

Trailblazing Female Dance Gian...ention Thanks to Harmony Bench

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SPEAKERS

Eva Dale, Harmony Bench, David Staley

- E** Eva Dale 00:00

From the heart of the Ohio State University on the Oval, this is Voices of Excellence from the College of Arts and Sciences with your host, David Staley. Voices focuses on the innovative work being done by faculty and staff in the College of Arts and Sciences at The Ohio State University. From departments as wide ranging as art, astronomy, chemistry and biochemistry, physics, emergent materials, mathematics and languages, among many others, the college always has something great happening. Join us to find out what's new now.
- D** David Staley 00:32

Harmony Bench is an Associate Professor in the Department of Dance at The Ohio State University College of the Arts and Sciences, where she is also affiliate faculty with Women's Gender and Sexuality Studies, and with Translational Data Analytics. Her research revolves around encounters between bodies and machines or bodies and media technologies, and asks how people leverage the various technologies at their disposal for cultural expression, political control, and social action. She is the author of the forthcoming book "Dance as Common: Movement as Belonging in Digital Cultures". Welcome to Voices, Dr. Bench.
- H** Harmony Bench 01:08

Thank you, thanks for having me.
- D** David Staley 01:10

So your most recent research project is titled "Dunham's Data: Katherine Dunham and Digital Methods for Dance Historical Inquiry". Tell us, tell us about this research.

H

Harmony Bench 01:20

Yeah, so this is a collaboration between myself and Kate Elswit, who is based at the Royal Central School of Speech and Drama in, she's based in the U.K. And what we are thinking about is how to use digital methods in a way that makes sense for dance history. So if we think about the way dance artists, for example, or scholars who write about dance artists have thought about digital media, it's often in the context of stage based productions, so people will incorporate smart stage technologies or interactive media into live performance, for example.

D

David Staley 01:59

Smart stage technology means?

H

Harmony Bench 02:01

Oh, that's a good question. So people will use software like Isidora, or Max/MSP with Jitter, different programs that allow people to map out a stage space and create certain behaviors that arise in the environment, either visually, or in terms of audio.

D

David Staley 02:03

So it's part of the performance?

H

Harmony Bench 02:21

It's part of the performance, yeah, that's correct. So there's a lot of really great work that is happening in that area. But what Kate Elswit and I are interested in is how to think about digital technologies and digital methods for historical work, and so on. This creates a very, very interesting thing, you can't really go back and motion capture somebody's gestures from, you know, the nineteen-teens or you know, even earlier. So what kinds of approaches and what kinds of questions are relevant for for dance historians and how can we employ data analysis, visual, like data visualization, and other tools from visual methods to to help do historical research?

D

David Staley 03:10

And this is what you're doing then with Katherine Dunham, how are you using these methods and tools to describe her? First of all, who was Katherine Dunham?

H

Harmony Bench 03:17

Yeah, who is Katherine Dunham? So, Katherine Dunham was a mid-century African American choreographer, and she is a really interesting character. She created work for all different types

of stages, so the popular stage as well as the concert stage, she constantly navigates different audiences, different art forms, different expectations, and then also different biases, right? So, she's a very interesting person to think about in terms of dance history because she doesn't follow the rules, or she doesn't kind of stay in any particular lane of, I'm only going to work in this one particular movement form. She's also a person who is a trained anthropologist.

D David Staley 04:02
Really?

H Harmony Bench 04:02
Yes. So she brings a different approach to her choreography, whether it's for the popular stage or for the concert stage. And one of the things that she was really interested in was tracking Africanist influences, both in terms of where we see those in terms of U.S. culture, but also globally. So she would, in her various travels, she would observe movement practices, and sometimes she would incorporate that movement into her stage based productions. Sometimes she also participated in kind of a creative imagining of Nuvo rituals, right? So, so she's not a strict scholar in terms of observing movement information in the field, and then just simply reproducing that on the stage. She's certainly, in terms of outlook, she's a modernist, she has a very specific intention there. So it's just such an interesting figure to think about the global quality of dance practices at a time when it's really the ascendance of ballet as an art form in the U.S. And she's an interesting person, as I said, because she doesn't she doesn't stay in her lane, she doesn't follow the rules. And she does this at a time when you know, it's the Civil Rights Era.

D David Staley 05:19
So when, when is this occurring? What is her time?

H Harmony Bench 05:21
Yeah, so she's the most productive in the 1940s and 1950s. She definitely has a large body of work leading up to that time and certainly after, but the 40s and 50s are really her kind of heyday. And during that time, she's making work in New York on Broadway, she's making films in Italy as well as in Los Angeles, she performs in nightclubs, both alone and with members of her troupe. So she's just a really interesting person. It's also the case that she saved everything, so her archives are just bursting at the seams.

D David Staley 06:00
What every historian wants to hear.

H Harmony Bench 06:02

Harmony Bench 06:02

I know, right? There are multiple Katherine Dunham archives. So there are materials, particularly at the Southern Illinois University, also at the Library of Congress, there are certain aspects of her materials at the New York Public Library, but then also the Missouri Historical Society.

D David Staley 06:21

So you're using digital tools, digital methods to explore to excavate, to excavate her life. In what ways, how are you using these new tools?

H Harmony Bench 06:30

Yeah, so the thing about dance archives is that unless you're looking at motion capture data that was, you know, captured post, I don't know, 2013, maybe a little bit earlier, 2000, well, 2000, dance archives are not digitized. So part of our project is to go into these massive archives and sort through the correspondence, the receipt books, the journals, the you know, there's a lot of correspondence. And she has saved, like, copies of, of not only what she received, but also what she communicated back, so you get both sides of a conversation. And so we're not digitizing these and making them available online, that would be an insurmountable, that would just be too much. But what we're doing is we're going into, we're looking at these artifacts, and we're extracting data from them, or more specifically, metadata, right?

D David Staley 07:30

So metadata means...?

H Harmony Bench 07:32

So, metadata typically refers to the data about other data. So we think about it in terms of an artifact, you know, is it... what medium is it, is it a letter, is it a book, is it a note, is it a telegram? Who is it to, where is it being sent from, what was the date? So we're extracting all of these pieces of information, and those are the bits that go into a database that we're constructing. And in this database, what we're looking to do is to try to reconstruct and then represent where Dunham was throughout her career.

D David Staley 08:06

So you mean like a map, like a mapping it out?

H Harmony Bench 08:09

Yeah, like mapping it out, both literally and figuratively. Like literally, you know, plotting things out on a map, but then also thinking about what are the places that she returns to with some

out on a map, but then also thinking about, what are the places that she returns to with some level of frequency, what are the places that she seems not to really represent in her archives, and is that because they're very familiar places their home to her? Where does she travel, where does she seem to avoid? Are there places where, for example, we get a lot of indications in archives about various racist incidents that occur in terms of being refused access to hotels, for example. So then, is that predictive for whether or not she goes back to those places? There's this very interesting story about an encounter she had in Brazil, that actually led to legislative reform in Brazil, because it was such this publicized event of how she had been refused accommodations. So yeah, so we're trying to track all of those things and get a sense of... part of the project is about Dunham, but neither Kate nor I are Dunham experts. What we're really bringing to this project is this inquisitiveness around digital methods, and Katherine Dunham has, because she has collected so many things, she makes herself available to this kind of research in a way that's uncommon for other choreographers and other dancers. So in that way, she's really just like the right person for this for this work. And I'll also say that it's early days, we're in the process still of building our team, it's Kate Elswit, and myself and two postdoctoral assistants that will be working on the team, and it's a it's a three year project.

D David Staley 10:02

And you've been funded by The Arts and Humanities Research Council, I have that right?

H Harmony Bench 10:06

Yes, that's correct. So that is an organization in the U.K., a government funding agency, and it's a rather rigorous process that involves, you know, multiple levels of peer review. And at the end, different projects are selected for funding. I'm not sure if they're all for a three year period, probably not, but in any case, ours is a three year period. And it's because Kate Elswit is, is based in the U.K. that we were able to apply to this grant, and then, you know, both of our universities contribute various aspects to the project, whether in terms of, you know, supporting infrastructurally, or, for example, OSU is bringing with Mike Hardesty and his team in application development, we're contributing some of the design around the digital tools as that evolves over time.

D David Staley 11:04

How large of a grant, what was the award size?

H Harmony Bench 11:07

So, it's pretty phenomenal for dance. And, and also, I will say, it's pretty phenomenal for the humanities; it's nearly £600,000 for the grant itself, but that doesn't, that doesn't account for the many in kind contributions that we have, the in kind contributions push that number significantly north.

D David Staley 11:32

Yes. And, and she's a really interesting figure because she was this, again, this this female artist who toured extensively, And there's a certain kind of agency that happens in dance, that I don't think that we talk about enough, these kinds of female lead, whether they're companies or more loosely constructed organizations. So Anna Pavlova toured the globe throughout, you know, from about 1900 to I believe she died in 1929 around there. And so she has all of these stories and photographs collected in people's scrapbooks of her on steamboats, and her company members and the orchestra that she was also, you know, because if you're traveling ballet troupe, you got to bring the live orchestra with you. So they kind of commandeered all of these steamboats to take them, quite literally, around the world. Later, there's a duo of early modern dance pioneers, Ruth St. Denis and Ted Shawn, and they're much more committed to the train. And so, with Ted Shawn in particular, we see that he gives performances in the reading rooms of the Santa Fe Railroad stations. So these spaces were created for the railroad personnel, and he would ride the train to these stations and then provide local entertainment. So it's quite a, an interesting connection between these early dance choreographers and performers, and transportation technologies. And I was interested to think about how that kind of predates and yeah, again, it's like, just because now there's the Internet, that is not what started people sharing and dance. Certainly people who have written about the rise of handheld video in the 80s have talked about how important that was for the spread of otherwise very local practices within hip hop communities. So, I think that there's a lot of work to be done there, and a lot of that work has also happened in tandem with Kate Elswit, and particularly as we have focused on Katherine Dunham, who again, you know, she's such a, an interesting person, because she, she would fly and she would fly first class as an African American woman. And then, you know, she would send, there's a real interesting hierarchy that happens between her and her company members, who would end up on, you know, boats, they would they would travel by boat while she flew. She would take a transcontinental flight.

D

David Staley 17:10

So you started gesturing in this direction, what's, what's next for your research?

H

Harmony Bench 17:15

Yeah, so Dunham's data is really what's next for the research. As I said, it's a, it's a three year project, we've only just begun August 1st, so it's still early days. We did some preliminary work, thanks to a BETHA grant from Battelle, that allowed us to lay out some of our initial queries, particularly vis-à-vis transportation technologies. So what we're really thinking about is what it means for an African American female choreographer at the mid-century, again, you know, Civil Rights Era, to tour internationally and to have a global profile, to be this global celebrity, and what are the ways in which that celebrity does not overcome or defuse the racism of the day, and what are the ways in which she as an elite performer had access to things that other people didn't, and really trying to take her as a whole creative presence. Typically, when scholars think about Katherine Dunham, it's very easy to slice her into her different, you know, to talk only about one particular half that she wears at a time. So Katherine Dunham, the anthropologist, Katherine Dunham, the, the creator of a technique, and extraordinary teacher, Katherine Dunham, the choreographer, Katherine Dunham, you know, the Katherine Dunham, the that. And what we hope to do is try to bring all of these narratives together, and also to bring in the voices from people who have long standing histories, either with Dunham technique, or the people who have performed with Dunham and have inherited her legacy that way, to really think about this as a multifaceted project, not something that only contributes to

dance studies or dance history, but really opens up. Digital humanities are kind of the rage, and there are many things that the digital humanities are good at. One of the things that they're really good at is analyzing texts. One of the things that they're not so good at is analyzing movement. So part of our question -

D David Staley 19:31

That's an interesting problem.

H Harmony Bench 19:32

Yeah, it's a very interesting problem. So part of our question is, you know, not only what can digital humanities and digital methods do for dance history, but also what can thinking about dance and thinking through dance offer back to these text-heavy fields?

D David Staley 19:48

So how would you say that your research influences your teaching? What's that, what's that relationship like?

H Harmony Bench 19:55

Oh, that's an interesting question. So I think that, you know, one's research can't help but influence one's teaching. I think some of the things that I'm interested in as a teacher have to do with the kind of multifaceted ways to think about dance and dance history, and that we're not limiting ourselves to an inherited canon of choreographers, in particular. I think one of the things that interests me is really considering movement, broadly construed, and that really influences my teaching, that it's not - Not just aesthetic movement, it's movement. Right, it's not just what happens on stage, but all of the things that happen, you know, if we want to have a stage based context, all of the things that happen to get that piece on stage. But, really also thinking about like, what are all of the hidden moves, right? So if we think about transportation, what is the literal movement that brings these dancers to this place? Or if we think about, you know, dance circulating on the Internet, what is the movement of data that populates our screens? How can a kind of dance based awareness contaminate, if you will, a broader conversation about movement that attends to motion and bodies not just in the exclusive context of aesthetic performance, but you know, in a much more expansive and explosive context?

D David Staley 21:27

Harmony Bench, thank you,

H Harmony Bench 21:29

Thank you so much, it's been great.



Eva Dale 21:32

Voices is produced and recorded at The Ohio State University College of Arts and Sciences Technology Services Studio. Sound engineering by Paul Kotheimer, produced by Doug Dangler.