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The **Black** Sheep is the **Black** Dancer

What is it like to be an African American Dancer with Chocolate Skin?

by Ongelle Johnson

In the dance department at University of California, Irvine, Ballet V is the class for the elite ballerinas. The ballerinas who essentially have what it takes to earn a spot in a professional ballet company. Besides Ballet V is required to meet every day of the school week. So, for five days a week, I sometimes catch myself dancing center in the midst of my peers, realizing that I am the only one who looks like me. I am the only one with chocolate skin. I stand out. I am the one who is spotted easily. I am the black sheep in pointe shoes.

I attend an institution in which the African American population of students is below 5%. According to the Annual Survey of Colleges 2016, Black/African American students attending the University of California, Irvine comprise only 2.0%. I shouldn't be surprised when I look in the mirror, specifically in the highest level of ballet, to see that I am the only one with my skin complexion in the class. "Classical ballet celebrates pale princesses and fair swans" (Jennings). I ask myself, "Why are there only a few of us?" There are no role models for us dark-skinned ladies. Why would we dream or aspire to achieve and be something, such as a brown ballerina, when there is no one that looks like us doing it?

Brown ballerinas do indeed exist, but many of them are of a much lighter skin tone, giving them the ability to blend in better than those of us with a mocha or darker skin complexion: Janet Collins, Raven Wilkinson, Debra Austin, Nora Kimball, Misty Copeland, Francesca Hayward. All of these successful black ballet dancers have something in common: they skew toward the fairer end of the sepia spectrum. Onstage, the duskiness of their complexions can be all but washed out, bleached by the lights. From the audience, they could present as a white girl back from a beachside vacation, or be perceived as Latina" (Howard). If there is a way to blend them in and not seem so different, then they are in. They are not a distraction; they are not the black sheep. Former Houston Ballet principal Lauren Anderson has said that the deficiency of diversity in classical ballet is getting better. "We watched Misty Copeland's rise unfold in real time! We've had black ballerinas forever, but now they're just more visible, which is good because they're inspiring more kids to dance."

Slowly but surely, we are seeing improvement with the diversity problem in ballet. But we get over one hurdle, and there is another one that must be jumped. Hair and costuming are things that are seen as problematic when there is a Black/African American in the mix. Not all black girl hair can do what a white or Asian girl's hair can. In Yohana Detsa's "Brown ballerinas, Ballet's big diversity moment is approaching," Jenelle Figgins (dancer for Dance Theatre of Harlem) talks about the struggle of having different hair texture. "Naturally coarse hair texture can also be a hurdle. It's not 'convenient' for ballet, Figgins says. "I used to dread putting my hair in a French twist. My hair doesn't do that."

Costumes too can be just as problematic, if not more, than hair. In a 2012 article for *The Guardian*, Goldhill and Marsh acknowledge that there are so few black ballet dancers, shoes are not made for them, so that dancers have to color shoes by hand with brown makeup. Cira Robinson, of the Black Ballet in Britain, has her own system: "I use foundation--the colour is Caribbean coffee – it's basic cheap make-up, but it works. Pointe shoes come only in the traditional pink, unless they're red for a show. It would look strange if there was a pink shoe at

the end of a brown leg, so it helps with the line. My pointe shoes are brown because my skin is brown.” Women of color do not have the luxury of buying pointe shoes, ballet shoes, or nude socks because there aren’t any for them. For our nude, we have to go an extra mile that is time-consuming and can eventually add up in cost.

With the growth of African American dancers in the concert dance world, knowledge of what is needed to accompany the characteristics of an African American is a must. What that entails, for example, is understanding that an African American’s nude will not in any way, shape, or form be the same nude as a Caucasian, or even Asian American dancer. Just like Cira Robinson, I have been affected and hurt by this misunderstanding. In a piece that I was cast in, each dancer was to wear a pair of nude socks. Out of all the dancers in this specific piece, I had the darkest skin complexion. When the costume shop offered the nude socks that were available, not one was made for my dark skin. I had to ask the staff to dye them. The result of the dyed pair of socks was better, but still not right, not blending into my skin like the other dancers in the piece who looked as though they had no socks on at all, the ultimate goal of wearing nude.

My choreographer took note in my disappointment and went out of her way to buy brown socks that matched my brown skin flawlessly. During the dress rehearsal I wore the brown socks and felt comfortable in my skin, but in the end, the artistic director and her assistant felt that my nude socks were a distraction from the nude socks of everyone else. No one should ever feel as though their skin color, or the way they look is a disturbance. The aesthetic of the piece was put before my feelings and comfortability. There needs to be an understanding that with diversity comes differences, and those differences are not to be shamed or frowned up, but instead, thoughtfully recognized and dealt with in a respectable and compassionate manner.

Sadly, when issues of hair and costuming become complex and controversial, it is not surprising to find women of color looking to find a company where they know their diverse qualities will never be a concern. Johanna Desta states, “Issues like this are why Figgins joined DTH. She was surrounded by ‘like-minded individuals’ who made her comfortable and, above all, nurtured her dance ability.” The mission of Dance Theatre of Harlem is, “To present a ballet company of African American and other racially diverse artists who perform the most demanding repertory at the highest level quality.”

So, if companies are being established to specifically give black dancers a chance, white organizations could argue that there is no need to for them to add diversity because companies for diverse dancers have been created: “...it takes some pressure off mainly white institutions, allowing them to cop out on making room for diverse dancers. If the goal is to eliminate discrimination in the ballet world, dancers of color must be encouraged and welcomed into mainly white institutions, too. Only then can damaging stereotypes start to be challenged” (Desta).

I am a Black/African American dancer, and I want to be a professional dancer. The ballet realm is working on its lack of diversity, but the issue is not solved, so is modern dance the next best option? In the article of “What About Diversity in Modern Dance?” Wendy Perron points out the fact that not even modern dance has been accepting to dancers of color in the past. “It was an issue when Donald McKayle’s presence in Sophie Maslow’s 1949 *The Village I Knew* prompted *New York Times* critic John Martin to scold Maslow for casting a black dancer in a piece about a Jewish shtetl.” But in comparison to ballet, the modern dance world has made more change in its levels of diversity, now known for accepting all kinds of dancers. “So it took modern dance a while to give black dance artists their due. But in recent decades this genre of dance has embraced African Americans (and other non-whites) as dancers, teachers and choreographers.

Aesthetically, modern dance doesn't require a pristine row of white swans. It's more inclusive; it's more like the world we live in" (Perron).

I love who I am. Who I am should never be frowned up or discouraged. As dancers, we are trained to examine our bodies with such a critical eye. And with that critical eye we not only are trained to see ourselves, but are trained to see the things and people in the space around us. I look in the mirror, and I not only see myself but I see the people around me. I know there may not be a lot of others who look like me, which is okay, but as long I am welcomed, then I know I am where I belong, and I know that I can be the professional dancer I have always dreamt of being.

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Ongelle Johnson graduated in 2017 with a Bachelor of Fine Arts in Dance Performance at the University of California, Irvine. She truly believes there is room in this world for Black Ballerinas.
