

Whatever Liberation Looks Like, Dance Is One of the Tools: An Interview with Takiyah Nur Amin

CLAUDE CHASTAGNER

About Takiyah Nur Amin. This interview was conducted online on Thursday, March 16, 2023. Dr. Takiyah Nur Amin is a dance scholar, an educator, and the founder of Black Girl Brilliance, an organization providing individuals or institutions with strategic assistance and counsel.

CHASTAGNER. Can you tell us more about your organization, Black Girl Brilliance?

AMIN. I started BGB in 2014 to formalize work that I was already doing informally. When I would go to conferences, or other professional development opportunities, or any gathering where I was with graduate students or faculty, people were always asking for help. I love helping people, so whenever I could give any professional advice or support, I did. But I was doing it in bathrooms, and hallways, and parking lots. I started thinking I needed to formalize this in some way, so that people will be able to find me, and get the kind of assistance that they need. Sometimes people need confidential strategy, there are conversations that people don't want to have with their department chair, or their mentor, or someone in their institution. Professionally, the higher you go, the smaller the networks are. People might need help to craft a career, or an exit plan, in a way that's confidential. So I started in 2014 working one-on-one with individual clients. Around 2018, I

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started working with institutions who came to me needing assistance around curriculum development, policy review and professional development for their faculty, consulting on searches, or how to design an effective and appropriate search to fill a new position. I've worked with public universities, small private liberal arts colleges, and a couple of seminaries and divinity schools. I work with individuals and institutions that are looking for confidential strategic solutions around how to make a positive impact in higher education, in addition to my day job.

CHASTAGNER. Does the name of your organization imply that you are working specifically with African American women?

AMIN. What it means is that I bring the full weight of my personal and professional experience to the table to help my clients' problems. I work with clients across race and gender. When I have clients whose needs are beyond the scope of what I do, I will refer them to someone else whom I think might be a better fit, but I do have male clients, white clients, clients of all sorts of background. I like strategy, and I like solving complex problems, and I don't have the kind of personality where everybody needs to know that I did it. Sometimes I will see things my clients have accomplished, or institutions I helped, where I was the invisible hand, and I'm very satisfied with that.

CHASTAGNER. And how does your interest in dance play into this?

AMIN. I started studying dance when I was 3 years old, and it's the thing that I love the most, all of my degrees are in the arts, my undergraduate degree is in dance, my master is in arts administration, my PhD in dance studies. Dance for me is much bigger than thinking about discreet traditions. My area of expertise is 20th century American performance. It's important for me to help my students remember that dance is a fundamental human activity. It does not start on stage. Dance happens in our living-room, with our parents, in our bedrooms, when we were young, and in our communities. When we think about dance as a fundamental way human beings communicate ideas, and make sense of the world, it becomes broader, richer, and deeper. Dance comes into the consulting and strategy work that I do because dancers are problem solvers, they are communicators. There may be a particular movement or piece of choreography you want to teach and the best dance teachers I know have at least fifty different ways to teach that one movement, so I think my

orientation to being a problem solver, a quick thinker and a collaborator certainly comes from the experiences that I've had in dance.

CHASTAGNER. You have very strong words to describe the impact of dance when you write "it is resistance," it is "revolutionary acts," can you elaborate on this?

AMIN. As someone living in the States in a Black, racialized body, the kind of violence that we might think about that are aimed at Black lives are always pointed at our very bodies, at our fleshiness, at our materiality. As a descendant of formally enslaved people in this country, I can't help thinking that Black lives have never really been a problem unless they are working on behalf of themselves. When we worked for other people, when our labor was being exploited, whether that labor was physical or sexual or emotional, that was fine. As long as Black people used their bodies in agency to meet others' needs, whether those needs are material or psychological, everything was OK. But the minute we use our bodies to communicate our own experience, to interpret our own reality, to make sense of the world around us in some ways, usually, there are some problems. And in the context of protest, globally, often what people put on the line is their body. If you think about protest as a container for temporary communities, and about the way that gestures and movements, which are the building blocks for dance, show up in that space, then it is easier to see that dance is a part of the resistive technology that talks back to oppressive structures.

CHASTAGNER. Do you see this at work in the BLM protest movement?

AMIN. Sure, it is certainly a part of the broader movement for Black Lives, but more generally of the long freedom struggle that Black people have enacted, not just in the U.S., but in other parts of the world. I remember as a very young child, having parents who were pan-African in their political consciousness, I saw protest on television in Apartheid South-Africa, or parts of the Caribbean that were just then getting their independence from colonial powers. The way people enacted their bodies in those spaces left a big impression on me.

CHASTAGNER. Is there any connection between these issues and the struggle of LGBT people?

AMIN. Dance is older than the spoken language, than the written word. The impulse to communicate ideas through our bodies is a fundamental human act. If you look at the current structures of oppression, and the violence that are being pointed against communities not just in the States but globally, they are aimed at the bodies of queer folks. The pushback and resistance coming out of our communities are enacted at the level of the body. People are not just writing words, they are speaking back, they are pushing back. Protest exists at the level of our fleshy materiality. I think whatever liberation looks like, it is going to include a reckoning with our bodies, and dance, I think, is one of the tools. We have yet to meet a culture on the planet that does not have dance. It cuts across human experience, but many of us have not been taught or invited to think about it seriously.

CHASTAGNER. Have you been able to observe recent changes on these issues?

AMIN. I think the change that is resonating with me most in this moment is that increasingly young people (but I think this cuts across age) are less willing to collude with and make nice with structures of oppression. There are more sophisticated analyses around about what patriarchy means for all of us across gender, about the negative impact of capitalism regardless of where you sit in your relationship to that system. I am seeing people being less interested in colluding with those systems or making those who do more comfortable. People are sort of giving a big “screw you” to the systems in big and small ways, with dance or with what is closest to the body, the way people are choosing to dress or not dress. In the workplace, workers demand work/life balance and a living wage in ways that they hadn’t before. There is a shift in the socio-political zeitgeist, we have more agency than we think.

CHASTAGNER. What form does this negotiation take?

AMIN. I think people are less accommodationist, they speak in a way that is relevant to their culture and other people have to learn that, pushing back against professional norms whether about hair or clothes, requiring hybrid work agreement so that you can prioritize work/life balance. These things might seem small but they’re not because they’re helping to erode these totalizing systems that tell us our only value is what we give to the State. We’re seeing new business models tied to community and collaboration. We are also seeing an emphasis coming out of activist and artistic communities

around mutual aid which is essentially asking: “how do we get our needs met without everything being about money? If you have a big pot and a frying pan and I need it, can we borrow it, can we share, can we take care of each other’s needs?”. The only way to have mutual aid and sharing is to be in touch with your own community, not be afraid of each other.

CHASTAGNER. And when would you say was the starting point of this shift?

AMIN. It is not just one thing. The Obama presidency, for a lot of people, was a thing they never thought they would see. As a child, the idea of ever having a black president was sort of a punchline, it was a joke. A president with a name like Barack Hussein Obama in the United States, that was anathema to some people. And he had a second term! So certainly, the Obama presidency was impactful. It blew the lid off what was possible, and not just for people of African descent, but for lots of people. If this can happen, what else is possible?

I also think that the Black Lives Matter movement and challenges against State violence is a part of the push for freedom that goes back decades in this country. This kind of renewed interest is not just about freedom struggle and organizing but leveraging technologies. The Civil Rights movement knew how to leverage television, which was a new technology at that time, to get folks interested in and aware of the issues that were being faced in the Jim Crow South for example. So much organizing happens today through social media channels. The Obama presidency leveraged Twitter. Now of course it would be weird to try to organize without using Twitter, or TikTok, or WhatsApp, and Signal, and all these other platforms. Social media is borderless, and information can travel quite quickly, which has had a really strong impact on the way people think about organizing, about community, beyond the local.

All those things matter, and I don’t want to suggest that the election of 45 [Donald Trump] didn’t have an impact, it certainly did as a political backlash. But one of the things that gives me hope is the general analysis of that election as backlash. We were moving in a particular direction as a Nation with this black president, the way we were thinking, and dealing, and talking about race; everything wasn’t better, but our socio-political context was certainly different, the discourse was different from what it was under 45, and so holding that hopefulness as well as the backlash allows for a different kind of political analysis around what’s possible. Even with the disruption of Covid, we see people rethinking the nature and structure of their interpersonal relationships, of community and work, thinking differently about co-housing,

sharing resources. So even with all of the loss of life globally, there was still a seed of opportunity there to say, “OK whatever our life was before, it ain’t one we’re going back to,” so how do we begin to envision something else, something new, something deeper and richer that all of us can benefit from?

CHASTAGNER. Is it something that you see not just in the political and social fields, but also in popular culture, movies, dance, or music?

AMIN. Popular culture is interesting right now because there’s just so many more outlets. Now you don’t have to wait to get a contract with whatever major label, you can just put your music on SoundCloud, and produce it yourself. Some very successful HBO series started with a YouTube series. Think about these TikTok movements and trends. TikTok dances have proliferated with other people picking them up, extending them, interpolating them. When I was growing up, they were three major TV networks. Now I can’t keep up with all the streaming services, social media, podcasts... I can go record a podcast on my phone right now in my bedroom and have it up on Apple and Spotify by tomorrow if that’s what I want to do. It is allowing people to think differently about the notion of media. Most people think of themselves as content creators in some ways. I don’t know if the impact of that is entirely positive and I have some critiques (what does that mean in terms of people thinking of themselves as celebrity, that’s another thing); but I think there’s a greater opportunity. All of us can say something and can find an outlet for what we want to produce, if that’s what we want to do. The lid is off. You can make a movie on your iPhone, you can crowdfund, so what’s the problem!

CHASTAGNER. Do you think the same is happening or has happened in terms of expressing sexual preferences and gender?

AMIN. I think that LGBTQ+ people have always been in our communities and have always been in our world, I think the difference now is that our lens is wider and our acknowledgement of these people is broader. I don’t think that there’s more expression now. I think that expressing our realities and possibilities has always been present. I just think our willingness to deal with it as a society is shifting and changing and not always in good ways. There was just recent legislation passed here this week that would impact transgender teens and the kind of healthcare decisions they can make. There are ongoing debates about the presence of trans athletes in schools. There are

bills banning artists who are drag performers which may or may not align with any particular gender identity or sexual preference... That also raises larger questions, for example does that mean we can't do the school play if it is an all-girl school, and the play has boy parts? It raises all kinds of questions about not just sexual identity and historically marginalized communities, but who we believe is in the community, and what we are going to value as culture. Because the lid is off the box, these people exist, we can't pretend that they don't, and they are not going away, they have always been a part of our culture, so how do we live and work in ways that acknowledge and reckon with that reality, in a manner that is humanitarian and life affirming?

CHASTAGNER. Are these changes just a fad, or do they point to something deeper?

AMIN. It is something deep. It reminds me of the 1980s when there was a push in this country around multicultural education, and recognizing Black History Month across the country, and the various cultures that have helped to shape not just American, but global consciousness. People were asking the same question: is it a fad, is it just the flavor of the week? No, these people had always lived in our world and had always contributed to our society, but we haven't brought them enough into our circle of concern to consider them, their contributions, and their full humanity. And to some degree the same thing is happening with the LGBTQ+ communities that have always been an expressive, active part of our society. It is just that our lens hopefully is getting broader and deeper, and we have the possibility of dealing with each other in more equitable ways.

CHASTAGNER. What is the current mood of the people around you?

AMIN. I would say that you can always find pockets of hope. I work in higher education and so generally we can't afford to be cynical because if we are, we can't do the work we are called to do. It's very hard to teach people that they have capacity, that they can learn and grow if you don't really believe in people's capacity to grow and change. So, we have to push past some of that cynicism in order to do the work that we're doing, especially when it comes to educating students across the lifespan. I have a friend who calls me every week to ask if my job is illegal yet, because I work in the diversity, equity, and inclusion space and there are several States that are trying to pass bills to make that kind of work illegal and push it out of colleges and universities. Luckily, I

live in a state [Virginia] where none of that has happened and we seem to have a state government that is friendly, at least to some degree, to the work that I and many others do here, but that could change next week. So you definitely feel that tension in the air, the need to institutionalize, to make good things happen as long as we can, for as many as we can. The State that has proposed the most laws against that kind of work is Florida. I have colleagues who are teaching in Florida. When I see what's happening with their State government on the news, that's very real, in terms of what this means for their daily quality of life. I have a colleague who is interviewing for a job in Mississippi in a few weeks, a State that is trying to reinstate some of the deepest segregation laws we have seen in more than 30 years. Legislation is about ideas but it's also about real people. What does this mean for the lives of people whom we know, and love, and care about? I wish that lawmakers would allow themselves the space to think more intimately in that regard.

CHASTAGNER. What about the role played by black institutions like the Church or by Community leaders?

AMIN. I think that more and more people are not leaving religion as such, but they are leaving formal structures of religion. This has been a trend for 5 to 8 years, especially black folks articulating an interest in traditional African religions or other kind of spiritual practices that don't track along the lines of going to a formal structure on Sunday between 8 and noon. And it requires black institutions, that we might have looked at historically as holding a lot of community power, to reckon with the fact that the scope of their power is shifting, that everybody is not necessarily looking to them to set the agenda, that there are smaller activist communities and other spaces that are also articulating an agenda. It's the same for organizations like the Urban League or the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People that are active and have been active for some time, and much more informal activist communities, some of which are temporary, that come together and work for a particular cause or purpose. You have small virtually unknown groups that are doing excellent work organizing on the ground, and you have larger, perhaps more traditional, structures that are reckoning with their role in this moment. The organizations that have embraced technology earlier are much better off.

CHASTAGNER. Do you think there is too much emphasis on issues dealing with sexuality and gender?

AMIN. I don't think so because all of us are more than just one thing, and all of the identities that we hold come to bear every time we enter the room. Some people ask: are you black first or are you woman first? I've never been black and a woman 30 minutes later. Everything about who I am comes into the room with me every time I come in the room. A lot of young people now grew up in a world where the presence and comfortability around LGBTQ+ people is more normalized. Obama is the first president they remember, that's not an anomaly to them. Queer people are not strange to them in that way. Young people are always looking at the vanguard, always looking at what is on edge, always looking towards the futurity. We have yet, as a society, to really reckon with people who don't fit in our gender binary, who don't present in ways that we are comfortable with, or a language we fully understand. That's still a part of that vanguard. Young people just grew up in a world where their level of comfort is much deeper than the one we had at the same age.

CHASTAGNER. Does this have an impact on the nature of black masculinity, on the negative stereotypes displayed in hip-hop?

AMIN. I think that notions of black masculinity have always been in flux. It just depends on what you're looking at, and whose identities you choose to center in that discussion. Black masculinity is changing as much as any other identity, it is always shifting and changing. What we have now is more black men in the public eye who are willing to question notions of masculinity, and how these have been harmful and tethered to patriarchal models that have been oppressive, and how they are also wanting to push back on that in ways that we haven't seen before artistically, whether that's in film, or dance, or music, or television. But I think that notions of masculinity are always in flux and have never been set in time in the way that we want to think about. Black life is as complicated and nuanced as any other, but depending on the lens you use, it's easy not to see that nuance and that complexity.

CHASTAGNER. Is it something that you deal with in your job with Black Girl Brilliance?

AMIN. I do sometimes when I am talking to department heads, particularly if they run a dance or theater program, and are working on their curriculum. How do they deal with whatever classical notions of canon they might have, and the interest of their students which are often broader, and deeper than even they, themselves, have considered? So yes, all these kinds of questions come

to the fore when we're thinking about what we teach our students. There is no consensus around what foundational knowledge in dance is, or what foundational knowledge in theater is, we don't have that, and in some ways I'm glad, because it allows us to remain dynamic and flexible. But when you're on a campus, you have to make decisions around curriculum, what is going to ground, what you're teaching and sharing, and training students to do. So, these questions come up when I'm dealing with curriculum design.

CHASTAGNER. Do you observe today a different degree of appropriation of black people's creativity?

AMIN. Black life has always been appropriated, because black communities are creative in general. So, people always want to steal our stuff. That's just because black culture is generative and has always been. So, I don't think there's less appropriation. In terms of empowerment, there is so much violence aimed at black lives, both physically and rhetorically, I don't know that we are more empowered than we have been before, but I do think we have more access to information, and in some ways to each other, than we've ever had before, which certainly has an impact on our ability to think, work, and organize. So, if there's a context for more empowerment it is that: our ability to access more information and resources than we have ever had before and our ability to connect with each other without even leaving our own homes. That allows us to think broadly and differently about community.

CHASTAGNER. Is the black community today supported by a greater number of allies?

AMIN. The issue of allyship is complicated. You have more people who want to be allies perhaps, but you know my thought about allyship is: "the stones that are aimed at me are not hitting you." Often I have had the experience with people saying they want to be an ally, with disabled communities, or black communities, or with whatever marginalized group, but the minute that folks in the community to which they say they want to be allies do something or make a decision that makes them feel negatively, they withdraw their support because they disagree with the tactic or don't like the way it makes them feel: "If you're going to make me feel bad about my whiteness, if you're going to make me feel bad about being straight, if you're going to make me feel bad about whatever identity..." So allyship is a very tricky card because it's so easily withdrawn. This is why I say you can't name yourself as an ally, it is the

community that you claim to be with or supporting that can identify you in that way. They are the ones to say whether you are an ally. I want to believe that people have good impulses, I want to believe that it usually comes from a genuine place, that there are communities and people who care about others being oppressed, that it is a human impulse to want to join in that struggle and that fight. The challenge arises when the work of allyship becomes uncomfortable, like bailing people out of jail, or coordinating childcare, or a security protocol, or taking out his trash, or buying milk to wash out teargas. A lot of times what needs to be done is not glamorous, it's not feeding your ego...

CHASTAGNER. Do you see any regional disparities on these issues?

AMIN. I am originally from western New York, so I grew up about 45 minutes away from the Canadian border. But I've moved away, I've lived in different cities, in different kinds of institutions, with people from all over the country, from all over the world and I do think that there are differences, but they are largely about who you live around, who you are in proximity to. There are people in parts of this country who never lived with black people or other people of color in close proximity, so that the time of experience you might have had in a more urban center like New York City or Philadelphia doesn't necessarily show up in the same way, and the political concerns are not the same. You take a State like California which certainly deals with more migrant workers than Ohio, and the way that they think and talk about labor is going to be different. The size of the U.S. can be really daunting to consider because culturally things are different in different parts of the country, in terms of priorities and notions of indigeneity, and community. I'm from Buffalo, New York, which because of the proximity to Canada historically was a major site of the underground railroad. It was a place that people would get to from the South, you could swim across, and walk across, or get a boat across to freedom. That history is very deeply embedded in the culture of my city, in the culture of my community. That's not necessarily the case everywhere. If you go to a place like Texas which is a very large State, you can be driving for three hours and still be in the State of Texas. Part of it has to do with history and who is present in your community, around you, who you think of as community, there are real distinctions depending on where you live in this country.

One of the things that strikes me because I'm in Virginia now, which is certainly considered as part of the Old South, is the media people access.

When I lived in the North East, it was very common for people to read *The New York Times* or *The Atlantic* or *The New Yorker*, you certainly wanted to read *The New York Times* by lunchtime because your colleagues were going to be talking about what was on the front page at lunch, or you listened to NPR or BBC News. That's not necessarily my reality living in the South, where the emphasis was much less on that kind of intellectual and topical banter, and more about things that are deeply gendered. For example, I'm trying to get a signature on a form at work, but you want me to talk to you about pie recipes, or how your children are doing. All of that kind of chatter is necessary before getting to the business at hand, otherwise you are considered bold, and direct, and rude. Even notions of what is socially acceptable shift depending on where you might be in the country.

My grandparents were Southerners who came to Western New York after World War II because there were jobs, and that was true for a lot of African American service men. My grandfather fought in World War II and when many black men came back to this country, they were lynching black people in their uniforms in the South, so he moved north for work and for safety, that's why we ended up there.

I've had plenty of situations where a student never had a black teacher or professor before and even their notion of what a professor looks like... a professor is supposed to be an old white man with glasses, and is not supposed to be someone who looks, or talks, or sounds like me. It doesn't matter what degrees I have, or what professional experience I have, they have come from the context where you don't answer to black people, who are not to be in positions of authority. That has caused me challenges throughout my career that had nothing to do with whether I was qualified or not.

CHASTAGNER. What do you think young black people need to know right now?

AMIN. History! One of the things that concerns me, and I know this is probably starting to make me sound to young people like a granny, is that in this moment of social media with everything moving so quickly, the only thing that's exciting is the thing happening right now. If it happened three weeks ago, that's already old. I wish that I knew how to communicate more effectively the deep pleasure that comes from learning something, really learning it and being able to look at a scenario or political reality and make sense of it even if it's a difficult reality. There is something very satisfying about that, that I have experienced as a thinker, as an intellectual, as a person

who is hungry about knowledge in the world, and I wish I could translate that hunger and passion to every single person that I come across, and certainly to young people, that enthusiasm to learn more and not to just learn the things that show up on your timeline. I want you to read a book whose author you don't know about, I want you to go see a movie that you don't know anything about, I want you to take the questions that you had five years ago and spend time really getting to the bottom of them. One of the most satisfying things in my life as someone with a doctoral training is that I know how to research well enough that I don't have to wait for other people to answer my questions. That is deeply satisfying, and I wish I could communicate that joy, that satisfaction and that power. That is the thing that I would want young people to know, that there is more value in understanding the world around you and that it is going to require more of you than just talking to your friends or what you heard in a three-minute TikTok video. Go deeper, read more, explore further, don't be so easily satisfied with information that comes to you, don't steer away from the difficult questions and the complicated ideas that are facing you.

CHASTAGNER. Thank you, that's a wonderful conclusion.