

UC Irvine

UC Irvine Electronic Theses and Dissertations

Title

The Relevance of Black Ballet Schools in 21st Century America

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/0n25s6dt>

Author

Lee, Brandy

Publication Date

2021

Peer reviewed|Thesis/dissertation

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA,
IRVINE

The Relevance of Black Ballet Schools in 21st Century America

THESIS

submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements
for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

in Dance

by

Brandy Lee

Thesis Committee:
Dr. Jennifer Fisher, Chair
Professor Diane Diefenderfer
Dr. S. Ama Wray

2021

DEDICATION

To

Doris W. Jones,

who taught countless students how to be graceful, tenacious and fearless.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	iv
ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS	v
INTRODUCTION	1
CHAPTER 1: Racist Exclusions and the History of the Black Ballet School	4
Stereotypes and Myths	7
Early Black Ballet Schools	11
The Influence of Arthur Mitchell and Dance Theatre of Harlem	13
CHAPTER 2: The Cultural Markers of Black Ballet Schools	16
CHAPTER 3: Creating Lasting Change: Definitions of Success in a New Era	31
Defining Success	31
Black Dancers in a White World	35
Sea (See) Change	37
Lip Service or Sustained Action?	39
CHAPTER 4: Responding to a Double Pandemic	42
Moving Through Pandemic Challenges and Beyond	45
CONCLUSION	51
BIBLIOGRAPHY	55

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Words are inadequate to express the depth of gratitude I have for my thesis chair, Professor Jennifer Fisher, whose ongoing enthusiasm for my work served as both an anchor and a guiding light. Her scholarly inquiry opened my eyes to new possibilities and helped me to see how important it is to use my voice to help create necessary change. My thesis is so much due to her hours of brilliant and compassionate consulting and selfless leadership.

I would like to thank my committee members, Professor Diane Diefenderfer and Professor S. Ama Wray for their curiosity about my thesis topic and support for my work. Their commitment to my effort is deeply appreciated.

I thank the Dance Department at University of California, Irvine, from each of my professors, to the administrative staff, to Chair, Molly Lynch. I can't imagine having attended another school for my Master of Fine Arts degree, and it is because of the beautiful, honest interactions that unfolded with each of you. I also express deep love and thanks to my fellow cohort members, the class of 2021, whose support, understanding, talent and dedication throughout this journey have continually made me better.

In addition, I thank University of California, Irvine librarian Scott Stone and District of Columbia Public Library librarian David Edmonds for identifying and providing invaluable scholarly resources.

This work was made possible by the many people I interviewed and their willingness to candidly share their experiences. I am forever grateful to each of them. I am especially grateful to Sandra Fortune-Green, Robert Garland, Marcellus Harper, Kevin Thomas, Nena Gilreath and Waverly Lucas, whose insight into their tireless work gave me hope and inspiration for the future.

The last year was challenging in ways large and small. Through it all, my family, friends and neighbors were right there for me, encouraging me at every twist and turn. My mother, especially, was my effervescent cheerleader. Her sunny smile and positive disposition on even the darkest days kept my spirit afloat and encouraged me to continue on and on, until I crossed the finish line.

Last, but certainly not least, this list wouldn't be complete without thanking my heavenly Father. I chose this path by faith, and by faith I have completed this portion of my journey. I thank God for seeing me each and every day and supplying all my needs, and much more, along the way.

ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

The Relevance of Black Ballet Schools in 21st Century America

by

Brandye Lee

Master of Fine Arts in Dance

University of California, Irvine, 2021

Professor Jennifer Fisher, Chair

Ballet's problem with race and inclusion has been well-documented over the last 15 years. One of the natural outgrowths of Black dancers being systematically excluded from the art form - largely because of America's sordid racist history and Jim Crow segregation laws and ballet's racial bias towards whiteness- was the early formation of Black ballet schools in the 1920s and 1930s. Separate but equal, by law, has long ended, but the existence of Black ballet schools and their continued draw for parents and students alike cannot be denied. This paper examines the most prominent U.S. Black ballet schools, and the purpose they serve in the larger American ballet ecosystem. The author culls data from twenty-five (25) interviews with various stakeholders in the ballet world to determine why parents choose a Black ballet school, whether students of these schools can matriculate to major American ballet companies, asking what other outcomes are important as well. The thesis focuses on current challenges for Black ballet schools and how the Black Lives Matter movement and the coronavirus pandemic affected Black ballet schools. Included is a history of Black ballet schools, why they were initially established, their cultures, and why they continue to thrive in the so-called post-racist society that is America in the 2000s.

INTRODUCTION

Returning to school to earn my Master of Fine Arts degree twenty years after I graduated from Smith College gave me the time and space to reflect on my career, in which I have consistently performed, taught or served as a director for predominantly Black dancers and companies. While this wasn't necessarily my intention at the outset of my journey, I realize what a privilege it has been to serve my community through my artistic passion of dance for so many years. In hindsight, I can see that the trajectory I have followed, consistently working in the Black dance community, began with my training at Jones-Haywood School of Ballet in Washington, DC.¹ For 13 years, I took ballet lessons under the watchful eye of the school's co-founder Doris Jones. By day, I attended predominantly white private schools, but my evenings and weekends were spent in a studio where nearly all of the students were Black. The experience of training in a historically white art form by teachers who were mostly black, equipped me mentally and emotionally to contend with unforeseeable race-related challenges, and prepared me to advocate for myself when my needs as a Black student, Black dancer or Black woman were left unmet. I can now, unequivocally attest to the fact that my Jones-Haywood experience prepared me to not only compete in the dance world, but to also thrive in white spaces.

I know the power of my experience growing up in a Black ballet school, while relatively rare in the ballet world, is not unique. My research centers around three major organizations in America whose mission is to train Black dancers specifically in classical

¹ The school was renamed Jones-Haywood Dance School in 2006.

ballet. They are Ballethnic, Dance Theatre of Harlem and Jones-Haywood.² These schools, while few in number, are well-respected in the communities they serve. The leaders at these schools have been rolling up their sleeves and working tirelessly—one of them for 80 years—to provide the rigorous training that can lead to a successful ballet career. Though the students at these niche studios are steeped in the European tradition that is ballet, these schools have a look and feel that are undeniably Black. From the myriad hues of brown skin, to the flesh tone tights worn by female students, to the voices heard at the front of the room (speaking in what former DTH Executive Director, Laveen Naidu calls “the code”), these schools, while teaching a European art form, are providing a Black experience for their students.³ From the evidence of their sustained existence and the success of their alumni, it is clear that a Black ballet training experience is sought after, in demand, and one of clear importance, not only for individuals, but for entire communities, and also for the dance field in general.

My research questions grew from this experience and knowledge: What are the training outcomes of Black ballet schools? Can their students successfully matriculate into elite U.S. ballet companies? What function do these schools serve inside of the larger American ballet ecosystem? Why are these schools even necessary in 2020 (the year that I began my research on this topic), over five decades after the Civil Rights Act ended segregation? What are their major challenges? Enrollment is not one of them, given that,

² The current mission and training focus of Dance Institute of Washington, Chicago Multicultural Dance Center and others might have warranted inclusion with these three highlighted schools, but time constraints led to their not being part of my research.

³ Naidu.

during the coronavirus pandemic, some of their enrollments grew, or at least stayed the same. These are the numerous, pertinent questions that drove my research.

My methodology consists of two main parts: a literature search and interviews. A literature search was used to establish the history of whiteness and white supremacy in ballet. There is also literature containing evidence of early Black ballet schools, from the 1920s onward. Works by Brenda Dixon Gottschild and Melissa Klapper were critical in establishing this history. At the time of my research, the story of Black ballet schools' collective impact, however, had yet to be written. I found it important to include more voices, therefore, much of my research is original and based on interviews with Black ballet school directors, parents of Black ballet students, their teachers, professional Black ballet dancers, Black ballet school board members, white company directors and others. These 60–90-minute conversations took place online via Zoom during the coronavirus pandemic era, from November 2020 – April 2021.

It is important to acknowledge the work being done to train dancers who can diversify the professional ranks of ballet companies, and thereby push the art form to reflect the America in which it has developed.⁴ This hard work was ongoing in some arenas, long before white supremacy in ballet was ever a wide topic of discussion. It is also pertinent to understand the contributions that Black ballet schools continue to make towards the fabric of their communities, and to training capable, resilient students who will undoubtedly face a racially challenged country for years to come.

⁴ Stated in Fisher, and in myriad articles and public proclamations by ballet organizations and writers after the George Floyd era in American politics, when the white supremacy of ballet came into wider focus.

CHAPTER 1

Racist Exclusions and the History of the Black Ballet School

Black ballet schools were formed in America as early as the first part of the 20th century and continue to exist today, largely as a reaction to ballet's biases. Discrimination in ballet, based on one's skin color is sadly, nothing new. As dance scholar Jennifer Fisher summarized in 2014, ballet "is very white, meaning that pale-skinned people have dominated both onstage and backstage throughout its history as a profession from the seventeenth century to the present," and furthermore, this whiteness associated with a Western cultural form "has been linked to purity, innocence, unattainable ideals, and notions of 'civilized society'."⁵ Racist attitudes in relation to Black dancers particular to the U.S. context could be seen as early as 1963, when *New York Times* dance critic, John Martin suggested that the black dancer "has been wise enough not to be drawn into [ballet], for its wholly European outlook, history, and technical theory are alien to him culturally, temperamentally and anatomically."⁶ This idea that Black dancers are somehow disqualified from ballet has been debunked many times since then, throughout history, in both Europe and America.⁷ While the success of the Dance Theatre of Harlem, founded for Black dancers in 1969, gave proof of ballet talent and interest in the African American community, tales of blatant discrimination against Black ballet dancers abound to this day. Most recently, Berlin's Staatsballett's first black ballerina, Chloé Lopes Gomes, details the "racial harassment" she experienced, including being forced to powder her skin for *Swan*

⁵ Fisher.

⁶ Perpener.

⁷ Kriegsman; McCarthy Brown.

Lake, and learning through her white colleagues that the ballet mistress claimed that it was “a mistake to hire [Gomes] because a black woman spoils the aesthetics.”⁸

The enduring history of hostility that Blacks have faced in this specific genre of dance becomes more vivid when individual stories are told. From the 1930s onward, there are examples of African American dancers being excluded from white ballet companies. The exceptions were pioneering Black ballerinas like Raven Wilkinson (with the Ballets Russes) and Janet Collins (at the Metropolitan Opera), whose careers were definitely limited by their race. Like Wilkinson, who was discouraged from performing for her own safety during the Jim Crow years, the fair-skinned ballerina Marion Cuyjet performed with Littlefield Ballet Company in Philadelphia, until it was discovered after a performance that she was Black. According to Brenda Dixon Gottschild, this resulted in an abrupt ending to her contract.⁹ Dixon Gottschild further notes that while Blacks embraced ballet, they were not allowed to perform or train in ballet in white venues.¹⁰

Throughout the second half of the 20th century, most ballet companies around the world featured only white faces, with the exception of some smaller, contemporary companies. Black dancers in classical companies rarely reached the stage of principal dancer, with a few exceptions, such as Arthur Mitchell (NYCB) and Lauren Anderson (Houston Ballet). Fast forward to 2000, where America’s enduring legacy of racism continued to affect the number of Black dancers in ballet, when dance critic Sarah Kaufman wrote, “The world of ballet remains sharply segregated. Though it is gradually becoming

⁸ Connolly.

⁹ Dixon Gottschild, 2012, p.4.

¹⁰ Dixon Gottschild, 2012, p.4.

more of a melting pot, with many Latino and Asian dancers gaining worldwide recognition, it is resolutely unwelcoming to blacks.”¹¹

When professional ballet company and haven for Black ballet dancers, Dance Theatre of Harlem went on hiatus in 2004, the situation described by Kaufman was exacerbated. As founder of Philadanco and former aspiring ballerina, Joan Myers Brown, describes, “When Dance Theatre of Harlem disbanded, all of those wonderful dancers couldn’t find work because [white companies] still weren’t hiring Black ballet dancers...If they hired anybody black, a woman, they had to be so fair [skinned].”¹² Many out-of-work DTH dancers could have reasonably expected to join another company but it rarely worked that way. Former New York Negro Ballet ballerina, Delores Brown states, “When I see those gorgeous young women from Dance Theatre of Harlem, they could meld right into [a] corps de ballet because they have Balanchine ballets under their belts. They have been doing all of those ballets. They have all the aesthetics except color.” Three years later, in 2007, the continuing problem of race in ballet was reflected in Gia Kourlas’ landmark inquiry in *The New York Times*, “Where are all the Black swans?” Today, one must look no further than the website rosters of major American ballet companies, including New York City Ballet, American Ballet Theatre and San Francisco Ballet, to see that despite recent efforts towards Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI), ballet companies continue to employ a disproportionately low number of Black dancers, particularly women. The dearth of Black ballet dancers is rooted in racist ideology about Black bodies, as well as myths that were

¹¹ Kaufman.

¹² McElroy.

propagated about Black people, which ultimately proliferated in the sociocultural context when ballet gained popularity in America.¹³

Stereotypes and Myths

Historian Melissa Klapper, in her chronicle of ballet class in America, notes that its popularity rose after World War II, with ballet schools multiplying in number and the art form taking root in American culture.¹⁴ This was no less true amongst the African American population, who saw ballet “as a path toward respectability among upwardly mobile black families.”¹⁵ However, “[t]o be a black ballerina in twentieth century America was the artistic equivalent of staging a civil rights protest,”¹⁶ according to Joan Myers Brown, founder of Philadanco dance company in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Racist stereotypes abounded to keep Black dancers, and particularly Black women out of ballet. One such myth was that African Americans didn’t have the right bodies for ballet. In 1966, Klapper notes, a report from the School of American Ballet to the Ford Foundation, said that, “Unfortunately, we must face the fact that inspite [sic] of their gifts for music and movement, a very small percentage of Negroes have the right build for ballet. We tend to forget that ballet was developed on European bodies and that many non-European races are handicapped in relation to it.”¹⁷ The black body, then, was seen as monolithic, as if bodies did not come in many shapes and sizes in many ethnic groups. Klapper notes that

¹³ To read more in depth about the history and perceptions of Black bodies, see *Dixon Gottschild, 2003* and *Smithsonian*.

¹⁴ Klapper, p.73.

¹⁵ Klapper, p.131.

¹⁶ Klapper, p.139.

¹⁷ Klapper, p.146.

this myth of the Black body as simply “not ideal” was accepted by many, quoting from a 1970s newspaper article in which Oliver Smith, then co-director of American Ballet Theatre, said that Black dancers lacked classical lines and carriage.¹⁸ In a 1975 article, *New York Times* editor Jack Slater, exposed even more explicit and reductive myths when he said: “Black people’s feet are too big or too flat for the classic line required in ballet; black people’s bone structure is too large, and their buttocks protrude too unattractively; black dancers tend to rely on instinct rather than on the technique of classic ballet; a black skin would destroy the illusion of symmetry of the corps de ballet.”¹⁹ Beyond physical limitations, Slater further relayed the belief that “blacks generally don’t relate to ‘serious’ music, so they can’t relate to classic ballet; black dancers would hardly be capable of identifying with an art that began in 16th-century European courts.”²⁰ Even George Balanchine, who originally wanted both black and white dancers in his American company, took until 1955 to hire his first full-time company member, Arthur Mitchell. Even though, as Dixon Gottschild points out, there is evidence of Balanchine basing his ballerina prototype on a Black woman’s body, as well as his enthusiastic embrace of Africanist aesthetics in his choreography, the next Black full-time dancer, Debra Austin, wasn’t hired at NYCB until 1971.²¹ There have been very few since.

The exclusion Black dancers faced wasn’t limited to the professional realm, but also applied to the training arena. Whether due to racist attitudes or codified laws, Blacks who embraced European art forms, including ballet, were not only barred from performing, but

¹⁸ Klapper, p.146.

¹⁹ Slater, 1975.

²⁰ Slater, 1975.

²¹ Dixon Gottschild, 1998, pp.64-67.

also from training in these genres in white venues.²² Former New York Negro Ballet ballerina Delores Brown details the racial discrimination she encountered when attempting to secure ballet instruction in the 1940s during Philadelphia's segregation era: "I didn't know at the time that the schools were not open to me. God Bless my mother, she didn't tell me the reality because it would have been very upsetting to a little ten-year-old, to realize you're in a city like Philadelphia and you have limited opportunities."²³ Studio owners told Brown that classes were full, politely avoiding race.²⁴ Similarly, Klapper captures the story of Doris Jones, co-founder of Jones-Haywood School of Ballet, who was able to persuade a white studio owner, Lulu Philbrook in 1930s Boston to give her lessons, but only after she was initially rejected on the basis of her race.²⁵ According to Jones, "I went to every studio that I could get into. I would call up and make an appointment, and my voice was not black. They'd say, 'Yes, we'd love to have you.' Of course, when I got to the door, that was something else again." Klapper further details that although Jones was eventually able to work with Philbrook, she was never allowed to take class with other students or perform in recitals.

Despite such stories, few in the dance world ever identified systemic racism as a reason Black dancers were so often excluded. Interestingly, prominent British choreographer Antony Tudor, who accepted Black ballet students in his classes, did point to one problem in the ballet world: "We are so conservative, and the public is not yet acclimated to seeing blacks in ballet."²⁶ Instead, unfounded myths that influenced exclusion

²² Dixon Gottschild, 2012, p.3.

²³McElroy.

²⁴ Klapper, p.135.

²⁵ Klapper, pp.133-35.

²⁶ Klapper, p.146.

kept circulating. In addition to the one about the ideal body, it was said that Black people were not exposed to or interested in ballet, or that they could not afford the training. Evidence in recent decades has countered those assumptions. For example, Dixon Gottschild points out that between the two world wars, there was a “class-stratified black Philadelphia community that nurtured and supported a concert dance tradition, indicating a black upwardly mobile aspiration to co-opt and be identified with European-based fine arts, and thus with the white upper class.”²⁷ And scholar Lauren Erin Brown found much coverage of ballet in Chicago during this period in the African-American newspaper, *The Defender*, including reports on the activities of a white dance teacher, Mildred B. Haessler, who taught Black students ballet between 1937-1965. The newspaper covered ballet extensively, Brown says, including “annual recitals, new ballets, and the surrounding society, not of white theater galas or black cotillions, but of black mothers investing in ballet training and young black girls growing up to do the same for their children.”²⁸ This pattern plays out in Washington, DC, during the period of 1928-1945, according to scholar Terlene Terry, with upper-class Blacks providing ballet lessons for their children in private studios, and working class Blacks taking advantage of free lessons provided at local community centers and public schools.²⁹ The evidence confirms, as Dixon Gottschild states, that “[ballet] served the same function in black and in white America...it was a symbol of privilege signaling a level of acculturation inaccessible to the masses.”³⁰ It was this

²⁷ Dixon Gottschild, 2012, p.6.

²⁸ Brown, Lauren Erin, p.367.

²⁹ Terry, pp.54-55.

³⁰ Dixon Gottschild, 2012, p.5.

demonstrated demand for ballet in Black communities that drove the inevitable creation of Black ballet schools, given the reality of segregation throughout much of the country.

Early Black Ballet Schools

“Without the black community, it could not have happened, because I was given the opportunity to develop...I think had it been left up to the white community I would not have ever set foot on a ballet stage or on any other kind of stage, for that matter.”³¹ -Ballet dancer and choreographer, Billy Wilson (1935-1994)

Where private ballet schools were not a reality, African American children would often take free classes at their local YMCA or community center during the 1930s and 1940s. Such was the case in places like Milwaukee, Chicago, Washington, DC and Jackson, Mississippi.³² One option for Black students in Philadelphia was training under Essie Marie Dorsey, who created a studio on the second floor of her home.³³ Successful alumni include Marion Cuyjet, who in the 1930s, became the first Black Philadelphia dancer to perform with a white ballet company. Cuyjet would go on to train Judith Jamison, former principal dancer and artistic director for Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre, and Joan Myers Brown, founder of Philadanco dance company. Dorsey, who was a member of the Black bourgeoisie, “lived and moved in a bubble, a segregated city during a racist era. [Her]

³¹ Dixon Gottschild, 2012, p.81.

³² Klapper, p.133.

³³ Dixon Gottschild, 2012, p.11.

skilled but amateur concerts were [African Americans'] cultural lifeline, since they were unwelcomed at professional performances in white Philadelphia."³⁴

In her master's thesis, Terlene Terry highlights some of the early Black dance studio owners in Washington, DC, including Bernice Hammond who was frustrated by the lack of training opportunities in the city at that time.³⁵ As summarized by Terry, Hammond began her studies in 1927 at YWCA, but quickly found that there was only one white teacher in town with whom she could advance her studies, and only in private, due to segregation. Hammond and studio owners Therrill Smith and Doris Nichols Patterson were students of the first known Black teacher in Washington, Mabel Jones Freeman. Terry further notes that, beginning in 1927, Freeman began offering private ballet lessons to Black students who could afford them, as well as free lessons to students in D.C. public schools and recreation centers. Her teaching was so successful that her students were invited to perform for the First Lady of the United States Grace Coolidge and at the George Washington Monument grounds and other venues that previously excluded Black citizens.³⁶

With doors to white studios in Boston, Massachusetts closed in her face because of her race, Doris Jones eventually relocated to Washington, DC and alongside Howard University alumna, Claire Haywood, founded the Jones-Haywood School of Ballet in 1941.³⁷ The school, which is the only early Black ballet school still in existence, has a storied legacy,

³⁴ Dixon Gottschild, 2012, p.21.

³⁵ Terry, p.73

³⁶ Terry, p.63.

³⁷ This information comes from my personal conversations with Doris Jones, throughout my years as a student at Jones-Haywood School of Ballet. It has been corroborated by teachers at the school. An official written history of the school does not yet exist.

having trained numerous Black dancers who have had illustrious dance careers in ballet and other genres, including Louis Johnson, Hinton Battle, Renee Robinson, Sylvester Campbell, and Chita Rivera. With both founders now deceased, the school continues its mission under the current artistic director and alumna, Sandra Fortune-Green. According to Fortune-Green, George Balanchine and Arthur Mitchell both visited the school under a 1960s Ford Foundation grant tour, and Mitchell would come to the school from New York City every Monday to teach for several years. During his visits to the school, Balanchine would select students to train at School of American Ballet (SAB) during the summer, through the Ford Foundation grant.³⁸ Jones-Haywood would later become a source for dancers funneling into Dance Theatre of Harlem, the ballet school and company founded for African American dancers by Arthur Mitchell in 1969.

The Influence of Arthur Mitchell and Dance Theatre of Harlem

When Arthur Mitchell left NYCB, he had a positive relationship with George Balanchine. When he established Dance Theatre of Harlem as a response to the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Balanchine was a close ally. Dance Theatre of Harlem (DTH) was founded first as a school in 1968 with thirty students, growing to over 100 students in its first year. Established one year later, the company was iconic from the 1970s to the 1990s, touring the world over. With every performance, the company served to dispel the long-held myths used to rationalize excluding Blacks from ballet. Yet, despite DTH's success, and perhaps because of it, racial progress in ballet has still been slow. As Brown suggests, it's possible that the "the stream of black dancers was diverted to a black

³⁸ Dance Theatre of Harlem, 2021.

company, taking pressure off white companies to integrate.”³⁹ As late as 2007, there was only one Black girl in School of American Ballet’s advanced division.⁴⁰ This statistic lays bare how the unfortunate reality of scant training and professional opportunities for Black dancers continued to be the status quo long after DTH seemed to crack the glass ceiling. Into this void came a new generation of Black ballet schools founded by former DTH company members. While there were many of these schools, the following are examples of schools that still exist today.

The first school in this category is Dance Institute of Washington (DIW), founded by former DTH soloist, Fabian Barnes in 1987 in Washington, DC.⁴¹ The school initially began as an outreach program in D.C. recreation centers, and eventually grew to over 100 students as of 2020. Throughout the 1990s, the school provided its students a paycheck to train in ballet through the Mayor’s Summer Youth Employment Program. Here, the students would train intensively for six weeks, and perform alongside invited DTH company members. For a short while, the school shared resources and training with a professional company, Washington Reflections. Barnes passed away suddenly in 2016 and the school is currently led by Kahina Haynes.

Soon after DIW was established, former DTH dancers Nena Gilreath and her husband Waverly Lucas relocated to Atlanta, Georgia, where they cofounded Ballethnic, in 1990. Like DTH and NYCB before it, the organization was first established as a school, with

³⁹ Brown, p.371.

⁴⁰ Klapper, p.152.

⁴¹ In addition to the school’s website, the information about Dance Institute of Washington comes from the author’s personal experience as a summer student there in the 1990s.

a company to follow. As of January 2021, Ballethnic had over sixty students training in classical ballet.

Collage Ballet Conservatory in Memphis, Tennessee is the youngest of these Black ballet schools, established in 2009. When DTH went on hiatus in 2004, former DTH principal dancer Kevin Thomas and business partner, Marcellus Harper co-founded their company, Collage Dance Collective to provide work for displaced Black dancers. They eventually moved the company to Memphis, TN, and started their school in a church basement with one student. The school now has over 500 students and is housed alongside the professional company in a \$9 million, 22,000 square foot building.

Providing a space for ballet training when Black students could not find it elsewhere, it turns out, was only the start of what makes a Black ballet school necessary and successful. Marion Cuyjet, who studied under Philadelphia's Black ballet pioneer, Essie Marie Dorsey during the 1940s, once said, "The worst colored dance school is better than the best white dance school for a colored child. They will have more love and attention, more one-on-one, and they will come out of there smiling."⁴² After interviewing directors, teachers, students, parents, alumni, board members and other stakeholders from this small but mighty group of Black ballet organizations, it becomes clear why her words continue to ring true. If ballet training is highly specialized, Black ballet schools are unique, because they are born of the commitment to training in the European art form of ballet, while at the same time validating and honoring the African American experience.

⁴² Dixon Gottschild, 2012, p.1.

CHAPTER 2

The Cultural Markers of Black Ballet Schools

Organizations whose mission is to train a predominantly Black student body in the classical art form of ballet have several common threads running through them.

Throughout the interviews I conducted, themes emerged that serve as a cultural through line, revealing a clear, Black-centered identity amongst the schools. All of my interviewees mentioned some element of a training experience that caters to Black students, from the uniform they wear in ballet class, the people they see in the front of the studio, the choreography they learn and perform, and connections to their surrounding communities—all at the heart of what makes ballet training accessible and effective in this demographic.

Each school is as unique as the people who lead it, and their stakeholders remain devoted for similar reasons, not the least of which is the schools' dedication to providing excellent training in classical ballet. In that respect, the Black ballet school resembles any other serious training institution. What is often different is that the founders saw where there were needs for Black students who might encounter difficulty later, or who might never be attracted to the field if the training had not been close by—and available and welcoming to them. Nena Gilreath, who co-founded Ballethnic ballet school with her husband Waverly Lucas, says that when the duo arrived in Atlanta just over 30 years ago, there were “pockets of little schools,” that catered to a Black clientele; however the “next level place” for pre-professional training did not exist.⁴³ Similarly, Collage Ballet

⁴³ Unless otherwise noted, all quoted material comes directly from personal interviews of the individual quoted. Specific information regarding the date of each interview can be found in the Bibliography section of this manuscript.

Conservatory's executive director Marcellus Harper says, "When we started Collage over ten years ago, there was definitely a lack of Black kids who were training at a level to be competitive for collegiate programs or pre-professional programs." He goes on to say that Blacks "have a lack of access, which has created a lack of students...so we really have no one in the pipeline" to reach the professional stage. Simply put, Harper says, Collage exists "to increase access to high quality and caliber training, to develop students who can be competitive and to hopefully, long-term change the [racial] landscape" of ballet. When it comes to providing excellent ballet training, Jones-Haywood Dance School's artistic director, Sandra Fortune-Green says her school's faculty members "are teaching from the perspective that these kids might dance professionally and even if they don't, it doesn't change [...] what the teachers are expecting the children to do in the class." Collage Ballet Conservatory's artistic director, Kevin Thomas echoes how rigorous his training program is by relaying some initial parental impressions on arrival to Collage:

First, they can be surprised... "Oh wow, you guys are really serious about this. You're using vocabulary that we've never heard before. My child has never learned this much in such a short amount of time." [Some] parents [say], "Oh, [you're] really serious" and then other parents [say], "Oh, this is a little too serious!" Because it's very demanding.

Laveen Naidu, former executive of Dance Theatre of Harlem (DTH) explains that ballet training at the school was and continues to be exacting. "Mr. Mitchell used to always say, everybody wants to abstract [experiment with classical form] but they don't know what

they're abstracting from. You have to understand the beginning before you can abstract and so there [has always been] this great respect for solid teaching" at the DTH school. Collage parent Kimberly Perry appreciates the primary focus on ballet saying, "I'm glad they teach you the foundation of traditional ballet before doing [other genres]."

Beyond the rigorous demands of ballet training which, as Fortune-Green says, "are not different from any other ballet school because the standards are traditional and universal," Black ballet schools are different in other ways from predominantly white ballet institutions (PWBI). They specifically address the Black experience in ballet and America writ large, mainly by providing safe spaces, meaning that students do not have to face obstacles and attitudes just because their race is perceived as a challenge to ballet's traditionally white-centered aesthetic.

Another of the reasons that Black ballet schools are havens for Black students is because they consistently provide clear images and models for their students to emulate. Ballethnic co-founder and director Nena Gilreath, still a performer when she began teaching in Atlanta, says that her desire was to continue performing as she and her husband Waverly Lucas embarked on their teaching journey. She explains, "As we continued to perform around the city, kids started following us. We were like the Pied Pipers of dance. We [eventually] wanted to establish the company, because the company is what gave the kids [in our school] something to look at and to aspire to be; someone that looked like them that came from their neighborhood ...that they could relate to." According to Thomas, his school strives to show Black people that "we can really be successful in this art form, and what it can do for our lives and...for our community." He further explains that "the positive images of dancers of color ...instead of the [negative] images we are

constantly bombarded with [in the media] ...is a different image, and a lot of people in our community are not aware of how far dance can take you.”

Like Dance Theatre of Harlem and Ballethnic, Collage Ballet Conservatory shares an umbrella with a professional company, providing highly visible, accessible role models for students in the school. In addition to serving as mentors for students, company members in all three organizations also teach in the school, resulting in what Thomas calls “a very close relationship” between some students and company members, much like those seen in “big brother/big sister programs.” Former DTH principal ballerina, Ashley Murphy, who taught extensively in the DTH school says, “it’s important for students to know that no matter what you look like, you can achieve whatever you want.” One Collage parent agrees. Elliot Perry (a minority owner of the Memphis Grizzlies NBA team and husband to Kimberly Perry) says that at Collage, his daughter has “instructors that look like her to push her and hold her accountable...and they have [her] best interest at heart.” As former Jones-Haywood alumna and DTH company member Dionne Figgins states, “It’s always important to have representation because our experiences [as Black people] are different.”

Elliot Perry appreciates that his daughter’s teachers at Collage not only visually reflect who she is, but they can also “encourage her in a way that...speaks to who she is” as a Black ballet student. “Straight-talk” from teachers who communicate what the art form requires is considered a linchpin for excellent ballet training anywhere, and this is no exception at schools that mainly serve Black students. Yet, when a Black teacher is in the front of the room, Black students are able to take a break from the taxing work of being a token in a predominantly white environment. Faculty at Black ballet schools often echo the words of Troy Brown, a Jones-Haywood alumnus whose students include American Ballet

Theatre's African-American soloist, Courtney Levine: "I'm teaching students true classical ballet, meaning they have to know what it takes to be a classical dancer... I pride myself on my understanding of the classical ballet. And students are proud to say I'm their teacher because I look like them. It's as simple as that...It just makes students feel like they're at home." DTH Ballerina-turned Broadway star, Figgins echoes this sentiment saying that while a student at Jones-Haywood, "I was not in a classroom learning and then also being very aware of my racial identity in the space as well. It was just ballet, and we all did it." She also states that "the teachers that we had were professionals. We had Charmaine Hunter come and teach and she was dancing at the Dance Theatre of Harlem. And so [being in a Black learning environment] was all very normal." This idea of being at home, or comfortable in the training environment lends itself to teachers communicating with students in a way that is specific to the Black experience, using what Naidu calls The Code:

The Code is the ability to communicate with somebody in language and gesture that is culturally relevant, that they will understand, that maybe other people don't get or could be interpreted differently by others. So, it's the way we interpret information verbally and physically that's based on our shared cultural identity that can oftentimes be missed by other people...that speaks to us in a way that we understand viscerally and emotionally.

Naidu goes on to explain that The Code isn't just words or ideas, but rather it also encompasses, "the tone of those words. It's also what comes before what you said and what comes after what you said. Naidu believes that "For someone in the front of the room to be

able to talk to you in your own language – the power is immeasurable because you’re able to tap into things that can’t be tapped in other ways. I can just put in The Code and the door will open...That’s why it’s important. It’s very efficient.” For Figgins, having someone in the front of the room who not only looked like her, but could communicate with her in a familiar way, “instilled a certain level of confidence that there was a world where [she] would belong once [she] was no longer in the confines of the school.”

Another way being in a Black learning environment is normalized, is through the attire the students are expected to wear. Unlike the standard pink tights and shoes worn in most PWBI’s, female students don tights, ballet slippers and pointe shoes that match their own unique fleshtone. Jones-Haywood’s Green asks, “If the theory is for the tights and the shoes to lengthen the line, then why would you cut the line in half on a brown girl with pink tights? Why would you do that?” Dance Theatre of Harlem’s school director, Robert Garland states that when dancers wear fleshtone tights, “it really [is] quite that simple: you can see the human female body from the top of the head to the tip of her toe. It just makes sense.” Demonstrating the importance of this issue in training dancers of color, Collage’s Harper actually took on the topic with SAB when Collage artistic director Kevin Thomas was a National Visiting Fellow there. “Even if it’s through Kevin, I definitely am using my voice to help push,” Harper says, “So, we pushed against SAB and their pink tights and they changed this year where the girls did not have to wear pink tights. It was an option, so they could wear flesh color this year.”⁴⁴ Parents also take great pride in their children matching ballet

⁴⁴ My position is that all dancers, not only dancers of color, should wear fleshtone tights instead of the standard pink (See *Lee, Brandy*). Solely providing an “option” for dancers to wear fleshtone tights places the burden on dancers of color to act against the status quo, leaving too much room for further alienation if they choose to act. Adopting fleshtone as the standard will signal to dancers of all skin tones that they are welcome in the space.

attire to skin color, often taking part in the process of dying their shoes. Mitty Williams, whose daughter was Collage's first student shares how, pressed for time, she had to take her daughter's shoes to work with her to dye to her daughter's complexion. She says, "I gave the whole district attorney's office a show on how to cover our shoes, and they were amazed. I always say, if you have a girl and she feels she's not light enough or too dark, she will fit in at Collage," because dancers of all skin tones are embraced there.

Garland at DTH explains how the tradition of donning fleshtone tights and shoes began there when a dance student from Washington, D.C., Llanchie Stevenson, came to study, wearing tights and shoes to match her skin early on. This was soon adopted by Arthur Mitchell and made the new standard for his company and school, a standard that has been readily embraced by Black ballet schools, and is now, very slowly being adopted by PWBI's throughout the country. Relaying how traumatizing it can be for Black students who were required again to wear pink tights when returning home after attending DTH summer intensives, Garland says, "For decades, I got the phone calls from mothers and fathers with their kids hysterically crying, 'Oh my God, [her ballet school] will not let her wear [fleshtone tights and shoes], not even for class.'" Thomas of Collage says that "putting on the pink tights, you know that's not your color, but they make you put it on" at most PWBI's, and it's "this way of pretending to be something you're not." For him, "matching our own skin color...that's very, very significant" because it is to "honor this black and brown skin and let the kids know that they're beautiful and that this art form that we're doing is made for you."

Equally important as the uniform in validating the beauty of Black ballet students is properly grooming the hair for class. Like their PWBI counterparts, Black ballet schools

require their students to secure their hair neatly into a bun. However, because Black hair textures vary widely and can be prone to breakage with the stress of pulling it into a bun for each class, Black ballet schools have adopted hair guidelines that allow dancers to incorporate braids and other “protective” methods to achieve a bun. According to Harper, the majority of the students Collage serves are not biracial, so they do not necessarily have the wavy or straight hair that is often associated with this particular demographic. Examining the experiences of darker skinned Black female students, he emphatically states that, “I think we need to figure that out and ballet needs to figure that out.”

Ashley Murphy, who now dances with The Washington Ballet says that she chemically relaxes her hair, straightening it in order to more easily achieve the classical standard ballet look. However, for many Black girls, this is not an option, as straightening the hair requires a high level of heat or chemicals, which can damage the scalp and the hair. Fortune-Green says she provides guidance for parents to help their daughters achieve a bun with natural hair, not allowing hair weaves or excessive added hair for fear of cervical injuries that could result from added weight hampering head movements required in ballet. She says that some of her students are now choosing to cut their hair off, making it look neat and groomed, even though it ignores the standard ballet bun requirement. She says, “I’m proud to see the kids have done that now. When they step into the white culture, [their short hair] may be a little problematic, but I believe that’s the ignorance of the white culture.”

To Fortune-Green’s point, her former student and Jones-Haywood alumna Dionne Figgins shares how her natural hair became a problem during her studies as a dance undergraduate student at Goucher College, when she was cast as a lead in Balanchine’s

Serenade. In the ballet's second act, the dancer traditionally lets her hair down, creating a cascade of hair (if the dancer has a certain type of hair, typically found in Caucasians). When Figgins learned the role, she had recently cut all of her hair off and was just growing it back, which meant extra effort and hair products to achieve a classical bun with her natural hair, unaltered by chemicals. It also meant that she didn't have long hair to "let down," which is where the tension arose. Once natural African American hair is groomed into a certain style (like a ballet bun), it doesn't always transition easily into another style. When the repetiteur who cast her in the role left Goucher, Figgins relays that a white faculty member asked her, "What can we do about your hair? Can you get braids [to achieve both a bun and flowing hair in the same ballet]?" Figgins explained that although she was willing to wear them, braids would have been too expensive for her student budget, and the dance department was unwilling to foot the bill.

Figgins states that her discomfort came from knowing at the time that, "the woman who cast me in this role knew what I looked like. I had a baby 'fro. If she's from New York City Ballet and thinks I'm good enough to do this role, I don't think my hair is an issue." Figgins says this was the first time she had been made to feel insecure about her race because, she says, "even if I have long hair, it is a giant afro. When I'm sweating and working, my hair is not going to be straight, even if I have a relaxer."⁴⁵

In the end, Figgins says the faculty was on her back about her natural appearance for no reason because eventually, the repetiteur gave her permission to keep her hair in a bun. Unlike her teachers at Jones-Haywood and DIW, Figgins says that at Goucher she felt alienated by white faculty members, with no Black faculty to turn to for support. She said

⁴⁵ A relaxer is a chemical treatment used to "relax" or straighten curly hair.

she would often wonder, “Can someone come to bat for me? Can someone speak on my behalf? I just had to do all of that fighting on my own.” Figgins imparts how her early training by people who looked like her gave her strength to fight against white privilege, doing something to her hair that it wouldn’t naturally do. “Because I had this foundation of belonging, acceptance and confidence, I was able to say ‘no, that’s not okay and I’m not doing that to my hair.’ I don’t think I would have had that confidence if my early [ballet] education had been different.”

Another element central in affirming the identity of Black students is the commitment of their ballet schools in bringing forth choreography, productions and other programming that speak to their history and lived experiences. By circumventing white ballet supremacy and re-centering the Black experience in ballet, Thomas likens the existence of Black ballet schools to Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU’s), in that “they instill this Black culture that is important and surrounded with positivity. Black ballet schools are important to our history and to our own storytelling. So yes, we want to tell different stories” from those that have served to marginalize or stereotype Black people in the past. It is his hope that as more Black students become professionals, they realize that stories affirming Blackness are worthwhile and important to be told. As Waverly Lucas of Ballethnic states, “Black history didn’t begin with slavery, and this is [reflected in] all of the Afrocentric aspects of our studio.” According to him, “We felt always that we were taking ballet to another place, putting it in another realm because we had a voice. Ballet was our tool that we were using, and we always looked at that as a revolution for us; we were revolutionizing ballet...and we didn’t try to assimilate” [into the dominant Eurocentric ballet culture]. Instead, they have used their platform to create ballets like *The*

Urban Nutcracker which feature the roles of Brown Sugar and Chocolatier in place of the classic *Nutcracker* ballet's standard Sugar Plum Fairy and Cavalier. Other Ballethnic ballets that speak to African American culture include *Jazzy Sleeping Beauty*, *The Leopard Tale*, and an adaptation of African American author Pearl Cleage's *Flyin' West*.⁴⁶

At Collage, students also have the opportunity to perform annually alongside professional company members in Thomas' seminal tribute to Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., *Rise*, now in its 11th year. For Thomas, *Rise* is "about honoring that people have come before us. It talks about our own stories, our own pains and puts it out in the public for the [students] to see and understand." Collage remains committed to bringing in Black choreographers like Kevin Iega Jeff, Darrell Grand Moultrie, and Amy Hall Garner, to work with students and instill important cultural lessons as they make contemporary ballet works.

Centering Black dancers and the Black experience at Jones-Haywood, Sandra Fortune-Green has brought in African American ballet stars Misty Copeland and Brooklyn Mack in recent years. Students got up-close and personal with Copeland when she was honored with an award, and they were equally impressed by Mack, who taught a masterclass at the school. Fortune-Green also continues in the footsteps of the school's founder, Doris Jones by taking select students to Martha's Vineyard for summer training. The island was home to "formerly enslaved people, or their descendants...in the early 20th century, drawn by the religious services held there. Teachers, politicians, lawyers, doctors, artists, musicians and entrepreneurs all arrived and flourished for decades afterward."⁴⁷

⁴⁶ Whitfield.

⁴⁷ Taylor.

Fortune-Green alternates this trip with a popular training opportunity in Cannes, France, also started by Doris Jones, who forged a friendship with former Native American ballerina, Rosella Hightower, who was based there. Hightower would host Jones and her students for summer study at her school, Rosella Hightower Centre de Danse Internationale.

Continuing these traditions is important because, Fortune-Green says, “in all of those cultural experiences is another mechanism to broaden their perspective” about ballet.

Collage also includes student travel as an important element of their course of study. Dancers in the Collage Youth Ensemble (CYE) have either trained or performed in Chicago, Montreal, San Francisco, New York City, and Washington, DC. According to Thomas, many of the students had never travelled outside of Memphis before these trips. He believes that “parents see firsthand what our program is doing for their child” and in turn, the parental support and the broadening of student horizons helps to “create a community of Black fine arts culture” that never existed before in Memphis.

The element of community that Thomas raises is a commonality amongst Black ballet schools, which has major implications for their students and more broadly, the communities they serve. When asked what the appeal is for students to continue enrolling at Jones-Haywood, now in its 80th anniversary year, Fortune-Green says, “it’s a sense of camaraderie, a sisterhood and a fellowship.” Furthermore, she says, “what parents love about the school” is that their children “are around black children raised with the same values that their children have, and the same expectations that they as parents have for their children.” This sense of community also flourishes at DTH where Garland says, “we are some parts conservatory but then some parts, literally, a community school that knows its people. The care of Black people and the community whose name we bear, both from

the inception of DTH to this moment today, remains our concern.” This sentiment is echoed by Collage parent Mitty Williams who juxtaposes her current experience at Collage to previous experiences. In a primarily white ballet school, she recalls what it was like waiting for her daughter in class:

Every Saturday morning, I was sitting in the hallway. No one hardly spoke... We were just there...They just took my money. And I honestly felt that way. I told my husband, “It's two of us [Black people] here and they're not looking at either of us.” Collage engages with everybody. They know my baby's name; they know my name. They know the kids by their names, the back of their head and their voices.

Aspen Santa Fe Ballet ballerina and former student of Fortune-Green, Jenelle Figgins trained at the DTH residency program at The John F. Kennedy Center, and went on to perform professionally with the DTH company. She likens DTH to “an ecosystem...that is continuously feeding back into itself.” For Figgins, it mattered that the ballet school and company were part of the neighborhood, often hiring their personnel locally, where she would see them on the sidewalks as well. She says, “We would have very candid conversation that was very relatable to who I am as a woman, and not necessarily as a dancer, but as a person. So, I like the organic camaraderie that's just natural to artists of color, or just black people in general. That feeling was definitely in the [DTH] building and that makes me very comfortable.” Comparing this experience to her time at Aspen Santa Fe or Les Grands Ballets Canadiens, she says, “the community atmosphere [I experienced at DTH], I definitely did not get from any other institution.”

As Figgins noted, DTH's location in the heart of Harlem, a historically Black New York City neighborhood, is a critical factor driving the strong sense of community felt inside the organization. In Washington, D.C., Jones-Haywood sits on the corner of what was a major Black business corridor and Black neighborhood before recent gentrification began to lighten the complexion of the area's demographic. Still, its location along the city's African American Heritage Trail and relative proximity to Howard University, known as the "Black Harvard," and across the street from a Black-owned bank, signals to passersby that the school serves a Black demographic. The school occupies its original location, in the building that founder Doris Jones owned. Throughout its 80-year existence, the school has hosted events like flea markets and barbecues on its wrap-around porch, inviting the community to join in the festivities. Similarly, Gilreath and Lucas not only own the building that houses Ballethnic, but they own the entire cul-de-sac, which is also home to an outdoor stage and garden, open to the surrounding community. Lucas says, "We wanted to put ourselves in a position with our cultural cul-de-sac, to be able to provide what we do [as a ballet organization] and share with our community directly." Gilreath adds, "We've had a place like a family kind of environment where people could land on their feet and learn, and [ballet] was always the tool, but we also lead with an entrepreneurial spirit."

It is this entrepreneurial spirit that led Collage's founders Thomas and Harper, to take a bold leap of faith to launch a \$12 million capital campaign, build a new building and move into it, all during the height of the coronavirus pandemic. Says Harper, "This is a \$9 million facility that we are building. There are not many \$9 million Black facilities that are built anywhere, [let alone] for dance in this country." Collage's existence in an underserved neighborhood positioned the organization, "to really in every possible way, walk the talk"

of their mission, to inspire the growth of ballet. Their new 5-studio home is located in Memphis' Binghampton neighborhood, a high-poverty community, just around the corner from the space they previously leased in the burgeoning Broad Ave arts district. Collage parent Elliot Perry says, "For the people who live in the community, for the kids, the location is chipping away at who gets access to ballet." Collage Board Chair, Jim Jenkins says, the building is "in a place where you know it can inspire people. A lot of people are really excited that this [new building] was put there because we could have put it elsewhere." There are other benefits, as well, Jenkins says: "Collage, making a major commitment to that area will attract other organizations like a magnet and so I think it's going to be very, very good for the city... Locating something like this in this area will be good for the community. It will be an anchor."

By embracing community, Collage's approach continues to bring new energy, students and audiences to an old art form that has historically missed the mark when it comes to diversity. Before Collage's arrival to Memphis' ballet scene, there were no professional Black ballerinas. Harper says, "Whether you think diversity is right or wrong, 63% of Memphis is Black. We want to be successful from a business standpoint if we want to be sustainable, so we need to figure out how to engage these folks."

Whether it is their location, their people, or their approach to training their students, each of the Black ballet schools in this chapter has made culturally relevant choices that ground their institutions in the community around them in ways that make them successful and sought-after by their constituents. By reflecting the culture in which they develop, they continue to stand in the gap for young Black hopefuls that many predominantly white ballet schools are just beginning to understand, let alone address.

CHAPTER 3

Creating Lasting Change: Definitions of Success in a New Era

Defining Success

While many Black students continue to flock to schools where their identity inside of classical ballet is both affirmed and centered, the question of whether they can matriculate into the professional ranks of major companies remains. After all, Black ballet schools have offered professional training for many years without seeing the complexion of major ballet companies change much. Will change come now that more company leaders strive to raise their consciousness around ballet's legacy of white supremacy? It may be too soon to tell, given that relatively few Black dancers are now on the rosters of companies like New York City Ballet, American Ballet Theatre and San Francisco Ballet. Ballet is a highly competitive field where, as the physical and artistic demands increase, the number of dancers who advance to the next level decreases. It is fair to say that the vast majority of ballet students never make it to the professional level; this applies to all ballet students, no matter their race. As DTH executive director Laveen Naidu puts it:

Let's say you have a class of fifty kids in your school, ages seven to eleven years old. Of all those fifty kids, you'll probably have four that have all the attributes that set them up in a way where they can begin pointe training at eleven years old. At 14 years old, they're at an advanced level of dancing, and at sixteen they're going to be ready to go head-to-head with the best of the age group around the country. If you are lucky, one will get a contract.⁴⁸

⁴⁸ Unless otherwise noted, all of the citations in this chapter are from interviews with the individual quoted.

With competition alone, these odds are stringent for all ballet students; however, the stubborn effects of racism continue to linger in ballet companies, making it even more difficult for Black students to advance from the pre-professional to the professional level.

With enduring aesthetic and systemic anti-Black prejudice in ballet, as well as the precarity of a ballet career in general, it becomes clear why, even as Black ballet schools strive to provide professional-level training, their directors are reticent to claim that they are training the next generation of Black professional ballet dancers.⁴⁹ How, then, do their leaders define success when it comes to training Black students in ballet? Marcellus Harper, executive director at Collage Dance Collective (CDC) believes that the presence of the ballet industry's "white gatekeepers," inherent Eurocentricity, and insularity all make it difficult to define what success means in the context of training Black students. Whereas Collage stands to affirm the identity and existence of Black dancers within the art form, he says he has no desire "to create metrics, definitions or models of success that are dependent on validation by white people." Harper says it is irrelevant to him how many Collage students are accepted into major pre-professional training programs, like SAB or companies like NYCB, given their track records for training and hiring Black dancers. For him, success ultimately means broadening who has access to the art form, and "normalizing diversity" within it.

Yet, with companies slow to embrace change, the challenge for Black dancers lies not only with being hired by a mostly white ballet company, but also with remaining in what can often be a hostile environment for them. "I quite honestly push kids towards college, because I believe that if the dancing is going to happen it's going to happen [no

⁴⁹ Schrock.

matter what],” says DTH school director Robert Garland. He continues, “But I do want people to have fruitful lives after that moment is over.” Acknowledging the struggle that many professional Black dancers face in mostly white companies, he says, “I am privy to so many personal stories of black dancers and other artists working in predominantly white spaces that have ended, at times, in nearly destroying not only the artist, but the person.” Indeed, throughout my research, Black dancers have shared experiences in white spaces that could possibly have damaging effects on the way they think of themselves.

As if acknowledging the increased number of hurdles her students will inevitably face as Black dancers in ballet, Jones-Haywood artistic director Sandra Fortune-Green says her goal is also to provide students with training to pursue alternative arts-related careers, if they so choose. She says, “If they go into a dance major, or a Bachelor of Science degree program for exercise [science] or injury prevention, it is all movement related.” Given that both Jones-Haywood and Collage students were recently accepted into prominent training programs like SAB, ABT and Houston Ballet, it is safe to say that these students are receiving strong ballet training at their home institutions. Therefore, one can surmise that the straddling of their goals, by the aforementioned directors of Black ballet schools points to their knowledge that while they have long been doing the work to prepare their students in every way possible to enter the highly competitive world of ballet, it is a field that has been slow to create space for Black dancers to not only exist, but to thrive.

As students from both Collage and Jones-Haywood continue to expand their training horizons, there is a fledgling pipeline growing between Black ballet schools and some professional training programs. Both schools have artistic directors who are National Visiting Fellows at SAB, which aids in creating relationships with those who are committed

to teaching students from diverse backgrounds. Fortune-Green is also a member of SAB's Alumni Advisory Committee on Diversity and Inclusion, whose focus is, according to their website, "national outreach, the building and strengthening of alumni networks, and diversity programming for current SAB students."⁵⁰ Thomas says that there have been immediate benefits for the Collage organization and students stemming from his fellowship. For example, he was introduced to key individuals at the Ford Foundation, a major funder for arts organizations, including Dance Theatre of Harlem. In addition to his being informed of SAB auditions in a personal and timely fashion, audition fees are waived for Collage students, which helps remove financial barriers. At the time of their interviews, both Fortune-Green and Thomas were negotiating partnerships with other major training programs and companies, seeing such ties as potentially helpful for their students to succeed in the white milieu of ballet, should they wish to pursue that trajectory. With so few spaces for Black ballet dancers available, it is critical that new strategic alliances continue to be forged and existing partnerships strengthened between Black ballet schools and major ballet organizations, to begin providing more opportunities for Black dancers in the art form and level the long-lopsided playing field.

Ultimately, if they attend a predominantly white program or join a majority white ballet company, Black dancers may encounter racially hostile situations or environments. For Harper, schools like his can affirm and "provide students with the foundation to weather that type of unfortunate storm when they meet those challenges or enter spaces that make them feel insecure. We can prepare them, and they always know that they have this community to come back and tap into." With the competitiveness of the field, racial

⁵⁰ School of American Ballet.

hostility, and ballet's expectation of uniformity (which I discuss later in this chapter), it is clear why Black students need more armor.

Black Dancers in a White World

In June of 2020, amid the social upheaval that followed the George Floyd killing, Black ballet dancer Nicholas Rose called out The National Ballet of Canada in a post on his Instagram page. He was upset that during this time, no one from the company had checked in with him, and he also took the opportunity to report his experiences in the company. One of their transgressions, he said, was photoshopping his full lips to a thinner version in his company-produced headshot. Rose, who is dark-skinned, was incensed, as thin lips and thinness, generally, are associated with whiteness. Rose also noted that he and the other Black male dancer in the company had often been called by each other's names. The National Ballet of Canada quickly responded in a *Dance Magazine* article that touted the company's diversity efforts, an act which in and of itself, demonstrated a degree of white privilege.⁵¹

When I recently interviewed her, an African American ballerina shared how in one white ballet company, she felt that her "Blackness was pushed down so much in order to make people comfortable."⁵² Because she spent so much time on and offstage with white company members, "I did start to condition who I was being in certain spaces out of survival. So, in order for me to stay here, I have to swallow all this stuff." When she went to

⁵¹ Crabb.

⁵² I have chosen not to disclose this dancer's identity, as she remains at the company.

the company's leadership for support, she felt gaslit—told she was too sensitive, imagining things— and she was forced to endure the microaggressions on her own.

Another professional Black ballerina with a major predominantly white ballet company, spoke about feeling pigeonholed when it came to teaching jobs within the organization.⁵³ In her interview, she disclosed that she and another Black company member are always asked to go to the school's second location, which services a predominantly Black clientele. She would have no problem with this, if she were also offered to teach at the school's main location, where the student body is majority white. As she states, "I wouldn't have had a problem with it if I didn't feel like they were sending us there because we were black. Ask me to teach at the [main] location sometimes. I can go both places." For all her trouble, this ballerina feels that she was prepared for the racial challenges she has faced at the company where she is currently employed. When she left DTH, she says Arthur Mitchell sternly warned her, "You know, you're stepping out of the bubble, so you know, you have to be prepared to stand up for yourself." Now, she says, she knows "exactly what he was talking about."

Even in ballet training, white spaces can pose risky challenges for Black students. One parent of a Black SAB student shared that their daughter spent many years "feeling ignored and not being seen" to the point where they believe it will "take a lot of work to reverse" the damage, as their daughter has lost her passion for ballet.⁵⁴ The parent noticed an immediate difference in the attitudes of her teachers while training at DTH's summer intensive with school director Robert Garland inquiring about the student in an individual

⁵³ I have chosen not to disclose this dancer's identity, as she remains at the company.

⁵⁴ I have chosen to keep this person's identity private to protect the identity of their daughter.

way. The parent feels that perhaps their daughter would feel differently about ballet if while at SAB, “she had someone that was really in her corner that was knowledgeable and building her up” and encouraging her in the way she experienced at DTH.

Sea (See) Change

While Black ballet schools are doing their part towards a more racially diverse ballet future, they cannot be the only part of the solution. In the past, artistic directors of major ballet companies have tended to dodge the question of hiring only white dancers, or offered external or cultural factors, not acknowledging that ballet might logically reflect the racism present elsewhere in society. However, during the coronavirus pandemic and post-George-Floyd-murder era, a sea change of sorts has occurred, at least when it comes to stating intentions; ballet’s lack of diversity is suddenly being addressed by majority white ballet companies. Just before the pandemic hit, NYCB had experienced a seismic shakeup of its leadership, appointing Wendy Whelan as associate artistic director. In a *New York Times* article chronicling the historic change, Whelan said she was actively pushing for “more diversity on stage, bigger ideas, more open ideas, more daring ideas.”⁵⁵ With Whelan now in charge, newly planted seeds were freshly watered when the pandemic floodgates burst open. When I interviewed her at the end of a tumultuous 2020, Whelan recognized that “there are still many underlying complex issues that remain at play” working against Black dancers at NYCB, including microaggressions, legacy and typecasting. While there is hope that continued commitment to DEI training at NYCB and other major companies can open

⁵⁵ Cooper.

doors for more professional Black ballet dancers, Whelan emphatically recognized that at NYCB, “We have a very long way to go, and in fact this work will never end.”

When I interviewed another towering figure in the ballet world, Julie Kent, former ABT principal ballerina and current Artistic Director at The Washington Ballet, she said that the murder of George Floyd and the subsequent 2020 summer of racial unrest thrust the issue of diversity in ballet to the forefront of her priorities as a leader. The Black Lives Matter movement, she says, sparked a lot of introspection around race, making diversity “by far the greatest priority for not just The Washington Ballet, but for every ballet company director I’ve spoken to this last six months.” For Whelan: “this past summer’s racial unrest and having the time and space within the pandemic to necessarily focus on white people’s depth of ignorance about systemic racism and the built-in factors of our racial inequity continue to alarm and motivate me toward a commitment to action.” The words of both women offer cautious optimism in the face of what has long been a systematic exclusion of Black dancers in both the white training and company milieu.

While the recent introspection and funding of DEI training and other initiatives by leaders at predominantly white companies marks a major shift in their posture towards confronting systemic racism and adopting racial inclusion practices, it remains to be seen if this is all lip service, or if real change will come. They are perhaps no longer blind to ballet’s Jim Crow mentality and the “separate but equal” practice in which the majority of Black dancers are trained and employed by Black organizations; but the questions remain as to whether their words will be coupled with action to create the meaningful, enduring, visible change and racial inclusion they claim to seek.

Lip Service or Sustained Action?

Whelan defines success in terms of diversity as the point where “people of all skin tones can feel they belong together in the same space. It’s when our institutions--onstage and behind the scenes-- can genuinely reflect our community.” With not a single principal Black ballerina in the NYCB ranks, and with its affiliate school still mostly white, questions have been raised about whether this company’s purported commitment to diversity is real, or if it’s a necessity-based front to maintain funding. Harper points out that “institutions like ABT and SAB have had schools in New York City for many years. They’re not producing Black dancers and they’ve had decades,” to do so. One SAB National Visiting Fellow was confused by the disparity between statistics they received about diversity in the student body before their arrival to the school, and what they saw in the studio.⁵⁶ Not seeing many Black students, they suspected that “anyone who has a grandfather or somebody [non-white] in their lineage” gets counted in terms of providing “diversity.” This points to a larger problem of Black dancers oftentimes being lumped together with the larger Black Indigenous People of Color (BIPOC) group, which allows companies and schools to claim diversity within their ranks, while avoiding opening its doors wider to Black dancers. Naidu, formerly of DTH, states that some company directors are making “superficial gestures to check the [grant application] box, but [they’re] not invested in truly understanding what that change is going to require.” He says that there is a long checklist required to make meaningful change towards diversity, with directors being met with “explicit barriers. But largely it’s implicit barriers. People will give you a lot of lip service, but they won’t move.”

⁵⁶ I have chosen not to disclose this person’s identity due to privacy concerns.

Part of the issue with major companies hiring Black dancers is that it will necessitate a new vision for uniformity. Tudor was honest in his admission back in 1975 that, in the ballet world, “We are so conservative, and the public is not yet acclimated to seeing blacks in ballet.”⁵⁷ As discussed previously in this chapter, there are those who still believe Black dancers disrupt a version of white uniformity on the ballet stage, an attitude that can make it untenable for Blacks to remain in such spaces. Referencing this legacy of a white corps de ballet, Harper states that “even though the words aren’t spoken, the remnants of [the legacy] are still there. So, if you don’t fit that [mold] you feel it.”

Ballet’s expectation for homogeneity, and a lack of imagination spills into casting, which can keep Black dancers from being cast in roles they know they have earned, a painful reality that becomes clear through the experiences of a Black ballerina in a major ballet company.⁵⁸ She shared that she has been cast in roles by the visiting repetiteur, but once they leave, she is stripped of her part. Other indignities include not being invited to rehearsals with a repetiteur, learning that the casting decisions were made before their arrival. She says, “A lot of times, I never get to show that I can dance this role better than the person who is casted, because the ballet is essentially cast before the repetiteur even gets here.” Adding insult to injury, she has subsequently discovered that the repetiteur has asked why she wasn’t invited to a given rehearsal. In another incident, a ballerina and her male partner, the only two Black dancers in an entire showing of *The Nutcracker*, were limited to appearing in the “Arabian” variation, a casting decision many Black dancers have experienced, as if they somehow suit the sensual “foreign” dance instead of being placed in

⁵⁷ Klapper, p.146.

⁵⁸ I have chosen to not to disclose this dancer’s identity, as she remains at the company.

roles according to their specific dancing skills or level. For her and other Black dancers, changing casting practices to provide equal opportunity to be seen by those making casting decisions is a key component in leveling the playing field in majority white ballet companies. She also states that success in diversity means “having more people that look like us in the front of the room so that there are decisions being made by people that look like us.”

From hiring more Black people in positions of leadership, to having more than one Black dancer onstage at a given time, predominantly white companies have their work cut out for them. In due time, the world will find out if the good intentions of artistic directors became embodied through action, or whether it was all lip service for surviving an intense period of scrutiny. In Naidu’s experience, talking is much easier than sustained action: “When people actually start thinking about what it takes to enact change, they might think twice about whether they want to embark on this journey.” The ideal would be that one day in the not-so-distant future, Black ballet schools will be able to confidently send their students into a ballet world that completely sees and accepts the truth of their talent, beauty and equality.

CHAPTER 4

Responding to a Double Pandemic

The Memorial Day 2020 killing of unarmed Black man, George Floyd, by a white police officer sparked nationwide protests, heightening Americans' consciousness around issues of systemic racism. While Floyd's killing was certainly not the first of its kind, the brazen callousness of his killer and blatant disregard for human life – Black life – was put on full display by the video footage capturing the tragic event. Whereas previous cases had never seemed to inflame white public opinion enough for mass protests, the video evidence of George Floyd's avoidable killing sparked unprecedented worldwide upheaval. Floyd's death, as well as the killings of unarmed Black citizens Breonna Taylor and Ahmaud Arbery and the resulting, subsequent calls for justice dovetailed with the coronavirus pandemic, creating a climate ripe for recognizing and confronting America's systemic racism. In the dance world, companies that had never acknowledged, or perhaps never had to notice their nearly all-white preferences, were suddenly issuing statements in support of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI), as discussed in Chapter 3. At the same time, with much of the country under stay-at-home orders due to the coronavirus, many dance companies and schools were forced into the virtual realm, hosting classes and performances on the internet instead of in-person. This chapter examines how Black ballet schools responded to the double pandemic of the coronavirus and innocent Black lives taken at the hands of police and other white vigilantes.

The sentiment that Black lives matter has been at the heart of Black ballet schools, long before it became a more recognized and supported slogan. After all, these schools were formed in response to the art form's neglect of Black dancers, in both the training and

professional realms. DTH school director Robert Garland frankly declares that in his position at DTH, “we have to do what we have to do for our people. I’ve always believed that I’ve been called to uplift and serve Black people.”⁵⁹ As Collage artistic director Kevin Thomas states, “Black lives matter is an idea that has been a part of Collage’s breath, a part of our blood from the very beginning.” He references how the school uniform, repertory, and curriculum discussed in Chapter 2, all reflect that idea. Black ballet schools are, in a sense, ballet’s Black Lives Matter movement, consistently advocating for more than mere attenuated existence in the art form, where, as scholar Eddie Glaude has put it, white people feel a sense of ownership and Black people are to accept the scraps that are thrown their way, and just be grateful to be there.⁶⁰ In fact, Black ballet schools continue to push the envelope around their long-proclaimed messages of inclusion, representation and ownership of an art-form that has historically and systematically held up principles of white supremacy.

An alumna of Jones-Haywood herself, Fortune-Green, in her self-proclaimed role as “guardian of the legacy,” wants to instill the same type of confidence around ballet that she experienced under the tutelage of Doris Jones and Claire Haywood. Early on, the lesson was instilled in her that as a Black student pursuing ballet she was representing something larger than herself, which she felt acutely when she stepped into white spaces. When invited to train at SAB as a youngster, she understood the weight of the responsibility that came with having earned her place as a student there. So, when her two African American teachers came to observe their students in class at SAB, “We’d better not be in the back

⁵⁹ Unless otherwise noted, all quotes in this chapter are from interviews with the person referenced. Interview information is contained in the Bibliography.

⁶⁰ Glaude.

row. We knew who we were when we stepped into that building.” Having come full circle, not only can Fortune-Green advise SAB on its DEI practices, but she can now groom her own Jones-Haywood students to take ownership of the art form, no matter the space they engage in it. Fortune-Green’s feelings around Black ownership of ballet are shared by other Black ballet school directors, including Nena Gilreath of Ballethnic, now in its 31st year, who says, “We wanted to be in the forefront, not relegated to the background. In the beginning, Ballethnic was all about black empowerment and that's what we've always done.”

Like their counterparts at Jones-Haywood and Ballethnic, Collage students are also groomed to advocate for themselves in white ballet spaces, to manage the stressors that come from being in them and ultimately live up to their potential as artists. The following anecdote demonstrates how the training at these schools empowers students to confront racial disparities. At a recent predominantly white summer intensive, a Collage student approached the director about the requirement to wear pink tights. Initially the director pushed back against the student’s request; but when the student and her parents would not back down, going so far as to discuss the origins of pink tights with the director, the student was allowed to wear the fleshtone tights to which she had grown accustomed. At DTH, Jones-Haywood and Ballethnic, the lessons of self-worth, self-validation, and ownership that students learn at Black ballet schools were in place long before Black Lives Matter was a national movement. With Collage joining the chorus, the collective voices of their directors, students and other stakeholders continue to agitate for change against the marginalizing status quo of white privilege in ballet.

Moving through Pandemic Challenges and Beyond

The survival of Black ballet schools through the 2020-2021 Black Lives Matter protests and coronavirus pandemic is a testament to their appeal for their students and the broader communities that they are not only part of, but in many instances helped build. Already in alignment with the message that Black Lives Matter, these organizations didn't have to scramble to prove their alignment with the moral arc of the moment, instead freeing up valuable time and resources to steer their organizations through the coronavirus pandemic, which has undoubtedly tested the ballet world.⁶¹ Already accustomed to being consistently underfunded, (which is more fully discussed later in this chapter), Black ballet schools took on the pandemic, as just another challenge, albeit a daunting one. When interviewed, each of the directors spoke of their schools thriving throughout the pandemic, with DTH and Collage maintaining or growing their respective student bodies. On the other hand, Ballethnic was positioned in the "open state" of Georgia, where no stay-at-home orders were issued during the pandemic. Co-directors Nena Gilreath and Waverly Lucas acknowledge financial difficulties, with several students losing loved ones due to the coronavirus, which ultimately took a mental and financial toll on their families. Switching to a hybrid model helped the school to weather the storm, as they were able to continue offering intensive in-person training, and also provide classes virtually for those who were not comfortable leaving their homes. Owning their building also alleviated some of the stress of covering overhead costs, and they are now planning for studio renovations and expansion.

⁶¹ See Scher; Schulman; and Williams for ways the pandemic affected ballet companies.

For the way Jones-Haywood continued to function through the pandemic period, Fortune-Green says, “I’m very grateful.” When the school was forced to close its doors in-person, they immediately shifted to virtual classes in the spring of 2020. This was followed by a virtual summer intensive, which included a performance opportunity for every student. Before the start of the 2020-2021 school year, Fortune-Green sent a letter to parents outlining recommendations for the purchase of marley flooring and a ballet barre.⁶² Signaling strong student and parent buy-in for ballet training, she says that most students from the year before not only re-enrolled but complied with her recommendations. Green shares, “The fact that parents have been supportive and the fact that the children wanted to come back, makes me feel as though I’m making some substantive difference in their thinking.” Parental and community support during this time further supports what Brown pointed to in her essay countering ideas about Black people not supporting or desiring ballet in the past—today, there is still both a demand for training and an investment in it.

Shifting to virtual classes and a more flexible schedule allowed DTH to maintain its enrollment. Whereas pre-pandemic, students trained 32 weeks during the school year, the school created a 24-week virtual program, where students could enroll for a total of three independent 8-week sessions. Garland says that knowing his constituents allowed him to build-in flexibility for those parents who may have been struggling to pay because of lost income during the pandemic. He says that for every student the school lost, they gained another because of the unprecedented remote access to classes, with students logging on from as far away as Brazil and Europe.

⁶² Marley is special rubberized flooring, which helps to provide an ideal surface for dance work.

Collage, by far, has been the most successful in terms of expansion throughout the pandemic. Having launched a capital campaign just before the pandemic hit, the organization raised over \$10 million, and opened a brand new, 22-thousand-square-foot building with five studios in November 2020. They currently have a \$1 million operating budget, as well as a \$1 million reserve fund, something that has long been on the directors' wish list. Thomas says the successful fundraising efforts are a direct result of community support, particularly Collage parents, some of whom sit on the organization's board of directors. Thomas says, "They see firsthand the work we're doing, the way we pour into their children, and how much their children enjoy being a part of Collage." Harper says that early on, establishing the school was about building a community, and eventually "the community grew so large and became so strong that it started to help us." In addition to financial backing from parents and community members, what powered Collage's pandemic fundraising and building efforts was thoughtful messaging in its marketing materials. Absent were ideas like "save us," "help us," or "we're struggling." Instead, Harper says his team was laser-focused on promoting the message, "We feel like ballet can be better and this is what we're building. Here is our vision for it and we want you to support it." Of this strategy, Harper says, "That's worked for us." For so long, according to Harper, Collage existed in a space where they "didn't have the freedom to dream big. And if you don't have the vision, you can't get there." The successful fundraising efforts have shifted the organization's paradigm from one of surviving to one of thriving, all during a pandemic.

Yet, even with finances in order and ample space for training their growing student body, the success that Collage experienced with their capital campaign doesn't fully expose the difficult road they have faced in the past without securing funding through traditional

means, like grants. My interviewees' experiences and opinions pointed to the conclusion that racial disparities that are embedded deeply within ballet also arise at the funding level. According to Harper, "the philanthropic model is very racist." Echoing Denise Saunders Thompson, President and CEO of International Association of Blacks in Dance, Harper explains in his interview that the majority of funding for arts organizations, which includes those dedicated to ballet, continues to be awarded to white institutions.⁶³ He says that this happens "regardless of demographics or share in a certain market." Harper says it is especially frustrating because a lack of transparency in funding criteria makes it impossible for him to find out why Collage continued to miss out on grant awards. He says, "The X, Y, and Z of the criteria are not clear. It shifts and it moves, and it has always done so [in favor of] white institutions" and the result is that they "receive funding with no accountability."

Waverly Lucas, co-Artistic Director of Ballethnic, shares the painful experience of seeing a larger, white Ballet organization receive funding for new so-called diversity initiatives, work that Ballethnic has been consistently doing throughout its 31-year history. He says, "the funders are guilty" of perpetuating disparities in grants, because, whereas Ballethnic has a building full of Black students, if the white school "gets one Black student in there, oh yeah, [the funders] are going to give them a full scholarship and all this funding for that one student," to attract other Black students. For Ballethnic, this funding gap creates another problem, what Lucas and his co-artistic director Nena Gilreath describe as "poaching," where they cannot offer a competing scholarship to retain the accomplished Black students they often train from the ground-up. Gilreath shares how she and Lucas would call their students who would tell them, "We're on scholarship at the Atlanta Ballet.

⁶³ To read more about racial disparities in arts funding, see Williams, Nikesha Elise.

We don't have to do work study and we get a full scholarship." The effects of this poaching cannot be understated, because according to Gilreath, "A couple years ago, Atlanta Ballet got a million dollars for their outreach program to work with Black children." With Black ballet organizations, she says, "this is the fight we're constantly up against." She adds, "I feel like we're back to when we first arrived in Atlanta. We're almost in the same cyclical place where there are a lot of upstarts and smaller Black companies and schools happening." However, Gilreath feels that sadly, "All of that splitting and splintering means that none of [those organizations] will ever rise to the place of becoming an institution."

With the experiences of Harper, Gilreath and Lucas, it becomes clear that creating more transparency in grant application processes and criteria, could go a long way towards dismantling racial disparities in funding ballet organizations. It is ironic that Black ballet organizations would continue to be underfunded, particularly when it comes to favoring DEI initiatives for white schools and companies. Such funding creates a dangerous illusion, according to Harper, feeding into a damaging "white savior" narrative, where to their own benefit, white people are given funding priority to "solve" Black people's problems. Of well-established white ballet institutions such as NYCB and ABT, he demands, "How are you going to lead a diversity initiative when you haven't done the work in communities where the Black kids live? Where are the Black kids from the Bronx who are now dancing with New York City Ballet? Now y'all want to be leaders in the movement. That doesn't make any sense to me." Indeed, with leaders at all ballet organizations working towards change, throwing money at fledgling diversity initiatives at white organizations, while continuing to ignore the hard work that Black organizations have long championed, can be interpreted as an insult that can sow long-term distrust and resentment. Cultivating diversity generally

requires careful listening to all relevant parties, so this inequality in funding ballet diversity seems a counterproductive strategy, one that could potentially fray existing alliances between Black and white organizations, and ultimately undermine white ballet organization's stated desire for change.

CONCLUSION

As stated by Jones-Haywood alumna and parent Maia Coleman-King, Black ballet schools like Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) “came from a necessity out of white supremacy, where if we didn’t create the space for ourselves, we wouldn’t exist.” Indeed, the founders of early Black ballet schools were responding to a demand and desire for engagement with the art form, when doors for entry were largely shut to Black participants. Black ballet schools not only opened their doors to train students, but they continue to do so in a way that validates their students’ existence. Students in these schools are encouraged to embrace the unique hue of their own skin, wearing brown tights and shoes, instead of reaching for an exclusionary ideal image, through wearing pink tights and pink shoes. In these spaces, Black dancers’ natural hair texture is not only understood, but embraced, with students often twisting or braiding their mane into the classical standard, or revising the standard by cropping their hair short. With the problematized elements of race neutralized, students can focus more closely on what matters, which is their understanding of the classical ballet technique and art form. It is ultimately freeing to be released from the burden of being in the minority. Coleman-King, who is also a Doctor of Psychology, explains that being in the majority is powerful, because “you get a break. You don’t always have to talk about race, because that’s understood. Now you can focus on the nuances” of training. Coleman believes that at Jones-Haywood and other Black ballet schools, much like at HBCUs, students “can get deeper into solving real problems because they can get beyond the surface.”

In addition to affirming their students, the mission of Black ballet schools often extends beyond their studio walls, by helping to build, anchor and serve communities in

which they exist. By opening their doors for community events and often hiring staff or faculty who live in the neighborhood, Black ballet schools send a clear and powerful message, that their community, which is ultimately a Black one, deserves an opportunity to participate in this beautiful art form. By supporting their communities, these schools often win the trust of people inside them, which over time has strengthened bonds and paid dividends unique to each school.

Black ballet schools continue to prepare their dancers for the competitive professional ballet world, despite the limited opportunities that Black dancers have historically faced in the field. Accustomed to grappling with tough odds, Black ballet school directors have both a thick skin and an optimism regarding their students' prospects. When asked if Black students should aspire to be ballet dancers, Collage artistic director Kevin Thomas says, "Oh, my God, yes. We need more Black dancers and more Black teachers. They should aspire to this place; there's really plenty of room, especially if you're trying to create your own thing. More of us need to be doing this."

To Thomas' point, schools like his encourage their students to not only train in the rigors of ballet technique, but they also teach them how to advocate for themselves in the white ballet milieu and take ownership of their craft. This demonstratively puts value on Black lives and agency in an enfranchised microculture that never meant to include either. In the post-George-Floyd-murder era, the fact that Black Lives Matter to Black ballet schools couldn't be more apparent. Leaders and students from these schools have pushed forward the conversation around diversity and inclusion in the field, with a consistent message that necessarily centers the Black experience in what has been an often hostile white ballet world.

Even as these schools serve a majority Black student body, and maintain an ethos and practice that supports them, the directors of some of these schools acknowledge that they do not exist in a bubble, and continue to forge alliances with major, predominantly white ballet organizations. In an effort to diversify ballet's highest professional ranks, Black ballet schools have positioned themselves as a natural partner in the uphill battle in ballet's reckoning with race. Black ballet school directors Thomas and Fortune-Green continue to seek partnerships with major ballet training schools and companies, with the intentions that their students will ultimately be afforded the opportunity to be seen and embraced at these institutions.

When Arthur Mitchell founded DTH over 50 years ago in response to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s assassination, he did so out of a deep desire to serve Black people in his community through ballet.⁶⁴ Although his school wasn't the first for Black ballet students, the incredible body of work that his company produced through the years made a tremendous impact on the psyche of Black dancers and audiences, filling them with an awareness that Blacks are capable of performing ballet. He made his point more widely by touring his company all over the world. In the wake of his death, his hero's words come to mind. In the last speech he would give before he was gunned down in Memphis, Tennessee, Dr. King spoke these prophetic words, "We've got some difficult days ahead...But it really doesn't matter with me now, because I've been to the mountaintop...I've seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the Promised Land."⁶⁵

⁶⁴ See *Dance Theatre of Harlem and Slater, 1975*.

⁶⁵ King, Jr.

By welcoming a more diverse population to the art form, Black ballet schools have been doing the work that predominantly white institutions have long ignored. This inclusion inevitably leads to more creativity and innovation in the field which will ultimately help ballet to maintain cultural relevance. With both Mitchell and King now departed, there is still reason to hope that with the continued consciousness around ballet's white supremacy awakening and sharpening, and the continued efforts of Black ballet schools towards change, a brighter day is truly on the horizon for Black ballet students who, like their white counterparts, deserve an equal chance to pursue their dreams.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Acocella, Joan. "The Dance Card." *The New York Times*. 16 March 2008,
<https://www.nytimes.com/2008/03/16/books/review/Letters-t-003.html>,
retrieved 6 February 2021.
- Barnes, Clive. "Shaping a Black Classical Ballet." *The New York Times*. 12 October 1969,
[https://search.proquest.com/docview/118553248/6805CC029D14404CPQ/4?acco
untid=14509](https://search.proquest.com/docview/118553248/6805CC029D14404CPQ/4?accountid=14509), retrieved 6 February 2020.
- Brown, Lauren Erin. "'As Long as They Have Talent': Organizational Barriers to Black Ballet." *Dance Chronicle*, vol. 41, no. 3, Routledge, 2018, pp. 359–92,
[doi:10.1080/01472526.2018.1518076](https://doi.org/10.1080/01472526.2018.1518076), retrieved 2 January 2019.
- Brown, Troy. *Personal Conversation*. 15 November 2020.
- Burns, Harry Mark, Jr. *Personal Conversation*. 7 November 2020.
- Carman, Joseph. "Behind Ballet's Diversity Problem." *Pointe*. 21 May 2014,
[https://www.pointemagazine.com/behind-ballets-diversity-problem-
2412811909.html](https://www.pointemagazine.com/behind-ballets-diversity-problem-2412811909.html), retrieved 9 November 2020.
- Coleman-King, Maia. *Personal Conversation*. 10 December 2020.
- Cooper, Michael. "City Ballet, Shaken by Turmoil, Chooses New Leaders." *The New York Times*. 28 February 2019,
[https://www.nytimes.com/2019/02/28/arts/dance/new-york-city-ballet-
jonathan-stafford-wendy-whelan.html](https://www.nytimes.com/2019/02/28/arts/dance/new-york-city-ballet-jonathan-stafford-wendy-whelan.html), retrieved 12 April 2021.
- Crabb, Michael. "After Being Called Out, the National Ballet of Canada Increases Its

Diversity Efforts." *Dance Magazine*. 17 June 2020, <https://www.dancemagazine.com/national-ballet-of-canada-diversity-2646194429.html?rebelltitem=1#rebelltitem1>, retrieved 13 April 2021.

Dance Theatre of Harlem. "Our History." *Dance Theatre of Harlem*.

<https://www.dancetheatreofharlem.org/ourhistory/#:~:text=Arthur%20Mitchell%20created%20the%20company,at%20New%20York%20City%20Ballet.&text=Mitchell's%20impulse%20to%20start%20Dance,on%20April%204%2C%201968>,
retrieved 17 April 2021.

---. *The Legacy of Arthur Mitchell: Dance Theatre of Harlem in*

Washington, D.C. 13 February 2021,

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2kXBps6ML5g>, retrieved 21 February 2021.

DeFrantz, Thomas. "The Black Body in Question." *The Village Voice*. 23 April 1996,

<https://search.proquest.com/docview/232242995?accountid=14509>, retrieved 7
February 2020.

Dixon Gottschild, Brenda. *The Black Dancing Body: A Geography from Coon to Cool*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2003.

---. *Joan Myers Brown & the Audacious Hope of the Black Ballerina*.

Palgrave Macmillan, 2012.

Dunning, Jennifer. "Doris W. Jones, 92, Ballet Dancer Who Founded School for Blacks." *New York Times*, vol. 155, no. 53539, p A21.

Encyclopedia Britannica. "Classical Ballet." *Encyclopedia Britannica*

<https://www.britannica.com/art/classical-ballet>, retrieved 31

May 2020.

- Figgins, Dionne. *Personal Conversation*. 21 December 2020.
- Figgins, Jenelle. *Personal Conversation*. 13 December 2020.
- Fisher, Jennifer. "Ballet and Whiteness: Will Ballet Forever Be the Kingdom of the Pale?" *The Oxford Handbook of Dance and Ethnicity*. March 2014, <https://www.oxfordhandbooks.com/view/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199754281.001.0001/oxfordhb-9780199754281-e-008>, retrieved 22 November 2020.
- Foster, Carol. *Personal Conversation*. 3 December 2020.
- French, Mary Anne. "Making Her Pointe: Doris Jones, Still Bringing Blacks to the Barre." *The Washington Post*. 15 May 1993, <https://search.proquest.com/docview/307641348/fulltext/76F4027C67784375PQ/1?accountid=14509>, retrieved 6 February 2020.
- Gasman, Marybeth et al. "HBCUs and the Production of Doctors." *AIMS Public Health*. 27 November 2017, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6111265/>, retrieved 8 February 2020.
- Gilreath, Nena and Waverly Lucas. *Personal Conversation*. 7 February 2021.
- Gladstone, Valerie. "Racism in American Dance." *Black Masks*. 31 December 1995, <https://search.proquest.com/docview/195808538?accountid=14509>, retrieved 6 February 2020.
- Glaude Jr., Eddie. "Eddie Glaude, Jr. on Disparity of Treatment for U.S. Capitol Rioters and Peaceful Protestors," *MSNBC*, 7 January 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=416629196320324>, retrieved 3 March 2021.
- Harper, Marcellus. *Personal Conversation*. 9 December 2020.
- Harss, Marina. "Raven Wilkinson, 83, Is Dead; Black Ballerina Braved Segregated South."

- The New York Times*. 20 December 2018 <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/20/obituaries/raven-wilkinson-dead.html>, retrieved 22 January 2021.
- Hurt, Tammy. *Personal Conversation*. 13 December 2020.
- Jackson, Jehbreal. *Personal Conversation*. 30 December 2020.
- Jenkins, Jim. *Personal Conversation*. 27 December 2020.
- Jones, Paunika. *Personal Conversation*. 7 April 2021.
- Kaufman, Sarah. "Lithe on Their Feet," *The Washington Post*. 19 March 2000, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/lifestyle/style/2000/03/19/lithe-on-their-feet/e39ad931-c281-4a0b-a802-7ee858a5835f/>, retrieved 21 March 2021.
- Kent, Julie. *Personal Conversation*. 18 December 2020.
- King, Jr., Martin Luther. "I've Been to the Mountaintop." *The Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute, Stanford University*. 3 April 1968, <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/encyclopedia/ive-been-mountaintop>, retrieved 15 April 2021.
- Klapper, Melissa. *Ballet Class*. Oxford University Press, 2020.
- Kourlas, Gia. "Where Are All the Black Swans?" *New York Times*. 6 May 2007. <https://search.proquest.com/docview/1712312877/2BB0F7FD8088475CPQ/1?accountid=14509>, retrieved 7 February 2020.
- Kriegsman, Alan M. "New Strides for Black Dancers." *The Washington Post*. 10 December 1978. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/lifestyle/1978/12/10/new-strides-for-black-dancers/144164a3-5d73-4de3-bded-69f831af8959/>, retrieved 20 August 2021.

Lee, Brandye. "Black Skin, Pink Tights." *Dance Major Journal*, 2020.

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/6jd088rg>, retrieved May 4, 2021.

Lee, Keith. *Personal Conversation*. 30 December 2020.

Library of Congress. *Race Relations in the 1930s and 1940s*.

<https://www.loc.gov/classroom-materials/united-states-history-primary-source-timeline/great-depression-and-world-war-ii-1929-1945/race-relations-in-1930s-and-1940s/>, retrieved 5 February 2021.

Malone, Kevin. *Personal Conversation*. 25 February 2021.

McCarthy-Brown, Nyama. "Dancing in the Margins: Experiences of African American Ballerinas." *Journal of African American Studies*, vol. 15, no. 3, 2012, pp. 385–408. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/43525500. Accessed 20 April 2021.

McElroy, Frances. *Black Ballerina*. Shirley Road Productions, 2016.

MSNBC. "Eddie Glaude, Jr. on disparity of treatment for U.S. Capitol Rioters."

<https://www.facebook.com/msnbc/videos/416629196320324>, retrieved 27 March 2021.

Murphy, Ashley. *Personal Conversation*. 16 December 2020.

Naidu, Laveen. *Personal Conversation*. 15 December 2020.

O'Neal Parker, Lonnae. "Shannon Harkins, the Face of African American Ballet Dancers' Struggle." *The Washington Post*. 29 November 2013,

<https://search.proquest.com/docview/1462587316?accountid=14509>, retrieved 7 February 2020.

Perpener, John. "Janet Collins." *Jacob's Pillow Dance Interactive*.

- <https://danceinteractive.jacobspillow.org/themes-essays/african-diaspora/janet-collins/>, retrieved 8 April 2021.
- Perry, Elliot and Kimberly. *Personal Conversation*. 16 December 2020.
- Saunders Thompson, Denise. *Personal Conversation*. 15 December 2020.
- Scher, Avichai. "What's Ahead for Ballet Companies in the Age of COVID-19?" *Pointe*. 12, August 2020. <https://www.pointemagazine.com/ballet-companies-covid-19-2646951540.html?rebelltitem=1#rebelltitem1>, retrieved 14 April 2021.
- School of American Ballet. <https://sab.org/diversity-and-inclusion/>, retrieved 2 March 2021.
- Schrock, Madeline. "These 21 Organizations Are Banding Together to Increase the Presence of Black Dancers in Ballet." *Pointe*. 9 October 2018, <https://www.pointemagazine.com/the-equity-project-increasing-the-presence-of-blacks-in-ballet-2611140673.html?rebelltitem=2#rebelltitem2>, retrieved 11 April 2021.
- Schulman, Michael. "How New York City Ballet Took on the Pandemic." *The New Yorker*. 29 October 2021, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2020/11/09/how-new-york-city-ballet-took-on-the-pandemic>, retrieved 14 April 2021.
- Shields, Dale Ricardo. "Louis Johnson." *I for Color*. 18 March 2020, <https://iforcolor.org/louis-johnson/>, retrieved 9 November 2020.
- Slater, Jack. "They Told Us Our Bodies Were Wrong for Ballet." *The New York Times*. 27 April 1975, <https://search.proquest.com/docview/120625472/6DC772D9DDD5434DPQ/6?accountid=14509>, retrieved 7 February 2020.
- Smithsonian. "Popular and Pervasive Stereotypes of African Americans." *National Museum*

of African American History and Culture, <https://nmaahc.si.edu/blog-post/popular-and-pervasive-stereotypes-african-americans>, retrieved 20 April 2021.

Stennet, Desiree. "Black Owned Ballet School Extends Reach – New Studio Could Teach Hundreds More." *Commercial Appeal*. 21 October 2019, https://infoweb.news/bank.com/apps/news/openurl?ctx_ver=z39.882004&rft_id=info%3Asid/infoweb.news/bank.com&svc_dat=WORLDNEWS&req_dat=0D0F9A1261961D4A&rft_val_format=info%3Aofi/fmt%3Akev%3Amtx%3Actx&rft_dat=document%3Anews%252F176B600B0C2596B0, retrieved 3 Nov 2020.

Stephenson, Monica. *Personal Conversation*. 15 December 2020.

Taylor, Nicole. "Martha's Vineyard Has a Nourishing Magic for Black Americans." *The New York Times*. 22 August 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/22/dining/marthas-vineyard-african-american-community.html>, retrieved 13 March 2021.

Terry, Terlene. *A Survey of Black Dance in Washington 1870-1945*. 1982, <https://dra.american.edu/islandora/object/thesedissertations:7839/datastream/PDF/view>, retrieved 16 December 2020.

Thomas, Kevin. *Personal Conversation*. 27 November 2020.

Whelan, Wendy. *Personal Conversation*. 9 December 2020.

Whitfield, Chandra Thomas. "When Will Black Ballerinas Take Center Stage?" *AJC*. 9 December 2020, <https://www.ajc.com/life/arts-culture/when-will-black-ballerinas-take-center-stage/CNNGMSW40FAXDI40QGN5EQH4SQ/>, retrieved 12 December 2020.

Williams, Mitty. *Personal Conversation*. 2 January 2021.

Williams, Nikesha Elise. "Black Dancers Struggle to Make Their Way Through Pandemic."

The Washington Post. 14 February 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/road-to-recovery/2021/02/14/ballet-black-dance/>, retrieved 14 April 2021.