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Guide to the

Djola Branner papers

ca. 1983-2010

Sc MG 868

Processed by Nora Soto, April 2017.

Summary

Creator: Branner, Djola

Title: Djola Branner papers

Date: ca. 1983-2010

Size: 1.25 linear feet (2 boxes)

Source: Gift of Djola Branner, 2012.

Revision History: Finding aid updated by Lauren Stark.

Abstract: The Djola Branner papers, 1983-2010, document his personal life and professional career as a writer, poet, dancer, choreographer, actor, and educator. The collection reflects how his identity and experiences as a gay Black man informed much of his creative work.

Preferred citation: [Item], Djola Branner papers, Sc MG 868, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Manuscripts, Archives and Rare Books Division, The New York Public Library

Language of the Material: English

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Separated Materials:

Transferred to the Moving Image and Recorded Sound Division: audio material. For more information, please contact the division at schomburgaudiovisual@nypl.org or 212-491-2270.

Transferred to the Photographs and Prints Division: photographs

Related Materials:

In the Life Archive (ITLA) miscellaneous collections, Sc MG 736, Manuscripts, Archives and Rare Books, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture

Creator History

Djola Branner, also professionally known as Bernard Branner, is a gay African American interdisciplinary artist who has worked as a writer, poet, dancer, choreographer, actor, and educator. The youngest of four siblings, Branner was born in 1957, and raised in South Central Los Angeles, California. He attended the University of California, Santa Cruz, and graduated with a Bachelor's degree in Psychobiology in 1980.

Branner established himself in San Francisco after graduation, where he first worked as a writer for publications such as *Coming Up!: The Lesbian/Gay Community Calendar of Events and Newspaper for the Bay Area* and *San Francisco Bay Guardian*. While pursuing poetry and prose writing, he participated in poetry readings where he began performing in front of an audience. Around this time, Branner also began dancing after taking his first dance class at the age of twenty-five. He originally studied the Dunham Technique, a modern Afro-Caribbean dance pedagogy developed by Katherine Dunham, whom he would later meet and study under in Haiti. While Branner also took classes in jazz and ballet, he specialized in Afro-Haitian dance, including the Dunham Technique and traditional Haitian folkloric dance.

Branner began his career as a dancer for Group Petit La Croix in 1985, a Haitian dance and drum company directed by Blanche Brown. While studying at San Francisco State University, Branner was a member of the school's EMBAJE Dance Ensemble and Dance Kaiso. After graduating in 1989 with a Masters of Arts in Creative Arts, Interdisciplinary Arts, Branner founded Flesh and Spirit, a collaborative Haitian dance company based in San Francisco. As the company's artistic director from 1989 to 1994, Branner performed at the San Francisco Carnival and the San Francisco Ethnic Dance Festival. During this time, he appeared in several Marlon Riggs films, including *Tongues Untied* (1989), *Anthem* (1991), and *Black Is... Black Ain't* (1994).

In 1990, Branner co-founded Postmodern African-American Homosexuals (Pomo Afro Homos) with Brian Freeman and Eric Gupton. The Pomo Afro Homos were a groundbreaking San Francisco-based performance group whose work explored the identities and experiences of gay Black men while challenging stereotypes, deconstructing myths, and creating opportunities for truthful, realistic representations of a historically underrepresented group. Branner served as the troupe's co-artistic director from 1990 until 1995, during which he co-wrote and performed *Fierce Love: Stories of Black Gay Life* (1990) and *Dark Fruit* (1991) with Brian Freeman, Eric Gupton, and Marvin K. White. Pomo Afro Homos were critically acclaimed and commercially successful, touring nationally and internationally in venues such as Josie's Cabaret and Juice Joint in San Francisco, Lincoln Center's Alice Tully Hall and the Public Theater in New York, the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, Dance Place in Washington, D.C., and the Drill Hall in London.

After marrying Patrick Scully, a Minneapolis-based performance artist and founder of Patrick's Cabaret, Branner relocated from San Francisco to Minneapolis in 1994. His first solo theatre performance, *Sweet Sadie*, a one-person show about his relationship with his mother, premiered at Patrick's Cabaret in 1994. He toured nationally and internationally with the show between 1994 and 1997, performing in venues such as Out North Theater in Anchorage and Dixon's Place in New York and at events like artBlacklive in Leicester, England and the National Black Theater Festival in Winston-Salem. During this time, he also performed with Morris Johnson's Drummers and Dancers of Langa.

In 1995, Branner and his then-husband Patrick Scully collaborated on *Forever Hold Your Piece*, a satirical performance piece about interracial gay marriage which premiered in 1996 at Patrick's Cabaret. That year, he was awarded a Jerome Travel and Study Grant to study dance in Haiti and was featured as a keynote speaker at artBlacklive-Two, a Black-led forum on live art sponsored by the Black

Arts Alliance in Leicester, England. Branner later worked on *Homos in the House*, a two act play, and *The House That Crack Built*, a collaborative theater, music, and dance performance with Aaron Barnell. *Homos in the House* was subsequently co-commissioned by Intermedia Arts and the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis in 1998. The following year, Branner was awarded the McKnight Fellowship for an 18-month fellowship at Intermedia Arts. He was also Bush Artist Fellow of 2000, for which he was awarded a \$40,000 grant from the Bush Foundation. In 2000, Branner staged *Mighty Real: A Tribute to Sylvester*, a stage tribute to the openly gay Black singer-songwriter and legendary "Queen of Disco" that premiered at Intermedia Arts.

Branner earned a Master of Fine Arts in Theatre from the New School for Drama in 2006. He has acted in plays like *Angels in America*, *Black Nativity*, *Blues for an Alabama Sky*, *Fools and Lovers*, and *...and Jesus Moonwalks the Mississippi*. Branner's poetry, plays, and prose have been featured in journals such as *Evergreen Chronicles: A Journal of Gay and Lesbian Arts and Cultures*, *Haight-Ashbury Literary Journal*, and *Yemonja*, as well as anthologized in *In the Life: A Black Gay Anthology*, *Here to Dare: 10 Black Gay Poets*, *Staging Gay Lives: An Anthology of Contemporary Gay Theater*, *Voices Rising: Celebrating 20 Years of Black Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Writing*, and *ZZZZYVA*. His work has been collected in *lyrics of the last born and sash and trim and other stories*.

Branner has taught traditional Haitian dance and folklore at Cadaques Dance Center in Barcelona (1985), Underground Movement in San Francisco (1986-1987), Third Wave Dance in San Francisco (1987-1990), the Ruth Asawa San Francisco School of the Arts (1989-1994), the Institute of Choreography in San Francisco (1990-1994), the City College of San Francisco (1991-1993), Stanford University (1994), and Macalester College (1996-2002). He has also taught acting and theatre courses at the Minneapolis College of Art and Design and the University of Minnesota. Currently an Associate Professor of Theatre at Hampshire College's School of Interdisciplinary Arts, Branner formerly served as the dean of the School of Interdisciplinary Arts.

Scope and Content Note

The Djola Branner papers, 1983-2010, document his personal life and professional career as a writer, poet, dancer, choreographer, actor, and educator. The collection reflects how his identity and experiences as a gay Black man informed much of his creative work.

Arrangement: Arranged into two series: I. Personal and II. Professional

Key Terms

Subjects

African American actors
African American artists
African American dancers
African American dramatists
African American entertainers
African American gays
African American poets
African Americans in the performing arts
Authors, Black
Choreographers
Folk dancing, Haitian

Names

Branner, Djola

Scully, Patrick, 1953-

Flesh and Spirit (Dance company)

Pomo Afro Homos (Theater group)

Container List

Personal ca. 1985-2008

This series contains biographical profiles, personal and professional correspondence, and ephemera such as event program material and pin-back buttons from gay rights organizations and political campaigns. The correspondence folder includes greeting cards, postcards, and letters from friends, as well as an invitation to his 1994 wedding to Patrick Scully.

- b. 1 f. 1 Biographical
- b. 1 f. 2 Correspondence
- b. 1 f. 3 Ephemera
- b. 1 f. 4 *Outlook: National Lesbian & Gay Quarterly collection*

Professional ca. 1983-2010

This series documents Branner's career as a writer, choreographer, director, playwright, actor, and performing artist, including his work with Pomo Afro Homos.

Arranged into eight subseries: (1) Writing; (2) Choreography; (3) Directing; (4) Playwriting; (5) Acting; (6) Pomo Afro Homos; (7) General performances and public appearances; and (8) Posters.

Writing ca. 1983-1998

This subseries features some of Branner's published work, including the poems "Only Darla", "Baby", and "Gift"; the introduction to John B. Selby's *Alien Native Son: Poems 1976-1985*; and the playscript of *Forever Hold Your Piece*, written with Patrick Scully. The subseries also consists of promotional material for *sash and trim and other stories*, Branner's first collection of dramatic work published in 2013, as well as interviews with Anna Deavere Smith and Wayne Corbitt for the *San Francisco Bay Guardian's* Arts and Entertainment section; an annotated manuscript of his 1995 interview with performance artist Keith Antar Mason, co-founder of Hittite Empire; and a manuscript of "Blackberri: Singing for Our Lives", an interview with the singer-songwriter Blackberri, published in *In the Life: A Black Gay Anthology* in 1986. Also included are Branner's reviews of dance performances and theatre productions, and written fiction for *Coming Up!: The Lesbian/Gay Community Calendar of Events and Newspaper for the Bay Area* in 1984, as well as promotional flyers and postcards for his poetry readings and author appearances from 1983 to 1998.

- b. 1 f. 5 "Only Darla," *Clay Drum 4* 1986
- b. 1 f. 6 *Introduction to Alien Native Son: Poems 1976-1985* 1987
- b. 1 f. 7 "Baby", *The Drumming Between Us* 1994
- b. 1 f. 8 "Gift", *Evergreen Chronicles: A Journal of Gay and Lesbian Arts and Cultures* 1995
- b. 1 f. 9 "Forever Hold Your Piece", *Evergreen Chronicles: A Journal of Gay and Lesbian Arts and Culture* 1996
- b. 1 f. 10 *Sash and Trim* 2013
- b. 1 f. 11 Interviews
- b. 1 f. 12 Reviews
- b. 1 f. 13 Poetry readings and appearances

Choreography ca. 1988-2002

This subseries consists of programs, promotional flyers, tickets, clippings, and reviews of performances by *Flesh and Spirit*, Branner's dance company, as well as material related to performances of his choreography in various concerts, showcases, and events, and instruction at workshops and classes.

- b. 1 f. 14 *Flesh and Spirit*
- b. 1 f. 15 General

Professional (cont.)

b. 1 f. 16 Directing ca. 1997-2001

This subseries includes promotional material and programs for Branner's directed work, such as *Journey/Sanctuary: A Celebration of the Spirit*, *The Magic of Laughter*, and *Esker*.

Playwriting ca. 1994-2008

This subseries contains the playscript for *Sweet Sadie*, a one-man show written by Branner in 1994, as well as programs and promotional material for performances at Josie's Cabaret and Juice Joint, Patrick's Cabaret, the National Black Theatre Festival, Out North, artBlacklive-Two, and MIKA Man Productions of New Zealand. Also included are chronologically-arranged clippings of press articles and reviews published in *SF Weekly*, *San Francisco Bay Times*, *Bay Area Reporter*, *San Francisco Sentinel*, *Time Out New York*, *The Village Voice*, and *Anchorage Daily News*. The subseries also features programs, news clippings, and reviews of *Homos in the House*, and planning material for *Mighty Real: A Tribute to Sylvester*, such as a grant application; contracts; professional correspondence with the Intermedia Arts, the Jerome Foundation, and Actors' Equity Association; financial invoices; programs; and clippings. There is also a general folder for material related to Branner's plays, *The House That Crack Built*, *Forever Hold Your Piece*, *My Life as a Pomo*, and *Oranges and Honey*, and various performance workshops and events spanning from 1996 to 2008.

Sweet Sadie

b. 1 f. 17 Script

b. 1 f. 18 Programs

b. 1 f. 19 Clippings

b. 1 f. 20 *Homos in the House*

Mighty Real: A Tribute to Sylvester

b. 1 f. 21 Planning

b. 1 f. 22 Programs and clippings

b. 1 f. 23 General

b. 1 f. 24-25 Acting ca. 1999-2006

This subseries consists of programs of various theatre productions and plays featuring Branner, such as *Angels in America*, *Black Nativity*, *Blues for an Alabama Sky*, *Con Flama*, and *Fools and Lovers*, as well as related clippings and reviews. There is also an annotated script of *delta dandi*.

Pomo Afro Homos ca. 1990-2010

This subseries features playscripts, programs, promotional material, clippings, and reviews related to Branner's work with the Pomo Afro Homos performance group. Material related to *Fierce Love: Stories from Black Gay Life* includes annotated drafts of playscripts for skits and songs, programs, promotional material for performances spanning from 1991 to 2001, and clippings of press articles and reviews from American, British, and Canadian publications such as the *San Francisco Bay Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, *The New York Times*, *The Independent*, *The Voice*, *San Francisco Bay Chronicle*, *Time Out*, *Xtra!*, *Performing Arts*, *BLK*, *OUT/LOOK*, *National Lesbian and Gay Quarterly*, and *Parallélogramme*. The subseries also contains programs, promotional material, news articles, and reviews of *Dark Fruit*. Also included are general clippings about Pomo Afro Homos from publications such as *Gay Community News*, *The City: San Francisco's Magazine*, *San Francisco Bay Guardian*, *The New York Times*, *Chicago Tribune*, *The Village Voice*, and *Los Angeles Times*.

Fierce Love: Stories from Black Gay Life

b. 1 f. 26 Script

b. 1 f. 27 Programs

b. 1 f. 28 Clippings

b. 1 f. 29 *Dark Fruit*

b. 1 f. 30-31 General

Professional (cont.)

General performances and public appearances ca. 1994-2009

This subseries contains programs and promotional material related to Branner's performances in cabaret shows, fundraising events, and festivals, as well his appearances at talks and conferences. Also included in the sub-series are playscripts, promotional material, and clippings from *Diva X: An Extravaganza*, his 1996 drag show with Brian Chapman Evans and Daniel Alexander Jones.

b. 1 f. 32 *Diva X: An Extravaganza*

b. 1 f. 33 Other

b. 2 Posters ca. 1989-1993

This subseries includes two oversized posters for Branner's performances with *Flesh and Spirit* at the Little Theatre at San Francisco State University, and *Fierce Love* with Pomo Afro Homos at the Drill Hall Arts Center in London.