

Quare Dance: Fashioning a Black, Queer, Fem(me)inist Aesthetic in Ballet

by

Alyah Baker

Dance Program  
Duke University

Date: 3/15/2021

Approved:

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Andrea Woods Valdés  
Supervisor

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Stefanie Batten Bland

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Richard Powell

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Michael Kliën

Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Fine Arts in the Dance Program  
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ABSTRACT

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## Abstract

What can an intersectional lens that considers race, gender, and sexuality offer ballet in the 21st century? Historically, Black and Queer stories have been relegated to the margins of ballet history in service of Eurocentric, heteronormative ideals. This creative and written project investigates the ways Black Queer Ballerinas disrupt dominant discourses on dance and identity by moving against, through, and around oppressive structures. The purpose of this exploration is two-fold: 1) to examine the intersections of race, gender, sexuality, and ballet, with a particular focus on the stories of Black Queer Women and Femmes, and 2) to collaborate with the aforementioned artists on a performance installation that explores the embodiment of a Black Queer Fem(me)inist aesthetic through movement and material artifacts.

Grounded in the present moment and framed by a close reading of Black and Queer presence in the archive, *Quare Dance* documents how Kiara Felder, Audrey Malek, Cortney Taylor Key, and Alyah Baker imagine and enact new possibilities for ballet's future—possibilities that have both aesthetic and pedagogical implications. Employing an interdisciplinary lens and mixed methods approach that centers dance and material culture, this project situates these performances of Black Queer Fem(me)inity in relationship to Black feminist studies, Queer theory, dance studies, and performance theory. I argue that Black Queer Ballerinas trouble dominant discourses

embodying an important, yet previously overlooked counter-narrative for what ballet  
and the ballerina is and can be.

## **Dedication**

For Flora and Bob.

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## **Acknowledgements**

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# 1. Quare Dance: An Introduction

Black. Queer. Fem(me)inine.<sup>1</sup> Ballerina. *Quare Dance: Fashioning a Queer Black Fem(me)inist Aesthetic in Ballet* considers the particular intersections of race, gender, sexuality, and performance that coalesce when the ballerina is also Black and Queer. Ballerina is a title frequently used to refer to female ballet dancers at large, but more specifically denotes an idealized female body that is marked cisgender, heterosexual, thin, and white.<sup>2</sup> Decentering the hegemonic eurocentrism of ballet, this project instead focuses on the ways contemporary artists imagine and embody new possibilities for what ballet is and could be. Employing an interdisciplinary lens and mixed methods approach that centers dance and material culture, *Quare Dance* explores how Cortney Taylor Key, Audrey Malek, Kiara Felder, and I (re)define ballerina through the performance of Black Queer Fem(me)ininity. The purpose of this exploration is two-fold: 1) to examine the intersections of race, gender, sexuality, and ballet, with a particular focus on the stories of Black Queer Women and Femmes, and 2) to collaborate with the aforementioned artists on a performance and installation that explores the

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<sup>1</sup> Inspired by Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley's *Ezili's Mirrors* I use fem(me)ininity to highlight Femme as Queer identity and the behaviors associated with a constructed gender identity rather than a biologically assigned sex. Feminine roles in ballet are generally performed by cis-gender women, although this is not always the case.

<sup>2</sup> Hill, Sandford & Enright, 'It has really amazed me what my body can now do': boundary work and the construction of a body-positive dance community. See also Fisher "Ballet and Whiteness: Will Ballet Forever Be the Kingdom of the Pale" (2016)

embodiment of a Queer Black Fem(me)inist aesthetic through movement and material artifacts.

It is important to note that all women do not identify as Femmes but engage with the performance of femininity to varying degrees. For the purpose of this research, Femme is mobilized as a Queer identity that can apply to any and all genders. Queer, in this context, is being deployed in multiple ways. First and foremost, I use the term to represent a broad spectrum of sexual and gender orientations that sit outside of cisgender, heteronormative frameworks. The material reality of Queer people is central to this undertaking. I also mobilize queer as a theoretical framework through which to analyze positionalities or acts that resist normative sociality. Quare, as coined by E. Patrick Johnson in 2001, is a variant of Queer referencing one for whom sexual and gender identities always intersect with racial subjectivity. The artists engaged in this exploration identify with Femme, Queer, and Quare to varying degrees.

I embarked on this journey motivated by a desire to elucidate the lives of Black, Queer Ballerinas, past and present, and expand the archive of this presence in ballet. To do so my collaborators and I employed a mixed-methods approach that draws from a variety of artistic and scholarly traditions and engages multiple embodied, theoretical, and aesthetic frameworks. Black feminist theory, Queer and gender theory, dance studies and performance theory all played a role in this process. In order to foreground the lived (and danced) experiences of Black, Queer Ballerinas, the collaborating artists

and I investigated our personal cosmologies through movement, conversation, storytelling, and journaling. We explored the environments, tools, materials, and relationships--familial and chosen, that shape our identities. Together we assumed the role of dramaturg in our performance of identity. Our dance of Black, Queer, Fem(me)inity, in alignment with the scholarship of José Esteban Muñoz, reflects the capacity for performance to “dream and enact new and better pleasures, other ways of being in the world, and ultimately new worlds”.<sup>3</sup> *Quare Dance* moves towards a new reality for ballet, the ballerina, and beyond.

### **1.1 Defining Ballet**

So, what exactly is Ballet? Before diving more fully into the particulars of this research it seems wise to pause and parse through some of the various meanings. The goal of this extended meditation is to establish a framework through which to understand ballet and to situate *Quare Dance* within this context. Like many forms, ballet is not as fixed or stable as it may appear on the surface. How it is defined can vary depending on who is doing the defining. Much of my understanding of ballet is derived from thirty years of training and performing in the US context and what follows reflects

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<sup>3</sup> Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: the Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York university press., n.d.)

that positionality. While some assert that ballet is an insular and closed dance form,<sup>4</sup> I propose that it has the potential to be more porous and capacious than it may seem. In the simplest terms, ballet means to dance. The French term we know today has roots in the Latin “ballare” and Italian “balletto.”

But all dance is not considered ballet. Ballet more specifically denotes a codified and highly specialized way of moving that carries with it a particular language, set of positions, aesthetics, values, and logics.<sup>5</sup> These logics govern how bodies that do ballet move through space, and in many circumstances, what bodies are allowed to do the moving. Even those with limited knowledge of the dance form may be familiar with some of ballet’s distinguishing characteristics like turn out, where the legs and feet rotate outwards from the hip; frequent use of pointe work, allowing performers to dance on the tips of their toes; and the iconic tutu, to name a few.

Classical ballet technique privileges lines, symmetry; an upright, lifted carriage of the body; intricate and virtuosic steps, all performed with a sense of weightlessness and ease. The finely honed body and skill of the dancer is ballet’s primary tool.

Generally, the requisite positions, steps, and aesthetics are learned in a dance studio in

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<sup>4</sup> Cynthia J Novack. “Ballet, Gender and Cultural Power.” *Dance, Gender and Culture*, 1993, 34–48. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-349-23842-2\\_3](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-349-23842-2_3).

<sup>5</sup> Geraldine Morris. “Problems with Ballet: Steps, Style and Training.” *Research in Dance Education* 4, no. 1 (2003): 17–30. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14647890308308>.

front of a mirror over the course of many years. Performers of all levels display their technique in theaters around the world. Ballet performances can express stories, ideas, emotions or be plotless. In the 21st century, Ballet is performed to a wide variety of music, but instrumentals without lyrics and classical music are still the most common. Like many facets of the world, where and how ballet is practiced and how audiences engage with the form has shifted greatly due to the Coronavirus pandemic that continues to re-choreograph every aspect of life at this moment.

Ballet also has its own politics. It is widely acknowledged that ballet has historically been aligned with, maintained, and disseminated values that privilege a Eurocentric and elitist worldview.<sup>6</sup> I do not believe, like some scholars<sup>7</sup>, that movements done in ballet are inherently oppressive. I may also be biased. For three decades I have been captivated by the exacting and challenging nature of ballet. Training my body to move in this specific way has been a longtime source of joy, even when the social and cultural environment was less than welcoming. I've always felt most myself when I was dancing. Thomas DeFrantz proposes that “[b]allet technique, in and of itself, is not racist, but the people who teach it, as well as its company managers, artistic directors,

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<sup>6</sup> Novack. “Ballet, Gender and Cultural Power.” p

<sup>7</sup> Rebecca Chaleff. “Dance of Dance of the Undead: The Wilis’ Imperial Legacy.” *Futures of Dance Studies*, 2020, 415–30. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvvh86kr.33>.

patrons, critics, and choreographers live in a racist society and succumb to its vicissitudes.”<sup>8</sup> I am inclined to agree.

Following the work of Joann Kealiinohomoku, some view Ballet as an ethnic dance form that has passed itself off as “universal” in the same vein as the imperial and colonial powers that helped disseminate the form around the world.<sup>9</sup> Brenda Dixon Gottschild reminds us that in the American context there is also “the hidden legacy, the black text in Balanchine’s Americanization of ballet... throughout his career he introduced to the ballet canon Africanist aesthetic principles as well as Africanist-based steps from the social, modern, and so-called jazz dance vocabularies.”<sup>10</sup> In my opinion, ballet’s “hidden legacy” and the Africanist impulses that radically changed the form during the 20th century, birthing neo-classical and contemporary ballet, remain mostly obscured in dominant discourse. Fortunately, emerging scholarship seeks to trace ballet’s North and West African roots as far back as the 8th century.<sup>11</sup> It’s notable that acclaimed contemporary ballet choreographer Alonzo King has been saying this in

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<sup>8</sup> Thomas DeFrantz. *Dancing Revelations: Alvin Ailey’s Embodiment of African American Culture*. Oxford [U.K.]: Oxford University Press, 2004. <https://hdl-handle-net.proxy.lib.duke.edu/2027/heb.05770>. EPUB.

<sup>9</sup> Joann Kealiinohomoku. "An anthropologist looks at ballet as a form of ethnic dance." *Impulse* 20 (1970): 24-33.

<sup>10</sup> Brenda Dixon Gottschild. *Digging the Africanist Presence in American Performance: Dance and Other Contexts*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1996. p. 60.

<sup>11</sup> Jehbreal Jackson. *Interrogating Histories: A Conversation About Africanist Roots of Ballet*. 2021. <https://www.jehbrealjackson.com/publications>.

interviews for years.<sup>12</sup> Even still, popular perception of ballet remains most closely associated with canonical and widely performed works including *Nutcracker*, *Giselle*, *Sleeping Beauty*, and *Swan Lake*.

Ballet, perpetually influenced by a variety of cultural and social factors, has evolved greatly since it was codified in the courts of Louis the 14th.<sup>13</sup> Prevailing aesthetics, technical demands, and choreographic interest have shifted with each generation. I would argue that many of the ballets from the late 20<sup>th</sup> century and a majority of works produced today reflect a hybrid movement sensibility. By this I mean, the classical iconography is being reimagined as dancers and choreographers routinely borrow from and blend with other movement traditions. Furthermore, professional ballet dancers, once dissuaded from learning other dance styles, must now be well versed in a variety of dance techniques and approaches.<sup>14</sup>

What's most exciting about ballet in the 21st century is that dancers are leading the charge to disrupt archaic practices in favor of something decidedly more diverse, equitable, accessible, and democratic. While we continue to observe the ways ballet

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<sup>12</sup> Penelope Ford. "Lines of Thought." *Fjord Review*, December 26, 2019. <https://fjordreview.com/alonzo-king-lines-ballet-education/>.

<sup>13</sup> Jennifer Homans, *Apollo's Angels: a History of Ballet* (London: Granta, 2011).

<sup>14</sup> Thorne, Casey L. "Practicing Choice: Progressive Pedagogy in Contemporary Ballet Training." Order No. 10822200, Mills College, 2018. <https://login.proxy.lib.duke.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/dissertations-theses/practicing-choice-progressive-pedagogy/docview/2054014367/se-2?accountid=10598>.

training shapes dancers, I also believe we must pay equal attention to how ballet is being transformed by the practitioners and spectators who engage with the art. It is from this point that *Quare Dance* moves forward.

Offering a critique of ballet's traditions and dominant histories, the written portion of this project reveals the hidden legacies of Black Queer women within the form. Building on these legacies, the creative process and resulting multi-media installation creates a virtual and physical space for contemporary artists to bring all the facets of our identity to bear on our chosen art form. What does making these perspectives visible have to offer ballet? What does a creative process based in intersectional thinking have to offer us?

To clarify, *Quare Dance* is not concerned with proving that Black Queer Ballerinas can assimilate into a dominant ballet narrative or aesthetic. That has already been proven by countless dancers and scholars.<sup>15</sup> Rather this project seeks to expose the Black Queer presences and resonances already woven into the fabric of ballet and harness this information to open a path for the future of ballet practice and performance.

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<sup>15</sup> See Gottschild 2008, Brown 2018, Lipton 2020

## **1.2 Research Question**

Through a multifaceted methodological approach that includes dancing, journaling, historical analysis, creative collaboration, and ample imagination, *Quare Dance* investigates the following questions: What are the narratives of Black Queer Ballerinas past and present? What is the relationship between identity and ballet for these dancers? What practices, tools, and materials help to fashion their Black Queer Fem(me)inity? How has/does the embodiment and performance of a Black Queer Fem(me)inist aesthetic help enact and envision future possibilities for ballet? While I believe this project could have relevance for a broad audience concerned with diversity and representation in dance at large, I am primarily interested in how these dancers can be understood as “both mirrors and maps”<sup>16</sup> of Black Queer presence in ballet.

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<sup>16</sup>Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley Ezili's Mirrors

## 2. Hidden Histories

Although the existing historical genealogy of ballet and the omission of Black dancers at large is not the primary focus of this research, situating my project in relation to these histories is important for this undertaking. Historically Black, Queer, and Fem(me)inine presences and voices have been invisibilized in broader society.<sup>17</sup> Racial omission and heterocentric norms contribute to this erasure in ballet. In the introduction to *A Queer History of Ballet*, Peter Stoneley writes,

And as with other traditions, this one is a code that effects certain exclusions. A 'queer history' may refer equally to men and women, for instance, but this is for the most part a male tradition. Where women feature, they are more the means to male expression than subjects in their own right. Where ballet hints at lesbian behavior, this should, in most cases, be seen as 'heteroscopic sapphism', as displays that were calculated to stimulate the imaginations of heterosexual men. 'Queer' might also refer equally to people of different races and classes, but ballet has treated people very differently according to their race and class. The queer tradition in ballet has had its defining or constitutive prejudices.<sup>18</sup>

Black cisgender women and Femmes also experience erasure within queer communities.

In *Ezili's Mirrors: Imagining Black Queer Genders*, Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley notes that

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<sup>17</sup> Omise'eke Natasha, *Tinsley's Ezili's Mirrors*, chapter 1.

<sup>18</sup> Peter Stoneley, *A Queer History of the Ballet* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2010), p. 4.

“Black queer women’s exclusion from femininity is doubled, as Black lesbians are always already assumed butch by virtue of their race and sexuality.”<sup>19</sup> Black Queer Ballerinas trouble dominant discourses on the interplay of race, gender, sexuality, and ballet, embodying an important, yet previously overlooked counternarrative.

## **2.1 White Ballets, Black Swans**

“Could I be a ballet dancer and be lesbian?” In June of 2019, Kiara Felder, a Black ballerina, and member of Les Grands Ballet Canadiens, posed this question in an interview with Dance Magazine.<sup>20</sup> Ballet, the ballerina, and the Black Queer feminine subject is a precarious fit. In the mainstream consciousness, ballet is still closely associated with ideas that came into being in nineteenth century France. During this period, deemed the Romantic Era, the ballerina rose to prominence due to the advent of pointe shoes that allowed female dancers to rise momentarily to the tips of their toes, giving the impression of weightlessness. With the invention of pointework, female dancers were cast as ethereal, elusive fairies or spirits that captivated men, establishing a set of gender dynamics that still exist in ballet today. Influential ballets of the Romantic Era routinely included entire acts, called “ballet-blanc” or white ballets, where the prima

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<sup>19</sup> Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley *Ezili's Mirrors*, p. 32

<sup>20</sup> Avichai Scher, “Pride & Dance: Why Our Field Can Be Both a Haven and a Challenge for LGBTQ Artists,” Dance Magazine (Dance Magazine, March 16, 2020), <https://www.dancemagazine.com/lgbtq-dancers-2638993174.html?rebellitem=1#rebellitem1>

ballerina and flanking corps de ballet donned long white tutus constructed of ankle-length layers of white tulle to transform into the wilis, fairies, and spirits conceived in men's imagination. Some of the most famous Romantic Era white ballets, like *Giselle*, *La Sylphide*, and *Les Sylphides*, are still regularly performed today. Towards the end of the nineteenth century, ballet transitioned into the Classical Era, characterized by increasingly dynamic movement and intricate steps. As the choreography grew more complex, tutus were shortened to better reveal the ballerinas' legs and feet. Although classical ballets are aesthetically different from the Romantic works, ballets like *La Bayadere*, *Sleeping Beauty*, and *Swan Lake* only amplified the otherworldly ideal of the white ballets. Romantic and Classical Era ballet elevated the status of the ballerina, artistically and socially, and, in the process, solidified a new feminine archetype: supernatural, delicate, meant to be rescued and possessed by men, and closely associated with white, in both color and race.

Although understandings of race have evolved since the nineteenth century, the Eurocentric origins of ballet are deeply entangled with the form's aesthetic values. Whiteness, and its association with purity and transcendence, were privileged in the Romantic era and deeply tied to the construction of femininity.<sup>21</sup> In texts from the

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<sup>21</sup> Fisher, "Ballet and Whiteness" p.1

nineteenth century, the wilis of *Giselle*, young virgins who died before marriage, are described as “white as snow” with faces that resembled an “oval of alabaster.”<sup>22</sup> Like other art forms, ballet is a product of the cultures in which it was developed. It is then, perhaps, unsurprising that a dance style “developed significantly in Italy, France, Denmark, and Russia, all regions where pale skinned people predominated” would have a history that privileges whiteness.<sup>23</sup>

Today, as other fields and art forms have become more racially integrated, ballet noticeably lags behind. This lag was not always self-evident. Contemporary scholars, like Theresa Ruth Howard and Dr. Adesola Akinleye, document that Black folks have consistently practiced and contributed to ballet as the art form was gaining its footing in America in the twentieth century. In cities like Chicago, Philadelphia, New York, Boston, Washington DC, and Los Angeles, Black dance communities had robust relationships with ballet as early as 1919.<sup>24</sup> By the time Arthur Mitchell founded Dance Theatre of Harlem, an all-Black company, in 1969, a handful of other Black or integrated companies had preceded it. Through the latter half of the twentieth century, Dance

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<sup>22</sup> Heinrich Heine and Theophile Gautier as quoted by Carrie Gaiser, “Caught Dancing: Hybridity, Stability, and Subversion in Dance Theatre of Harlem’s Creole *Giselle*,” *Theatre Journal* 58, no. 2 (2006): pp. 269-289, <https://doi.org/10.1353/tj.2006.0111>)

<sup>23</sup> Fisher, “Ballet and Whiteness”, p.588.

<sup>24</sup> Lauren Erin Brown, “‘As Long as They Have Talent’: Organizational Barriers to Black Ballet,” *Dance Chronicle* 41, no. 3 (February 2018): pp. 359-392, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01472526.2018.1518076>)

Theatre of Harlem (DTH) spawned generations of accomplished ballet dancers and did a lot to change perceptions of Blacks in ballet both nationally and internationally.

Mitchell's influence is still felt today through DTH and his many proteges who are now teachers and company directors in their own right. Still, the fact remains that outside of DTH and a handful of notable exceptions,<sup>25</sup> ballet companies are overwhelmingly white. Furthermore, the stories of the many barrier-breaking Black ballet dancers have been largely ignored until recently. Why does ballet remain, as Gottschild puts it, the “last bastion of white dance supremacy?”<sup>26</sup> Like the underlying racism that frames this question, the answer is complex. In my experience, multiple factors continue to contribute to the limited number of Black professional ballet dancers employed today, including a lack of visible role models, cultural barriers, hostile training environments, and claims of aesthetic preference. Of all of these factors, “aesthetic preference” may be the most overt and egregious reason for continued discrimination against Black dancers.

As an art concerned with the presentation of the physical form, ballet has perhaps overemphasized aesthetic preference when it comes to hiring and casting all dancers. To be hired or cast, dancers are expected to look the part. For Black ballerinas,

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<sup>25</sup> Notable exceptions include Collage Dance Company, Complexions Dance Company, Alonzo King Lines Ballet, Ballet Black, Joburg Ballet

<sup>26</sup> Gottschild, *Black Dancing Body* p 131

in particular,<sup>27</sup> this means that they can be extremely talented, hardworking, and even have the desired body shape for ballet,<sup>28</sup> but be denied opportunities due to their skin color. Darker skin stands in direct contrast to the white ideal of ballet's foundational years. When Black ballerinas are given an opportunity, colorism still seems to be at play with lighter dancers faring better than their darker-skinned counterparts. Throughout history, there are also instances of Black ballerinas being encouraged to "lighten up" to appear whiter.<sup>29</sup> In *The Black Dancing Body* Brenda Dixon Gottschild states, "[m]ore than the other contested sites in the Black dancing body, skin is the alpha and omega of racial difference. The darker the skin, the more likely will its inhabitant be excluded from white power and privilege, or even the chance to approximate it."<sup>30</sup> Directors and choreographers have attempted to defend these actions citing the need for a uniform look in ballet, but that argument is faulty at best and thinly veiled racism at worst. The corps de ballet is where a semblance of uniformity is most expected. The function of a cohesive corps de ballet is to frame the action of the lead or solo dancers. But cohesive doesn't equal identical. A closer look at the corps de ballet of most American ballet companies reveals a range of different bone structures, heights, and musculatures, even

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<sup>27</sup> Rhone, "Swan Lake Dreams"

<sup>28</sup> Gottschild, "Digging the Africanist Presence"

<sup>29</sup> Black Ballerina Documentary RSS 092 (Shirley Road Productions) accessed April 26, 2020, <https://blackballerinadocumentary.org/>.

<sup>30</sup> Gottschild, *Black Dancing Body*, p.190

amongst the white dancers. Black ballerinas seem particularly aware of this fact. "It's very rare that you're going to go somewhere and you're going to see 30 white girls in a row looking the same," said [former Black Ballerina Andrea] Long, whose small, naturally thin frame meets the strict ballet standards. "To me when they say uniform, that should be in the dancing and not so much the look."<sup>31</sup>

The traditional structure of ballet companies requires that most dancers learn the ropes in the corps de ballet before ascending to the rank of soloist or principal, where individuality is more celebrated. If they make it to these elevated ranks, dancers that are taller or shorter than average, those with different builds, and Black and other minority dancers no longer have to worry about fitting in with the corps, they can stand out. For this reason, soloist or principal ranks might be more accommodating to the ballerinas that are visibly different. If the uniformity of the corps de ballet is narrowly constructed to mean racially homogeneous, Black dancers are automatically at a disadvantage. The corps de ballet acts as a filter or barrier to entry, keeping hopeful Black ballerinas out.

Moreover, the litany of corporeal stereotypes directed at the Black dancing body goes beyond skin deep. Many of these stereotypes have roots in western beliefs and practices built to solidify the social, political, and cultural power of whites while

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<sup>31</sup> Andrea Long as quoted in Rhone, "Swan Lake Dream". Long trained with American Ballet Theater before beginning her professional career with New York City Ballet. She joined Dance Theatre of Harlem in 1998.

subjugating others. Again, Black women have been doubly impacted by the violent raced and gendered gaze projected onto their bodies. While the archetypal ballerina was constructed as feminine, pure, and white, a very different set of attributes was assigned to the bodies of Black women. For centuries Black women have been characterized as ignorant, impure, irrational, hypersexual, animalistic, angry, deviant, and inferior.<sup>32</sup> “Colonial expansion, enslavement, and ‘science’ all contributed to the ways in which the Black female body came to be regarded within visual and actual European culture.”<sup>33</sup> By Eurocentric standards, the Black female body is deemed unfeminine, and thus fails to achieve the ballerina archetype. Layering a Queer orientation onto the Black female body results in further slippage from the balletic norms. It is in the slip, in the break<sup>34</sup>, that *Quare Dance* takes root and performs a critique on the dominant paradigms that have shaped ballet. The Black Queer ballerinas represented in this project “use this dissonant condition to forge discursive as well as embodied insurgency”.<sup>35</sup> Employing a variety of strategies this exploration expresses and reflects counter-normative ballet culture, as well as alternative epistemologies on race, gender, and sexuality.

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<sup>32</sup>Kaila Adia Story, "Racing Sex- Sexing Race: The Invention of the Black Female Body", *Imagining the Black Female Body: Reconciling Image in Print and Visual Culture* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010))

<sup>33</sup> Story, "Racing Sex-Sexing Race", p.38.

<sup>34</sup> Fred Moten, *In the Break the Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003).

<sup>35</sup> Daphne Brooks. *Bodies in Dissent: Spectacular Performances of Race and Freedom, 1850-1910*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006.

## **2.2 Queer Resonances, aka Not So Straightforward**

A level of ambivalence underscores the relationship between Queerness and ballet. On the surface, ballet subscribes to a heteronormative world view where ballerinas and their princes live happily ever after in a fairytale world or in the afterlife. Below this facade, things are decidedly less straightforward. Mobilizing an expansive definition of Queerness that considers orientation as well as behaviors that challenge heteronormativity, one need not look far to uncover ballet's many Queer resonances.

In *A Queer History of Ballet*, Peter Stoneley charts the Queer presence, possibility, and potential in ballet over the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. He locates Queer potential in the construction of the theater as a space "that initiates and structures desire"<sup>36</sup> in the cloak of darkness where social norms might be transgressed. He also investigates how the aesthetic interests of ballet might give way to a Queer reading: the presentation of an idealized body that prances and deals in excess, illusion, and evanescence; the performative construction of gender that "is always intensely conscious of its own constructedness".<sup>37</sup> Furthermore, he points to specific Romantic and Classical Era ballets where a Queer subtext might be read. In *Giselle* and its predecessor, *Ballet of the Nuns*, the white acts which feature ghostly virgins and nuns, respectively, resist

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<sup>36</sup> Stoneley, *A Queer History of Ballet*, p. 8.

<sup>37</sup> Stoneley, *A Queer History of Ballet*, p. 12.

strictly heteronormative interpretation. In these acts, we encounter sapphic sisterhoods of unmarried women, that rise to dance in the moonlight leading unsuspecting men to their demise. Stoneley further connects the magical creatures and fairies of nineteenth century ballet to the more popular use of the fairy archetype in Queer circles throughout the twentieth century.<sup>38</sup>

Even before the Romantic Era, there is evidence of Queer gender performance in ballet. In court ballets of the Renaissance, male dancers routinely performed female roles en travesty.<sup>39</sup> During this period, it would have been immoral for women to be seen on stage. Roles changed dramatically in the nineteenth century. As the ballerina rose to prominence, male dancers fell out of favor, opening up an opportunity for skilled female dancers to perform male roles en travesty.<sup>40</sup> Aside from Les Ballets Trockadero de Monte Carlo, an all-male drag ballet company, instances of dancers in drag are less frequent today. In some versions of the story ballets *Sleeping Beauty* and *Cinderella*, the roles of wicked fairy godmother Carabosse and ugly stepsisters, respectively, are performed by men.

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<sup>38</sup> Stoneley, *Queer History of Ballet*, chapter. 2.

<sup>39</sup> Homans, *Apollo's Angels: a History of Ballet*. "en travesty" refers to a performer portraying a character of the opposite sex.

<sup>40</sup> Lynn Garafola, "The Travesty Dancer in Nineteenth-Century Ballet," *Dance Research Journal* 17, no. 2 (1985): <https://doi.org/10.2307/1478078>.

Stepping away from drag portrayals, companies like Complexions and the recently formed ballet22 are beginning to feature men dancing on pointe, previously the sole domain of the ballerina and the epitome of femininity. Individual male identified and male presenting dancers are also starting to embrace pointe work for a variety of reasons, in increasing numbers.<sup>41</sup> Rather than using pointe work for comedic purposes, a la Tockadero, or to meet the aesthetic needs of a role,<sup>42</sup> many of these dancers embrace pointe in an effort to intentionally blur and subvert normative gender roles.

ballet22, formed in 2020 during the Covid-19 pandemic has the explicit mission of “presenting works that break gender normative traditions”.<sup>43</sup> According to their website and social media outlets, ballet22 intends to fulfill this mission by promoting practices and repertory that provide “opportunities in the ballet field for mxn, transgender and non-binary artists to perform professionally ‘en pointe’.”<sup>44</sup> Thus far they have reworked or reimagined classics like *Romeo + Juliet*, White Swan pas de deux, and *Dying Swan* through a queer lens that centers men and male presenting dancers.<sup>45</sup> Aside from executive director Theresa Knudson and videographer Natasha Adorlee,

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<sup>41</sup> Helen Hope. “Why More and More Men Are Dancing on Pointe.” Dance Spirit. Dance Spirit, January 23, 2021. <https://www.dancespirit.com/men-on-pointe-2645203882.html>.

<sup>42</sup> For instance the role of Bottom the donkey, in Fredrick Ashton’s *The Dream*, utilizes pointe shoes to represent hooves

<sup>43</sup> Ballet22. Accessed February 20, 2021. <https://www.ballet22.com/>.

<sup>44</sup> Ballet22. <https://www.ballet22.com/>.

<sup>45</sup> ballet22 uses MXN to articulate a coalition of cis gender, trans men and nonbinary people

women and women presenting folks are currently absent from this articulation of queer ballet. Two of the company's ten dancers hired for the 2020-21 are Black.

By contrast, Complexions Contemporary Ballet, established by Dwight Rhoden and Desmond Richardson has offered a glimpse of what a racially diverse, gender inclusive (and expansive) ballet company can look like since their founding in 1994. Complexions works to “transcend” the boundaries of ballet by blending contemporary and classical movement vocabulary with gender performances, body types, and cultural references that sit outside of the traditional ballet framework. Several of the works in their repertoire have featured men and masculine presenting dancers on pointe, and women often perform the same powerful and extremely athletic choreography as their male counterparts.<sup>46</sup>

Increased visibility and opportunities for men en pointe is one important step towards representing a full spectrum of gender expressions in ballet. More commonly, men, regardless of sexual orientation, are presented as hypermasculine, strong, and athletic to counteract the perception of ballet as feminine and male dancers as inherently homosexual. The need to conform to dominant conceptions of gender is persistent and

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<sup>46</sup> Villareal, Alexandra. “It's Really Special': the Ballet Company Shaking up the World of Dance. Theguardian.com, February 19, 2020. <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2020/feb/19/dance-complexions-contemporary-ballet>.

pervasive even today. Complexions and ballet<sup>22</sup> help to expand our understanding of gender in relation to ballet, even if these efforts remain on the margins, as exceptions to the rule, and male centric. What to make of these advances for men in ballet without similar and parallel opportunities for women to explore non-normative gender expressions? One could argue that male dancers on pointe play into the stereotype of male dancers as effeminate and is thus more readily accepted. Another possibility is that the culture of misogyny and patriarchy that has long informed how ballet operates privileges men. While women may be dominant in numbers, the balance of power in ballet is largely skewed towards their male colleagues. We can look at the disproportionately low number of women choreographers and artistic directors as evidence of this phenomena. Even if male ballet dancers fail to meet hegemonic ideals of masculinity, their position of privilege within ballet may afford them more opportunities to deviate from expectations.<sup>47</sup>

Looking more closely at choreography there are a few contemporary dance makers who have attempted to reimagine, challenge, and subvert the normative view of gender and sexuality commonly reinforced in ballet. Recently, choreographers like Justin Peck and Lauren Lovette have experimented with gender-neutral casting and

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<sup>47</sup> Susan Gartrell. "Masculinities in Motion: Patriarchy in the Ballet World," 2020.

romantic same-sex duets at New York City Ballet<sup>48</sup> while Myles Thatcher has explored non-binary representation in his work at San Francisco Ballet.<sup>49</sup> It is important to note that Peck, Lovette, and Thatcher can all be considered ballet insiders by virtue of the positions they occupy within these major American companies. In my opinion, their work moves from the inside out to help reignite and shape conversations about how gender and sexuality are portrayed in neo- classical and contemporary balletic works.

By contrast, earlier choreographers have focused on the canonical works of the romantic and classical era in their efforts to challenge and rework balletic norms.<sup>50</sup> *Swan Lake* and *The Nutcracker* have been famously reconceived by Matthew Bourne and Mark Morris in 1995 and 1991, respectively, in ways that suggest homoerotic desire and subvert ideas of masculinity. Several other choreographers have re-envisioned the plot of *Giselle* to place it explicitly in conversation with queer and feminist theories. In *Reworking the Ballet: Counter-Narratives and Alternative Bodies*, Vida L. Midgelow compares five different versions of *Giselle* including Mats Ek's in 1983 and Michael

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<sup>48</sup> Gia Kourlas, "When Two Men Fall in Love on the Ballet Stage, and Why It Matters," *The New York Times* (The New York Times, October 10, 2017), <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/10/arts/dance/same-sex-duets-justin-peck-lauren-lovette-new-york-city-ballet.html?searchResultPosition=6>.

<sup>49</sup> Chris Bull, "San Francisco Ballet's Myles Thatcher Is on a Mission to Make Dance as Queer as the City," *GayCities Blog* (Queerty, March 4, 2019), <https://www.gaycities.com/outthere/40693/san-francisco-ballets-myles-thatcher-mission-make-dance-queer-city/>.

<sup>50</sup> Vida Midgelow, *Reworking the Ballet: Counter-Narratives and Alternative Bodies* (London: Routledge, 2007).

Keegan Dolan's in 2003. I would add the forthcoming *Giselle of Loneliness* from genderqueer, lesbian choreographer Katy Pyle to that list.

While all of these reworkings are very much in conversation with the original canonical ballets, they also demonstrate a queer and queered aesthetic that moves away from balletic norms. This aesthetic can be read in the modern, post-modern, contemporary, and social dance genres that inform the choreography and the costumes and settings that locate these pieces in a different temporal, physical, and psychological spaces than their classical and romantic era counterparts. As we engage with how these reworked ballets "reconfigure the body," and "evoke performative, plural, and fluid bodies, as opposed to a closed or universal body"<sup>51</sup> we must also contend with how they reinforce the primacy of the canon. Although these ballets open up queer potential, they all privilege a white, primarily cis-male worldview, with only partial exceptions, foreclosing Black, Femme possibilities in the process.

Looking beyond plotline and performance, ballet's most salient Queer presence may be located in the many Queer artists that have shaped the art form. The list of male dancers is quite extensive and includes famous performers like Nijinsky, Nureyev, and modern stars like James B Whiteside. The list includes choreographers like Jerome

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<sup>51</sup> Midgelow, *Reworking the Ballet* p6

Robbins and the aforementioned Matthew Bourne and Mark Morris; composers like Tchaikovsky; and company directors like the influential Serge Diaghilev. Diaghilev's Ballet Russes was responsible for the spread of ballet throughout Europe and America in the early twentieth century and was the training ground for many of the prominent dancers and choreographers throughout the century.<sup>52</sup> Some of the more prominent Black Queer ballet dancers and choreographers include Arthur Mitchell, Desmond Richardson, gender-fluid Harper Watters, and NYCB and ABT principal dancers Taylor Stanley and Calvin Royal III, to name a few. While the archive of Queer males that have contributed to the form continues to grow, stories of Queer female subjects are noticeably lacking. Addressing this gap, Jane Desmond asserts that the lack of attention is,

not only a mark of the come-lately status of dance scholarship, but a consequence of the "spectre" of homosexuality that has for so many years hung over the U.S. dance profession, painting dancing men as "effeminate;" as gays. Female performers, already being feminized through their bodily display, escape the label. The significant presence of gay men in dance, and in the art world generally, is both one of the reasons for this silence and its contradiction.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> "Ballets Russes," Zeitgeist Films, accessed April 29, 2020, <https://zeitgeistfilms.com/film/balletsrusses>)

<sup>53</sup> Jane C Desmond, "Engendering Dance: Feminist Inquiry and Dance Research" *Researching Dance Evolving Modes of Inquiry*, p. 320 (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2014).

Expanding on this observation, I contend that female performers, particularly in ballet, are expected to legibly perform an idealized version of femininity, to be hired and cast. For a significant portion of its existence, the ballet idiom has hinged on the successful perpetuation of this cisgender, heteronormative, white ideal. In many regards, it still does. Through performance the Black, Queer Ballerinas engaged in *Quare Dance* move to disrupt white, cis-het normativity and “employ [our] own bodies as canvasses of dissent in popular performance culture.”<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Brooks. *Bodies in Dissent*. p. 6.

### **3. Literature Review**

Over the late 20th and 21st centuries, the amount of scholarship that seriously considers the meaning of the dancing body has grown significantly. Scholars from various disciplines have made a concerted effort to demonstrate how critical theory can be enacted and produced through the body in motion. Germaine to this research, is scholarship that takes up race, gender, sexuality, and the various intersections of these identity categories in relationship to ballet.

#### **3.1 *She loves him, She loves him not***

In the vast body of literature that theorizes gender and sexuality in ballet, much attention has been paid to binary gender roles, heteronormative sexuality, and the patriarchal culture that ballet has historically upheld and reinforced. Given the highly gendered nature of ballet, feminist critiques and re-readings abound. Hanna, 1987, Adair 1992, Novack, 1993, Banes 1998, and Foster 1998 offer a few foundational works. These texts, and many others, demonstrate how we might begin to understand the cultural context, attitudes, and performances that shape the dominant understanding of ballet and how we might view the ruptures and resistances to strictly normative readings.

In my observations, the way sexuality is discussed in many dance texts is determined by which side of the gender binary subjects are perceived to inhabit. Men's sexuality is often explicitly referenced, while the discourse on women tends to carefully avoid sexuality or collapse womanhood and heterosexuality into co-constitutive

identities. When women's sexuality is explicitly discussed, it is often characterized in extreme and essentialist terms. The narrow set of categories women are afforded include overdetermined heterosexuality, asexual or desexualized existence, or mere surrogate for male desire as in the ballerina as phallus<sup>55</sup> or Prima Ballerina as embodiment of queer male imaginings.<sup>56</sup> Women in ballet are rarely portrayed as agentic sexual beings. Significant consideration of the role that racial identity may play in the way gender and sexuality are constructed and experienced in ballet is notably missing in much of this analysis.

On the flip side, when ballet is examined through a lens that considers race, sexual identity is rarely given significant attention. In the ballet literature that explicitly addresses Black subjectivity, much necessary work is done to amend the archive by documenting the existence and impact of Black dancers, choreographers, and pioneering dance companies. The significant barriers Black ballet dancers face, particularly Black women, have also been well documented.<sup>57</sup> Although this scholarship gives great insight into the particularities of being Black in ballet, authors rarely delve beneath the covers to explore the intimate layers of performers' identity.

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<sup>55</sup> Foster, Susan Leigh. "The Ballerina's Phallic Pointe." Essay. In *Corporealities: Dancing, Knowledge, Culture, and Power*, 1–24. London: Routledge, 1996.

<sup>56</sup> Stoneley. *A Queer History of the Ballet*.

<sup>57</sup> See Gottschild 1996, Rhone 2000, Fisher 2016, McElroy 2016

In the absence of literature that brings ballet in conversation with Blackness, queer sexuality, and fem(me)inine identity, this literature review will instead focus on the few texts that explicitly address queer, lesbian, and same gender loving women in concert dance, including ballet. Scholarship that addresses queerness as the material, yet fluid, lived conditions of specific bodies, rather than a purely theoretical framework, are of particular interest. Additionally, I will consider one closely related text that explores Black lesbian performance in the realm of modern dance.

### ***3.2 (In)Visible Women***

The overwhelming consensus in scholarship that addresses queer women and ballet is that this area of study is undertheorized. Additionally, lesbians, same-gender loving, and queer women face the additional hurdle of being rendered invisible by dominant discourses on dance and sexuality. In “Patterns of Dominance: Men, Women, and Homosexuality in Dance”, Judith Lynne Hanna investigates dance history to determine why women and homosexual men dominate the ranks of western concert dance. In alignment with other scholars, she notes that dance has long been considered women's work as one of few historically accessible and (somewhat) acceptable career options. She also notes that a dance career allows those that deviate from societal norms

to "deal with difference, including homosexuality, through the artistic medium".<sup>58</sup> While this article deals with women, male homosexuality, and ballet in detail, Hanna seems mostly uninterested in queer women as a salient or important group of study. In fact, she uses the two categories of "women" and "homosexuals" throughout the text, lumping all women regardless of sexuality into one group.

The occasional reference to lesbian or homosexual women in ballet is quickly dismissed. For instance, Hanna notes that, as early as the mid- 18th century, some ballerinas were rumored to be homosexual. At this time women also frequently performed gender-bending roles dressed as males "en travesty." In the passage that follows, she immediately negates this queer presence referencing the "bordello politics that governed theatre corridors,"<sup>59</sup> evoking the wealthy male patrons that paid young female dancers for sexual favors. Later in the chapter, Hanna states,

What about lesbians in dance? They were probably always present in dance, as in other fields. However, the literature on this subject is scant...Puritan men may have thought only males were capable of experiencing and acting on sexual attraction to their own sex; furthermore, lesbianism is often sexually arousing to heterosexual males.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Judith Lynne Hanna. "Patterns of Dominance: Men, Women, and Homosexuality in Dance." *The Drama Review: TDR*, vol. 31, no. 1, 1987, pp. 22–47. JSTOR, [www.jstor.org/stable/1145764](http://www.jstor.org/stable/1145764). Accessed 5 Mar. 2021.

<sup>59</sup> Hanna. "Patterns of Dominance" p26-27

<sup>60</sup> Hanna. "Patterns of Dominance" p35

In a departure from Hanna's scholarship, the *Quare Dance* project isn't satisfied with taking the history at face value, but instead re-reads the archive for performances that suggest the possibility of a queer lineage. Furthermore, we materialize queer/quareness in the present through performance.

Over a decade later, in *Dancing Desires: Choreographing Sexualities On And Off The Stage*, Jane Desmond and contributors, from a range of scholarly fields explore the historic "kinesthetics of sexuality"<sup>61</sup> in social and concert dance. Desmond echoes the familiar refrain that "neither dance scholarship nor work on gay and lesbian lives nor queer theory has seriously investigated these linkages in any sustained way".<sup>62</sup> For Desmond and her colleagues, the body is central to both dance and sexuality studies and thus the intersection is a ripe site for further investigation.

While women are well represented as authors in this text, Desmond notes "that few scholars took up the challenge of relating issues of non-heteronormativity to women"<sup>63</sup> even when encouraged to do so. In an extended reflection on why women dancing queerly, and queer women dancing remain nearly invisible Desmond offers a few possible explanations. Reasons given include the "unthinkability" of lesbianism,

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<sup>61</sup>Jane C Desmond. *Dancing Desires: Choreographing Sexualities on and off the Stage*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2001.

<sup>62</sup> Desmond. *Dancing Desires*, p. 7.

<sup>63</sup> Desmond. *Dancing Desires*, p. 17.

reminiscent of Hanna's earlier reference to the limited thinking of puritan men. The relative power and resources available to gay men as part of the dominant gender is another significant factor. Even when men fail to meet the hegemonic ideal, they are often still privileged over women.<sup>64</sup> Women in concert dance must also contend with a persistent heteronormative positioning structured by the pervasive male gaze. Desmond argues that "representations of lesbianism must work against or rework this feminization and thus the heteronormative pleasures of spectacle that posit a male viewing position and a female object".<sup>65</sup>

Importantly the possibility is raised that women may also choose or prefer to remain illegible as queer or lesbian artists for a variety of personal and professional reasons. In "Lesbian Lacunae: Invisible Spaces in Dance Education", Karen A. Mozingo extends and complicates this line of thought. She argues that "[i]t is time to move from discussion of absence to acknowledgment of the revolutionary potential suggested by the 'liminality' of lesbian dancers who exist and, in many cases, thrive 'on the fringe'".<sup>66</sup> Being out of the proverbial closet is not universally safe or desired by all. While Mozingo also recognizes the transformative power of visible lesbian role models, for

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<sup>64</sup>Gartell. "Masculinities in Motion."

<sup>65</sup> Desmond. *Dancing Desires*. p.18.

<sup>66</sup>Karen A Mozingo. "Lesbian Lacunae: Invisible Spaces in Dance Education." *Journal of Dance Education* 5, no. 2 (2005): <https://doi.org/10.1080/15290824.2005.10387286>. p.64.

dance students of all orientations, she asks us to rethink and question the idea of absence. Troubling the notion of lesbian “invisibility” she draws attention to the various tactics that some may employ to exist safely in their chosen field.

Still some women, like myself and the participants in the *Quare Dance* project, do not want to remain invisible or on the periphery. So, what options might such artists have to stage queerness? Desmond, referencing the scholarship of Petra Kuppers and Valerie Bringinshaw, offers a few strategies artists employ to unsettle heteronormativity. These include performance that embraces the grotesque, refuses feminine spectacle, disrupts the desiring subject/ desired object binary, and shifts focus to the realm of the private or spectral.<sup>67</sup>

Although Loie Fuller, is the sole lesbian in concert dance to receive significant attention in *Dancing Desires*, queer spectatorship receives somewhat more substantial treatment. In her essay “A Mistress Never a Master?” Jane Feuer speculates on the potential for lesbian erotics in ballet. Feuer’s vantage point is that of audience member rather than the performer, but is exciting, nonetheless. Referencing the canonical *Swan Lake*, she states “the lesbian reading of this ballet exists mainly in the resisting minds of individual audience members. We await the great feminist choreographer who will

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<sup>67</sup> Desmond. *Dancing Desires*.

realize this vision.”<sup>68</sup> In response, I offer that these readings against the grain also exist in the resisting minds and bodies of the queer dancers that continue to perform this and countless other classical and contemporary works. These dancers are poised to realize this and many other queer visions.

Turning back to potential strategies for staging lesbian / women’s same-sex desires in dance, Petra Kuppers, furthers her analysis in “Vanishing in Your Face: Embodiment and Representation in Lesbian Dance Performance”. Reading the work of UK choreographers: Emilyn Claid, Yael Flexer, and Kate Lawrence she argues for the effectiveness of disruption, the grotesque, evocation of private and the spectral as performance tactics. She notes the difficulty of embodying and representing a lesbian aesthetic in the confining space between essentialist stereotypes and invisibilizing norms, particularly in concert dance.<sup>69</sup> The already inscribed body as the site of meaning-making in dance complicates matters. Kuppers explains:

Within dance, we have a strong tradition of stable, clearly defined, never to be transgressed roles for ‘the female.’ Where she isn’t ‘just a modernist body,’ supposedly empty of gender, class, race or other signs, she carries the burden of representation, she becomes ‘woman.’ Airy, light, on tiptoes, swathed in cloudy gauze, flying up through strong, male arms: these are the

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<sup>68</sup> Jane Feuer. “A Mistress Never a Master?” Essay. In *Dancing Desires: Choreographing Sexualities on and off the Stage*, edited by Jane C. Desmond, 385–90. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin, 2001.

<sup>69</sup> Petra Kuppers. “Vanishing in Your Face.” *Journal of Lesbian Studies* 2, no. 2-3 (1998): 47–63. [https://doi.org/10.1300/j155v02n02\\_04](https://doi.org/10.1300/j155v02n02_04).

attributes of the romantic ballet dancer. In modern dance 'femininity' was allowed somewhat more scope though the reconnection with the earthy, the flower, the swaying, growing, maternal body-all images still firmly fixed in one version of heterosexual myth.<sup>70</sup>

So how then does one resist the naturalizing, universalizing force of dominant epistemologies? This question had multiple levels of relevance for all the participants in *Quare Dance* as we explored the intersections of our identity and our participation in ballet culture.

For Kuppers, lesbian performances could be read as successful when they demonstrate a break with formalist conventions and assert another possibility. Lesbian and women's same-sex desires become, at least momentarily, recognizable when the performers,

confound traditional audience expectations of romantic narratives, abstract spaces or formalist creations, through the constant 'tainting' with other discourses, be they social, cultural or personal. Something always stands in the way, complicates things, and makes the categories and conventions of stage work visible through its refusal to conform.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Kuppers. "Vanishing in Your Face. p.54

<sup>71</sup> Kuppers. "Vanishing in Your Face." p.55

Kupper's description of how artists might taint or complicate performance by using conventions against themselves or juxtaposing discordant elements feels quite relevant to this research and creative process.

While I generally find the scholarship put forward by Kuppers and Desmond to be a useful foundation, I'm also aware that they do not attend to the way racial difference has inscribed different meanings to different bodies. For *Quare Dance*, it is important to foreground how layers of identity complicate how performance is read and what strategies are available to be deployed. After reviewing this literature, some questions come to mind: To what extent is "grotesque" a viable and desired strategy or label for a Black body that has already been deemed as such? What does it look like for Black folks to reject spectacle when their mere presence, particularly in ballet, is already deemed spectacular? I wonder if ideas and terms that recall Black performance or queer theory would be more appropriate for this undertaking. Might concepts like productive excess, in the vein of José Esteban Muñoz<sup>72</sup>, or eccentric, rearticulated by Carla Peterson as "off-centeredness to suggest freedom of movement... and new possibility of difference conceived as empowering oddness"<sup>73</sup> be more apt. These articulations

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<sup>72</sup> José Esteban Muñoz. *Cruising Utopia: the Then and There of Queer Futurity*. New York: New York University Press, 2009.

<sup>73</sup> Carla Peterson. "Eccentric Bodies." Foreword. In *Recovering the Black Female Body: Self-Representations by African American Women*, edited by Michael Bennett and Vanessa D. Dickerson, ix-xvi. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2001.

position the Black Queer Fem(me)inine subject in a position of surplus, as something more than, rather than in a perpetual state of deficiency.

In stark contrast to the aforementioned literature *Refusals and Re-Creations: Imagining Utopia through Black Lesbian Affect in Modern Dance* by Shayla K. Robinson specifically considers Black Lesbian performance. Although Robinson's and my interest and approach differ in some regards, there is still significant overlap. The main differences lie in my focus on ballet and the ballerina and my intentional use of the expansive term Queer. On the other hand, Robinson eschews the "highly restrictive nature of traditional European art forms, which included classical ballet"<sup>74</sup> for what she characterizes as the dissident and resistive space of modern dance. In this space, she argues, and I concur that Black dancers have been able to stage "self-generated and self-actualized representations of Blackness"<sup>75</sup> that often implicitly or explicitly intersected with themes of gender, class, and sexuality. Robinson also intentionally mobilizes the gendered specificity of Black lesbian. She makes this move to avoid the potential universalizing or homogenizing effect of Queer as an umbrella term for non-normative genders and sexualities.

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<sup>74</sup> Shayla K. Robinson. "Refusals and Re-Creations: Imagining Utopia through Black Lesbian Affect in Modern Dance." 2018.

<sup>75</sup> Robinson. "Refusals and Re-Creations."

Differences in dance form and terminology aside, Robinson's text is especially relevant to *Quare Dance* because it focuses on Black femininity, non-normative sexualities, and performance. We are both concerned with what I refer to as a Black, Queer, Fem(me)inist presence and the potential of this presence to enact counter-hegemonic possibility in western concert dance. Our work is further connected by the use of José Esteban Muñoz's articulation of disidentification to theorize performances of Black, Queer, fem(me)ininity in white, heteronormative realms. In conversation with the work of scholars like Michel Pêcheux, Eve Sedgwick, and Judith Butler, Muñoz writes,

[d]isidentification is the third mode of dealing with dominant ideology, one that neither opts to assimilate within such a structure nor strictly opposes it; rather, disidentification is a strategy that works on and against dominant ideology. Instead of buckling under the pressures of dominant ideology (identification, assimilation) or attempting to break free of its inescapable sphere (counteridentification, utopianism), this 'working on and against' is a strategy that tries to transform a cultural logic from within, always laboring to enact permanent structural change while at the same time valuing the importance of local everyday struggles of resistance.<sup>76</sup>

As articulated by Muñoz, disidentification offers a specific framework for understanding queer of color identity formation that is valuable for both performers and spectators. A performer who deploys disidentificatory strategies actively participates in

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<sup>76</sup>Muñoz. *Disidentifications* 2015.p

disrupting and restructuring normative ontologies. For the spectator, disidentification provides a way to read performances against the grain, to recognize the ruptures and slippage that open up space for something new to be revealed. In many ways, this strategy overlaps and is in dialogue with ideas put forth by Kuppers and Desmond.

One strategy that Robinson offers not previously discussed concerns building community and care amongst Black Women as a practice of resisting heteronormativity and patriarchy. Community in this instance is not structured by essentialist ideas of race, gender, or sexuality. It is instead a flexible container where individuals with both parallel and different experiences can work together to form supportive and affirming bonds. This notion of community is disruptive because it is constructed with the needs and desires of Black women in mind rather than a dominant white male class. While not necessarily lesbian or queer in terms of sexuality, these communities are places where a lesbian or queer politic is at work. For *Quare Dance* disidentification and a community of care emerge as tools for manifesting and performing a Black, Queer, Fem(me)inist aesthetic. These tools hold space for the specificity of Black, queer of color and feminist ways of knowing and are thus are equally disruptive and generative. In the act of refusal we (re)create the space to move forward in new ways.

## 4. Moving Forward, Looking Back

The women, nonbinary, and transgender dancers that have gained recognition for pushing back against ballet's cis-het normativity are few and far between. These figures include previously mentioned Katy Pyle, choreographer and director of Ballez, a Queer ballet company; dancer Sydney Magruder Washington; choreographers Lauren Flower of Queer Women Dancers and Adriana Pierce of #QueertheBallet; Transgender ballerina Jay Ledford, formerly of the Kirov Academy of Ballet; and gender-fluid dancers Chase Johnsey and Ashton Edwards. Most of these figures garnered public attention within the last five years and in that time, some have decided to step away from dance.<sup>77</sup> Only recently have Black, Queer Ballerinas started to garner a modest amount of recognition. In my quest for *Quare Dance* collaborators, I was only able to locate four other women who, like me, openly claim this particular intersection of identities over the course of a multi-year search. This should in no way suggest that there are only a handful of Black Queer Ballerinas that exist or that my search for participants was exhaustive. To locate collaborators, I turned to close friends, colleagues, and the community of dancers to which I belong. I searched relevant articles, books, social media channels, and affinity groups to expand beyond my immediate network.

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<sup>77</sup> Sydney Magruder Washington has stepped away from ballet to pursue graduate studies. Jay Ledford has changed their name to Chloe and is currently attending college.

After several decades as a performer, I know or know of many Black dancers, many queer dancers, and many ballerinas, but finding multiple artists at the intersection of these three identities was challenging.

This challenge is probably the cumulative effect of several factors. As previously mentioned, there is the intentional exclusion of Black women from ballet and the role of ballerina that still persist today. There is also the issue of safety. Grappling with ballet's embrace of queer people, themes, and performance while simultaneously dying them, Stoneley notes:

If ballet granted a presence to people who were otherwise illegal and obscene, as noted, those same people have often—and out of necessity—resisted any overt, public acknowledgement of their role. As cultural historian, Wayne Koestenbaum, observes of the relationship between opera and homosexuality, 'the point was not to draw the connection... but to pass into operas into a safe silence'. In ballet, the tradition of 'discretion' has been prolonged into the present day. It is a tactic that has protected individual reputations, and enabled ballet to promote itself as worthy of mainstream interest and support.<sup>78</sup>

While attitudes towards non-normative sexualities and genders may be improving it is not always safe or desirable to be out publicly. Even in ballet companies that appear to be more accepting, some women admit they do not feel safe coming out at work for fear

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<sup>78</sup>Stoneley, *A Queer History of Ballet*, p. 2

of judgement, discrimination or differential treatment.<sup>79</sup> If the presence of queer men in ballet is considered ballet's open secret, the presence of queer women in ballet is still largely a closed and closeted matter.

In light of the raced and gendered norms that inform ballet, and the inevitable slippage of the Black Queer ballerina, the near invisibility of this presence is not surprising. Yet, Black Queer ballerinas have existed and still do. My collaborators and I know this because we exist. Furthermore we've read between the lines, heard the stories, and bared witness to others that have been forced or choose to keep their private lives from the public eye. Our collective presence stands as a testament to possibilities outside the norms of ballet. Through *Quare Dance* we begin to embody and map this Black, Queer reality.

Circling back to *Dancing Desires*, Jane Desmond, reflecting on queer possibilities and dance, asks, "[w]hat would dance history look like if we were to emphasize these issues, to 'make the tacit things explicit'? And what would gay/ lesbian history look like if we analyzed its embodied practices, if we made gay history dance?"<sup>80</sup> In what follows, I propose that through a close, re-reading of Black dance history we can see a lineage of Black Queer Fem(me)inity start to emerge. Specifically, I'll investigate how the

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<sup>79</sup> Lauren Warnecke. "For Queer Women in Ballet, There's a Profound Gap in Representation. These Dancers Hope to Change That." *Pointe*, 2021.

<sup>80</sup> Desmond. *Dancing Desires*. p14

idea of the Black Queer ballerina is implicitly or explicitly evoked and constructed through the lives and performances of Josephine Baker, Katherine Dunham, and Angela Bowen. To start, I consider the career of Josephine Baker and how she might lay the groundwork for Black Queer Femininity in American ballet.

#### **4.1 Josephine Baker**

Josephine Baker (1906-1975) is arguably one of the most (in)famous performers of the Jazz Era. In the afterlife, she has been conceptualized as a Queer Black icon that challenged notions of femininity<sup>81</sup> and is thus a fitting place to begin a conversation that engages the aforementioned identities and performance. Baker, who rose to prominence in Paris in 1925, broke onto the scene with her *Danse Sauvage* in La Revue Negre, which featured an entirely black cast. She is most well known for her finale routine that premiered a year later at La Folie du Jour featuring her electric moves and one suggestive banana skirt.<sup>82</sup> Much of the available discourse on Baker attempts to grapple with her complex and controversial performance persona and her relationship to prevalent western ideologies of the “Other.” On stage and in film, Baker willfully engaged the exotic/erotic and the noble savage tropes that exemplified the primitivist

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<sup>81</sup> Mae G Henderson and Charlene B Regester, eds., *The Josephine Baker Critical Reader: Selected Writings on the Entertainer and Activist*, p. 50 (Paw Prints, 2017).

<sup>82</sup> Henderson and Regester, *The Josephine Baker Critical Reader*

beliefs of the era, but did she challenge or perpetuate racist stereotypes? In the vein of Gottschild, I propose that she did both with skill and panache.<sup>83</sup> We can perhaps understand the way Baker worked within, between and through the social structures of the time to construct her identity as a form of disidentification<sup>84</sup> employed to survive. Mobility and reinvention characterized Baker's personal and professional life.<sup>85</sup> In addition to performer, she assumed the roles of activist, mother, and member of the French resistance during her 68 years, embodying a fluidity that defies a singular definition.

Deemed the "Black Venus,"<sup>86</sup> Baker's blackness and femininity captivated audiences and was readily apparent to spectators. Less apparent may be the Queer resonances in her Black femininity performed in intimate and public settings. Although married four times, the last of which was to openly gay musician Jo Bouillon, Baker's approach to love and family can be read as Queer. In defiance of social conventions, she left marriages that weren't working, had several female lovers, and was a single mother to her twelve adopted children. On stage she queered stereotypical black femininity by

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<sup>83</sup> Gottschild, *The Black Dancing Body*, p154-165.

<sup>84</sup> José Esteban Muñoz., *Disidentifications Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015).

<sup>85</sup> Jean-Claude Baker and Chris Chase, *Josephine: the Hungry Heart* (New York: Cooper Square Press, 2001).

<sup>86</sup> One of many names of Baker. This epithet was also used to describe Sarah Baartman, the South African Khoikhoi Woman who was brutally subjected to white objectification and experimentation in the early nineteenth century. See Gottschild, *The Black Dancing Body* p.148-154.

“bring[ing] attention to the constructedness of her performances in order to challenge audiences to think critically about their preconceived conceptions of race and gender.”<sup>87</sup> Her performances were also spectacles embodying the excess and over the top-ness closely associated with Queer performance. Through her full-bodied, movement, use of irony, humor, and intelligence, she manipulated the white gaze, to gesture towards other possibilities for black femininity.<sup>88</sup> In Baker, we are able to glimpse a Queer presence: a self-possessed, liberated Black Woman in motion.

The sheer magnitude of Baker’s legacy somewhat overshadows the direct impact of her dancing on concert dance at large. In addition to her cabaret and music hall productions, Baker trained in and performed ballet. A small archive of images and video clips show her poised en pointe, performing with Alberto Spadolini, and practicing ballet on the beach with danseur Serge Lifar. The impact that Baker and her dancing had on ballet is most recognizable through her relationship with George Balanchine.

Balanchine, one of the most influential choreographers of the twentieth century, was the architect of a uniquely American style of ballet.<sup>89</sup> The style popularized by

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<sup>87</sup> Joanna Dee Das, “Dance That ‘Suggested Nothing but Itself’: Josephine Baker and Abstraction,” *Arts* 9, no. 1 (2020): p. 23, <https://doi.org/10.3390/arts9010023>, p. 2

<sup>88</sup> Jennifer Sweeney-Risko, “Fashionable ‘Formation’: Reclaiming the Sartorial Politics of Josephine Baker,” *Australian Feminist Studies* 33, no. 98 (February 2018): pp. 498-514, <https://doi.org/10.1080/08164649.2019.1567251>

<sup>89</sup> Homans, *Apollo’s Angels*, p. 290-340, 448-539.

Balanchine is characterized by speed and attack, percussive rhythm, long lines, and extreme, off-center positions, executed with ease. Many of his ballets are abstract rather than narrative and they are all closely tied to the music. Although Balanchine is of Russian descent and a product of the classical imperial ballet tradition, his style is deemed American because of the clear influence of jazz rhythms and Black popular dances.<sup>90</sup> Balanchine further shaped how ballet looks by championing a new aesthetic for “the ballet body,” which is still dominant today. Before Balanchine, ballerinas were differently proportioned, longer torsos with shorter legs and a softer, round musculature. The Balanchine ballerina, by contrast, is often angular and athletic with “short torso, long arms, long legs, and a small head.”<sup>91</sup> With this new body type also came a shift in roles. Balanchine’s ballerina is rarely a mythical fairy or wilis, she is a woman.

Balanchine and Baker first crossed paths in Paris in the early 1930s; he was a talented choreographer with Diaghilev's Ballet Russes, and she was bonafide music hall star. During this time, he gave Baker private ballet lessons<sup>92</sup> and was most certainly inspired by her singular persona and artistry. The two would work together again in

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<sup>90</sup> Gottschild, *Digging the Africanist Presence*, p. 70-79.

<sup>91</sup> Arthur Mitchell as quoted by Gottschild. *Digging the Africanist Presence* p.65

<sup>92</sup> Sally Banes, *Writing Dancing in the Age of Postmodernism* (Hanover, N.E.: University Press of New England, 1994).

1936 when Baker returned to the United States to perform with the Ziegfeld Follies after ten years away from the country. Balanchine was the choreographer for the show. In addition to a dancer-choreographer relationship, the pair had a friendship, and Balanchine was said to have deep admiration for Baker.<sup>93</sup> Marian Smith, citing the scholarship of Beth Genné, expands our understanding of Baker and Balanchine's relationship and the formation of American ballet.

As the dance historian Beth Genné points out, Balanchine may have been inspired by Baker when he created the classicized jazz (or Africanist) steps for *Apollo* in Paris in 1928. These movements included hip thrust poses, high kicks, and one of Baker's specialties, the split in the air while being held by her partner. Indeed, Genné even posits that Balanchine had found in Josephine Baker his first American muse in a long line of long-legged, lithe female dancers.<sup>94</sup>

Through her presence and embodiment of ballerina, Baker, recast the archetype as a site of possibility for the Other and helps us begin to construct an archive of Queer Black femininity in ballet. Tracing the connecting between her and Balanchine, we see how a Queer Black aesthetic revolutionized the form and is key to our contemporary understanding of this dance style.

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<sup>93</sup> Banes, *Writing Dancing in the Age of Postmodernism*. P.58.

<sup>94</sup> Marian Smith, "Balanchine at the Metropolitan Opera," *Ballet Review*, p. 128, accessed April 28, 2020, [https://www.academia.edu/41134495/Balanchine\\_at\\_the\\_Metropolitan\\_Opera](https://www.academia.edu/41134495/Balanchine_at_the_Metropolitan_Opera)).

## **4.2 Katherine Dunham**

Similarly to Baker, Katherine Dunham (1909-2006) is another formidable Black woman that had a significant influence on the shape of concert dance in the 20th century and a notable working relationship with Balanchine. Dunham, even more so than Baker, trained in and utilized ballet as part of her signature dance praxis. Sometimes referred to as the “matriarch of black dance”<sup>95</sup> Dunham, was a dancer, anthropologist, choreographer, teacher, and activist whose work helped to shape and shift perceptions about Black dance.<sup>96</sup> Today she is probably most well-known for the significant impact she made on concert dance. Dunham was the first Black woman to develop a codified dance technique that fused the “flexibility, strength, and lifted qualities of ballet, the rootedness and complex rhythmic work of West African dance, and the flow and gravitational awareness of modern Dance.”<sup>97</sup>

Throughout her career, Dunham founded and led several dance troupes, the first of which, Ballet Negre, was formed in 1931. This short-lived company laid the foundation for Dunham’s future endeavors and the next generation of companies like Alvin Ailey and Dance Theatre of Harlem that would continue to revolutionize Black

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<sup>95</sup>Joanna Das. "Choreographing a new world: Katherine Dunham and the politics of dance." PhD diss., Columbia University, 2014.p2

<sup>96</sup>Das. "Choreographing a new world".

<sup>97</sup>Das. "Choreographing a new world, p 8.

dance. Dunham's dance troupes and schools, her fusion of African diasporic ritual performance with concert dance, and her enduring technique are important pieces of a legacy that is still felt today.<sup>98</sup>

Looking at Baker and Dunham together, there are clear thematic through lines that connect their legacies. They were both self-made, international performers, film stars, and outspoken activists that no doubt encountered "invidious stereotypes about the exoticized and eroticized black female dancing body."<sup>99</sup> Each woman married multiple times, participated in interracial partnerships, and grew their family through adoption. They stand as two salient examples of life lived otherwise; dynamic existences that exceeded the narrow and normative ideas of race and gender prevalent during the first half of the 20th century.

Yet, further comparison of their legacies reveals that each woman literally and figuratively moved in a distinct and singular way.<sup>100</sup> Although each artist had a relationship with Balanchine, Baker existed primarily as muse, while Dunham should be considered a colleague. Dunham and Balanchine's paths crossed in 1940 when they both worked on a production of *Cabin in the Sky*. After watching her perform, Balanchine

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<sup>98</sup> Das. "Choreographing a new world."

<sup>99</sup> Anthea Kraut. "Between Primitivism and Diaspora: The Dance Performances of Josephine Baker, Zora Neale Hurston, and Katherine Dunham." *Theatre Journal* 55, no. 3 (2003):.p.434

<sup>100</sup>Kraut. "Between Primitivism and Diaspora"

personally invited Dunham and her dancers to join the cast. While never given program credits, Dunham choreographed several dances in the show.<sup>101</sup>

Another factor that set Dunham apart from Baker was her commitment to scholarship and research to inform her art. Dunham's position as a scholar made her a sought-after commodity and afforded her a level of prestige and respect amongst her peers. John Perpener notes, "[t]he fact that a woman--especially a black woman-- who was invited to lecture at universities and anthropological societies, could at the same time present a sensuous, glamorous image on Broadway stage, and in Hollywood films sent writings into bits of journalistic ecstasy."<sup>102</sup>

From a performance standpoint, Baker and Dunham's strategies, aesthetic and intellectual interests, and cultural context varied greatly. While Baker is more closely associated with popular entertainment and vaudeville, Dunham's work is firmly situated in the parallel and often overlapping genres of Modern Dance and Negro Dance.<sup>103</sup> They are both part of an aesthetic continuum and movement tradition that draws heavily on African diasporic and Black vernacular performance. Yet, each artist deployed this tradition in unique ways. Baker relied on Black vernacular dances to

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<sup>101</sup>John O Perpener. "Katherine Dunham." Chapter 6. *In African-American Concert Dance: the Harlem Renaissance and Beyond*, 129–160. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2005. p145-146

<sup>102</sup> Perpener. "Katherine Dunham." Chapter 6. *In African-American Concert Dance: the Harlem Renaissance and Beyond*, 129–160. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2005. p129

<sup>103</sup> Susan Manning. "Modern dance, Negro dance and Katherine Dunham1." *Textual Practice* 15, no. 3 (2001): 487-505.

suggest a generalized African diasporic consciousness that was read as primitive and other against France's colonial backdrop. Dunham worked in an opposite manner to develop her elaborate productions and technique. Seeking to illuminate the connections and continuities of the middle passage and contextualize Black dance traditions, Dunham's art and research drew a clear cultural and aesthetic line between African, Caribbean, and Black vernacular dance traditions.<sup>104</sup>

Drawing on these Africanist traditions, Dunham's productions demonstrated a level of gender and sexual fluidity that can be read as queer. Of works like *Tropics* and *Le Jazz Hot*, Susan Manning notes, "it is equally clear that many spectators were drawn the eroticism of Dunham's performances... For other spectators, Dunham's dances presented legibly queer images."<sup>105</sup> Dunham performing the role of "Woman with the Cigar" is one of those salient queer images. This role showcases Dunham as a Madame Saras, the women in Caribbean marketplaces that supported other women referred to as "wives."<sup>106</sup> The cigar, Dunham's suggestive demeanor, and the juxtaposition of femininity was "clearly an allusion to a butch femme, [and] the image fused heteronormative with queer eroticism and both with the performance of diaspora."<sup>107</sup> In

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<sup>104</sup> Kraut. "Between Primitivism and Diaspora"

<sup>105</sup>Manning. "Modern dance, Negro dance" p 499

<sup>106</sup> Manning. "Modern dance, Negro dance" p 500

<sup>107</sup>Manning. "Modern dance, Negro dance" p 500

addition to the queer images, there were the actual queer people in Dunham's troupe.

My great, great uncle, Bob Curtis, was one of many dancers that experienced Dunham's company as one centre for gay life in Harlem during the 1940s and 1950s."<sup>108</sup>

Through her art, academic studies, and activism, Dunham constructed a life that resisted the normative pathways laid out for women. Her technique and repertoire exist as enduring examples of Black, Queer, feme(me)inist ethos and epistemology. It is incumbent on us to remember that "she worked hard, faced down her detractors, published her research, established a school, and toured the world with a large company of dancers. Accomplishing these things in the face of racism and sexism was a feat that doubly testifies to the seriousness of her endeavors."<sup>109</sup>

### **4.3 Angela Bowen**

Angela Bowen (1936-2018), born thirty years after Baker is another multifaceted Queer Black ballerina. Unlike Baker, she was not an international icon, although she performed throughout Europe during her career. As a lesser-known artist, there is decidedly less information available about Bowen's life. Much of what is known comes from the documentary film *The Passionate Pursuits of Angela Bowen*, released a few years

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108 George Chauncy referenced in Manning. "Modern dance, Negro dance" p 499

109 Perpener. "Katherine Dunham." Chapter 6. In *African-American Concert Dance: the Harlem Renaissance and Beyond*, 129-160. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2005. p130

after her death, newspaper articles, and interviews with friends and loved ones. Even with limited research available, it is important to include Bowen in this archive as it is being constructed. Her story is inspiring and relatable. What follows is an abbreviated biography that paints a picture of Bowen's life and highlights moments where public and private performance gestured toward Queer Black possibility.

Like Baker, Bowen's life was one of mobility and reinvention. She grew up in Boston with her mother and six siblings and started ballet at the age of fourteen to correct her posture. Ballet prizes youth and fourteen is typically considered old for a beginner, but Bowen showed promise, and her teacher, Elma Lewis, took an interest in her. Bowen excelled at The Elma Lewis School and, after a short while, began to teach and help run the studio.<sup>110</sup> This experience would prepare her to open her own studio in the future. For Bowen, dancing was "a matter of emerging and becoming and taking charge".<sup>111</sup> Kenneth Kamal Scott, a fellow dancer and frequent partner remembers,

Angie was our hero. She was the person we looked up to, was the best of all of us. Everybody should've seen [her] rendition of the Swan Queen... It was beautiful and because Angela was not a light skinned person that was very special to us. It was special to me.<sup>112</sup>

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110 "Angela Bowen," *Astraea Lesbian Foundation for Justice*, accessed April 29, 2020, <https://www.astraeafoundation.org/honorees/angela-bowen/>

111 Angela Bowen. Interview in *The Passionate Pursuits of Angela Bowen*, 2018

112 Kenneth Kamal Scott. Interview in *The Passionate Pursuits of Angela Bowen*, 2018

As she got older, Bowen began to audition for roles in New York, frequently accompanied by Scott. Together they went to audition after audition, sometimes multiple in a day, only to be rejected because they were black. Despite the racism that pervaded the Broadway auditions, Bowen was determined to be seen. In 1959 the pair were hired for their first gig, the European tour of *Jazz Train*, making the leap from students to professionals. *Jazz Train*, a musical revue “dedicated to the Negro People,”<sup>113</sup> introduced Bowen to Europe as *La Revue Negre* had done for Baker. Italian audiences greeted them with cheers of “La Bella Negra,” a stark contrast to the overt discrimination the cast faced in the U.S.<sup>114</sup> Although Bowen enjoyed the production, she left the tour after ten months because her budding interest in politics put her at odds with some of the other dancers on tour.<sup>115</sup>

Upon her return to Boston, Bowen married Ken Peters, a drummer from the Elma Lewis school who had proposed to her before she left for Europe. From an early age, she already knew she was Queer, but also felt that “it would be dangerous” to express these feelings.<sup>116</sup> After much convincing, she married Peters, and together they had three children and opened the Bowen Peters School of Dance in 1961. Bowen again

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113 “The Jazz Train - Musical Revue,” a musical revue, accessed April 29, 2020, [http://guidetomusicaltheatre.com/shows\\_j/jazztrain.html](http://guidetomusicaltheatre.com/shows_j/jazztrain.html))

114 Bowen. Interview in *The Passionate Pursuits of Angela Bowen*, 2018

115 Jennifer Abod, “The Passionate Pursuits of Angela Bowen,” Vimeo, April 27, 2020, <https://vimeo.com/ondemand/angelabowen?autoplay=1>)

116 Bowen. Interview in *The Passionate Pursuits of Angela Bowen*, 2018

excelled in this new role as studio owner and teacher. The couple deliberately established their school in the projects of New Haven to service the surrounding black community, training their students in a diverse range of dance styles. At its peak, over four hundred dancers were enrolled.<sup>117</sup> Yet, Bowen was not completely satisfied in her personal life. As her knowledge of feminism grew, so did her courage to come out. Inspired by the Black Feminist text *Sturdy Black Bridges* and a growing interest in the life and work of Audre Lorde, Bowen made the decision to drastically change her life.

I wanted a life of my own. I wanted to live among women who were political and who were lesbians. Who were all different kinds of things. Who were feminists and who had politics and some kind of sense of the world.<sup>118</sup>

Although she felt ready to leave her marriage, leaving the school “was the hardest decision” of Bowen’s life.<sup>119</sup>

Bowen came out in 1982 and quickly established a new home with her children and partner, Jennifer Abod, who would later become her wife. Over the next few years, she would grow into her new identity as a lesbian, revolutionary feminist, and activist. From this point on, Bowen’s passion was fighting for lesbian and feminist causes around the country. She would go on to speak at numerous universities, organizations, and on local and national radio and tv. “In the early 1980s and 90s, when there were few Black

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<sup>117</sup> Angela Bowen *From Artist to Activist: A New Haven Legend*, International Festival of Arts and Ideas, accessed April 29, 2020, <https://www.artidea.org/video-podcast/2112>)

<sup>118</sup> Angela Bowen. Interview in *The Passionate Pursuits of Angela Bowen*, 2018

<sup>119</sup> Angela Bowen. Interview in *The Passionate Pursuits of Angela Bowen*, 2018

feminists, let alone lesbians speaking out”<sup>120</sup> Bowen was a visible representation of what a Black feminist and lesbian could be. She also took the opportunity to return to college, completing a B.A. and Ph.D. in Women’s Studies at Clark Atlanta. Upon completion of her Ph.D. Bowen would return to teaching, becoming the “first Black woman and out lesbian hired in the 30-year history of the Women’s Studies Department at Cal State Long Beach”.<sup>121</sup>

Bowen met the restrictive racial and gender norms of her generation with the same boldness and confidence she instilled in her dance and academic students. A Queer Black feminist ethos can be read not only in Bowen’s orientation, but in her actions. This is evident in the way she confidently pursued her passions- dance, activism, and academia in the face of racism, sexism, and homophobia; in the way that she was unafraid to leave situations that didn’t suit her; and in her refashioning of family and motherhood.

Throughout *The Passionate Pursuits of Angela Bowen*, both Bowen and her partner remark on “how easily [Bowen could] move from one thing to another.”<sup>122</sup> This skill for flexibility and adaptability, honed in her days as a dancer, was a central theme in

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<sup>120</sup> Abod, Jennifer. Interview, “Angela Bowen,” Astraea Lesbian Foundation For Justice

<sup>121</sup> Abod, Jennifer. Interview, “Angela Bowen,” Astraea Lesbian Foundation For Justice

<sup>122</sup> Abod, “The Passionate Pursuits of Angela Bowen.”2018

Bowen's life and something she instilled in her students. The film ends with this apt piece of advice and encouragement from Bowen, "...sitting here, knowing that you've got all this life ahead of you and all the different things you could be. You don't just have to do one thing."<sup>123</sup>

When asked what inspired her to make *The Passionate Pursuits of Angela Bowen* Jennifer Abod replied, quoting Audre Lorde, "Who would believe our stories unless we tell them?"<sup>124</sup> This sentiment perfectly captures why I was motivated to begin the process of researching and collecting stories of Black Queer Fem(me)ininity in ballet. Until recently, I had never really imagined that these stories, and others, existed because no one was telling them. Even with an understanding of the factors that might disallow these particular identities to come together as a salient, cohesive whole, the gap in the histories felt odd. If Queer folks have always existed and if ballet had so many queer resonances, then there was bound to be more to the story. The documentary about Angela Bowen sparked a renewed curiosity in the archive and was a catalyst for *Quare Dance*.

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<sup>123</sup> Bowen. Interview in *The Passionate Pursuits of Angela Bowen*, 2018.

<sup>124</sup> Abod, "The Passionate Pursuits of Angela Bowen," Vimeo, April 27, 2020, <https://vimeo.com/ondemand/angelabowen?autoplay=1>

In Baker, Dunham, and Bowen's lives, we can see the slippage inherent in the construction of the Black Queer Ballerina, a Quare Ballerina if you will. We can also see the ways they transgressed boundaries, in dance and beyond, to move towards spaces of possibility. Following their example, we might start to shift our perception of ballet and ballerina away from dated stereotypes. As critics and advocates of ballet continue to work through the complex entanglements of race, gender, and sexuality, the Quare Ballerina's presence and the associated aesthetic presents a new lens for old debates. When we discuss the cultural relevance of ballet in the twenty-first century and conceptualize new modes of training and performance that move away from structures of white supremacy, we should also pause to acknowledge what is and what has been. Quare Ballerinas have already dreamt and enacted possible futures for ballet and continue to point(e) us toward what might be.

## 5. Maps and Mirrors

*Quare Dance: Fashioning a Black, Queer Fem(me)inist Aesthetic in Ballet* is a project of cultural imagining, discovery, and innovation that comes together like an improvisational quilt, using what we've got to make what we need; in the process, creating something altogether new and beautiful. In this investigation, disparate pieces, influences, traditions, fields, people, and epistemologies dance together. I believe the complexity and plurality of Black Queer fem(me)inine identities begs this type of interdisciplinarity.

Entry into this way of thinking owes a great deal to Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley *Ezili's Mirrors: Imagining Black Queen Genders*. I stumbled upon this text as I searched for sources that modeled theoretical fluidity and transdisciplinarity; that attempted to capture the capaciousness of Black Queer Fem(me)inity. Though not about dance specifically, I was thrilled to find that Tinsley's meditations on Vodou Iwa Ezili, in all her Black, Queer, femme glory, dealt with performance and performativity. Direct reference to ballet, quilting, and creative black genders, demonstrated by Black Ballerina Janet Collins's life and art, was the encouragement and inspiration I needed. To write this text, Tinsley employed "theoretical polyamory," a philosophy and practice that "encourages movement between different modes of theorizing: music videos, popular songs, dance, film, erotica, speculative fiction, and fashion all 'married' into one theorizing enterprise—all accorded as much explanatory power as academic prose to

make sense of Black queer lives.’’<sup>125</sup> This approach captures how my collaborators and I moved through our exploration of Blackness, Queerness, gender performance, and ballet.

### **5.1 Methodology/ Creative Process**

In the Spring of 2020, following the death of Breonna Taylor, with plans for all future in person dance opportunities canceled due to the Covid-19 pandemic, I began to develop a personal practice that would form the basis for this exploration. Top of mind for me was the question of how to infuse my dance practice, heavily informed by many years of ballet, with a Quare Fem(me)inist sensibility. What did a Quare or Fem(me)inist sensibility even look like? How did it move? For inspiration, I turned to my Black, Queer, and dance communities; to music, books, visual art, and crafts that grew out of these traditions; and the creative legacies of my own family.

My investigations over the spring and summer included solo improvisation, self-documentation via video or voice recording, journaling, attending creative virtual workshops, and participating in conversations with artists working at the intersection of race, gender, sexuality, and dance. All of these practices became an instrumental part of the process of *Quare Dance*. The praxis and choreographic framework that emerged

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125 Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley Ezili's Mirrors, p. 172

draws upon the decades of dance and movement practice that I bring to the project and the collective moment histories of collaborators Kiara Felder, Cortney Taylor Key, and Audrey Malek. My specific influences include somatic principles of sensing, awareness, and self-reflection introduced by Glenna Batson; story culling and site-responsive movement praxis introduced by Nia Love; Shadow Digging introduced by Amara Tabor-Smith; movement excavation introduced by Michael Kliën; and Alonzo King's encouragement of play and experimentation in western classical dance (Ballet).

I intentionally mobilize the concept of emergence to describe this process to underscore that the approach presented itself through practice, influenced by my dance training, current interests, and the circumstances of the pandemic. For instance, my first documented movement exploration happened in my backyard in March, just weeks into lockdown. Itching to move fully and freely and inspired by a flowering azalea bush my grandmother had planted years ago, I donned a matching fuchsia dress and began to improvise. I originally purchased the dress to wear to a celebration of the Duke-American Ballet Theatre partnership that would feature Misty Copeland in the role of *Giselle*. At this moment several components of this process came into focus: the importance of "dancing myself" or improvising movement based on what I felt at the time, unbound by the rules of codified techniques; the role of dress or adornment in this performance of self; and the liberatory possibility of a welcoming and meaningful site. In *Lost in Language and Sound*, Ntozake Shange writes, "That's why I dance. I can't

always find the ‘words’ to say it... I’m becoming trans-lingual so that I may speak myself.”<sup>126</sup>

### **Engaging Collaborators**

In October of 2020, Kiara Felder, Audrey Malek, Cortney Taylor Key, and I gathered for the first time to dream *Quare Dance* into existence, having only previously connected via social media and email. Due to the pandemic, our entire creative process unfolded on zoom. Audrey, the youngest member of our group, is currently a member of the Washington Ballet Studio Company. Kiara lives in Canada and is a member of Les Grands Ballet Canadiens de Montréal. Cortney is a freelance performer and teacher based in New York City. I am the oldest member of our group, nearly two decades older than Audrey, and currently reside in Durham, NC, where I am completing my MFA in Dance at Duke University. Although we have yet to meet in person and vary in age, location, dance experience, and career path, our group felt instantly connected. Deep bonds were forged over shared Black, Queer/LGBTIA identities, experiences of womanhood, and a love of ballet.

In an introductory email and our first zoom session, I rolled out the creative framework developed over the summer. By design, the process was flexible and meant

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<sup>126</sup> Ntozake Shange, *Lost in Language & Sound, or, How I Found My Way to the Arts: Essays* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2011).

to evolve with the needs, desires, and schedule of the group. Over the course of six months, we participated in a series of group and one-on-one conversations, reflective journaling exercises, and solo movement improvisation with the goal of (re)connecting with aspects of ourselves that are often unwelcome or ignored in traditional ballet settings. Although I initiated this project and was responsible for guiding the process, the creative content generated for *Quare Dance* is the embodiment of the hopes and dreams of four different dancers spread across the US and Canada.

### **Key Components**

Discussion, witnessing, self-reflection, and improvisation were key components of our methodology. While I intentionally selected each of these components based on previous creative processes, proven choreographic methods, covid constraints, and theoretical interest, each element's importance became more apparent as the weeks progressed. Surprisingly discussion emerged as one of the most important pieces of the puzzle.

In my experience, discussion is not always a part of the creative process, especially in a dance context. Time to create and rehearse is often limited and expensive, so learning and generating movement is prioritized. On occasion, a choreographer or director may relay a theme, story, or background information, but there is rarely time to engage in robust discussion. By contrast, discussion figured prominently throughout the *Quare Dance* process. Each zoom session began with 1-2 hours of discussion, and topics

ranged from dance and identity to personal relationships, favorite books and songs, and how we were navigating the pandemic. Prioritizing dialogue allowed us to develop the comfort necessary to be vulnerable while exploring personal issues like race, gender, and sexuality. Conversation also allowed us to combat the isolation of the pandemic, work against socio-cultural forces that silence Black and Queer folks, and build a community rooted in care. In ballet spaces, in particular, there is a culture of silence that often penalizes dancers that speak up. For scholar Patricia Hill Collins, dialogue amongst community and an ethic of care are necessary components of a Black feminist epistemology.<sup>127</sup>

Witnessing, another key component of our process, was also part of establishing an ethic of care in our sessions. I am defining witnessing as an engaged, responsive, participatory way of seeing. This way of seeing is perhaps experiential and embodied, denoting an exchange between subjects rather than an audience-object relationship. Our creative process and the resulting installation invited multiple types of witnessing. On one level, folks who attended the installation were able to spend time with and witness a piece of each artist's story. As participants, Kiara, Cortney, Audrey, and I learned from and witnessed each other's process. Getting a front row seat to the inner and outer

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<sup>127</sup>Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2015).

expressions of my collaborators was a gift. In each of them, I saw elements of my story reflected. Lastly, and most importantly, each artist had the opportunity to witness and reflect on their own identity, movement, and experience.

From the outset each collaborator was asked to critically reflect on the role that race, gender, and sexuality plays in their life. We explored how these intersections impacted our experiences with ballet. Several strategies were employed to facilitate this process of self-reflection. These strategies included regular journaling, building vision/dream boards that represented how we see ourselves and the people, books, music, quotes that inspire us, and documenting our creative process through photos, video, and voice recording. Time to think deeply about how our identities shape the ways we move our bodies was crucial to this project's success.

*Quare Dance* facilitated a moment of integration, a space to put our lived experience as Black, Queer folks in dialogue with what we do for a living. Reflecting on this, I am reminded of Collins' articulation of lived experience as a crucial part of a Black Feminist epistemology.<sup>128</sup> José Esteban Muñoz's theory of disidentification is also relevant to frame the process of claiming and making sense of seemingly conflicting identities like Black, Queer, and ballerina. Centering self-reflection allowed us to give

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<sup>128</sup> Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, p 257.

more weight to our internal voice and deprioritize the dominant discourse. Through improvisation, a similar process unfolded with movement.

In a departure from more conventional choreographic projects, each *Quare Dance* collaborator was invited to respond to the process in the movement style that felt most authentic. While our discussions centered around ballet, the goal for improvisation sessions was to move towards pleasure and discovery. Improvisation plays an important role in the creative process for many dancers and choreographers. It has been a significant part of my dance training, particularly in contemporary and modern dance settings. Within Ballet, William Forsythe has perhaps developed one of the most well-known improvisational methodologies.<sup>129</sup> While I won't detail all the intricacies of Forsythe's method here, his primary interest seems to be geometric, and shape based; extending and manipulating the lines and curves of ballet by modifying various spatial plain and dynamic. In this instance, my approach to improvisation was much less bound by a particular movement methodology or technique. I was interested in mining to our individual movement inheritances and desires. To communicate this to the collaborators, who have varying degrees of experience with improv, I drew upon ideas and imagery from Black vernacular creative praxis. Improvisational quilting, jazz music,

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<sup>129</sup>William Forsythe. "William Forsythe Choreographic Objects: LECTURES FROM IMPROVISATION TECHNOLOGIES." William Forsythe Choreographic Objects.

and collage are specific influences. I encouraged Kiara, Audrey, and Cortney to let their movements be guided by what was within them, their feelings, their thoughts. What might it look like to dance as ourselves? How do we like to move? What feels good?

In my practice, I have come to understand improvisation as an act of recovery and response; recovery of subjugated ways of moving that have been trained away by codified technique, rediscovery of pleasurable ways of moving, and response to an emotion, physical site, song, or idea. While not always the case, improvisation sometimes feels like a practice of self-actualization and liberation. On several occasions, we noted that engaging in a regular improvisational movement practice enhanced our ability to bring increased richness, nuance, and joy to ballet. This anecdotal and experiential “proof” affirms my interest in continuing to investigate how to fully embody complex identities within ballet.

## ***5.2 Installation: Fashioning a Black, Queer, Fem(me)inist Aesthetic***

Six months of creative process culminated in the *Quare Dance* installation. In keeping with the theme of interdisciplinarity and quilting of various disciplines, video footage, text, music, and material artifacts all figured prominently in the space. Ephemera and artifacts like old brown pointe shoes, white tulle, childhood pictures, headshots, and a mirrored floor worked together to bring tangible materiality to the experience, even while abiding by pandemic safety protocols. Each participant was

tasked with documenting elements of their creative process in their preferred site for the installation. We also generated a collaborative playlist and movement score that reflected our process together. Our creative contributions varied greatly, reflecting the diversity of our group even within our shared identities.

My choice to build an installation was inspired by visual artists that I admire and who work in that format, including Ebony G. Patterson, Amaryllis DeJesus Moleski, and Mickalene Thomas. In the past, I have curated and produced several installations for other artists and produced one installation of my own. With the assistance of a small team, our Black, Queer, Fem(me)inist environment was built.

The installation format speaks to me because of the embodied nature of the creation process and the immersive potential of the experience. This type of presentation is quite different from the proscenium theater, where concert dance is often presented. Our visitors were physically able to step into and witness a Quare worldview. Choosing installation also gave me the opportunity to traffic in the excess of material artifacts and ephemera, further tapping into a lineage of Black and Queer aesthetic culture.

With dance was our primary mode of exploring and embodying a Quare sensibility, the videos of Kiara, Audrey, Cortney, and I in motion were the central focus of the exhibition. Using oversized projection and three additional televisions, videos of our solo movement explorations and group process played on loop. Through the videos, each artists proposal to the research questions that promoted this investigation become

clear. In their own way, each video disrupted normative ideas of how a ballerina might behave and act. Thinking back to strategies proposed for staging alternative desire and sexualities, intimate spaces, the spectral, and juxtaposition of ballet with discordant elements figured prominently in much of the footage. In her film, Kiara chose to present a raw improvisation session in her living room sanctuary with her beloved cat watching from the windowsill. Dressed in a black turtleneck trousers and bare feet, she spun, stomped, fell, and recovered with a second like spectre of herself tracing and repeating the movement.

Audrey and Cortney each presented two videos showing various aspects of their personalities and a variety of movement styles. At first, we see Audrey in a long sleeve leotard, and close-fitting long skirt. Her torso is contracted, arms and back twitching and convulsing while her feet glide seamlessly across the floor. Then she appears in short skirt and pointe shoes, dressed as the quintessential ballerina. A third video shows her with hair in cornrow braids, shiny metallic crop top and leggings, wearing high heels and working it for the camera to RuPaul's Snapshot. Also interested in presenting multiple layers, Cortney's videos go from the daily ritual and labor of ballet class at home into two distinct improvisations, one rhythmic and virtuosic, the other solemn and introspective. A final highly produce video features a movement score, elaborate costume changes, plush backdrop to dialogue about gender from the tv show Euphoria.

Two of my videos, filmed before our group process began, evoke and disrupt the ballerina archetype. This is achieved through movement as well as adornment and location. In the first, I wear a floor-length rainbow tutu and matching headwrap while frolicking barefoot in a secluded and sun-soaked clearing. In the second video, I bend, stretch, run, and leap through a wide open expanse. This time, I am dressed in a sheer lime green dress, reminiscent of a romantic era ballet costume and combat boots. In my last video, I return to an intimate setting, showing only my bare brown back as I extend through and beyond balletic port de bras. Consistent across all the videos was the feeling that each artist was the subject of their own narrative and exploring various ways to embody complex identities and pleasure.

### ***5.3 Personal Statement***

My personal experience grappling with identity and a career in ballet informs the direction of this research. At an early age, I identified my passion for dance and have spent decades exploring various western concert dance forms with a focus on classical and contemporary ballet. My interest in dance was always serious, and I was fortunate enough to train with prestigious pre-professional programs and master teachers around the country. My ultimate goal was to be a professional ballerina, which I achieved in 2004 with my first full professional contract at Oakland Ballet. Regardless of the company or training program, I have always been one of a handful of Black ballet

dancers. Rarely was there more than one other Black woman. Usually, I was the only Black dancer.

Although I've always been hyper-aware of my Blackness in relationship to ballet, my Queer identity was not something I would have to contend with until my early twenties, right as my professional career was taking off. Before this, my experience with queerness and ballet was limited to the many gay male dancers I trained and performed with. I was lucky to come out and into my queerness in the Bay Area, a Queer utopia of sorts, in the early 2000s. From the beginning, I was supported by a loving family and dance community that included gay male ballet dancers and Queer, mostly white women, that studied modern dance. Although I never felt an internal conflict with my Queer identity and ballet, I also wasn't aware of any other queer ballerinas, definitely not any Black Queer Ballerinas.

Yet, the Queer resonances in ballet have always been a part of my understanding of the form. Thanks to Brenda Dixon Gottschild and others, I am also now aware of the ways in which Black American dance and culture has deeply influenced neoclassical and contemporary ballet. Still, the Black, Queer Ballerina in historical and current contexts is a proverbial unicorn. As I began to teach ballet students of various races, genders, and orientations, I became more curious about this apparent lacuna in ballet history. Why had the stories of Black, Queer, Women, and non-binary Femmes been excluded from ballet? Did we exist at all? Was I an aberration? A cursory google search determined that

I was not, in fact, the only Queer Ballerina or even the only Black Queer Ballerina. I was intrigued and motivated by this finding and set out to find the obscured and ignored presences that offer a counternarrative to the dominant view of ballet as exclusively cis-gender, heterosexual, and white.

My research, up to this point, illustrates that the documented history of ballet's queer resonance is overwhelmingly male and white. Queerness as it relates to women of any race has been glossed over if it is mentioned at all. In recent decades, Black dancers and Black influence has become more legible in the history of ballet due to an increasing number of Black dancers and scholars that are determined to correct omissions in the history. Even with modest advances in visibility, Blackness and Queerness still seem to exist on the margins of ballet narratives although these identities and aesthetics have informed and shaped the dance form for centuries.

Through this research and praxis, I am beginning to address the lacuna in dance and performance studies as it relates to intersectional identities and ballet. I am exploring how a Black, Queer, Fem(me)inist worldview informs and shapes how I move, teach, and understand ballet and dance in general. I see my praxis in conversation with colleagues and contemporaries near and far working at the intersections of queerness, race, and dance, in the most capacious sense of the word. Artists and scholars I admire include well known and emerging figures like Kyle Abraham, Katy Pyle, Theresa Ruth Howard, Anna Martine Whitehead, Jennifer Harge, Maria Bauman Morales, Stefanie

Batten Bland, and Sarah Cecelia Bukowski. And the list continues to grow. As I deepen my individual movement praxis and engage with this research and diverse artists, my understanding of the specific socio-cultural positioning of ballet is expanding. This awareness is crucial to my growth as an artist, teacher, and citizen that wants to move towards a ballet future that prioritizes ethics, equity, experimentation and inclusion.

## 6. Conclusion

At the heart of *Quare Dance* is the question of what an intersectional lens might allow us to see, learn, and create within a concert dance context. As a teacher, my positionality requires me to question pedagogical approaches that uphold racist, sexist, or heteronormative ideals. As a scholar, my positionality inspires me to look for the voices missing in dominant histories. As an artist, I feel committed to telling new and different stories so that more communities might see themselves represented. While my interests, desires, and goals are not solely defined by race, gender, and sexuality, I highlight these intersections to call attention to and work against systemic marginalization and erasure.

Looking specifically at Black, Queer, Ballerinas, this project's written portion examines and re-reads dominant histories to construct a genealogy of this previously overlooked presence. In addition, the paper details how my collaborators and I grapple with the complexities of Black, Queer identity, and ballet through creative practice. While we don't offer definitive answers to all the questions posed during this process, the writing and the *Quare Dance* installation reflect our thoughts, ideas, and embodied theory at this point in time.

Based on visitor feedback to the installation, the movement and ideas presented prompted critical thinking, reflection, and robust conversation. I can only hope that these conversations continue to grow and inspire action in the future. *Quare Dance*

represents just the first step towards imagining and enacting new possibilities within ballet.

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