



# ANTIRACISM IN BALLET TEACHING

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Edited by  
Kate Mattingly and Iyun Ashani Harrison



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## BALLET'S EVER-PRESENT PRESENCE

Thomas F. DeFrantz

The cultural pull of ballet as a realm of influence accelerates. More and more, young people think of ballet as the way that dance moves them from an interest to a practice, or from an awesome spectacle to something they simply must do by any means necessary. Ballet becomes foundational to any training that allows for a career in dance; ballet takes over the narrative of what it means to engage in dance. Even as some dance programs in higher education move away from requiring ballet for dance students—and these programs are few and far between—ballet continues its stranglehold on the idea of dance as an art in the United States. How has this happened? How is it that ballet becomes a stand-in for the idea of dance as an art form, inevitably worthy of public attention?

### Cultural Capital

Ballet takes up a vast amount of real estate in a general cultural imaginary concerning dance. A cultural imaginary might be an aspect of culture and its value, or *capital*, that define the way that people understand a relationship of a thing's value to its form. Why is ballet so well-regarded in general? The form holds high cultural capital across many different communities in locations all around the planet.

Cultural capital has been effectively theorized by French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu in his 1979 volume, *Distinction*.<sup>1</sup> Bourdieu was concerned with how taste manifests, especially in relation to social class and social identity. People make distinctions concerning locations, practices, objects, and the human communities with which they are willing to be affiliated. These distinctions emerge in relationship to social exchanges but also in terms of economic exchange. In many ways, cultural capital determines the amount of

economic and social value that an object or a practice might be able to hold. Ballet is thought to be a "high value" physical expression and, as such, something that should be maintained by institutions that can control its quality and presentation to the general public. Ballet holds high cultural capital, creating an ongoing impression of specialized quality, profound physical discipline, and unerring capacity to demonstrate aspects of grace, beauty, and fragility. In the United States, ballet aligns with other expressive forms that stand in as high-value remnants of a quasi-European past: opera, classical music, and fine art. Cultural capital surrounds these forms and imbues them with a sense of importance to the general public.

Cultural capital compels municipalities to invest in these forms, with the idea that an affiliation with these art forms will demonstrate refinement and sophisticated taste. Thus, museums, concert halls, and opera stages that welcome ballet have been built in many cities across the United States. This specialized real estate contributes to the sense of value that surrounds ballet, as the general public believes that the specialness of these buildings is inherent to the specialness of ballet as art.

Of course, cultural capital is at once illusory and entirely real. There might not be much endemic to ballet that would ensure it to become the foundational dance form for professional and amateur training in dance. And yet, through time and repetition, ballet has become the primary cultural marker for dance in the context of the United States. This lines up with Bourdieu's theorization that cultural capital and taste cohere through embodied practices, and that the attention paid by a mainstream of participants enlarges through time to encourage more and more people to contribute to the value accredited to a form. That value may be economic or imaginary, but it has real effects in the world.

### **Colonial Roots of Ballet**

Ballet in the United States rose as a fantasy space of theatrical dance deployed to create a connection to colonial manners, understood by many to be refined and honed by time. And it is true that ballet had enjoyed hundreds of years of uninterrupted development by 1929 when Dorothy Alexander created the group that later became the first professional organization for its practice in the United States, the Atlanta Ballet. As ballet continued to develop in the United States, it allowed artists to claim physical affinity with European creative practices. The event of ballet took on an aspect of "civilizing" the harshness of American social life. Ballet's reliance on simple classical music, usually performed live, contributed to a sensation of antique simplicity, unfettered by the capitalist concerns of modern life.

Practitioners of ballet honed its pedagogical ability to train some dancers toward a certain excellence in its contours. And ballet assuredly colonized professional dance in the United States, setting an exclusive standard of dance

activity that became the *lingua franca* for professional dance artistry, even alongside the emergence of modern dance. Remarkably, ballet and modern dance each resisted aspects of African American musicality and physical gesture in their formation. Where ballet called for "lightness" and "grace," qualities of motion that are often irrelevant to excellence in African American artistry, modern dance progenitor Isadora Duncan wrote in 1927 of her desire to create an idiom that would resist the "inane coquetry of the ballet or the sensual convulsion of the Negro."<sup>2</sup>

The racialized nature of colonial encounters becomes essential here. The *colonial* might be a structural logic of conquer, one that assumes that the organizational methods of the colonizer are to become the ultimate considerations for the colonized, the disavowed, and the impoverished. As Black Americans were continually forced into impossible circumstances of a school-to-prison pipeline and racialized discrediting in every part of public life for generations, an urgency to prove capacity in the processes of the colonizers took deep root in our social psyches. Ballet stands in for a certain kind of powerful whiteness here, an aesthetic remedy for the many injuries that Black Americans and other marginalized people of color have endured.

Ballet emerged in contradistinction to the African American dances that stressed communal gathering and the sharing of passionate joy among participants. And ballet developed as a container of special import to measure white cultural achievement. For many dancers of color, to prove excellence in ballet is to resist colonial and racist asymmetries that would deny our presence in "sophisticated" modes of creativity. The contradiction here becomes obvious: ballet becomes a test for an elusive humanity, a humanity often denied to people of color in the United States. At the same time, ballet as a form offers no interest in structures of life that surround Black people in everyday circumstances. In this way, ballet operates as a colonial agent of assimilation for all who engage it, whether to prove a certain humanity or to imagine an illusory class mobility toward a perceived European sophistication that is less available to many in the United States.

Ballet on the global stage operates in a distinctive manner according to where it is practiced. Bourdieu's formation of culture as a phenomenon of locality can remind us that place matters. While ballet movements might seem similar from one studio to the next, the social structures that produce life in Taiwan, for example, are distinctive from those in South Africa. How young people come to practice ballet in these places, or Vietnam, or the Philippines, will be particular in relation to social life in these locations, as well as in neighborhoods in Oakland, CA, Atlanta, GA, or Manchester, VT. Thus, there is no singular way to consider how ballet operates among large anonymous populations; there can only be ways to consider how ballet continues to operate for particular people in particular locales.

## How Language Matters

But what do we mean when we say ballet? Do we mean some sort of classical technique, as in Vaganova or Cecchetti? Or do we mean the basic movements structured in a classroom format, with some sense of barre-work, plié, tendu, développé, and grand battement? Is this about stretching in several directions simultaneously, even as part of the body is held still? Does it draw more students into the studio when we say "ballet" because we think we know what that might be?

It matters how we use language in relation to dance practices. When we place dance forms into a context of "classical art," we tend to elevate them to a place of prominence that distinguishes them from everyday activities. This might be fine if we followed this practice for any dance genre offered as a formal practice in a college classroom. But the logic of cultural capital predicts that some forms of classicism will be considered more important than others. Too often, when we label dances to be "social" or "vernacular," we imply that these are forms that require little expertise. We imply that these forms do not value aesthetic excellence; that these forms of dance exist along simplistic lines of pleasure in their execution. Labeling ballet as a "classical" art, we participate in a hierarchical rendering that separates it from other dance forms. And in moving towards ballet as a primary form of dance, rather than forms of dance concerned with participatory joy, or the caring for rhythm, Americans were able to preemptively reduce the Africanist impact on an emergent classicism. Classical dance became ballet in the United States, reducing everything else to a secondary category of importance.

## Ballet Training

Ballet training in the United States began with a catch-as-catch-can format for years, continuing until the emigration of a significant number of Russian artists, many of whom had been affiliated with the Ballets Russes. Most famously among these, George Balanchine established the School of American Ballet (SAB) in 1934. Balanchine developed a training model quickly, which became a respected standard of progressive, professional achievement. Balanchine's choreography for film, Broadway, and the ballet stage fascinated audiences, and scores of dancers sought his training methods. Balanchine's preferred fast movements, downward-directed energy made evident by a deep plié, and a presentational approach to exercises that always open the dancer toward the audience became standard for American ballet dancers. SAB fed the New York City Ballet, and in time dancers from that company dispersed to direct other major organizations across the country, including Miami City Ballet, Philadelphia Ballet, Pacific Northwest Ballet, and the celebrated Dance Theatre of Harlem. By now, Balanchine and SAB's influence extend deep into how ballet is practiced around the planet.

Balanchine himself may have been interested in an anti-colonial ballet world, one that has still not emerged even generations after his death. Significantly, scholars, including myself, have pointed out that Balanchine sought to establish his school and company as an entirely integrated assembly of white and Black artists working together. That anti-colonial gesture was squashed by the racist presumptions of financial backers who excluded people of color from Balanchine's studio and company and professional ballet training across the United States for decades.

Balanchine training became quite particular as one mode among several. Cecchetti, Vaganova, the Royal Academy of Dance syllabus, and more recently, the National Training Curriculum disseminated by the American Ballet Theatre each seek to stabilize teaching methods and outcomes to gather ballet practice towards a characteristic style. The proliferation of approaches means that most students and faculty likely combine elements of these methods, as narrow training in a singular style does not predict the versatility most professional artists covet. In some ways, the 21<sup>st</sup> century availability of a variety of approaches to training returns most young dancers who are unable to study at SAB or ABT itself to the catch-as-catch-can format of a century ago.

### Is Ballet Inevitable?

The question of ballet's seeming inevitability connects to a very American desire to control territory, configured here as an art practice in dance. Ballet had been the leading form of theatrical dance respected in Europe for hundreds of years; some Americans wanted to prove their ability to participate in its time-proven practices. Even today, as dancers ask inevitable questions about the necessity of ballet as an aspect of training, the useful nature of its method continues to support its ubiquity. Ballet stands in as a gathering notion, a standard to work from, and a practice by which to measure other forms. Of course, it need not have been ballet that became the primary form of dance in the United States. What if it had been tap dance? What if an American-made dance practice that allows for the exploration of rhythm and musicality had become the "most basic" bit of dancing that young people engaged in, moving towards dance as an activity? We can only speculate toward another parallel universe where ballet was placed adjacent to other forms rather than as the leading, most important, and singular component of interest in dance.

Ballet offers an escape from everyday structures of life for any who engage in its practices. And ballet's highly stylized, theatrical manifestations appeal to people who need fantastical imagery, unusual stories, and unexpected explorations of turning, leaping, and balance. Ballet becomes a way to recognize dance as a specialized movement, a theatrical method for social exchange that can be shared among large numbers of people regardless of their level of

participation across time. Ballet thus performs a crucial physical task, allowing multitudes access to its simplest terms in movements that are decidedly different from other gestures and motions found in everyday life.

### What Ballet Demands

As a physical practice, ballet offers ways to be in motion through an elongated body, one that engages muscles isometrically along a center axis. The basic stance of ballet reaches up and away from the floor, emphasizing a stretching of limbs and feet. In ballet practice, the body is treated as a stretchable object that reaches simultaneously in opposite directions, curving as needed in the back so that the shoulders can be positioned variously in relation to the limbs. Ballet techniques are designed to produce a general effect of lightness with energy directed upward towards the rear walls of the halls of performance where the dancing happens.

Ballet is generally practiced in a studio or on a stage; it matters that ballet is a form that tends to require a specialized environment for its terms to be recognized. As dance, it does not belong to "the people" wherever we might be, and its aesthetic impact is built upon an exclusionary logic that predicts special access for some—those willing to go into the theater and remain stilled while the performance unfolds. While cheers and "bravos" may follow a dynamic array of turns and jumps in a ballet performance, ballet generally does not call for sustained participation from its witnessing audience. Ballet calls for a rarefied physicality, entirely affected and distinctive from everyday movement, and usually performed in specialized shoes for women and men. Its audience is to remain generally still and quiet as the dance happens, evaluating its successes and achievements. In this, ballet sets up terms of engagement that require judgment from its audience in a manner, not unlike its original practice in the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> century courts of Europe.

This essential scrutiny of the performer is built into ballet as a practice. This need to assess the form and achievement of the performer forces ballet into an asymmetry of roles for the dancer and audience. This power dynamic invites the audience to scrutinize the artist in a manner not unlike the role of a sovereign or wealthy patron regarding the peasantry, encouraging a disavowal or exotification of the dancer. Ballet proceeds from a judgmental relationship with the audience, choreographer, and teacher that can easily extend into an unhealthy self-assessment for the dancer, often built upon watching oneself dance in the mirror.

As we consider the terms of racialized pedagogies and the scrutiny of bodies, it can become obvious that tendencies toward racism, misogyny, and body-troting are built into ballet as a practice. Crafting anti-racist pedagogies here might go against the very foundations of ballet training, even as these new practices are surely essential to understanding any sort of future for the form.

## Limitations of Ballet as a Profession

Ballet as a profession contends with serious limitations. Ballet offers minimal material rewards for all the effort that goes into its practice. There are very few jobs for professional ballet artists, and many of these positions are part-time or part-year. The profession is ridden with injury and an extremely short career timeline. While the attention afforded to ballet dancers comes amid the seemingly-glamorous physical surround and attractive costumes of the stages and studios where it is performed, it is not an easy profession to endure. Competition for roles and an opportunity to be featured plagues social interactions among groups of dancers. Structural racism and homophobia restrict access to the stage for queers of color, queers, and people of color in general. The working environments for ballet dancers are as rife with the unfair asymmetries of gender, class, and age as in any other US-based profession. And audiences and critics bring high expectations into the room with them, raising the stakes of performance beyond any sense of normalcy. It bears repeating that in the United States, ballet is always configured as special, outside of everyday concerns, and a demonstration of the fantastical.

These aspects also make ballet attractive to those who enjoy risk and the ephemeral nature of gesture. Ballet cannot be effectively "captured" even when it is filmed; the experience of being in the live presence of skillful ballet artists far exceeds the capacity of film technology. The limitations of the form attract some to it, and dancers enjoy the unlikely reliance on impermanence that is foundational to its execution. But even as many people are drawn to try ballet or engage it in order to practice the stretching and balancing that it requires, very few—a minuscule number—are allowed to perform in professional circumstances. This limitation by number forces the form into a horrible routine of elimination, one that rewards those most like their predecessors. In this manner, dancers tend to replace those who came before them, reproducing the racism, misogyny, and homophobia of the recent past.

## Futuring Ballet

Ballet will have to continue to open its practice to the thousands of children and young adults who are drawn towards its contours. The parents and guardians of these young dancers will continue to support ballet practice as best they can to respond to the desire that flows from the audience toward the people moving onstage. And ballet will inevitably change in response to these expanding publics who want to dance and want to dance ballet.

To imagine open space for ballet as a training and performance practice, we will need to expand our sense of how ballet can feel. The challenge here is enormous: general publics tend to think they know what ballet looks like, what sorts of gestures and movements define it, and who should do it. As ballet expands towards unexpected vistas, it will need to be able to look

different than it has. It will need to understand its histories differently, according to the routes of affiliation that have determined people's presence in the form. And it will need to be taught differently, allowing people to enter its particularity with a clear-eyed determination that might be matched by a reward of affirmation and encouragement.

The shift in perspective that will allow publics to accept a variety of body types and physical approaches to ballet takes time to coalesce. For example, we find many examples of Black excellence in ballet over the past fifty years in the context of the United States.<sup>3</sup> Inevitably, these dancers bring a particular physical address to the craft, even as an ongoing narrative of inappropriateness or lack of skill still surrounds Black presence in the form. White supremacy is baked into ballet training in a way that moves people of color, trans, gender-fluid, and disabled dancers out of the mainstream formations. This is surely the challenge of rethinking how we teach and share our practices of ballet.

### The Dance Remains Present

By now, we know that **the dance will not be denied**. People will dance, and dance will shape consciousness and pleasure, and group dynamics. Ballet is a dance form that people practice for many reasons, and it will not simply disappear because we begin to realize that its practices have been harmful to many.

Ballet has gained an unavoidable place of high-value cultural capital. This explains why so many dancers feel it easier to claim a relationship to ballet than not. As ballet stands in for dance, it has become commonplace to compare any form of dance with ballet in order to characterize how dancing materializes. Ballet stands in for disciplined, specialized dancing that demonstrates "grace," "lightness," "fragility," "elegance," and "strength." Its form socializes girls and femmes to move with strength and delicacy at once, in gestures that have been culturally recognized as belonging to white femininity. Dancing ballet, we feel this affiliation of ballet with a white feminine in the context of the United States, even as we might believe that ballet training should be available to anyone who wants to dance at any age: as a method of socializing through movement that has a patina of classicism and historical gravity.

The contradictions of the form and its politicized histories surround its practice. And still, we dance, and we dance ballet. We wonder at the stretchings of the limbs and extremities and the counter-balances and lifts that predict something other-worldly. We marvel, at times, at the smooth movements that glide and turn with a flowing tautness, one that does not refer to the rhythms of the earth or the body as so many other dance forms do. We imagine, differently and among each other, what it would be like to float and fly for a moment in the leaps of ballet that seem essential to its recognition. And we wonder how it could be if we all could engage this form that has so much to offer to our sense of fantasy and physical discipline.

## Notes

- 1 Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987).
- 2 Isadora Duncan, *My Life* (Garden City, NY: Garden City Publishing, 1927), 339–343.
- 3 Thomas F. DeFrantz, “Ballet,” in *Encyclopedia of African American History and Culture* (Detroit, MI: Gale, 2016), 183, and “The Race of Contemporary Ballet: Interpellations of Africanist Aesthetics” in *The Oxford Handbook of Contemporary Ballet*, eds. Katherina Farrugia-Kriel and Jull Nunes Jensen (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021), 562–580.