

The Dancing Thinker

NAOMI JACKSON HELPS STUDENTS INTEGRATE PRACTICE AND THEORY AT ARIZONA STATE UNIVERSITY.



Associate Professor Naomi Jackson's career path may have something to do with her genes. Born into a family of "artsy intellectuals," with an architecture professor for a father, a visual artist mother and a brother who is a music history and theory professor, Jackson grew up in an environment where "there was a model of thinking about the arts from an intellectual standpoint," she explains. From her early education at the family dinner table to her PhD in performance studies at New York University, Jackson's background has been instrumental in helping ASU students think critically about dance.

An ASU faculty member for the past 10 years, Jackson teaches Dance History and Philosophy as well as Dance Criticism to undergrads. She also teaches two graduate courses, Philosophy of Dance and Cultural Concepts of Dance; the latter discusses the history of dance ethnology and the relationship between dance and culture from the beginning of the 20th century.

She prides herself on demonstrating the connections between practice and theory. "Often technique class teaches you to move in a certain way that is the 'truth'—if you were dancing in the time of Graham, everyone would

think Graham is the truth," she notes. "I try to open [students'] eyes to the social, political and economic power of what they're doing."

Dialogue and exchange are vital in Jackson's classroom, where she often asks students to debate opposing theories, as well as in her work with department colleagues. "Dance departments [sometimes] solidify into a style, and it's so limiting—there are so many ways to move, dance, choreograph," she says. "I bring in work and open the frame of reference so that we don't become narrow. It's a way of helping people go beyond the status quo."

To this end, she recently invited Senegal's Compagnie Jant Bi to present *Fagaala*, a piece about the Rwandan genocide, and hosted a panel discussion about dance and human rights. With Toni Shapiro-Phim, a Cambodian dance specialist, Jackson is coediting a compilation of essays about dance and human rights, with contributions from dance theorists and choreographers.

She is also developing a new course, perhaps the first of its kind, with the help of a grant from the Lincoln Center for Applied Ethics. Entitled Dance and Ethics, the class will explore the treatment of dancers, ethical approaches to choreography, and the relationships between morality and creativity, dance and the government, and dance and community. By reflecting on the state of dance today, Jackson is hoping to help ASU dancers become more successful tomorrow.

—Katia Bachko

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