

Racism in Dance

by

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Dance is a measure of society, not something apart from it.
- Brenda Dixon Gottschild

In 1958, a 27-year-old dancer and choreographer named Alvin Ailey started a new modern dance company in New York City. He called it the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, and his goal was to showcase the work of major American choreographers of the time (Homans 36). His choreography was carefully composed to avoid references to West African dance and other “black” dance styles of the 60s (tap, jazz, and swing, among others), while also steering away from the traditional European, ballet aesthetic. Though Ailey’s intentions were to present something neither black nor white, but distinctly American, he was unsuccessful in escaping the race labels thrust upon his work by dance critics and audience members alike. The problem: he was black. And most of his dancers were black, too. In spite of his attempts to project an American image and an American repertory, the theater-going society was unwilling to consider his work and his company anything other than black dance.

Brenda Dixon Gottschild, senior advising editor for *Dance Magazine* and decorated author for her works on African-American dance, makes an important argument that may shed some light on why Ailey’s American vision was not received in the way he intended. She argues that “bodies are idealized for specific political, economic and social purposes of inclusion/exclusion, for

purposes of figuring out where the Self ends and the Other begins" (107). In other words, dancing bodies are social constructs that extend beyond the human form to include and project the cultural values of our time; dance is inseparably tied to an aesthetic, and that aesthetic is tied to culture. On the surface, dance consists simply of movement and moving bodies; it is about the stylistic choices of the choreographer in creating a series of movements that create a desired visual and emotional impact. But it is all too clear—especially in Ailey's case—that the interpretation of those choreographic choices must necessarily depend on cultural values concerning beauty, sexuality, and art, among others.

Race plays a major role in this kind of interpretation. Have you ever wondered why most pictures of ballet dancers are of white women? Or why most hip-hop dancers on TV are black? The dichotomy of black and white is particularly relevant to the dance world, not only for categorizing styles of dance, but also because it often shapes our expectations of what certain dancers should look like. This segregation of "black" versus "white" dance has caused controversy over ideal body types, sexuality, and racialized casting. However, the divide between black and white in dance forms themselves is not as clear as it once was. Choreographers love to sample aspects of other dance styles in their pieces; a contemporary ballet may contain influences from traditional African dance, or a hip-hop piece might utilize ballet technique and basic Latin dance steps. Where, then, can we draw the line between the "color" of one style and another? What's the deciding factor in determining whether we're watching "black" dance or "white" dance? What needs to

change in order to recognize these styles as neither black nor white, but *American* dance?

A new vocabulary could be one solution. Instead of referring to performances as black or white (or the politically correct African or European), we need to think of dance technique as something separate from the dancers. In other words, we need to differentiate between African dance technique and African dancers. One of the most debilitating effects of racialized decisions in the dance world occurs when directors and choreographers assume that dancers will be more or less proficient in certain styles solely on the basis of their skin color. But ask yourself, what really makes someone suited for ballet or tap or hip-hop? Why do white dancers recommend to black dancers that they audition for Ailey? Regardless of whether the dancer's style is suited to what Ailey's company looks for, whites often assume that since black dancers look alike, they must dance alike. Black dancers can think this way, too. But when people really believe in those stereotypes, they limit themselves to one technique, thinking it's the only way they'll succeed. It's a *problem* because it perpetuates unnecessary segregation in the dance world. It's *unnecessary* because there is no evidence to show that white bodies are any more suited for ballet than black bodies are suited for tap. If we can teach ourselves to separate skin color from dance, perhaps Ailey's vision of an American dance company could become a reality. Until then, we will be stuck in a world of black and white.

IMAGES IN BLACK AND WHITE

The black (dancing) body is a sociocultural concept, not a biological

imperative...we could more accurately speak of "black dance aesthetics." The black dancing body – be it black, white, or brown—is the body that is shaped by black culture ... a constellation of attitudes-habits-predilections, the sum of which are reduced to the least common denominator by using the terms "black dance" and "black dancing body."

- Brenda Dixon Gottschild

White dance critics coined the term "black dance" in the 1930s to describe and differentiate between black performance dance and white performance dance (Gotschild 13). Although this term is no longer commonly used in theatrical reviews, it has significant historical importance for the discussion of race in the dance world. In theory, the term refers to styles of dance that are characterized by West African elements of movement such as the articulation of different body parts independently of each other, often moving in different rhythms. For example, if you've ever watched tap dance, you'll notice that the dancer's feet and legs move at a rhythm and pace almost unrelated to what his torso and arms are doing. This movement is characteristic of African dance and is described as polyrhythmic (containing multiple rhythms) and polycentric (originating from more than one "center" on the body). Interestingly, most performances staged around the time the term "black dance" was introduced did not necessarily use any blatantly obvious choreographic references to traditional African dances; in fact, the labels assigned to such works were often based more on the race of the performers than on the steps they performed, as seen in Alvin Ailey's case. The definition of black dance is somewhat vague in that it does not specify what qualifies as black, and most experts recognize that the term is more of a social construct than an accurate descriptor of a distinct form of movement (Gotschild 6). It is more likely that critics projected such a distinction on the pieces they reviewed

because the white dance community *wished* for there to be a distinction rather than because one existed in reality.

A central idea to the study of black and white dance is the idea of the dancing body. A "dancing body" refers not only to the physical body, but also to the social constructs regarding gender, race, and sexuality that are inherent in body and movement. For example, the black ballerina's dancing body is more than just a physical body performing a series of choreographed movements; she is a black woman dancing a traditionally European style of dance, and the interpretation of her performance depends on more than just her technique. Such dancing bodies are often labeled as either European or African, white or black. Although interpretation of dancing bodies as *either* one style *or* the other is a restrictive and frequently inaccurate descriptor, it should be noted that African and European dances do spring from two distinct styles of movement. According to Gottschild, the African aesthetic consists of a grounded quality, body asymmetry, polycentric movement and balance, polyrhythmic movements in the body, the articulation of different parts of the torso, and the value of improvisation on both the individual and group levels (15). In contrast, European dance is characterized by rigidity, control, verticality of the body (especially of the spine), and, as Gottschild explains, the direction of energy "upward and outward," as opposed to down towards the ground (15-16). Visually, this means that dancers working in African styles are much more loose and free-flowing and their energy is very grounded – dancers are often barefoot and curved over or arched back, accentuating parts of the body like the pelvis, breasts, and buttocks. The European style is more or less embodied by the image of a

ballerina: erect and centered with all the body parts aligned and held in a controlled position, often accentuating the feet and hands. In this very stark comparison we see a tension of opposites: upward vs. downward, control vs. release, order vs. improvisation, "animalistic" vs. "ethereal." The problem with defining African and European dance as one of two extremes is that those two styles are often combined to create different choreographic effects to the extent that a modern piece may no longer be only one style or the other.

NO SUCH THING AS PASSIVE OBSERVATION

I have conceptualized spectatorship not as a psychodynamic exchange between performer and spectator but as a series of sociohistorical encounters between spectators and performers across the spectrum of hyphenated American identities.

- Susan Manning

Equally as important as movement itself is the interpretation of the movement on the part of the observer. The evaluation one gives of a performance is influenced not only by the technical precision of the dancers, but also by the more subjective experience of whether one enjoyed the piece, thought it was beautiful, innovative, or accessible. While it is possible that subjective reactions vary mostly on an individual, rather than cultural, basis, the observer's basis of judgment—the yardstick of a "good" performance—is, more often than not, informed by cultural standards regarding beauty, greatness, and appropriateness. There is a reason it was acceptable for a black Josephine Baker to dance topless for Parisian audiences in the early 1900s, just as there is a reason why Janet Jackson's "costume malfunction" at the 2004 Super Bowl was unacceptable to American audiences. That difference in reaction can be attributed to a difference in the understanding of appropriateness in two

different countries at two different points in history. Gottschild argues that cultural preferences set by the established pundits of taste set and shape the exclusive criteria that distinguish one culture's values from another, one dance form from another. It's really more about what we like to see than about what the dancing body can be taught to *do* ... Each form carries its own human-made (usually man-made) aesthetic criteria that represent a particular culture's needs, aspirations, preferences and dislikes in a particular area. (103)

Viewing and understanding choreographic intent is highly subjective and often reflects cultural climate more than individual interpretations might suggest.

Cultural climates can be categorized by time period, socioeconomic class, and ethnic upbringing, in addition to the obvious race factor.

The difference in interpretive readings of dance is fairly obvious when comparing black and white cultural climates in the United States. Africanists often see the European aesthetic as "rigid, aloof, cold, and one-dimensional," while Europeanists interpret African movement as "vulgar, comic, uncontrolled, and, most of all, promiscuous" (Gottschild 16). The problem this poses in our society, and in the dance world more specifically, is that the white aesthetic is considered the "norm" instead of its own ethnic category. Brazilian choreographer Patricia Hoffbauer reflects in an interview with *Dance Magazine* that her choreographic intentions were misunderstood when she created a piece about colonization and cultural imperialism that registered with audiences only as a mocking parody of Carmen Miranda. She also pointed out that, we [artists of color] were expected to do things that had to do with our

ancestry – African, Indian, whatever. But white people were not asked to look at their racial identity; they were not asked to do anything different from the minimal, abstract, angst-driven modern dances that they'd been doing. (“Other Voices” 59)

This kind of experience perpetuates the feeling that anything non-white is inferior or alien. Dance critic Susan Manning addresses this dichotomy when she notes that white dancers have access to “the social and artistic privilege that adheres to dancing bodies that can be read as racially unmarked, the legitimizing norm against which bodies of color take their meanings” (xv). The idea of being “unmarked” allows choreographers and audiences to assume that there is some unity inherent in an all-white cast, which a black dancer might disrupt.

Such an attitude not only casts a negative light on black bodies and so-called black movement, but it also serves to exalt the European, white aesthetic. Elements of ballet such as pointed feet, an erect spine, and an emphasis on visual line and shape are present in almost all forms of stage dance from classical ballet to ballroom dance to modern. The only styles not overcome with this aesthetic are those that are considered African American: hip-hop, tap, club dancing, and the kind of stage performance common among pop superstars (Gottschild 133). What can be difficult about the perception of African-American styles is that white critics used to think that in borrowing influences from European dance, African Americans were conceding something to the white aesthetic. Susan Manning notes the occurrence of such thinking in her book *Modern Dance Negro Dance*:

On the one hand, if Negro dancers staged themes perceived as

Africanist, then many white critics considered them “natural performers” rather than “creative artists.” On the other hand, if Negro dancers staged themes perceived as Eurocentric, then many white critics considered them “derivative” rather than “original” artists. Yet the reverse did not hold, for white critics voiced no objections when [white] modern dancers staged ethnic or primitive themes. (9-10)

Essentially, whites took it as a sign of their cultural superiority that blacks borrowed elements of European dance styles (Gottschild 22). Of course, such borrowing implies nothing of the sort, and many white critics failed to notice that white choreographers were borrowing African movements as much as black choreographers included elements of European dance. Unfortunately, the interpretation of such borrowing as indicative of cultural superiority resulted in a particularly demeaning connotation for the term black dance.

THE SEXUALIZED BLACK BODY

For centuries whites have seen the black body as a sexualized terrain – not because black people are sexually different from whites, innately or biologically, but because that is how whites chose to perceive blacks.

- Brenda Dixon Gottschild

Since the early 19th century in the West, black bodies have been stereotyped as sexual objects. Common black caricatures like Jezebel and Big Thomas, both characterized by hyper-sexualized and predatory personalities, shaped much of the way blacks were perceived by white society. Even today we find evidence of how whites tend to sexualize black bodies. Whereas European styles of dance emphasize slimness, long limbs, and visual unity, whites tend to notice certain characteristics of black dancing bodies that appear to

clash with that aesthetic: skin, hair, feet, and buttocks (Gottschild 9).

When asked in interviews conducted by Gottschild what parts of the body they associated with African dance, most people (both black and white) responded with those characteristics listed above, claiming that black bodies were rounder, more muscular and generally bulkier than bodies they associated with European dance (Gottschild 48-70). Gottschild argues that these stereotypes have very little grounding in actual fact or biological data; black bodies simply serve as an outlet for cultural ideas about sexuality and its connection to the body. She writes:

For centuries whites have seen the black body as a sexualized terrain—not because black people are sexually different from whites, innately or biologically, but because that is how whites chose to perceive blacks ... the black body has served as the screen upon which white fears and fantasies have been projected. (Gottschild 41)

For most whites, bodies are sexually charged objects. In white society, sexuality was a taboo subject for a long time, and even now we still struggle to have comfortable conversations about sex and its role in art. On the other hand, comfort with sexuality and sensuality seems to be more of a non-issue in the African worldview, which has presumably trickled down through the generations to a similar level of acceptance in modern society (Gottschild 45). In light of this cultural difference, we might argue that the stereotypes about the sexualized black body are born of the Euro-American inability to comfortably talk about sexuality; attributing that discomfort to another body is a way of dealing with that feeling by distancing oneself from the issue.

Sexuality in dance often seems to concern parents, even when their children are young enough that they have little or no context in which to place sexual interpretations of movement. A study of the dance program in a Vancouver elementary school, for example, revealed that some parents objected to the study of certain styles of dance because of possible "sexual or immoral connotations" (Willis 59). The following excerpt from the study details some measures taken to relieve the parents' worries about morality in dance:

Parents who did allow their children to participate in movement classes had certain guidelines that restricted some social dances, touching movements, and rolling on the floor if it was perceived as having sexual overtones. Vernacular dances that stress thrusting movements of the pelvis were de-emphasized. Particular words such as "chant" which to some religious sects denotes a diabolic sense of worship were eliminated or explained to the students. Some students were not allowed to participate in particular theme dance such as healing the world, being one with the universe, or recycling. (Willis 2)

This reaction could not show any more clearly the extent to which African-American elements of dance are perceived as highly sexualized. Contact with other bodies and with the floor, articulation of the hips (pelvis), and chanting or chant-related movement are all elements of African culture and African dance that these parents feared would corrupt their children. Africans are no more promiscuous than Europeans or white Americans, so why would anyone assume that such movements imply sexual immorality? *Because that is how whites chose to perceive black dancing bodies, and we, as a society, have yet to correct that*

false image.

This false perception of sexuality has some root in the physical body, as well. Common stereotypes dictate that African-Americans are weightier and bulkier, have more defined musculature and large buttocks, and are born with a natural sense of rhythm (Gottschild 62). In reality, black bodies are just as physically (and rhythmically) diverse as white bodies. The distinction to be made is between white and black *aesthetics*. Any body can be taught to dance a certain technique and to look a certain way; it is a question of training and natural, physical disposition. There are just as many black bodies naturally suited for ballet as there are white bodies naturally suited for hip-hop and break dancing. Given the enormous diversity of bodies in the dance world, the characteristic physical attributes of one race or another are assigned more or less as arbitrarily as the sexual connotations that accompany them.

The sexuality associated with the black dancing body does not have to be entirely negative, however. Hip-hop culture is a subset of youth culture that often focuses on negative aspects of the African-American experience in an attempt to invert the stereotype, turning it into a positive image. One example of this is the glorification of the black female's 'booty' or 'butt.' The female buttocks that served as a symbol of the white man's fetish during slavery is the same buttocks celebrated in hip-hop culture, which attempts to "challenge the assumption that the black body, its skin color and shape, is a mark of shame" (Campbell 501). Styles of dance that emphasize the buttocks, such as 'booty dancing' and other nightclub dances, allow women to show off their bodies as symbols of pride, instead of shame. Such a display of power is also a double-

edged sword because a black woman may feel pride in her dancing, while white observers misinterpret her attitude as a sign of sexual promiscuity or immorality. These are the kinds of assumptions that we need to challenge if we truly want to eliminate racism in the dance world, especially when it comes to hiring dancers for a production.

RACE BACKSTAGE

The problem and issue is where preference leaves off and prejudice begins. When does a penchant for a certain body color, size, shape, style help advance one's creative ideas, and when does it reflect narrow-mindedness?

- Brenda Dixon Gottschild

The people who have the most control over the racial image of a production are the people we never see: the artistic director, the casting director, and the choreographer. The decisions these people make backstage determine where race is cast on stage, and they have a profound effect on what visual messages reach the audience. Racialized casting and hiring of dancers was so commonplace through the middle of the 20th century that even after significant improvements in multiracial representation in major companies, it is still sometimes difficult to tell the difference between preference and prejudice (Gotschild 90-91). While racialized casting can benefit dancers by giving them work, it can also get them stuck in a typecast rut when choreographers can't get past skin color (Gotschild 72). In the professional dance setting, all dancers in a company are at the mercy of the choreographer when it comes to casting, and in light of that power dynamic, it can be difficult to raise questions about race. Choreographers, like all people, prefer to work with people they like and get along with, so if a dancer expresses a negative

reaction to being cast in a certain role (or to not being cast at all), she risks offending the choreographer and losing future jobs. In a profession with no job security, it is dangerous to complain.

Racialized casting is an issue not often addressed by dancers for exactly this reason; it is easier to bite one's tongue and hope for better luck next time. Unfortunately, the next time often isn't any better than the first time for black dancers unless the piece calls for a "creature" character. One of the most appalling implications of racialized casting is the notion that skin color (specifically black skin color) can be part of a costume, because it means the choreographer considers white skin the norm, and all other skin tones are deviations from that supposedly neutral shade (Gottschild 42). Ballet dancer Finis Jhung reflects that when he first joined Harkness Ballet in New York, he became, "the company exotic." Jhung, of Asian descent, explains that.

[w]henever there was some kind of creature role it was given to me. I was that thing that rose out of the woodwork wearing brown tights below my navel. I was one of those apparitions who are supposed to frighten people. Or I was cast as the noble savage, with a jewel in my navel and a long black wig. ("Other Voices" 59)

Aesha Ash, the only African-American woman in the New York City Ballet, tells *Dance Magazine* about her experience working on *Swan Lake*, when the choreographer told the dancers that she "[didn't] want to see any tan bodies

on stage" (qtd. in Collins 42). In the all-white corps¹, Ash's skin color was a perceived blemish on the unity of the group; she clashed with the choreographer's call for all white. Ash also comments that she is continuously cast in "stuff where there's all this fierce raw energy" even though she's entirely capable of showing a softer side in performance (qtd. in Collins 42). It seems in these situations that skin color is intended as an extension of costume, as though being non-white is supposed to make the dancing more acceptable or accessible to the audience.

Unfortunately, it is often the case that skin color is a factor in casting decisions that don't give talented dancers a chance to show their work. Zane Booker, a black dancer with the Philadelphia Dance Company, sums up his frustration with being passed up for less-talented white dancers to dance principal roles:

If you have someone who looks the part and their technique is a little shaky, [the choreographers will] work with them and fix it and put them into it. Where if you don't look the part or if you don't fit into their perception of the part, you never get a chance. You never get a chance. (qtd. in Gottschild 75)

The ballet world, in particular, has more difficulty incorporating black dancers than do other dance genres such as Broadway and modern dance. In

¹ The corps de ballet refers to all the extra dancers on stage during a scene. While principal dancers play characters or dance the lead in a given piece, the corps dances behind him or her. Technical and visual unity is generally considered essential to a good corps because any disruption in the visual is a distraction from the principal dancer.

an interview with *Dance Magazine*, Joselli Andain Dean, PhD, says, "Yes, you have one or two black dancers in a lot of [ballet] companies – mostly men ... But if a company does take African Americans, we're almost always in the corps. Is that progress?" (qtd. in Collins 39). Andrea Long is a principal dancer with Dance Theater of Harlem (DTH, a predominately black company), who used to dance for New York City Ballet (NYCB). She says that, in her experience, "very few mainstream companies are going to say, 'Hey, let's give this black girl a chance; let's make her a ballerina'" (qtd. in Collins 39). Long eventually left NYCB, a mostly white company, because DTH offered her more opportunities to dance outside of the corps de ballet. The pressure felt by black dancers in such predominately white companies is one of the factors that perpetuate racial divisions in the dance world. Black dancers who wish to have performance experience in principal roles will go where they are most likely to be cast in those roles. Thus, many of them dance with predominately black or mixed-race companies, rather than battle uphill through a white company during their peak years.

In most companies, the power of creating a multiracial image is in the hands of that company's artistic director, who is in charge of hiring most of the dancers involved in any particular production. However, though many directors have this power, multiracial casting is not generally a priority. "My responsibility is to hire talent," says Edward Villella, artistic director of Miami City Ballet; "What I do is hire human beings, no matter what their ethnicity, based on certain abilities that suit our repertoire" (qtd. in Collins 39-40). As valid as a director's claim to that right may be, the presence of only one or two Afro-Americans in a

company of 35 can raise questions among dancers about their value to the company and their perceived roles. Many dancers interviewed by *Dance Magazine* commented that they felt like “token” dancers—dancers hired to create a multiracial *image*, but who were often cast only as wild things like savages, mystics, and creatures (“Does Classicism Have a Color?”). Unless the ballet calls for a “black” character, it is much more likely that black dancers will not be cast in principal roles. This raises the question: at what point does artistic license become discrimination? Is a director racist for not wanting to cast a black Romeo or Snow Queen?

One explanation for the absence of more African Americans in ballet companies is the absence of African Americans at auditions for ballet companies. Stanton Welch comments in a recent interview with *Dance Magazine* that he had just conducted an audition with 95 dancers, 6 of whom were black—and that, he says, was above average (Collins 45). The problem with this scenario is not that blacks lack the talent for a professional dance career, but that they lack access to the kind of training and role models available to white dancers. With no available model for success, can we really expect black dancers to battle racial stereotypes in an unfamiliar territory? A dance career, in general, is a much more formidable undertaking for a black dancer in a white dance world than any white dancer will ever experience.

A reevaluation of the role race *should* play in one’s career might show us that replacing “black” and “white” with other adjectives that refer to the true composition of styles, or to the particular choreographer, might change the way both blacks and whites view their potential careers. In other words, recognizing

someone as an *Alley* dancer, rather than a *black* dancer, might help to correct dancers' perception that their options are polarized as either black or white, while also more accurately describing his or her genre of choice. Another route might be to replace the adjectives "African" and "European" with "American" when describing contemporary fusions of style.

WHAT IS 'AMERICAN' DANCE?

Although it is unclear whether the stylistic borrowings are intentional, it is clear that distinctively 'American' forms of dance deploy identifiably Africanist elements.

- Susan Manning

It is black American culture that in many ways distinguishes American culture from European culture. White Americans differ from white Europeans by having easier access.

- Brenda Dixon Gottschild

Among dance critics today, it is generally recognized that "black dance" and "white dance" are social constructs that don't adequately describe the American fusion of African and European styles, nor the diversity of styles within those two arenas. It has also been noted that black and white dancers are starting to look much more like each other—not because of racial mixing, but as a result of integrated teaching and the emphasis on studying dance styles within their cultural contexts (Gotschild 139). For example, in the 50s and 60s, it was difficult for black children to study ballet within a European cultural context because most ballet schools were segregated, with the more accomplished European teachers working with white students. Similarly, hip-hop was equally inaccessible to whites because the black dancers who invented the style would not be hired to teach white dancers. Now that some of those barriers have been crossed and overcome, there is not such a clear divide between African

and European styles as might have been seen in the beginning of the 20th century (and earlier).

Gottschild addresses the fact that any dance style is fluid and subject to influences from other styles through a process of, in her terms, appropriation, approximation, and assimilation (21). It is important to note that elements of particular dance styles are not simply transposed onto other styles; rather they are adapted in such a way that they fit the existing aesthetic of the borrower's style. For instance, typical "white" jazz dance is really an approximation of jazz dance as it first appeared in black communities; the more familiar, white variations come from selections and reinterpretations of black jazz movements that fit what white audiences found aesthetically acceptable.

The problems that fusions of Euro- and Afro-American styles produce may be attributed to a deficiency in our language; the way we refer to dances, styles, and bodies influences the way we think about them, and our habit in this regard is to classify them in terms of black and white, African and European (Gottschild 19). As mentioned earlier, the difference between African and European is not always clear, and the distinction is made at the discretion of the observer; without any concrete criteria for classification, the label is entirely subjective. This begs the question: if dance can't be *objectively* categorized as European or African, can and should it be recognized as *American* dance?

Modern and post-modern dance, contemporary ballet, jazz, Broadway, and swing are all fusions of African and European aesthetics that pertain specifically to the culture within the United States. The lindy hop, for example, is an American dance that expands upon the European tradition of dancing in

couples with inclusions of “African” elements in the bent, “get down” posture and the energetic, hopping rhythm characteristic of this style. Lindy hop originated in black communities, but does that make it a black or “African” dance? A stylistic definition based on the dancers’ skin color rather than on dance technique holds little argumentative power; black ballerinas don’t make classical ballet a “black” dance, after all. But how can we recognize African and European elements without blanket categorizing the style as either one or the other?

We might look to the hip-hop community for some ideas. In terms of multiracial representation and multicultural influence, hip-hop is one of the more accepting forms of dance today. The difference between hip-hop and other styles of dance is that it seems less concerned with the body than with what the body can do. Dancer and choreographer Chuck Davis explains that “in traditional [Africanist] dance, [your body] is the last thing you worry about. If you can dance, then you can dance” (qtd. in Gottschild 33). The focus on ability and technique could explain why successful hip-hop artists tend to vary more in their ethnic background than do successful dancers in other styles; nothing about their bodies matters to hip-hop except what they could learn to *do*. Halifu Osumare, Assistant Professor of Dance and American Studies at Bowling Green State University and former dancer with Rod Rodgers Dance Company in New York, believes that

the cultural multiplicity of the globally defined twenty-first century offers more polyvalent possibilities. ... Contemporary hip hop culture allows us a vision of how intercultural processes can push us beyond the social

construction and objectification of "race" inculcated over the last three hundred years. (40)

In her on-site research, Osumare found that the hip-hop culture in Hawaii embraced black, Asian, Caucasian, and Hawaiian dancers without any apparent bias for one over the other. In hip-hop "battles" (dance-offs), all dancers are on a level playing field, and the only goal is to show up the other dancer with skills and attitude. The focus on ability rather than body takes hip-hop a significant step away from racial bias and could help dancers, directors, and choreographers avoid making racist decisions.

However, the task of deconstructing racial stereotypes may prove more difficult for the ballet world. With the continued improvement and accessibility of training to all dancers, it is no longer legitimate to argue that there is a difference of ability between black and white dancers. However, that doesn't mean that 50- and 60-year-old white directors will recognize a black dancer's talent. The first step to fixing the race issue might be acknowledging that the issue still exists. Turning a blind eye when a dancer raises a question about race doesn't make the problem go away, but recognizing and acknowledging the issue can help us think about what we can do to fix it. Remembering that both African and European aesthetics form only part of American dance may be enough to change our attitudes of superiority and inferiority when it comes to the artistic merit of dancers and choreographers of all shapes, colors, and sizes.

Just as all dance performances consist of choreography and the audience's interpretation of the performance, the solution to the race problem in the dance world has two parts: the companies and the audience. If we hope

to end the de facto segregation of major companies, then the onus is on artistic directors to start paying more attention to the racial implications of their decisions. Not only should they be aware of the types of dancers they're hiring, but they should also take note of the roles those dancers are given. As much as directors and choreographers have artistic license, they need to be aware that they have the power to perpetuate racism, an issue that extends beyond the dance world to society as a whole.

After fixing backstage problems, it is up to the audience to avoid racial bias in the interpretation of those decisions. A choreographer is *allowed* to make stylistic references to any genre of dance he might choose, so it is not necessarily our job to critique whether he should have included this step or that character. Rather, we should try to evaluate why such decisions were made and how they fit into the choreographer's vision for the performance. If we take the time to understand the intent of the piece, we can avoid misinterpretations like those of Patricia Hoffbauer's choreography about colonialism or of Alvin Ailey's attempt to create a strictly American repertory. Even reevaluating the language we use can make a difference. This is not to say that we shouldn't acknowledge African and European influences as such, but we need to be careful that we don't categorize styles of dance as *black* or *white* (or red or yellow, for that matter). Racial bias in the dance world will have ended when we—as dancers, choreographers, directors and audience members—can look at dance and separate body from ability. Until then, we are only doing ourselves a disservice by limiting artistic approval to those who perpetuate the divide.

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