

**AN EXAMINATION OF HOW EUROCENTRIC DANCE HAS
DISTORTED THE SELF-IMAGE OF BLACK WOMEN**

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ABSTRACT

Due to lack of research, the nuanced experiences of Black women training in the discipline of ballet, have been overlooked. As a result of lacking academic examination, the disorientation of Black women has continued at the hands of foundational and cultural principles found in Eurocentric ballet. This research is a qualitative study of scholarship paired with auto-ethnography to highlight the mental and physical damage Eurocentric ballet has caused Black women. The presented scholarship employed an afrocentric approach in an effort to accurately articulate and validate the experiences of Black ballerinas.

This work is dedicated to the
Black ballerinas who came before,
And the Black ballerinas who will come after.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Ballet has aligned itself as the foundation of dance and has significantly influenced the hierarchy in the artistic field. Through intense and strategic efforts including funding, opportunity, and curriculum, the French based technique has positioned itself as the standard amongst dancers regardless of background, culture, and ethnicity.¹ As the vocabulary, dance steps, and artistic principles have traveled to western parts of the world, the cultural characteristics have also traveled into the cultural spaces of Black women.

Historically, researchers have aligned their work with maintaining the assertion that ballet is the constitution of dance and have produced scholarship supporting this idea. Research has played a significant role in cementing ballet as both the beginning and end of respectable dance. It is what every dancer is instructed to master and what ultimately defines their success. While ballet is a Eurocentric dance style, it has neutralized itself amongst dancers and dance scholars that encourages the continuation of slated, skewed, and inaccurate examination and scholastic conclusions. Although some researchers have dedicated their studies to revealing the historic origins of the art form and its development, ballet has maintained its status and authority in prominent dance institutions despite its late entry in dance's historic timeline. This has had significant influence both in and outside of the studio to further cement the European dance style as

¹ Adesola Akinleye, (Re:) Claiming Ballet (Intellect, 2021).

the standard.² By situating dance at the epicenter of the artistic genre, research surrounding dance has remained Eurocentric thus, stifling accurate critiques of how it has impacted its practitioners. Forcing dancers to adopt a Eurocentric standard has significantly effected individuals of differing cultural backgrounds, specifically Black women.

Current research has begun exploring the racist undertones in ballet however, it falls short of explaining the damage it has caused Black women who have trained and continue to train in the discipline. Historically, African American women have suffered in the United States as a direct result of imposed cultural practices and racism.³ Recent research has slightly highlighted the role ballet has played in maintaining these intense levels of oppression. Since prominent Black ballerinas including Misty Copeland, Chrystyn Mariah Fentroy, and Michaela DePrince have shared their experiences, there has been a shift in the conversation. Bloch and Capezio's recent releases of limited brown pointe shoes, the passing of the Crown Act, and Karon Davis' *Beauty Must Suffer* exhibit have paired with Copeland, Fentroy, and DePrince's public stories to encourage practitioners, observers, and researchers to challenge the stratum of dance and the severe impact it has had on Black women.

While select personal accounts, legislation, and artistic presentations, have gained traction and raised awareness around the professional and pre-professional studio culture established by ballet, an afrocentric understanding and approach to the study has caused a

² Ibid.

³ George Okello Abungu and Webber Ndoro, Cultural Heritage Management in Africa, October 18, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003199144>.

gap in the research. Without this tailored approach and academic lens, the current conversation remains stagnant and unequipped to challenge the perception and prestige of Eurocentric ballet or validate the experiences of Black ballerinas. Colorism and exclusion have been prevalent topics and common themes in the discourse around Black women in ballet however, they fail to highlight major cultural characteristics found in ballet and their deeply rooted psychological impact. This research will analyze, critique, and utilize personal experiences, reported accounts of Black ballerinas, foundational principles of ballet and African dance, and dance scholarship through an afrocentric vantage point to articulate how it has influenced the way Black women view and feel about themselves. These tools are employed with the objective of answering the following question: *How has Eurocentric ballet distorted the self image of Black women?* Afrocentricity will ground the study and allow for an accurate articulation of how Black women have suffered as a direct result of their professional training.

This research aims to: 1) Identify the cultural differences found in ballet and African dance. 2) Understand how those differences have impacted Black women who have trained in the dance discipline. 3) Articulate micro-aggressions found in studio culture and its impact on the Black woman's self-image and perception. 4) Validate the experiences of Black ballerinas who have been culturally dislocated by European ballet. The ultimate goal of this study is to validate the experiences of Black ballerinas whose personal perception has been damaged and provide a framework for change.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

In order to properly highlight the mental, physical, and spiritual impact ballet has had on Black women, examining current research and academic viewpoints is required. There is a plethora of scholarship analyzing the history, structure, and technique of ballet, however, there is little research centering the Black woman's experience within the art form. Due to the lack of research on the subject matter, scholarship of various related topics have been consulted to establish an understanding of the current academic conversation. The selected themes that contributed to the research are: 1) the history and distinct characteristics of European ballet, 2) principles of African dance, 3) Black women in ballet and their self image.

History and Foundations of European Ballet

Understanding the history of ballet, its dominance in the dance world, and its impact on the dance industry, is imperative to this study. The assertion of ballet as the foundation of all dance technique has been supported by various esteemed dance contributors including George Balanchine, Carlo Basis, Marius Petipa and dance scholars like Jennifer Homans, Jack Anderson, and Gail Grant. The idea solidified itself throughout the dance community by the dance teachings, curriculum, and research presented by individuals aligned with the names aforementioned. While maintaining this assertion, dance scholars have acknowledged outside influences pre-dating the development of ballet and their contributions to what is defined as dance and dance

technique.⁴ Their scholarship separates foundation and origin to acknowledge native dance styles found in modern day Africa, Asia, and parts of Europe while establishing ballet as an organized and foundational dance technique. Homans, Anderson, and Grant establish Greece as the main influence on ballet while crediting the dance forms emphasis on theatrics and structure to the rule of King Henri II and Florence Catherine Medici.⁵ Each scholar historically marks Henri II and Medici's rule as the beginning of refined, structured, and professional dance. Their writing points that under their reign, ballet had many characteristics inspired by Greece, Italy, Southern Asia, and Northern and Western Africa, however dance masters began developing distinct characteristics and technical approaches to set it apart. Homans noted, in *Apollo's Angels: A History of Ballet*, choreographers prioritized perfection and removed emotional and spiritual connection in an effort to polish and sophisticate the art as much as possible. She further concludes that this was an effort to distinguish ballet from native and ancient dances found in neighboring communities that influenced their take on the art. She later explained that perfection became the standard and shifted ballet to a profession and not a communal activity. Homans detailed dance master Carlo Blasis' tailored approach to the ballet technique, and stated:

In an attempt to uncover the precise mechanics of an expressive body.... He expounded a "theory of the center of gravity" and dropped plump lines (as Leonardo had done) through the body posed in ballet positions and pictured in the nude— even posed statuesquely in a stone base. He charted the weights and balances and contemplated the physics of moving thus

⁴ Jennifer Homans, "Italian Hersey: Pantomime, Virtuosity, and Italian Ballet," essay, in *Apollo's Angels: A History of Ballet* (Randomhouse Trade Paperbacks, 2010), 224.

⁵ Gail Grant, *Technical Manual and Dictionary of Classical Ballet* (Victoria (BC): Must Have Books, 2021).

and so without compromising balance and line. Above all, he analyzed the relationship between posture and emotion and sketched stick figures with dotted lines showing the gaze and geometry of “stupor,” “enthusiasm,” “meditation.” “We will portray,” he wrote enthusiastically in another work “lightness” in using the figure of an upside-down pyramid, and we will then demonstrate that in order to give a body a quick and light air, it is necessary, as far as possible, to diminish it’s base.⁶

Perfection became a strong distinctive trait of ballet and began to spread in the technique.

This emphasis became increasing evident through the development of dance positions that prioritized geometric symmetry, required perfection classes, and a decrease in choreography tempo to reveal imperfections in movement execution.⁷ Perfection became not only the goal but requirement for each piece of ballet, including the costuming.⁸

Jeromy Hopgood, Jennifer Homans, and Toni Bentley have added that choreographers were intentional about the shoes dancers wore and preferred pairs that were as close to the dancers’ skin as possible. In addition, shortened tutus that allowed the entire leg of the dancer to be visible and create clean and clear lines were selected.⁹ The professionalization of ballet is a noted contributing factor to the dominance of ballet. In his book *Ballet and Modern Dance: A Concise History* Jack Anderson highlighted how the establishment of venues like the Paris- Opera and Paris-Opera Ballet School, allowed trained dancers to become a common form of entertainment and part of a formal societal practice. He detailed the development of theater culture and the intentional separation

⁶ Jennifer Homans, “Italian Hersey: Pantomime, Virtuosity, and Italian Ballet ,” essay, in *Apollo’s Angels: A History of Ballet* (Randomhouse Trade Paperbacks, 2010), 224.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Elina Wisung, “Costumes through the Ages,” *The Lewis Foundation of Classical Ballet*, August 16, 2022, <https://www.thelewisfoundation.org/2022/08/costumes-through-the-ages/>.

⁹ Toni Bentley, Edward Gorey, and Lincoln Kirstein, *Costumes by Karinska* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1995).

between the audience and the performers. In addition to this clear line of separation, stage construction and theater etiquette were noted elements highlighted to articulate how ballet began to move in an elitist direction and excluded groups of people.¹⁰

Homans and Anderson both brought attention to the impact religion had on the development of ballet. They agree that the French church had major influence over society's perception of ballet however, the organized religion often contradicted itself with the inclusion of dance in religious gatherings. While ballet became popular in the secular world, the conflicting opinions of religious clergy prevented the craft from gaining universal respect. However, at the same time in Russia, the condemnation of ballet by the church did not exist, a distinction highlighted in Anderson's *Ballet and Modern Dance: A Concise History*. He expounds on this idea and adds:

Ballet was imported into Russia during the country's first period of Westernization when many European fashions, including dancing, were widely imitated. Several foreign ballet masters were invited to Russia, and one of them, the French-born Jean Baptiste Lande, founded the St. Petersburg Ballet School in 1738...If dancers were morally suspect in western Europe, Imperial patronage made dancing a respectable career for both men and women in Russia. Dancing provided women with job security and the opportunity to lead an independent life. Male students at the state ballet were considered the equal of the students at military or naval academies and had similar uniforms.¹¹

Anderson's point articulates how ballet continued to gain respect and popularity despite controversy, while also highlighting how it traveled outside of its place of origin, France.

While the negative stigma and societal perception from ballet was removed with its

¹⁰ Jack Anderson, "Imperial Russian Ballet," essay, in *Ballet & Modern Dance: A Concise History* (Haghtstown, NJ: Princeton Books, 2013), 100.

¹¹ Ibid.

spread to Russia, there remained a strong and heightened emphasis on perfection. Russian dance masters implemented more requirements to the technique to produce perfection among its practitioners.¹²

Adesola Akinleye and Sarah Wilbur's works bring an additional perspective to the academic conversation as they highlight funding. Akinleye's (*re:*) *Claiming Ballet* pairs with statistics pulled from the Arts Council of England, supported the understanding that ballet has played a large role in European culture and was important to leaders to preserve. As a result, money was poured into operas, theaters, and dance institutions to aid in the continued development of ballet.¹³ Sarah Wilbur contributes to this in her text *Funding Bodies: Five Decades of Dance Making at the National Endowment for the Arts* and concluded art fellowships and organizational grants along with the executive boards that directly influence funding, have contributed to the push for preservation of dance, specifically ballet.¹⁴ Both writers agreed monetary power, was used to make ballet the dance standard across the globe and directly influenced accessibility and visibility, instructor selection, and the established criteria used in dance institutions. Andrea Olmstead added to this point in *Juilliard: A History* where she highlights the direct role investors had on the development of the dance curriculum.¹⁵ This detailed history confirmed the requirement of every dance student enrolled in the institution to take ballet,

¹² Jennifer Homans, *Apollo's Angels: A History of Ballet* (New York: Random House Trade Paperbacks, 2011).

¹³ Sarah Wilbur, *Funding Bodies: Five Decades of Dance Making at the National Endowment for the Arts* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2021).

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Andrea Olmstead, *Juilliard: A History* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999).

was a direct result of numerous investors prioritizing their personal views on ballet. This model has been repeated in colleges, conservatories, and intensives including Fordham University, Dance Institute of Washington, and New York University.

Principles of African Dance

Front runners and esteemed leaders in the African dance community, have presented notable research that provides clear understanding of the dance style and its origins. Samuel Floyd, Kariamuwelsh Asante, and Adesola Akinleye, have emphasized how the song, drum, and dance were integrated into early and current African civilization.¹⁶ Their scholarship concluded that these activities extended beyond entertainment and were integrated into society and spirituality. Floyd, Welsh Asante, and Akinleye have all detailed how dance is incorporated into communal practices including rituals, initiations, royal celebrations, and general social gatherings. The readings provided understanding to how the three elements (song, drum, and dance) work cohesively in African dance and are equally imbedded into the culture. In Welsh Asante's *African Dance: An Artistic, Historical, and Philosophical Inquiry*, she highlighted the meaningful connection African dancers have with the dances they perform. The text provided insight to the purpose of each African dance step or sequence and their significance to African spirituality. She emphasized and supported this point by highlighting specific examples including the foot stomping of the Zulus, shoulder articulation performed by Ethiopian men, and high jumps demonstrated by the Masai, and their connection to blessings, direct wishes from their spiritual figures, and to other

¹⁶ Samuel A. Floyd, *The Power of Black Music: Interpreting Its History from Africa to the United States* (Oxford University Press, 1997).

members of community.¹⁷ This understanding and explanation is further supported by scholars including Alphonse Tierou, Barbara S. Glass, and Elizabeth Hanely. Another sharp point noted by Welsh Asante in her writing around African dance and its origins, is how perfection is perceived in this specific genre of dance. She articulated the lack of emphasis on perfect but rather communal participation, personal connection, and purpose. This perspective draws clear distinction between African dance and other dance disciplines. The approach, developed technique, and practices of African dance that stem from this foundational principle articulates the expectation placed on practitioners while emphasizing the celebration of individuality. Welsh Asante, Hanley, and Glass, make a point to highlight complexity and accessibility of African dance through their respective research. They detail the polyrhythms, core control, spacial and musical awareness, appreciation for community, and rigorous training required to master the dance style in an effort to provide further insight to the core of the dance form. Robert Farris Thomas furthers this thought and introduces an additional unique characteristic of African dance. He explained what is identified in the technique, as the element of the “cool” which allowed dancers to perform intricate dance moves while appearing unfazed, calm, and without concern of their intense efforts.¹⁸

In addition to the previous points highlighted above, Welsh Asante discussed the impact world politics and nation relations, specifically specifically colonization and the spread of European dominance and influence, had on African dance in her book *African*

¹⁷ Kariamuw Welsh Asante, “Dance As A Reflection of Life,” essay, in *African Dance: An Artistic, Historical, and Philosophical Inquiry*, 2nd ed. (New York, NY: African World Press, 2010)

¹⁸ Thompson, Robert Farris. “An Aesthetic of the Cool.” *African Arts* 7, no. 1 (1973): 41–91. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3334749>

Dance. She detailed religious and judicial powers that were established and enforced to eliminate native dances and practices.¹⁹ Welsh along with her academic peers, revealed how dance was imbedded in the culture and societal framework of African community. Welsh Asante calls to this point, to emphasize how detrimental colonization was to the art form and its stifled development. As a result of these restrictions, African culture as a whole was simultaneously oppressed. This tactic of erasure is supported by Akinleye, Francesca Castaldi, Regina Fletcher, Sadono, and Raquel Monroe as they emphasize this in their writings and explanations. Despite noted attempts of suppressing African dance, the style has remained prevalent on the African continent and throughout the diaspora.²⁰ The articulated characteristics and foundational elements including polyrhythms, isolations, community, and individuality in movement quality are evident through dance styles around the world including dancehall (Jamaica), hip hop (United States), merengue (Dominican Republic). Regardless of location, African dance is easily identified due to its prominent attributes. Its strong foundation has allowed African dance to travel throughout the diaspora and remain a key component of African culture.

Black Women In Ballet and Their Self Identity

There is little research detailing the experiences of Black women in ballet. Prominent Black ballerinas like Misty Copeland, who became American Ballet Theatre's first African American principal dancer, and Michaela DePrince, the youngest dancer in Dance Theatre of Harlem's history to join the company full-time, have shared their

¹⁹ Kariamu Welsh Asante, "Dance As A Reflection of Life," essay, in *African Dance: An Artistic, Historical, and Philosophical Inquiry*, 2nd ed. (New York, NY: African World Press, 2010), 24.

²⁰ John O. Perpener, *African-American Concert Dance: The Harlem Renaissance and Beyond* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001).

experiences through detailed personal accounts. Their respective memoirs have contributed to developed scholarship exploring how the experiences of Black women studying ballet have differed from their counterparts. Their personal reflections explored topics including colorism and discrimination while detailing how their rigorous training impacted their physical and mental health. To pair with their individual experiences, writers including Akinleye, Copeland, and Gottschild have provided a foundation for research dissecting the common experiences of Black ballerinas. In *(Re:) Claiming Ballet*, Akinleye discussed the power ballet masters possessed over dancers and their bodies. Sadono continued this thought in their writing while explaining how ballet colonized the bodies of dancers and stripped their identity and self value. They continued to point out that men were the usual front runners of ballet and were placed in positions of control and power of the dance ensemble.²¹ Akinleye expands on the points made by Sadono to include the element of race to provide further understanding of the nuanced treatment of Black women in the field. A key continuations to the study from her research, is the role of colorism in ballet. Akinleye noted:

Choreographers extended their power to control who the audience was watching: using white dancers representing ‘people of color’ on stage still privileged white dancers and meant that Black people effectively remained unseen on stage. While Black people of various skin tones existed in both [Africa and Asia], choreographers either subconsciously or consciously depicted the main exotic character as ‘brown/light skinned’, consequently making them more palatable to the audience. Petipa and Fokine’s racial choices in these early productions were beginning of colorism in ballet.... From the countries and themes that Petipa and Fokine included in their narrative ballets, colorism is demonstrated through the backfire/brownface

²¹ Regina Fletcher Sadono, “Details and Reproducing Domination: The Birth of the Ballet School, the Prison, and Other Correctional Facilities,” *Paroles Gelées* 16, no. 2 (1998), <https://doi.org/10.5070/pg7162003088>.

make up as conscious part of ‘authenticating’ the racialization of characters’ roles.²²

Her points on racism in the professional dance field are echoed by scholars Julie Gleich and Joselli Audain Deans while grounding the thoughts expressed by Copeland and DePrince. They concluded the same ideas and have articulated, through multiple examples, how racism has oppressed Black dancers from training in the discipline, specifically Black women. They declared lack of resources, funding, accessibility, and racism as some of the major influences and reasons Black dance schools and institutions were created.²³ They credited Black ballerinas, who created these spaces, as pioneers in the dance community and the foundation of the research. While these are noted by these authors as safe spaces, africanist and sociologist Patricia Hill Collins provides an additional perspective in her book *Black Feminist Thought*. While her writing is not specific to dance, it provided context around the relationship Black women have with themselves that serves as a foundation of analyzing the challenges Black ballerinas are met with.²⁴ Her writing noted that while spaces were created for Black people out of necessity and retaliation, those same spaces weren’t always safe. Collins proclaimed that racist ideologies began to infiltrate these areas and perpetuate these same damaging and degrading ideals. Collins and Akinleye’s ideas pair together to give an understanding of Black women studying ballet in both white and black studios. Raquel Monroe also adds

²² Adesola Akinleye, (Re:) Claiming Ballet (Intellect, 2021): 24

²³ “Arthur Mitchell: Harlem’s Ballet Trailblazer,” Columbia University Libraries Online Exhibitions | Arthur Mitchell: Harlem’s Ballet Trailblazer, n.d., <https://exhibitions.library.columbia.edu/exhibits/show/mitchell/arthur-mitchell-artist/-before-dance-theatre-of-harle>.

²⁴ Hill Collins Patricia Hill, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 2022).

to this conversation in her writing, as she detailed the impact the assertion of ballet as foundation has had on Black ballerinas and their views on dance forms that stem from their own culture. Her study shared that Black dancers didn't classify their West African classes as essential to their dance training due to the notion that ballet is the foundation of dance and without prioritizing it, their technique would falter. Monroe highlighted the nuanced struggle of Black ballerinas who often reject dance styles that reflect them and their community as a result of centering ballet.

Lacking in Current Research

The scholars mentioned in this section have been able to contribute to the conversation around ballet, African dance, and the treatment of Black women in ballet discipline. However, there is little research discussing the relationship the themes have with one another. A bulk of the current academic conversation calls for inclusion and representation however, this research aims to critically analyze the severe physical, mental, and spiritual damage of Black ballerinas in an effort to fill the gap in already established research.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

To effectively and accurately articulate the dislocation and distorted self image of Black women created and instilled in their ballet training, this study will use unique and tailored methods. With authenticity and accuracy at the forefront of this work, the centering of Black women in their own experience is essential. Current research has had a strong emphasis on dissecting the many aspects of ballet without considering the impact the technique has had on its practitioners. Consequently, the nuanced realities of Black ballerinas has been overlooked and under-researched. As awareness of diversity and cultural experiences increased academic and social conversations, research surrounding Black ballerinas has slowly developed. A direct example is Adesola Akinleye's (*Re: Claiming Ballet*) and Raquel L. Monroe's "*I Don't Want to do African . . . What About My Technique?:*" *Transforming Dancing Places into Spaces in the Academy*. Both authors use their personal encounters with ballet to critique its current structure and how it disproportionately affects Black dancers. This research provides a different vantage point and poses important questions however, it fails to articulate the perspective of Black ballerinas or provide supporting scholarship. While the current research brings awareness to how Black people have impacted the dominate genre of dance and pushed against limiting boundaries, this work aims to bring attention to the physical, mental, and spiritual harm Black women have endured as a direct result of their training. The rigorous and intense nature of ballet requires the dancer to be an object and property of the dance masters instead of agents of their own bodies. This research is designed to articulate the

harmful impact this type of dynamic continues to have on Black women by prioritizing their experiences over their artistic discipline.

In an effort to center the African perspective and achieve the academic goals outlined above, an afrocentric framework is employed. In *The Afrocentric Paradigm*, Ama Mazama defines ‘afrocentricity’ as:

A frame of reference wherein the phenomena are viewed from the perspective of the African person...it centers on placing people of the African origin in control of their lives and attitudes about the world...As an intellectual theory, Afrocentricity is the study of ideas and events from the standpoint of Africans as the key players rather than the victims. This theory becomes by virtue of an authentic relationship to the centrality of our own reality, a fundamentally empirical project... it is Africa asserting itself intellectually and psychologically.²⁵

Adopting an afrocentric approach sets this study apart from the current research and presents Black women as active agents in their own experiences. By grounding the research in the afrocentric paradigm, the accurate conclusions and gainful recommendations drawn from the work will prioritize Black women. This moves the conversation forward as the current research surrounding the topic does not possess the same priorities. Utilizing afrocentricity as a framework equips the conversation around Black ballerinas to move beyond the heavy current emphasis on colorism and desired inclusion. Afrocentricity and the afrocentric approach will serve as the foundational theory for this study and provide general principles to examine, critique, and draw conclusions from the presented sources.

²⁵ Ama Mazama, “Introduction,” introduction, in *The Afrocentric Paradigm* (Trenton, New Jersey: Africa World Press, 2003), 5.

Ownership and Agency

Ownership and agency are essential to afrocentricity thus, making them integral to any study the theory is applied. Within the discipline of ballet, which will be further discussed in this study, dancers do not possess full ownership over their bodies and their agency is not extended beyond spatial awareness and comprehension of technique. However, every piece of their physical bodies, from the moves they execute to what they wear, is determined and maintained by their dance masters. While every dancer experiences this lack of agency, Black women are isolated even further in this experience. Given that ballet is designed to anticipate that all dancers are of European descent, most of the foundational elements and universal decisions consider the comfortability and convenience of white dancers. The specifics of this will be discussed later however, this emphasizes the importance of grounding this work in a framework that prioritizes the agency of Black women. Afrocentricity's requirement of agency of all African people, both on the continent and in the diaspora, positions this study to authentically and accurately center Black women. While European dancers are able to find some agency and freedoms within the strict requirements, cultural differences make it impossible for Black ballerinas to do the same. Costume requirements and cosmetic availability pair as just two examples of how the cultural differences impact Black women. Though European dancers can explore what foundation better matches their skin tones and types, Black ballerinas are forced to use the limited shades and/or required to use lighter shades to alter how their skin tone appears on stage. This study will emphasize the damage

examples like this have caused to Black women while also highlighting the deeper damage caused when European cultural standards are applied to Black women.

Africana Womanism

Out of the afrocentric paradigm, Africana womanism provides an understanding to the perspective and interests of Black women. While there are Black men who train in ballet, this study exclusively focuses on Black women. This is specifically done with the intention to validate and thoroughly dissect the experiences of Black women who have studied in the ballet. Africana womanism and afrocentricity pair together to create a framework that accurately examines the complexity of African American women.

Africana womanism allows us to identify the duality of Black women and understand the complexities of both their racial and gender identity. It is important to note that *feminism*, *Black feminism*, or *womanism* were strategically not used as a framework for this study. In an effort to fully understand the ideology, Clenora Hudson-Weems' definition of Africana womanism is used here. In *Africana Womanism: Reclaiming Ourselves* Hudson-Weems defines it as:

an ideology created and designed for all women of African descent. It is grounded in African culture and, therefore, it necessarily focuses on the unique experiences, struggles, needs, and desires of Africana women.²⁶

Hudson-Weems' diligent research on the intersection of womanhood and Blackness, is used to understand the Black woman's place in the world, her relationship with self, and her community.

²⁶ Daphne Williams Ntiri, "Introduction," essay, in *Africana Womanism: Reclaiming Ourselves*, 5th ed. (Routledge, 2020), 4.

Of the dancers who walk into the dance studio to practice ballet, Black women have a complex experiences that differ from white women and Black and white men practicing in the same dance genre. Due to Black women's socioeconomic status, cultural understanding, interpersonal relationships, and self identity, and their perspectives are distinctive and require equally nuanced frameworks. This study follows the guidance of Hudson-Weems who emphasized the necessity of separating the interests of Black women from their counterparts. As mentioned earlier, feminism, Black feminism, and womanism ideologies have not been utilized within this research. Historical context allows us to use examples like the Women's Suffrage Movement to reveal contrasting priorities and social stances between white and Black women that have remained consistent. The Women's Suffrage Movement had foundational principles that prevented its members to acknowledge and value the existence of Black women.²⁷ Due to the movement's racist undertones, it served as an additional tool of Black women's oppression. The movement also articulated a strong resistance to men which does not align with the cultural values of African people and their communities. These qualities prevented feminism from advocating for the rights and equality of Black women. The eurocentricity and Eurocentric standards found at the foundational level of feminism can also be found in the additional ideologies, Black feminism and womanism, and disqualify them from being conducive to this study.²⁸ Feminism and womanism fail to draw out cultural differences or ground its research in African culture, thus lacking utility in this

²⁷Ama Mazama, "Introduction," introduction, in *The Afrocentric Paradigm* (Trenton, New Jersey: Africa World Press, 2003), 155-156

²⁸ "Unlearning History: The Women's Suffrage Movement," PBS, January 8, 2024, <https://www.pbs.org/education/blog/unlearning-history-the-womens-suffrage-movement>.

study. Nah Dove's understanding and employment of africana womanism is applied to this study as it aims to highlight cultural differences between European and African culture as they are seen in their respective cultural dance styles, techniques, and artistic foundations. In *Africana Womanism: An Afrocentric Theory*, Dove explained the importance of pairing a strong understanding of culture when discussing africana womanism:

Underpinning the conceptual framework of this work is the belief that a clash of cultures between European and African people was instrumental in facilitating the European domination of Africa and her people. Importantly, although this focus is on the African experience, there is the recognition that the European domination has altered and destroyed cultural groups other than that of the African people.²⁹

She furthers this idea with:

The differences that arise from these two cultural orientations are significant. The debasement of women in one culture and the respect for women in the other are distinctions that should not be ignored when analyzing the contemporary difficulties for African people, especially African women living in Western-oriented societies.³⁰

Since ballet is a European style of dance that maintains European standards, Black women who choose to train in the dance technique are also required to navigate a culture separate from their own. Using afrocentricity and africana womanism will allow this research to shift the current conversation by prioritizing the people instead of the craft. With the centering of Black women, this study will aid in developing solutions that prioritize the well-being of Black women who choose to practice ballet and navigate the

²⁹ Dove, Nah. "African Womanism: An Afrocentric Theory." *Journal of Black Studies* 28, no. 5 (1998): 517.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 521

Westernized dance community as a whole. By applying this to the study, Black ballerinas are extended agency and ownership over their experiences which is the ultimate goal and foundation of this study. This study was developed to contribute a deeper look into the cultural differences found in ballet and African dance and explain how those differences have negatively impacted Black women.

Bridging Afrocentricity and Dance Through Scholarship

In addition to afrocentricity and africana womanism, an understanding of dance scholarship is also employed to appropriately address and examine the nature of dance and the dance community. While research around Black ballerinas rooted in afrocentricity is underdeveloped, Katherine Dunham and Kariamuwelsh Asante have provided a foundation that bridges the studies of Africology and dance. Both scholars serve as pioneers in the understanding of African dance and dancers. Their research defines and details the commonalities of dance throughout the African diaspora, intention behind particular movements and sequences, and the role the dancer plays in these practices. Welsh Asante paired African dance and Africology to articulate how dance has a large cultural impact on African people. In her book *Hot Feet and Social Change: African Dance and Diaspora Communities* (2019) Welsh Asante collaborated with Esailama G. A. Diouf and Yvonne Daniel for the introduction chapter titled *Introduction: When, Where, and How We Enter* to explain dance's impact on African epistemology. In the chapter they state:

We must lend symmetry to Africa and the Diaspora in our discourse and pinpoint how African dance reminds us of our past positively affects the people we are and will become. In many continental African societies, dance is not simply motion set to music but rather a mechanism for

cementing ongoing familial-like relationships, building cooperating communities, and communicating value systems that prioritize cohesion and consensus. Dance is not merely for performance, but rather a participatory means through which communities are able to embody and demonstrate their values in physical space. African dance is thus a social institution predicated on mobility, and institution established to reward innovation and ‘tradition,’ to refer generosity and inclusion, and to value respect for the elders, ancestors, and cosmological spirits. By centering Africa in our identities and discourse here, we empower ourselves and affirm the reality of the African continent, with its more than fifty countries. It is a mammoth site of creative, intellectual, spiritual, and artistic brilliance, as well as historical and maliciously targeted productivity.³¹

Welsh Asante’s understanding of African dance as more than just movement used to entertain an audience, provides researchers with additional context to understand how dance practices can directly impact dancers physically and spiritually while shaping their self identity. Welsh Asante’s understanding and definition of African dance, is employed in this study to highlight commonalities in the dance style and their impact on Black people across the diaspora. Katherine Dunham’s use of anthropology to understand the influence Eurocentricity has had on cultural dances found in African communities has also served as a foundation for this study. Her writing detailed how European cultural practices forced their way into African spaces, specifically dance, and how that impacted the art form as a whole and her own Dunham technique.³² Dunham pairs academic research with her own experience with dance to create a unique perspective to her

³¹ Kariamu Welsh-Asante et al., *Hot Feet and Social Change: African Dance and Diaspora Communities* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2019): 6

³² Katherine Dunham, Vèvè A. Clark, and Sarah East Johnson, *Kaiso!: Writings by and about Katherine Dunham*(Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2006).

scholarship. Both scholars utilized their understanding of Afrocentricity with their own dance training and experiences to develop studies that serve as the basis of this academic discussion.

This study uses their collective research approaches to create a framework for the study. Their academic choices have been applied to dig even deeper into the experiences of Black women in dance and expand on their dedicated academic scholarship.

Terminology

Within the continuous dialogue in the dance community, there are commonalities found in the language used to discuss and examine. The terms not only reveal a commonality amongst dancers and dance scholars but also further reveal the nuances of the disciplines. While these may be common phrases amongst dancers, it is important to define common phrases used throughout the study to provide further clarity to the findings. *Ballet* will be used several times in this study. While it has many definitions, in this study it refers to the French word used to describe the dance technique that developed in Italy and gained prominence in France and Russia. Ballet is a technique that consists of various movements that illustrate clean and artistic lines executed by the dancer with a developed French terminology.³³ In this research ballet technique is not interchangeable with the choreographed works and variations that use the technique and are referred to as a 'ballet' or 'ballets' as well. An example of this would be Swan Lake and The Nutcracker. *African dance* is repeatedly used in the study as well. While Africa is a large continent with a plethora of dance styles found on six continents, Kariam

³³ Mary Ellen Snodgrass, "Classical Dance," essay, in *Encyclopedia of World Dance* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowan&Littlefield Publishers, 2015), 99–105.

Welsh Asante's definition of the term is adopted for this study. She provided a definition in *African Dance (2010)*:

African dance can be defined as a collection of dances that imbued with meaning, infused purposely with rhythm, connected to the ritual, events, occasions, and mythologies specific people... These dance traditions provide a foundation for contemporary expressions. Generalizations about African dance as an absolute are inappropriate and inaccurate... This simply means that these dances originate in Africa and share cultures where traditionally dance is integral to and central to the society. This book acknowledges and appreciates the differences and contradictions that exist in and among the many cultures that are discussed throughout.³⁴

This is important to the study because while African dance is not one singular technique, this definition explains the commonalities found in the various techniques found in the continent and throughout the diaspora. This understanding allows us to compare cultural elements found in African dance as it compares to others without breaking down each specific dance style developed and practiced by African people.

When ***Black women/woman*** is used throughout the writing, it refers to self-identified women of African descent from the African diaspora located in the United States. ***Black*** is also interchangeable with ***African American*** in this study. ***Dance masters*** is used in continuation with with dance scholars who have studied and trained in the field. Dance masters refers to dance instructors with notable experience in either one or more dance genres.³⁵ ***Master classes*** refers to classes instructed by dance masters who are considered experts in their respective genres. This term becomes important when looking at the methods, specifically the auto-ethnography portion, used to complete this

³⁴ Kariamu Welsh Asante, *African Dance Second Edition* (Chelsea House 2010): 16

³⁵ Gail Grant, *Technical Manual and Dictionary of Classical Ballet* (Halifax, Nova Scotia: Atlantic Provinces Special Education Authority, Library, 2021).

study. *Ballet masters* is also referenced in this study and builds off of the same foundation however, reveals more about the individuals' role in a ballet company and not solely based on their physical expertise. Ballet masters refers to members of the ballet company that are responsible for training and rehearsing the dancers in the company. Their responsibilities include making sure every dancer met the technical and performance standards set by the company. This person also has creative power in this role and is responsible for costume design and musical arrangements used in performances. Historically this role has been occupied by a man.³⁶ As this study uses the difference in cultures to serve as a base line for the research, defining *culture* is important. Culture is defined as the social behavior, institutions, and norms found in groups of people, as well as the knowledge, beliefs, arts, laws, customs, capabilities, and habits of the individuals in these groups.³⁷

Methods

This research is a qualitative analysis of Black women who have trained in European ballet. My research consisted of an analysis of scholarly articles on topics including: African culture, European culture, ballet technique, African dance commonalities, and self image. While the current scholarship on the effects of European dancers emphasizes colorism and inclusion, this research will focus on culturally grounded research topics and theoretical frameworks that focus on hair discrimination, body dysmorphia, and relationship to self identity, as a result of forced Eurocentric art

³⁶ Jennifer Homans, *Apollo's Angels: A History of Ballet* (London: Granta, 2010).

³⁷ Tylor Sir Edward Burnett, *Primitive Culture* (New York: Harper, 1958).

standards. The analytic process started with the collection of academic articles written by respected scholars who cover the topics outlined above. The selected sources provided a baseline for the study by defining ballet terminology, commonalities of African dance and ballet techniques, and their relationship with their respective culture. While this provided an understanding of dance history and various techniques, other forms of information were used to capture the nature and tone of dance studios. Autobiographies of Black women who have studied ballet for over twenty years and trained in the United States, including Misty Copeland, Michaela DePrince, and Elaine DePrince were examined and utilized in this work. Their personal experiences written in their respective books were used to provide perspective to the dance techniques and studio culture identified. In addition to this, documentaries and live performances were examined to further understand how Black women have historically and presently navigated the professional dance spaces in the United States. A content analysis was used to highlight and streamline common themes within the gathered diverse qualitative data and their relationship to the study.

Finally, I employed an auto-ethnography as a method. Auto-ethnography is a form of ethnography where the researchers utilizes their personal experiences as a tool of analysis and critique as it relates to the overarching themes of their respective study.³⁸ As a Black woman who trained in ballet for over twenty years and West African dance for fifteen in in several dance studios in the country, my personal experiences and knowledge has been incorporated into the research. My dance background paired with my research in

³⁸ Essentials of autoethnography, n.d., <https://www.apa.org/pubs/books/essentials-autoethnography-sample-chapter.pdf>.

Africology and self identification as a Black woman allows for a tailored analysis and comprehension of Black women in the field. This method is supported in Ruth Reviere's

The Canons of Afrocentric Research (2006):

...the personal and the theoretical are inseparable, the researcher is, in fact, compelling the reader to search for the layers of subtexts beyond what has actually been revealed, to come to a more complete understanding of the meaning of the data presented.³⁹

Considering the framework of the afrocentric paradigm, I will employ an Afrocentric approach to research that allows me to insert myself into the study and pull from personal experiences to influence and guide my analysis. This will couple with a qualitative analysis of presented research to provide a holistic understanding of how ballet has directly impacted Black women; specifically their perception of themselves. My training will provide additional context to others with similar experiences and aid in articulating commonalities found in ballet training, curriculum, and studio culture. With a study grounded in afrocentricity, separation of personal opinion or experience is not required. Instead, I have submerged myself into the study, as encouraged by afrocentric methodology, in an effort to produce a strong explanation and understanding to future readers and researchers. In addition to my pre-professional and professional dance training, I have participated in several master classes to gain an understanding of the current climate as a Black ballerina as it compares to previous experiences expressed by both myself and others. I took ballet, West African, and Horton technique classes at The Dance Institute of Washington and The John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts

³⁹ Ruth Reviere, "The Canons of Afrocentric Research," *Handbook of Black Studies*, 2006, 261–74, <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781412982696.n17>.

in Washington, DC to keep myself grounded in the work. Participating in classes allowed me to understand the language, resources, and requirements used to train Black women in 2024 and identify any developments or consistencies. While participating in the classes, I observed the instructors and dancers' physical and verbal communication throughout the class' allotted time. By participating in these classes, the research around Black women in dance is able to expand from Katherine Dunham's findings in 1946, ad land in 2024. The research will be gathered and presented as outlined, to broaden the current conversation around the issue. This research will continue the foundational and pivotal work of Katherine Dunham and Kariamuwelsh, to explore Black women in dance and the oppressive tools that are found in ballet. The conclusions drawn and presented will hopefully, instill a victorious consciousness in Black women who have studied and will continue to study ballet, and emphasize the importance of tailored curriculum for Black dancers in the discipline.

The research is broken into two sections and will use tailored methods to articulate specific points. The first chapter will look at the research from a macro level to compare the cultural differences between ballet and African dance. To properly articulate this, the selected research focused on the origins of and development of ballet, African cultural principles, and cultural dislocation. These scholarly resources were pulled to create an understanding of the foundations of the two genres of dance and how their principles have culturally impacted Black women. Curriculum and tuition costs associated with dance programs and institutions including The Juilliard School and The Dance Institute of Washington were examined to emphasize the social status associated

with the two dance techniques. The second chapter looks at the research on a micro level. Personal experiences from Black dancers and racist micro-aggressions in the dance studio were uncovered through books written by professional Black ballerinas. Misty Copeland's *Black Ballerinas: My Journey to our Legacy* and *Life In Motion: An Unlikely Ballerina* paired with Michaela and Elaine DePrince's *Hope In a Ballet Shoe* to draw conclusions about how racist micro-aggressions had a direct impact on their self image. Their experiences were supported by research focused on uniform accessibility, traction alopecia, and body dysmorphia. Both chapters use auto-ethnography to bring a personal approach to the work. This method will allow the research to reach beyond the page and articulate the spirit of the study. All of the research will be examined through an afrocentric lens that will allow for conducive conclusions to be drawn and outlined later in the study.

CHAPTER 4

DANCING BETWEEN TWO WORLDS: THE CULTURAL DIFFERENCES OF BALLET AND AFRICAN DANCE

With ballet deriving from European culture, it is important to take a brief look at the cultural differences between Europe and Africa to accurately understand the impact ballet has on African American women who have trained in the dance style. Differences in cultural identity exhibited in European and African values and principles have historically had a direct impact on the treatment of African people and integrity of African cultural spaces including spirituality, education, and art.⁴⁰

Examining the position of women in each respective culture, allows for a deeper understanding of how these differences have manifested and directly influenced their community. With Europe's intentional centering of men and prioritization of patriarchy, women have been in a position that is both inferior and dependent of their male counterparts.⁴¹ Deborah Simonton discusses this further in *Women in European Culture and Society* and detailed how this inferiority was applied and emphasized in education, family structure, and legislation.⁴² Women existing within this culture are trained to benefit the men they are legally attached to, father and/or husband, without equal emphasis on how they can be beneficial to themselves and honor their self interests. To highlight this imbalance in power, Simonton stated that a "woman is specially made for

⁴⁰ George Okello Abungu and Webber Ngoro, Cultural Heritage Management in Africa, October 18, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003199144>.

⁴¹ Deborah Simonton, "Intimate Worlds: Self, Sex Family," essay, in *Women in European Culture and Society* (London: Routledge, 2013), 21

⁴² Ibid.

man's delight"⁴³ and should position herself to remain in service of her husband. She furthers this point by stating:

If woman is made to please and to be in subjection to man, she ought to make herself pleasing in his eyes and not provoke him to anger; her strength is in her charms, by their means she should compel him to discover and use his strength.⁴⁴

This example explains the dynamic between men and women in European culture when examined on its own. However, further conclusions can be drawn when compared to African culture. When examining both ancient and modern African culture, women are complimentary to their male counterparts and possess their own respect, societal roles, and spiritual significance. Presently, the Akan, who reside in Ghana, must establish an *ohemaa*, also referred to as *queen mother*, to act alongside the appointed chief.⁴⁵ The *ohemaa* is granted the authority to determine ruling in court, veto decisions made by the chief, and appoint individuals to leadership positions during her term.⁴⁶ With women currently holding seats in parliament and continuing to obtain equality in domestic relationships, respect for women is exemplified throughout the societal and political structure of Ghana.⁴⁷ As a direct result of this, women are situated to be complimentary to men and necessary in the functionality of society. This is further supported and cemented in African culture, through spirituality. The African belief in Ma'at demands equality,

⁴³ Ibid., 521-19.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Kofi Antubam, *Ghana's Heritage of Culture* (University Microfilms International, 1981).

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Dan-Bright Dzorgbo and Sylvia Gyan, "Exploratory Study of the Current Status of the Rights and Welfare of Ghanaian Women: Taking Stock and Mapping Gaps for New Actions," *African Journal of Reproductive Health* 20, no. 3 (September 29, 2016): <https://doi.org/10.29063/ajrh2016/v20i3.18>.

respect, and harmony among every member of the community.⁴⁸ While colonization has forcefully allowed European cultural standards to infiltrate African culture, Black people throughout the diaspora use the culture as a frame of reference and continue to function in a structure situated in it. Whether through political appointment of an ohemma or the position of grandmothers as community healers in African American culture,⁴⁹ women continue to hold significant and equal roles in their own culture.

Cultural Comparisons: African Spirituality and European Religion

With Europe's colonization of African countries, the African woman was harmfully reduced in her own experience. The dismantling of the African woman's role became evident in examples including the restructure of the The Holy Trinity. Christians, following the King James understanding of the religious practice, identify the Holy Trinity as the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.⁵⁰ However, in the African understanding rooted in spirituality native to the continent, the Holy Trinity was known to be Ausar, Auset, and Heru (father, mother, and son respectively).⁵¹ This removal of the deified woman figure, aided in Europe's effort to dismantle the matriarch's ability to exist without connection and with inferiority to men. With these new and disoriented concepts of religion forced into the minds and spiritual safe spaces of African people, their driving belief in Ma'at was challenged causing a fracture in the foundation of their societal and

⁴⁸ Karenga, Maulana's Maat : the moral ideal in ancient Egypt ; a study in classical African ethics, (New York : Routledge, 2012).

⁴⁹ Jillian Jimenez, "The History of Grandmothers in the African-american Community," *Social Service Review* 76, no. 4 (December 2002): 523-51, <https://doi.org/10.1086/342994>.

⁵⁰ "Trinity," *Encyclopædia Britannica*, July 20, 1998, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Trinity-Christianity>.

⁵¹ Gershon, Livia. "A Holy Trinity in Ancient Egypt - Jstor Daily," (August 26, 2021). <https://daily.jstor.org/a-holy-trinity-in-ancient-egypt/>.

cultural structure. Cheikh Anta Diop criticized Europe's evolutionist theories⁵² that declare the supremacy of patriarchy in comparison to matriarchy and is supported by Afrocentric scholars, Nah Dove, Antwanisha Alameen-Shavers, Ama Mazama, Kimani Nehusi, Maulana Karenga, and Molefi K. Asante. This is just one example employed to bring emphasis to Diop's point however, there is great research in both the African principles, such as Ma'at, that could pair with this study to increase one's understanding of the woman's role in African culture.

Cultural Differences and Its Impact on Dance

Cultural infiltration continued to creep into macro and micro components of African culture, including art. This not only de-centered African women but presented a standard foreign to their cultural norms. Inevitably, misrepresentation of self identity became a direct result. Examining Black art allows a deeper understanding of the cultural dislocation forced on Black women and its detrimental impact. As European standards seeped into Black art, Black women have consequently been shifted out of their own epistemology. The validity of their experience and perception of their self image has been severely distorted by centering principles from a foreign culture. When looking at the Black Arts Movement, it is important to note that Black women were the heart and voices leading the community of artists. Their voices dominated Black music as it shifted from Negro spirituals and field songs to the Blues, and their mix of African traditional and social movement directly influenced the development of Jazz music.⁵³ As Western ideals

⁵² Cheikh Anta Diop, *The African Origin of Civilization: Myth or Reality* (Chicago, IL: Lawrence Hill Books, 1997).

⁵³ Imamu Amiri Baraka, *Blues People: Negro Music in White America* (New York: Perennial, 2002).

continue to attempt to govern Black art, by proxy they are simultaneously redefining Black women. The art created from Black people, specifically Black women, was directly tied to their personal experiences, viewpoints, and identity. Due to the interconnection between artist and art, any distortion of the art became direct distortion of the artist. Black people suffer under the imposed pressures of acculturation and assimilations of European values which influences of their own artistic articulation, causing what Addison Gayle Jr. referred to as, “cultural strangulation”.⁵⁴ As a result, Black creatives abandoned their own cultural norms for socioeconomic and artistic advancement and survival. The financial and social gain associated with art produced under the advisement of Western standards, made resisting extremely difficult. Since art is a direct reflection of the Black artist’s understanding of how they viewed themselves and relationship, manipulation of the art and artist were coetaneous. Langston Hughes emphasized this point in *The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain*:

[The] Philadelphia clubwoman is ashamed to say that her race created [jazz] and she does not like me to write about it. The old subconscious "white is best" runs through her mind. Years of study under white teachers, a lifetime of white books, pictures, and papers, and white manners, morals, and Puritan standards made her dislike the spirituals. And now she turns up her nose at jazz and all its manifestations- likewise almost everything else distinctly racial. She doesn't care for the Winold Reiss portraits of Negroes because they are "too Negro." She does not want a true picture of herself from anybody.⁵⁵

The cultural shift Langton Hughes discusses here, continues to show up in the discipline of dance in the United States. As European classical music became the standard for

⁵⁴ Addison Gayle, “Cultural Strangulation: Black Literature and the White Aesthetic,” *Within the Circle*, 2020, 207–12, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9780822399889-022>.

⁵⁵ Langston Hughes, “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain (1926),” *African American Studies Center*, 2010, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acref/9780195301731.013.78675>.

musicians (both instrumental and vocal), ballet was positioned the same way for dancers. This declaration was solidified through funding, curriculum and class offerings, and opportunity. Dance programs like The Juilliard School and Fordham University, which have been recognized as two of the most prestigious dance programs in the country, require dance majors to take ballet every semester while other styles like Hip Hop, West African, Black Traditions in American Dance, and “world dance” are only offered once out their four year program. While the white population in both Juilliard and Fordham’s dance programs are over 40 percent, this curriculum is seen in dance studios whose demographic is comprised of young Black women.⁵⁶ The Dance Institute of Washington services Black girls in the nation’s capital however, their pre-professional curriculum upholds the standard of Eurocentricity despite low registration of young white women. By comparing the curriculum of institutions like Juilliard and The Dance Institute of Washington, it becomes clear that the assertion of ballet as the core technique in dance is maintained regardless of the program’s cultural demographic. Enforced Eurocentric curriculum, removes Black dancers from where respected dance is found and prevents their ability to see themselves in their desired craft. It is common for a dancer to hear that ballet is the foundation of all dance, regardless of their ethnicity. As a Black woman who has trained in dance for over twenty years, I have never walked into a dance studio where this assertion was challenged. In addition to the funding designated to cement ballet at the core of dance, this idea was imbedded in the culture of the dance studio. In order to qualify for certain programs and trainings, dancers are often required to develop essays

⁵⁶ “The Juilliard School Racial-Ethnic Diversity Breakdown,” College Factual, March 9, 2023, <https://www.collegefactual.com/colleges/the-juilliard-school/student-life/diversity/chart-ethnic-diversity.html>

justifying the genre as the dance standard and participate in tests that demonstrate mastery of French terminology. While at the surface, the completion of these assignments were advancing dancers, improving academic skill, and providing them with the credentials to train professionally, there was a deep level of cultural reinforcement happening to each participating individual who did not identify as white. Requiring dancers to present written arguments supporting the dance hierarchy allows for intense manipulation of the mind. Pairing what they hear from instructors with their now developed research, an indisputable argument for the dancer is created and further maintains the perpetuated notion. While the required research uncovers a layer of the cultural reinforcement, terminology takes it a step further. Regardless of location, ballet is taught in French and any dancer wishing to master the dance form must also master its native tongue. As terminology and language is a main tool of identifying culture, this practice further separates Black women dancers from themselves and places them firmly in the Eurocentric paradigm. Nah Dove further supports this understanding of linguistic variables and its relation to cultural identity in *The SAGE Encyclopedia of African Cultural Heritage*.⁵⁷ Historically, Europeans in North America have used English to suppress Africans and African-based communication. Although African Americans adjusted and developed linguistic systems to both survive the country and reconnect with their community, the forced adaption of English oppressed and shifted Black people into a paradigm diluted of their own cultural norms. As Black dancers are also impacted by

⁵⁷ Mwalimu J. Shujaa and Nah Dove, essay, in *The Sage Encyclopedia of African Cultural Heritage in North America* (Los Angeles: SAGE reference, 2015).

this system, they are forced to undergo another round of cultural dislocation when required to learn French.

Additionally, codification becomes another tool in advancing the technique while oppressing genres that are not grounded in the same technical factors. Codification has always played a significant role in the dance hierarchy. The development of language and terminology commonly understood by those who practice the discipline, allow another channel for the art form to dominate. Tonia Sutherland explains codification and how investors in ballet have been able to use it to solidify its supremacy, in *Reading Gesture: Katherine Dunham, the Dunham Technique, and the Vocabulary of Dance As Decolonizing Archival Praxis* as she states:

Codification is both a legal and linguistic term that refers to the act or process of arranging something in a systematic form. Codification may also denote the result of such an act or process of arrangement. Linguistically, codification indicates that a language has been standardized, that it now adheres to a norm and that it can be read and understood by those who possess the proper literacy tools. Normalizing and standardizing a movement vocabulary has similar implications. For example, ballet a concert dance form like Dunham Technique was codified in the seventeenth century in the French courts of Louis XIV. Ballet enjoys its own vocabulary, based on French terminology; as a result, those conversant in ballet terminology can hear a command for a *jeté* and know immediately that they are expected to jump? Likewise, when one sees a ballet dancer execute a *jeté* it is instantly recognizable as such. A *jeté* is comparable to a single word in the ballet lexicon.⁵⁸

This tool disproportionally effects cultures, and art that derives from them, that do not solely rely on written communication, while significantly benefiting cultures that do. By prioritizing codification, ballet has been able to produce written scholarship that supports

⁵⁸ Tonia Sutherland, "Reading Gesture: Katherine Dunham, the Dunham Technique, and the Vocabulary of Dance as Decolonizing Archival Praxis," *Archival Science* 19, no. 2 (2019): 167–83, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10502-019-09308-w>.

the technique's self declared accreditation. By developing tangible and clear definitions of phrases, dance sequences, and histories around ballet, dance masters have been able to utilize the resource as a means to further enforce their biases onto dance practitioners.

As curriculum is used as a tool of cultural alienation, understanding the dislocation process requires an understanding of ballet's foundation and how it compares to African dance. By drawing these comparisons, the detriment of placing ballet as the standard of formal dance training becomes clear. The foundational elements of the respective styles nearly juxtapose each other. Jennifer Homans highlights important principles of ballet while she details the art form's history in *Apollo's Angels: A History of Ballet*.⁵⁹ While she notes emphasis on posture, balance, and symmetry, the overarching expectation of dancers, is perfection. To emphasize this was required and not merely suggested, perfection classes were worked into rehearsals and training.⁶⁰ In these classes, dancers are trained with the goal of achieving the same quality of movement, without error, every time a phrase is performed. From head placement to the pointing of the foot, dancers are given a standard to meet, replicate, and master. With an intense emphasis on perfection, ease and comfort was strategically removed. Homans detailed examples including packing several movements into a musical time frame, restricting arms to remove aid in propelling in the air, and exaggerated pauses to reveal any flaws in balance, to call to the intentional and deliberate removal of physical aid to the performer in an effort to highlight flaws. Weaving perfection into the basis of ballet created an elitist shift

⁵⁹Jennifer Homans, *Apollo's Angels: A History of Ballet* (New York: Random House, 2010)

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 123

in the discipline that parallels the elitism found in the basis of European culture. While dance at its earliest development included an open invitation to anyone, ballet created a firm line of separation between those who could and could not meet the intense and specific artistic requirements. Through these practices, separatism, perfection, and elitism coupled with dance phrases became the foundational groundwork of ballet. This differs from principles and characteristics found in African dance on the continent and throughout the diaspora which includes complimentary movement, individuality, and community. Katherine Dunham reported on the polyrhythms and simultaneous isolation of various body parts and the consistency of these traits found in various African dance styles. From the shoulder isolations found in Zulu dances, to the juxtaposed legs and hand movements found in the “walk it out” developed by 21st century Black Americans, these commonalities continue to show up in African dance culture. While there is a level of skill that is celebrated, African dance does not position itself to be unattainable or unachievable to those interested in participating. This is due to the equal weight on both the dancer/s and the audience. Elements like call and response, repetition, and societal influence on dance movement, require a communal dance experience in order to fully participate in African dance. Patricia Reid-Merritt emphasized this point in *The Sage Encyclopedia of African Cultural Heritage in North America* and explained “the mere expectation of audience participation has, for all intents and purposes, been elevated to the level of requirement. It’s an affirmation to all that ‘we are here with you’.”⁶¹ This phrase is one of many African phrases (example: “*I am because we are*”) that emphasize

⁶¹ Mwalimu J. Shujaa and Patricia Reid-Merritt essay, in *The Sage Encyclopedia of African Cultural Heritage in North America* (Los Angeles: SAGE reference, 2015), 348

the necessity of community that is applied to African culture in its entirety. Community and communication are found at each layer of the genre.

Communication with self, drummers, audience, and spirituality influence the movements, length of sequences, energy level, and repetition. Communication and relationship building occurs during the performance of the art allowing for not only a communal experience, but also a unique and creative one. In addition to the performers connection with the physical audience, their spiritual connection is equally important. Each movement and dance phrase is created with intention and storytelling beyond the physical body and requires a deep appreciation and connection to the spiritual plane. The harmony between movement, music, and community continues to be embedded in African and African American social gatherings and is culturally held with high importance. Kariamuwelsh Asante's note on perfection in African dance streamlines these characteristics and reveals distinctions between African dance and ballet. In her text *African Dance*, she states:

Perfection is not the ideal in African dance; rather it is the culmination of the dancer's skill meshed with the musician's rhythms and his or her understanding of the overall event that makes the performance admirable or memorable. Excellence is a goal and is greatly appreciated but not at the expense of the dance, other dancers and musicians, and/or the ritual.⁶²

It is clear that the foundation of the two dance forms are different however, they both mirror those of their culture. As a result of this, the Black dancer who becomes situated in ballet dance suffers more than just artistic dislocation, but a cultural one as well. As the

⁶² Welsh-Asante, K. (1997). *African dance: An artistic, historical, and philosophical inquiry*. Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press.

black woman dancer aligns and strives to meet the expectations of ballet, she unconsciously replaces her cultural African principles with ones rooted in Eurocentricity.

As the evidence has revealed, ballet maintains its elite position in the dance community disproportionately affects Black women. This has a major impact on Black dancers in dance, particularly women in ballet, and imposes separation from their cultural orientation. Their social status, respect, and even livelihood become dependent on their assimilation to Eurocentricity. For example, in a dancer's training, one simple question is often posed: *Are you trained?* Due to Eurocentricity's disguise as "normal" or "the standard," the question is specifically asking about ballet training without explicitly using the term. This question is typically asked to young women during or right before they arrive at puberty which aligns with their eligibility to be accepted into pre-professional programs. Depending on their answer to the questions, dancers are quickly separated. If you are not trained in ballet and cannot demonstrate sufficient understanding and ability, your dedication and interest in dance, is dwindled to a hobby instead of a potential profession. Despite mastery of other dance styles, like jazz, modern, tap, or West African, dancers are not allowed to train in respected dance programs without mastery of ballet. Most institutions and studios prohibit dancers from participating in other styles without being enrolled in a ballet course. Thus, regarding and positioning other dance styles as extra curricular and inferior. In order to succeed in dance, dancers are not presented with options based on interests or cultural background but rather the expectation to commit to ballet as their primary foundation of dance. WEB DuBois examined this in his essay

Criteria of Negro Art.⁶³ He used Black writers to explain the decision between financial security accompanied with assimilation, and the freedom of being able to authentically represent themselves in their art:

Perhaps the artist chooses the latter? The artist is still subject to the critique of those who dominate society and the associated outcomes. If the Black artist seeks validation and resources outside of the dominating cultural group, they are presented with very little benefits of choosing their own racial community— or, themselves.⁶⁴

While DuBois highlighted the desired financial security of the artist in this quote, the financial security required to be in these spaces, is of equal importance. The question posed earlier in the section is used to create a divide however, the monetary commitment required to arrive at that question, is imperative when examining the damage caused to Black women dancers. Due to ballet's lack of priority on community and attainability, access to training comes with a cost. Whether a dancer pursues dance recreationally or enrolls in pre-professional training, their financial contribution can range between one and five thousand dollars per year. Prices vary depending on class schedule, institution accreditation, and instructor qualifications that further deepen the line of separation. A dancer who can only afford a certain level of financial or time commitment, will not receive the same quality of training as their counterpart with monetary and daily flexibility. While tuition covers the training the dancer will receive, artistic materials are a separate cost that falls solely on the individual. With the fragility of dance attire (including nylon tights and canvas shoes), dancers find themselves replacing these items

⁶³W. E. Du Bois, "Criteria of Negro Art (1926)," *The New Negro*, December 31, 2008, 257–60, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781400827879-047>.

⁶⁴ Ibid

a few times a month to remain compliant with attire regulations. Although every dancer is required to do this, these things work at a greater disadvantage for Black women. In addition to mobility, one of the main purposes of dance attire is to create the illusion of a continuous line from hip to toe. As a result of this, dancers are often required to match their tights and shoes with their skin tone however, these things are not available in shades conducive to Black skin. Dancers with melanated skin use tinted liquid (example: foundation or spray paint) and fabric dye to make up for the lack of inclusivity and meet the standard of their dance institution. The additional materials, increase the financial responsibility of the Black ballerina that her white counterparts are not met with. Due to their pale skin, white dancers are allowed to train and perform with pink shoes and tights without additional altering thus, removing a level of financial strain. Historically, Black people in the United States have been systematically oppressed with financial inequality being a direct result. With the average Black family making roughly thirty thousand dollars less in annual income compared to their White American counterparts, dance training and the associated costs, even on the basic level, is not feasible for a Black woman interested in dance.⁶⁵ If a dancer is able to find herself on the other side of the financial hurdle, her assimilation inevitably perpetuates paradigm dislocation. In the dance community, the Black woman is faced with choosing between herself and the

⁶⁵ Peter G. Peterson Foundation, "INCOME AND WEALTH IN THE UNITED STATES: AN OVERVIEW OF RECENT DATA," Peter G. Peterson Foundation, November 9, 2023, <https://www.pgpf.org/blog/2023/11/income-and-wealth-in-the-united-states-an-overview-of-recent-data>.

profession. Due to the polarizing characteristics of the two options, choosing the latter will continuously result in the abandonment of her culture while assimilating to one that refuses to recognize her.

CHAPTER 5

DISTORTED REFLECTION: THE EXCLUSION OF BLACK WOMEN IN BALLET

The comparisons previously expressed, highlight the cultural foundational differences in ballet and African dance. While the principles worked into ballet are detrimental to Black women, understanding the established studio culture provides a deeper examination at the damage Black ballerinas endure. While there are numerous examples, this study will highlight three, to emphasize contradictory choices found in ballet and their intense impact on Black women.

As a result of the cultural differences and financial elitism found in ballet, Black women are placed in a state of both cognitive hiatus and cognitive dissonance. In order to define this term, I have adopted Ama Mazama's definitions of cognitive hiatus and dissonance to establish the difference between the two phrases. In *Cognitive Hiatus and the White Validation Syndrome: An Afrocentric Analysis*, Mazama wrote:

Cognitive Hiatus should not be confused with cognitive dissonance, which results from holding two contradictory views, or engaging in an action that violates one's beliefs. Cognitive dissonance is a source of great stress that must be eliminated by resolving contradictions....In the case of Cognitive Hiatus, however, no such stress is discernible. As a result, no action is taken to resolve an otherwise glaring contradiction. A critical question thus arises: What has happened to us, on the mental level, such that our contradictions are not even a source of disorientation, and that we, therefore, do not seek to resolve them?⁶⁶

⁶⁶ Ama Mazama, "Cognitive Hiatus and the White Validation Syndrome: An Afrocentric Analysis," *Black/Africana Communication Theory*, 2018, 25–38, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-75447-5_3!

Ballet is filled with the glaring contradictions Mazama discusses here. Black ballerinas find themselves subconsciously and consciously participating in contradictory and oppressing acts throughout the extent of their training that will be detailed with the following examples: body dysmorphia, hair discrimination, and costuming.

Body Dysmorphia and the Ideal Ballet Body

Cognitive hiatus is often happening in the dance studio as Black ballerinas have been conditioned to dispel certain parts of their reality. One prominent and common example of this, is body dysmorphia and the unhealthy relationship Black ballerinas develop with their physical bodies. While it is common for dancers to experience negative feeling toward their bodies⁶⁷ it is also common that Black women studying ballet will deny having unfavorable feelings toward themselves. Within ballet training, there are several reminders about your weight, appearance, and diet. In academic dance classes that focus on the genre's history and foundation, dancers are introduced to the ideal ballet body, which consists of long necks, short torsos without curves, long lean muscles, flexible feet, small breasts, and straight spines, and are expected to strive to that standard. The standard ballerina body also extends to the dancer's height. While long limbs are preferred, ballerinas must remain shorter than their male dance partners to meet the aesthetic preferences worked into ballet's artistic identity. Women who are taller are often placed in the back of the ensemble or are instructed to dance parts designated for men. As a Black woman who stands at five feet and eleven inches, I regularly danced

⁶⁷ Rachel Fine, "Body Image Support for Dancers," Dance Nutrition, March 11, 2024, [https://dancenutrition.com/body-image/#:~:text=Dancers%20at%20all%20levels%20struggle,uniforms%20\(like%20leotards\)%20and%20costumes](https://dancenutrition.com/body-image/#:~:text=Dancers%20at%20all%20levels%20struggle,uniforms%20(like%20leotards)%20and%20costumes)

male parts in ballet classes and have only had one classic ballet duet experience during the duration of my twenty year training. Solely due to my height, I was classified as a more masculine dancer regardless of my self identification as a woman or my movement quality. Floor to ceiling mirrors are incorporated into every studio structure and encourage individuals to adjust any physical characteristics that fall outside of the identified standard. While dance masters serve as instrument of verbal reminders of the standard, mirrors become a visual reminder for ballerinas and strong tool for self critique. This is accompanied by several conversations around diet and weight. Depending on the studio structure, the discussion around diet can vary. This can look like an in-house dietitian, annual health classes held at the studio, or daily fitness and meal logs submitted to the dance masters. In addition to these various structured and “educational” tools, dance masters engage in spoken reminders often. Examples of this include private and public conversations encouraging dancers to “lean out” their bodies, associating poor performance with eating habits, or insulting their “unflattering” physical appearance. The intense and constant combination of physical critique, creates an environment where the dancer is critically aware of her body, food choices, and what impacts their ability to perform. This often results in skewed outlooks of appearance and an unhealthy relationship with food. There are instances where a dancer might be diagnosed with extreme cases of anorexia (low body weight paired with an extreme fear of gaining weight⁶⁸) or bulimia (uncontrollable binge eating paired with extreme measures to avoid

⁶⁸ “Anorexia Nervosa,” Mayo Clinic, February 20, 2018, <https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/anorexia-nervosa/symptoms-causes/syc-20353591>.

weight gain.)⁶⁹ However, the most common instance is that dancers will develop cognitive dissonance and deny they, or the people around them, are experiencing an eating disorder. A clear example of this is present in Misty Copeland's memoir *Life In Motion: An Unlikely Ballerina*. As Copeland detailed her experience with pressure surrounding weight gain and eating habits placed on her by her dance masters, she started by dispelling the "myths" of dancers having eating disorders and rejected the idea that any dancer around her suffered from anorexia.⁷⁰ However, on the same page, she detailed how a conversation with the dance masters at American Ballet Theatre surrounding growth in her breasts, caused her to binge eat. After her instructors suggested the guidance of a dietitian, the dancer recalled eating 24 doughnuts a night due to heightened emotions and hyper awareness of her body.⁷¹ As she continued to detail her experience and mental struggle with her own eating habits and physical appearance, common themes within the Black ballerina's experience become evident and strikingly obvious. Within the same thought, Misty Copeland denied the prominence of eating disorders while also explaining her own. It was clear that she was aware of how her eating habits and emotional health were a direct result of her conversations with her dance masters however, she was unable to accurately identify the severity of her experience. Her thought process becomes strikingly common in Black dancers. In my own experience, my relationship with food fell on the opposite side of the spectrum. While I purposely

⁶⁹ "Bulimia Nervosa," Mayo Clinic, February 29, 2024, <https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/bulimia/symptoms-causes/syc-20353615>.

⁷⁰Misty Copeland, *Life in Motion: An Unlikely Ballerina* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2014): 33

⁷¹ Ibid.

skipped meals and occasionally forced myself to vomit, I never considered that I had an eating disorder or demonstrated unhealthy eating habits. While eating disorders encourage an unhealthy physical relationship, it falls under the broader umbrella of body dysmorphia. Understanding body dysmorphia and body dysmorphic disorder is important when exploring the mental and emotional impact eating disorders and excessive physical critique has on the Black woman. *Body dysmorphia*, which is defined as a mental condition that causes an individual to obsess over their physical appearance and constantly find flaws⁷² has characteristics that are commonly found in the structure of ballet. The Mayo Clinic articulated some of the behavioral attributes of body dysmorphia:

When you have body dysmorphic disorder, you intensely focus on your appearance and body image, repeatedly checking the mirror, grooming or seeking reassurance, sometimes for many hours each day. Your perceived flaw and the repetitive behaviors cause you significant distress and impact your ability to function in your daily life.⁷³

With these characteristics imbedded into studio culture, the chances of dancers experiencing body dysmorphia are significantly increased. Checking mirrors and constant grooming for hours at a time, are encouraged and required of dancers within their training. This inevitably causes dancers to participate in body dysmorphic practices throughout the duration of their day at their respective dance institutions. Since dancers are encouraged to start training as soon as possible, young women are introduced to this culture at as early as three years old. Conversations surrounding diet and weight become prevalent around the ages of thirteen. Puberty is identified as an intense time of mental,

⁷² “Body Dysmorphic Disorder,” Mayo Clinic, December 13, 2022, <https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/body-dysmorphic-disorder/symptoms-causes/syc-20353938>.

⁷³ Ibid.

emotional, and physical changes for young women and typically occurs between the ages of eight to thirteen,⁷⁴ directly aligning this change with the introduced conversations. In a study conducted by the National Library of Medicine, puberty has a direct link to a decline in mental health. Due to conversations in the dance studio happening simultaneously with puberty, the weight of the damage these conversations and how they are interpreted by young women, is intensified.

The inability to critique physical mistakes, can also be perceived negatively in ballet. Since physical critique and analyzation are worked into ballet culture, they are disguised as tools required to succeed in the dance form. Dancers become trained to microscopically evaluate and analyze their form, training, and body better and earlier than ballet masters. I recall an incident in 2014 in the studio where a dance master walked out and refused to continue teaching after I couldn't identify what I did wrong fast enough. The dance master later communicated the one flaw he noticed however, prior to the conversation I had found a handful of things to correct and obsess over for the rest of the day. I didn't need him to verbally tell me I was a terrible dancer with awful body structure and slim chances of becoming a professional ballerina because I had already convinced myself of that prior to. While at the time, I used this as motivation, the emotional and mental precedent this set had graver consequences and trained me to associate harsh critique with mastery of the technique.

While this form of training potentially impacts every dancer that experiences it, the experiences of Black ballerinas are heightened. As mentioned earlier, ballerinas are

⁷⁴ "Puberty for Girls," healthdirect, n.d., <https://www.healthdirect.gov.au/puberty-for-girls>.

constantly compared to the ideal ballet body. With the expectation consisting of a body that has a strong emphasis on lean muscles and straight lines, it is nearly impossible for Black women to meet the standard. In a study conducted by the National Library of Medicine, it is proven that Black women have a higher chance of having more breast density than their white counterparts, increasing the physical size of their breast.⁷⁵ This can be paired with their study on the ethnic differences in body composition that concludes Black women generally have more muscle mass than their white counterparts. This makes them appear curvier and thicker despite their eating habits.⁷⁶ With these natural differences, the chances of Black women experiencing body dysmorphia, fat shaming, and an overall heightened sense of their bodies, is increased in the discipline of ballet. This rings true to Misty Copeland's experience whose eating disorder was triggered by the increased size of her breasts. These commonalities found in women of African descent allow dance masters to increase their racial discrimination and discard Black ballerinas. In her memoir *Hope In a Ballet Shoe*, Michaela DePrince speaks to this as she reflects on her experience in her book:

Once someone in the ballet world, whose opinion meant a lot to me said to my mother, 'we don't like to waste a lot of time, money, and effort on the Black girls. When they reach puberty, they develop big thighs and behinds and can't dance ballet anymore.' I over the remark, but I wasn't supposed to be outside the door listening in, so I couldn't speak to challenge what he

⁷⁵ Anne Marie McCarthy et al., "Racial Differences in Quantitative Measures of Area and Volumetric Breast Density," *Journal of the National Cancer Institute*, April 29, 2016, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5939658/>.

⁷⁶ Gasperino J., "Ethnic Differences in Body Composition and Their Relation to Health and Disease in Women," *Ethnicity & health*, n.d., <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/9395578/>.

said. My mother did, thought, and that made me feel better. However, those words still terrified me.⁷⁷

Her experience highlights the common perception held by dance masters and how it directly impacts their approach to teaching Black women. This dismissal from respected leaders in the dance structure, influences Black women to adapt those same ideas of themselves. A deleterious relationship between the dancer and their own body is developed as a result of the culture in ballet. Studies conclude that body dysmorphia is incurable and requires an outlook adjustment from the individual suffering however, this becomes extremely difficult for individuals who are participating in an environment that foundation is built on perfection. Without proper diagnosis and clinical assistance, body dysmorphia can result in extreme cases of self harm. According to studies conducted by the Cleveland Clinic, 80 percent of individuals experiencing body dysmorphic disorder have suicidal thoughts and 25 percent of those individuals will attempt suicide at some point.⁷⁸ Whether through diet, disregard, or constant critique, Black ballerinas are forced to adopt negative and harmful views of their identity. These glaring statistics force researchers to ask *what is at risk here?* The consequences reach beyond the studio and present life threatening outcomes.

Hair Discrimination and Damage Caused by Standard Ballet Bun

With physical critique deeply imbedded in ballet culture, conversations around hair become very common. Culturally, an African woman's relationship is extremely

⁷⁷ Michaela DePrince and Elaine DePrince, *Hope in a Ballet Shoe: A True Story* (London: Faber & Faber, 2014): 90

⁷⁸ Cleveland Clinic medical professional, "Body Dysmorphic Disorder (BDD): Symptoms & Treatment," Cleveland Clinic, accessed January 2024, <https://my.clevelandclinic.org/health/diseases/9888-body-dysmorphic-disorder>.

important and directly tied to her self regard, identity, and image. Ballet's emphasis on uniformity extends to the dancer's hair in an effort to create a cohesive ensemble among the group of dancers. Similar to the body standards, the expectations of hair and how it is styled, are just as strict and require tailored strategies.

To emphasize the damage caused on the dancer's hair as a result of these imposed practices, it is important to first understand the cultural significance hair has in the Black community as it specifically pertains to Black women. The relationship between the two and its magnitude can be found in historic and present examples. Examining the ancient civilization of Kemet allows an understanding of how beauty standards and practices were established. Spiritual beliefs of Kemetic people aligned beauty with harmony and balance amongst society, allowing beauty to transcend physicality. The emphasis and respect of beauty is found in royal naming that include the sacred language of *mdw ntr*'s term of beauty, *nefer*.⁷⁹ Examples of this are found in common names including Nefertiti and Neferkare. As a result of these intentional names, those who possessed them had undeniable influence. Hair styling and attention to hair grooming was included in the beauty standard and were incorporated into the daily routine of Kemetic women as a direct result of this influence. Whether women were preparing for a specific ritual, ceremony, or their daily accustomed tasks, there was daily attention to hair. The styling choices and level of attention took on additional meanings and significance. In addition to expression and ideas of beauty, hair styling became an indication of their position

⁷⁹ Allen. Middle Egyptian. Cambridge University Press, 2014.

amongst the community. In *Hairstyling Technology and Technique*, Geoffrey John Tassie explains the relationship hair had to social status amongst women. He states:

The hair styles that a person could wear were temporally dependent upon a person's social position and status. A form of sumptuary laws existed in Egypt regulating social etiquette with regards to what forms of hair style were permissible by various classes and statuses of individuals at certain occasions. These laws were not written down but were governed by social and courtly modes of behavior. The hair stylists through their creation of hair styles and wigs helped to perpetuate the hegemonic situation and reinforced the social relations, even when creating new styles.⁸⁰

This provides contexts surrounding the numerous ways hair was used as an extension of the individual in Kemet. History has revealed how the cultural importance of hair has remained consistent throughout the diaspora and time. During the transatlantic slave trade, African women used hair as a means of communication, storage, and spiritual connections with their culture. Although tailored strategies were used to physically and mentally dislocate Africans from their native land, African women adapted to their new reality with the limited resources. Tools and techniques were quickly developed to maintain styles and community. Kimani Nehusi expressed how culture continues to live through individuals despite their physical location in his book *In Libation: An Afrikan Ritual of Heritage in the Circle of Life*:

When a people migrate, especially en masse, or, as in the case of most Afrikans in Arab lands and in the West, were made to migrate, they do not leave their culture behind. They take their culture with them, for culture cannot be peeled off and separated from a people like a discarded shirt and left behind like another forgotten or unwanted garment or a house or a farm or like any other material possession. Modifications, the consequences of challenges of space, place and time, which often translate into the compulsion to work with new or differing materials in new and

⁸⁰ G. J. Tassie, "Hair in Egypt," *Encyclopaedia of the History of Science, Technology, and Medicine in Non-Western Cultures*, n.d., 1043–47, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4020-4425-0_9703.

differing environments, account for variations, transformations and discontinuities.⁸¹

Both the strategic manipulation of the hair and the bond developed amongst the women were equally important. Women caring for one another through hair care was a direct reflection of African cultural values that prioritize the collective care for individuals and community. Within the confinement of enslavement, women continued to prioritize these practices during their allotted free time. As hair had a significant role in spiritual survival, hair also became a tool of physical survival. The styles executed by enslaved Africans held grain that could be used to eat later in the day whether they remained on the plantation or had plans of escaping.⁸² While women participated in these practices, they were forced to navigate imposed standards. Maneuvering requirements presented by slave owners and what they established as acceptable while also attempting to retain cultural connection, complicated the interpersonal relationship Black women developed with their hair. Throughout the country's development, African Americans challenged the country's government and resisted against racial inequality. As a direct result of this, hair became a political statement of resistance and self established pride. Hair continues to show up in politics presently through legislation. The CROWN Act (originally established in 2019) allows us to understand the current conversation around Black women in the United States and their hair. According to The CROWN coalition, the legislation was developed "to ensure protection against discrimination based on race-

⁸¹Kimani S Nehusi, *Libation: An Afrikan Ritual of Heritage in the Circle of Life* (Lanham: University Press of America, Inc., 2016): 129

⁸²Afiya M. Mbilishaka et al., "Don't Get It Twisted: Untangling the Psychology of Hair Discrimination within Black Communities." *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry* 90, no. 5 (2020): 590–99, <https://doi.org/10.1037/ort0000468>.

based hairstyles by extending statutory protection to hair texture and protective styles such as braids, locs, twists, and knots in the workplace and public schools.”⁸³ This legislation reveals not only how Black women view their own hair but also how Black hair continues to be perceived by others in ways that directly impact their treatment, respect, and accessibility within the country. Whether we look at ancient Kemet, the civil rights movement, or present politics, conclusions can be drawn that emphasize the consistent role hair has played in Black communities, specifically for Black women. Cultural, historic, and political examples allow clarity to the nuances highlighted between the relationship a Black woman has with her hair. Due to this strengthened connection, Black women’s perception of their hair is directly connected to their perception of themselves. This point is important when brought back into the context of this research.

Since the hair requirement for ballet is rooted in European culture, Black ballerinas are placed at a cultural disadvantage. A professional and compliant ballet bun is required in most institutions during trainings and performances. While some studios will allow variations of the style with different parting and bun placement, the dancer’s hair must be tightly pulled back in a knot similar to a doughnut and secured with pins, elastics bands, gels, and/or hair nets to ensure it will not become undone within the performance or rehearsal time. If the dancer is training at the studio for an eight hour period, the expectation is that they will not have to readjust their bun during the duration of their training day. Regardless of hair length, texture, density, or cultural background, every dancer is required to meet the same standard. For most Black dancers, achieving the

⁸³ “The Official Crown Act,” The Official CROWN Act, accessed January 2024, <https://www.thecrownact.com/>.

standard bun requires several tools, products, and tailored approaches. Due to the natural curly, coiled, and course texture found in the natural hair of Black women, dancers use hard bristle brushes, gels, hot tools, and/or straightening chemicals in order to manipulate the hair strands. Coarser, denser, thicker hair follicles, creates volume throughout the individual's head making the hair grow out rather than down and preventing the hair strands to lay completely flat to the head and scalp. When compared to the texture of European or white women who typically have finer, straighter, and less dense hair, challenges in achieving the standard are presented in Black ballerinas that aren't present for white dancers. The fine texture found in European hair allows for the hair strands to grow down and lay flatter to the scalp and requires less tension to achieve slicker styles. Due to the natural composition of their hair, less products are needed to remain compliant with the required bun. While the tools Black women have used help them remain compliant, they also cause severe damage to the quality of their hair. Since the average pre-professional and professional dancer is dancing an average of five to six days out the week, the repetition of the tactics used to achieve the style increase the likeness and severity of damaging the hair follicle. Constant heat and straightening chemicals become common in the Black ballerina's experience to cut down the amount of time it takes to achieve and adjust the hair style throughout the week. Flat ironing the hair requires the hair strands to undergo temperatures north of 400 degrees per straightening session. Excessive heat causes the hair to experience breakage and will likely cause the hair to become *heat trained* or *heat damaged*. Heat damage occurs when:

Essentially, it's all about the impact to keratin, a protein found in hair. Exposure to high heat temperatures may alter the shape of keratin strands in your hair, with heat greater than 140° celsius converting A keratin to B keratin. This leads to weaker hair, losing its elasticity and leaving it prone to damage. As keratin is melted, hair maintains this shape at a molecular level which is irreversible over time.⁸⁴

Relaxers are another common hair process that uses parabens, ammonium thioglycolate, formaldehyde, and additional heavy metals to break down the bonds of hair strands and strips the natural protein produced by the scalp to restructure the texture of the hair. As a result, the natural coil is removed from the hair and it remains straight regardless of applied products or additional manipulation. Similar to heat damage, once the process is complete, the strands cannot return to their natural state. What separates the severity of chemical processing from heat damage however, is its direct link to health conditions. In a study conducted by Boston University, it was revealed that the chemicals found in relaxers result in an increase risk of uterine and cervical cancer which both impact Black women at a much higher rate.⁸⁵

While straightening chemicals and heat tools allow women to achieve an easier texture to manipulate, the excessive pulling caused by the tight style presents additional threats to the hair's integrity. Traction alopecia which can be defined as breakage around certain areas of the hair (commonly the temporal areas) due to excessive pulling and tight hairstyles, is a common outcome. While discussing usual causes of this form of damage, professionals cite tight buns and ponytails as two of the leading causes of traction

⁸⁴ Sonia Blair, "How Does Heat Damage Hair? An Investigation into a Common Hair Mistake," RUSSH, April 1, 2022, <https://www.russh.com/how-does-heat-damage-hair/>.

⁸⁵ "First Large Study of Hair Relaxers among Black Women Finds Increased Risk of Uterine Cancer." Chobanian Avedisian School of Medicine First Large Study of Hair Relaxers Among Black Women Finds Increased Risk of Uterine Cancer Comments, August 1, 1969, <https://www.bumc.bu.edu/camed/2023/10/11/first-large-study-of-hair-relaxers-among-black-women-finds-increased-risk-of-uterine-cancer/>.

alopecia. Studies, including the American Academy of Dermatology, National Institute of Health, and Department of Dermatology and Cutaneous Surgery, University of Miami School of Medicine, have concluded children and women of African descent have an increased chance of developing traction alopecia. The coiled strands prevent sebum from fully coating the hair shaft and decrease the overall amount of moisture throughout the individual's head. With the hair being dryer and less elastic, breakage occurs when constant pulling is applied. Researchers note that the combination of consistent tension and chemical usage increases the likelihood of traction alopecia and the severity of the damage.

In ballet, there is very little compromise on the established standard which forces Black women to use practices that challenge the integrity of their hair. If a dancer fails to meet the standard, their grade or respect within the program is often compromised. In high school programs like Duke Ellington School of the Arts in Washington, DC, grooming and presentation are incorporated in the dancer's grade and can impact their academic success and grade point average. With direct consequences that could alter academic opportunities and professional advancement, Black dancers are forced to consciously participate in culturally strangulated practices. While most Black ballerinas will experience a form of hair damage, drastic decisions regarding the hair's appearance cannot be made without consultation and approval of the dance masters. I have witness several cases where Black women displayed severe signs of hair damage as a result of their buns. Some young women suffered from alopecia and went through stages of intense hair loss throughout the training year, while another had suffered breakage in the

crown section of their head. Both dancers participated in years long conversations with dance masters before reaching a mutually agreed upon conclusion. As a result of these conversations, each dancer was required to invest in wigs to remain compliant with the hair requirement.

In addition to the physical damage produced by enforced practices, open conversations around hair in the dance studio emphasize and contribute to the unhealthy and culturally displacing relationship Black women develop with themselves. Within ballet, hair is open to verbal critique throughout a dancer's training. Misty Copeland supported this in her book when she recalled several instances where her or other Black dancers had to engage in conversations with their dance masters regarding their hair.⁸⁶ While dance masters engage in conversations in front of dancers, it is rarely an open dialogue between the instructor and student. This increases the skewed power dynamic and furthers the influence dance masters have over their dancers. Due to the poor structure, Black dancers must subject themselves to the harsh opinions regardless of their personal feelings. Throughout my dance training there was a particular ballet master who couldn't "figure out" my hair. He went through several nicknames to articulate how he perceived my naturally curly hair before ultimately landing on "wild woman." For the four years (2011-2015) I trained under his leadership, it was the only name he called me. It became my identity and allowed other instructors to openly share their opinions. Several public and private conversations revolved around me finding ways to "tame" my hair so I wouldn't embarrass the company when visitors, media outlets, and prominent

⁸⁶ Misty Copeland, *Life in Motion: An Unlikely Ballerina* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2014)

dance figures would observe the institution. Repetition of the spoken ideas becomes powerful and extremely influential. Molefi K. Asante emphasizes the generative and productive power of the spoken word' which he identifies as "*nommo*."⁸⁷ The conversations circling around hair in the studio strongly influence the relationship Black women develop with their hair and shape their self identity. Since the studio culture does not warrant dancers sharing their personal feelings, they are consumed by the opinions of their instructors and prioritize them over their own. After four years of being called "wild woman" and constantly being told my hair wasn't professional, it played an integral role in how I viewed my hair and myself. There were moments when my identity relied solely on my hair due the hyper fixation my dance masters placed on it. As a result, my training and dedication to ballet were overshadowed. I straightened my hair once thinking the tone and nature of the conversation would shift, and it did not. I centered myself around external validation that caused me to question and waiver on the love I had for myself. *Do they think my hair is a joke? Am I ugly? Does my hair really look that bad? Am I an embarrassment?* All became common questions throughout my training and as a result, my self identity was dependent on someone else's views.

Costuming and Cosmetics

Ballet is filled with micro-aggressions against Black women. While body dysmorphia and hair damage are more blatant examples, dance attire is a passive tactic used to exclude Black dancers from the discipline. Similar to meeting the hair requirement, dancers are responsible for their own dance materials and meeting the

⁸⁷ Molefi Kete Asante, *The Afrocentric Idea* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2006).

expressed standard. This includes, but is not limited to, tights, leotards, ballet shoes (canvas and pointe shoes), and rehearsal skirts. Within this list, tights and dance shoes are required to match the flesh of the dancer. This is requested so the dance attire can emulate the dancer's legs and feet. When the dancer wears tights or shoes that contrast the color of their skin, it appears that their limbs stop at the hip or ankle. Since symmetry, lines, and perfection are prioritized in the genre of dance, this requirement is extremely important. This standard presents several challenges for the Black woman participating in ballet.

Due to the pale skin of white ballerinas, they are able to use ballet shoes and tights in their manufactured pink color without creating stark contrast between their skin and the fabric used in the materials. Black dancers with melanated skin must adopt several additional tactics to meet the request of their dance masters. The most common way Black dancers adjust their ballet shoes, is by using liquid foundation that matches their skin. The dancers then apply the liquid to the satin or canvas shoes with brushes or their hands to perform what is referred to as *pancaking*.⁸⁸ The cosmetic product serves as a paint-like texture and adheres to the shoes. After an adequate amount of drying, the shoes remain the stained color without transferring the liquid on to the studio floor. For Black ballerinas, this becomes a common practice every few months however, it reveals the layered exclusion they experience. Since liquid foundation has been the primary form of pancaking, Black women are dependent on the shade selections provided by makeup brands. Historically, the make up industry has participated in racial exclusion by failing

⁸⁸ Sophie Robertson For Dance Spirit, "A Step-by-Step Guide to 'Pancaking' Your Pointe Shoes," Pointe Magazine, June 20, 2021, <https://pointemagazine.com/how-to-pancake-pointe-shoes/>.

to provide deeper pigments in products to reflect the various complexions of Black women. Beauty brands who have dominated the industry for decades and have product placement in several stores in the country, presently fail to diversify their shade range. On the surface, this makes it extremely difficult for Black women to remain compliant in their training. Aside from the financial burden Black women are forced to bare due to the need for extra materials, they are constantly reminded of the racist beauty standards. Makeup has had a direct influence on the standard of beauty for its consumers. White men are the most common CEOs of major makeup brands like MAC, L'Oreal, and Este Lauder allowing them to set the standard of beauty executed by their company's products. By participating in the pancaking process, Black women are not only racially excluded from ballet but also from the bigger conversation surrounding beauty.

The conscious practice of purchasing a pair of shoes that are exclusively made in pale pink and painting them with liquid to match your skin tone to remain compliant, is a blatant exclusionary practice. This paired with manipulating hair at the expense of the hair's integrity, and participating in dysmorphic practices, provide glaring contradictions. However, due to the desire to gain respect in the field, Black dancers take on additional strain to further their advancement. Making this decision subconsciously places the value of her Blackness below the desire to be accepted in exclusively white and Eurocentric spaces. This process of subconscious contradiction becomes common in the Black dancer's experience and detrimental to their self image and self esteem.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

By participating in ballet, Black women are forced into a process of cultural dislocation and strangulation. As a direct result of this, their self image is distorted, creating a negative and harmful relationship with oneself. As explained in Chapter 4 and 5, there are several factors continuing this detrimental practice. Core foundational principles pair with direct and indirect exclusionary and harmful practices to aid in the attack on Black ballerinas. This has forced Black women practicing ballet to develop their definitions based on the contradictions found in dance discipline. Within the confinement of their intense training and studio culture, Black women are tasked with validating their place in the world using the controlling images and ideas expressed and maintained by dance masters while developing their personal opinions of themselves.

This study was structured to provide additional research to the very underdeveloped topic regarding the experience of Black ballerinas. Current scholarship provided historical context surrounding the establishment of ballet and what has contributed to its universal assertion as the foundation of dance. The research revealed that while pioneers acknowledge ballet is not the beginning of all dance, funding, professionalization, isolation, and emphasis on perfection have had a direct influence on cementing ballet's place in professional dance environments. Additional research revealed cultural principles found in African dance and allowed for a deeper understanding of how unique dance sequences and cultural priorities allow for a spiritual and communal connection between the art and practitioner. While this research was helpful, the presented research in Chapter

2 emphasized a lack in scholarship. Although ballet and African dance have been researched by numerous scholars, the two concepts rarely intersect in academic conversations to allow for a comprehensive study.

The gap in research, emphasizes the uniqueness of this study. The work presented above applied the following approaches to create a strategic study: 1) auto-ethnography was paired with scholastic evidence to develop an examination that grounds personal experiences and research. 2) Black women were centered throughout the study and prioritized. 3) Cultural differences between African dance and ballet were identified and compared. 4) Macro and micro examples were utilized to create a detailed comprehensive study. 5) Afrocentricity was applied to the complete study to accurately articulate the experiences of Black women in ballet.

The ultimate goal of this study was to validate the experiences of Black ballerinas whose personal perception has been damaged and provide a framework for future scholarship. Through a tailored methodology, this goal remained. While this examination was designed to articulate the experiences of Black women, additional research is required to prevent the harmful practices listed above, from continuing. Afrocentric scholarship is imperative to advance this important academic discussion. Without afrocentric approaches, Black ballerinas and the cultural strangulation they endure, will go unnoticed and intensify. Through afrocentric scholarship, additional concerns outside of body dysmorphia, hair damage, and cosmetic exclusion will elevate current scholarship and overall awareness of this experience. Through advanced and accurate research, curriculum, racist perspectives, and forced standards have the potential to shift

thus, decreasing the cultural dislocation Black ballerinas endure. Change in the dance community and studio culture, starts with dedicated research with an emphasis on amplifying the voices of Black women who have not been able to speak beyond the studio walls.

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