

The Skin We Dance, The Skin We Teach

Appropriation of Black Content in Dance Education

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When I have attended conferences I have been struck by the aggravation, and at times, animosity shared by some African Americans over what Caucasians are presenting in papers and classes about African-based dance or about major African American figures in dance. Whose culture is whose? Is this appropriation, misappropriation, or an effort to broaden the scope of dance pedagogy?

I am a Caucasian. I am also a dance educator. I teach, and therefore appropriate, black cultural material in the studio, classroom, and when on the lecture circuit. I disseminate this material because I want to present the whole picture to students who might otherwise not have access to this significant component of our American dance legacy. Our “comprehensive” dance history textbooks have omitted many of the contributions African Americans made to our collective history due to the intended and unintended bias of their authors. Subsequently, in my work to correct these omissions, I have also been the recipient of animosity by some African Americans. However, I have also been embraced for my efforts.

History can provide some insight as to why blacks take issue when whites appropriate black content, whether on stage, in the studio, in a classroom, or at a conference. Appropriation is a complex issue founded upon the history between blacks and whites in this country, upon ownership of the black body by whites, and upon inequities of power. The very concept of race was invented by whites in post-Enlightenment Europe for purposes of power and imported to

the Americas so that blacks could be identified, denigrated, and bought and sold like livestock. Intertwined with this phenomenon, whites have envied, imitated, and exotified the black body. The black body has been up for grabs by whites. A recent example of this surfaced last year when it was disclosed that in 1925 the late Senator Strom Thurmond, a segregationist from South Carolina, fathered a child with his family’s sixteen-year-old black maid.

Despite the inequities, blacks and whites kept talking through an intense bodily discourse that has been going on between them for over four hundred years. Ironically, this clash of dance cultures, which occurred when African and European peoples came to the “New World,” has produced amazing and diverse forms of dance in this country. The fusion of these culturally distinct dance/movement traditions is where the story of American dance begins. Dance journalist and historian Zita Allen termed this the “Africanization of American dance.”¹

In the popular and concert dance realms, the dance practices exemplified by George Balanchine, Elvis Presley, and Britney Spears reflect distinct social and economic demographics. While they differ widely in dance forms and socioeconomic stratification as well as chronological eras, each of these figures share one similarity: appropriation of black forms as dancers or choreographers. Balanchine intricately wove black movement content into an existing vocabulary in very sophisticated ways that, in part, informed, and subsequently altered the American ballet aesthetic. As pop vocalists,

Presley and Spears were more blatant in their use (or theft) of black material because they took it verbatim. This occurred because they lacked a dance vocabulary of their own that would both serve and market their music. Despite their differences, Balanchine, Presley, and Spears made notable gains in visibility and economics without acknowledgment of its source.

A difficult question remains: When is it right for a white dance educator to teach, and therefore appropriate, African and African American-based content for purposes of a history course or a West African dance class? Is it ever?

Yes. I do not think that the amount of melanin in one's skin determines the right of delivery anymore than I think it insures a better sense of rhythm. Rather, it is about experiences, upbringing, exposure, access, and the like – and not about skin color. These are cultural referents, not racial ones. Cultural historian Brenda Dixon Gottschild captured this issue quite succinctly in the dance world when she stated: "I do not believe there is such a phenomenon as black or white dance – or even a black or white dancing body. *They are cultural milestones, not racial markers* [emphasis added]."² Applied pedagogically, bad teaching is just plain bad teaching, and it can come in any "color." Problems arise when race becomes a measure of what constitutes a good teacher of certain content.

However, at the risk of contradicting myself, the teaching terrain becomes a bit more slippery when applied to this subject matter because of the history of black and white relations in this country. Therefore, whites teaching black material warrants further examination. I have seen some Caucasians fail because they are teaching from an uninformed perspective, perhaps because they thought the materials was "up for grabs" – paralleling the previous centuries of misappropriation. Compounded by their assumed "right" of access, their failure was founded on historical inaccuracies, or that they watered down content to the point that they misinformed students in the process.

Essential to a white dance educator's success in teaching black content is an "historical perspective and emic intelligence," as Dixon Gottschild defined when I discuss this subject matter with her.³ In other words, the white dance educator must immerse herself in the historical content in order to understand it before she disseminates it. She must also be able to *acknowl-*

edge the painful history that surrounds the content. Accordingly, as the instructor prepares, she must be able to enter African American historical content, not only as a researcher in search of information, but also as a human being capable of empathy. This is the type of knowledge that the white dance educator must possess before entering the classroom or studio.

Each educator, regardless of whether they are black or white and regardless of the content, is capable of misinformed teaching if they lack appropriate training in conjunction with historical and cultural knowledge of the material. Ultimately, it is the responsibility of all educators to provide students with a well-rounded education. To this end, we need to be able to present a full and accurate picture to our students.

The American dancing body is the crossroad of African and European movement and aesthetic sensibilities. Major figures in modern dance and ballet are a testament to this – Dafora, Balanchine, Guy, Graham, Humphrey, Tudor, Tamiris, Dunham, Robbins, Primus, Cunningham, Ailey, Joffrey, Brown, Tharp, Fagan, and now the work by choreographers such as Ronald K. Brown. At this crossroad is a radiant dancing body. The Dayton Contemporary Dance Company recently performed their "Flight Project" – a program about the theme of flight, which is a tribute to the Wright brothers. This predominately African American-based dance company has focused on escaping from the earth to become airborne – moving from an African-based movement aesthetic to a European one. The Flight Project is a testimony to the possibility for dialogue – dialogue between dance forms that have fused equitably. In a review of the Project, Rohan Preston, a critic from the *Minneapolis Star Tribune*, paraphrased Bill T. Jones (who choreographed for the Project) as stating that he acknowledges the early modern dancers aesthetic of weightiness and of being of the earth and yet spoke of his desire to "fly" in dance.⁴ In both this review and the Flight Project itself, two disparate worlds are being brought together. The dancers embody this cultural crossroad.

Art such as the Flight Project paves the way for insightful change in dance education with a "knowing" that we can hope to achieve. It has taken us to a fusion of diverse dance forms and continues to confront us, moving us toward

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needed change. Paradoxically, in some instances the verbal discourse among dance educators has not caught up with the movement discourse that is embodied on American concert dance stages across this country night after night.

White appropriation of black cultural forms is an issue for some African American dance educators. It is my hope that this editorial not only calls attention to this issue, but also opens the door to further dialogue. This is the only way we can hope to better understand it, which in turn will increase our effectiveness as dance educators. I look forward to the day when the need to write an editorial such as this has become obsolete. This day will come when we can all share in the dance by honoring memory and through mutual respect of one another's histories and our particular dancing bodies.

Acknowledgments

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