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Ballet Pedagogy and a "Hard Re-Set": Perspectives on Equitable and Inclusive Teaching Practices

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ABSTRACT

In her scholarship on pedagogy, Gloria Ladson-Billings describes COVID-19 as a call to re-set education using a more culturally relevant pedagogy. As ballet teachers and researchers working in higher education and pre-professional settings, we teach a form of dance often associated with the characteristics of white supremacy. Through this collaborative institutional ethnography, we generated methods for posing questions, critiquing choices, and imagining alternatives to create more equitable educational settings. We connect the process of addressing and challenging systemic exclusions in ballet with tangible steps toward creating more inclusive classes and performances that value the joy and pleasure in moving.

KEYWORDS

Ballet; pedagogy; leadership; white supremacy; posture

Introduction

The year 2020 brought heightened attention in the United States to systemic racism, police brutality, and disproportionate access to healthcare, exacerbated by the impact of COVID-19. During the summer of 2020, numerous institutions and cultural organizations issued statements proclaiming solidarity with the Black Lives Matter movement and commitments to "diversity." Pedagogical theorist and educator Gloria Ladson-Billings identifies in COVID-19 an opportunity to redesign pedagogies, using the analogy of a "hard re-set" for a cell phone, "to describe what needs to happen to reclaim and preserve our culture through our school students."[1]

In 2022, many universities are eager to get back to "normal" after the widescale disruptions of the pandemic. In what follows, we show how the idea of normal includes a failure to address racialized oppression and the ways in which it is perpetuated within normative approaches to ballet pedagogy. The status quo of how ballet is being taught in many university settings is at odds with culturally relevant pedagogy and is often failing to serve our student populations, as Ladson-Billings writes, "If we consider what normal has been for Black children, it is easy to see why 'getting back

to normal' does not seem like a good idea."[2] This is especially true for Black dancers who have faced centuries of discrimination and barriers within ballet schools, university settings, and professional companies.

Ballet as an art form has a long and troubled relationship with patriarchal structures and racialized assumptions that together work to uphold and reproduce white supremacy.* The crises of 2020 instigated much-needed reconfigurations in dance pedagogy. They also exposed how a canonical history of ballet interlocks with approaches to technique that undergird white supremacy. We take our cue from Ladson-Billings's research, who defines culturally relevant pedagogy as encompassing "three propositions: academic achievement/student learning, cultural competence, and socio-political/critical consciousness. Any iteration that does not reflect all three of these propositions cannot be said to be culturally relevant pedagogy."[3]

There are numerous obstacles to equity that ballet faculty and students face in university settings. Tracing the disciplinary formation of dance departments in the United States, we see a clear effort to exclude Black† artists and Africanist aesthetics, visible from the 1920s when the first dance degree program was created at the University of Wisconsin-Madison to the first decades of the twenty-first century when dance faculty are predominantly white-identifying and teach techniques created or codified by white artists. In a biography of Margaret H'Doubler, the educator who established the first dance degree in the United States, Janice Ross writes, "H'Doubler, like the other preeminent dance pioneer, Isadora Duncan, initially had an implicit vision of America as white, Europeanized, and without significant social, racial, or economic diversity."[4] H'Doubler's curriculum reflected these values in much the same way dance critic John Martin's formulation of "modern dance" was the purview of white Americans. Ross continues her analysis of H'Doubler's pedagogy, "Implicitly, the dancing female American body was being constituted as counter to the Africanist presence."[5] The pervasiveness of this segregation was made visible in the

*While our research focuses on how characteristics of white supremacy cultures show up in ballet pedagogies and university settings in the United States, there is ample evidence of the supremacy of whiteness in other countries that have promoted ballet, as well as in other genres of dance. Focusing on the 1841 production of *Giselle* in France, dance scholar Rebecca Chaleff observes "the historical convergence of imperial economies with cultural conventions embedded within ballet technique and choreography." See Rebecca Chaleff, "Dance of the Undead," in *Futures of Dance Studies*, eds. Susan Manning, Janice Ross, and Rebecca Schneider (Madison: University of Wisconsin, 2020), 416. Scholar Arabella Stanger analyzes "*The Sleeping Beauty* as offering the imperial court a world in which to locate itself as an invulnerable ensemble of powers" in nineteenth century Russia. See Arabella Stanger, *Dancing on Violent Ground* (Evanston: Northwestern Press, 2021), 54.

†We capitalize "Black" when referring to a culture, ethnicity, or group of people. We use lowercase "w" in white because the descriptor refers to a hegemonic formation, not a shared culture or history, and has long been capitalized by hate groups. See Lori L. Tharps, "The Case for Black with a Capital B," *New York Times*, November 19, 2014, https://www.nytimes.com/2014/11/19/opinion/the-case-for-black-with-a-capital-b.html and Oyin Adedoyin, "Race on Campus: Should the 'B' in 'Black' Be Capitalized?" *Chronicle of Higher Education,* June 28, 2022, https://www.chronicle.com/newsletter/race-on-campus/2022-06-28.

twenty-first century as activists' demands for social justice and calls to dismantle white supremacy turned their focus to the predominantly white dance faculty in higher education. This demographic imbalance can be traced, in part, to the many educational settings that used H'Doubler's curriculum, which became, as Sally Banes describes, the "template and the source of personnel for so many other university dance programs, both nationally and internationally."[6]

During the same period, a similar segregation of Black and white artists emerged in John Martin's dance criticism, which has influenced the writing of history books, the teaching of history courses, and the establishment of aesthetic hierarchies in dance departments. Both Martin's role as a full-time dance critic and H'Doubler's establishment of a dance degree occurred almost simultaneously and during a time of horrific racialized violence and exclusion—for example, the Tulsa Race Massacre of 1921 and the Immigration Act of 1924, two instances among many in the United States. Although there were differences between H'Doubler's and Martin's approaches to defining and teaching dance, both used their writing and courses to protect a racially segregated realm where white dancers were valued as artists and educators.[7]

This historical reflection offers a lens for viewing our current situation: of the more than three thousand dance degrees awarded in 2019, the majority of this coursework focused on modern and postmodern dance.* Heeding calls from students, faculty, and artists to dismantle white supremacy in dance education, many institutions faced the quandary of departments comprised of tenured faculty ill-equipped to teach anything beyond technique, history, and composition courses that center white modern and postmodern dance.[8] In conversations among collaborating authors, we noted that while departments scrutinized modern and postmodern dance curricula, ballet seemed to receive considerably less attention.

One reason for this inattention may be linked to ballet's ubiquitous, yet paradoxically more peripheral, role within American higher education dance programs. Although many dance departments offer ballet classes, ballet is rarely represented on university stages during student performances, except for at a handful of institutions that offer degrees focused on ballet. Of the hundreds of dance departments and programs in the United States, the number that offer a ballet degree is less than ten, a number that includes Butler University, Indiana University, Texas Christian University, and the University of Utah.

Collectively, we witness a dynamic in which ballet is either placed on a pedestal as (erroneously) "foundational" to all other dance techniques and

*We are basing this claim on our own observations as well as NASD requirements for coursework plus 2020 statistics: "General Dance," *Data USA*, https://datausa.io/profile/cip/general-dance.

an essential part of training pre-professional dancers, or wholly dismissed as an emblem and instrument of colonialism.* In this article, we depart from this either/or paradigm, which Tema Okun has identified as a tenet of white supremacist thinking, by pinpointing the specific mechanisms that encode white supremacy within standard approaches to ballet pedagogy.[9] Instead of pronouncing judgment on whether or not ballet should be taught, we examine the *how* of ballet pedagogy, unmasking ballet educators' complicity within larger structures of oppression and asking what other possibilities might lie within the form. We view this as a necessary and complementary project to the broader reorganization of curricular emphasis away from Western aesthetics.

We build upon the foundational work of Brenda Dixon Gottschild who, in her 2003 book *The Black Dancing Body*, has outlined many of the mechanisms by which Black dancers are made to feel "out of place" within American concert dance.[10] Indebted to Dixon Gottschild, we extend this thinking toward the role ballet educators play in creating environments in which dancing bodies are (or are not) made to feel at home. This addresses a gap in the literature on ballet pedagogy, which has effectively analyzed how gender roles impact learning,[11] but seems reluctant to confront racism and white supremacy head-on. We furthermore highlight that, among the literature that does engage racism within ballet pedagogy, many of the authors taking up this work are dancers and educators of color.[12] As dance scholar Rebecca Chaleff observes, "Whiteness can only masquerade as unmarked among white subjects."[13] Part of our work in this article is unveiling how white supremacy culture informs the language and practice of ballet pedagogy.

Acknowledging that there is much work to be done, and that our responsibilities will vary according to our specific positionalities, we aim to specifically call-in white scholars and teachers to help shift this culture. As education scholar Brian Gibbs writes:

> [W]e must unlearn habits of privilege, develop authentic solidarity, confront power imbalances in our lives, and engage in collaborative social change that searches for joy and inner wisdom . . . Rather than avoiding or causing additional harm, teachers seek to help students better understand the harm, where it came from, how it manifested, and ultimately, how it can be prevented. The possibilities of healing come from knowledge, understanding, and the possibility of something different.[14]

Motivated by Gibbs's calls to action, this research interrogates the ways that each privilege is tethered to an oppression.

*For sources on ballet as the foundation of dance technique, see current class descriptions at schools like Utah Dance Artists where "classical ballet technique" is defined "as the technical foundation for various dance styles." "Varsity Ballet & Conservatory Ballet," *Utah Dance Artists*, https://www.utahdanceartists.com/programs/conservatory-ballet.html

Methodology

Since dance departments train teachers who will educate future generations of dancers, we see our teaching as playing an important role in shaping the future of ballet, specifically its language, assumptions, intentions, and pedagogical methods. As a group of six educators diverse in terms of race, age, institutional affiliation, and institutional rank, we assess the power that educators have to change classroom cultures in a variety of academic and nonacademic settings. Our investigation began with identifying privileges and obstacles faced in our experiences, questions that compel us, and strategies we employ within ballet education. In this research, we pay close attention to the ways that the suspension of the "normal" through COVID-19 has challenged, as well as improved, our pedagogies. After a preliminary conversation sparked by our shared investment in anti-racist ballet pedagogies, Zena Bibler, Paige Cunningham, and Kate Mattingly presented working ideas about white educators' roles in dismantling white supremacy to a collective called White People's Work (WPW).* This hour-long Zoom event, titled "Anti-Racism in Ballet," was held in March of 2021 with approximately thirty white-identifying educators joining the discussion. We then engaged in additional conversations with Black educators and scholars Keesha Beckford, Iyun Ashani Harrison, and Jehbreal Muhammad Jackson. Beckford, Harrison, and Jackson introduced additional questions, experiences, research, and strategies for teaching ballet according to an anti-racist ethos, based on their combined fifty years of performing and teaching. Further conversations ensued through the revision of this article, which was drafted by Mattingly and has undergone several rounds of collaborative revisions.

As co-authors, we bring together a variety of professional and educational experiences: two performed with Dance Theatre of Harlem, and one with the Merce Cunningham Dance Company. One has a doctorate in Performance Studies and two are currently pursuing doctoral degrees (one in Culture & Performance and one in Theater). Three graduated with BFA degrees from Juilliard, and four have MFA degrees in Dance. One co-author is part of the leadership team at Chicago's Joffrey Academy; one co-author established a dance company, Ballet Ashani; and one is currently pursuing interdisciplinary projects as a choreographer, researcher, and filmmaker. All of us are teaching ballet classes, ranging from elective courses for non-dance majors to advanced classes for dancers on a pre-professional track. Because of our different positionalities with respect to institutional

*Established in 2020 by Sammy Roth, Ryan Rockmore, and Kate Mattingly, WPW hosted monthly Zoom meetings, open and free to any dance educators, that addressed and challenged the supremacy of whiteness in dance pedagogies during the academic year 2020-21.

power, privileges, challenges, and student populations, what we offer is not a prescriptive approach, but a set of questions and strategies that we have been exploring in our teaching practices.

We consider our research an institutional ethnography (IE) and align ourselves with methodologies of sociologists, especially Dorothy E. Smith, developer of IE.* Institutional ethnography is a method for mapping trans-local relations, meaning invisible but powerful processes that congregate in specific areas and coordinate people's activities within institutions. We view this as an ideal approach for our research, which seeks to trace connections among institutions, people, pedagogies, and racialized assumptions. In *The Everyday World as Problematic*, Smith defines IE as a method to "explicate institutional relations determining everyday worlds and hence how the local organization of the latter may be explored to uncover their ordinary invisible determinations in relations that generalize and are generalized."[15] In our research, we view these "ordinary invisible determinations" as inextricably linked to the supremacy of whiteness. The terms "institution" and "institutional" are used to "identify a complex of relations forming part of the ruling apparatus . . . [and] coordinating multiple strands of action into a functional complex." Smith further articulates her use of ethnography as distinct from "observation and interviewing" and instead focuses on "a commitment to an investigation."[16]

We distinguish our research as a collaborative IE because our methodology is communal and collective; we gather multiple perspectives and highlight differences in experiences. Throughout this article, we identify the co-author when one of us introduced a distinct line of inquiry or drew from a personal experience. Our findings are informed by conversations we had with one another and with students, which are included here with their permission.† Additionally, this is a social justice-focused IE, distinguished by an attitude that linguistic ethnographer William Sughrua defines as "not patronization nor exoticization."[17] Sughrua quotes literary author Nelson Algren, who writes, "In times when the levers of power are held by those who have lost the will to act honestly, it is those who have been excluded from the privileges of our society, and left only to its horrors, who forge new levers by which to return honesty to us."[18] Algren's statement emphasizes the need to amplify and respond to students, educators, and artists who have been excluded from or mistreated within ballet settings. For this reason, our research centers voices and actions that dismantle white supremacy characteristics in dance education, with the aspiration that readers might consider, apply, and add to these proposals. Our approach to this

*We thank journal editor Olive Demar for this vital insight and recommendation.
†Conversations were held confidentially, and student names are withheld by mutual agreement to protect students from retaliation.

research mirrors the redesign of our teaching, which seeks to engage different perspectives while fostering joy and a sense of belonging.

For example, Harrison, Jackson, and Beckford illuminated challenges encountered by Black people in white spaces—from exceptionalism to tokenism to assimilation—and how these obstacles are navigated physically, emotionally, and professionally. Beckford spoke about pressures from white and Black communities and the implicit and explicit idea that Black dancers should not like ballet. We also tend to the problematics of classical ballet being employed as a conduit of "racial uplift," meaning attractive to students of color who desire entrée into a "respected" and "refined" artistic practice. We begin by identifying connections between white supremacy characteristics and ballet pedagogies, then suggest questions and strategies for teachers. Our intention is not to offer prescriptive statements or one-size-fits-all solutions, but rather to focus on barriers to access and to experiment with shifts in power arrangements and facilitation strategies. We approach embodied practices like ballet as mergers of ontological and epistemological pursuits, meaning theories and values are inextricably linked to sensorial knowledge and movement qualities, for both teachers and students.

Unmasking white privilege and white supremacy in ballet

White skin has historically provided easier access to ballet classes and a sense of belonging within them.*[19] Our research connects elements of ballet pedagogies to the fifteen characteristics of white supremacy cultures, defined by Tema Okun, that include "fear of conflict," "perfectionism," "individualism," "either/or thinking" (or "good/bad" evaluations), "right to comfort," and "paternalism."[20] For instance, white peoples' "right to comfort" generates "the belief that those with power have a right to emotional and psychological comfort . . . scapegoating those who cause discomfort."[21] This allows leaders to equate the raising of difficult issues with a person being impolite, rude, or out of line—responses that effectively keep whiteness in a dominant position. When Okun's characteristics are placed alongside values held by ballet teachers, the alignments are striking. We offer three examples of how these characteristics manifest in ballet pedagogy, beginning with students' perspectives on the "fear of conflict" they experience when attempting to discuss bias.

Students at an R1 university's School of Dance with a predominantly white faculty noted that teachers appeared afraid of conflict and sought to

*See Judith Jamison's recounting of Marion Cuyjet's pedagogy, as well as the history of the Jones-Haywood School of Ballet, and the biography of the ballet teacher Therrell C. Smith, a teacher of Virginia Johnson, among many others.

avoid difficult conversations. One student of color noted it is "especially difficult to explain racial bias to a white faculty, and the lack of women of color on the faculty became apparent when we needed to discuss topics like auditioning as a dancer of color, casting decisions, and neglect."[22] Additionally, they highlighted the challenges of making faculty aware of harms that are often not documented or taken seriously: "we are unable to relate how microaggressions have affected us because not all experiences have been recorded or witnessed [by an outsider]."[23] During a discussion with students and teachers, a student was asked by faculty if she experienced ballet coursework as welcoming and inclusive. Her response, as a BIPOC student, was, "Not really,"[24] adding that there has been a lack of inclusion in casting of ballet performances by faculty, with lead dancers being white and blond: a performance of *La fille mal gardée* at the university included a first cast that was "all white and all had blond hair."[25] The student added that it is noticeable that dancers of color are not promoted to featured roles and higher technique levels as often as white students.

This student recalled a white faculty member telling her, in response to her "not really," that the leveling system should be removed, which might reduce anxiety around promotion. For these students, the inability of faculty to engage in conversation about unconscious bias—within a department that had invested in hiring four DEI facilitators over four years—exposes deeply embedded problems. Students noticed how quickly conversations with a facilitator shifted from racial issues to issues of gender inequality, sexuality, and readily fixable course titles, and how often white students opted out of the ostensibly required meetings, complaining that they felt "victimized."[26] Another student heard in the faculty member's suggestion to get rid of leveling an attempt to shut down conversation about an important issue, and by extension, an abuse of power that makes it difficult to bring up questions about white supremacy. There is a general power imbalance between faculty and students, since faculty have the ability to decide casting and level-placement, meaning who moves forward and who does not, as well as the criteria for such decisions.[27] The student remembers asking if faculty could "attend to how they use their power to cloud or disregard the experiences we, as students, are having."[28] Thus, suggesting the removal of merit-based levels and promotions, rather than interrogating the reasons that BIPOC dancers are not being promoted, exemplifies how either/or thinking is often used to maintain the right to comfort. Dispensing with the leveling system altogether equates multiple types of hierarchy and thus glosses over racial disparity. These exchanges expose how eliminating something does not automatically make things more inclusive unless there are real conversations around barriers—particularly

around the role of unconscious bias—and what inclusivity means and requires.

At this School of Dance, while students experienced these abuses of power, there were no Black faculty members who were tenured or tenure-track. In the Fall of 2022, the School introduced a Black tenured faculty member and targeted hire, who had worked for one year as a visiting associate professor. This school's pattern of hiring visiting faculty into tenured or tenure-track positions exposes a strategy of making sure someone is the right "fit" for a department, thereby avoiding the difficult work of asking why the faculty and students are predominantly white, and how their curricula may uphold white supremacy. This strategy raises questions about "whiteness's adaptive maneuvers," a phrase coined by scholar Allison Page to describe how predominantly white organizations bypass interrogations of white supremacy characteristics and the work that intentional inclusion requires.[29]

Resistance to confronting bias, racism, and white supremacy contributes tangibly to the lack of diversity among faculty in university settings (currently, only 5.5% of university faculty are Black).[30] Theresa Ruth Howard explains the dearth of Black ballet teachers in the following way:

> Access and opportunity create access and opportunity. That has historically kept the circle quite tight, and white. The common requirement of a certain pedigree and artistic lineage among faculty members has perpetuated a deficit of Black ballet teachers.[31]

The combined impact of these exclusions faced by BIPOC dancers and educators in university settings means there are very few tenured or tenure-track Black faculty teaching ballet in higher education. Students of color notice the absence of faculty of color when they need the support and understanding of someone with similar lived experience.

A second obstacle in ballet education is the ongoing idealization of the "perfect," which is linked to whiteness, thinness, purity, and cleanliness. To offer one of many examples, attire requirements often call for women's hair to be neatly secured in a bun. As we explored reasons for this rule, we found the justifications that it looks "clean," shows respect for ballet history and tradition, and allows the teacher to "pick out exactly *what* is wrong and *who* is wrong."[32] What is often not considered within this requirement is that ballet hairstyles require a smoothing and straightening of hair in order to achieve that "cleanliness." Dancers who do not comply are faulted with a messy appearance, pedagogical obstruction, and disrespect for tradition. When teachers use this language, we cannot help but notice how dancers with curly or textured hair can only succeed through masking these attributes.

As we considered traditional requirements like these, we began to formulate questions about the obstacles to equity: 1) What traditions are commonly upheld by instructors uncritically, without discussion of *why* they are upheld? 2) What are the implications of positioning the instructor as the main arbiter of "success"? 3) How do the ways in which teachers convey feedback (especially through the language of "cleanliness" and "correctness") sustain systemic exclusions and white supremacist ideologies?

One frequently under-examined tradition concerns the narration of ballet history in university classrooms. Whether through oral or written dissemination, an oversimplified and hagiographic approach to ballet history dominates, portraying ballet as a monolithic art form that has evolved in a linear fashion, developed by individual and primarily white, male artists. In his research and teaching, Jackson advocates for centering multiple influences on the development of ballet as an art form.[33] Jackson brings attention to the substantial contributions and creativity of Africanist and Islamic cultures, including the mainstay of ballet technique—moving with externally rotated legs. If most canonical histories of ballet reinforce its association with whiteness by tracing its origins to the court and theatrical dances of Anglo-European communities, Jackson's research reveals a direct, but largely disavowed, lineage from North African, West African, and Indigenous American cultures that helped shape classical, neoclassical, and contemporary ballet.

A foundational part of this story is al-Andalus, the rule of the Iberian peninsula (present-day Spain and Portugal) from the early eighth century to the end of the fifteenth century[34] by North African Moors.* During this period, Islamic cultures promoted interdisciplinary studies of the sciences, arts, mathematics, and religion, which were far more advanced than Christian European scholarship. These approaches to research and design were appropriated by artists in Europe, which laid the groundwork for ballet as an "embodiment of geometry."[35] Jackson shows how Islamic geometric patterns and spiraling arabesques appeared in Islamic architectural designs and calligraphies, providing foundational elements for ballet

*The word 'Moor' was used much like the word 'Black' in the twenty-first century to describe a person of certain or uncertain African descent, likely mixed with Arab, Syrian, or other lineage. It was used in both descriptive and pejorative ways. Jackson uses 'Moor' here to underscore that this term not only refers to a historical group of people, but also to yoke historical uses of the word to our current depictions and understandings. The term intentionally elicits a broad spectrum of skin tones and demographics as the ethnic make-up of the occupants of al-Andalus was as diverse as present-day African Americans, moving beyond the 'Imazighen' and 'Berbers' (also a derogatory term) to include sub-Saharan populations and migratory mixing with Middle Eastern peoples, some even being traced as far as Indigenous American populations. According to many scholars, the spectrum of skin tones and phenotypes had a wide range from very dark skinned to very light, with some Moors passing for white Europeans with blonde hair. Because the Moors of al-Andalus predominantly practiced Islam and ruled Spain under Islamic doctrine and culture, the word became synonymous, and therefore interchangeable, with Islam and Muslims.

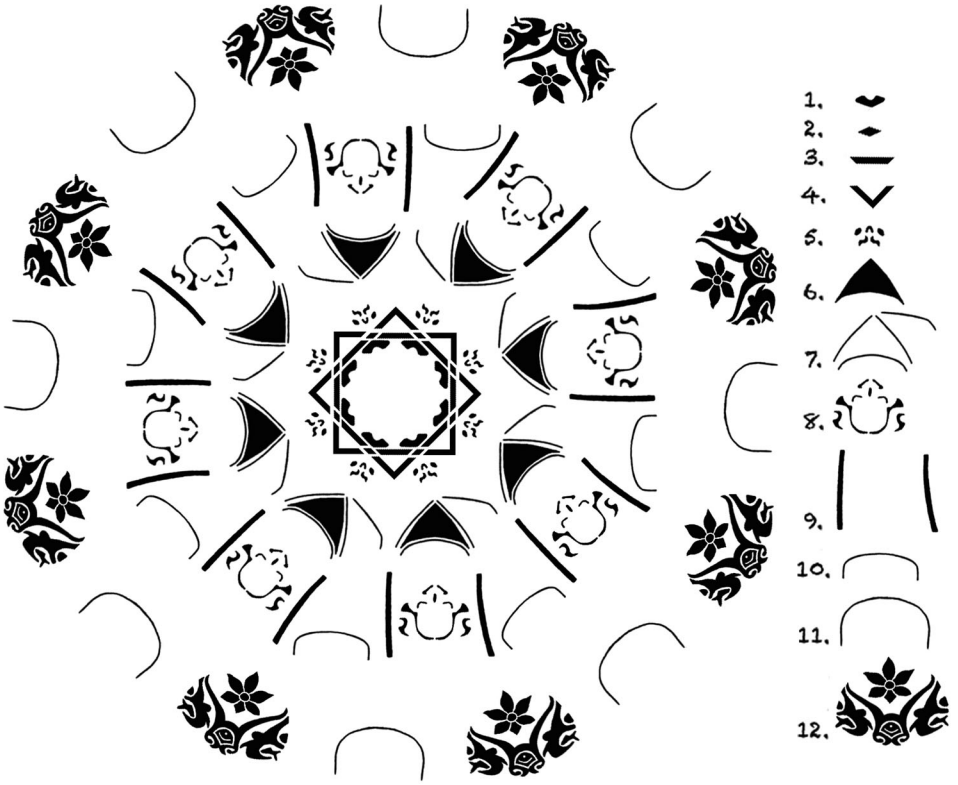

Figure 1. Pictured is a reduction of the eight-point star that anchors the *muqarnas* [stalactite] dome in the Hall of Two Sisters in the Alhambra palace built during the Nasrid dynasty, the last dynasty of Islamic rule in Spain. The design reflects the Kalām atomically interconnected universe with the "created world" represented by botanical vines, plant, and flower shapes that weave throughout *shabaka* [grid] patterns. The precision of the geometric patterns indicates the permanence, order, and exactitude of the creator, and the patterns repeat rhythmically to imply infinity, as if continuing beyond the frame in which they are held. *Muqarnas* domes are extrapolated from two-dimensional star patterns, seen at its center, that are themselves conceived through points, lines, right angles, and planes that were foundational to the geometric understanding and rendering of atomic designs. The legend refers to the design's points, lines, right angles, and planes (numbers 1-4), geometric patterns (numbers 1-4, 6, 7, 9), and flower shapes (numbers 5, 12). For more information, see Yasser Tabbaa, "The Muqarnas Dome: Its Origin and Meaning," *Muqarnas* 3 (1995): 61–74. Recreated design by Raheem Tutein and Jehbreal Muhammad Jackson. Reproduced by permission of Jehbreal Muhammad Jackson and Raheem Tutein.

technique.[36] These patterns are believed to serve as scientific treatises on concepts of atomism and explorations of the cosmos that Jackson, among other scholars, argues were explored across the arts and sciences throughout in the Islamic World (Figure 1).[37]

In addition to being influenced by these Islamic practices, European court dances like the Sarabande and Chaconne have been attributed by scholars and early modern sources to Moors, Moriscos, Indigenous North and South Americans, and their mixed-race descendants. They have also

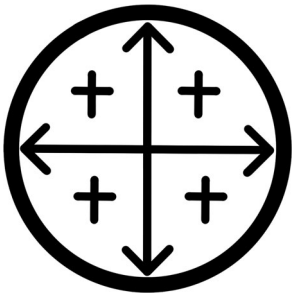

Figure 2. This is an example of a cosmogram, or spiritual signature, found throughout the Americas, which shares a common religious ancestor, the Bukôngo religion, that is traced to the historical kingdom of Kongo. *Sarabanda* is a *mpungo* (a spirit of an ancestor or natural force) in the Cuban Kongo-based Palo Monte Mayombe religion derived from Bukôngo traditions. It is associated with healing metal and equivalent to the Yoruba deity Ogun. See Grey Gundaker, "The Kongo Cosmogram in Historical Archaeology and the Moral Compass of Dave the Potter," *Historical Archaeology* 45, no. 2 (2011): 176-183 and "NKISI SARABANDA—Signature of the Spirit," *National Park Service,* November 5, 2015, https://www.nps.gov/afbg/learn/history-culture/nkisi-sarabanda.htm. Recreated design by Raheem Tutein and Jehbreal Muhammad Jackson. Reproduced by permission of Jehbreal Muhammad Jackson and Raheem Tutein.

been traced through Spain to sub-Saharan Africa through its diasporic traditions preserved in the Americas. There is evidence that the Sarabande, for example, is connected to the diasporic Bukôngo and Yoruba religious traditions through Afro-Cuban retentions that include cosmograms, which are also found in North America. These cosmograms reflect similar principles to those of Islamic design and classical ballet (Figure 2).[38]

In most universities and professional companies, this history is unknown, under-investigated, and/or erased, and ballet is taught as "a world-renowned classical art form, originating in Europe, with roots in the Italian Renaissance court."[39] Jackson's research vivifies how curated histories of ballet reproduce white supremacy through erasure, one of many examples of the ways that "education" can inflict harm and oppression (Figure 3).

This incomplete narration of ballet history is sometimes used to justify what we observe as an embrace of authoritarianism and rigid hierarchical structure within ballet classrooms. This version of ballet history frames authoritarianism and social stratification as nearly baked into the form. Educators perpetuate authoritarianism when framing themselves as the sole source of information and knowledge and when separating and striating groups of students according to their compliance with ballet norms. Cunningham and Mattingly have memories of watching and/or participating in master classes attended by fifty to sixty high school ballet students, taught by someone from a prestigious company, and the teacher focused on two students for the entire class. Not only was this accepted and considered normal, but also the teacher's opinion was the only one that mattered.

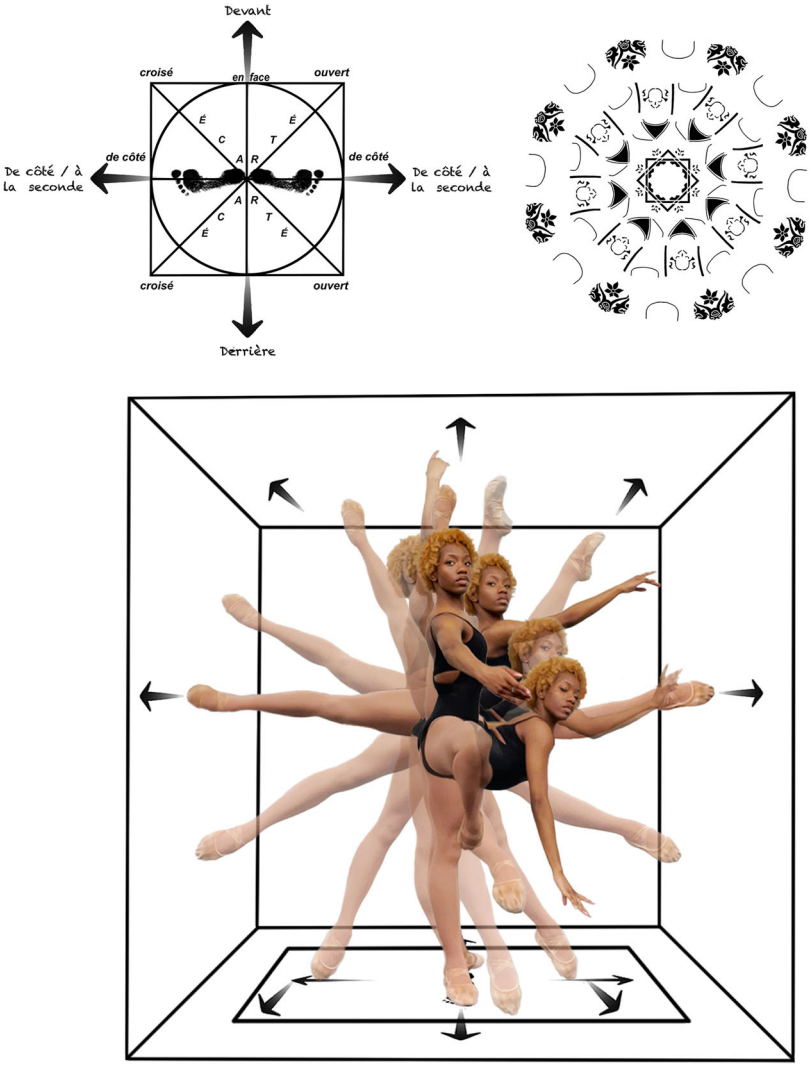

Figure 3. Ballet dancer Marja Miller demonstrating geometrically degreed leg heights that correspond to eight-point star patterns seen in Islamic architecture. Her softly curved upper body resembles botanical patterns, and her hand can be likened to a flower. A common feature of Islamic art is the repetition of image motifs, which is also seen in a dancer's ballet barre. In order to achieve and maintain balance, a dancer must generate an energetic pull that reaches in all directions beyond the dancer's body, similar to the evocation of infinity in Islamic architecture. In the upper left corner, rotated leg positions in ballet form the foundation of the vocabulary and replicate the four winds of creation depicted on the *N'kisi Sarabanda*. When combined with the ordinal directions *(croisé, ouvert, écarté)*, they reflect the eight-pointed Islamic atomic star of creation that is a staple of Islamic art. Jennifer Nevile argues that the gardens of the Italian Renaissance, which can be traced to Islamic designs in Spain, provide the floor patterns for the Renaissance court dances that move from Italy to France. Islamic garden designs were the manifestation of cosmological philosophies, seen vividly in the Alhambra dome and *N'kisi Sarabanda*. To compare the striking similarities of the images and their formal constructions, see Nevile's analysis of the villa L'Ambrogiana by Giusto Utens (1599) and its links to court ballet spatial design. Jennifer Nevile, *Dance, Spectacle, and the Body Politick, 1250–1750* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008), 300-8. Design by Raheem Tutein and Jehbreal Muhammad Jackson. Reproduced by permission of Jehbreal Muhammad Jackson and Raheem Tutein.

These moments made clear that such "master teachers," a title that signals ownership and domination, have no interest in fostering inclusive learning and understanding.

Beyond educational environments, authoritarianism undergirds ballet's hierarchical organization of companies and informs leadership roles. Building on research by Lisa DeFrank-Cole and Renée K. Nicholson, Harrison analyzes how this authoritarian and traditionalist leadership model in American ballet holds women and persons of color in place: their individuality is erased, and divergent voices are silenced and taught their expendability.[40] Harrison investigates how the intersections of gender and race prevent Black ballerinas, in particular, from gaining access to ballet leadership roles.[41] Harrison's critique focuses on the vertical structures and homogeneity of ballet organizations' executive leadership teams, which tend to rely on binary power structures—executive and artistic directors—to set institutional goals. As a result, organizational direction lacks the wealth of perspective that a rigorously diverse leadership team can bring to institutions.

The third obstacle we name is the assumed appearance and desired comportment of ballet students. This closely relates to the authoritarian structure named above; if the teacher is the main arbiter of students' worth, the ideal student is thus rendered docile, mute, and compliant, seeking to adapt their mind, body, and movement to the teacher's definition of a good dancer. This contributes to the paternalistic and authoritarian approach prevalent in ballet education wherein students deny their own sensations, questions, and concerns in order to fulfill a teacher's vision or ideal. The anecdote of the student who noticed how frequently BIPOC dancers were overlooked for lead roles and level promotions exemplifies this confirmation bias. We see a similar perpetuation of racism and sexism in ballet when awards for students are given based on white students being "beautiful," "wonderful," or "kind and respectful"—criteria shared by predominately white faculty in the ballet program at an R1 university during the Spring semester of 2021. This also plays out in the granting of opportunities, which often rewards dancers who do not question the power dynamics at play and conform to white faculty and/or directors' ideas of what a ballet dancer looks like.

There are numerous unspoken messages that make dancers, especially dancers of color, feel that they are not included within the ideal ballet body. From the requirement to straighten hair into a bun, to the lack of availability of tights and shoes that match different skin tones, to the cut and sizing of leotards that are made for petite, minimally curved bodies, there are many aspects that help to construct the "ideal" ballet body according to white supremacist and patriarchal value systems. Beckford

observes that notions of "deficit selves" have been impactful for Black ballet dancers who are, historically and currently, treated as outliers or "against the norm" in predominantly white settings, and who must navigate their own validation and self-worth in hostile environments. Racialized assumptions about anatomy and aesthetics, such as Black ballet dancers not having flexible feet and/or more muscular body shapes than white ballet dancers continue to be repeated in predominantly white institutions. These misconceptions exacerbate feelings of inadequacy. As educators, we underscore that teachers are implicated in the perpetuation of this ideal through the feedback we give and the way that feedback conveys unquestioned bodily ideals that can exacerbate students' feelings of deficiencies or "deficit selves."[42]

Paths toward more equitable practices

As we discussed these three obstacles to equity, we analyzed the tenacity of white supremacy characteristics that are upheld by actions—both large and small—that center white people and culture within ballet pedagogy and create an environment that is inhospitable to dancers of color, from the disproportionate number of white men in leadership roles to the constant surveillance and microaggressions experienced by BIPOC dancers. In this section, we offer two proposals as paths toward more inclusive educational environments. In response to departments and schools that resist interrogating bias, one strategy is to organize a committee to support dancers feeling mistreated or those contending with a teacher's racialized assumptions. To support parents and young dancers of color, Beckford initiated a committee of parents who have children of color enrolled in the Joffrey Academy. Parents have responded with appreciation and gratitude for:

> the open forum where parents can come together to discuss how Joffrey can do better, what they are doing well, what they can improve upon. During committee meetings, parents learn how Joffrey administration is making internal and structural changes to make sure the dance environment at Joffrey is welcoming for all.[43]

A distinguishing characteristic of this committee is the investment of Beckford, part of the Joffrey Academy's leadership team. As a dancer who has experienced bias and mistreatment, Beckford brings vital insights to creating educational settings that are challenging and inclusive.

Another path towards more culturally relevant teaching requires disentangling the relationships between histories of ballet and the aesthetic priorities favored in ballet technique classes. To decenter a fabricated lineage of primarily white, male artists "creating" ballet, we instead start with relationships between a canonical history and who determines dancers' value and "greatness." We perceive ballet technique as an "emergent strategy,"

defined by adrienne maree brown, who writes "emergence is a way complex systems and patterns arise out of a multiplicity of relatively simple interactions."[44] So too, ballet, as an art form, emerges from a multiplicity of people and cultures. In excavating histories of ballet, Jackson notices how amplifying the Africanist sources and Islamic influences changes the perspectives and demeanors of Black dancers: instead of feeling like anomalies in ballet studios, Black artists occupy these spaces with a sense of belonging. Jackson says:

> Knowing the history means empowering the present. This change of posture can be understood both literally and figuratively: if ballet has never been the sole purview of white European dancers, then the hierarchies that place white dancers over dancers of color as 'better suited' for ballet can also be discarded.[45]

Similar to brown's conceptualization of emergent strategies as capacious and interdependent, Jackson's research into the roots of ballet generates both a more historically accurate and egalitarian view of this art form.

Instead of reproducing a racialized, canonical history, books and courses can challenge a narrative of ballet that upholds white supremacy. This approach resonates with scholar Brian Gibbs who studies how "authentic understanding of the past can lead to liberation."[46] When referring to classical or traditional ballet, it is helpful to emphasize the tremendous varieties of ballet across geographies and histories. Teaching that there is one story, origin, or tradition to protect, raises the question, "To what end?" When does upholding tradition equate with upholding oppression? Are we using the term 'classical ballet' to circumscribe who belongs and who does not? Lee Anne Bell and Dipti Desai articulate the value of the arts and sensorial learning as vital to dismantling inequities:

> Situating dominant discourses and institutional structures within a historical context is another vital component of social justice work. Perceiving the relationality of privilege and oppression requires that we be attentive to the kinds of stories that are given voice through history and those that are not. Further, how we make sense of our relationship to the world, and ourselves, is both historical and embodied/sensate. The arts can play a unique role in highlighting the embodied nature of historical inquiry . . . Ellsworth poses a critical question for social justice art: "What might be possible and thinkable if we were to take pedagogy to be sensational"?[47]

We note the importance of bringing a critical lens to ballet history in our studios as well as seminar rooms, further opening up venues for introducing and reflecting on ballet's history.

The kinds of critical inquiry encouraged in history and dance studies courses can have a profound impact on students' relationships to the technique. If we want to cultivate joy and uniqueness within the practice of ballet, then this must be replicated in our depictions of the form. Jackson's

work offers a model for inquiry that is both embodied and discursive, and this kind of inquiry is essential to eradicate the white supremacist ideal of either/or thinking around ballet.

Discussions of ballet's capacious histories can also inform how we embody ballet movements. Bibler has been designing classes where students consider questions of tradition and history through physical means. Drawing from Nyama McCarthy-Brown's work, some practical strategies include embodying the aesthetic variations (in music, movement, and expressive quality) of different historical periods and/or influential performers; using non-traditional ballet music and asking students to reflect on how it changes their experience of class; foregrounding the deep-rooted Africanist, Indigenous, and immigrant influences on American ballet; and situating ballet in historical relationship to other techniques.[48]

Instead of positioning an instructor as the sole authority in a class, which has been a longstanding approach to ballet pedagogy, each of us works to dismantle the assumption that teaching depends on a hierarchy with the teacher above the students. Bibler and Mattingly center students' voices and priorities by beginning their university courses with a request for students to set their own goals and then offering feedback throughout the semester based on those articulated goals. Additional strategies include incorporating improvisation and interpretation with set material, creating space and time for peer-to-peer feedback with the recommendation, "Look for inspiration from each other," and centering the dancers, meaning the people in the room, more than "technique." We believe that the technique needs *dancers* in order to survive and reproduce itself, so we must make decisions about what we retain and discard. This shift also contributes to inclusive and welcoming pedagogies that dismantle the white ideal and foreground ballet as created by a multiplicity of people with various priorities and capacities.

Finally, we recommend a critical interrogation of common feedback strategies as a way to put in check the white supremacist and eugenic precepts underneath the construction of ballet's "ideal" body. Language is a tool that can help to interrupt assumptions about whose bodies belong and which dancers can be successful in ballet. Bibler has observed a tendency to speak in 'Frankenstein' terms when teachers and students talk about having good feet, exceptional turnout, or long leg extensions. We caution against the over-emphasis on line, which is associated with thin bodies, and challenge the embedded values of "purity" and "cleanliness" that are attributed to an idealized execution of ballet movements and the obedient fulfillment of dress codes. Instead of defending this kind of feedback via an ahistorical invocation of tradition, Bibler encourages emphasizing functionality over aesthetics by sharing information about what a particular way of

moving allows you do to. Additionally, rather than praising students for possessing the "right" kinds of bodies, as a group, we discussed the importance of coaching dancers to cultivate awareness of energy, sources of support, and the movement of weight instead of making static forms. There are many opportunities to be attentive to our word-choice in offering feedback, and to amplify students' strengths and assets, as opposed to emphasizing weaknesses. Cunningham notices that each dancer has a distinct quality that is beneficial in certain combinations, or for certain speeds of movement, and less so in others. It is important to recognize that there are many ways to excel in a ballet class, and all dancers have strengths and weaknesses in accordance with different contexts. By turning our and our students' attention to the whole person and entire body (as opposed to isolated parts), we have witnessed our students dance expansively and with more confidence as a result of foregrounding person-first (instead of body part-first) language. This also redirects focus to the experience of *dancing*, rather than the creation of static postures, and, we hope, promotes the value of joy that we hold in common.

Re-configuring our posture

The term 'posture' not only refers to the position of the body but also to the attitude assumed by our bodies through muscular activity. Ballet dancers are often identifiable by their posture, meaning lifted torsos and turned-out legs. These postures are the result of embodied practices that repeat and emphasize certain patterns and alignments. What happens when we approach our pedagogies as grounded in an anti-racist posture, meaning a practice that we repeat and refine so it becomes embedded and ingrained?

Bibler finds that asking ourselves and our students why we study ballet technique motivates more generative and inclusive pedagogies: Why do I value ballet technique? Why do I keep returning to class? What do I want to carry forward or leave behind? How can strategic rule breaking, disobedience, or dismantling of ballet norms actually enrich students' learning of the form?* How can I advocate for productive questioning, friction, and conflict within institutional spaces that promote smooth repetitions of the norm?

As teachers, we examine who is not in our studios due to lack of access and systemic exclusions and pay close attention to how we offer feedback to encourage those students who are present. Cunningham asks, how do I

*Bibler honors her teacher mayfield brooks for introducing the possibility for dancers to act as "critical participants" within the forms they study. See mayfield brooks, "touching myself: a refusal of contact improvisation," *Contact Quarterly* (Summer/Fall 2018): 39.

move away from ballet's tendency to pick apart and "correct" and towards offering feedback with clear action steps that the student can work with? Educator and exercise scientist Paul Doyle focuses on the influential roles that goal setting and "self-talk" play in learning processes. Too often in ballet we focus on *don't do this, don't do that, your arm is too low*, and so forth. Instead, we could adopt what Doyle calls a "positive re-enforcement sandwich model": state a positive, provide the feedback, and then close the loop by giving tangible steps the student can take.[49]

Cunningham notices that the shift away from individualism requires redirecting attention from an internal focus—evident in thoughts about "my arm, my leg, my turnout…"—towards a communal and external emphasis. Holistic health advocate Clare Guss-West suggests the redesigning of our pedagogies during COVID-19 brings attention to our audio instructions, feedback, imagery, and choice of music:

> This prompts [students] to begin to learn implicitly—to take your attention to what the movement 'feels' like for you. What are the sensations in your body? What does that image, that shape or that quality proposed by the teacher bring to you and to the success of your movement? This shift in your focus of attention, onto what are termed *external* foci, brings with it immediate physical and mental benefits—enhanced strength, balance, consistency of movement—it deepens breathing, releases unnecessary tension, increases stamina, energy levels and importantly assists us to manage the stress, the frustration or the emotions that arise in such learning circumstances.[50]

Ultimately, each of our questions and strategies advocates for a hard re-set, meaning a different posture, that prioritizes a learning culture of joy and creativity within ballet class.

During the pandemic, while theaters were closed, we noticed how access to ballet dancers and performances through social media platforms reconfigured notions of ballet's exclusivity. Pre-COVID, ballet training and creative processes often took place behind closed doors in expansive studios at well-funded institutions. Tickets to performances are often inaccessible for lower- and middle-class communities, and these financial and cultural barriers contribute to the assumptions that ballet belongs to moneyed, white communities.* During COVID, and seemingly overnight, restrictions, rules, and requirements disappeared. Ballet was accessible online and survived as an art form, signifying perseverance, expression, and mutability. We view this as a much-needed redistribution of access and possibilities.

*Tickets to performances were expensive with the cheapest seats for the New York City Ballet, located in the uppermost balcony of the fourth ring, costing between $90 and $105 in 2018. Ballet classes, attire, and summer programs are increasingly expensive. A pair of pointe shoes costs approximately $85, and most pre-professional dancers go through three to four pairs in a month without performances (Zoe, "The Price-tags of Pointe Work," *Medium*, November 11, 2019, https://medium.com/@info_70178/the-price-tags-of-pointe-work-a0668b3b332c).

Taking a cue from Saidiya Hartman and her call for "the radical divestment in the project of whiteness, and a redistribution of wealth and resources,"[51] we continually bring attention to white supremacy in ballet pedagogies. Our research emphasizes dismantling white supremacy from ballet teaching as a path toward reconfiguring value systems that have become entwined with ballet. It is important to differentiate our strategy from those of neoliberal inclusion that attempt to make ballet classes inclusive or that promote teachers who self-identify as progressive, but do not address the presumed superiority or commodification of ballet.* As a result, ballet remains in a dominant or centered position among dance forms, and its cultural capital continues to accrue. In contrast, we interrogate how we can teach ballet as one of many valuable approaches to dancing and as an art form that continually evolves and is influenced by multiple communities. Ultimately, we advocate for exposing and explaining how racism—both historic and current—impacts us all in different ways and at different scales.

As we disentangle our pedagogies from white supremacy culture, we think about and return to these ten reminders that ground our teaching in anti-racist practices:

- Ballet is a movement system that organizes our bodies in particular ways.
- As such, the aesthetics of this movement system have no inherent superiority over any other aesthetics.
- There are historical and institutional approaches to teaching ballet that are racist and sexist, just as any dance teaching can be entwined with systemic exclusions. Teachers and administrators continue to make decisions that encourage and endorse racism and sexism.
- Canonical ballets often perpetuate heteropatriarchy, sexism, and racism, and these ballets need to be contextualized.
- There are abusive teaching practices associated with ballet; they are not essential to the form, and they do not need to continue.
- Disentangling ballet pedagogy and white supremacy means looking at the gatekeepers who continue to prevent dancers and choreographers of color from being supported and elevated.
- Teachers need to bring care, analysis, and intentional action in order to foster leadership skills within ballet students.
- Teaching ballet can be supportive, nurturing, fulfilling, and anti-racist.

*We thank Reviewer 1 for this vital insight.

- Companies like Ballet 22, Ballez, and Complexions, alongside increasing awareness of gender-fluid dancers, show the fallacy of gender binaries and the irrelevance of gendered vocabularies and steps.
- Ballet history books and courses need to include historical and current influences on ballet—from the underrecognized and under-researched ties to African diasporic, Islamic, and Indigenous American cultures to the numerous dancers of color who continue to shape ballet today. Ballet courses should debunk the assumption that dancers of color are rare or out of place in ballet settings.

Conclusion

As we discussed and analyzed ballet pedagogies during COVID-19, we noticed commonalities between the hierarchies of universities and professional ballet settings. The damaging impacts of paternalism, individualism, and perfectionism that students experience are also faced by educators and leaders who work to dismantle white supremacy in predominantly white institutions. The ways that administrators treat and evaluate faculty who question racialized norms mirrors the (mis)treatment of BIPOC students in ballet studios. The institutional hierarchies of ballet companies and universities tend to punish people who introduce perspectives that are deemed challenging by (predominantly white male) leaders. The tendency of teachers and faculty chairs to equate agreement and obedience with being "good" and disagreement as being "bad" hinders the vitality of people, classes, and departments. Philosopher Kate Manne analyzes this dynamic as the inability of men to tolerate even the possibility of a challenge, which requires men making a woman who poses a challenge into a "bad" person for disagreeing and a "good" person for believing him.[52] This creates an agent who will not and cannot challenge him.

Inspired by research into leadership models that are more conducive to anti-racist environments and practices, we advocate for a different posture: one that is committed to constructing richly diverse and non-vertical leadership teams, rather than relying on tokenism or celebrating symbolic statements of a commitment to diversity. The eradication of white supremacy cannot be accomplished by a mass email or website posting. It requires leadership teams with disrupters, dissenting perspectives, stamina, and everyday investment in uprooting oppression and violence. Natalie Odom Pough explains, "White supremacy and racism are so deeply embedded in our education system that they will not be eradicated until everyone who wants to see change is ready to accept responsibility for enacting it."[53] As we worked on the final drafts of this article, Jackson was participating in a graduate workers strike at Columbia University, the largest active strike in

the United States at the time, focused on dismantling unfair labor practices.[54] Jackson perceived resonances between the strike and our research, as both strive to be inclusive and distributive within hierarchical and dehumanizing settings. As the workers were threatened with replacement if they continued striking, Jackson noted the lack of concern or support from Columbia's lawyers and administration, observing how workers were treated as disposable in much the same way that ballet students have been treated as subservient and expendable.

Advocating for the inextricable links between pedagogies, cultures, institutions, and people, we draw inspiration from Ladson-Billings's statement, "Culturally relevant pedagogues are those who challenge the construction of knowledge that rarely gives students access to knowledge and information about how we make decisions about what counts as valuable."[55] We savor this collaborative research as an avenue to develop teaching methods that are inclusive, dialogic, and emergent; that is, they can evolve to meet the needs of the students we teach. As we reflect on our interventions during COVID-19, we make increased conversation and collaboration among educators a priority, which includes sharing ideas, syllabi, and resources. We attend to disproportionate access among our students to spaces for dancing and working, maintaining heightened awareness for the contexts that inform how students show up in our classrooms. In disentangling ballet from white supremacy, we incorporate holistic check-ins, reimagine feedback, emphasize sensation and experience alongside appearance, invite guest teachers, and use our platforms to introduce students to other artists and teachers who are working to challenge ballet norms. We not only seek to develop students' proficiency with ballet technique but also to frame the technique as a path to knowledge, expression, and inquiry. More than the execution of steps or movement phrases, we believe ballet is valuable because it helps us to create connections to self, space, and others and to nurture joy.

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