

## **Guide to the Molissa Fenley Collection (1973-2015)**

Finding aid prepared by Karma Pippin, Revised in 2016  
Special Collections, F.W. Olin Library, Mills College

Molissa Fenley Collection  
Mills College  
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2016

### **Descriptive Summary**

**Title:** Molissa Fenley collection

**Dates:** 1973-2014

**Collection Number:** Consult repository

**Creator:** Fenley, Molissa.

**Extent:** 40 linear feet (61 boxes, 4 cartons, 19 oversize boxes)

**Repository:**

Mills College  
Oakland, California 94613

**Abstract:** This collection documents professional activities of choreographer and dancer, Molissa Fenley. Collection includes printed promotional materials; performance programs and playbills, publicity, and reviews; choreography notes and diagrams; correspondence; memorabilia; costumes; and photographs.

**Language of Material:** English

**Access:** Collection is open for research.

**Publication Rights:** Contact the Special Collections Curator, F. W. Olin Library, Mills College for copyright and permission to publish information.  
Preferred Citation

**Acquisition Information:** Donated by Molissa Fenley in 1997. Additions to collection donated in 2008, 2009, 2012, and 2015.

**Preferred Citation:** [item], Molissa Fenley Archive, 1973-Present, Special Collections, F.W. Olin Library, Mills College.

**Biographical Note:**

Molissa Fenley was born on November 15, 1954 in Las Vegas, Nevada. At the age of six, she moved with her family to Ibadan, Nigeria, where her father worked for the U.S. State Department's USAID mission. She attended intermediate school for two years in Spain, and took a few lessons in Flamenco. She returned to the United States in 1971, and entered Mills College, where she studied under Rebecca Fuller and trained in the choreographic techniques of Martha Graham and Doris Humphrey and the compositional methods of Louis Horst. She graduated with a B.A. in dance in 1975. Shortly thereafter, she moved to New York, dancing with several choreographers there and elsewhere including Carol Conway and Andrew deGroat.

Fenley formed her own dance company in 1977, Molissa Fenley and Dancers, for which she composed numerous choreographic works for ten years. In 1988, she decided to choreograph and perform as a solo artist. She has received regular commissions from The Kitchen Center for Video, Music and Dance and Dance Chance; Dance Theater Workshop (DTW); Next Wave Festival at the Brooklyn Academy of Music (BAM); Jacob's Pillow Dance Festival; American Dance Festival (ADF); Dia Center for the Arts; and The Joyce Theater, where she performed annual seasons for many years.

Molissa Fenley has toured extensively throughout the United States and abroad, appearing at major dance events in the United Kingdom, Scandinavia, continental Europe, Latin America, Asia, and Australia. She has made repeated appearances at annual dance festivals such as Dance Umbrella, London; Centre d'Arts Plastiques Contemporains (CAPC), Bordeaux; Adelaide Festival, Australia; and Festival International de Nouvelle Danse, Montreal. Some of the other major festivals in which she has taken part are the Sydney Festival, the Indonesian Dance Festival, Jakarta, the Akasaka Performance Festival, Japan, the Brisbane Biennial, the International Festival at Perth, Lincoln Center Out of Doors, and Serious Fun! Festival at Lincoln Center.

Among the artists in other disciplines with whom she has collaborated are composers John Cage, Hamza el-Din, Julius Eastman, Philip Glass, Peter Gordon, Henryk Gorecki, Robert Lloyd, Jonathan Hart Makwaia, Pauline Oliveros, Maggi Payne, Ryuichi Sakamoto, Somei Satoh, Laetitia Sonami, Foday Musa Suso, and Jamaaladeen Tacuma, and visual artists such as sculptors Francesco Clemente, Roy Fowler, Richard Long, Tatsuo Miyajima, Richard Serra, Kiki Smith, Merrill Wagner and photographer Sandi Fellman.

In 1987, Fenley collaborated with video artists John Sanborn and Mary Perillo in the PBS production "Alive from Off Center." "Molissa Fenley at The Blackie" was produced by Lyn Webster for Granada TV's Celebration in 1989, and Molissa Fenley produced a music video of *Metamorphosis* with Philip Glass, directed by Scott B, for VH-1 in the same year. In 1997, she created *Latitudes*, a work choreographed for the website of Dia Center for the Arts ([www.diacenter.org/fenley](http://www.diacenter.org/fenley)). This consists in part of a series of

seventeen dance 'phrases' that are fragments of a three-minute dance, each 'phrase' a strip of seven thumbnail frames (all as if from a photographic contact sheet) of Fenley dancing, with links from these to close-ups, to facsimiles of her handwritten notes and to images of ancient art objects.

Fenley has participated regularly in benefit performances in support of the arts or on behalf of specific causes, including the plight of Tibet and Buddhist-related issues, throughout her career. In 1985, she founded The Momenta Foundation, a non-profit organization devoted to furthering an appreciation for the dance, through which she has received numerous grants and fellowships.

Molissa Fenley is a eleven-time recipient of the National Endowment for the Arts Choreography Fellowship (1981-1985, 1989, 1991-1995). Her awards include a Beard's Fund Fellowship (1980), a New York Foundation for the Arts Choreography Fellowship (1989) and grants from The Jerome Foundation (1983-1985, 1987), CAPS (1984), the National Endowment for the Arts Dance Program (1986), The William Hale Harkness Foundation (1987, 1989, 1992-2000), Philip Morris and Companies, Inc. (1987-2000), The Aurora Foundation (1988), The Foundation for Contemporary Performance Arts (1989, 1991, 1994, 2000), Arts International Fund for US Artists at Foreign Festivals (1990, 1994), The Joyce Mertz-Gilmore Foundation (1990-1992, 1995), The Mary Flagler Cary Charitable Trust (1991, 1992, 1996), The Fan Fox and Leslie R. Samuels Foundation (1992), The Heathcote Art Foundation (1996), The Suitcase Fund (1997), The Merrill Foundation (1999), The New England Foundation for the Arts (1999, 2000), and The Greenwich Collecton, Ltd. (2001). Fenley received New York Dance and Performance Bessie Awards for Cenotaph and State of Darkness. She was artist-in-residence at The Harkness Ballet Foundation from 1984 to 1986 and at the Dia Center for the Arts from 1986-1996. Many of Fenley's performances have been jointly sponsored by Momenta and the Dia Center.

Molissa Fenley has also accepted commissions to choreograph works for others, most prominently Peggy Baker, Felicia Norton, The Ohio Ballet, Deutsche Oper Ballet of Berlin, and the Australian Dance Theater. Performers of her work include The Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane Company, Elisa Monte & David Brown, and Dance Alloy, Philadelphia.

From the beginning, Fenley rejected the prodigious dancing feats that create isolated, framed moments in ballet and eschewed the reliance on legwork and narrative characteristic of both ballet and traditional modern dance. She has developed power and expressiveness in her entire upper body and makes emphatic use of her back, as dancers do so strikingly in Flamenco, and of her arms (as in Indian and Hawaiian dance, among others), which are not treated as merely an extension of the back as in ballet and modern dance. Her dances, highly demanding, involve sustained tension, frequent bursts of great speed, and (a feature of Nigerian ritual dance) perpetual motion. She is noted for incorporating quotes from classical and traditional dance worldwide into her choreography and for using unmediated physicality to convey emotional and psychic intensity. Her conceptions of dance (of the individual or ensemble in space and of

rhythm, emotion, physicality, intellection, intuition) and of its relation to the world are constantly evolving. See interviews and statements in Record Groups I-III and additional information in Fenley's own latest curriculum vitae and her website:

<http://molissafenley.com/>

**Arrangement:**

The collection is arranged into eleven series: Series 1. Daily and Weekly Press, 1978–2015; Series 2. Monthly Dance Journals, and Fashion and other Periodicals, 1979–2015; Series 3. Press Releases, Press Kits and other Promotional Material, 1982–; Series 4. Performances: Programs, Invitations and other Publicity, 1973–; Series 5. Choreography, 1978–2015; Series 6. Photographs, 1978–2015; Series 7. Correspondence: Work and Life, 1978–; Series 8. Other Performers, 1979–2015; Series 9. Audio-Visual Material, 1978–2015; Series 10. Costumes, 1979–2015; Series 11. Oversize (flat file storage). Some series broken down further into subseries.

**Scope and Contents:**

This collection documents professional activities of choreographer and dancer, Molissa Fenley. Collection includes printed promotional materials; performance programs and playbills, publicity, and reviews; choreography notes and diagrams; correspondence; memorabilia; costumes; and photographs.

Series 1, Daily and Weekly Press (1978–2015), consists of clippings and photocopies of press features, reviews, interviews, announcements, and performance calendars from daily and weekly news publications. There are numerous reviews throughout by dance critics Anna Kisselgoff of *The New York Times* and Deborah Jowitt of *The Village Voice*, among many others.

Series 2, Monthly Dance Journals, and Fashion and other Periodicals (1979–2015), consists clippings of press features, reviews, and interviews in monthly periodicals and major weekly magazines. Dance critics include Joan Acocella, Sally Banes, Robert Coe, Thomas Connors, Arlene Croce, James Dillon, Margaret Eginton, Roberto Gautier, RoseLee Goldberg, Robert Grescovic, Claire Martin, Anna Moszynska, John Percival and Allen Robertson.

Series 3, Press Releases, Press Kits and other Promotional Material (1982–2015), contains printed promotional material and a miscellany of images.

Series 4, Performances: Programs, Invitations and other Publicity (1973–2015), programs, playbills, flyers, brochures, festival publications, opening night invitations, performance calendars, and other printed material for specific performances, arranged chronologically and often by dance. It contains both United States Performances and International Performances.

Series 5, Choreography and Musical Scores (1978–2015), consists of Molissa Fenley's choreography notes and diagrams; research notes and background material; designers'

sketches for stage sets; David Moodey's lighting arrangements. Other material includes original notation by Meredith Monk and a copy of a Fred Frith score.

Series 6, Photographs (1978–2015), contains action and still photographs of Molissa Fenley individually and with other performances and d, including Philip Glass.

Series 7, Correspondence, consists of correspondence to and from Fenley, including notes and letters from collaborators, colleagues, friends and kindred spirits; correspondence regarding awards, contributions from Molissa Fenley, memorabilia and fan mail; Practical arrangements for performance engagements including background material, planning, production, collaborators, program proofs, etc.; Other projects, possibilities, grant applications, and professional news updates to colleagues.

Series 8, Other Performers, consists of correspondence, invitations, programs, and calendars of performers or dance venues, and is arranged alphabetically. Included are, for instance, Peggy Baker, Merce Cunningham, Martha Graham and Martha Graham Dance Company.

Series 9, Audio-Visual Material (1978-2015), consists of recordings of many of Fenley's performances or of accompanying music and is arranged by date.

Series 10 consists of various costume worn by Fenley throughout her career.

Series 11, Creative Miscellany, consists of items relating to artwork of Molissa's, writing by or about her and unique objects.

Series 12 contains various awards and honors received by Fenley throughout her career.