

All Bodies Are Created Equal

Uncovering Reasons for the Under Representation of Black Ballerinas in America

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“Dance Theater of Harlem has eliminated all the old ideas about ballet and blacks, though I never said I was going to become a ballerina so that every little black girl in America could be one. I did it in the sense that, if you have a dream, whatever it is, if you put the discipline, and the commitment, and the love into it, you can achieve it.”¹ Virginia Johnson, one of the first prominent black professional ballerinas in the United States from the late 60s to when she retired from the stage, succinctly describes the significance of race in American ballet. Johnson acknowledges racial prejudice as limiting opportunities for black women to enjoy successful careers as ballerinas. She also notes that the creation of Dance Theatre of Harlem, a ballet company predominantly made up of black dancers, helped to dispel pervasive ideas about the black body and its ability to perform classical movement.

Is Virginia Johnson right? Does it take only discipline, commitment, and love to achieve the goal of a black dancer to become a professional ballerina? In the United States, historically, unequal opportunities have prevented black dancers from pursuing amateur and professional training and performance opportunities in ballet.

In addition to historical evidence, my personal experiences shed light on the inequalities faced by blacks in ballet. I became interested in writing about this topic because of my identity as a black dancer who has studied ballet. As a young dancer, it never really dawned on me that all the other students in my ballet classes were different from me. In middle school and high school, I began to hear snide comments, such as “Ballet is such a white thing to do” or “Only white people do ballet.” At the time, I ignored them. I continued to dance and even assisted my ballet teacher with her class. It is only now as a result of my undergraduate studies, that I have wanted to explain this disparity between white ballerinas (professional and amateur) and ballerinas who share my racial identity.

¹ *Harper's Bazaar*, October 1988, 185.

My thesis includes a three- pronged argument that follows from the issue of race to the connotations of what particular races are capable of and/or should be doing. First, I will discuss the most evident layer of this disparity, which is race, followed by the misconceptions that continue to thrive in our society deriving from racial/cultural prejudice, and finally close with socioeconomic inequalities that are, at times, associated with specific races. In simple terms, I am addressing the question of whether or not the reality for aspiring black ballerinas is equivalent to the opportunities given, or at least provided for aspiring white ballerinas. By examining discriminatory laws, misconceptions based on traditional connotations of the art form, and socioeconomic disadvantages I hope to discover why black dancers are underrepresented in the ballet world and how this trend can be changed.

First however, it is important to understand the relationship between the laws that helped to shape the perception of blacks in all aspects of life, including the perception of the black body, and general ideas, which led to the creation of these laws. Although the American Revolution was fought in the name of liberty and freedom for all Americans, slaves of African descent were not considered to be Americans, but property void of rights and liberties. Aside from the economic value of slaves, racial misconceptions led to unequal treatment of blacks in America.

In 1787, Thomas Jefferson wrote,

[T]he difference [between the races] is fixed in nature, and is real as if its seat and cause were better known to us...They secrete less by the kidneys, and more by the glands of the skin, which gives them a very strong and disagreeable odor...They are more ardent after their female; but love seems with them to be more an eager desire, than a tender delicate mixture of sentiment and sensation... [I]t appears to me, that in memory they are equal to the whites; in reason much inferior...In music they are more generally gifted than the whites with accurate ears for tune and time...²

² Robert P. Green Jr., ed., *Equal Protection and the African American Constitutional Experience : A Documentary History* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2000), 26.

Jefferson provided an “intellectual” understanding of the difference between Africans and whites by addressing biological reasons for the inferiority of slaves. First, Jefferson asserted that all blacks have an unpleasant odor, which supports his claim that biology is the most dominant sign of their inferiority. Also, Jefferson addresses the sexual appetite of black men and their treatment of black women, which led to the notion of blacks as primitive and animalistic. The only positive attribute that Jefferson ascribes to blacks is their musicality: here they are more gifted than their white counterparts. If this idea were accepted without other prejudices, maybe the issue of underrepresented black ballerinas would not exist? However, the stereotype presented by Jefferson remains alive today. Blacks are praised for their music and dance abilities, but the styles they can master are affected by a history of prejudice and discriminatory treatment.

Legal precedence reinforced this discrimination. In 1892, Homer Plessy, an African American man, was arrested for refusing to move from the white section of a train, which was required by the Louisiana Act of 1890.³ Four years later, the United States Supreme Court ruled on the constitutionality of the statute. Specifically, Plessy argued that the law violated the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment, which states: “No state shall...deprive any person of life, liberty, or property, without due process of law; nor deny to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws⁴.” Ultimately, the Court ruled that segregation was constitutional. Justice Brown wrote the majority opinion:

We consider the underlying fallacy of the plaintiff’s argument to consist in the assumption that the enforced separation of the two races stamps the colored race with a badge of inferiority...The argument also assumes that...equal rights cannot be secured to the negro except by an enforced commingling of the two races. We cannot accept this proposition. If the two races are to meet on terms of social equality, it must be the result of each other’s merits and a voluntary consent of individuals...If one race be inferior to

³ Green, 157.

⁴ Green, 117.

the other socially, the Constitution of the United States cannot put them upon the same plane...”⁵

In other words, the United States Supreme Court did not rule in favor of Plessy because the majority did not interpret segregation between whites and blacks as a violation of the Equal Protection Clause. According to Justice Brown, segregation did not define blacks as an inferior race. Furthermore, the majority held that judicial authority could not mend the social inequalities between blacks and whites; only voluntary acceptance of integration can fix social injustices.

However, this finding could not be more flawed. The decision of *Plessy v. Ferguson* legalized segregation, which denied access to equal protection of the law as guaranteed by the Fourteenth Amendment. Black Americans were blatantly denied liberties that white Americans were granted. This second-class treatment of blacks supported the notion that blacks were inferior to whites. Furthermore, segregation prevented black dancers from sharing formal ballet training and performing on the same stage with white dancers.

In 1954, the Supreme Court declared segregation unconstitutional in *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas*. The majority opinion states:

...there are findings below that the Negro and white schools involved have been equalized, or are being equalized, with respect to buildings, curricula, qualifications...We must look instead of the effect of segregation itself on public education...We must consider public education in the light of its full development and its present place in American life throughout the Nation...To separate them from others of similar age and qualifications solely because of their race generates a feeling of inferiority as to their status in the community that may affect their hearts and minds in a way unlikely ever to be undone...‘Segregation of white and colored children in public schools has a detrimental effect upon the colored children. The impact is greater when it has the sanction of the law; for the policy of separating the races is usually interpreted as denoting the inferiority of the Negro group...’ Separate educational facilities are inherently unequal.⁶

⁵ Green, 158-159.

⁶ Green, 244-245.

The Court unanimously concluded that segregation was unconstitutional because the very act of separating students by race carried with it the stigma of inequality. This decision transformed the opportunities made available to black dancers who desired to pursue a formal education in dance. However, customary discrimination continued, despite the legal changes. As I will discuss in a later section, this prevented the achievement of total equality for blacks.

Furthermore, formal education in dance met with even greater obstacles resulting from perceptions of the black body. As exemplified by the beliefs of Jefferson, blacks were viewed as “primitive” creatures. This demeaning quality associated with blacks affected their presence in the performing arts world. According to African-American theater scholar, Annemarie Bean, the cultural expectations of blacks restricted the styles of art that African Americans could pursue.

An understanding of the performing African-American body must depart from the historical insight that this body is bound by its portrayal in white culture as inherently entertaining in its subjection. As Saidiya V. Hartman points out, “torture and torment both generated enjoyment” in the two arenas in which African-Americans were primarily, though not exclusively, presented and re-presented as public spectacle in the nineteenth-century: as the actual black body in pain on the auction block and the re-presentation of that black body on the popular stage by white performers. Therefore, our American image of the performing African-American has been performed through certain expectations ingrained through a history of slavery and oppression, as well as of mimetic containment.⁷

Bean examines the perception of the black body in a broad performance context. She acknowledges the historical connotations of the black body, as a result of the economic structure of slavery and the treatment of slaves of African descent as property subjected to public inspection. The concept of placing human beings on display for the sake of profit led to the American cultural expectation of using blacks as a source of ridicule and mockery. Thus, blackface minstrelsy became a popular form of American entertainment that lasted well into the

⁷ Annemarie Bean ed., *A Sourcebook on African-American Performance : Plays, People, Movements* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 2.

twentieth century. The persistence of such performance forms and acceptance of the ideas associated with them coincide with the unequal platform laid out for blacks in American history. Furthermore, the expectations for black performers and depiction of blacks as uncivilized counterparts to whites support the notion that the black body is incapable of learning and/or executing ballet.

Before black dancers could even attempt to learn and perform ballet in America, the black community needed to dispel the notion that they were incapable of entering society through the performing arts. Prior to *Brown*, American law reinforced a cultural distinction between blacks and whites. As theater historian David Krasner explains, “black high modernists envisioned a...social order that demanded an image distinct from minstrelsy...They attempted to correct injustices by imposing an alternative perception of African America⁸.” For example, the literary achievements of the Harlem Renaissance (early 1920s to mid-1930s) provided a mode for artistic expression of the African-American experience through the eyes of African Americans. Langston Hughes, in 1926, best encapsulates the significance of the Harlem Renaissance in his essay, “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain”:

We younger Negro artists who create now intend to express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame. If white people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, it doesn't matter. We know we are beautiful. And ugly too...We build our temples for tomorrow, strong as we know how, and we stand on the top of the mountain, free within ourselves.⁹

Hughes described the importance of freedom of expression without catering to white expectations, especially when these expectations were based on misrepresentations of blacks. This idea coincided with the necessity for black artists to express the diversity of their culture.

⁸ David Krasner, *A Beautiful Pageant: African American Theatre, Drama, and Performance in the Harlem Renaissance, 1910-1927* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 14.

⁹ Paul Finkelman, *Encyclopedia of African American History, 1896 to Present: From the Age of Segregation to the 21st Century*, Vol.2, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 373.

Thus, individuals of high cultural standing within the black community began to define acceptable forms of art. This was clearest in the literary field. In music and dance, a more hybrid process was at work.

According to Krasner, “black modernity was a complex mixture of ideas and movements- migratory, urbanized, intellectualized, fragmentary, literary, folk, jazz, blues rhythmic, Western, and Afro-centric that created a complex, hybrid form...Black modernity represented a desire to transform the image of black culture from minstrelsy to sophisticated urbanity.”¹⁰ The black aesthetic, which grew out of a desire by blacks to create a more accurate image of self, represented the diversity of black culture in America, incorporating traditional African and contemporary black American forms, including jazz and blues. The work produced and performed by Katherine Dunham exemplifies this aesthetic and its popularization and acceptance into mainstream American culture.

Dunham created a unique style of dance incorporating formal training in ballet, modern dance, and Afro-Caribbean movement. Her stage and on-screen performances earned her great popularity spanning from the 1930s to 1960s. Like many New Negro artists, Dunham sought a reconstruction of social and cultural identity. In 1935, as a student of anthropology at the University of Chicago, Dunham was awarded a Rosenwald fellowship, which funded her trip to Haiti, Jamaica, and other countries in the West Indies. Dunham used anthropological methods of analysis to gain a better understanding of her personal roots and the African-American experience. Based on her research, Dunham developed her own technique, which she taught at her school in New York. “The Dunham technique included anatomical bases of ballet and

¹⁰David Krasner, *A Beautiful Pageant*, 10.

modern dance that emphasized the torso movements of the primitive ritual of Caribbean-African dance and jazz rhythms.”¹¹

While the Dunham technique broke the minstrelsy conventions that limited performing arts opportunities for African-Americans, the popularity of Dunham’s work crystallized the notion that blacks were capable of only learning and performing “primitive” dance. For example, in a 1944 promotional advertisement for Dunham’s *Tropical Revue* words such as “heatwave”, “voodoo”, and “primitive” are used to describe the show.¹² The acceptance of Dunham’s work and technique rested on the exotic appeal of her movement and dancers. Although Dunham created a style that showcased the talent of black dancers, they were still not considered to be on the same level as white dancers.

During the 1960s many blacks embraced an aesthetic of artistic and political empowerment, following the end of legal segregation. “Black Art is the aesthetic and spiritual sister of the Black Power concept. As such, it envisions an art that speaks directly to the needs and aspirations of Black America. In order to perform this task, the Black Arts Movement proposes a radical reordering of the western cultural aesthetic.”¹³ As defined by Annemarie Bean, the new black aesthetic heightened the clash between the “classical” art of ballet and the “primitive” or exotic style of black dance, exemplified by Dunham. This new expression of African-Americans conflicted with the notion that black dancers were capable of performing ballet.

This was complicated by the history of ballet in America. “Until 1940,” critic Anita Finkel has written, “there was virtually no American tradition of ballet, and it was Ballet Theatre

¹¹ *Kaiso! : Writings By and About Katherine Dunham*, Ed. VèVè E. Clark and Sara E. Johnson. (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2005), 179.

¹² *Kaiso!*, Figure 11

¹³ Annemarie Bean ed., *A Sourcebook on African-American Performance : Plays, People, Movements*, (New York: Routledge, 1999), 55.

(as ABT was known from 1940 to 1957) that successfully established the notion of a native company as viable, flourishing thing...a company that would equal European companies in scale, grandeur, and prestige.”¹⁴ Crucially, the aesthetic of ballet was associated with Europe, the same continent of powers that had organized the African slave trade to their respective colonies. "Of course, not every American intellectual was sure of the New World's ability to receive the inherited torch of Western culture," American historian Gordon Wood has written, "and some doubted whether America's primitive tastes could ever sustain the fine arts.”¹⁵ The most striking word out of this passage is “primitive.” During the revolutionary period, European culture was highly esteemed. Indeed, the argument for European cultural superiority and American primitivism parallels the argument presented for white American cultural elitism in contrast to black American primitivism. White Americans were viewed as superior, capable of performing “classical” techniques, despite the fact that Europeans did not view them in that same light. Thus, blacks were considered to lack the ability to pursue ballet training because of their excellence in “primitive” forms, such as jazz, Afro-Caribbean, tap, and popular dances. In other words, the European origin of ballet along with the categorization of black dance as “primitive” identified classical ballet in America as an art form pursued by white dancers.

Despite discriminatory laws and the cultural connotations of words, such as “classical” and “primitive,” black dancers attempted to break the mold by pursuing an art form that they were told they could not accomplish. Joan Myers Brown, founder of PHILIDANCO!, was one of those dancers. During her early years of training, the cultural standards surrounding ballet limited Brown’s access to formal education in the art form. Brown attributes skin color as the dominant reason for discrimination, especially during the 1930s and 1940s when segregation was

¹⁴ Anita Finkel, *International Dictionary of Ballet*, Vol. 1. Detroit: St. James, 1993, 19.

¹⁵ Gordon S. Wood, *The American Revolution: A History*, (New York: Modern Library, 2002), 97.

sanctioned by law. In an interview with Barnard student Aliya Mosby, Brown described the process of casting for school performances at her segregated elementary school in Philadelphia: “only the light-skinned girls with long, flowing hair got the leading parts.”¹⁶ Even in an all-black school, skin color was a determining factor of potential opportunities in the dance field.

The issue of skin lightness or darkness within the black community permeated American culture. According to the dance historian Brenda Dixon Gottschild:

In brief, there seem to be several reasons why blacks and whites privilege light skin over dark: (1) whites feel more at ease with people who look more like them; (2) consequently, blacks whose skin color looked more like whites were frequently able to gain economic advantages not accessible to their darker siblings...(4) thus, the lighter the skin the more the black person had a natural passport to some small measure of white advantage, in both black and white worlds.¹⁷

Thus, blacks who were unable to “pass” were denied entry into white areas of culture, such as ballet. In fact, one of Brown’s earliest dance instructors, Essie Marie Dorsey, was a black woman who “passed as Spanish in order to be able to study ballet and Spanish dancing.”¹⁸ Another teacher, Marion Cuyjet, throughout her professional training passed for white in order to take classes. “Cuyjet danced with the Littlefield Ballet until her cover was blown when black friends visited her backstage after a performance. Like Dorsey, Cuyjet used her fair skin to benefit from training and performance opportunities most blacks could not receive.”¹⁹

Aside from her training experience, Brown encountered racism as a performer. In 1953, she appeared in the ballet staged in Philadelphia by the English choreographer Anthony Tudor,

¹⁶ Aliya Mosby, “Joan Myers Brown: A Life of Combatting Racism” (Senior Thesis, Barnard College, 2006), 6.

¹⁷ Brenda D. Gottschild, *The Black Dancing Body: A Geography From Coon to Cool*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan 2003), 191.

¹⁸ Aliya Mosby, “Joan Myers Brown: A Life of Combatting Racism” (Senior Thesis, Barnard College, 2006), 6.

¹⁹ Mosby, 10.

Les Sylphides.²⁰ In a review of the performance, a critic referred to Brown as a “fly in the buttermilk.”²¹ According to the critic, Brown’s skin color stood out among the white dancers, which spoiled the image of the whiteness both visually and culturally. By comparing Brown to a fly that does not belong in buttermilk, the critic implied that blacks did not belong in ballet classes or performances.

This pervasive racism became evident to Joseph Rickard, founder of the First Negro Classic Ballet, in 1946 when he witnessed a black student in Hollywood being turned away from a ballet studio because of her race.²² As a result, Rickard founded an integrated ballet school in Los Angeles that lasted from 1946 to 1956. This period marks a transformative period in US race relations.²³

Raven Wilkinson, the first black woman to dance full-time in a ballet company exemplifies the significance of skin color American ballet during the transformation from racial segregation to integration. Wilkinson auditioned two or three times for the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo before being hired in 1955,²⁴ a year after the landmark decision of *Brown v. Board of Education*. Fortunately, Wilkinson was given a chance to display her talents; by her second season with the Ballet Russe she was dancing the waltz solo in the ballet *Les Sylphides*.

Unfortunately, Wilkinson had to deal with the reality of her skin color in the third year of her tenure with the Ballet Russe. Until then, she was able to perform in the South because of her light skin color.²⁵ However, in 1958, when the company played in Montgomery, Alabama, two

²⁰ Mosby, 14.

²¹ Mosby, 14.

²² Kenneth H. Marcus, “‘A New Expression For a New People’: Race and Ballet in Los Angeles, 1946-1956”, *Journal of the West*, 44, no. 2 (Spring 2005), 24.

²³ Marcus, 24.

²⁴ *I'll Make Me a World. The Dream Keepers*. Dir. Tracy H. Strain. Blackside Inc. in association with Thirteen/WNET, 1999.

²⁵ *Ballets Russes*. Dir. Danya Goldfine, Dan Gellar, Robert Hawk, and Douglas B.

Ku Klux Klan men walked down the aisles of the theater and came on stage shouting, “Hey! Where is the nigger?”²⁶ Fortunately, Wilkinson’s life was not in danger because of her ability to “pass,” but the company sent her home whenever the tour hit the South.

Outside of the dance field, situations motivated by outrage to the new legal precedence placed African Americans’ lives in fear. September 1957 marked a pivotal change in America with the most famous execution of the decision in *Brown*. Nine black students entered the halls of a once segregated high school. Only three weeks before this, Governor Orval Faubus claimed that integration at Central High in Little Rock, Arkansas would never happen, voicing the sentiments held by many,²⁷ despite the fact that *Brown* had made segregation unconstitutional. While the decision was a significant turning point in US race relations, the transition from segregation to integration met with obstacles that prevented complete progress for blacks. As for Wilkinson, she was, gradually, encouraged by the company to leave, marking the end of her professional dancing career in America.²⁸

Race was not the only factor shaping the opportunities for aspiring professional ballerinas. As early as the 1930s and 1940s, Joan Myers Brown cites socioeconomic disadvantages as a hindrance to equal performance and educational opportunities. Specifically, family wealth affected both the training and performance opportunities. According to Brown, “Well, Dr. So and So’s daughter was featured [in a school recital] where the rest of us were just not, we were just there. And I think it was about class more than color, but most of the people in that class situation were light-skinned because their fathers were caterers, doctors, lawyers.”²⁹

Turbaugh. Zeitgeist Films/Zeitgeist Video, 2006.

²⁶ *Ballets Russes*.

²⁷ Kevin Chappell, “50 Years After Little Rock,” *Ebony Magazine*, (October 2007), 237.

²⁸ *Ballets Russes*.

²⁹ Aliya Mosby, 7.

Classes, essential to ballet training, cost money, and many black families could not afford them. On top of the misconception that blacks were incapable of performing ballet, socioeconomic disadvantages prevented all but a small minority from pursuing a professional ballet career.

Fortunately, Brown continued her pursuit of a professional career as a ballerina. In 1970, she founded PHILADANCO!, a company providing the opportunity for her students from the Philadelphia School of Dance Arts. to enter the professional dance world. At the time of the creation of the company, sixteen years had passed since the overturn of Plessy. African American dancers in pursuit of professional dance careers went to New York because of the wider market for performance opportunities.³⁰ Unfortunately, “due to financial or family reasons, Brown’s students either could not or did not want to New York, and thus became the original members of PHILADANCO!”³¹ In other words, Brown provided formal ballet education and performance opportunities to those who were burdened by racial and socioeconomic discrimination.

Interestingly, only a year before the founding of PHILADANCO!, Arthur Mitchell had created a similar company in New York. Mitchell was the first black principal dancer of the New York City Ballet during the 1950s.³² I was fortunate to observe a master class in Miller Theatre at Columbia University on November 10 of this year, in which Mitchell briefly described his experience of receiving formal training in dance. During his early years, people encouraged him to pursue other styles, such as modern, jazz, tap, and African, but not ballet. He attributes this prejudice to his race (and gender too).³³ Despite his success, people would tell him

³⁰ Mosby, 23.

³¹ Mosby, 23.

³² Martha Bremser ed. “Arthur Mitchell” *International Dictionary of Ballet*. Vol. 1-2. Detroit: St. James, 1993, 330.

³³ Arthur Mitchell, *Harlem Arts at Columbia University*, Miller Theatre, Columbia University, 10 November

that he was an exception.³⁴ Mitchell did not let that steer him away from his dream of becoming professional ballet dancer, which he attained in 1955, a year after the end of legal segregation, when he joined the New York City Ballet.

Fourteen years later, Mitchell founded a dance company “to serve the black community in Harlem and, on a wider scale, to prove to the world that black dancers can excel in an art form which has been traditionally been a somewhat precious, whites-only preserve.”³⁵ His decision to create a company of black dancers was a response to the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. in 1968. The creation of Dance Theatre of Harlem provided a space and learning environment for black dancers who exhibited facility and dedication, but did not have equal opportunity for expression.

Fortunately, Mitchell, along with his mentor and teacher Karel Shook, were able to start a successful company because of changes in the legal environment. Integration of blacks in traditional white schools provided greater access to formal technical training, which is necessary to become a strong dancer, as I know from my personal training and as Mitchell emphasized, during his master class at Columbia. Today, aspiring black ballerinas can access a broader spectrum of pre-professional instruction. The growing participation of blacks in ballet has started to change perceptions of black dancers’ capabilities in mastering the form. Learning ballet as a black American is no longer an matter of passing.

Dance Theatre of Harlem performed a repertory of modern works, including several neoclassical ballets by George Balanchine, but Mitchell and Shook felt it was also important for the company to perform works intimately associated with the very idea of classicism. Hence

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³⁴ Arthur Mitchell, 10 November, 2009.

³⁵ Bremser, “Dance Theatre of Harlem,” *International Dictionary of Ballet*, Vol. 1, (Detroit: St. James Press, 1993), 330.

their decision to stage *Giselle*, the 1841 classic of the Romantic tradition, but setting it not in the German Rhineland, but in antebellum Louisiana. However, apart from the change in costuming and setting, *Creole Giselle* had a traditional choreographic text.³⁶

The use of classical movement, the narrative, and choreographic conventions, such as partnering, pointe work, and the formalized pas de deux all are true to the core traits of ballet. As Martha Bremser pointed out, “This ‘Creole’ *Giselle* was meticulously researched and extremely effective in its new setting, yet at the same time utterly true to Romantic spirit and required early nineteenth-century balletic style.”³⁷ Dance Theatre of Harlem had made it clear that blacks could dance ballet.

There is significance in the fact that costuming and setting were changed to appeal more to an African-American audience.

Performers of the Harlem Renaissance, like all performers, required an audience. For African American performers, however the looming issue was whether to appeal to fellow blacks, to ‘cross over’ and perform for whites, or attempt to appeal to both. Many experienced the pressures to create for several audiences- white, black, middle class, and working class- and tried to accommodate as many groups as possible simply in order to survive.³⁸

Although this quote depicts the necessity for artistic appeal to an audience, during the Harlem Renaissance, a primary contribution of “*Creole Giselle*” was to set a ballet that an American audience can relate to during the 1970s and 1980s. In other words, Mitchell was aware of the multiple audiences for his company. In order for his work to connect with the Dance Theatre of Harlem dancers as well as its new patrons, he drew upon history to make *Giselle* stay true to the black experience: hence, the Louisiana setting.

³⁶ *Creole Giselle*, Thomas Grimm, Prod. Yanna K. Brandt, Kultur, 1988, Videocassette.

³⁷ Bremser, “Dance Theatre of Harlem,” 331.

³⁸ David Krasner, *A Beautiful Pageant*, 8.

The relaxing legal and racial tensions that led to the success of Dance Theatre of Harlem is also reflected in progress for black dancers in attaining a formal ballet education and access to performance opportunities. Still, racial connotations continue to exist. Here is how Martha Bremser describes the DTH dancers in *International Dictionary of Dance* as late as 1993: “The dancers leading the troupe were by no means technical virtuosos, but the most immediately palpable quality about their dancing was the visible energy and enthusiasm of their attack.”³⁹ Isn’t attack virtuosic? Why does energy stand out as opposed to the technique and lines of the body? The way dance critics view Dance Theatre of Harlem dances and dancers remain influenced by the issue of race in dance, at least subconsciously.

Annemarie Bean acknowledges the nationalist pressures that weighed on dancers of early Dance Theatre of Harlem:

Many of them [black dancers] had trained in ballet and established modes of American modern dance, two forms which had been created from a Europeanist vantage and for a largely white audience. The separatist demands of the nationalist moment precluded an acknowledgment of Eurocentric dance heritage; still, young black dancers respected the amount of information their bodies contained from intensive studio training. Even as younger dance artists strove to find forms which could be identified as conforming to an emergent black aesthetic, they could not easily dismiss their dance training as “inappropriately white.”⁴⁰

Indeed, as increasing numbers of black dancers receive advanced training in Eurocentric techniques, they remain divided about their artistic goals. Few want to dismiss entirely the training they have worked so hard to acquire. Even in 2009, we cannot completely rule out the significance of race as an impediment for black dancers with a desire to pursue a career in ballet. Fortunately, legal and political trends have eliminated segregation from dance training and performance sites.

³⁹ Bremser, “Dance Theatre of Harlem,” 331.

⁴⁰ Bean, *A Sourcebook on African-American Performance*, 85.

A founding member of Dance Theatre of Harlem, Virginia Johnson, exemplifies the opportunities given to black dancers as a result of the legal and cultural changes of recent US history. Raised in segregated Washington, Johnson initially trained at an all black school. By 1963, thanks to *Brown*, Johnson received a scholarship to train at the Washington School of Ballet. Her ability to access an outstanding pre-professional education in ballet resulted directly from the legal end to segregation.

Johnson faced a major setback when it came time for her to enter the professional world: “I spent six years at the Washington School of Ballet being trained to be a very fine ballet dancer. Then, suddenly, in my senior year in high school, they said to me, ‘We think you should try jazz or become a modern dancer. We don’t think you’re going to get a job as a ballet dancer...’ There were no ballet companies in America that had black women dancers.”⁴¹ The reality of the situation was that misconceptions of the black body still prevailed. Although changes were being made on the level of education or rather access to education for black dancers, the market for black ballerinas did not open at the same rate.

This setback did not deter Johnson from pursuing her dream. After graduating from high school, Johnson enrolled at New York University School of the Arts, which placed her in geographic reach of Dance Theatre of Harlem. In February 1969 Johnson signed an official contract and became a professional dancer of the company.⁴²

The following excerpt from an interview published in *Ballet Review* best encapsulates the Johnson’s personal experience with Dance Theatre of Harlem and her understanding of the impact that such a company had on the ballet world for black dancers:

I think that it was in the 1980s or maybe 1990s that DTH started to get a generation of young black dancers who were well trained and completely owned the fact that they were

⁴¹ Lynn Garafola, “A Conversation with Virginia Johnson,” *Ballet Review*. Vol. 33 , 2005, 52

⁴² Garafola, 54.

ballet dancers. They came in, and there was no question in their minds that they could do ballet, that they should be doing it... This was completely different from where I started, which was, 'Can I have permission to do ballet...' There are black dancers in ballet companies around the country now, although I wish there were more black dancers in schools. Maybe things aren't a hundred percent different now, but they're eighty percent and moving. I think there's a generation of artistic directions and an audience that expect things to be different, whereas in the 1950s and 1960s not only the companies but also the audiences were very resistant. No it's not changed enough, but, yes we're training wonderful dancers, and there are places for them to go, and it's going to get better.⁴³

Johnson captures the trajectory of black dancers in America who pursued a professional career in ballet. She acknowledges the significance of Dance Theatre of Harlem as a black ballet company in America. At a time when legal and cultural changes were challenging traditional notions of ballet, Arthur Mitchell had created a company that proved to America that blacks could dance ballet. The chief reason for the company's success was the fact that integration enabled and encouraged aspiring black dancers to receive formal ballet training. Johnson is right to acknowledge that black dancers in America today no longer need to ask for permission to learn and perform ballet. She is right, too, in pointing out the role of the audience in accepting and formulating standards who can and should perform ballet. Finally, Johnson optimistically concludes that progress will continue.

Johnson highlights as the problem the limited number of black dancers studying ballet. Taking classes is expensive. From a legal perspective, race does not seem to be the dominant obstacle for aspiring black dancers; rather socioeconomic factors are the main culprit preventing many from pursuing their dreams. In other words, it is no longer a question of whether or not laws dictate my right to share a stage with white peers; it is a matter of access to the resource of learning the discipline of ballet.

When discussing the history of Dance Theatre of Harlem, Bremser speaks of the initial mission of the company:

⁴³ Garafola, 61.

Mitchell's mission, as the publicity for the school now proclaims, was "to introduce young people, particularly those who were economically and culturally disadvantaged, to the beauty and discipline of dance." Ballet was not the sort of thing that attracted the average Harlem youth off of the streets, but Mitchell lured enough students into the studio.⁴⁴

Although the company's mission statement has changed over the years, its core content remains applicable today. Mitchell's company catered to those who were economically and culturally disadvantaged, which have seen through experiences faced by Brown, Wilkinson, Johnson, and Mitchell himself. *Poverty & Race in America: The Emerging Agendas*, edited by Chester Hartman, shows the historical connection between racial minorities and lower socioeconomic classes. Because of poverty, the pursuit of a formal education in ballet is more difficult to accomplish.

Because of discriminatory laws, misconceptions based on traditional connotations of ballet and socioeconomic disadvantages, black dancers have been underrepresented in the ballet world. Yet, my research has led me to agree with Virginia Johnson's claim that love, discipline, and commitment are necessary components in achieving one's dream. We see it from the 1930s to now. For example, Essie Marie Dorsey passed as a Spanish dancer in order to gain access of formal training. In turn, she was able to start off Joan Myers Brown with her training. Although the 1940s to mid-1960s were filled with racial tension, including the violent backlash of the Ku Klux Klan and the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., hope was not lost for black dancers because the founding of dance companies that catered to African Americans, including Dance Theatre of Harlem and PHILADANCO!. More importantly, *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas* in 1954 destroyed the legal basis of segregation based on skin color.

Despite the existence of customary discrimination, both Arthur Mitchell and Virginia Johnson achieved their goals of pursuing a professional career in ballet. As a result of their

⁴⁴ Bremser, ed., "Dance Theatre of Harlem," 330.

success and the principles embodied by Dance Theatre of Harlem, Americans are beginning to realize that all bodies are created equal. As stated by Mitchell, “There is not a black pirouette; a pirouette’s a pirouette.”⁴⁵ Ballet is not only for white dancers.

While the acceptance of black dancers in American ballet is a general trend today, smaller groups continue to share old beliefs. For example, the “outing” of Raven Wilkinson by another black woman in the 1950s because some blacks believed that passing was a betrayal to the race⁴⁶ is similar to my experience of dealing with the snide comments of my black peers. Unfortunately, some African-Americans still believe that blacks should not perform ballet because the art form is solely associated with white culture.

Today, the predominant factor limiting black entry into the American ballet world has shifted from race to socioeconomic inequality. I base the following argument on observations and interactions with my peers until I entered college. The comments of my black peers in school only highlighted the fact that black dancers are still not perceived as capable of performing ballet. More importantly, my experiences reveal that the way blacks perceive themselves results in the low presence of black ballerinas. Although I did not do research directly focused on the psychological effects of discriminatory laws and misconceptions of ballet as opposed to “primitive” art forms, it is apparent that people are aware of these claims and that some have either internalized them as true or acknowledged the struggle of pursuing a career in ballet and consciously decided to choose another option. In terms of internalizing legal and cultural standards, the *Brown* decision explicitly acknowledges the detrimental effects of teaching, through segregation, that blacks are inferior to whites simply because of their skin color. Historically in America, the fact that black ballerinas did not have a strong presence in the

⁴⁵ *I'll Make Me a World*, 1999.

⁴⁶ *I'll Make Me A world*, 1999.

dance field makes it no surprise that many blacks still struggle with the notion that blacks can dance ballet. Although blacks continue to question the presence of black dancers in ballet, education and performance opportunities have significantly changed since the 1930s.

The presence of black dancers performing ballet will minimize the old prejudices. For instance, the popular television competition show, *So You Think You Can Dance* contributes to the American awareness of black dancers' capabilities. The winner of the show during its third season was Sabra Johnson, a black dancer who performed a variety of styles including ballet or related forms, such as lyrical. Her skin color did not bother the American audience: she was voted America's Favorite Dancer that year.

In addition, the sociopolitical climate of America today prevents blatant discrimination based on skin color. Unfortunately, socioeconomic disadvantages continue to halt the dreams of black dancers who desire to pursue a recreational or professional career in ballet. My proposed solution is to incorporate the performing arts in public education. Minorities who cannot afford extra technique classes can be exposed the art form in public classrooms, which will help remove ballet's elitist identity.

Most importantly, as history has proven, time will facilitate progress, which leads me to believe that more and more black dancers will pursue formal training in ballet and create a more fair representation of black dancers in ballerinas in America.

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