black [Critical Race] theory be applied to create a Black dance theory developing a shared understanding and creative power connecting community in and through dance.

Furthering the conversation around language there was a consideration beyond gender binaries when continuing conversations around Black leadership. How do we explore the intersectionality of race and gender, inclusive of gender identities? Future discussions should be mindful to consider the language used within discussions, contribution and positioning of members of the Black LGBTQIA+ community and sharing perspective to include voices of Black people from marginalised genders.

LEADERSHIP



“Do you even agree that we have a problem with Black female leadership?”

“Understand that leadership is a lonely place.”

“Leadership is... people who are empowering us, people who allow us to be in a space.”

As emphasised in the opening context and key figures the presence of Black women in the dance sector is significant, the contribution of Black women to the sector is significant but this is not always reflected in traditional leadership roles. Black women in the dance sector are both visible and invisible. “You can’t be what you can’t see”.

A strong generation of Black leadership exists, but what about the emerging leaders coming into the sector. Where do we need representation, at board level, executive leadership, management? The importance of role models, the need for opportunities where current leaders make time for mentorship and supporting emerging leaders, whilst opening doors for emerging leaders to train, nurture and support. There was also a general consensus of the need to document the leadership that does exist in order to create case studies for emerging leaders to recognise and the positive impact of intergenerational conversations in shaping future leaders [see also Legacy and Research]. Structures of leadership, where people need to give up their power to make way for emerging leaders.

“You need to make yourself replaceable. Teaching others to do your job, you need to do yourself out of a job.”

Current models could evolve so that the knowledge and wisdom of existing Black leaders is not lost, allowing for succession planning. It is not just about taking chairs away for other to take them over, but rather, how do we put more chairs around the table? In doing this we also need to reconsider what we mean by leadership, how people are treated, the positions that they take, systems that accommodate for growth. There



needs to be fluidity in leadership models, hierarchy can be reimagined from a vertical structure of power into a system of accountability. Removing the idea of leadership being an exclusive group opens the doors to considering both experienced and emerging, elders and younger people as leaders.

Importance was given to that of quiet leadership, of the ground work that happens to put systems in place, support networks, research and development that informs decision making. Recognising that when people move into positions of leadership they should not have to change, they should still be approachable and open to collaboration.

“What do we mean by leadership?”

“The leaders at the top of the tree, they don’t look like us... But there are still leaders very much on the ground.”

“People are doing the work even when they are not in positions, how do we recognise and aid them into less precarious positions.”

“We need to consider quiet leadership - visible and invisible - lots of work is being done behind the scenes for us to stand on their shoulders.”

Image Credit: RJC Dance at Leeds Carnival. Photograph by Guy Farrar.



The conversation highlighted the barriers that potential leaders face. Potential leaders might be dissuaded from entering into a career in dance or the arts because they do not know what pathways exist or how to navigate the potential pathways into and through the sector. There are also issues of perception; if Black women do not see themselves as leaders then they don't become leaders. There is also an issue about the respect and perception of a career in the arts, further exasperated by cuts to funding and the racism that exists that continues to perpetuate stereotypes of Black women who speak up.

“We always feel like the underdog.”

“What is happening isn't new, but make it new for ourselves.”

Several themes and issues kept on reoccurring for instance how leaders and organisations are often pitted against each other for opportunities, funding and resources. Fuelled by the perception by larger institutions that there can only be one Black-led artist or company and once this box is ticked there is no space for others. Mentorship is not always a positive experience and leaders are not always supportive of each other. These can be traumatic experiences for Black women in [white] spaces, even with other Black women contending with patriarchal power struggles.

Another key factor that was raised was the impact that large institutions might make in tightening the pipeline by ignoring transferrable skills that potential Black leaders might have, alongside the work of Black artists and companies not being valued in the same way. Black dance is still not seen as equivalent to Eurocentric dance forms. If people are not applying for roles, organisations have to look elsewhere. On the other hand this can lead to tokenistic recruitment where leaders are set up to fail because they do not have the skills, the opportunity to develop skills or the support. This opens up issues of training, leadership roles need to accommodate growth and support [See Training and Education]. Leaders need to be advocates of the sector.



Image Credit: Black Victorians by Jeanefer Jean Charles 2021. Photograph by Ash Mills.

TRAINING, RESEARCH AND LEGACY



The subject of training, research and legacy underpin issues of language and leadership, the three topics are also interconnected. Without training, talent pipelines are disrupted and the cycle continues. Visibility across the sector needs addressing.

Training needs to explore who is teaching, examining and leading curriculum. Where are the Black leaders in dance training? Where is their visibility within the sector? Dance is not respected on the curricula, dance courses at universities are having their funding cut or being closed down. Where courses do exist the quality of the training often needs to be addressed. Where there are opportunities to access diverse dance practices these are often as supplementary workshops or grouped as "African dance" without being unpacked further. Artists upon leaving training still need opportunities to develop their craft and technique further.

"Everyone has been a child, not everyone has been an adult."

Research is essential for creating new models and challenging existing systems. The contribution of those who have come before needs to be documented and recorded so that those who follow know the ground work that has come before. Without establishing legacy that recognises the Black British dance pioneers and ecology, young people and emerging artists are led to perpetuate "a cycle of firsts."

"Black PhD students are like gold dust."

"Why does this space have so much privilege to create canons? What about alternative organisations, community, alternative curriculum, creating and maintaining oppositional thoughts. Paradigm shift, countercultural movement?"



Black PhD students who are the radical thinkers that can move the conversation forward. However, many potential PhD candidates struggle to make a pathway into research, particularly with established white-led institutions, getting funding for research and getting respect for their research. In addition, many who have potential to make strategic change do not get permanent roles and often leave the UK because they know they will receive more opportunities, recognition and accolades abroad.

“Education, information, archiving and writing - we need a central place to direct people to.”

Recognition was given to the importance of legacy and going to source for knowledge from trailblazers who have paved the way. This knowledge should play a part in training, ensuring that history, heritage and knowledge are not lost. That we can learn from those who have come before and give people a voice to share their story.

The need to move forward and keep pace was equally discussion and the role that technology can play as both a record of legacy and to disseminate information. Whether it is a podcast, blog, artwork, online performance or digitalised archive, technology can be used to share resources. Resources are essential for bridging training and research, connecting artists and organisations with each other and with audiences, being visible, particularly for young people. This is not to ignore the central role that publications and books can play as an accessible archive of legacy.

Image Credit: ACE Dance and Music.



Image Credit: Sarima, AkomaAsa Performing Arts Academy.

FUNDING



Awareness and acknowledgment of impact of the funding system in focusing on National Portfolio Organisations and segmenting other project funded (or self-funded) organisations reduces the vast amount of work that is taking place and opportunities to collaborate. National Portfolio Organisations form a significant part of the subsidised sector, but in dance Black-led organisations are only found in bands one and two.

Black organisations are often funded to fail. Piecemeal funding supports the development of one off projects but does not instil opportunities for resilience and infrastructural developments. Black organisations in the subsidised sector are also expected to deliver more for less, or nothing. An observation and reflection that was shared with the group highlighted an experience in which following a rejection from a major funding organisation, the latter asked a Black-led company to produce the same work but without funding. There is also the continued perception that Black-led companies are all community focused and not professional in the same way that white-led arts organisations are.

“Can we acknowledge actually how disruptive that likkle £100 can be to a person’s development.”

Funding systems are also set up to establish dependency and parent-child relationships, usually between the often white-led funder (or larger institution) and Black-led child.

The double-edged sword of how commercialisation can be detrimental to the sector was explored raising both positive and negative attributes. This can come in the form of pressures to generate income alongside the loss of talent from the subsidised sector as chorographers and dance artists move into the commercial sector.

NETWORKS



“A network is only as good as the people who invest in it.”

One of the objectives of this round table conversation was to discuss possible outcomes, one of which is a potential network. The capacity to invest time, energy and resources into network building. Other considerations such as the need to find ways to connect across the industry and how technology during lockdown helped to promote new and accessible ways of networking internationally and how building safe spaces to hold each other accountable, can reduce bystander behaviour and promote action. The need to build networks with a purpose, whether it is working towards a particular action, project or goal beyond networking was discussed as a key underpinning to a sustainable network and its survival beyond initial excitement. Suggestions included building a network that focused on touring, strategic planning across the sector, mutual support and advice. When building a network, socioeconomic barriers need to be considered alongside who is it for and what is the aim of the network. Black organisations need to work together and also recognise they are facing the same barriers in terms of space and resources.



Image Credit: nora chipaumire at Let's Dance International Frontiers 2018, Serendipity.
Photograph by Stuart Hollis.

THE GAZE ▶ ▶ ▶

This positioning paper has identified the importance of the gaze throughout. Where this has been largely discussed it is with reference to the gaze of funders, who makes decisions around programming, language used by reviewers. As Black leaders this impacts the need to explain everything and justify work in ways that white-led organisation often do not have to. The conversation picked up on subtler perception shifts needed, including a move away from London-centricity to recognise the trailblazers and work taking place across the UK.



Image Credit: Black Victorians by Jeanefer Jean Charles 2021. Photograph by Ash Mills.

CONCLUSION - NEXT STEPS ▶▶



*"A favour we can do ourselves - what do we need?
Don't be afraid to reflect on what you need."*

Image Credit: Sharon Watson, Phoenix Dance Company, Photograph by Hugo Glendinning.



The key ambition of this position paper is host a symposium in 2022 to further address the issues raised and contribute to research and documentation. This will build on the key topics raised in this paper around, language, leadership, training, research, legacy, funding and networks. It is hoped it will act as a catalyst for change.

Calls for actions for 2022;

“Better communication across the sector.”

“A call to all young Black leaders to make themselves known. Making a space for them to step into.”

“Strategic planning with organisations to support different spaces”

“Mapping the landscape.”

“Shifting language and problematistic the term ‘female’ as an exclusionary term.”

“Bridging generations and empowering our sector through education and training.”

“Whatever we do, we do not just do for the sake of doing. We need to make it have the greatest impact. We need to know why are we doing it. There needs to be a reason for us to keep coming back to the table.”

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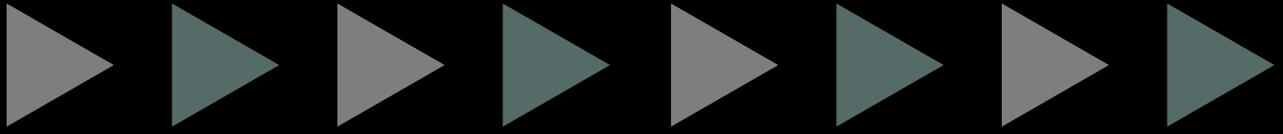
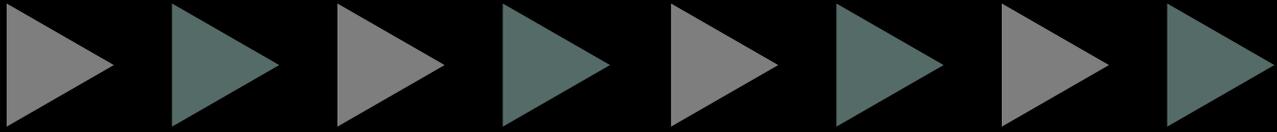


Image Credit: Germaine Acogny at Let's Dance International Frontiers 2018, Serendipity.
Photograph by Stuart Hollis.



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