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### The 5 Positions: The Ongoing Racism in Our Ballet Community

My ballet experience took off at the young age of six years old. Walking tall and proud in my cream ballet flats, my rosy pink tights, slick back bun, and now retrospective obliviousness, I would never have expected to be writing this paper a decade later. It was not until multiple annual trips to my local Nutcracker production that it hit me. Everyone on this stage was white. But why would I even dare question this in my past? Every ballet teacher I had encountered, every dancer I had joined at the bare, every ballerina I had studied and admired, and even my own shoes were white. Getting my hands dirty in research and investigation proved to me it was not that other races did not want to be involved in the ballet community, but that they were not able to due to blatant racism. Let's be real: dance had been unjustifiably reserved for one color.

**From the early 20th century to our modern society, Black ballerinas and dance practitioners have evidently experienced blatant and microaggressive discrimination from choreographers, casting directors, and critics through excluding bodies of color despite their level of talent and dedication, culturally appropriating and refusing to address so, microaggressive comments to Black dancers made, and refusing to teach other forms of dance that do not derive from a eurocentric background.** So let us break it down, cue the music...

The classic first position: the claimed starting point. Europe is the birthplace of the style of ballet, it is known as the claimed starting point. Deriving from the Italian Renaissance courts

in the 15th century and popularized by King Henry II of France and his wife, Catherine of Medici, the eurocentric roots sprouted. The addition of Black ballerinas only commenced during the early 20th century and did not come to pass lightly and eloquently. The simple inclusion and partaking of African Americans in ballet was looked down upon in the whole community simply because of a set determinism that ballet is strictly for those of white skin. In the 1930s, popular and established dance critic, John Martin, described Black ballerinas as “cannot be expected to do dances designed for another race” (James). He then went on to explain to his readers that Black dancers were “exotic,” whereas White dancers were “refined.” The description “exotic” is the most inhumane and besmirching epithet a community of people can ever receive. The eurocentric norm is so fixated on gatekeeping the art form of ballet for strictly European descent bodies. As stated by Ayo Walker in her research, “Traditional White Spaces,” claimed that “white supremacy, which exists in every sector of American society, is the plausible cause for the inadequacy of existing dance histories” (Walker). Though you would expect change for the more justifiable approach from then to our current generation, we have fallen short of human decency to spare and have only unhealthily contorted our racism in the dance community.

Second position: a tweaked form of the classic first position. Though a century could have been occupied by justification, racism in the dance world today is only a tweaked form of what it used to be. Blatant discrimination comes from those holding high power and influence. Demonstrated racism is primarily usually unfolded during the auditioning process. Directors and choreographers deny casting Black dancers because of their skin tone, claiming that the use of colored bodies in their ensemble causes asymmetry. In 2016, African American dancer, Candice Thompson, shared his personal statement of being refused a role, and not because of a lack of talent extent. Instead, he was told that “there wouldn’t have been people of color in the

aristocracy at the time and [the company was] trying to stay authentic” (James). To put it kindly, the thought of trying to stay “authentic” through the debarring of colored dancers is a pathetically superficial excuse to justify one’s racist conservatism. Casting directors have also proven their experience in excuse-making by prejudging the depth of one’s career just by examining their body structure before seeing any dance move. Most racist powerholders have insisted that White bodies are more fitting and seemingly proper for the art of ballet than a Black body by claim of the muscular and bone structure, including the buttocks shape and size of the feet. There has never been a logical statistic for this claim. The only proven defense is “their reliance on instinct” (James), Tobin James writes. Racism in choreography has also prevailed for many years as many choreographers have only taught Eurocentric-based dance styles.

Kristin Horrigan explains in her article, “Welcoming in Dancers From All Traditions,” that “choreography classes rooted only in modern/ post-modern/ contemporary dance fail to provide racial equity to today’s college students” (Horrigan). Excluding and refusing to acknowledge other dance styles that are deemed as cultural because “ballet is the foundation of all dance forms” sets the ideology and teaches those on a blank slate education that ballet truly is the establishing underpin of all dance styles to ever exist. We constantly hear stories from dancers such as Misty Copeland and Chloé Lopes Gomes of the brutal racism one can receive even after the auditioning and choreography process. Though six-year-old me came in stomping loud and proud in my rosy white tights and ballet flats, most don’t feel the same way. The demeaningly embarrassing discrimination towards Black ballerinas simply through the standard uniform has persisted until recent years. The purpose of the “standard ballet uniform” is to dupe the shoe as a bare foot.

When the addition of Black ballerinas arose, the hue remained “European pink” as companies did not believe in the incorporation of other skin-toned dancers. As a result of the last resort, many dancers of colors went out of their way to purchase and dye their slippers. Different skin-colored pointe shoes were not available until 2018, and though available, not easily accessible on mainstream companies until more recently. Set aside from not being equipped with the right ballet uniform, it is disappointing and unfathomable that a company, though, will purchase the right makeup to culturally appropriate their dancers in avoidance of not having to use dancers of color. This includes black face. The term black face molds from the process of a dancer being darkened by makeup to play a person of color instead of hiring a person of color. Harvard’s newsletter, “the Harvard Crimson,” explicates the awareness of blackface as a substitution for using colored dancers. “Misty Copeland pointed out just a few months ago when she reposted an image of two Russian ballerinas darkened from head to toe” (The Harvard Crimson), *the Harvard Crimson* recounts. Misty Copeland has also publicly shared that she has been asked to “whiten up” with makeup to fit the requests and requirements of the director. In both scenarios, the colored dancer is at a disadvantage due to ignorance and close-mindedness.

Third position: masking the negative space. Racism makes its appearance behind the mask of microaggression as much as it makes the same appearance plainspoken and outright. Microaggressive phrases, as described by Kori Wakamatsu in her article “Asian American Perspective” as small, regular, and common acts or experiences that serve to challenge and/or dismantle bias, stereotypes, discrimination, as well as oppression, in our ballet “utopia” is more common than one would imagine (Wakamatsu). Phrases thrown around such as asking Black ballerinas to “tame their hair” entails nothing but a dehumanizing request. Another term, widely used in other arts and sports besides ballet, is the notion that one is talented at ballet for a specific

race. This places one in a category that their race dances a certain way in contrast to the norm, which is not a form of flattery nor a justified way to speak a racist mind. Another form of this intentioned backhandedness is the phrase “you’re a credit to your race” (Wakamatsu). A frequently repeated phrase all dancers have been taught and drilled to be ingrained into one's dance practice is the idea that ballet is the foundation of all dance forms. This completely forgoes the cultural aspect of dances, where dancing during the birth of the first position was already in existence. Dance was not born in the court of France by Catherine of Medici, but instead, it is a natural human instinct in reaction to extreme emotions expressed through one’s physical format rather than audible.

Racism does also go the opposite way to voiced discrimination. The loud silence most Black ballerinas receive when fighting for justice in their community is deafening. The Black ballet representation fighting for injustice has always been left with a very small amount of all Black ballet companies with their support and to wallow in everyone else’s silence. Influential association, The International Association of Blacks in Dance, and their article, “I Siad, Can You Hear Me Now?,” writes that “silence is no longer acceptable” (IABD). Addressing white people in power, The IABD cries that “[they] need [them] to own this,” and that they need to “deal with [their] whiteness” (IABD). Silent when aware has the same intention as agreeing with the other side. This has mainly come to be because of the blank slate a six-year-old holds walking into their first ballet class. Usually, ballet dancers are taught at an early age in their ballet classes to stay silent, obedient, and passive. Chloé Lopes Gomes explains in collaboration with CNN that “such behavior is institutionalized within ballet, from the time that we are children and begin our training. We don’t talk about it because we are taught not to.” (Gomes) Because of this originating norm, fighting against racism has been seen as ghastly, and taking action could easily

end one's career and be seen as socially unacceptable in the ballet community. This should not be the case as those being discriminated against should not have to worry about one's reputation or career when trying to fight for equity to reach equality.

Fourth position: the most uncomfortable. The mental effects racism can have on a constantly active and young human being was the most uncomfortable research I had to learn to write this paper. The internal effects of discrimination and extreme racism on Black ballerinas can take immense measures on a dancer's work, eventually affecting one's career. First is the loss of motivation to pursue a dance career. An apropos lack of energy and luster and passion in the dance community and field of arts is lost because of the dancer's social environment. As human beings, most people are naturally reactive and respond solely to the emotions of our surroundings, as described in Stephen Covey's motivational best-seller novel, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*. Internal judgment kicks in. Dancers become not so confident in their own practice and wonder if this professional sphere is not the right fit for them. To put my last point bluntly: receiving racism is traumatizing. Black dancers who experience racism in the rehearsals of the art form they love and devote their time to are not needed or appreciated considering people of color are discriminated against outside of the studio. In my personal opinion, dance is utilized and exercised as a release of stress and an intake of passion. Racism and the release of stress could arguably be a juxtaposition considering how much one undertakes stress from the hateful and inequitable environment they live in. The life and dignity of a human being should be tended to with respect and equality. We are not all the same color, yet we bleed the same blood. The disadvantage those of color have simply not being of full White descent is a ridiculous excuse to have to face extra hardships in their profession, especially since racism derives from the mouth and opinions of another human being and not a fixed rule. Racism

strictly issues from the simple decency of a human being, proving that we still have no excuse to not change for the better.

Fifth position: Closing the uncomfortable. The dogma behind internalized racist thinking, as discussed in Kori Wakamatsu's "Asian American Perspective," is that "race constructs are built upon observable physical features. Similarly, dance is largely appreciated through observable performative elements accomplished by the body as a medium" (Wakamatsu). There is no way to ignore one's skin tone in this industry, but that does not mean enforced racism needs to concur. Using the community as a whole, we need to rectify from the root: building a ballet community with a multicultural system from the start. Uprooting the system and uprising a rectified practice is a hard thing to accomplish considering that people do not forget and are easily fixated on their past experiences. Simple things such as ballet attire where the definition of being able to blend into one's natural skin tone can be provided to everyone and the creation of different skin-toned pointe shoes does not cost any less than the production of European white shoes. This also includes the addition of different dance styles that do not derive from a Eurocentric root. This will terminate the ideology that European styles are the bases of all dance styles and shift the dance mindset that ballet is a reserved art by race. Racism in general is bad as it is, the best we can do is shine the spotlight on striving for equity. Many have been speaking up about this for years, but not enough.

Another way to reach this communal goal is to change the curriculums in dance schools. Evelyn Etienne reverberates for choreographer J. Bouey in Virginia's anti-racist voice journal that "white supremacy operates best in the shadows" (Etienne). She offered the solution, "we can begin reshaping college curriculum to include all styles of dance, offer scholarships to dancers of colors - whether they have formal ballet training or not - and acknowledge the achievements

made by dancers of color” (Etienne). Going by the ethical theory that we step on the marley for the first time with a blank slate mind means we, as humans, have chosen to revolve an art form belonging rightfully to all people around unofficial, yet followed, discriminatory regulations. The best we can do, now, is try and change; change what we teach, how we talk, how we evaluate talent, how we respect the art of dance, how we respect others, how we stay silent, and how we speak up.

Let’s get to the “pointe.” Like the five positional classics of ballet, uprooting and uprising are more complicated than it seems. Racism is placed by the people, and unto the people of the same blood. Racism in our ballet community has contaminated our dance community since the early 20th century. From numerous amounts of cast members to influential critiques and fellow dancers, racism, whether unfiltered or backhanded, has prevailed in today's society. Black ballerinas have gone through rigorous discriminatory difficulties just to occupy the art form they love. It has affected their career, their chances in the industry, their mental health, and more. It is 2022. Like the IABD Association said, we need you to deal with your whiteness. The racism is felt, and your silence is heard. It's been a century and we have not even given Black ballerinas the bare minimum of human decency and dignity. It is time to uproot, then uprising. We will keep reaching for what is fair until those receive justice. Until then, the music plays on.

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