

Mariam I. Williams

Teaching Artist Statement

As a literary nonfiction writer, poet, and dancer with academic research interests and education in Pan African Studies, Women and Gender Studies, and history, I see my art forms as powerful tools for exploring how the political, historical, and cultural affect the personal. My work strives to do for others what centuries of black women writing, choreographing, and performing literature and dances of the African diaspora have done for me: reveal black humanity, give dimensionality to Black womanhood, and provide new ways of thinking, healing, and being for all people.

I believe that for Black women, self-love in a world that upholds white supremacy, anti-blackness, and misogyny is one of the most subversive acts we can commit to. I believe we will find liberation for ourselves and our communities through radical self-love because it reminds us we are worthy of freedom, just as we are. Self-love begins with self-knowledge, and individuals can unearth self-knowledge by writing about the self and by listening to the wisdom and truths the body holds.

I always say that I write not because I have answers, but because I want to find them. Knowing that the curiosity many of us grew up thinking would kill us will actually set us free, I utilize writing prompts to guide workshop participants through deeply introspective questions. I encourage the use of literary devices and revision only as it serves to clarify the participants' lived experience to themselves. I set aside time in workshops for participants to read their work out loud so they can recognize common experiences, increase their confidence, diminish shame, and build community.

When teaching dance, my intention is that participants leave with a deeper sense of global Black history and with the joy that comes from knowing what West African and Afro-Latin dances first revealed to me more than 20 years ago: my body is not a mistake. I ask dancers and people who don't think of themselves as dancers to use their bodies to respond to sound, lyrics, poetry, emotions, or themes. I emphasize the importance of subtext in dance by asking participants to articulate verbally the story they conveyed through movement and the feelings or memories—lived or cellular—the movement brought up for them. I invite participants to experiment, to return to the uninhibited spirit of childhood by assuring them there is no wrong way to dance and emphasizing technique only as it serves to reveal the subtext.

Within these written and nonverbal investigations of lived experience, themes including self-love, sisterhood, body positivity, identity, class, and anger come to light, and workshop participants are able to see the effects history and larger systems have had and continue to have on their lives.

I began my teaching artist career in 2015, working in Philadelphia-area schools through established organizations and programs such as The ArtWell, Art Sanctuary, and the Rutgers Early College Humanities Program (REaCH). In 2019, I founded the Black Womanhood (Re-)Affirmation Project so that I could develop a literature and dance curriculum that centers adult black women and our liberation, amplifies our stories, and builds on the existing sisterhood and community among us. The Black WRAP is a course and workshop series that builds radical self-love in and affirms the resilience of Black women, women of color, and other participants utilizing literature, writing, and dance that center Black women's experiences.

As I shift my practice to working with adults, I see more need and opportunity to address themes such as ancestral memory, generational trauma, shame, religion, sexuality, and healing. Ancestors such as Toni Cade Bambara, Maya Angelou, Ntozake Shange, and Toni Morrison proved we can re-member these issues, (re-)consider them, and find peace within ourselves. I do my best to follow these legendary Black writers and dancers as I use my art to illuminate the journey towards freedom and wholeness.

**Mission:**

Build radical self-love in and reaffirm the resilience of Black women, women of color, and other participants by utilizing literature, writing, and dance that center black women's experiences.

Vision:

Center adult Black women and our liberation, amplify our stories, and edify, deepen, and spread the existing sisterhood and community among us.

What The BlackWRAP Does:

Create and facilitate courses, workshops, and curricula in creative writing, literature, and dance that address themes such as self-love, identity, sisterhood, body positivity, religion, shame, sexuality, generational trauma, ancestral/cellular memory, and healing.

Guiding Principles for How The BlackWRAP Does It:

- Prioritize Black women's and Black femmes' freedom and wholeness.
- Black women and femmes' race, sex, and gender are sources of power.
- Black folks around the world carry a lot of generational trauma, but we also carry a legacy of building communities and sustaining one another within those communities.
- Freedom for all begins with freedom for Black women and femmes.
- Curiosity will set you free.
- Self-knowledge can be scary and requires patience.
- Creating without regard to publication or finished product frees you to explore ideas.
- The body holds knowledge that the mind doesn't.
- Sisterhood is powerful.

- Sexuality is good.
- The human body is inherently good.
- A human body with a strong dose of melanin is inherently good.

