

A Transformative Escape:

Stories of Black Womanhood Negotiated in the Dance Studio

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Glossary of Terms  
(Defined based on personal knowledge)

First Position (feet) - The feet are together at the heels pointing outwards, like how the cartoon character Bugs Bunny stands.

First Position (arms) - The arms are making a halo in front of your body, akin to how you would hold a heavy basket.

Second Position (feet) - When your legs are hip-length apart. Think sumo wrestler.

Second Position (arms) - Your arms are outstretched at your sides and parallel to the floor.

Pliés - A ballet dance move where your knees bend in the position your feet and legs are in.

## Introduction

In the professional realm of ballet, ballet companies have a ranking system of ballet dancers that dance professionally consisting of, based on order of importance, the “Corps de Ballet”, “Soloists”, and the highest rank of “Principal Dancers”. What determines who belongs where in these ranks is based on seniority and the extent of the dancers’ talent. Hence, the Corps de Ballet consists of dancers who do not dance individually and perform in group scenes of a ballet production; the Soloists are the dancers who get their own solos in a production but do not occupy a significant role; and the Principal Dancers always occupy the starring roles of any given ballet production (Grant 1982).

According to the online directories of three major professional ballet companies, among the Principal Dancers within these three companies, totalling 63 dancers, I have identified about eight of them as people of color: one African-American man and one South Asian/Puerto Rican man in the New York City Ballet; one White/Filipino-American man, one Filipina-American woman, one Korean woman, and one White/African-American woman in the American Ballet Theatre; and one East Asian-Canadian woman and one Chinese woman in the San Francisco Ballet (American Ballet Theatre 2016; New York City Ballet 2016; San Francisco Ballet 2016). There are also non-American principal dancers that are from places such as Spain, Argentina, Italy, and Cuba, but they present as White and would thus be identified as White within the American context, and is why I do not count them as a part of the “people of color” subcategory of principal dancers that I mention.

Granted, the Soloists and members of the Corps de Ballet at these three companies are more racially diverse and have the potential to eventually be promoted to Principal status. Nonetheless, I single out the Principal Dancers of these companies because it is the highest rank

that can be achieved in professional ballet companies that individually affords ballet dancers the most visibility and prestige; yet, it is the least diverse sect of this assembled hierarchy across these ballet companies that have been canonized in the U.S. and abroad. And of these 63 Principal Dancers, many Black people, particularly Black women like myself, can only identify with one of them, two at best if so desired.

The racial demographics of the Principal Dancers in these elite ballet companies as they stand demonstrate that despite the progress being made in diversifying professional ballet companies among the lower ranks, they continue to struggle with accepting, incorporating, and representing dancers in a way that best reflects the ever-increasing racial diversity of the United States. This is a problem deriving from ballet's history as a bourgeois, Eurocentric art that is practiced and consumed by people with the economic, social, and cultural capital to participate.<sup>1</sup> As will be articulated in more detail, ballet has this bourgeois and Eurocentric history because of the certain set of standards, ideologies, and aesthetics that are ascribed to it. These are standards, ideologies, and aesthetics that have served to foundation the European-led construction of race and White supremacy, a process that entailed using physical and cultural differences to make a hierarchy positioning European people as superior and thus the epitome of humanity, inferiorizing everyone else identified as not European and consequently sub-human (West 1982; Kant 1804).

Michel Foucault conceptualized biopower as ascertaining the conditions of people's rights to life and/or death, and who does and does not get awarded such rights (Foucault 1978 & 2003). Drawing from biopower, he delved into the concept by arguing that differentiation of people based on the construct of race "is the precondition that makes killing acceptable" and that a nation-state "must become racist" in order to exercise the "right of life and death" (Foucault

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<sup>1</sup> See Bourdieu (1986).

2003: 256) over racialized bodies. Orlando Patterson offers an extension of this argument beyond literal death and murder using the concept of social death; looking at the history of slavery as practiced all over the world, he argues that a slave in any society lived an existence marked by social death, where they were “conceived of as someone who did not belong because he was an outsider” and “became an outsider because he did not (or no longer) belong” (Patterson 2003: 109).

In the context of the U.S. for instance, it has exercised and enforced its power via the intersection of Foucault and Patterson’s claims. The country’s legacy is marked by how it has determined who belonged in the nation’s main society and who to consign to social death based on a racial hierarchy. This process of determination was mediated through institutions that regulated statuses of full citizenship and social death, awarding its White members full citizenship while relegating black members to an existence within institutions embodying social death.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, in order to understand why professional ballet companies do a poor job in accepting people of color into their companies in the U.S. amidst its increasing diversity, I find it essential to have an understanding of how the very institutions of authority that invested its dominating ideologies within the development of ballet have applied these ideologies in assigning who belonged where within their nation.

Based on this understanding of how ballet internalized the ideologies and exclusionary practices of the institutions that created and developed it, my overarching argument within this thesis is that these exclusionary practices directly impact Black women in many harmful ways. The nature of this impact manifests violently due to their existence within a perpetual social death in American society defined by their race *and* their gender. This definition has developed

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<sup>2</sup> “White” and “European” are used interchangeably throughout this thesis, for the construction of whiteness derives from Western European identity and ideologies.

over history via the institutional manufacturing and regulation of archetypes of Black women as morally and sexually depraved, angry, and matriarchal figures complicit in the emasculation of Black men.<sup>3</sup> As a result of these archetypes that racist and sexist institutions collaborate in manufacturing, Black women experience unique forms of violence that create for them “specific raced *and* gendered experiences” (Crenshaw 1991: 1252), having a tremendous impact on their lives, social conditions, and their daily navigation of spaces within American society.

Coming from this understanding of how the U.S. enacts its ideologies of belonging, the social location and conditions of Black women, the internalization of these ideologies of belonging within ballet, and how Black women are directly impacted by ballet’s application of such ideologies, I aim in articulating my argument of Black women’s racialized and gendered experiences in ballet through the incorporation and analyzation of stories told to me by Black women. I have obtained these stories through in-person interviews I conducted with four Black women, in which they have told me how their experiences in ballet, and dance as a whole, played out in their lives. I have gathered these stories in order to achieve an understanding of what were the positive and negative aspects of these experiences for my participants, and to what degree these experiences impacted their existences, their worldview, and their choices in continually pursuing it as a career or otherwise in their lives.

In these conversations, what unfolds are not only personal anecdotes regarding who they are, what they have done in dance and what it has done for them in and throughout their lives, but also interpretations of how these experiences impacted their everyday lives, perceptions of themselves, and an understanding of how ballet as a cultural institution wields power. To different extents, of course. While the conversations that took course are not wholly indicative of

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<sup>3</sup> See hooks (1981) for a more in-depth analysis on sexual violence and exploitation experienced by Black women from slavery into the late twentieth century.

how all Black women feel and experience ballet, and are treated in ballet academies, I want to use their stories to achieve an understanding of why they continually dedicate themselves to ballet at varying extents despite the institutionalized harm it actively reproduces and takes out on Black women, how they went about confronting the harm, and the extent to which they have reaped the benefits they looked for. Additionally, the overarching goal of the analyses I have come to achieve from these conversations is that given that Black bodies, especially Black female bodies, are continually subjected to forms of violence (Alexander 2013; Haley 2016), I wanted to see if dance provided catharsis, empowerment, and autonomous identity development for Black women despite the racialized and gendered violence that they are subjected to; and if not, what did it provide for them.

When I was thinking about what provided me catharsis and confidence in my life, I realized it was ballet. However, despite my enjoyment in practicing and performing ballet dances and what doing such gave me, there was also certain discomfort in practicing ballet that began developing as I got older and my body started going through puberty. I at the time was unable to articulate why I was uncomfortable and where this discomfort was located, being young and lacking an understanding of how systems of power operated and manifested. I sought the answer to this unsolved mystery through my thesis, and now realize that the source of my discomfort came from the enactment of the dominant ideologies I mentioned in exclusionary and isolation practices within the dance studio, and I was slowly but surely falling victim to such practices at thirteen. Moreover, I not only want to see how they experienced ballet and other genres of dance, I want to see if their experiences fall parallel to mine, and how they reacted when confronting the harm that was attempted to be wielded towards them.

The stories used here come from professional and nonprofessional perspectives of Black women who have experience doing ballet and other dance genres to understand the different degrees of impact dance has on the lives of Black women who are trying to make a career out of it versus Black women who pursue it by means that are not professional. The two professional perspectives come from Laurel and Jordana, who are at a company based in Philadelphia called the Philadelphia Collective (PC). The two nonprofessional perspectives come from Katrina and Lisa-Danielle are from a developing nonprofit organization called Dance All Day (DAD) in Baltimore, Maryland. Katrina regularly goes to the organization's dance workshops, and Lisa is the owner and founder of DAD, and both have received training in ballet and continue their dedication to it through this organization and its workshops.

Despite what has been said thus far regarding discriminatory practices enacted within canonized ballet academies, this does not mean African-American people are completely deprived of the opportunity to pursue a career in ballet or another dance genre if so desired. There exists a myriad of dance academies and companies created by and for Black people, incorporating training in classical ballet but also training in other dance genres that fuse together elements of ballet and elements of African diasporic dances to expand the repertoire of traditional Black social dances. It is these Black-owned institutions, such as Alvin Ailey, the Dance Theatre of Harlem, the Chicago Multicultural Dance Center, and even the PC where two of my participants work, that provide avenues for Black people who aspire to pursue a career in dance, be it in ballet or another dance genre. Moreover, as will be talked about in greater detail, there is an entirely different dance world full of long-standing dance institutions that are wholly Black in who controls it and who participates in it.<sup>4</sup> As will be shown, the PC and DAD are a

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<sup>4</sup> People of all races are not excluded from participation in these institutions within this world, but Black people are definitely the primary benefactors and the priority of these institutions within the Black dance world.

part of this world, continuing the mission of these institutions of providing avenues for Black people seeking a space that would allow them to dance and occupy space, while embodying missions uniquely their own.

Regardless, I am articulating that while it is not impossible for members of the African diaspora to pursue a career in ballet dance and other genres of dance because of these reputable Black dance institutions, it is has definitely proven to be most difficult for them to do so in ballet schools and companies that have been historically White, especially within those that have been canonized like the ones mentioned in the beginning. And while I am aware that Black men also experience exclusion from dance academies to a certain extent, my concern is with Black women and how they experienced exclusion and inclusion.

I will proceed with summarizing and analyzing the stories told to me in sections divided by the location in which these women usually dance, providing subsections dedicated to each women's individual stories to best unpack the parts of their lives that they shared with me. I then will dedicate separate sections to themes that have been consistent in one, some, or all of the women's experiences whilst invoking the relevant details. These themes will point to the extent that ballet reproduces the volatile collaboration of institutionalized racism and sexism, and to demonstrate that their experiences are not anomalies and have historical and systematic precedent. I also aim to demonstrate the level of awareness that these women have concerning how these intersections of their oppression in American society covertly, sometimes overtly, impacted their experiences in ballet.

Despite the harmful value systems and forms of violence ballet is capable of reproducing, especially in terms of the varying degrees in which it has impacted Black women in mainstream settings, based on my interviews with Laurel, Lisa, Jordana, and Katrina, I have found that it has

not prevented Black women like my informants from continuing dancing ballet, because of what ballet dance provides for them, its significance in their lives, and the extent of its impact on their lives. I also found that it largely had to do with the environment in which these women were trained in ballet growing up.

Themes I plan to go into more detail with that emerged from these women's stories include the perception and treatment of black women and their bodies in ballet institutions, grounded in the larger history of the othering and deviance-making of Black women's bodies; Black dance as compared to White dance; and colorism that impacted women more so than men in the context of dance; I am also prefacing the stories I go into detail with by providing an outline of ballet's development and trajectory to help cultivate an understanding of ballet from its beginnings to when it arrived and grounded itself in the United States. That way, the proper connections can be made in making sense of the stories and the corresponding analyses and conclusions that are to follow. I will then conclude this thesis by articulating summaries of all analyses made, followed by anecdotes from the women unpacking the reasons why they continue to dance despite the amalgam of racist and sexist violence ballet reproduces.

All in all, I sought the answers to questions concerning the problems of diverse ballet representation using individual accounts touching different parts of the dance world. And even though ballet internalizes ideologies that have historically produced various forms of harm for these women and women like them, they not only pursue it at the fullest extent their lives offer for them, but they also unapologetically take up the space they want and feel entitled to in dance spaces. Therefore, they are able to pursue dance whilst achieving what they hope to achieve, despite the social, historical, and political weight of their identities that they carry on their shoulders.

## Methodology

Starting in the seventies, anthropologists critiques emerged concerning anthropological methodologies in how they impact the communities that have been subjects of ethnographic research. These critiques have emerged in response to the shift of the socio-political landscape in the U.S. and abroad, from the Civil Rights movement to the second wave of feminism to the decolonization of African countries by European powers (Harrison 2008). These critiques emerged concerning what Talad Asad said was, “the institutionalised relationship between rulers and ruled, objectified by the functional anthropologist” (Asad 1973: 104), and used accounts from anthropologists and other scholars of the social sciences such as E.E. Evans-Pritchard, P.C. Lloyd, and Gustave von Grunebaum who made inquiries into territories in Africa and the Middle East to argue that “the typical description of local African structures totally ignored the political fact of European coercive power and the African chief’s ultimate dependence on it” (Asad 1973:108). Moreover, various ethnographic accounts on certain territories not only did not capture the more nuanced individual experiences of the members of the communities being studied, but they were also written about without any analysis concerning the colonial regimes in place in their territories and the impact that such regimes had on these indigenous, non-Western communities.

However, beginning in the seventies, issues like these that informed Anthropology and ethnographic inquiry within the subject field upon its development ignited debates and much-needed critiques surrounding the ethics of traditional methodologies in fieldwork, which scholars like Asad took part in doing. And feminist anthropologists foregrounded these critiques, even though they were not initially credited as doing so (Visweswaran 2008). Judith Stacey for instance, in her essay *Can There Be a Feminist Ethnography?*, critiques ethnographic inquiry

like Asad, but differs in that she argues that fieldwork is inherently problematic and unethical to a certain extent because of this history that Asad analyzes and critiques. She states, “No matter how welcome, even enjoyable the fieldworker’s presence may appear to ‘natives’, fieldwork represents an intrusion and intervention into a system of relationships, a system of relationships that the researcher is far freer than the researched to leave” (Stacey 1988: 23). Overall, based on Stacey’s claim, *any* kind of interaction that plays out between the anthropologist and the people that they want to do research on will be interaction that disrupts the community being researched, because the anthropologist’s position as an outsider alone already sets them up as interfering the community they take interest in,

Thus, going into researching for this thesis, I wondered how I was going to handle this fieldwork conundrum. As careful as I hoped to be going in, no matter how aware and cautious I was and still am of the power dynamics between me and the people I am interested in talking to and writing about, the interference in their routine is inevitable, the exchanges that take place between us occur based on me and what I need from them, and I cannot guarantee that I can present them in this thesis in a way that they would prefer despite how well-intentioned I am being. So how did I handle this?

I decided that the best course of action to take was to pursue this field work acknowledging these positionalities and power dynamics that are apparent in ethnographic inquiry, which Stacey also recommends the ethnographer to do (Stacey 1988). As for incorporating and analyzing my findings into this thesis, I decided that the best way that I can write with care about my informants and the institutions they come from to structure my thesis in a way that analyzes and focuses on the individual narratives that unfolded from my conversations with the four women I came in contact with, followed by an analysis of different themes that

came up in some or all of these interviews that I interpret as significant and reflecting greater patterns of how Black women experience ballet. My approach to structuring and writing this thesis in this way was particularly inspired by Lila Abu-Lughod's ethnography *Writing Women's Worlds*.

For her ethnography, she focused on the everyday lives of Bedouin women she was acquainted with in Egypt, writing about various conversations, their individual narratives, their relationships, and her observations on these women, doing so in their voice as much as she was capable of conveying (Abu-Lughod 2008). She approached her ethnography in this way narratives because of her weariness concerning generalization in ethnographic analysis that she recommends other anthropologists should keep in mind doing field work. She emphasizes that anthropologists have to "be especially weary" of this because first, "it is inevitably a language of power" possessed by the outside observer, one "who seems to stand apart from and outside of what they are describing" (Abu-Lughod 2008: 8); and secondly, because "it contributes to the creation of 'cultures'" in how writing within the framework of culture ultimately homogenizes people within a particular community as though they are "fixed," lacking "of internal differentiation," and frozen in the time in which they were written about (Abu-Lughod 1993: 9). As a result, using culture as the framework through which to achieve an understanding of a certain community or a group of people with a certain set of shared characteristics ignores the individual differences of the people being studied while reproducing the harmful elements of classical European anthropology that are being scrutinized.

Based on this understanding of what culture is capable of reproducing, Abu-Lughod proceeds to propose to combat methodologies of generalization within anthropology via culture by arguing for what she calls "writing against culture" (Abu-Lughod 1991; Abu-Lughod 2008:

9). She says that by using this method of ethnographic theorization by “focusing closely on particular individuals...one could subvert the most problematic connotations of ‘culture’” (Abu-Lughod 2008:14). Individual recounts on how they live and move in the community in which they reside better capture the various ways of existing within a community, the multifarious ways people interact with one another, how such interactions unfold, and the role relevant institutions or sources of power play in how people exist and interact with one another. Therefore, with how Abu-Lughod wrote about particular individuals, that approach she used in her ethnography helped me conceive the structure of how I decided to write this thesis about the four Black women that I interviewed.

In using and attempting to understand their experiences here, I also incorporate my own experiences in ballet within these themes that I touch on to use and compare the knowledge that I have gained and the sentiments that I have and continue to harbor in relation to what ballet has done for me and for such of my informants. Dance anthropologist Cynthia J. Novack said in an autoethnographic essay of hers, “I am an anthropologist, but I am also a dancer, and I begin...by using my dance experiences,” choosing this route “because it allows me to shift between my memories and comments as a dancer and my analyses as an anthropologist” (Novack 1993: 34-5). Even though she does not incorporate the perspectives of any particular informants that do dance or have experience in dance like I am about to, she uses and analyzes her own experiences to understand how ballet as an institution functioned and treated young girls and women like her, and what it meant to be a part of that institution. Moreover, throughout this thesis, details alluding to my own experiences getting trained in ballet will come up to foreground what my prior understanding regarding the themes that I go in depth with were, compare and contrast them with that of the understanding Laurel, Jordana, Katrina, and Lisa conveyed for me, and

then attempt to synthesize them all and interpret what it overall means regarding Black women's experiences with ballet.

I should make it clear that I have not developed a relationship with my informants prior to doing the fieldwork that I have done. The closest I have been of the four women is Laurel, and even then we have not been in touch for a while. Nonetheless, I reach out to her via Facebook asking if she can take an hour of her day to talk to me about her experiences in ballet, and she responded that she was happy to do just that. With her help, she forwarded an email of mine asking for another Black female dancer to talk to me about their experiences doing ballet, and that was how I got in contact with Jordana. As for Lisa, I found her through a post on a news publication's Instagram page, went on her organization's page, and reached out to her via the provided email from her organization's Instagram account. After exchanges that occurred sporadically, we finally got to meet at one of her ballet workshops that she hosted, in which she introduced me to her longtime friend Katrina that used to do ballet with her, but stopped doing it earlier in her life because of reasons that will be explained later. In all, without my ability to harness the internet and social media networks available to me at my disposal, none of this contact established with my informants would have been possible, and so I took advantage of what I was capable of doing using the internet.

I chose to just do interviews in an oral history-esque setting, because my informants are in different locations, in Philadelphia and Baltimore, so there was no possible way to gather them in one space to talk. Also, time constraints left me unable to get the answers I sought for just by slowly developing relationships with my informants, especially since I just wanted to gather their stories of their experiences doing ballet and what led to where they are in their relationship to ballet now, regardless of whether or not it persisted for them. Nonetheless, despite the obvious

ethical taboos I committed in just dropping in and out of their lives that Stacey mentioned, I was aware of these in the process leading up to my interviews, and thus approached them with an acute sensitivity to the power dynamics mentioned earlier, being especially concerned with my informants' agency, comfort, and safety.

I wanted to make the interview for Laurel, Lisa, Jordana, and Katrina as egalitarian as was possible by assuring them that they could answer the questions to the extent that they were most comfortable with, and that their identities would be kept anonymous upon the writing of this thesis. Which is what I do; their names are pseudonyms and not their real names, and I keep Lisa's organization anonymous under the pseudonym Dance All Day. Besides, the ethos of DAD is to provide ballet fitness workshops for women who are and are not dealing with certain forms of trauma and in need of healing, whereas the PC ethos is, according to Laurel, to provide dance education and opportunities for Black people.

I also meet to interview them in places that they chose. I assumed that they would have wanted to meet in the places that they dance in, but I ended up meeting with two of my informants in cafes that they chose (Laurel and Lisa), and met my other two in dance studios, one within the PC dance school and the other where a DAD workshop I attended took place. The questions I asked, while they were varied by informant and time constraints, I prepared beforehand as a personal guide, but during their interviews I tailored my questions based on the content of their answers, sometimes using questions I prepared and other times asking questions that came up for me in the moment. Moreover, the interviews with Laurel, Jordana, and Lisa were more in depth in content and length than my one with Katrina, because dance is central to the lives and identities of Laurel, Jordana, and Lisa, whereas while Katrina emphasized an appreciation for ballet, especially Black ballerinas, it is not as central to her life to the same

degree. While I wanted to gain an understanding of Katrina's experiences practicing ballet in her life, I was more concerned with her experiences in the DAD workshops that Lisa-Danielle hosted, how often she attends them, what she gains from them, why she does them, how well she thinks Lisa organizes and executes her workshops, and her overall reaction to the DAD workshops.

Regardless, the overarching theme of the ethnographic inquiry that occurs here through these interviews deals with Black women's experiences in practicing ballet, what their experiences doing it demonstrate regarding how ballet functions as a cultural institution and treats people who are incorporated, or wish to be incorporated, within it in, and the reflections and critiques that arise from the interviews I conducted.

### **Ballet's Beginnings**

In order to best contextualize the experiences Lisa, Laurel, Jordana, and Katrina had in ballet and why they played out the way that they did, and why I see it as a cultural institution that upholds White supremacist patriarchal ideologies, it would be helpful to provide an outline of ballet's origins and trajectory, from its conception to when it reached the U.S. I am attempting to provide this understanding based primarily on Jennifer Homans' *Apollo's Angels* (2010), a secondary source that recounts the history of ballet with immense and intricate detail, among other sources available at my disposal. I will focus on this trajectory of ballet in France, a little bit of the UK, Russia, and the United States. What follows is an outline that will hopefully provide a basic understanding of ballet in where it began its development and how its influence expanded to various corners of the globe.

While an exact date of ballet's conception cannot be pinpointed, historians agree that it was initially a common social dance done and performed during special occasions and festivities in Italy, and its development took course upon the marriage of Catherine de Medici of Florence and King Henry II of France in the mid-1500s during the Renaissance, where she "[brought] her Italianate tastes to the French court" (Homans 2010: 6). These tastes included a myriad of elaborate and lavish festivals, plays, and special balls where "The Italians performed simple but elegant social dances known as *balli* and *balletti*, which consisted of graceful, rhythmic walking steps...[and] the French called them *ballets*" (Homans 2010:4). Thus, the fruition of ballet commenced through an act of cultural exchange mediated via holy patrimony between the then-incoming king and queen of France. Over time, it became evident that ballet was used by Catherine to not only entertain herself, the French court and members of other elite classes associated with the French monarchy during special gatherings, but also to serve as a distraction from France's then socio-political climate that had moments where the country "was beset with intractable and savage civil and religious conflicts" (Beaumont 1933; Homans 2010:4).

Over time, in 1570, King Charles IX in France had established the *Academy of Poetry and Music* to be the academic mainstay for various distinguished French poets, and was "modeled after the famous Renaissance Florentine Platonic Academy", (Homans 2010: 5).<sup>5</sup> It is from this academy in 1581 that emerged the first known ballet in print, called "Ballet comique de la Reine" (Homans 2010: 7), for "it fused the elements of music, dance, plot...and design into a dramatic whole" (Britannica 1998).<sup>6</sup> This ballet play was created as a gift "to celebrate the betrothal of [Catherine de Medici's] sister" (Britannica 1998). In summary thus far, ballet

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<sup>5</sup> Translated from French *Académie de Poesie et Musique*.

<sup>6</sup> Translation was unavailable.

derives from a traditional Italian social dance often done on special and flamboyant occasions, reaching France as part of an instance of cultural exchange mediated through a royal marriage.

It then became an institutionalized performance art form once a formal academy that was created by another French monarch conceptualized the first printed ballet that was produced and performed to an audience for a special celebration. Its institutionalization, development of technique, and the production of ballet play performances akin to *Ballet Comique*, continued under the heirs and heiresses of Catherine de Medici and Henry II, used as a means of personal entertainment among the French royal family, but also was realized for its potential to become a distinctively French traditional ethnic dance (Kealiinohomoku 2001). Critiques later emerged during the Enlightenment and in the aftermath of the disposal of the French monarchy, calling out ballet for how “it had come to stand for decadence and decline” (Homans 2010: 50), and “was seen as a ‘frivolous Circumstance’ at best and at worst as a suspect enterprise cloaking indecent impulses...” (Homans 2010: 52). These critiques ignited a wave of reforms, led mostly by either British artists or Italian and French artists who moved to England to have a role in such reforms, amidst the growing reputation England was developing regarding the innovation of ballet in the country.<sup>7</sup>

What emerged from these critiques was a new way of expression as has been found in the British-grown pantomime performances akin to the Italian *comedia dell’arte*, based on “the idea that dance could tell a story *better* than words, that it could express some essential human truth with a moral force that words simply could not convey” (Homans 2010: 67).<sup>8</sup> Moreover, incorporating the expressive elements of pantomime theatre performance helped add an emotive dimension and complexity to the rigidity within ballet the Enlightenment was confronting,

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<sup>7</sup>Among them included John Weaver, Giovanni Andrea Gallini, Marie Sallé, and La Camargo (Homans 2010).

<sup>8</sup> See Miller (2016) for an explanation on pantomime performance.

causing the dance genre to evolve into what is recognized as ballet today. While ballet initially embodied certain aspects of the over-indulgence and decadence that defined the French elite, and was also a cause of its downfall, critiques of it eventually emerged, questioning this frivolousness as embodied in the practice and performance of ballet. Reforms were then brought about in response to these Enlightenment critiques, incorporating elements of British pantomime performance to add a storytelling component to add dimension to ballet productions.

### *Imperial Russia*

Ballet then reached Russia amidst Peter the Great's reign (Homans 2010) as part of his mission to "radically re-create Russian society in a European image" (Homans 2010: 246). Ironically enough, this meant that Peter the Great pursued a mission of creating a new Russian national identity that incorporated the very aspects of the Western European aristocracy the French was working towards replacing in their national identity. He accomplished this through a myriad of projects and policies, such as the development of St. Petersburg and the certain social expectations he instituted for his Russian courtiers. The dance genre was introduced when Peter the Great required his courtiers to "learn the latest dances [of the 1720's]" for social events and especially requiring "aristocratic children [to learn] to dance [at] an early age by French and Italian ballet masters" (Homans 2010: 247). In short, ballet made its way to Russia as part of Peter the Great's "Westernizing project" (Homans 2010: 246) to remake Russian national identity into a carbon copy of Western European bourgeois aristocracy.

It then consolidated its space within Russian society through the military and the Russian Orthodox Church. For the former, the connection between ballet and the Russian military was made through the military-esque style of "discipline and regimentation" training that came to characterize ballet training in Russia over time to this day (Homans 2010: 249). As for the latter,

Homans claims that the the Orthodox Church in Russia “was (and remains) opulently theatrical” (Homans 2010: 249) in its rituals, decorations, and adornments, so ballet and the Russian church connected through its mutual affinity for spectacle. What followed came the establishment of one of Russia’s most well-known landmarks, the Bolshoi Theater, in 1783, followed by the eventual creation of the two most canonized Russian ballet academies: the Maryinsky and the Kirov.<sup>9</sup> Therefore, what is evident is that ballet made its way into Russia as part of Peter the Great’s Westernizing policies to refashion Russia’s initial national image being one akin to the European peasantry into an image that embodied Western European opulence and aristocracy. Ballet then forged connections with two other major institutions in Russia, the Church and the military, through common characteristics, allowing ballet to further consolidate its place within Russia and Russian national identity.

### *Across the Pond*

Ballet reached the United States through members of the “Ballet Russes”.<sup>10</sup> The U.S.’s national identity is one that is anti-monarchical in nature, and thus the integration of ballet into its national fabric would be contradictory to such an identity because of how ballet is rooted in the glorification of ruling figures of royalty. Regardless, it began in the early twentieth century upon “the arrival of the Russians, the tsar’s Imperial dancers” (Homans 2010: 450). Given that these dancers were touring prior to the overthrowing of the Tsar regime, and saw themselves “as standard-bearers for an aristocratic art” (Homans 2010: 451), they perpetuated this image, this form of ballet performance, and as Homans points out, “It was these Russians who seeded ballet in America...” (Homans 2010: 451). Ironically enough, despite the critiques that emerged in France concerning the frivolous narcissism of the French aristocracy within ballet, the Russian

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<sup>9</sup> The Kirov was previously known as the Mariinsky before its name was changed to the Kirov during Soviet Russia (Homans 2010).

<sup>10</sup> Russian ballet company based in Monte Carlo (Homans 2010).

reimagining of this aristocratic aesthetic of ballet was what found space to occupy in the U.S. However, after World War II, ballet's popularity escalated quickly, due to, for one, the U.S.'s growing post-war prosperity.

But this boom in popularity was also largely to an increase in investment in the arts in the U.S. led by JFK as cultural leverage over the USSR amidst Cold War tensions, causing the establishment of ballet companies to dramatically increase (Homans 2010). The oldest company, known now as the American Ballet Theatre (ABT), was established in 1937 and opened for its first season in 1940; and the second oldest company, now known as the New York City Ballet (NYCB), was established in 1948, by Russian-American choreographer George Balanchine, whose style of dance is the main subgenre of ballet that the NYCB trains its disciples in (Homans 2010).

This has been the overall trajectory of ballet, highlighting particularly important moments of ballet transcending national borders to meet a given authority figure's certain needs and advance certain goals. What this process entailed had to do with the development of a collective national identity, and when the opportunity arose, ballet became the vehicle through which leaders of Western nations were able to, to invoke Benedict Anderson (1991), make a reality the national identity they were striving towards achieving. And it is evident that these nations used ballet as part of the development of a greater national identity in moments of undergoing changes within their socio-political landscapes. First, the conception of ballet began amidst an interethnic marriage, and then underwent reform in response to scholarly critiques and the dismantlement of the French monarchy; Russia in the same time period as the Enlightenment began integrating the dance genre into its culture amidst Peter the Great's policies to cultivate a new public image of Russia more similar to images of Western Europe; and in the U.S., there came a greater national

investment in the arts, especially ballet, to bolster the U.S. as culturally superior to the U.S.S.R. amidst Cold War tensions, especially in a dance genre commonly associated with Russia.

Overall, ballet provided a landscape in which Western nations were allowed to take advantage of for their self-image making to purport themselves as strong, resilient, all within a structure created by, and for, the elite ruling classes of these nations. Even Homans admitted that “classical ballet had always been a state-supported art whose purpose...had been, in no small measure, to promote and glorify kings and tsars” (Homans 2010: 448). I will go into detail later how these ideologies of dominance manifest in ballet’s technique training, choreography, aesthetics, and ultimately, their exclusionary practices towards people identified as opposite of these ideologies and aesthetics, in the recounts of my informants’ stories.

### **Dance All Day (& Lisa-Danielle)**

Writing about Lisa is hard to do when she and her organization are so intimately bonded, not just because she runs it all by herself, but because telling the story behind how the development of DAD began makes telling her story inevitable, which is why I talk about her in this section alongside her organization. As I touched upon earlier, she explained to me that when she came up with the idea for the creation of her organization, she “conceptualized this [organization] as a way for survivors of sexual and domestic assault to heal following their trauma”, and as we talk more, she tells me of a deeply personal story where she experienced, and still experiences, trauma from an incident back in 2012<sup>11</sup>. This is when it is clear that she conceptualized the mission of DAD based on *her* own experiences in using ballet as a part of her healing regimen. She said that amidst her “very dark, traumatic period” post-incident, she ended up finding ballet an essential part of her recovery process, something that is still ongoing given

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<sup>11</sup> I decided to omit the details surrounding the incident for the sake of her safety and integrity. She did not go into much detail with me during our conversation, and she provides a more detailed narrative surrounding the incident on Instagram, but for her sake, I am omitting those details.

her PTSD.<sup>12</sup> She said to me that when she got back into doing ballet, “it just seemed very fitting that during this particular time of my life that I found myself relying on ballet following this trauma” (Lisa-Danielle 2017).

Ballet has been her catharsis when dealing with the traumatic incident she endured years ago. This year marks doing into her 27th year of ballet, and even though she took breaks from ballet in that time frame because “life has kicked in, reality has taken place” (Johnson 2017), she makes clear that it is an important part of her life and identity; otherwise, she would not make running ballet fitness workshops her primary commitment. She said ballet is her favorite genre of dance, but she is also trained in a variety of other dance genres, such as the many versions and deviations of modern dance, hip-hop, salsa, tap, jazz, and so many more. She also loves to curse, which I welcome and participate in, for as she said, “I curse like a fuckin’ sailor.” DAD is a very young organization, having been developing since 2015, and is on track to achieve 501(c)3 nonprofit status.<sup>13</sup> I would say that it is based in Baltimore, Maryland, but it is not located in a building with its own address.<sup>14</sup> Lisa told me that DAD is a nonprofit structured as a “concierge service,” which means that she wants to be the one to go to her clients, rather than have them come to her (Lisa-Danielle 2017). She goes in further detail on this structure and why she opted for it, for reasons primarily pertaining to professional pragmatism:

I don't want to have to be committed to the city, to the state, because I know that there are dozens among dozens, dozens of shelters, organizations, studios who can benefit from these services. I've developed this program for it to be concierge so I would always have the option to travel with it. Also, because it's just me right now, I have to be smart....So the goal, at least not right now, is not to have a studio, I don't want to be stuck in one place, and I don't want to franchise per say, you know?  
(Lisa-Danielle 2017)

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<sup>12</sup> Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder.

<sup>13</sup> Though upon writing this, there is the possibility that DAD has already achieved official nonprofit status.

<sup>14</sup> For sake of convenience, I say it is in Baltimore because its founder and owner, my informant Lisa-Danielle, currently lives there.

In short, she does not want to financially, physically, and mentally overexert herself in running these workshops for her organization, while being able to travel to where the workshops are asked for. Clearly, this lack of a fixated space means that she is holistically living up to her praxis of accessible and reparative ballet fitness, rather than a lack of organization. She knows that the need for her and what she is offering is not in one particular place, but multiple places. Just as how ballet was able to spread its influence to meet the certain needs of political leaders at the time, she wants to make DAD workshops able to spread its influence to meet the needs of women *everywhere*, or at least in places she is able to go to.

I first learned about Lisa-Danielle and her organization Dance All Day through an Instagram post posted by a Black-owned news and social media publication that I follow on the social media network. They posted about who she is and what she does and so after skimming her account, I reached out to her, expressing interest in getting to know her and her organization. After exchanging emails sporadically and private messages on Instagram, we finally got to meet at one of her workshops that she called “Trap Ballet”, held in Baltimore where she is based.

The mission of the organization at its core is, according to her, “to service women and girls who are survivors of sexual and domestic assault” (Lisa-Danielle 2017), but she does emphasize that you do not have to be a survivor of a form of interpersonal violence and violation to participate in her classes. Because in the end, she said, “We are strivin' to make ballet accessible to women overall and girls overall, so you know, along with the classes being geared towards helping women heal, there are open classes period. You don't have to be a survivor just to partake. Come on, come on, I'll take ya” (Lisa-Danielle 2017). She is thus not only aiming in helping women use ballet as a way to provide an avenue for healing personal trauma, but is also making ballet more accessible in this process, especially for women that it has usually been

inaccessible to. This is why she constantly signs off her organization's Instagram posts with the phrase, "Where Every Girl Is A Ballerina!", because it is a daily reminder of the organization's overall goal in providing accessible fitness classes for "anyone who may be interested in tryin' it" (Lisa-Danielle 2017).

In talking to her, she tells me that she runs the DAD organization all by herself. All of the workshops, the social media postings on Instagram, the maintenance of the organization's website, she does all on her own. She recently posted on DAD's Instagram account about looking for two part-time paid interns to do work in business administration and dance fitness (balletafterdark 2017) so that she can catch a break. She admitted to me that she takes on more work than she can handle, but that the overload also helps her pace herself and be more organized. In the end, she tries to do so much to the point where it is too much because as she said, DAD is a one-woman show, and as of now, she runs everything, from the workshops to the business side to communications, on her own. When I asked how many workshops she runs currently, and while she does not articulate an exact day of the week and time in which she runs them, she does say that she aims to run about four to six a month. Although, that also depends on whether or not she gets the help that she has been and still is seeking.

Lisa said that she runs the workshops based on a syllabus she created and recently completed, and the general schedule that the workshop follows are as follows: first, there is the warm up, followed by an exercise across the floor, and a mini-dance routine that she teaches her clients if time allows her to. This all happened at the workshop I attended, but there was one activity that she said she usually does in her workshops that I did not experience. She called it "the bonding circle", where she said is the cool-down part after the intense exercises she gets her clients to do. However, Lisa articulated later in her interview that another goal she wanted her

clients in the space she is creating to achieve is that she “wanted to create an element of sisterhood, because it's lacking severely, especially amongst women of color” (Lisa-Danielle 2017), showing that she wants to make the bonding circle to inculcate socialization amongst her clients that can potentially give way to a level of sisterhood. It is also worth noting that even though she welcomes anyone regardless of race, sexuality, and gender identity (minus cisgender men that is), this subtle statement of especially hoping to cultivate that among women of color demonstrates that she had women like her, black women, in mind when developing DAD and its praxis.

Through DAD, Lisa is actively striving towards making a space where ballet can be accessible to women for whatever purpose they seek from it. The primary purposes that she had in mind when she created it however, was to provide an avenue for women in need of its restorative powers to help them heal from trauma, or even to get in shape. After talking to her, it is clear that she and DAD are one and the same, for DAD's praxis is embodied by her and within her. She is capable of existing fully as herself without DAD, but DAD is nothing without her because of how she crafted DAD's structure from her imaginary and her deeply personal journey to self-empowerment and healing.

### *Trap Ballet*

Lisa does not host DAD workshops that often, but once I heard when her next one was happening, I knew I had to go, especially since it coincided with my break.<sup>15</sup> I go to the address that she posted on her organization's Instagram, one of her primary methods of posting news related to her and her DAD workshops. I go to the address, and it is in a recreational space within a community center that takes up an entire floor of a building above a bank. I walk in and join

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<sup>15</sup> Katrina also told me that she held two other workshops prior to this one that I attended. As of now, I know that Lisa had held one more DAD workshop since the one I went to, and she was invited to conduct one in Washington, D.C. as part of SAAM (Sexual Assault Awareness Month).

the rest of the women in the room who organized themselves like polka-dots across the room, and Lisa-Danielle begins the class by leading our warm-up. Everyone in the room are Black cisgender women, except for one White-presenting woman. Everyone's ages seems to scatter across the twenties and above, except for three young Black girls all under the age of ten, who were brought here by another attendee.

We warm up by doing some stretches and ab workouts, followed by an exercise where we were instructed to walk from one side of the room to the other with a partner made to help us build confidence. After that exercise is done, she brings us back to where we stood in the beginning to teach us what she called in my personal conversation with her, the "fundamentals" of ballet (Lisa-Danielle 2017). Which was just what we learned: first and second positions in our hands and feet, pliés in said positions, followed by a mini-routine based on those movements. When I practiced ballet, my teacher would play piano music from a CD for us to warm up and dance to, sometimes even bringing in a piano player to play live for us to dance to. However, Lisa-Danielle played for us some Rae Sremmurd, Beyoncé, and Bruno Mars, songs by people that are currently popular, but is not common to play in any setting where ballet is being practiced.

Going into this environment was awkward for me because I came on my own and tend to not be the first person to strike a conversation with someone.<sup>16</sup> But coming out, I did feel more comfortable in the space I was in and the people I was surrounded by. And thus was the effect of DAD: comfort.

### *Katrina*

Katrina is one of the most frequent attendees in Lisa-Danielle's DAD workshops, and a major reason why has to do with how she and Lisa have been good friends from since they were

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<sup>16</sup> This is not an anomaly, I am awkward the majority of the time no matter what setting I am in.

kids. Like Lisa, she was born and raised in Baltimore, and continues to live there today. She told me that she has experience in doing ballet, having started in a local recreation center when she was five. I get a glimmer of excitement for a second, for I found something we had in common; I too entered dance beginning with weekly ballet and tap classes held at my hometown's local recreation center, and took my classes there until I outgrew them and changed to a more rigorous ballet school. Going further in detail, she said she then moved to another dance studio alongside her sister, where she also met Lisa-Danielle, and danced for about ten more years and now does not dance there anymore. One factor had to do with how she is "an adult and unfortunately, dancing comes with money" (Katrina 2017). However, as we continue talking, I asked her the question of how she felt in the space DAD provided for its clients compared to the dance studio she grew up dancing in, and whether or not she was comfortable in one and uncomfortable in the other. She responded :

Well, when we were younger, I was a bit of a chunky kid, so I was literally always in dance and that kept me fit and, my weight went down and I slimmed out when I was older, but at the same time, my director that I had, she was a very good director, but...I mean I kinda felt like she wanted I guess kinda like the students to kinda be her friends or things like that and that just wasn't me. So overall like, my sister and I, we wound up leaving the studio. But, when we were there, I did appreciate what she did for us as far as giving us the foundation that we needed for dance.  
(Katrina 2017)

Thus, she felt out of place because of her body and because she found the behavior of her director generally inappropriate for her. However, she expressed how much more relaxed and liberatory the setting Lisa creates for her clients in her DAD workshops:

And with her, with [Lisa], she is like she says, she's classically trained as well, so I feel like she just takes her technique that she's learned and just infuses it like she says with the hip hop and things like that and makes it fun. So that you feel like not everything has to be perfect, you know? You're free to express yourself and be you.  
(Katrina 2017)

She also said that she stopped continuing ballet because it was not a lucrative position. Which is ironic, considering it costs so much to do. Growing up, I remember always applying for and receiving scholarships at my local ballet school, for my mom was usually unable to pay out of pocket at the time. This lack of monetary accrument is evident in dance as a profession as a whole, unless you choose to do, say, Dancing with the Stars for instance. She attends the workshops primarily for fitness purposes, in addition to supporting Lisa-Danielle. She prefers it that way, because she enjoys the structured lack of structure within the DAD workshops; by that, I mean the workshop is organized to emulate the same order of events as would unfold in a regular ballet class, but the lack of structure is in the lack of discipline and the encouragement of self-expression Lisa-Danielle emphasizes as she facilitates her workshops. She still expresses much adoration for the dance genre, and for Lisa-Danielle, and thus what makes her one of DAD's most avid supporters.

### **The Philadelphia Collective**

The PC is a dance academy and professional dance company that has been around for over fifty years. Its founder is a Black woman whom I will call Patricia Gibson Parrish, PG for short, and she founded the PC when she was in her twenties during the sixties.<sup>17</sup> PG got into ballet as a kind of physical therapy for an injury she obtained, and wanted to keep doing it even after her injury was ameliorated. However, this proved difficult for her amidst racial segregation, to the point where she would receive dance lessons from her childhood friend that was taking classes. This experience was what eventually led her to creating and opening the PC. She herself said, and Laurel reiterated, that her overall mission with the school is “to create opportunities for Black dancers” in the form of a dance education and professional training that PG herself was

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<sup>17</sup> For anonymity purposes, for the same reasons I keep my informants and the institutions anonymous.

denied access to growing up due to the active enforcement of legalized American racial segregation (Gottschild 2012).<sup>18</sup> Its main focus is modern dance, but the company offers training in multiple dance genres, including classical ballet, because as Laurel articulated, she wanted to provide opportunities for Black people of all ages to learn the dance genres she offered while also equipping aspiring professional Black dancers for jobs in other dance companies. Jordana’s explanation further validates this claim, but she offers insight as to what this mission looks like right now:

Her goal here was to have an outlet for her dancers in Philly, African-American dancers, to have an opportunity to dance in the company.... You won't see a lot of us, honestly, in a ballet company in New York or in—any major dance company you won't see a lot of us, it's always goin' to be a token. So, her company allows a lot more dancers of color to have opportunities to dance and get the touring aspects, and the different type of rep that we have, so it gives us the opportunity to dance in places we normally wouldn't be able to. It's still valid, basically.  
(Jordana 2017)

Given that, as you will later see, Jordana is one of “the most senior members” of the PC, she possesses the most knowledge of the company. As is evident though, PC was created for Black people by a Black woman, and it is joining the myriad of historically Black institutions that sustain spaces for Black people to perform and dance to their fullest desire.

### *Laurel*

Laurel is the only informant of mine that I knew prior to her interview. I did not know her well, but I did know that she has experience in dance performance, having been a part of a dance concert I once attended at school. I would learn that she had received robust training growing up from since she was six. Inspired by her older cousin, she started ballet by taking lessons with a Russian teacher named Zuri. She expressed an overall positive experience with him, for he did not let the large amounts of money he received from his students’ parents cultivate favoritism for

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<sup>18</sup> *Black Ballerina*. Directed by Shirley McElroy (Narberth, PA: Shirley Road Productions, 2014), DVD.

the children of those parents. In fact, he favored her and her cousin. However, she said she was coming into “this sort of racial awakening when I was like, in tenth grade,” from reading Assata Shakur’s autobiography (Laurel 2017). This awakening led her to get more involved in diversity groups and conferences in school, and it extended into the kind of dance spaces she sought for. She said, “I from that point made it my mission to seek out environments of color that were created specifically created for environments of color. So when I was seventeen, I could’ve gone to the summer program at the Kirov...but I decided to go to the Dance Theatre of Harlem instead.” (2017) As eager as she was about this opportunity, when she made it, she ended up actually experiencing a kind of culture shock, for as she articulated, she has not been around that many Black people. It reminded me of when I did my college prep program’s orientation and was around mostly Black people. Nonetheless, she pushed herself to continually pursue dance spaces of color to reclaim a part of her identity that she thought she missed out because of the predominantly White environment she grew up in, despite the Black family she belonged to. She said she went to summer intensives at Dance Theatre of Harlem (DTH) and Alvin Ailey two times. Moreover, given that she actively pursued and occupied predominantly Black spaces, “it just kinda made sense for me to go to the PC from there.” And is thus how she ended up at Philadanco as an apprentice, meaning she is in the underclass of students being prepped to join the main Corps upwards.

### *Jordana*

I meet up with Jordana in the PC’s academy. I go inside looking for her, and the woman at the front desk takes me up to a dance studio, where she is in the middle of teaching a dance class to young girls who appear to be in their early teens, counting and snapping out loud as they dance on beat to her counts and snaps. She greets me enthusiastically, and then I sit next to her

and watch the girls dance the routine that I assume Jordana taught them. She tells me that she is from New York, an Afro-Latina, and grew up being taught ballet in the Dance Theatre of Harlem (Jordana 2017). She also attended school at LaGuardia, one of the most well-known performing arts schools in the city and country, that was also predominantly black. She also did the Alvin Ailey summer intensives, so while she received training in classical ballet, she was able to receive it in predominantly black settings that accepted her as she came. However, she said she experienced a “culture shock” upon entering university at a predominantly White university in the south, where she and her twin sister were the only two black women, people as a whole, in their incoming ballet freshman class. She also talked about experiencing a variety of microaggressions concerning her Afro-Latina identity, her hair, and her skin. She recounted me one of the worst incidents, which happened in the hands of her instructor for a performance:

It was Jose Ramon's "Mama Leche". It's a trio, the woman has a solo and two men. And I was the solo girl, and I remember saying, "We're not the black cast. It just happens that I'm the lead girl as black, but I had a white male as my co-dancer, and then an Hispanic boy, but they called us the "black cast" because of me. And the other cast, which was the main cast who did the evening performances, was a lead white girl, black boy, and another white boy. But they never called them that cast. So I was like, "I don't understand." "Well you're a freshman. That's the reason why you're doing matinees only." And I was like, "No, it's 'cause the black girl's the lead, that's why." So that was my experience. And I was like...hurt. (Jordana 2017)

She was basically labeled as the singular force that made a cast Black, implying as though her blackness was contagious and something that can touch those around her. And she was deeply hurt about it, which was probably what led to her desire to dance for a more diverse ballet company. That way, she would not have to go through that pain over and over that was caused by the predominantly white setting that she was not even use to due to the predominantly black settings she grew up in. She told me she made a list of places she was interested in at the time, and the PC was not on said list at the time. After she graduated from college, she danced

for another company in the same town as her college, a Black dance company, and she said that she enjoyed it, but did not feel like she was progressing in her technique; just stagnant like a plateau. Looking for something different, and back on the East Coast where she's from, she fell into the PC, despite a fallout between her and her first company of employment, where it initially affected her contract with the PC. Nonetheless, she made it, and even though she said she was not treated properly as she hoped, she worked her way to the Principal Dancer position that she occupies now.

### **Black Space, Black Dance**

The PC and DAD are two obviously different institutions in their structure and praxes; the PC is a dance school and professional company that provides opportunities for black people by teaching a wide array of dance genres outside of classical ballet, and DAD provides fitness workshops with a ballet motif for women interested in participating. However, their similarities are just as obvious, in that they are concerned with making dance accessible and inclusive for Black Americans. They are not the first institutions to have such a mission, nor will they be the last, thus, they are continuing the tradition of Black people making spaces for each other in the realm of dance.

I will highlight this history by zeroing in on three of the most significant leading figures of this movement: Katherine Dunham and Alvin Ailey, and the institutions they have created are among the most canonized in the country that are also predominantly Black in composition.

Alvin Ailey was a dance choreographer who founded the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater in 1958 (West 1996). His company has an emphasis on modern dance, and one of his company members recounted that, "As a choreographer, Alvin was always loose; he allowed us freedom in our roles....He would give a framework and you would color it in" (Topaz 1996: 15).

What Alvin Ailey embodied that was the overall praxis of his company was liberatory dance. It was significant considering the theater is serving people who have descended from people who were stripped of their freedoms at varying degrees. Therefore, Alvin Ailey, being one of the first dance companies that was Black at heart and serving Black people, wanted to create a theater and form of dancing that allowed the Black dancer to be autonomous and able to achieve a sense of liberatory movement through such movement.

If men had Alvin Ailey as a pioneer in Black dance, then women had Katherine Dunham. She was a performer that gained more and more attention as a performer by incorporating aesthetics and dance moves that were distinctly Black and Caribbean (Perpener 2001). She achieved this fusion of dances and aesthetics of the Black American and the Afro-Caribbean, Haiti to be specific, because she was a trained anthropologist. The bulk of her field work was rooted in Haiti, and she identified certain secular and sacred dance practices in Haitian voodoo rituals (Aschenbrenner 2002). With her field work that she actively pursued in Haiti, she ultimately fused together her field work with elements of modern dance and classical ballet to ultimately create a new dance genre that dance schools now call by her last name. Moreover, while she has a dance company that has her namesake in New York, her development of a new and authentic diasporic form of dance would not have been possible without the work in using ethnographic inquiry and research that she pursued.

They are surely not the only trailblazers of Black dance; there are too many dancers that have cultivated spaces for Black people and made fusions of modern dance and ballet dance, but this is to give minor snapshots of examples of people that essentially paved the path for women like Lisa-Danielle, Katrina, Laurel, and Jordana, and the institutions of the PC and DAD.

### **Deviant Dancing [Black] Bodies**

Upon the mentioning of the words “ballet” and “ballerina”, what images come up for you in your head? What do It is highly likely that what you see is most accurately embodied in the art of Edgar Degas.<sup>19</sup> The French Impressionist painter is most famous for his artistic renderings of ballerinas in settings such as the dance studio or backstage of a dance performance, and all of his renderings portrayed White ballerinas.

Ballet, as does any genre of dance, has a substantial emphasis on the body in terms of what standards dancing bodies are supposed to meet in aesthetics and movement capability. It is through these standards in how they are used as the criteria in judging whether or not certain bodies meet or exist in proximation to these standards, that determines dancers’ sense of belonging. In the context of ballet, it is evident that this process of determining who does and does not belong in a ballet academy and/or company is a reflection of how the ruling class within the society enacts this process. Ballet’s origins and development in different Western cultural contexts shaped largely by countries’ leaders, . Deidre Sklar has argued that in the context of dance, “All movement must be considered as an *embodiment* of cultural knowledge” (Sklar 2001:30), alluding to Diana Taylor’s analysis of the repertoire as possessing valid sources of knowledge.<sup>20</sup> Moreover, in order to understand why my informants experienced micro and macroaggressions in ballet dance settings pertaining to their bodies, and why there is a pattern of black women denied entry from ballet academies and companies, we must look at a triptych of ballet and the knowledge and histories within the undercurrents of ballet and the history of what institutions of power subjected the black female body to.

Understanding the story of Sara Baartmann is most essential in finding the direction to take in navigating this topic of the Black female body. Sara Bartmann, also known as the

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<sup>19</sup> See Biography (2014).

<sup>20</sup> See Taylor (2007).

Hottentot Venus, has a story that, as Sander L. Gilman best encapsulates, is “representative of the essence of the black, especially the black female” in the White imaginary (Sanders 1985:206). She was a woman of the Khoisan found in what is now called South Africa, and was brought to England by Alexander Dunlop, a doctor who was in charge of the so-called tour of her body (Crais & Scully 2009).<sup>21</sup> During this tour, she stood on a podium in front of an all-White audience with her naked body, akin to how Black people brought into slavery were put on auction blocks in the West. Her body was not only gazed at, it was repeatedly violated, and after her death, she was dissected for her genitals because they were perceived as not actually being of a human variety (Sanders 1985). In short, the dehumanizing sexual objectification and exploitation of Baartmann set the stage for the black female body to be perpetually viewed as marked by sexual deviance, an object to be scrutinized under a white gaze, and is “only when it is synonymous with accessibility, availability, when it is sexually deviant” (hooks 1992: 66).

My informants experienced a variety of scrutiny in relation to their body. Jordana said the most frequent criticism was for her muscle toning in her legs and arms. Her retelling I feel most accurately reflects a primary reason as to why predominantly white dance companies tend to exclude black women:

My sister and I ended up getting into the ABT summer intensive. And we went, we were again one of the token black girls, and they would say, "Oh, we love your dancing, beautiful technique, you're too muscular." I *always* heard that, and I was like, "Okay, it's either too shapely, too muscular," like "No no, you're not shapely, it's just too much muscle tone, if you toned it down then I could see you in our studio company. But it's just too strong of a look and I don't think you'll blend in very well for our company." And I was like, devastated, 'cause I was a senior in high school thinking possibly getting into a ballet company, and I was like, "You know what, forget it." Because that was always the response out of the white establishments. "Too muscular, too tall."  
(Jordana 2017)

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<sup>21</sup> I have to say, this text is disgusting for downplaying the level of dehumanization Bartmann’s body was subjected to, but it is also one of few print sources I found that gave great detail to her journey.

Laurel did not have a particular experience like Jordana did above, but she did express that her teacher did not provide her the necessary attention to her body because of the development of her muscles. This is also a given, since ballet expects the female-identified participants to embody a certain kind of skinny that is only possible for a handful of women. For the women that it is not possible, but what they still try to strive for, they go to extreme means, such as smoking cigarettes, and restricting eating to the point where they develop eating disorders (Adair 1992; Thomas 2003). Moreover, it is evident that the sexual deviance metaphorically branded on black women travels with them everywhere, and it is through these harmful practices of racialized and gendered exclusion that they are prohibited from identifying with femininity, an inherently white supremacist construct. As a result, predominantly White ballet institutions ultimately exclude black women the majority of the time, save the one or two that proximates to whiteness, because of these underlying ideologies and narratives surrounding the black female body and white femininity.

### **Sexist Colorism**

When I said in the beginning that there was one principal ballet dancer that's a Black woman, she is the eponymous Misty Copeland, who achieved this promotion in the summer of 2015. This marked a huge milestone for not just people that identify as African-American, but especially for people who identify as African-American *women*, for Black women finally had . However, Laurel for instance, best expressed it when she said, "I love Misty Copeland but she looks White on stage" (Laurel 2017), meaning that despite the significance of Copeland's promotion, her having light skin that registers as closer to the color of cashew nuts than a chestnut played a significant role in this achievement of hers because of ballet's heavy emphasis on the classical beauty that it embodies in the professional realm, thus begging the question of

whether or not Copeland would have been able to achieve principal status had she been of a darker skin color.

Institutionalized racism is pervasive to the point where Black people are sent multiple subliminal and explicit messages at an early age that reflections of themselves are undesirable, inherently bad, and unredeemable of anything good. They are sent these messages repeatedly, until they achieve a point where they believe them, and by consequence believe that they put themselves in their particular socially marginal location, and not a centuries-old racial hierarchy that has evolved so as to maintain White and/or European dominance. The level of the insidious nature of racism is best exemplified in a particular moment during the *Brown v. Board of Education* Supreme Court case.

Psychologists Kenneth and Mamie Clark used identical baby dolls that had different skin tones from one end of the spectrum to the other and asked several children aged 3-7 questions concerning which baby exemplified the most positive traits and which baby exemplified the most negative traits. A majority of the children, if not all, chose the whitest baby as the epitome of positive traits, and the darkest baby as exemplifying the worst (NAACP). Furthermore, if Black people are taught at an early age that very light skin, rather any skin tone not perceived as dark, is better than dark skin, then they reinforce that belief in their daily lives, interactions, and interests, especially among their own. As Laurel and Jordana articulated, it is a reality they have experienced especially strongly in ballet and in their career with the PC. While this issue was not touched upon in all my conversations, it is an important issue to highlight, because it affects most, if not all, Black women who aspire to be professional ballet dancers more so than their male counterparts. It has directly affected my informants Jordana and Lisa, for it is what Laurel benefits from and is aware of, was what Jordana was subjected to, and an issue that is prevalent

within the PC's selection criteria. Overall, colorism functions within the PC's selection criteria as an internalized, self-perpetuating version of the criteria within canonized ballet companies rely on it in deeming who is and is not worthy of inclusion.

Even though Jordana actually said that one of the main female Principal Dancers in the PC during the eighties was a dark-skinned Black woman, I have perceived it as an instance of tokenizing that other Black ballerinas condemned in the White mainstream dance world (McElroy 2014). Especially when I first brought up the question of colorism with Laurel, who made it clear that PG "does prefer lighter-skinned brown people." Laurel, being a light-skinned Black woman, is aware of this and the privileges that come with her having lighter skin, especially in a professional dance company run by an older Black woman that prefers lighter-skinned Black people. I will note, that Laurel mentioned how PG jokingly called Laurel a White girl upon learning where she received her education. Regardless, both Laurel and Jordana pointed out PG's colorist preferences, even though she has grandchildren that are darker than her (Jordana 2017).

Jordana validated Laurel's claim over PG's colorist preferences, saying, "I've noticed my first time ever at the company, I was the darkest girl at the company." Confused as to how she could be the darkest female member of PC, I put my forearm next to hers to compare out of sheer curiosity, and found that we were the same shade, and while we ourselves are not considered to be light-skinned, we certainly do not register as dark-skinned within the color hierarchy. She mentioned how in her first years in the company, she would get little comments about her skin, such as how she needed special-order tights because the other tights available did not match her shade, or comments referring to her like, "Oh, the dark-skinned girl" (Jordana 2017). Continuing, she said:

That just didn't make any sense to me. And I've always just said, I was like, how come it's an issue with the women but your men? *All* of them are really dark. All of them. And I remember it's like, different standards that they have held for men compared to women so, I don't know. Maybe it's a preference of what she considers beautiful: light.  
(Jordana 2017)

Colorism can be defined as, “the unequal treatment and discrimination of individuals *belonging to the same racial or ethnic minority group* based upon differences in physical features—most notably skin complexion, but also facial features and hair texture” (Wilder 2015: 6). It was a term first coined by feminist scholar Alice Walker during the eighties, but variations of the name of this practice of internalized racial discrimination has been used, such as the “color complex” and “shadeism” (Wilder 2015). As demonstrated

I say that it specifically impacts Black women in the dance world in particular because, for instance, the first Black woman to ever achieve Principal status in one of the most well-known dance companies was promoted to that status two years ago, whereas the first Black man to achieve principal status in a major dance company did so in 1955 (Peters 2007).<sup>22</sup> Additionally, Jordana and Laurel are affected in different ways, and have pointed out that the Black men who are in the first and second companies are all categorized as dark-skinned, whereas the Black women have Jordana as the darkest member; the rest of the Black women are all lighter than her, including Laurel. Even though this is a subject I did not get into with Lisa and Katrina, Laurel and Jordana’s accounts on their personal experiences and encounters with colorism in the PC are real and are symptomatic of the depth in which the exclusionary practices ballet emulates of larger institutions of power can funnel in and enable the very people impacted by such practices to enact them as well. This begs the question of whether or not ballet companies are to blame these harmful practices of racialized and gendered exclusion they enact, or to empathize with for

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<sup>22</sup> It was Arthur Mitchell in the New York City Ballet. After his tenure, he also founded the Dance Theatre of Harlem

falling victim to the institutions of power that manipulate it as a cultural institution for their own personal, political, social, and economic gains. But that is a question for another thesis.

### **Conclusion**

What I learned from Laurel, Katrina, Lisa-Danielle, and Jordana, are very personal stories concerning their relationships with ballet and other genres, telling me across the board that it is a huge part of their life and identity. They offered a variety of analyses and perspectives regarding what the environments in which they learned to dance reproduced for them, how they felt about them, and how they responded. If I can draw a consensus among all four of my informants, it is that they have been impacted by the racialized and gendered ideologies of belonging that ballet absorbed from larger institutions of power, but at varying degrees and at different times of their lives. I would say that it was Lisa who was hit the hardest, because she was not offered *any* opportunities to dance for a company, despite the many auditions she went to and the sacrifices she made in going to said auditions. On the one hand, I could argue that Katrina was hit the hardest for never even being able to pursue a profession after facing rejections from the city's local arts school and another academy's summer intensive program, but on the other, she also did not want a profession that was not lucrative. Additionally, Katrina did not mention that she actively pursued auditions at professional dance companies like Lisa did.<sup>23</sup>

As for Laurel and Jordana, they were both clearly dedicated to practicing and getting trained in ballet growing up, in addition to other dance genres. During this interview, they occupied positions within the Philadelphia Collective as professional dancers, except Dana occupied one of the lower positions as what they called an apprentice, and Jordana occupied the position of a principal dancer, the highest offered in the Philadelphia Collective. Regardless, they

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<sup>23</sup> This is based on her not mentioning doing that. It does not guarantee that she actually did not try out for professional company auditions.

existed within a Black-owned and Black-made company, for the same yet different reasons; Laurel went to PC as part of an ongoing mission of hers to seek out intentionally Black spaces because of how she felt as though she missed out on not exactly being Black, but on important aspects of the Black American experience that is essential to being Black in the U.S. Whereas Jordana, she grew up getting trained in intentionally Black dance spaces, but after spending her college career as one of two Black women in her freshman ballet class, while experiencing a myriad of racist encounters, it appears that she sought for a return to the Black dance spaces she was a part of.

Here in this thesis, I have juxtaposed four Black women who do dance in different settings at two institutions both founded by Black women. Their experiences are uniquely their own, yet all find commonality in that they all feel a connection to dance. They also find commonality in what they have been subjected to in formal ballet dance settings, at varying degrees, from exclusion to perpetual othering and fetishizing, proving to be symptomatic of larger systems that regulate people's locations in certain spaces. These larger systems are the ones that people with social, political, and economic power control so as to dictate who belongs where, subsequently assigning different values to such locations using ideologies of white supremacy, patriarchy, and the collusion of the two. They are in predominantly Black settings in the current moment, taking full advantage of the safety that they are afforded in such settings, but it is worth wondering if they would be there if canonized, elite ballet companies did away with their standards and ideologies and accepted and fully included them. The women probably would not, but these ballet companies would never discard these standards and ideologies, for doing so would ultimately render ballet as no more.

Overall, it is evident that ballet, while having its positive attributes in these women's lives, also negatively impacted them to certain extents.

So why do they still dance?

When I asked them why they dance, or what dance means to them, the answers varied. Laurel and Lisa-Danielle are on the same plane in terms of the answer to this question, for Laurel called it an addiction for her, going further in saying, "I need it. I need to move, if I don't move for while I feel really weird, like if I don't dance for a month I feel really gross" (Laurel 2017). Lisa-Danielle echoes this sentiment of Laurel, calling it "an incessant desire to move" (Lisa-Danielle 2017). Lisa also said that there was "something so soothing and captivating about the grace. And the elegance and the technical requirements of ballet" (Lisa-Danielle 2017), so it was not just about an insatiable desire to move your body in a particular way, but to also move it with grace. Jordana and Katrina are also on the same plane, considering it their outlet, their temporary escape from the more mundane or tenuous parts of their lives. In other words, ballet proved to be their *catharsis*.

What I have written about these women is not the full picture, nor does it fully capture the beautiful stories that they have told me. What I did try to capture however, was their overall experiences in ballet and in predominantly black spaces as a means of respite and cultivating individual identities for themselves. White ballet institutions did enact their harmful and violent methods of exclusion on Lisa, Jordana, Laurel, and Katrina, but they showed a response with resilience and managed to forge a space of their own that they felt entitled to despite institutions they are not deserving of such.

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