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Why Dancers Should Care about Colonialism—because it’s “The Gift that Keeps on Giving”

Do you absolutely love those Hollywood movies where a ballet dancer encounters hip hop and ends up dazzling everyone? Read on....

by Julianna Cressman

After a long day of dancing at UC Irvine, I told my roommate over tea that I could absolutely ruin the 2001 dance film *Save the Last Dance* for her. You know, the movie starring Julia Stiles in which a young, fragile, white ballet student named Sarah is suddenly forced to transfer to a primarily black, inner-city high school. There, she faces both racial tension and the loss of her suburban childhood comforts, yet still triumphs in her audition for Juilliard with the fresh hip-hop skills she acquires from her new peers at school. We dancers tend to love this film in general. We get excited when we see modern or ballet, our high-art practice, represented in popular film. The narrative of a dancer getting into a performing arts conservatory resonates with all of us, because we all audition and we all want to succeed.

As my roommate expressed her zest for the film, I was reminded of my own dancer nostalgia, remembering the first time I saw *Center Stage* or the first *Step Up* movie. I felt galvanized by these films; they made me feel confident and proud of my dance world. These movies were also a major adhesive for my social life at my home studio, because we all agreed how absolutely awesome they were, and repeatedly indulged in these popular romance, high-stakes competitive dance narrative spectacles. But, this light-hearted perspective did not last long when I left my ballet studio behind and enrolled at UCI. In my Screening Race class my freshman year, a research course devoted to Race and Media studies, I finally decided to take a critical look at the Stiles movie, and subsequently “ruined” it for myself. But it was an important step in making me a more informed dancer—and person.

Through my research, I found that *Save the Last Dance* tries to put forth a progressive, anti-racist message by portraying a triumphant interracial relationship featuring hip hop dance, and showcasing a primarily black cast, but ultimately, it fails at this mission. The film prioritizes the personal losses suffered by Stiles’ character, Sarah (her mother has just died), as she appropriates hip-hop and blackness to help her heal and serve her Eurocentric dance goals of joining the Juilliard elite. It struck me that the melodramatic portrayal of individual triumph and romance appeals to the hip-hop generation, but the movie ignores the larger issues of structural racism embedded within the story.

Save the Last Dance assumes a post-racial sentiment that allows for and embraces appropriation, and it also recapitulates stereotypes of the black community. When examined with a critical lens, the film is a Eurocentric pop piece that ends up highlighting the supremacy of whiteness and high-art. The film accomplishes this in its narrative and in its subtle camera techniques and music choices. Using the theme of hip-hop versus ballet, the film makes the statement: Ballet, equated with whiteness, always wins.

To be clear, when I say I can “ruin” the movie for you, I really mean “deconstruct.” This is not a negative thing; it’s a powerful tool for navigating our modern world. Deconstruction is a

practice that helped me see the film for its true intersecting themes and mechanisms. Looking at it with a theoretical and historical perspective, I was able to see what the movie is really saying socially, politically, and epistemologically. This solidified for me that we are not living in a post-racial world. As a dancer who identifies as white and female, much like the star in *Save the Last Dance*, I found myself comparing my actions with the problematic elements of the film. I found that my own dance practice is not neutral, just as Sarah's is not. When I researched further, I found that my dance practice is not at all outside of the current neocolonial systems that influence the modern world, still tinged with Eurocentrism and racism.

Colonialism, as you'll recall (or not, so I will refresh your memory) is the exploitation of a country, land, or group of people by a stronger group, which then uses those acquired resources to enrich their own economy. The result of this process is the suppression, victimization, erasure, and often criminalization of the subjugated people, their culture, and way of life. "Post-colonial" refers to the present day, after the enforcement of explicit colonial subjugation. In many locations, major perpetrators of colonial agendas suppressed indigenous dances not only as a form of social control, but because they deemed their subjects' cultures as "savage," or "grotesque," as indicated in early colonial writings.

A great example of the residual effects of colonialism is present in the Juilliard aspect of *Save the Last Dance*. Sarah's viability as a candidate for study at Juilliard is only made possible by consuming black culture to make her stand out. Her ballet technique is average at best—in fact, quite a bit below. The objectified “other” of hip-hop aesthetics, which she mines from her disadvantaged black friends in her urban public school, gives her special value in the judges' eyes, enabling her to win a place in the program. Through her dancing body, Juilliard is able to exploit the cultural practices of students of color who live in the defunded, South Side Chicago school district, without having to interact with them or care about the problems they face. Sarah's white dancing body invisibilizes the culture she learned from, even as she performs aspects of that culture for a white panel of judges.

This cultural mining and appropriation is clearly a colonial practice, in that it echoes the objectification, control, dehumanization, and erasure of colonial subjects, which is the legacy of so many American institutions. Colonial practices are responsible for creating the hierarchy of dance in the United States that forged a high-art/low-art ranking, one which places dominant forms of ballet and modern at the top. This emphasis on Eurocentric practices “others” non-dominant, historically suppressed dance forms, and continues the colonial processes of delegitimizing cultural practices and the people to whom these practices belong.

Dance scholar Anthony Shay has called colonialism “the gift that keeps on giving” in an ironic sense, referring to the continuation of power that circulated during colonial times, the way racism and “othering” still occur in insidious ways. This “gift” has given us specific ideas about dance that actually should concern us as dance majors. Nyama McCarthy Brown, author of “Decolonizing Curriculum in Dance Education: One Credit at a Time,” states that when any dance department privileges ballet and modern dance over other techniques, they are effectively, “colonized.” That in turn sends messages to students that non-dominant forms are not worth studying. In Ojeya Cruz Banks' “Critical Postcolonial Dance Recovery and Pedagogy,” she points out that “suppressing non-dominant dance practices” has historically been used “to disempower the cultural vitality of a people” (360). North American dance departments tend to have a monocultural focus on ballet and modern dance that does not reflect the diverse American population, a sort of “whitewashing” of dance curriculum.

So, even if we grew up innocently enjoying movies for the romance and dancing, I think that we should all take part in this kind of deconstruction—for our own good and the good of others. In "ruining" our blindness to these neutralized practices in media, in academia, and beyond, we are actively addressing the violence and subjugation that has been overlooked and still can perpetuate an ugly reality. We should be asking ourselves, out loud to each other, Why are ballet and modern dance techniques privileged to such a high extent in so many university dance programs? Why are hip-hop, African dance, or folklórico, secondary? Are these art forms really worth less than ballet and modern? We often ask the question about our own school: why are there four ballet faculty members, but just one in jazz? Why is African dance offered only one quarter per year? And when it *is* offered, why is it scheduled during other major requirements that we must prioritize in order to graduate? As McCarthy-Brown asks, "why are Eurocentric dance forms worth preserving and good for all students, but dance and heritage of the 'other' are not?" (128).

Essentially, we have the responsibility to "ruin" our pristine relationship with ballet and modern for the greater good of humanity, in order to participate in the undoing of oppression. Cruz Banks concludes that, "decolonization begins with countering imperialism by revitalizing distinct cultural expressions" (19). Bringing light to the invisibilized cultures and people upon which our Western dance practices sit helps to debunk myths of a post-racial society. Without this knowledge, our society maintains subtle yet powerful forms of racism that continue to disenfranchise, institutionally devalue, and even kill people of color and other oppressed groups. None of our dance education is outside of the scope of the politics of our world. In fact, the lack of awareness is a product of oppression and will maintain this system until someone breaks the cycle.

My advice to young dancers who still want to enjoy movies like *Save the Last Dance* unproblematically is to take an Ethnic Studies class, a Gender and Sexualities Studies class, and/or an African American Studies class. These classes are offered to all majors and will provide the foundation for critical thinking. These courses enrich our perspectives, open our artistic possibilities, and help us interrogate our world more powerfully in our choreography and performance. Go to the Cross-Cultural Center and check out some programs and talks, and meet new people who are at the forefront of this scholarship. The university is brimming with opportunities to engage with peers to help deconstruct our world! Begin to hold yourself accountable for your own education and take charge to influence the many spheres where you operate. Then, when you do watch a silly dance movie, enjoy the show, but remember that you have a choice in how you perceive its messages.

Works Cited

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