

Teresa Ramos

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[Teresa 5-12-04](#)

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Meeting with Cynthia Oliver

October 27, 2003

I arrived early to her office which is in the dance administration building, a little blue paneled building [not very prestigious looking, it reminds me off Ann's comment on the Dance and Ag departments being the "back doors" to the university.] When I entered into the main area, I saw her office to the left. She had a color print out of the official Brown vs. Board of Education Handout, which I looked through for about ten minutes. It was attached to a piece of string and then taped to her door so that people could flip through it. [I would really like to get a copy of this from the committee, or else make a copy of hers and take a picture of it hanging on her office door.] [Mikkana, the dance student that I interviewed who participated in the McIntry Dance, said that Cynthia Oliver taught her a lot about Brown and got her involved with different events.](#)

She came out of her office, I introduced myself, she then asked me if I could wait a few more minutes until she talked to one more student, and then she could give me more of her time.

Around ten minutes later, she emerged from her office again and invited me in. She had some music playing in the background, which she asked me to turn off for her, since the CD player was near where I was sitting. I then asked her to read over and sign the IRB form and gave her a copy. Her office was very artsy. Every wall is decorated with pictures, posters, flyers. The lighting is very subtle and warm, not iridescent.

The first question I posed to her was regarding how she became involved in the Brown vs. Board of Education Celebration. I told her I was trying to understand how her project came into motion. She replied that there were a couple of black artists she thought would be important for the dance department to be exposed to, even before the Brown vs. Board commemoration came to her attention. [I suspect that many BvB Comm events were things that people might have wanted to do anyway but didn't have the support to do without the commemoration \(rather than brand new things inspired purely by the BvB comm opportunity\) \(MA\). That's interesting, I never thought about that.](#)

However, these programs were not possible due to lack of funds. The dance department had a limited amount of funding. In order to **reach out to the community** more money was necessary. [Important to her that the community is affected](#) At that point, this past summer, she was performing in New York when a colleague of hers told her about this opportunity for money, through the Brown vs. Board commemoration, which would allow her access to the funds necessary to bring these artists to UIUC.

"It was an opportunity that I thought that I couldn't pass up." She wrote up the proposal.

"What I thought was we could attempt to get a wide variety of black artists who have been impacted by this decision in one way or another and that could also represent a good chunk of the black dance community." Representation was needed from the black dance community. Cynthia was influenced by countless black dance artists. For example, she said Dianne McIntyre was one of the dancers who was not as recognized in the black dance community, but had a strong impact on her personally. Dianne was the

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choreographer for the movie “Beloved”; she has been in the dance community for a long time. Dianne came up in the 1950’s and 60’s. She could talk about the impact of black artists at this time. Dianne was someone who could talk about the movements, the Brown decision, and “how they immediately impacted black artists and what they imagined they would have access to.” Dianne McIntyre would cover the modern dance scene, and Amaniyea Payne, would represent an African influence and swing dancing (which is an African derived dance form.) [I did not know that about swing dancing. [Either did I. Appropriation without recognition](#)] -The two of them together would create a broad spectrum of knowledge on how Brown influenced African Art.

Cynthia wanted “the dance department to interact with the university community as well as the larger Champaign-Urbana community, specifically the black C-U community. Cynthia noticed a lack of connection with the Black C-U community.” [How did she create her own narrative through this? [Ties into how the community is excluded from the University in some ways](#)] [rb](#) “How do we interact with people? How do people imagine us (the university) as a **resource**?” [key word that has been emergent often. rb](#) Then she “started talking with various people in the community, some of whom approached her, and we came up with ideas about offering a **community class** in which local kids can participate. We are going to do a talk where a couple of professors will talk about the brown impact on education.” [I would defiantly think that EOTU should go more in depth with her on how she established these connections with the community, and how the community reached out to her.] [Do you know who reached out to her?](#) [\(MA\) No, I don’t. I’ll try to find out.](#)

[All of the people who will be giving a talk are **connected in some way, besides being black**. They are all in the arts, some have worked with each other at different points of the in their careers. They will all bring different things to one Brown vs. Board of Education discussion.]

Dianne wanted to represent a particular **generation** of black dancers initially, this semester. In the spring, she will bring two younger artists to UIUC. The first is Reggie Wilson, “he is touring the country with a huge program with the Noble Douglas Company of Trinidad as well as a group called Black Umfolosi. He has done a lot of work with the American South Dances. “He’s going to be a really interesting person to bring to kind of expand the idea of what dance and dance theater is... and the history of black dance and performance.” Karen Love who is an amazing performer will also be coming.

Theses dancers will also have a talk similar the form of Dianne and Amaniyea talk. Cynthia and Ralph Lemon will be mediators. They are going to talk about what the decision meant for Cynthia’s **generation**: “Which I think right off the bat, is kind of an expectation, I mean we just we never even considered that we would not have **access** to education or a way of thinking about art and I think it’s because of this work that has come before. I mean we just assumed that we have this freedom of access and of expression that artists of another generation may not have. So we’re going to talk about that.”

This is how she tried to shape this project, in requesting the funding for this ongoing program. [This really is a long program, similar to those at Allen Hall. The artists are coming, on average, for two weeks. Her request must have been phenomenal because I feel that 1) her proposal would have had to beat out many other proposals and

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2) this program has to be expensive. I would like to see her proposal.] [Good idea to look at it! \(MA\)](#)

It is important that students understand what black influence had had on American Art Forms.

The next question I asked her was regarding promotion of these events.

- Dance Department will have bulletins, updates, e-mails
- The Dance Community
- The larger intellectual university community
- Those that are interested in performance, art and African performance art, art history
- The C-U community through media outlets, community contacts, public service announcements

Cynthia wants to “spread the wealth” so she is having the **dancers perform at community** centers i.e. the Douglas center and the YMCA. [This type of commitment to community impact is exceptional - she's taking the burden on herself to ensure access and involvement - stands in contrast to School of Ed symposium \(and many other events\) that simply invited community folks to campus \(which doesn't fully account for barriers to that happening. \(MA\)](#) In addition, there will be a group of children, from the community, at the winter show’s dress rehearsal. These children, from the Boys and Girls Club, expressed interest in seeing the show but did not have funding, hence the dress rehearsal solution.

[Follow up community information: Aarona is the contact at the Boys and Girls Club; Ty, is the name of the contact at the Douglas Center]

“**Performance ultimately is about communication**”, this is why she entitled this “Conversations on Black on Brown” [this name is SO great, creative, important]. [I see this same as a little exclusive because it is not just a Black issue.](#) The most important thing is for people to be moved.

Then I asked Cynthia how the Brown decision personally affected her.

“Well That’s Huge.” First, had there not been this Brown decision, she would probably not have the same education from the same institutions, that she has now. It provided her with **access to a quality of education** that many people before her, of her race, were not allotted. Her parents’ lives were shaped by the lines that could not be crossed, family life and their professional life for example.

She is the first Ph.D. in her family, which was huge and foundational for her. [Can the majority of students in college say that their parents or family members have Ph.D.s? I would be the first in my family to get a Ph.D.] [Interesting question, I wonder whether there is good data on the educational backgrounds of family members of American Ph.D.s and how that's changed historically, both within and across various racial/class lines. Such info would help to contextualize our interpretation of the impact of Brown \(MA\)](#)

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The generations of African Americans that came before her had lines they could not cross. There is more access with out difficulty. There is a sense of entitlement now that the previous generations did not. Cynthia seems to be stating that there is almost a mental aspect of now being able to assume that you are good enough to have access to these things, which previous generations did not necessarily assume.

The fact that she can stand in front of a racially diverse class and be their teacher is huge as well. In the dance department during the first week of classes, Cynthia was “asking the students if they knew or understood the impact of the Brown decision and if they knew what it was, and some of them didn’t. They were a **little embarrassed** about it and I said there was nothing to be embarrassed about, but had it not been for this decision we would not be in the same room together. (Dialogue) On top of that, I would not be teaching you, plain and simple. That...that’s a huge impact.” Cynthia, however, still feels that there is a long way to go.

I then asked her if she had intended any of the other Brown events.

She wanted to go to the keynote address but was not available. Her desire to go to other events is that she “**wants to hear what people are dialoging about.**” Are people dialoging? Besides EBC? She plans to attend a lot more.

She went to Peter Irons talk also at unit one, and she was one of a couple professors in the room. (TS Ulen was also there.) She felt that it was really interesting to hear the student perspective on things. “The students of color are acutely aware of the disparities in their education. The European American students and other white students of various backgrounds, I think, have **less of an urgency** about the meaning of all this. Although, there are some who were really impressive in terms of their knowledge of history and their own complicity in the whole system and what they want to so to **change** it. So that was really encouraging because there are people who are active and aware and are trying to make others active and aware and do something about, you know, the issues in our education.” The commemoration has provided opportunities for people who have or are developing commitments to address issues of race in education and life more generally to find each other? (MA) I think so.

I explained to her that EOTU was not a campus initiative when Peter Irons came to visit, and that we were looking for more information about that. I also asked her how she came across the book.

She said that another artist-friend suggested she read the book She read it over the summer. [She read the book before she even knew about the Brown Commemoration. I do not feel that many people can say that on this campus.] After she read it, she realized that there was a lot she did not know about the Brown decision. She then inferred that most of the students in the dance department would have no idea as well. That motivated her to talk to the Provost so that she could get the Irons book for the dance students. She got the books and distributed them to any student who expressed interest. (Some of the books were still in a box in her office.)

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She then addressed an earlier question I asked about the communication of this information:

She thinks that the university is seen by the community as an evil thing. Reaching out to the community is a challenging thing because the **community is always weary of the universities motives**. She has no motives Do you have the exact words she used here? I wonder what she is trying to say? I suspect that she would acknowledge at least SOME motives in her move to connect to the community. (MA) (I do and I'll try to incorporate them soon) and feels that she barely knows the black community because this is only her fourth year at this university.

"It is limited, how information gets past out, because so many of us depend on e-mail and how many people have computers, you know. I mean that there is an assumption there that there is a community of people that have computers and there is a whole segment of the community that doesn't, that we won't reach in that way. And that's why it was important for me to make sure that I had connections in the community of people who would put flyers around, who would send a PSA to the local radio station that they listen to, not necessarily what I listen to but what they listen to. Radio stations that I had never heard of, so that hopefully the word could get out."
The community is not necessarily connected to the world-wide-web. Not many of them even have computers. The universities tend not see this limitation in communication.

Cynthia has no idea how information travels around the student community, she just hopes that it does. [I should have told her that her involvement helps spread the word to the student community.]

I then told her about the two day vs. three-day orientation and then asked her if there was this type of orientation for faculty and what "stories" she was told. She answered that she did not have an orientation. Specific group contacted her and she had to ask about "where people were", we both laugh (she is referring to where the minority faculty were.) Students in her classes also tell her about events that are going on around campus. She was not aware of any formal type of orientation. It would be interesting to hear more student perspectives on what they thought of the minority orientation and also to look at the changes that are being made and possible positive and negative aspects it may bring.

I asked her for any final thoughts.

"I hope that, at some point in this process, that the students in the dance department make a connection between the **act of dancing and social and political action.**" ART as tool for bringing more justice

She hopes that because of this commemoration, students will think in different ways. She feels that it is important that they realize that dance and performance are not things that exist outside of culture and are important components in all of that.

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[I finished the last fourth of these notes on 12/03/03. Cynthia was very insightful. Her direct relationship with the Peter Irons book is fascinating. [I'd be interested to hear what about that relationship intrigues you! \(MA\)](#). I would like to know what other departments or organizations received the book.

Her connection and the processes of building a connection with the community should be looked into. How does one go about establishing a connection that is not seen by the community, as an “evil”, one-sided connection typically associated with the university? This reminds me of Keith asking if the university just expects him to go up to a white person on the quad and ask to be his friend. All I can conclude is that the university seems to lack the programs needed to allow people on this campus to connect with each other, and with the community, and when the university succeeds in establishing a connection, it usually negatively affects that non-university affiliate. I truly hope that these issues will go to the hearts of the people who read this report.]