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Dancing Under the Weight of Racism

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Abstract

The slogan “I can’t breathe” reverberated in 2020 with the Black Lives Matter movement protests against police brutality and racial injustices in America. As much as there was an uncanny coincidence with that phrase and the root of the COVID-19 pandemic, the immediate association of those words for me, a dance educator in South Africa, was the 2015 #RhodesMustFall national student protests in South Africa. Black students at the University of Cape Town, and eventually across the nation, vehemently protested racism and the suffocating whiteness of their institutions and curricula. Their motto of “We can’t breathe” resonated in our dance

studios and lecture halls. Through personal narratives the author aims to reveal multiple ways in which racism can permeate dance teaching and learning and the adverse effects of this abhorrent phenomenon on dancers and dance education. A lacuna in the dance scholarship on race and racism are first-person accounts that provide rich descriptions of individual's lived experiences with racism in dance. As a step toward healing and transformation, such storytelling is useful for demystifying a phenomenon that is complex and prone to blind spots and denial.

Introduction

The years 2015-2016 in South Africa were marked by national student protests under the banners of #Rhodesmustfall and #Feesmustfall respectively. Student activists of colour and their White allies joined forces across the nation at historically White universities to protest the suffocating whiteness of their institutions and curricula. "We can't breathe" was their motto as they staged mass demonstrations on campuses, literally shutting them down for months in a courageous and resolute call for transformation. Collectively as South Africans, with multiple racial identities, students were claiming space for their diverse ancestral histories, cultures, and peoples in the canons of knowledge. They demanded the right to an African education not predicated on Eurocentric hegemony and racist/colonial value systems that only served to disempower themselves and their communities (Fairbanks, 2015; Hartocollis & Bidgood, 2015; Longari, 2016; Sosibo, 2015). With our dance department at the University of Cape Town at the time boasting more faculty members of colour than ever before in its eighty plus year old history, and a progressive curriculum with African dance (history and techniques) as a core area of study alongside ballet and contemporary dance¹, I assumed that our students did not experience this sense of feeling deprived of air and oxygen in their dance education. I was wrong!

The protests and forced shut down of the campus for months afforded our dance department, faculty, and students alike, the invaluable opportunity to pause from our "business as usual" modus operandi, and to critically dialogue on matters of racial and colonial oppression in the university dance experience. These conversations were never going to be easy given that emotions are heightened during protest activities and calls for change are usually counteracted with calls of resistance. Additionally, students and faculty alike, be they of the same race group or another, are likely to experience the university dance program in different, even

¹ The curriculum was such at the time that students chose two major areas of dance to study in their undergraduate program. The options were either African and Contemporary dance or Classical ballet and Contemporary dance.

competing ways. Yet, these dialogues were necessary for us as a department to begin the open and honest journey of understanding each other's position on the matter of dance, coloniality, and racism, and to move forward together on a path of transformation. In these conversations, I learnt so much from my students who appeared far more critically conscious and socio-politically savvy than their dance lecturers who seemed to have had their heads buried in their research and the habitual nature of university teaching. Through our unfiltered discussions we did not solve many problems. However, the exercise of students and faculty sharing their experiences with oppression in the department made it clear that the "business as usual" approach to teaching dance was a false assumption that everyone was dancing to the same tune, at the same tempo, and with the same gusto. Much tension, hurt and pain abounded in the dance teaching and learning experience and we needed to look for transformational alternatives.

As I listened to the students, I realized that their stories resonated with my own experiences as a university dance student over 20 years ago in the global North, and even as a Black academic in higher education today. As the memories of those weighted experiences with racism came flooding back, the conversations too provoked deep introspection as I pondered on the ways in which I too may be complicit with perpetuating racism through any kind of bias or hegemonic oppression in my pedagogical practice. This was a moment of self-reckoning.

In this paper, through personal narratives from my years as both a student and teacher of dance in higher education, I aim to reveal the multiple levels at which racist attitudes, stereotypes, prejudices, and biases can permeate dance education. The paper also aims to reveal the harm this abhorrent phenomenon effects on those who experience it and on the field of dance education that perpetuates it. I believe such first-person narratives are useful for demystifying a phenomenon that is complex and prone to blind spots, denial, and dismissiveness, especially on the part of those who hold power and authority and those privileged enough to have never been targets of racism themselves.

Racism

Racism is an ideology that assigns a certain race and/or ethnic group to a position of power over others based on the constructs of physical and cultural otherness and difference, as well as economic wealth (International Labour Office et al., 2001). Consequences of racism are therefore the marginalization and oppression of people of a particular racial or ethnic group, typically one that is a minority, by a more dominant racial and/or ethnic group. Racism in action, for example, racial discrimination, prejudice, racial profiling, stereotyping,

exclusionary attitudes, and barriers make things more difficult for people from the non-dominant cultural/racial/ethnic group.

At the core of this ideological construct of racism is White supremacy, an organizing principle that hierarchized human beings according to racial ontological densities (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2015). In this racial hierarchy, White bodies, their worldviews, and cultural practices are regarded as superior and are positioned at the top of the human pyramid. Positioned at the bottom of the pyramid are Black bodies and their Afrocentric cultural practices and worldviews. Racism is a global reality that sustains not only asymmetrical global power relations, but also a singular Euro-North American-centric epistemology that claims to be universal, neutral, disembodied, truthful, secular, and scientific (Grosfoguel, 2007).

Jablonski and Pityana (2020) assert that “race thinking, the idea that people belong to a race determined mostly by their skin colour has so framed our realities that we can scarcely imagine a world without it.” Critical Race Theory explains that racism is so endemic in society that it can feel non-existent to those who are not targets of it. Racism is also structural, meaning that public policies, institutional practices, cultural representations, and other societal norms work in various, often reinforcing ways to disadvantage “minority” groups while advancing the interests and dominance of the “privileged/superior” group (Carmichael & Hamilton, 1967). Consequently, racial group inequities are perpetuated over generations. In the presence of systemic racism, all lives do not matter in the same way, and #alllivesmatter does not denote equity. Jablonski and Pityana (2020) further addressing the impact of racism on individuals and society argue that race thinking has deformed us and society, underpinning expectations of character, intelligence, motivation, and behaviour, paving the way for the unleashing of suspicion, derogation, and dehumanisation.

Racism is heavy and traumatic for those who witness and experience it and, therefore, addressing the issue of racism in dance is literally a matter of life and death. Simply put, racism kills!

Racism affects health and often leads to early death...More sinister even are the health problems caused by acute and chronic stress on people who are subjected to racial othering and overt racial discrimination. The trauma of humiliation caused by racism creates recurrent stress in individuals, families, and wider communities. These stresses manifest in manifold ways, and often transcend generations (Jablonski, 2021).

What is racism in dance killing? Creative possibilities and futures? Personhood? Artistry? Agency? Passions? Ambitions? Before addressing these questions, let us examine the ways in which racism may be manifested in dance, potentially creating environments in which some

students and faculty may not thrive. I came to understand racism in dance and the world when I left the comfort of my Black majority home country to study abroad at predominantly White universities and reside in societies with strong colonial histories and legacies. I loved to dance, and I arrived with much enthusiasm and eagerness to learn how to move more skillfully and efficiently and to share my Afro-Caribbean dance heritage and culture with others. It was not long before I realized that while I was eager and ready to learn from, and about the dance world of others, they were not readily interested in learning about my world of dance. I loved dance, but some days it felt like dance did not love me in return.

So began my story, my love-hate relationship with dance, penned in my journal in 1999:

*To dance was to set my spirit free
My whole body moves and comes alive
As air and oxygen circulate my being
Opening up spaces of known and unknown possibilities
I loved to express myself through dance
Hungry for more I went to study dance
There, I almost lost my passion
I almost lost my truth
I almost lost my power,
But I was always a believer, a rebel for my unique magic*

My enthusiasm for dance quickly shifted to much tension in the dance learning experiences. Drawing on my years of study from undergraduate to postgraduate to academic lecturer, I acknowledge having to dance with *lower expectations, racial stereotyping, curriculum bias, diminished personhood, health and well-being* as manifestations and symptoms of racism in dance in higher education. The proceeding personal narratives aim to illuminate the impact of such manifestations on the individual and the mission of dance education.

Lower Expectations

I was very surprised when I went to study and work abroad that my White colleagues and student peers seemed to have had lower expectations for me and expected less of me. This really puzzled me. For as long as I knew myself, I was a high achiever. I was nurtured from young to believe that I was a great big bundle of potentiality and so lived my life as an ambitious, confident, and bold young woman with a personal motivation that only my best

was good enough.² While abroad, I would often hear the comment “you are so articulate” and recall feeling conflicted by the remark, even though I would politely respond with a “thank you” as is customary for a compliment. As such a remark was frequently communicated with a sense of surprise and wonderment, as if I had surpassed some expected or assumed level of intelligence for a young Black woman, I was often left searching for reasons why those who expressed it would not expect that I would be articulate. Was it because I was a foreigner from a third world country? Black?

In dance, I constantly battled with and resented this sense of feeling like I was a racial or geopolitical anomaly. On too many occasions, I recall thinking to myself, “I am so common where I come from, I am not any special kind of Black; clearly these people have not experienced my people who are articulate in more than one language.” Having lower expectations for students’ work and abilities and what they can achieve on the basis of their racial identity or difference is one way in dance that racism can exist. Furthermore, commenting on a Black person’s language or speaking habits has a complicated history steeped in colonial power relations of dispossession, disempowerment, and forced assimilation that can trigger deep emotions for the individual (Samy & Smitherman, 2012; Williamse, 2017). Commenting on specific ideas and insights that a person of colour has said is far more beneficial than commenting on how they speak.

The flip side of the coin of being surprised by or downplaying the academic achievement and success of students and faculty of colour are racial microaggressions that my students also expressed that they experienced in their university dance experience. Entering academia as a lecturer and being on the other side of the lecture room, did not spare me the assumed sense of inferiority I experienced as a student. I was equally stunned with White colleagues and White students remarking, “You are so/actually intelligent.” It appeared to me quite early in my academic tenure that being Black in higher education initiated me into a world of doubters or questioners of my credentials and abilities. For the new Black academic, the elephant in the room was always that Black professors are less knowledgeable and credible than their peers of other races. Yet, ironically, in my department at the time, all lecturers of colour had higher academic qualifications than their White counterparts. Such is the power and painful injustice of racism that by nature of belonging to the dominant race, even with lesser credentials, an individual inherits privileges, power, and authority that even a more educated and articulate Black body would be denied.

² Studying at St. Hugh’s High School, an Anglican high school for girls in Kingston, Jamaica, every school day before lessons started, all students recited this purpose driven statement, “whatsoever thy hands find to do, do it with all thy might that God in all things may be glorified.”

Such microaggressions can provoke students and faculty of colour to become defensive, frustrated, isolated, self-doubting, angry, even resentful as their sense of worth and personhood are being challenged. To experience this on a constant basis is detrimental to any human; they impair performance by sapping the psychic and spiritual energy of the recipients and increasing stress hormones to unhealthy levels (Franklin, 2004; Sue, 2004). The vignette below from my postgraduate studies also speaks to this:

I found myself for the rest of the year expending energy to prove my worth and value in my postgraduate studies since I dared to be ME: passionate, bold, and determined. How did I even find myself in this fight? All I came here to do was to study dance. It all began when I confidently and proudly told my lecturer in the introduction session that I had a passion for dance and that I could perform all kinds of dance: ballet, modern, jazz, hip hop dance. I was not prepared for her response which was, “No you cannot!” Why would she utter such a thing? After all she did not know much about me and my dance background. No such comments were made after the other students spoke and introduced themselves. Instead of feeling celebrated and welcomed into the course, I was left crushed by an unnecessary remark that made me feel like I was a liar and that I had misrepresented myself and my abilities. For a moment even I questioned and doubted what I knew to be true about myself. What just went down here? I did not know how to process what just happened. My heart raced, my head began to pound, and I felt like a truck had just rolled over me. I found myself for the rest of the year expending energy to prove my worth, value and abilities as an accomplished dancer. Instead of just enjoying my studies, I now had the unwelcomed and unwanted challenge of expending energy to prove to my teacher that my dance level and skills were far greater than what she thought I was capable of. Sigh!

Why was it not believed that I could be an accomplished dancer in all these forms? Why was my word not taken as truth? Perhaps, as a Black dancer, it was assumed that I could only perform Black aesthetics and dance forms. Was this a moment of racial stereotyping? Perhaps, I too would be shocked if a White student announced that they were skilled at Black dances and aesthetics if I were not exposed to dancers of all races having fluid and diverse embodied/movement identities. That which is certain as Jablonski (2020) asserts is that racism promotes lies and assumptions about people and races that pave the way for the unleashing of suspicion, derogation, and dehumanisation. All of which are dangerous to a thriving and positive learning environment where everyone can actualize. Also, seeing students through racial stereotypes will at best stifle their growth, and at worse suffocate those who always existed outside those frames.

Teachers are powerful players in the dance studio and therefore it is important for teachers to

have high expectations of all learners no matter their racial identity, culture, language, sexuality, or religion. After all, intelligence and achievement potential are neither ethnocentric nor functions of race. To ignore, belittle or deny students' diverse sense of personhood and possibilities based on unfounded, racist stereotypes and assumptions has the potential to dim or at worst put out their light. The consequence of which is that both student and teacher are robbed of the opportunity to enrich and extend each other's world, creativity, artistry, ways of thinking and being.

Curriculum bias and deceit. As a dancer I was open to and was privileged to have learnt and dabbled with a wide range of dance forms: modern dance, jazz, Afro-Caribbean dances, hip hop and other urban dance forms and fusions prior to going to study dance in higher education. It was there that I realised that the dance curriculum was heavily biased toward the Western dance forms of classical ballet and modern/contemporary dance. This experience was over 20 years ago, and that persistent bias remains. Multiple voices in dance education in the US and South Africa (Cruz-Bank, 2010; Kerr-Berry, 2012; McCarthy-Brown, 2014; Rani, 2018; Walker, 2020; Wilson, 2017) continue to lament and problematize the dominance of Western dance traditions and the corollary peripheralization of other arts traditions in dance in higher education in the 21st century. Why does this reality remain when classes are more diverse, and students bring with them so much more embodied movement practices and expressions? Who or what is upholding Western dance as the core standard of dance education?

I remember the first time that I heard that ballet was the foundation of all dance forms from a colleague of mine in South Africa. I was so baffled by the statement that I did not respond. As I pondered on the statement, I remember thinking that this does not make any sense as I had never seen a ballet step in the African dances I had done or any of the urban forms I had explored. In fact, their movement styles, philosophies, and practices work contrary to those of ballet. I also remember reasoning that my ancestors were dancing long before the arrival of classical ballet so on that fact alone, such statement is inaccurate. In the end I resolved the tension by assuming that my colleague meant that ballet was the foundation of Western or concert dance forms.

It is my opinion, however, that these are the kinds of unchecked, archaic, fallacious, even racist beliefs that continue to uphold and support Western dance forms and techniques at the centre of dance education. Leaving students of the global majority, as African American dance professor Nyama McCarthy-Brown aptly describes in an interview with dance writer Shannon Woods (2020), marginalized in their own dance classes and limited in their options to work within other cultural/movement practices. Still believing with all the knowledge and information that we have today that ballet is the foundation of all dance forms, in my opinion,

is a racist suggestion that dance forms outside the influence of ballet are not regarded as art, lacking formal foundations and techniques worthy of study. Historically, in South Africa, where the majority of the population is Black, centuries of rich dance traditions exist both nationally and continentally. African dances and African bodies were excluded from dance in higher education while White bodies and classical ballet thrived for decades due to legislated and institutionalized racism. This underscores that racism in dance is more about upholding the power, interests, and domination of whiteness and less about the power of dance. If personal artistry, socio-political agency, and creativity are aims of higher education dance, and self/personhood is diversely constructed from varying socio-cultural backgrounds, locations, ethnicities, and histories, it stands to reason that every effort should be made to move dance curricula away from its narrow Eurocentric dance bias and toward greater inclusion and diversity in dance philosophies and practices. This move will enable our art to truly begin to harness the vast power of dance across and for all of humanity. To do otherwise is simply antithetical and hypocritical to the self-expressive, self-development, creative, and global citizenship goals of dance education. But perhaps these were never intended goals for all?

I want to further assert that curriculum bias that excludes or does not acknowledge the contributions of diverse voices in dance is a form of epistemological deceit. Recently, I was in search of a resource on modern dance to be used with my students. I came across a very concise documentary video by BBC titled *Dance rebels: A story of modern dance*. After watching the hour-long video, I realized that no Black dancer was named as one of the modern dance rebels. The preferred and grossly inaccurate message that Black dance pioneers and their innovations made no significant contribution to the modern dance revolution was loud and clear. The glaring absence of Black representation in this recently published documentary, despite the increased presence and availability of historical writings on Black dance was just a sad and unfortunate reminder of the politics of Black erasure and invisibility that continue to plague either an asleep dance field or one that is simply blind to its own whiteness. The documentary became a useful resource for me and my students to engage in critical discourse around racism and dance history. Who or what is included in the curricula and who or what is left out and why? Does my curriculum reflect my students and their present and future worlds? As educators, we should engage in an ongoing and constant questioning of ourselves to keep checks on curriculum bias and epistemological deceit in dance. Diversifying curriculum in meaningful rather than tokenistic ways can challenge the shaping of stereotypes in dance or ethnocentric views of human potentiality, possibilities, and power in dance. Educational transformation certainly necessitates going far beyond tinkering with the curriculum.

Oppressive pedagogical practices. Vandeyar (2020) argues that academics are key agents of the curriculum and so also should be given much attention in the discussion on coloniality and racism in dance. The education triad comprises the teacher, the learner, and the content (curriculum) which unfolds within historical, political, social, and educational contexts. I concur with Vandeyar (2020) that changing one aspect of this triad without due consideration to the others will not effect the desired change. Vandeyar's argument was endorsed by the 2016 student protestors who expressed that they were being "taught in oppressive classrooms by academics who are demeaning, unprofessional and use their power in ways that discriminate unfairly against students" (Shay, 2016, p.3).

This vignette speaks to this:

It was the time of our end of year production and my White colleague, a ballet lecturer, volunteered to take the pre-show cast warm-up. He proceeded to do an entire ballet barre knowing fully well that only a handful of students in the production took ballet and most of the dancers were African dance majors. My colleague chose to use all the ballet terminology in the book, briefly demonstrated the exercises and moved from one exercise to another like a steam train without even setting his gaze on anyone else except the few ballet students positioned in the centre. I kept observing on the side, hoping that he would change his pedagogy given that the number of dancers on the stage dwindled with every exercise. He remained steadfast and unflinchingly continued teaching with the kind of take it or leave it pedagogy and belief that it was the African major dance students' responsibility to catch the train. It wasn't long before more than half the cast members left to avoid any further embarrassment. I was burdened with the probable reality that my colleague did not care whether the vast majority of students were struggling or not. I was burdened with the thought that perhaps I should have intervened and rescued the students from the embarrassment and humiliation. And then, I was left with the burdensome aftermath as the one female Black lecturer on staff of listening to the students' complaints about the warm-up and extinguishing the emotional fires.

Countering racism in dance pedagogy requires exposing dance faculty to good practice that draws on evidence-based pedagogies in working with diverse students who are marginalised by systemic inequalities based on race, ethnicity, and language (Gay 2015; Paris 2012; Paris & Ball, 2009). In my own pedagogical practice, I am becoming more and more conscious and courageous to experiment with new kinds of pedagogies that can affirm, validate, and draw out more of students' cultures and worlds into the dance learning experience. I have in recent times been experimenting with what I have coined as "dancing back to the motherland pedagogy" based on a reverse flow of dances from the African Diaspora being taught to dancers on the African continent. With this pedagogy, I teach creolised Caribbean dances that

integrate European and African aesthetics in order to affirm my students' multiple identities as well as attempt to dismantle racist attitudes, binaries, and stereotypes about dance and dancing bodies. For example, I have collaborated with both my African and ballet colleagues and volunteered to teach a module on *Bele*, a creolised dance form with both African and European influences. In speaking to students' multiple ancestral heritages in the same dance experience, students have expressed feeling equally validated rather than contested in their multiple movement identities through these creolised movement experiences. With me working on both the African & European aesthetics, the students get to witness and experience an integrated rather than a hierarchized or polarized approach to dance through the dance content, the pedagogy used and the teacher's disposition. In the *Bele* the students learn the song and dance of the Caribbean, both of which have French European and African values. What is beautiful about these creolised dance experiences is that through the integrated pedagogy the students no longer see themselves as performing ballet or African as the creolised dance does not fit into any of those boxes; they transcend these fixed borders.

A pedagogy of dancing back to the motherland engages in anti-racist work in multiple ways. First, by reclaiming African Diaspora stories of agency, creative ingenuity, and powerful resistance against total European subjugation. Second, by enabling African young people to "see" and resituate enslaved Africans in the New World as "creators of dynamic and consequential civilizations, not just victims of slavery and subsequent oppression" (Demerson, 2013, p. 9). It engages in anti-racist work by affirming rather than negating Africa's global contribution to world cultures and civilisations. Through this pedagogy African students experience a powerful paradigm shift that potentially enlarges their view of Africa and ultimately their perception and positioning of themselves as Africans within the larger contemporary world. Part of the subjugated logic and mission of coloniality and racism always was and continues to represent colonised peoples using negative and deficit-laden narratives that offend and distort their sense of who and what they are (Tuhiwai-Smith, 2012, p. 26).

Conclusion. The students' protests of 2015-2016 and recent #Blacklivesmatter protest have shown once again that the problem of racism is an ongoing and resistant one. Black and Brown people have been resisting, uprising, and protesting racism globally for centuries. Without intentional actions and a vision plan to eradicate racism from dance practices and structures, "protests will function more as expressions of Black and Brown pain than as inflection points in the culture" (Nolan, 2020). Anti-racist work demands that all academics, especially the critical mass of White academics, concern themselves not only with research outputs and supervision but actively be involved in critical, open, honest, and ongoing reflections and inventories on their teaching and learning context - curriculum, pedagogy, ethos and attitudes, expectations, and outcomes - and their relationship to White supremacy.

It has become critical for university education to be transformed into a more humanizing experience for all students and faculty and for academics, inclusive of dance academics, to become agents of meaningful educational change through engaging in decolonial work (Mignolo, 2020; Vandeyar, 2020). For teachers of dance, embracing an anti-racist pedagogy is to acknowledge that dance education is more than Western dance paradigms and practices and that it is being limited by an unwavering loyalty to them. It is to encourage dancers not only to move from their physical centres but also from their various cultural centres that lay dormant in the university dance experience due to curriculum bias, racial stereotyping, oppressive pedagogies, and lower expectations.

Though much progress has been made to increase awareness of racism in dance, more needs to be done. Even as I add to the discourse on dance and racism, I do not think that we need any more books on racism. What we need is courage and will power to effect transformation. I recommend ongoing constructive discussions among staff and students, especially those of opposing views, to disable the reflexivity that paralyses much of the discourse about race and racism and make it possible for us to grow in our appreciation of our common humanity.

COVID-19 has shown us that things do not have to remain the same way. Many dance departments showed unprecedented adaptability and innovation in light of the COVID-19 pandemic to give dancers oxygen and keep dance alive. Consequently, I see signs of hope that we can disrupt and dismantle the status quo of racism and survive, emerging from the rubble with different but newer and fresher possibilities. If we can adapt and innovate our subject of dance in the midst of an unprecedented health crisis, then we can adapt and innovate dance in higher education in the midst of its lingering racism crisis. To keep dancing under the weight of racism is to be willfully complicit with a praxis of the body dependent on the asphyxiation of self and others. Our students understood their assignment as agents of change and had the courage to act. When will we as dance educators and administrators understand ours?

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