

Final I Just Want to Get My Groove On: An African American Experience with Race, Racism, and the White Aesthetic in Dance

by

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Abstract

Dance, like other sports, operates through the frame of cultural identity. However, while there may be freedom in bodily movement, the body is constrained when it comes to who is able to dance. Oftentimes dancers do not fit into a certain racial aesthetic. Using an autoethnographic approach, examples in this paper stretch over three decades to examine the question of race, power, and White aesthetic. The personal narratives shared are through the lens of an African American, non-professional dancer whose dance experiences have been solely in largely White homogenous dance studios or companies (an earlier version of this paper was presented in 2011 at the National Council for Black Studies conference in Cincinnati, Ohio. The author thanks Samuel Patton for his assistance with this paper).

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Introduction

I appreciate dance. I have to dance. It is difficult for me to sit and watch other dancers in motion without imagining myself dancing on stage with them. While I am not a professional dancer, I dance with an appreciation for the art. At 5'9, 113 pounds, and as a tri-racial¹ African American,² I never thought I could become a professional dancer. I did not attend a performing arts K-12 school, nor did I major in dance when I was an undergraduate or graduate student. Rather, I danced ballet, tap, and jazz at private studios until I was twenty years old. Even though I did not major in dance, I still had secret desires to dance professionally. However, my dreams were derailed at twenty-one when I had a severe knee injury that resulted in three reconstructive surgeries. Combine the knee problems with a successful, but distracting victory over cancer, and there went any dreams I had in regard to professional dance. However, once healed, my love of the art pushed me to take dance again as an adult. I continue to dance ballet and jazz, but have added pointe, hip-hop, and modern to my repertoire, as well as dancing for a local dance company. Being a dancer in this company is a dream come true, and one that I thought would forever elude me.

As an active dancer, writing this autoethnography is quite difficult. I am not examining whether or not a dancer experiences more or less racism or oppression if one dances with a majority African American or Euro American dance company as that is an entirely different article. However, in this article, I examine the complicated and multi-dimensional roles that Black women and men have endured in dance generally using my personal experiences in White homogenous studios as an exemplar. Therefore, issues of integration and acceptance or non-acceptance within dance may be referenced either through my experiences or through others illustrative experiences. While some people like to imagine that in the twenty-first century, issues of racism are long in the past; e.g., post-racism,³ I argue that the U.S. continues to deal with the legacy of racism and artistic fields such as dance are no exception. The shape of one's body, the color of one's skin and/or the texture of one's hair can have a greater impact, sometimes, more than the gifts a dancer is able to bring to a studio or company. Being seen as "different" can cause one not to be cast, or taken out of roles one had in preference of a certain aesthetic—in some cases that preference is White. Using autoethnography, coupled with interview data and examples from the historical foundations and marginalization of African Americans in dance, the questions of race, identity, and marginalization are explored as they concern ballet, modern, jazz, tap, and hip-hop genres. The examples used in this paper illustrate a White supremacist, hegemonic aesthetic that explicates and illuminates issues of marginalization in dance. This paper will increase awareness about the interlocking systems of domination in the dance world at the microlevel. This microlevel lens, therefore, exposes important meanings of marginalization that may occur but possibly go unnoticed at the macrolevel.

Black Diversity in Dance: A Literature Review

I am leery about critiquing a field that brings me so much spiritual joy. Dancing allows me to speak my narrative using my body as the instrument of communication. Writing about my dance experience over the last three decades allows me an avenue to take agency over the marginalizing experiences I have had in the dance world. I have never danced regionally or nationally as a professional, and, therefore, some people may choose to dismiss my experiences, as dance is a passionate hobby for me, not the way I make my living. However, being a non-professional dancer does not negate the fact that the ripples of racism, marginalization, and power can be felt at the highest levels of the profession all the way down to the hobbyist level; thus, at times, exposing a marginalizing culture endemic to dance generally. This critical autoethnographic examination also exposed my complicity to the racism that I have experienced in dance. In this article, I have been intentionally vague about where I have encountered experiences of racism or other types of marginalization in dance in order to maintain the anonymity of people in this autoethnography. Therefore, the names of dancers, dance studios, instructors, artistic directors, or choreographers have not been included in the examples contained herein. I also chose not to put exact dates on interviews (written and oral) in order to keep the anonymity of those who spoke to me. The dates from which these examples are taken are 1977-2011.

Dancing since the age of five, I draw on my myriad of dance experiences in ballet, modern, jazz, tap, and hip-hop from a variety of dance studios, companies, university experiences, and dance workshops with professionals in the field. All of my dance experiences come from White-majority dance studios, and one dance company. My experiences in dance may have differed drastically had I been in predominantly African American dance studios or companies. Maybe I would have had to address issues of intraracial racism, rather than interracial racism. It is this tangle of racism that I grapple with today. Scholars who have examined Blacks in dance, e.g., Jayna Brown's *Babylon Girls: Black Women performers and the Shaping of the Modern* (2008); Anne Anlin Cheng's *Second Skin: Josephine Baker & the Modern Surface* (2011); Thomas Defrantz's *Dancing Many Drums: Excavations in African American Dance* (2001); Barbar Glass' *African American Dance: An Illustrated History* (2006); Brenda Dixon Gottschild *The Black Dancing Body: A Geography from Coon to Cool* (2001); and John Perpener's *African-American Concert Dance: The Harlem Renaissance and Beyond* (2005) have conducted thorough literature reviews. Therefore, given the trail that other scholars have already blazed, I will not be reiterating their existing thorough literature reviews. Rather, highlights of Blacks in dance in four key dancing areas, ballet, modern, jazz, tap, and hip-hop will be provided as these areas correspond with my dance narrative and experiences that I share in the autoethnography section of this article.

Ballet

All cultures have a dance heritage and African American culture is no exception. African Americans have been, and continue to be, involved in dance genres such as ballet, modern, jazz, tap, and hip hop which are explored here. This literature review is not exhaustive, but rather, provides a sample of African Americans in some genres of dance, as well as examples of marginalizations within dance.

Because of my own historical understanding of the dance, on some level all of it is black dance because you know, when you look at the history of ballet, its rhythms were drawn from Africa, and when you look at the history of modern [dance], it's very evident that folks of color; particularly the African diaspora, very much influenced what that form is. So for me, on some level, all of it is interconnected and mixed up just as much as the blood is. (Marlies Yearby interviewed by Gottschild, 2003, p. 12-13)

Regardless of the dance genre, often, when people think about African Americans in dance, instantly the prestigious companies of Alvin Ailey, Cleo Parker Robinson, or Dance Theatre of Harlem come to mind. Rarely is an African American dancer thought of outside of Black-majority companies. But, by focusing on the Black body in dance, the hyper-visibility and invisibility of the body stands out.⁴ Because ballet is a largely White homogenous genre, the White public generally accords credibility to Black dancers when the genre is contemporary, hip-hop, jazz, tap, or modern, because it is more common to see racial diversity in these genres. It is indeed true that there are few ethnic minorities in ballet, and even fewer who are Black and in principal (leading) ballet roles in White ballet companies; e.g., American Ballet Theatre, Boston Ballet, Cincinnati Ballet, Colorado Ballet, Houston Ballet, New York City Ballet, Pennsylvania Ballet. This lack of visibility contributes to the stereotype that Black people are incapable or not interested in ballet, and perpetuates a white supremacist belief that is fueled by myth and racism. Ballet companies, such as San Francisco Ballet, are becoming more internationally diverse, where members represent a variety of dancers from around the world; but aesthetically, the visual hue still compliments the nearly all-White preference.

The lack of racial diversity in ballet, in the U.S., does not reflect reality. As early as the 1930s, Black ballet studios existed. For example, Essie Marie Dorsey (1930s) opened a ballet studio (Gotschild, 2003), as did Mark Turbyfill, a White artist, dancer, and poet, who opened a ballet studio for his former student, Katherine Dunham, and her friends, so African Americans would have a place to train in Chicago (Sheehy, 2005). Marion Cuyget and Sydney King (1940s-1970s) (Gotschild, 2003) operated ballet schools as well.

In the late 1950s and 1960s, African American male ballet dancers, as opposed to African American female ballet dancers, were more likely to attain a modicum of success due to the persistent need for male ballet dancers. One famous example of a ballet dancer who did just this was Arthur Mitchell, who was a principal dancer with the New York City Ballet and later co-founded Dance Theater of Harlem in 1969 (see Kourlas, 2007). Today, there are Black and Latino ballet companies around various parts of the U.S. For example, there is Alonzo King's Lines Ballet and Eduardo Vilaro is the new Director of Ballet Hispanico. Vilaro notes there are a "wealth of Latino dancers in New York, many trained at Julliard, Ailey/Fordham, or ballet schools. 'But then you have this mixture, these other students of color, often mixed race that are coming from university background that are well-trained also, but not so classical'" (Perron, 2010, p. 31). He continues and notes that audiences may have a degree of power in demanding a change in who is performing on stage. "Young audiences are looking for a reflection of what they see in their environment, which is [a]technology-filled extravaganza that reaches beyond their hometown, their city, their school" (p. 31). Benoit-Swan Pouffer, Artistic Director of Cedar Lake Contemporary Ballet, said that he looks for excellence in a dancer, regardless of race. "I have the option to hire different nationalities, but I am looking for good dancers first. Dance doesn't have a race, doesn't have a palette" (p. 34). Even the School of American Ballet has seen the benefits of racial diversity, and through its recruiting efforts, they have been able to increase their ethnic minority population from 12 percent in 1998 to 24 percent today (p. 34).

Modern

In her interview with Lemon, Gottschild notes that over several decades, Cunningham has worked with Black male dancers one-on-one, but never Black female dancers.

I still love going to Cunningham's dance company, you know there are no black bodies there...So, you know, nothing against that. It's just that, what does that really say? It says a lot, and it's very complicated. It doesn't say one thing, but it does say something, I think, that is very racially powerful and, yes, for me, is ultimately a little disturbing..." (Ralph Lemon interviewed by Gottschild, 2003, p. 73)

The irony of this situation is that modern is, in part, based on African dance styles and traditions as shown in the common figure eight design from the Yoruba welcoming and blessings dance, *Fanga Alafia*, where the hips and buttocks move simultaneously and independently from one another while the dancer is walking. African dances, like *Fanga Alafia*, encourage the dancer to create movements that allow for improvisation, as well as movements that integrate stomping or clapping, as well as dances that integrate both circular and linear formations in their dance which allow for fluid, polyrhythmic movements.

As early as 1900, there was a challenge to the limitations and expectations of classical ballet in the United States and Europe that began to unfold. As dance underwent a revolution in moving from controlled, classical movements, modern dancers (both Black and White), like Loie Fuller who famously danced with silks at the Paris Exposition in 1900, chose to embrace a style of dance that allowed for more freedom in her movements, as well as an opportunity to express emotion when she intertwined herself with the music. White dancers, like Fuller, embraced the revolutionary transformation in dance that the modern genre afforded. Beginning in 1900, White culture and dancers embraced these new and popular “African-based dance” styles, like the Tango, Rumba, Mambo, and Salsa from South America and the Caribbean...“as well as African American forms like the Charleston and the Lindy” (Gottschild, 2003, p. 148). While there are several styles of dance which only incorporate the use of the upper body or have a stiff torso, (e.g., clogging, swing, Irish step dance, tango), broadly, if ballet and modern dance styles are juxtaposed, an interesting dance trajectory and development appears; ballet and modern dance styles are concerned with the same regions of the body—the torso, spine, legs, and buttocks. The difference between these two styles is an issue of how one sees or seizes control of the body. “In traditional European dance aesthetics, the torso must be held upright for correct, classic form; the erect spine is the center—the hierarchal ruler—from which all movement is generated. It functions as a single unit. The straight uninflected torso indicates elegance or royalty and acts as the absolute monarch, dominating the dancing body” (McMaines, 2001-2002, p. 64).

Compared to the ballet form which has fluid and soft movement and lines, the modern aesthetic allows for jerky and jagged moves, as well as long flowing and soft movement and is typically danced in bare feet. In juxtaposition to classical ballet training, a toe in modern may or may not be pointed, legs may or may not be straight, a torso may or may not be erect at all times and buttocks and hips can move freely from one another. For example, Professor, choreographer, and dancer Katherine Dunham used her extensive knowledge of dances from Cuba, Haiti, Jamaica, Martinique, and Trinidad and integrated dance, ritual, and religion to construct the Dunham technique. The Dunham technique provided a vocabulary and a “coherent lexicon of African and Caribbean styles of movement...which she integrated with techniques of ballet and modern dance” (Sommer, 2001, para. 3). Professor, choreographer, and dancer, Pearl Primus, was “famed for her energy and her physical daring, which were characterized by leaps up to five feet in the air.” Her dance movements, which combined African, African American, and Caribbean styles with modern and ballet technique, were praised as “forceful and dramatic, yet graceful and deliberately controlled” (Foley, 2001, para. 2). Finally, choreographer and dancer Lester Horton created what is referred to as “the Horton technique.” The Horton technique is broadly used and his style juxtaposes freedom and control as well as circular and fluid movement in his modern technique. Horton draws his inspiration from African, African-Brazilian, American Indian, Balinese, Caribbean, Japanese, and Javanese movements. The creativity valorized in modern is one that allows the improvisation of jazz dancing to come alive.

Jazz

The worldwide phenomenon of jazz, with beloved ambassadors like John Coltrane and Duke Ellington, is an original music tradition that is interconnected with dance. Popular jazz music styles include ragtime, blues, dixieland, big band, bebop, early folk jazz, and free jazz. The music and the dance, like modern, incorporate aspects of African rhythms and styles. According to conductor and saxophonist, Loren Schoenberg, “long before the early 20th century, when jazz evolved, the various dance steps that had originated in and around the plantation set the modes of expression for whites who imitated the slave’s moves, blithely unaware of the extent of parody in those dances” (Schoenberg, n. d., para. 1). The melodic freedom found within the music of jazz with its intricate and complex polyrhythms and repetitions allowed for a freer dance expression as well. The free expression in jazz dance allows for heavily choreographed movement to improvisation, as well as dance movement that can be abstract and graceful, and incorporate clean lines and grand leaps.

Previous to the 1900s, dance was typically the only allowable space for people to engage in an intimate space in public which was about an arms-length distance from one another. Styles like ragtime in music, allowed for the creation of swing dancing where, for the first time, dancers (professional and recreationalists) were permitted to further breakdown the interpersonal distance space that was demanded of more structured dance styles. For example, dances like the Bunny Hug (1910s), Charleston (1923), and Lindy Hop (mid-1920s) allowed people to shimmy and gyrate further challenging the once-demanded for conservative dance styles and conservative interpersonal distance space. Beginning in the 1940s, both jazz music and jazz dance began to change. The change in jazz music from ragtime made space for Charlie Parker and Dizzy Gillespie, which ushered in a style of rhythm and blues (see Schoenberg, n. d.). And within dance, “there was already a division between the jazz dancers whose roots were in the theaters and ballrooms of Black America and a more self-consciously theatrical, more stylized and less spontaneous style epitomized by Katherine Dunham’s dance company” (Schoenberg, n. d., para. 9). While not a jazz choreographer, but part of her repertoire, in the 1940s and 1950s, in Chicago, it was Dunham who “exposed audiences to popular jazz steps like the Charleston and the Black Bottom as part of her evening-length dance concerts” (Kraut, 2005, para. 2). Many people also “think of Bob Fosse and innumerable Broadway shows when they think of a jazz dance” (para. 8).

Moving from its African roots, jazz allows the dancer creative license in executing the steps, but from a foundation of ballet that also incorporates elements of modern and contemporary styles. Continuously a popular dance form, jazz moved from the dance halls and stage, to the television and movie screens of America with commercials, movies, music videos, and shows. Some of the more popular television shows showcased the latest dance crazes (e.g., the Twist, Moonwalk) which included *American Band Stand* (1957-1989) and *Solid Gold* (1980-1988), to more recently *Dancing With the Stars* (2004-present) and *So You Think You Can Dance* (2005-present). The creativity found in jazz was also seen in tap.

Tap

Tap dancing is the beautiful, rhythmic percussion of a dancer's feet in time with music that has its roots in Africa. For example, Gumboot stomping is a form of tap. Gumboot stomping was a form of communication between miners in apartheid South Africa who were forbidden to speak. Thus, these men used stomping and tap as a form of communication in the mines. Nonverbal forms of communication, like this were also used in U.S. enslaved African and African American cultures. In tap, typically, the feet are the primary instruments, and the rest of the body is secondary. The feet become the embodiment of the verbal "playing the dozens"⁵ as, like jazz, the improvisational nature means no two tappers sounds the same. The genius in tap is its dynamic nature in the hoofing sounds produced by tap phenoms, as expressed by Gregory Hines and Savion Glover. A distinction between tap and hoofing is defined and can be seen with dancers like Fred Astaire who gave tap a ballroom dance look, or Gene Kelly who incorporated ballet into tap which popularized and normalized tap for White consumption, erasing the African and the U.S. connection of the enslaved. Whereas hoofers like Bill Bailey, the Nicolas Brothers, Sammy Davis Jr., LaVaughn Robinson, Gregory Hines, and Savion Glover showcased the beauty of tap, and therefore, the participation of the Black body.

In the 1920s, audiences saw incredible tap performances by African American professional tappers. African Americans in tap like Buster Brown, John Bubbles, Charles "Honi" Coles, James Cross and Harold Cromer (a.k.a. Stump and Stumpy), and the world-famous, Bill "Bojangles" Robinson, began to take the stage in the 1920s and 1930s. In the 1930s and 1940s, tappers included Bunny Briggs, Harold and Fayard Nicholas, and Jimmy Slyde. In the 1960s, Lon Chaney was an inspirational tap star. Gregory Hines popularized tap beginning in 1978 with his performances and movies. Hines starred in such notables as *Eubie* (a Black Broadway show in 1978), and the films *White Nights* (which also starred Mikhail Baryshnikov in 1985) and *Tap* (which also starred Sammy Davis Jr. in 1989) where he tapped to both rock music and to African drumming. Savion Glover continued the hoofing trajectory Hines left.

Glover, a tap virtuoso, transitioned from drumming to tapping at seven years old, electing to use his feet, like Lon Chaney did, instead of a drum set.

He can tap dance faster and harder and cleaner than anyone I've ever seen or heard of. He hits the floor harder than anybody, and to do it, he lifts his foot up the least. It doesn't make any sense. There must be some explanation [;] you tell me what it is. (Glover, 2000, p. 54)

Whereas Hines hoofed to rock, Broadway, jazz and African music, Glover hoofs to African, hip-hop, and reggae. Glover has an extensive dance history which can be traced to *Tap* in 1989 with Gregory Hines and to *Sesame Street* in 1990-1995. However, Glover's talented feet may be familiar to those who viewed the film *Happy Feet* in 2006.

However, he is also most familiar to audiences from his performance in *Bring in Da Noise, Bring in Da Funk* (1996) a dance musical which tells the story of African and African American history in the U.S. from enslavement to the present; *Savion Glover's Nu York* (1998) Broadway production that gives tribute to dance, music, and New York City; and Spike Lee's *Bamboozled* (2000), where Glover was cast as ManRay/Mantan, an unemployed and homeless street performer who is the lead in *Mantan: The New Millennium Minstrel Show*. This show takes place in Alabama on a watermelon plantation in blackface. Glover's character is the "uneducated Negro, but with educated feet" (Lee, 2000). Glover's character was based on Mantan Moreland, one of America's top African American stars best known for his portrait of the wide-eyed, scared-to-death chauffer, Birmingham Brown, in the Charlie Chan movies (see *Bamboozled* 2000). Tap, like the other forms of dance briefly chronicled in this literature review (ballet, modern, and jazz), allowed the genre of hip-hop to be born.

Hip-hop

While Jay-Z may have "99 problems" (Jay -Z, 2004) and hip-hop may now be a billion dollar industry today, the foundations of hip-hop are tied to West Africa. In this article, hip-hop is used to reflect the musical genre which includes, but is not limited to, music styles like rap, gangsta rap, lover rap, and party rap. Rap is a vocal performance found under the umbrella term "hip-hop" that can include both music and dance. Common dance styles in hip-hop include, but are not limited to, breaking, krumping, popping, locking, jazz hip-hop and lyrical hip hop. Two men are credited as the founding fathers of hip-hop: Afrika Bambaata and Grand Master Flash (see Jeff Chang, 2005). Afrika Bambaata went to the Western part of the African continent where he studied the synchronization of the dance beats coupled with the dance rhythms. And In contrast, Grand Master Flash and the Furious Five expressed the point of despair in Black, urban communities with their popular anthem "The Message" launching hip-hop from local community centers to a national and international stage.

It can be argued that rap, particularly in its infancy, was used to express a common narrative of African American oppression that involved issues of apartheid, poverty, and racism. Referred to by hip-hop scholar, Jeff Chang, as political rap, Chang argues that the "Bronx community center dances and block parties where hip-hop began in the early 1970s were not demonstrations for justice, but were celebrations for survival" (2005, p. 17). As the genre of hip-hop music evolved, so did the message from groups like Public Enemy, Ice-T, X-Clan, Poor Righteous Teachers, and Brand Nubian. The messages in these raps focused on civil rights, corruption, politics, sexism, and welfare. The dance styles in hip-hop also changed and matched the message of the song as well as focused on creativity, style, and endurance. However, despite the rich and influential creativity of Black choreographers and dancers, marginalization in dance has occurred.

Marginalization in Dance

Dancers who studied the art form prior to 1965 may have been faced with the impact of the U.S. law known as Jim Crow. For example, Jim Crow altered Black participation in ballet because, like the rest of the U.S., public places were racially segregated along the Black/White binary, and dance studios were no exception. Jim Crow laws legalized segregation between Blacks and Whites. These laws developed from Black Codes which sprung up after the 14th Amendment (1865-1866) ended legal slavery in the United States. Jim Crow laws began during the Reconstruction era in 1877, and became Federal law in 1896, after the Plessy v. Ferguson decision formally established the “separate but equal” law. Black codes “establish[ed] peonage or apprenticeship resembling slavery” (Woodward, 2001, p. 23), whereas Jim Crow Laws “constituted the most elaborate and formal expression of sovereign white opinion upon the subject” (p. 7). Jim Crow laws also limited any social or economic mobility an ethnic minority, particularly a Black body may gain, through the threat of, at minimum, jail to the maximum, death. Jim Crow laws were created to oppress and bar African Americans from public places, equal opportunities for education, events, sports and so on (see Blumberg, 1991; Woodward, 2001). Dance followed White societal trends and Federal law by incorporating Jim Crow laws into their rules, thus relegating Blacks to second-class citizenry as evidenced by the need for segregated ballet studios in order for African Americans to dance, such as The American Negro Ballet (1937-1938); the First Negro Classical Ballet (founded in 1947 by Joseph Rickard, a White man); and the studios opened by Essie Marie Dorsey Mark Turbyfill, and Marion Cuyget and Sydney King (see Ballet in the Literature Review section).

However, once Civil Rights legislation desegregated dance studios, among other places, it did not necessarily equate to freedom from racism. For example, Stacie Williams, an African American ballet dancer with Ballet Memphis, remembers as a little girl dancing for the Pittsburgh Ballet Theatre School where she performed as Clara in *The Nutcracker*. She heard someone say, “I’m surprised that little black girl did a good job” (Hanlon, Perron, Poon, & Stuart, 2010, p. 37). Williams continues her reflection,

I think a lot of the young minority students get discouraged at big ballet schools. They look at the company and see no one that ‘looks like me’... Just because I’m African American people assume I’m going to be more of a contemporary dancer. They don’t expect me to wear a tutu. I love contemporary work but I wish that the doors would be a little more open if I wanted to be the lead in a tutu ballet...People in power need to make a conscious decision to increase diversity in ballet companies. (p. 37)

Diversity is a conscious choice that choreographers and directors in other styles of dance (e.g., modern, jazz, tap, and hip hop) have largely embraced, perhaps because of the relative acceptance ethnic minorities have had with these dance genres as juxtaposed against ballet which has been able to maintain a White-majority visual aesthetic. Without the level of diversity that audiences expect when they see styles of dance other than ballet, ballet is choosing to remain largely nonintegrated and, thus, to be left behind. Like Williams mentions, she wishes the doors to performing a lead role in ballet would be more open; however, she is more accepted as a lead in her contemporary situation. This type of acceptance is not only racism, but it is also comparable to racial tracking. Many young dancers, like Williams, find that they are often “tracked” out of ballet and into contemporary, hip-hop, jazz, tap, or modern.

Racial tracking refers to a segregated education system that continues today where often Euro- and Asian American students are placed in college prep courses, while Black and Latino students are placed on a vocational track. If one thinks of ballet as the “college prep track,” then all other dance styles where ethnic minorities thrive and are accepted in lead roles would be the “vocational track.” From the marginalizing hierarchical perch where ballet sits, the view is rather limiting. The narrow acceptance of who can and cannot become a ballerina is looking more antiquated, as other forms of dance styles thrive and find allure in racial diversity. This racial tracking in dance perpetuates the myth that ballet is all White, that ethnic minority dancers are not interested or talented enough to perform ballet, and that the ethnic minority body is just too different to be normalized into ballet.

While a few of the marginalizations in dance are from the past, the past can influence the present (e.g., ballet and racial diversity). Hence, examining Black experiences in dance is important to the discipline of Black Studies, because, as I have shown, dance was, and still is, one of *the* forms for voice and nonverbal expression as has been widely demonstrated in the study of communication, in this case, between Black people of the Diaspora. Given that dance is an important form of communication, dance is also a place where one can experience freedom and be marginalized due to hegemonic structures already in place.

Theoretical Perspective and Methodological Considerations

From a theoretical perspective, this study uses hegemony with the issues of power and marginalization as the core. Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci (1992), who first described hegemony, argued in his 1920 essay “Notes on the Southern Question” that, the proletariat in Italy could only become the “leading” or “dominant” ruling class insofar as it, “leads the allied classes [and] dominates the opposing classes” (p. 136). The notion of hegemony was, therefore, expounded by Gramsci to include all classes, not just the proletariat alone. As Gledhill (1997) explained,

Since power in a bourgeois democracy is as much a matter of persuasion and consent as of force, it is never secured once and for all. Any dominant group has to a greater or lesser degree to acknowledge the existence of those whom it dominates by winning the consent of competing or marginalized groups in society. Unlike the fixed grip over society implied by “domination,” “hegemony” is won in the to-and-fro of negotiation between competing social, political and ideological forces through which power is contested, shifted or reformed. *Representation* is a key site in such struggle, since the power of definition is a major source of hegemony. (p. 348)

Hegemony can only be understood in its “constant attempt to restructure and refigure its strengths and weaknesses, and in its continual attempt to recuperate forms of resistance that are as ongoing as they are different” (Giroux, 1993, p. 37). Individuals, through their articulation and enactment of hegemony, perpetuate marginalization which can be seen in actions or in verbal disseminations. As Dziech and Hawkins (1998) aptly noted, “whether it is an extension of or a reaction against its history, an institution’s present always reflects its past, and that past influences [marginalized bodies] profoundly” (p. 560). To challenge hegemonic concerns, dance and chorographical vision must be ever evolving. This theoretical perspective is best coupled with autoethnography as methodological approach, because this methodology allows for reflection, inclusion, and empowerment of one’s voice. Thus:

Any story, any form of rhetorical communication not only says something about the world, it also implies an audience, persons who conceive of themselves in very specific ways. If a story denies a person’s self-conception, it does not matter what it says about the world....The only way to bridge this gap if it can be bridged through discourse is by telling stories that do not negate the self-conceptions people hold of themselves. (Fisher, 1995, p. 285)

Second, narratives convey ideas not only about the self or one’s group, but also about culture. Culture can be described generally as a learned behavior, pattern, or perception. Therefore, cultural interpretation involves trying to understand some group, culture, or unique cultural aspect, by “Observing and describing the actions of a group, just as one might examine a written text, and trying to figure out what they mean. Another term for cultural interpretation is *ethnography*” (Littlejohn, 1996, p. 213), and the turning of a critical cultural lens on oneself becomes autoethnography. This methodology encourages the critical, passionate examination of one’s lived experiences, and allows their narratives and their experiences to be treated as primary data (Jackson, 1989; van Maanen, 1995), which is critical in understanding, analyzing, and voicing the experiences of marginalized groups (see Ashcraft & Pacanowsky, 1996; *Communication Theory*, 1999; Denzin, 1997; Geist & Gates, 1996; Murphy, 1998).

In my autoethnographic process, my personal reflections were facilitated through conversations and observations with others, as well as internal processing. The conversations with others increased consciousness about my experiences with racism in dance. Given that I have dance experiences that cover more than three decades, it was impossible to include all instances of marginalization. However, the themes in the racism were all similar and all involved issues about my body, hair texture, and phenotypic hue. Therefore, the narratives contained herein are from ballet, modern, jazz, tap, and hip-hop genres. The experiences I share are taken from: one experience from the late 1970s, six from the 1980s, two from the 1990s, and five from the 2000s. And given that my experiences cover all of the dance genres I have participated in as it concerns body shape, hair texture, and phenotypic hue, I found Brenda Dixon Gottschild's *The Black Dancing Body: A Geography From Coon to Cool* (2003) to be an ideal way to organize this article as well as to provide clarity to my experiences in largely White homogenous dance studios and companies.

Autoethnography: My Bodacious Ballet Bootie

When I was young, like many little girls, I wanted to be a ballerina. I thought my chances were better than average since my mother was once a ballerina who had danced in California and Germany, as well as taught ballet and pointe. I remember the joy I felt the first time my mother fashioned me in my black leotard, pink tights, and black ballet slippers. I literally skipped to class and found myself in beginning ballet with an equally excited group of girls. Every Saturday, either my mom or dad escorted me to dance class, but one experience in ballet changed my view of the art forever. Each week, the teacher chose two girls to hold her hand as we learned how to *chassé* properly in a circle. I remember I only held the teacher's hand once, and was never chosen again. I did not know why. I remember asking one of my dance friends in class why she thought the teacher did not want to hold my hand. Her response: "Well, you're Black." Honestly, the thought never occurred to me that in dance my color would matter. On the playground, color mattered, but I never knew it did in the dance studio. I responded by telling the other little girl that I was going to be a ballerina; as if this was a reason the teacher should want to hold my hand. The girl replied, "Ballerinas aren't Black; they are White, like me" (1970s, student in ballet).

My first lesson in dance and race had occurred. I remember trying to process the above situation, thinking I can be a ballerina because my mother was one. Just then, it dawned on me. She is Black but can pass as White. My mother possessed something that I could never access no matter how much I tried: White privilege in dance. My interactions in dance continued along this raced trajectory. Because the ballerinas I encountered in my early dance experience exemplified the White ideal (e.g., White skin, long straight hair), I eventually bought into the White supremacist belief that only White women could be ballerinas.

At that young age, and living in White homogenous cities, I was unaware of African American ballerinas like Janet Collins who were internationally acclaimed ballerinas. Like many young, Black girls, I soon found myself in jazz and tap classes as opposed to ballet.

Looking back, it is difficult to discern whether or not I was tracked into these classes, or if I was complicitous in tracking myself in to jazz and tap due to feeling more comfortable in these classes. While I ended up studying ballet elsewhere, I still found that I did not quite fit in with the other dancers despite my slender shape and long limbs. As my study in ballet continued, the teachers may have noticed me in ballet, but not always for my grace. For me, praise was a rarity in ballet. The continual critique I received was almost always about my lower back/derriere: “Don’t stick out your butt!” and “Why are you built this way?” (comment made by a ballet dance teacher, 1980s). As an adult dancer, I decided that I was going to challenge this racist belief and my complicitous thinking that only White women could be ballerinas. After all, I was beginning to see at least a few examples in the ballet world of Black ballerinas (e.g., Aesha Ash, Misty Copeland), and I was no longer interested in being complicitous and being removed from ballet. I decided to remain active in the styles I had as a child, but dropped tap in favor of hip-hop, modern and pointe. However, in reference to ballet, the same comments from my youth circled around again.

What is it about my backside? I have tried to tuck, restrain, pray, and conjole it into submissiveness, but my bootyliciousness (a word first coined by Snoop Dogg in 1992 and popularized by Beyoncé and Destiny’s child) (see the *Oxford English Dictionary*) refuses to listen. Outside of the dance world, I do not think about my bottom; but once I enter the ballet studio, I begin to have anxiety about my butt. If only I could flatten it somehow, my life in ballet would be easier. I would be able to avoid comments like, “How did you get in that tutu with your big butt?” (comment made by a dancer in ballet, 1980s). While Josephine Baker, a complex and complicated icon in dance, enthralled all of Europe with her curvaceous body, beauty and scantily clad costumes, why was I suddenly meant to feel inferior and otherized?

In the Black community, where often a more voluptuous body is revered, I fall below those standards as well. Sadly, I found myself falling into and wishing for White standards of beauty, as it concerned my derriere in ballet. I became convinced that I would be seen as a ballerina if my body fell within the accepted standards of the White ballet body which also reifies the White aesthetic. A White aesthetic refers to a visual image of beauty that is more accepted by society. In the United States, that body image is White and seen reflected predominantly in the media as well as dance styles like ballet. White aesthetic standards tell women what they need to aspire to, thus invoking a narrow standard of beauty which includes such stereotypes as straight long hair, pale phenotypic hue, thin profile, and virginal qualities that even not all Euro American women can attain (see Patton, 2001; Welter, 1976). Despite this fact, however, more often White women will see their body and beauty valued and celebrated as opposed to African American women who often see their body and beauty associated with negative stereotypes.

Because of the degradation that African American women may feel as it concerns seeing their body, African American women and the Black community typically create their own standard of beauty that may or may not receive media attention. Such creations of a culture's own standards can be challenged in conservative dance styles, like ballet.

Therefore, because of this White aesthetic, I had to develop an intimate connection with my body sans societal expectations as well as those unattainable ballet expectations that were in conflict with my physique. I had to reflect back on the foundational elements of ballet that were within my grasp: my abdominals were engaged, my spine was erect, and my shoulders were down. There was nothing more that I can do as a dancer.

Keeping it Real: Hair Texture and Skin Hue

“Did you straighten your hair? You should do that to your hair every day. I mean, you actually look really pretty.” This was a comment made by a dancer seconds before going on stage to perform a jazz number in the 1980s; a similar comment was made in the 2000s by a dancer before going on stage for a modern piece only then my hair was down in loose waves rather than in a tightly coiled ponytail. Up until my late twenties, I straightened my hair. Straightened hair, I thought, would allow me to better assimilate to the White standard of beauty in dance. I was proud of the tight ballet buns I was able to put my hair in, as I felt like I was a professional ballerina since I looked the part. My hair, in these buns, also looked stick straight. However, on more than one occasion in the 1980s and 1990s, a choreographer or fellow dance student in the 1980s or 1990s would say, “You look so severe with that ballet bun.” As the only ethnic minority in class, I remember looking around and noting that my bun looked like all of the other ballerinas. The only key difference that I could ascertain between the other ballerinas and me was that they happened to be White. In the 1980s, while the lighting was being set for a tap number, I was told, “Your hair and skin are so dark you just blend right into the background. Now, how are you going to fix this?” Was I now responsible for fixing the lighting? Is that not what this lighting director was being paid to do?

In a dance company in the 2000s, I moved up from an understudy role when the dancer originally cast in the primary role dropped out of the piece. The original dancer was White and blond. The choreographer, therefore, wanted to cover my naturally curly, dark brown hair with a curly, blond wig because not only did that look fit with the vision of the choreographer, but also it was the traditional look in that particular role which was most often danced by White ballerinas. Because my hair can easily be styled in its curly texture, I wondered why there was a need to purchase a curly, blond wig. I asked the choreographer if I could dance the role with my naturally curly, dark brown hair.

I made the argument that aesthetically, my brown hair would match my skin tone, making me look less like a clown. Shortly thereafter, the original choreographer was replaced with a new choreographer for reasons not explained to the dancers. I too was later removed from the piece and placed back in an understudy role. My understudy, a White woman with brown hair, however, was now cast and performed the role sans the blond wig.

In what I thought was an unusual move, I sought solace with those other understudies who also were upset about not being able to dance in the performance. My abrupt removal from the piece caused a few dancers to email me privately to convey their shock, while others told me the decision was “wrong.” Oddly, my then understudy was upset by the situation as well, because she wanted to dance the role, but not if that meant I could not. I found myself comforting someone who was dancing a role I, at the time, thought meant everything. One dancer, however, said, “The decision is racist. Why do you even stay around? You should quit.” However, it was through an eventual conversation with the choreographer that shed light on the situation; this was the same advice echoed by a former dance teacher who, in part, said: “Don’t take things so personally!” This was a lesson for me about artistic vision.

Choreographers have an artistic vision in mind and that comes with the territory of dance regardless of genre. As a dancer, whether or not one agrees with the vision of the choreographer is irrelevant. In my hope to persuade the new choreographer to move me up from my understudy status, I challenged the choreographer’s vision. The person who replaced me did not question the vision of the choreographer. She accepted the hegemonic hierarchal dance structure; the choreographer’s vision is the one that matters, not the dancer’s. While there was a moment when I thought my removal had to do with race, the fact is that I had no proof that the choreographer’s decision to remove me from the piece was race-based, as the one dancer believed. A preference for a White visual aesthetic is difficult to prove, unless it is overt, and, while minimal, the dance for which I was an understudy had racial diversity. Removal from dances often falls into that gray area of dance where it is difficult to separate the artistic vision of the choreographer from those personal feelings of being hurt and rejected.

Perhaps the comment in *Dance Magazine* summarizes the complexities of ballet and racism, hence:

Ballet is a white-dominated world and I don’t necessarily think its racism...But I feel like what happens in these ballet companies is that it is just not in their palette. It’s not at the forefront of these artistic directors’ minds...The scary thing is that most directors just coast along in their comfortable bubble and don’t look at the larger picture of art and its social impact. (Hanlon et al., 2010, p. 37).

Furthermore, in her interview with Gottschild (2003), former dancer and Artistic Director of Philadanco, The Philadelphia Dance Company, Joan Myers Brown had this to say about generational shifts in attitudes regarding dance, “I think, no, there hasn’t been a change. I mean; here I am, I’ll [soon] be 70 years old, and they are still doing what they were doing in 1950. There’s one or two [black members in an ensemble] when they could be half and half” (p. 287).

With the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, which ended Jim Crow or “separate but equal” laws and forced racial integration across the U.S.—including dance studios and companies—why then has dance, in particular ballet, lagged so far behind when it comes to further racial integration whereas Brown states it should be half and half?

In my experience, dancers, whether professional or those who dance as a hobby, they want to dance. As a professional, dancing with a professional company is the goal, and in any profession, one often starts at the entry level. In much of my dance experience, I was happy to merely be part of the ensemble. Initially, I never minded the back, as I am usually the tall girl in the class. But, comments like “we need to showcase other dancers” or “it’s not your time to shine,” or “don’t dance like a honky” (comments said to me by choreographers in the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s in hip-hop, jazz, and a dance company), eventually take their toll and it is only human to wonder, “Is it my dancing ability? My race? Both?” It could be neither dance ability nor race, but simply choreography. It is times like this that illuminate the power a choreographer retains and how s/he chooses nor does not choose to communicate that artistic vision to the dancers.

There is no one formula to determine the artistic vision of a dance instructor or a choreographer and why some people are cast in what roles in productions. There can be muses around whom they may design choreography, but unlike other professionals or hobbyists, I have never had any of these experiences. For example, some of my dance training included instructors and choreographers who focused strongly on partnered dancing in ballet. I have never been partnered as I was told by a choreographer, in the 1980s in ballet, that “racial mixing in the piece could upset the story line.” This statement did not fall into that gray area of: is it racism or artistic vision that had me unpartnered in the piece? As Gottschild noted, “Probably still the area that is the toughest to accept, all around, is seeing a black dancer do a specific classical ballet that for years has had a tradition of being performed by white dancers...Like maybe Romeo and Juliet” (2003, p. 87). This overt experience made me wonder if I should have questioned where or how I was staged. Instead, I said nothing.

In this particular experience, I was complicitous to the hegemonic hierarchy of the choreographer due to my silence. None of the other dancers said anything either. Maybe they did not hear the statement, or perhaps they were not sure if the incident was racist as the statement was said in a matter-of-fact way. Regardless, the rhetoric of silence was upheld and is complicated.

If we spoke up would we have to endure unintended consequences of challenging the choreography? Or, if we maintained our silence we would be signaling passive agreement with the statement made? In choosing to be quiet, perhaps we allowed the status quo to go forward.

The Final Act: A Conclusion

“Dance in itself would not be so powerful, so enriched, if it wasn’t for black dance” (Fernando Bujones interviewed by Gottschild, 2003, p. 82). The greatest lesson I have learned is that in dance, there may be love for diversity, but many times, no love exists for the diverse dancing body. I have lost count how many dance instructors, choreographers, or artistic directors have told me they “just love Black culture and music,” particularly when the classes are hip-hop, jazz or modern, yet, at times, I feel like or have been treated like a marginal member.

Perhaps some people may feel that as a dancer I should expect to be marginalized, particularly in a genre like ballet, given the long history of segregation, racism, and White supremacy against the Black body in ballet. However, as I have shown in the literature review, despite a history of Black dancers in ballet, modern, jazz, tap, and hip-hop, there has been marginalization and stereotypes that Black dancers in many these dance genres have had to surmount. I chose, however, not to segregate myself out of any of the dance styles I enjoy. There have been times where I have been juxtaposed against the White ideal, and, at times, I have been seen as “the other,” unusual, and out of place in ballet, modern, jazz, tap, and hip-hop. But, there are also times where I have been cast in a lead role. Most recently I was cast as the Queen in Snow White with my current dance company, and I dance with a studio and company where there is some racial and ethnic diversity, and where I feel welcomed regardless of whether or not I am cast in one piece. I choose to navigate a world where the shape of my body, hair, or skin may not always fit into the White aesthetic because dance fulfills a need in my soul.

Dance is the communicative foundation of all cultures, and African diasporic culture is no different. Thus, dance is a greatly impactful art in African diasporic culture and one whose study is important to the discipline of Black Studies. Dance is cultural and communicates a culture’s view of the world at a particular moment in time. In communicating cultural perspectives, dance helps complete African diasporic experiences which, in turn, helps provide Black Studies with a more complete picture of Black life and experiences. Seen in this way, dance can be a way to keep cultures alive, as well as communicate traditions that can be passed across generations. Dance is powerful, and thus a powerful way to share narrative as well as diasporic stories of oppression, marginalization, happiness, and freedom. Like dancer Thiago Soares says, “dance conquered me when I first felt the control it’s possible to have over your own body...” (2010, p. 32). As a cross cultural communication scholar, I see dance as another way for me to communicate cross culturally, as one need not to understand a language fluently to understand the emotional range that is communicated through movement. I also dance, because, like Soares, dance, thankfully, chose me; and I have no choice.

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Notes

¹ My heritage is comprised of African American, White German, and Tennessee Cherokee.

² African American and Black are used interchangeably. African American may refer to the author directly or to other Blacks born in the United States, for example, while Black is used in the diasporic sense to connect Black peoples around the world.

³ Post-racism is a term that has become more actively used since the inauguration of President Barack Obama, who, while bi-racial (Black and White), identifies as African American. In post-racism there are typically three primary ideas: 1) that racism does not exist as evidenced by the election of Mr. Obama; 2) that people are too sensitive about race and need to “get over it;” and 3) that if there is an instance of racism, the issue is one of a personal bias rather than a structural or systemic bias. Racism in dance is nothing new. The examples used in this article show that dance in the twenty-first century actively lives with racism and biases from the twentieth century.

⁴ As noted in Patton (2008), “the concept of the hyper-visible invisible Black body is an apparent oxymoron. However, the significance of this term is in how the black body is seen (hyper-visible) and then invisible (something to be ignored)...This visible performance made blacks hyper-visible” (p. 165). In dance the Black body was often something that was seen as an anomaly. Something that stood out from white heteronormativity. Blacks became invisible because the racist performance was often relegated to something unusual, odd, or mere entertainment. Not a performance that added to the story the dance was trying to communicate.

⁵ Playing the dozens is an oral rhyming competition between two or more people that often results in boasts and/or insults. The person with the most creativity in rhymes wins. A comparison between two tappers competing can be made. The tapper with the most creativity, improvisation, and difficulty of moves wins.