Introduction

Founded in 1981, Black Cultural Archives’ mission is to collect, preserve and celebrate the heritage and history of Black people in Britain. Our unparalleled and growing archive collection offers insight into the history of people of African and Caribbean descent in Britain and includes personal papers, organisational records, rare books, ephemera, photographs, and a small object collection. The bulk of the material is drawn from the twentieth century to the present day, whilst some material dates as far back as the second century.

This is an introductory subject guide to Black British dance in Britain and includes a list of selected sources held by the Black Cultural Archives which relate directly to Black British dance. Though the introduction looks at the historical roots of Black dance in Britain, the focus of this subject guide is on Black British dance after World War II.

Background

Black dance in Britain\(^1\) draws upon the embodied histories and dance traditions of the peoples of the African diaspora whilst also responding to the cultural landscape of the UK. There have been many debates as to how best to title such dancing.\(^2\) It can be argued that there is a Black dance aesthetic or qualities specific to the dancing of peoples of the African diaspora\(^3\) serving as a thread that weaves throughout dance histories, from traditions established in Africa, to the enslavement period, to dancing in the Caribbean, America, the UK and everywhere that the influences of African diasporic traditions are significant. Dance traditions of the African diaspora have made important contributions to British culture throughout history and the dancing of Black people is often bound up in social and political activities.

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\(^1\) Please see the ‘Arts’ subject guide for research information on Black British performing arts more generally.

\(^2\) Some of these debates are analysed by Funmi Adewole in ‘The construction of the Black dance/African peoples dance sector in Britain: issues arising for the conceptualization of related choreographic and dance practices’ in Adair, C. and Burt, R (2007) *British dance; Black routes*, London and New York: Routledge.

\(^3\) For example Brenda Dixon Gottshild (1996) identifies an Africanist aesthetic which ‘integally conjoined the ludic and the tragic as elements in a continuum’ (p.101) and explores qualities she identifies as key to African diasporic dancing.
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issues. Black British dance refers to this historically-rooted art form in a specifically British context, looking at Black British, dancers, choreographers and organisations and the many ways in which Black British people dance.

Many studies of the history of African American dancing start by considering the narrative of the enslavement period. The transportation of the enslaved across the Middle Passage, could leave up to half of a ship’s passengers dying before the end of the journey due to the awful conditions. This resulted in the ships’ commanders calling for dancing on the open decks of the ship, a practice Lynne Fauley Emery calls ‘dancing the slaves’. Edward Thorpe argues that this was partly for the health of the enslaved, to keep them moving when they were away from the severely cramped conditions of the ship’s holds down below, but also to ‘afford entertainment for the crew’. Thorpe recognises that ‘the slaves were forced to dance by being lashed with whips’ (p. 10). Emery adds that this practice was also for economical purposes, ‘slaves who had been exercised looked better and brought a higher price’, and Emery draws on the comments of James Arnold before the Parliamentary Committee for the Abolition of Slavery: ‘In order to keep them [the slaves] in good health it was usual to make them dance’ (p. 6).

Various dance styles travelled across the Middle Passage along with the individuals on board the ships. One dance style was the Calenda, of which the popular dance style Charleston is a descendent. The Calenda was considered ‘indecent’ by many white observers and was eventually banned by some plantation owners for fear of it acting as a catalyst to a plantation uprising. Emery, in *Black Dance: 1619 to today*, gives an account of the different dance styles which travelled across from Africa and made their way into plantation life. Emery details the characteristics and history of different dance styles, including the Calenda, as well as other styles such as the Chica, the Bamboula, the Juba, and the John Canoe.

African American dancing drew upon many of the dance styles developed by former slaves to create styles for vaudeville and later Broadway shows and Modern theatre dance companies. As Ramsay Burt and Christy Adair explore in their (2017) account of researching the dancing of Black people in Britain, studies of African American dancing by writers such as Brenda Dixon Gottschild, Thomas F. DeFrantz and Kariamu Welsh Asante, have focussed attention on qualities specific to dancing rooted in African diasporic traditions. Africanist qualities, these writers argue, are appreciated in the context of a different set of aesthetic values than those firmly rooted in western artistic traditions. Burt and Adair (2017) recognise the significance of many of the same qualities in the styles of Black British dancers, in particular emphasising how ‘rhythm and spirituality’ or ‘soul’ were important to a generation of Black British dance artists of the 1970s and 1980s and remain significant to a current generation.

When African American dancers and companies visited and toured Britain, they made a significant impact on British culture. In the nineteenth century African American vaudeville performers were very popular in the UK. More recently the Alvin Ailey dance company, who perform a form of Modern theatre dance that draws strongly upon African American dance styles has been popular with British audiences while throughout the Twentieth Century

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5 Edward Thorpe. *Black Dance*, p. 10. Subsequent references are given in parentheses immediately following the reference.

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African American social dancing was very influential on the dancing scene in British ballrooms and later discos and clubs and theatres.

It was in the twentieth century that Black British dance began to become established. Ramsay Burt, a dance history professor, states that ‘Like Britain itself, British dance has been informed by different waves of immigration’. This influence includes the mass migration to Britain from the Caribbean in the late 1940s and into the 1950s, in the post-war era of Britain. Hence while African American influences are important to Black British dancers, so too are more styles of dancing direct from Africa and the Caribbean. While the political context of post-colonial Britain, in which many immigrants have faced racism and discrimination, has shaped many dancer’s approach to developing their own Black British dance style.

Les Ballets Nègres, the first Black dance company in Europe, was founded in 1946 with their first performance at the Twentieth Century Theatre, London. However there were otherwise very few concentrated professional outlets for Black dancers in Britain. It was in the 1970s that more companies were started that offered opportunities for Black British dancers and often (but not always) drew on forms of dancing derived from African diasporic traditions. The publication of ‘The Art Britain Ignores: The Arts of Ethnic Minorities in Britain’ (Naseem Khan, 1976), highlighted the lack of funding and opportunities for Black dancers in Britain, something that the Minority Arts Advisory Service (MAAS), established in 1976, strove to address.

This subject guide breaks down information available through the Black Cultural Archives about Black British dance since the Second World War into key companies, dancers and choreographers who have influenced and challenged notions of British dance in the twentieth century and continue to shape the image of modern dance today. The following list is by no means exhaustive but also provides links to further information.

Key companies

Les Ballets Nègres

Les Ballets Nègres was the first Black dance company in Europe, founded in 1946 by Jamaican dancers Berto Pasuka and Richie Riley. Riley commented on the company’s work and history: ‘negro ballet is something vital in choreographic art. As conceived by Berto Pasuka, it is essentially an expression of human emotion in dance form, being the complete antithesis of Russian ballet, with its stereotyped entrechats and pointe work’. Though the company was very successful it closed in 1953; dancer Brenda Edwards notes that ‘as with so many early pioneers, there was no support for them at all’. Without another comparative Black dance company the dancers dispersed in different directions. The early and formative work of Les Ballets Nègres is rooted in the modern dance companies of today.

MAAS Movers

Named after the Minority Arts Advisory Service (MAAS), MAAS Movers formed in 1977 under the directorship of Ray Collins, an American dancer. MAAS Movers was made up of

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8 Guardian, The, ‘They were Britain’s first Black Dance Company. How come no one’s heard of them?’ http://www.theguardian.com/culture/1999/aug/05/artsfeatures1

9 Ibid.
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ten Black dancers, including Greta Mendes, and the group first performed at the Oval House Theatre, South London, in July 1977. MAAS Movers collapsed after only a few years due to both financial unsustainability but also due to issues around the forming of the company's identity; some of the dancers wished to avoid being labelled as Black dancers, whilst others thought this was their very raison d'être (Thorpe, p. 177).

Adzido Pan-African Dance Ensemble

As its name suggests, Adzido Pan-African Dance Ensemble draws on dance originating from across the African continent. The company was formed in 1984 by George Dzikunu, who was originally from Ghana. In 1984, Dzikunu visited various African countries on a research trip to learn more about the dance forms that would influence the company's style. The company performed a season at Sadler's Wells Theatre in 1988 and Dzikunu continued his trips to African countries to continue to develop his research and understanding. During the 1990s the company was funded by the Arts Council which eventually pulled its funding in 2005.

Kompany Malakhi

Kompany Malakhi was set up in 1994 under the Artistic Direction of Kwesi Johnson, but due to a loss of funding, was wound down in 2012. Kompany Malakhi earned international renown through creating unique and dynamic inter-disciplinary performances that fused alternative movement styles such as contemporary dance, hip-hop, physical theatre, break dance, parkour and extreme sports. With a distinctly modern style and attitude, their dance performances reflected diverse and multi-cultural society through a unique, fresh and exciting visual language. The word 'malkahi' translates to 'messenger' with Kwesi Johnson using performance as a social commentary. Kwesi also describes himself as a 'Griographer' to enforce the importance of this concept; 'griot' is an Afrikan storyteller or social commentator, who uses many art forms to tell a story. The word 'grapher' he takes from the word 'choreographer', using it to describe the merging of movement and creation of a performance.

Tavaziva Dance

Tavaziva Dance is a national touring company that presents cutting-edge new work representing the diversity of Black British Dance. The company specialises in fusing African and contemporary dance, creating a unique dance style that is both contemporary and rooted in African cultures. Tavaziva Dance was set up in 2004 by Zimbabwean-born Founder and Artistic Director, Bawren Tavaziva. The company tours across the UK and explores new territories in combining the rich and diverse dance forms of Africa with a contemporary Western base.

Since its inception, the company has established itself as a significant presence in the UK dance landscape, bringing Bawren Tavaziva's unique artistic vision and inspiration to a growing and national audience through high quality and innovative artistic product, touring performances, commissions, residencies and education workshops. The company was awarded Regular Funded Organisation status in 2005, and since then, has continued to make a significant contribution to the development of both the Black dance sector and the wider dance sector.
Berto Pasuka was born in Kingston, Jamaica, in 1920 and he moved to Britain in 1939. Pasuka found what work he could and was cast as a dancer in the film *Men of Two Worlds* before setting up the dance company that would become Les Ballet Nègres. After the company closed, Pasuka travelled to Paris to study but returned to Britain in 1959. He died suddenly in 1963.

Richie Riley came to Britain from Jamaica in 1946 and attended the Serafina Astafieva dance academy. Having worked with Pasuka when they were both in Jamaica, Riley was invited by Pasuka to become the co-founder of Les Ballets Nègres. When the company collapsed in 1953, Riley retired from dance. He died in 1997.

Elroy Josephz was born in Jamaica and came to Britain in the 1950s. He joined Les Ballets Nègres in 1952 and when the company closed the following year Josephz went on to work in both musical and television productions. Josephz toured his own professional dance company between the years of 1967 and 1970. In 1976 Josephz became the UK’s first Black dance teacher in Liverpool. Josephz’s innovative dance styles formed African Caribbean forms with European and Asian forms and ‘central to his work was his understanding of the historical importance of slavery and its legacies’, which gave his work both ‘power and emotion’. Josephz passed away in 1997.

Carl Campbell set up the Carl Campbell Dance Company in 1978, the UK’s leading and oldest professional contemporary Caribbean Dance Company. Campbell trained at the Central School of Speech and Drama, London School of Contemporary Dance, Hilde Holger School of Creative Dance, New York School of Modern Dance and London School of Singing. Campbell’s professional career has included musicals, plays, dance tours, opera, choreography, and teaching. Campbell formed the company, which still exists today, after becoming discontent with the primitive and negative portrayal of black people’s arts and culture and the stereotypical imagery attached to it.

Brenda Edwards was the first Black dancer to dance with what is now the English National Ballet. She has worked to refute the widely-held belief that Black dancers were not suitable for ballet repertoires. Edwards is the Artistic Director and Producer of Hip Festival, which celebrates African Caribbean and Black British dance. Edwards was awarded an MBE in 2005 for her outstanding service to dance.

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10 Elroy Josephz, Liverpool Museums
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Timeline of Black Dance: Key Events

1946 Les Ballets Nègres founded by Jamaican dancers Berto Pasuka and Richie Riley. The company is the first Black dance company in Europe.

1953 Despite its success, Les Ballets Nègres closes. Without similar Black-led dance companies, the dancers disperse when the company closes.

1974 Peter Blackman forms Steel 'n Skin

Grassroots Dance Company is formed in Leicester


Elroy Josephz becomes the first Black dance teacher in the UK, teaching in IM Marsh Teacher Training College Liverpool

Barrington Anderson establishes Ekomé in Bristol

1977 MAAS (Minority Arts Advisory Service) begins. The main aims of the organisation were to maintain registers of artists, give advice to artists and arts organisations, and publicise activities.

1978 Carl Campbell Dance Company is founded by Carl Campbell in London.

Kokuma is established in Birmingham, directed by Bob Ramdhanie.

1981 Phoenix Dance Theatre formed by Leo Hamilton, Donald Edwards and Villmore James. The company still exists today. Material relating to the company has been archived at University of Leeds as part of the Black Dance Archives (BCA) project.


IDJ I (I dance Jazz) founded in London and brings UK Jazz dancing to a wider public

1985 Beverley Glean sets up Irie! Dance Theatre in London

Corinne Bougaard forms Union Dance

Black Dance Development Trust set up summer school in Leicester

1986

Sakoba Dance Company formed Bode Lawal.

Brothers in Jazz are formed in London by dancers from Northern England and develop a different style of UK jazz Dancing.

State of Emergency is established, an arts production and management company with a commitment to developing and profiling Black choreographic work, including contemporary and other dance forms. Led by Deborah Baddoo, the company seeks to make positive changes in the national dance ecology and works both nationally and internationally towards creating a strong place for Black dance in the national culture.
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1987 Carol Straker Dance Company formed

1990 Peter Badejo forms Badejo Performing Arts
    Bullies Ballerinas formed

1992 Sheron Wrey forms Jazz Exchange


1994 Association of Dancers of the African Diaspora (ADAD) is founded
    Kompany Malakhi formed led by choreographer Kwesi Johnson

1996 Body of People (BOP) is formed by Dollie Henry.
    ACE Dance and Music Established in Birmingham

1998 Jeanette Brooks establishes The Dance Movement Company, following previous involvement with Phoenix Dance Company and other major dance companies.

1999 Robert Hylton forms Urban Classicism2000
    Hermin McIntosh writes a report for Arts Council, ‘Time for change: a framework for the development of African people’s dance forms’
    Francis Angol forms Movement Angol

2001 Nubian Steps festival at the Southbank draws upon previous findings of David Byran’s 1993 report.

2004 Tavaziva Dance is formed by Zimbabwean-born Founder and Artistic Director, Bawren Tavaziva. The company tours across the UK and explores new territories in combining the rich and diverse dance forms of Africa with a contemporary Western base.


Brenda Edwards is awarded an MBE for her outstanding service to dance.

2009 Sharon Watson becomes the Artistic Director of Phoenix Dance Theatre.

2012 Boy Blue Entertainment choreograph and create music for the London 2012 Olympics Opening Ceremony.

2016 As of 1 April 2016, Youth Dance England (YDE) merged with the Association of Dance of the African Diaspora (ADAD), Dance UK and the National Dance Teachers Association, to form One Dance UK, a new national dance organisation. The newly formed organisation represents dancers at all levels of the dance industry, and champions, amongst other things, dance of the African diaspora.
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Black Cultural Archives – Collections

Please find below a list of selected sources held by the Black Cultural Archives which relate directly to Black British dance, including both archive material and also books from the reference library.

What is archive material?

An archive can mean a single record, or it can be an entire collection containing thousands of records. Everyone creates their own individual archive which includes letters, photographs and diaries. In the heritage sector, archives refer to unique records which are kept for their historic or social value. The archive collections at Black Cultural Archives include mostly paper records, including personal papers, periodicals, ephemera, and photographs. Black Cultural Archives, however, are increasingly receiving more and more digital material.

What is the reference library?

The reference library at Black Cultural Archives is accessible to all visitors to the reading room and currently holds 8,000 catalogued book titles. The library collection spans the majority of the later twentieth century and covers a variety of subject areas surrounding art, anthropology, education, history, and racism, as well as sociology.

Archive

1. **Black Dance Archives (BDA)**

The Black Dance Archives project, funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund and working with partners across the UK, aimed to collate, preserve, document and make accessible collections from eminent individuals and organisations from the British Black dance sector who have made a significant impact on dance in Britain, with the aim of celebrating the contribution of British Black Dance to the wider dance ecology and to national and cultural life. The project was headed by the State of Emergency Trust and a number of key collections have been deposited with Black Cultural Archives as part of the project:

- **JBROOKS/ Jeanette Brooks, 1959-2008.** This collection is partially open and comprises materials relating to work undertaken by Jeanette Brooks with various dance companies, including her own; The Dance Movement and Pick Up Dancers Corporation. It also includes contextual records, including more general and background information about Jeanette Brooks, as well as programmes and promotional materials from various productions and events.

- **JGAMBLE/ June Gamble, 1987-2006.** This collection is partially open and primarily comprises administrative records, correspondence, promotional materials and reviews relating to June Gamble's clients from the field of dance.

- **KMALAKHI/ Kompany Malakhi, 2000-2012.** This collection is partially open and primarily comprises audio-visual, administrative, and promotional materials. The records relate to Kompany Malakhi's governance, performances and education programme, from c. 2000 to its closure in 2012.

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11 To view archive material please call 0203 757 8510 (or 0203 757 8511) or email archives@bcaheritage.org.uk to book an appointment in the reading room.

12 Other collections from the project have been deposited with other institutions: Birmingham Museums and Libraries; National Resource Centre for Dance; University of Leeds Library.
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NUBIAN/ Nubian Steps, 1996-2013. This collection is partially open and primarily comprises audio-visual, administrative, and promotional materials. It includes records relating to the governance of OnyxArts Foundation and administrative and promotional materials for various Nubian Steps productions.

RHYLTON/ Robert Hylton, 1997-2014. This collection is partially open and comprises administrative records relating to the running of the company, and materials relating to various performances, productions, film, commercial works and education and outreach projects. The collection included paper-based records, audio-visual materials and objects.

SOE/ State of Emergency Productions, 1980-2015. This collection is partially open and comprises contextual materials relating to other dance companies and non-State of Emergency works. It also includes records relating to the running, governance and administration of the State of Emergency company and the planning and promotion of performances, productions, festivals, conferences and other outreach projects.

TAVAZIVA/ Tavaziva Dance, 1998-2015. This collection is partially open and comprises administrative records relating to the running of the company and the planning of and preparations for performances and education projects. It includes promotional materials, programmes, marketing records and press reviews.

2. Black Cultural Archives

In addition to the material deposited as part of the Black Dance Archives project, the Black Cultural Archives collection itself also consists of material relating to Black British Dance:

EPHEMERA/ Ephemera We have a large ephemera collection comprising of material such as posters, tickets, programmes, flyers, leaflets, etc. A lot of the ephemera relates to Black arts, including Black dance, in the late twentieth century. The ephemera collection is currently being re-ordered so please ask a member of the Collections team for more information or help.

MAAS/ Records of the Minority Arts Advisory Service, 1977-1994. The records of MAAS consists of annual reports, photographs of events and lectures, contributions to the Artrage periodical, training bulletins, newspapers, newsletters, correspondence, registers, and conference reports.

PHOTOS/ Photographs. This collection is a format-based collection of visual material, including photographs, images, negatives, and copies of photographs. There are images from and relating to theatre and dance productions during 1986 and 1994 [PHOTOS/168].

RECORD/ Record. This collection is a format-based collection of audio-visual material and includes some footage of dance productions and interviews with dance professionals:

- “Pocomania” produced for the National Dance Company, late twentieth century. 16MM FILM. [RECORD/91]

Les Ballet Nègres. Black Cultural Archives also holds material relating to Ballet Nègres across different collections:

- Black and white computer printed image of Richard ‘Richie’ Riley, artist and founder member of Les Ballet Nègres. [PHOTOS/130]
- Interview with Richie Riley [see above, RECORD/17].
- Programme from Les Ballets Nègres, 2 September 1952 [WONG/6/49]
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- Press cuttings relating to Les Ballets Nègres, including an obituary of Richie Riley, c1997-1999 [PRESS/94].

RC/PERIODICALS/ Runnymede Periodicals. This collection of periodicals donated as part of the Runnymede Trust archive collection includes issues of ‘Artrage’ (formerly Echo’) from 1977-1995. The general subjects covered by the periodical includes dance alongside other subjects such as music, books, news, visual arts and theatre.

RC/RF/20/03 Runnymede Research File: Culture and arts – Black and ethnic minorities. This collection of research files donated as part of the Runnymede Trust archive collection comprises material on Black and ethnic minority culture and arts in Britain including papers from the Commission for Racial Equality Advisory Group on Ethnic Minority Arts and the Greater London Council, Notting Hill carnival and gospel music.

Reference Library

1.10A KHA The Arts Britain Ignores: The Arts of Ethnic Minorities in Britain / Naseem Khan

781.65 COT From Jazz Funk & Fusion to Acid Jazz: The History of the UK Jazz Dance Scene / Mark ‘Snowboy’ Cotgrove

792.809 ADE Voicing Black Dance: The British Experience 1930s-1990s / Funmi Adewole

792.809 CAR Folk Dance of Jamaica: an insight / Hilary S. Carty


792.809 NET Roots and Rhythms: Jamaica’s National Dance Theatre / Rex Nettleford

792.809 SER Creolizing Dance in a Global Age / Serendipity Artists Movement Ltd

792.809 THO Black Dance / Edward Thorpe

792.96 HAR The Performance Arts in Africa: A Reader / edited by Frances Harding

823 BAA Blues Dance / Amon Saba Saakana

823.914 DEN The Last Blues Dance / Ferdinand Dennis
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Other Sources

Websites
Black Dance Archives project http://blackdancearchives.co.uk/
Elroy Josephz, Liverpool Museums
Guardian, The, ‘They were Britain’s first Black Dance Company. How come no one’s heard of them?’ http://www.theguardian.com/culture/1999/aug/05/artsfeatures1
Telegraph, The, ‘New Dawn for the Ballet that went to Sleep’, http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/4718058/New-dawn-for-the-ballet-that-went-to-sleep.html

Books

Other Institutions
Birmingham Museums and Libraries http://www.birminghammuseums.org.uk/
National Resource Centre for Dance (NRCD) http://www.surrey.ac.uk/nrscd/
Rambert Archives http://www.rambert.org.uk/explore/rambert-archive/
Trinity Laban Conservatoire of Music and Dance http://www.trinitylaban.ac.uk/
University of Leeds http://www.leeds.ac.uk/
Victoria and Albert Museum http://www.vam.ac.uk/

If you have any queries regarding this subject guide or would like to book an appointment to view archive material then please contact the Collections team at archives@bcaheritage.org.uk. Alternatively, you can call 0203 757 8510 or 0203 757 8511.