

# Tara Aisha Willis, Ph.D.

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## RESEARCH AREAS

Dance Studies (20<sup>th</sup>-21<sup>st</sup> century, esp. 1960s-Present concert dance; Black Dance Studies), Performance Studies (Black Performance Theory), Curatorial Practices in Performance, Archival Studies, Black Feminist/Queer of Color Critique, Contemporary Dance & Performance Practice

## CURATORIAL FOCUS

Contemporary dance and performance; Black arts discourses; Interdisciplinary programming; Presenting process, practice, and experimentation; Engagement and community connection in, around, and as artwork; Discursive platforms and public humanities

## EDUCATION

- 2022 Tisch School of the Arts, NYU  
Ph.D., Performance Studies (M.Phil. 2015)  
*Dissertation*: “Dancing Blackness: Kinetic Theorizations of Race in Contemporary Improvised Choreographies” (Pass with distinction)  
*Committee*: André Lepecki (chair), Barbara Browning, Malik Gaines, Thomas F. DeFrantz (external), Tavia Nyong’o (external)
- 2015-2021 Various anti-racism training workshops: The People’s Institute for Survival and Beyond, Erasing Racism, Enrich Chicago, Chicago Regional Organizing for Anti-Racism, and Ethos Anti-Racist Manager Training
- 2015 Mellon Dance Studies Summer Seminar, Northwestern University
- 2013 Tisch School of the Arts, NYU  
M.A., Performance Studies  
*Thesis*: “Stumbling into Place: Positionality, Mobile Resistance, and the Problem of Blackness in post-Judson Experimental Dance”  
*Advisor*: Tavia Nyong’o
- 2009 Barnard College, Columbia University  
B.A., Dance & English/Creative Writing Concentration (Poetry)  
Summa Cum Laude, Phi Beta Kappa, Dean’s List; The Barnard Centennial Scholars Program; The Ailey School Independent Study

## FUNDING, AWARDS & FELLOWSHIPS

- 2023-25 Studies in Dance History First-Time Author Mentorship Program, University of Michigan Press/Dance Studies Association
- 2023 Project Researcher, Feminist Performance Archives, Getty Research Center

2022	Joan Flasch Artists' Book Collection Residency, School of the Art Institute of Chicago
2022	NYU-Wide Outstanding Dissertation Award, Arts & Humanities NYU Deena Burton Memorial Scholarship in Dance Award
2019–2020	New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, Jerome Robbins Dance Division; The Jan Schmidt Dance Research Fellowship
2013–2018	Tisch School of the Arts Corrigan Fellowship for Doctoral Study
2016	NYU Performance Studies Stefanos Tsigrimanis Artistic Scholar Award
2015	Student Senator's Council Conference Fund Travel Grant
2014	NYU Graduate School of Arts & Sciences Dean's Student Travel Grant
2013	NYU Performance Studies Graduate Conference Travel Grant
2012	Barnard College Alumnae Fellowship for Graduate Study Tisch School of the Arts Scholarship for Graduate Study
2010	Dance Theater Workshop Van Lier Fellowship

## CURATION/PROGRAMMING

2017–Present	Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago Curator of Performance (2021–Present) Associate Curator of Performance (2017–2021)
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### Select MCA artist projects:

Bebe Miller, Ishmael Houston-Jones & Ralph Lemon (with printed contextual booklet, ed.); Will Rawls & Claudia Rankine; Trajal Harrell; Ola Maciejewski; Kim Brandt; Ligia Lewis; 600 Highwaymen; Okwui Okpokwasili; Adrienne Truscott; Dahlak Brathwaite; Rennie Harris; Yanira Castro (printed manuals, ed.); David Neumann & Marcella Murray; Kaneza Schaal; Tamar-kali; Thurman Barker; Ben LaMar Gay; Meshell Ndegeocello & Staceyann Chin; Justin Vivian Bond & Jim Hodges; Alice Sheppard/Kinetic Light; Autumn Knight; Mammalian Diving Reflex; Nona Hendryx; Bimbola Akinbola; Derek Lee McPhatter; Barak adé Soleil; Shamel Pitts|TRIBE; Marjani Forté-Saunders; SHAWNÉ MICHAELAIN HOLLOWAY; Samita Sinha; Laura Ortman; Anna Martine Whitehead; Brandon Markell Holmes; Jennifer Harge; Mariana Valencia; Patricia Nguyen

### Select programming partners:

Illinois Department of Juvenile Justice, League of Chicago Theatres, Project&, Bodies of Work, Threewalls Gallery, The Kitchen, Goethe Institut, Cultural Services of the French Embassy, Chicago Dance History Project, Chicago Dancemakers Forum, Portland Institute for Contemporary Art, St. Benedict the African Catholic Church, Bodies of Work, MOSAIC Soul, Chicago Humanities Festival, Prison + Neighborhood Arts and Education Project; Northwestern University Black Arts Consortium

Select panel moderation:

Patrisse Cullors & Alice Sheppard; Cat Mahari; Charlotte Brathwaite, Nicholas Galanin, & Pascale Ife Williams; Claudia Rankine & Will Rawls; Brendan Fernandes, Darrell Jones, & Amina Ross; Angel Bat Dawid; Patricia Nguyen; Mariana Valencia; Jennifer Harge; Brandon Markell Holmes; Derek McPhatter; Rosé Hernandez; Autumn Knight; Nao Bustamante; Meida McNeil; Jamal “Litebulb” Oliver

Exhibition experience:

*Groundings* (exhibition with six in-gallery performer residencies, co-curated with Grace Deveney); *The Long Dream* (led collaborative curatorial team to build robust live arts components of exhibition, including residencies and digital events); *Frictions* (performance series with two site-specific video installations)

- 2020 JOMBA! Contemporary Dance Festival, Durbin, South Africa  
Co-curator, U.S. screendance platform
- 2011-17 Movement Research  
Program Advisor, 2016-2017  
Co-curator, Spring Festival: *Hand Written Note(s)*, 2016  
Coordinator of Diversity Initiatives (founding Artists of Color Council administrator), 2014-2016  
Program Associate, 2011-2014

## PUBLICATIONS

### Books/Chapters

*In the Horizontal Plane: taisha paggett* (tentative title), Soberscove Press; Co-editor and author with taisha paggett and Jaime Shearn Coan, Forthcoming 2024

*Dancing on the Third Coast: Chicago Dance Histories*, University of Illinois Press; Susan Manning and Lizzie Leopold, eds., Chapter Author, “(Re)placing ‘X’: Poonie Dodson in Chicago, ca. 1985,” Forthcoming 2023

*Craft & Conceptual Art: Reshaping the Legacy of Artists' Books*, Center for Book Arts; Megan N. Liberty, ed., Essay Author, “Performance and the Page: The instructional score and conceptual bookmaking,” 2023

*Blondell Cummings: Dance as Moving Pictures*, Getty Research Institute/X Artists' Books; Kristin Juarez, Rebecca Peabody, and Glenn Phillips, eds., Essay Author, “Moves, Stages, and Frames: A Visual Essay on Blondell Cummings,” 2021

*Marking the Occasion*, Wendy's Subway, Document Series; Co-editor and author with Jaime Shearn Coan, 2020

*Relations: Bebe Miller, Ishmael Houston-Jones, Ralph Lemon*, Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, public domain booklet; Curator/editor, 2018

## Articles/Essays/Podcast

“Title TBD,” *How People Move People*, National Choreographic Center Akron (forthcoming six-episode podcast series)

*Imagined Theatres*, Author, “performance score built with undated performance notes,” 2020

*Contact Quarterly*, Co-author with Ishmael Houston-Jones, Ralph Lemon, and Bebe Miller, “RELATIONS: A Performance Reunion,” 2019

*Performance Research: On Reflection: Turning 100*, Author, “*A Litany on An/notations*,” 2018

*Performa Magazine*, Author, “What Remains: Reflections on Blackness, Dance, and Curation,” 2018

Danspace Project Platform: *Dancing Platform Praying Grounds: Blackness, Churches, and Downtown Dance*, Author, “Where We Land, Where We Fly, October 2016–2017,” 2018

*The Black Scholar: Black Moves: New Research in Black Dance Studies*, Author, “Stumbling into Place: Seeing Blackness in David Thomson’s Choreographies of Ambiguity”; Co-Author with Thomas F. DeFrantz, “Introduction,” 2016

*Movement Research Performance Journal*, Editor/Author, “Diversity and Accountability: A Conversation with the Movement Research Artists of Color Council,” 2017; Author, “Practice Text #1,” 2015; Co-author with Emily Bock for Reggie Wilson artist portfolio, “Getting It: A Conversation On The Body As Archive,” 2015

*TDR/The Drama Review*, Book review author, *Coloring Whiteness: Acts of Critique in Black Performance* by Faedra Chatard Carpenter, 2016

*Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory*, Performance review co-author with Barbara Browning, “Cynthia Oliver’s *BOOM!* and Dean Moss’s *johnbrown*,” 2015

Various artist interviews and book reviews, 2015–2021:

*Pioneer Works Broadcast: Autumn Knight*; *The Shed: Leslie Cuyjet*; *Brooklyn Rail: Steffani Jemison, Okwui Okpokwasili, Rakiya A. Orange, niv Acosta & Thomas F. DeFrantz*; *Voices from the Bush Blog*; *Urban Bush Women: Marjani Forté-Saunders, Chanon Judson, Marguerite Hemmings*; *Magazin in August: niv Acosta & Jaamil Olawale Kosoko*

## Editing

*Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory*, Editorial Collective Member, 2013–Present, Performance Reviews Editor, 2016–17

*Dancing While Black: Black Bodies/White Boxes*, Editorial Advisor/Content Editor, 2019

*The Black Scholar: Black Moves: New Research in Black Dance Studies*, Special Issue Co-Editor with Thomas F. DeFrantz, 2016

*TDR: The Drama Review*, Assistant Editor, 2015–16, Co-Managing Editor, 2014–15

# RESEARCH PRESENTATIONS

## Teaching/Course Visits

University of Chicago, Theater and Performance Studies, Dance Program  
Adjunct Lecturer, 2023-24 (Moving and Thinking; Dance Improvisation in Theory and Practice); 2022-23 (Dance and the Archive; Black Experimentation in Dance)

School of the Art Institute of Chicago, Department of Exhibitions/SAIC Galleries/Performance Department/John M. Flaxman Library Special Collections  
Workshop co-leader with taisha paggett and Jaime Shearn Coan, 2022

University of Chicago, Department of Visual Arts, Group Critique  
Visiting critic, 2021

Wesleyan University, Institute for Curatorial Practice in Performance  
Thesis project guest critic, 2021

Williams College, Graduate Program in the History of Art, Contemporary Curatorial Workshop  
Guest speaker, 2021

Yale University, Theater and Performance Studies, Experimental Writing and Performance  
Guest speaker, 2021

Princeton University, Introduction to Contemporary Dance  
Guest speaker, 2020

Northwestern University, Performance Studies, Curating Performance  
Guest speaker, 2020

School of the Art Institute of Chicago, Professional Practices in Contemporary Practices  
Guest speaker, 2019

Columbia College Chicago, Department of Dance, Dance Improvisation  
Guest speaker, 2018

New York University, Undergraduate CORE Curriculum, Expressive Culture: Performance  
Adjunct Teaching Assistant to Karen Shimakawa, Spring & Fall 2016

Movement Research, MELT Reading Group  
Facilitator, “to do what we have made,” 2016 and “making use, making move,” 2015

Hollins University, Dance Department  
MFA Thesis Writing Advisor, Summers 2013-2015

## Presentations/Panels

University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, Humanities Research Institute Interseminars Initiative, “Improvise and Intervene,” Guest speaker, 2023 (upcoming)

Bryn Mawr, Visual Culture Colloquium, Guest speaker, 2023

Brown University, Department of Theatre Arts and Performance Studies Virtual Roundtable, “Embodiment, Dance, and Performance in Contemporary Curatorial Practice,” Panelist, 2022

St. Mary's College, Visiting Curator Lecture Series, Guest speaker, 2022

Northwestern University, Andrew W. Mellon Sawyer Seminar, “The Black Arts Archive: The Challenge of Translation,” Guest speaker, 2021

Kenyon College, Race in Motion series, Guest speaker, 2020

Goldfinch Gallery, Chicago, “Expanding on Breath: A roundtable discussion on the significance of breath and breathing in our contemporary moment,” Panelist, 2020

Museum of Modern Art, *Judson Dance Theater: The Work Is Never Done* exhibition, Movement Research Studies Project: “Tracing Beyond,” Panelist, 2019

Between Gestures Festival, Chicago, Dance and Activism series, Guest speaker, 2019

Smith College, Museum of Art/Department of Dance, Guest speaker, 2019

Banff Centre for Arts & Creativity, Distributed Identities Visual Arts Residency, Guest speaker and Advisor, 2019

University of the Arts, Department of Dance Lecture Series, Guest speaker, 2018

Hampshire College, Department of Dance Lecture Series, Guest speaker, 2017

American Realness Festival, “shift/shape: Dana Michel, Ni’Ja Whitson, and Ligia Lewis,” Organizer/Moderator, 2017

Conversations on Diversity, Marymount Manhattan College, Guest speaker, 2014

### Conferences

Performance Studies International

Panel organizer, *Brief Liberation: Experiments in Black Feminist Embodied Practice*, 2023

Black Performance Theory, Participant, 2023

American Studies Association

Roundtable participant, *Horizontal Authorship: Black Worlds Being and To-Be*, 2023

Panel organizer, *Bodies in Crisis: Queer Resources of Black Survival*, “(Re)placing “X”: Poonie Dodson in Chicago, ca. 1985,” 2022

Association for Theatre in Higher Education

Presenter, “(Re)placing “X”: Poonie Dodson in Chicago, ca. 1985,” 2022

Dance Studies Association

Panel organizer, *Bodies in Crisis: Queer Resources of Black Survival*, “(Re)placing “X”: Poonie Dodson in Chicago, ca. 1985,” 2022

Panel organizer, “Citational Gestures: Black Counter-Archives in Performance,” Simon Fraser University, 2020 (Cancelled due to COVID)

Co-organizer/Panelist, “Dance Studies in the Commons: Public Dance Scholarship Outside the Academy,” Northwestern, 2019

Co-Presenter, “Choreography that Resists: Stillness, Dance, and the Tactics of Occupy,” UCLA, 2013 (formerly Congress on Research in Dance)

Collegium for African Diaspora Dance Conference, Duke University/SLIPPAGE, Presenter

“(Re)placing “X”: Poonie Dodson in Chicago, ca. 1985,” 2022

“Riffs and Relations: Dancing Blackness with Bebe Miller, Ishmael Houston-Jones, and Ralph Lemon,” 2020

“the action in the now’: Dancing Blackness in The Skeleton Architecture,” 2018  
“Enclosed Passage: The Space-Time of taisha paggett’s Performative Vestibularity,” 2016  
“Stumbling into Place: Positionality, Minority Difference, and Mobile Resistance in post-Judson Experimental Dance,” 2014

Configurations in Motion: Performance Curation and Communities of Color, Invited Presenter  
“For and With Whom?: Performance and live arts in relation,” Made in BC, 2020  
“Notes Toward a New Configuration,” Concordia University, 2017  
“Sustainable Structures: Thoughts on Movement Research’s Programming,” Duke University, 2016

Curating Performance Symposium, NYU Department of Performance Studies  
“Architecture & Institution,” Invited Speaker, 2018  
“the skeleton architecture’: Frames for Dancing Blackness,” Invited moderator, 2017

The Between: Couple Forms, Performing Together, NYU Department of Performance Studies  
with Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory  
Co-presenter, “Fake Proposal for a Co-Authored Dissertation,” 2018

Critical Matter of Performance Colloquium, New Museum  
Presenter, “the skeleton architecture’: Frames for Dancing Blackness,” 2017

Association for the Study of the Worldwide African Diaspora  
Panel co-organizer, Performing the Diaspora: Black Dance, Resistance and the Complexity of Black Bodies, College of Charleston, SC, 2015

Hemispheric Institute Graduate Student Initiative Convergence  
Performance Philosophy and its Politics Work Group participant, “Enclosed Passage: On the Space-Time of Black Vestibularity in Performance,” 2014

## **ARTS ADVOCACY/SERVICE**

Institut Francais/French Ministry of Culture/Villa Albertine, International Dance Series Advisory Committee, 2022–2023

Links Hall, Board of Directors, 2021–Present (Development Committee; Executive Director Search Committee, 2023–Present)

The Field Center, Artistic Advisory Board, 2021–Present

Chicago Dancemakers Forum Anti-Racism Team, Consortium Representative, 2021–Present

Open Dialogue, Emerging Curators Institute, Panelist, 2023

10x10 Crossbody Collaborations, Hubbard Street Dance Chicago/Chicago Dancemakers Forum, Artist Collaboration Guide, 2020–2021

Chicago Dance History Project, “Presenting and Commissioning Dance,” Panelist, 2021

Chicago Dancemakers Forum Awards Celebration and Benefit, Host Committee, 2020

“Creating New Futures: Working Guidelines for Ethics & Equity in Presenting Dance & Performance,” Phase 1 Contributing Writer, 2020 (“Bessie” Award–Honored Initiative)

Roy and Edna Disney/CalArts Theater, "Liveness: Reflecting on the Current State and Future Possibilities of Performance and Theater," Panelist, 2020

See Chicago Dance Critical Writing Fellowship, Guest Speaker, 2020

Creative Capital, "Adaptive Platforms for Artist Resilience," Panelist, 2020

Association of Performing Arts Professionals BREAK/ROOM Conversations: "Recovery/Transformation: What Comes Next," Panelist, 2020

Dance/USA Annual Conference, "Dance Performances: Planning & Preparing," Moderator, 2020

National Performance Network Partners, "LET'S GET REAL," Panel Co-organizer, 2020

Alliance of Artist Communities Conference: "Supporting Interdisciplinary Artists + Cross-disciplinary Collaboration," Panelist, 2019

National Dance Presenters Forum, Jacob's Pillow, Selected Participant, 2018

Dramaturgy Convening, Urban Bush Women Choreographic Center, Embedded Writer, 2017

Artist/Writer Convening, Maggie Allesee National Center for Choreography, Invited Guest, 2016

"Diversity and Accountability: A conversation with the MR Artists of Color Council," Organizer/Panelist, 2016

Select funding and award selection panels, 2014–Present:

Pew Center for the Arts & Heritage, Jerome Foundation, The Petronio Residency Center Award, On the Boards Curatorial Fellowship, Eyebeam Rapid Response for a Better Digital Future Residency, United States Artists Fellowship & The Rainin Fellowship, Creative Capital Awards, 3Arts Awards, MAP Fund, In/Motion Dance Film Festival, Special Selection Grand Jury Award, New York Dance & Performance ("Bessie") Awards, Current Practices Committee, Lower Manhattan Cultural Council Paris Residency, Chez Bushwick Artists-in Residence Program, New York Live Arts Fresh Tracks Residency

## PERFORMANCE

Choreographer, various projects, 2013–2022:

C'mon Everybody; Ragdale Foundation Residency; Harris Theater for Music and Dance Chicago Artist COVID Residency; SET FREE Residency, Links Hall; Chez Bushwick Artist-in-Residence; DraftWork, Danspace Project; the CURRENT SESSIONS, The Wild Project; Movement Research at Judson Church; Center for Performance Research; Roulette Intermedium; Dixon Place

Dancer, various performances, 2013–2022:

Ethan Philbrick, *Slow Dances*: The Kitchen Video Viewing Room, Montez Press Radio  
Paulina Olowaska, *Naughty Nymphs in the Courtyard of Favorites*: Art Institute of Chicago  
Will Rawls & Claudia Rankine, *What Remains*: ICA Boston, Walker Art Center, Yale Repertory Theater, MCA Chicago, Crossing the Line Festival/Danspace Project, BRIC, Fisher Center/Bard College, Roy and Edna Disney/CalArts Theater  
Yanira Castro, *CAST/STAGE*: The Yard, Abrons Art Center, Chocolate Factory  
Ivy Baldwin, *Keer*: Abrons Art Center  
Kim Brandt: Pioneer Works, SculptureCenter, Roulette, The Kitchen, Artists Space



Danspace Project Platform: *the skeleton architecture, or the future of our worlds* (“Bessie” Award-winning performance)

Anna Sperber, *PRIZE*: New York Live Arts

Abigail Levine: Hemispheric Institute Encuentro/Concordia University

Megan Byrne: Brooklyn Studios for Dance, New Museum, Danspace, Abrons Art Center

## **ADDITIONAL SKILLS**

Spanish-language reading comprehension. Over ten years of performance curation and programming experience: pan-institutional program-building; program structure visioning; supporting artists developing new work; managing community partnerships, artist relations, and sustained engagement; in-person, analog, virtual, and hybrid program building; building accessibility plans with artists; collaboration with publicity, interpretation, development, production, and front of house staff; grant writing/reporting; evaluation methods; contracting, budgeting, line-production, and project management for large and small projects (budget oversight up to \$300,000). Familiarity with museum exhibition-building and interpretation processes.