

# “I Don’t Want to do African . . . What About My Technique?:” Transforming Dancing Places into Spaces in the Academy

by

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**Abstract:** Building off of the work of dance scholar Brenda Dixon Gottschild, the author argues that the American dancing body is a fusion of West African, ballet, and modern dance techniques. Yet, curricula in collegiate dance departments throughout the U.S. reduce West African dance and dances from the African Diaspora to electives, while modern dance and ballet are regarded as foundational. This article theorizes how the delegation of modern dance and ballet as the proper “techniques” for training dancers in the academy invoke de Certeau’s notion of “place” and “space,” and reifies racist constructions of the black dancing body.

**Keywords:** Dance, Technique, West African, Modern Dance, Ballet

## Introduction

“I don’t want to do African, what about my technique?” a Latina student thoughtfully explains to her advisor when asked why she wanted to drop the Contemporary African/Modern I class and take a modern dance class from another teacher. Similar to other students who had dropped the class, the student cited fear of losing her “technique” as her primary reason. Like most dance programs throughout the country, our program requires that students spend the majority of their studio time in modern and ballet classes, while other genres are relegated to electives. To advance through our program, a panel reviews students in their modern and ballet classes to determine if they can move up to the next required level.

The students have to reach at least level two in both areas for a BA in Dance and advance further in technique for a BFA. The majority of our students, or at least the majority of our African American and Latina/o students, begin in introductory modern and ballet classes, which precede level one. These classes count as electives and not towards technique credits.<sup>1</sup> Students who begin in introductory courses fear being left behind as they feel they are already getting a late start in their dance training. Unfortunately, neither the students, nor our department and others across the country, have yet to figure out how to make the movement practices they enter with advantageous for their training in the academy. Our failure to do so impacts retention efforts, as students struggle to advance in our program. It might also impact diversity since these students, who are often of color, are simply not admitted into other collegiate dance programs.

I do understand the conundrum my students face. I was once one of those young, dance students entering the academy with training in jazz, ballet, and tap from a competition studio.<sup>2</sup> Like them, I was also well versed in the vernacular dances of the time. I could Snake, Prep, Wop, Reebok, Smurf, and Guess with the best of them. My expertise with the popular dance styles served me well at my dance studios. My teachers would ask me to teach the dances to them and my peers, so they could “clean up” the steps and insert them into our two-minute competition choreography. But it did not do much for me at the university, or so I thought. I, too, avoided West African or Afro-Brazilian classes afraid that they would not help me become a better dancer. Those classes were fun and came easy to me, unlike ballet. Thus, I failed to see how they would help me improve my technique. And, my teachers did not help me discover the connections between the various forms.

As I watch my students struggle with the same physical ideologies as I did twenty plus years previously, I am inspired to write this article. Conversations with colleagues at my own and other institutions who struggle to overhaul curriculum to include dances from the African Diaspora, also inform this essay. And the student compositions, journals, and formal interviews layered throughout this paper, evident the need to revise our programs to better suit the diverse student bodies that dance through our doors. Each instructor I spoke with or emailed, holds a full time or adjunct position, and teaches one or more of the following courses: modern, ballet, West African, pedagogy, dance making, and dance history. We discussed how to train our students to become performers, teachers, and dance makers.<sup>3</sup> Rather than dismiss the relevance of these specific “Western” concert forms, I challenge the construction of the physical dance cannon and argue that the demands of today’s contemporary dancer require a fusion of techniques that create fluidity in the body akin to the culturally pluralistic world in which we live.

I hesitate to employ the term “Western” here, as dance scholar, Brenda Dixon-Gottschild, labored to illustrate that Western dance, as we know it today, is a construct of European and Africanist aesthetics. In her formidable 1996 text, *Digging the Africanist Presence in American Performance*, Dixon-Gottschild provides a comprehensive framework for identifying Africanist aesthetics in concert dance, and in the context of the everyday. According to Dixon-Gottschild, Africanist aesthetics are paradoxical with the ability to embrace the conflict.

The movements are polyrhythmic and polycentric and juxtapose high intensity with soft fluidity. The dancers attack movements with a “youthful vitality,”<sup>4</sup> yet maintain a cool nonchalant attitude, while their bodies’ work overtime.<sup>5</sup> The “looseness and laid-back energy” of postmodernists Yvonne Rainer and Trisha Brown, and ballet choreographer George Balanchine’s attention to speed, syncopation, and isolations, whether acknowledged or not, exemplify Africanist aesthetics.<sup>6</sup> Rainer’s and Brown’s aloofness cited the “coolness” of black social dances and dancers. And Balanchine’s dancers learned to attack rhythmically demanding footwork, yet perform with the grace and ease expected of ballet dancers.

Hence, I will no longer use “Western” to describe modern dance. Ballet however, though practiced by many and Americanized with Africanist aesthetics, still qualifies as a distinctly European art form, because it originated and reflects the values of the European court. The term “African Diaspora” signifies not only the traditional dances throughout Africa, the Caribbean, Brazil and parts of South America; but also the fusion of dance forms that comprise hip-hop. I hesitate to call jazz, as it is practiced today, a dance of the African Diaspora. The ballet technique and watered down hip-hop that comprise most contemporary jazz makes it a great example of the fusion and/or appropriation of cultures that represent the U.S. But, to include it with African Diasporic dances is a stretch for me. As for Latin, Asian, and South East Asian forms, I agree with Dixon-Gottschild’s assertion that “The African-European paradigm is the bottom line of American culture that greets and grounds every newly arrived immigrant, regardless of ethnicity and political, social, religious or economic persuasion”<sup>7</sup> at least in concert and social dance. Yet, what qualifies as “technique” continues to reflect European ideas of dance that are directly related to ballet.

## **Technique Is/Technique Ain’t**

“So what is technique?” I ask Rose, an African American dance major. She willingly agreed to have a phone conversation with me after the end of the semester.

“Skill to me, skill level. When I first came, I defined technique as practice.”  
“Doing a movement properly. And-”

“What is *properly*?” I interrupt.

“I don’t know. Aligning your body—engaging your muscles, using the right muscles to do a specific movement. Head tail connection, using your core to hold up your body, proper breathing—inhaling, taking full breaths.”

“Oh okay.” I smile, to myself, knowing her modern technique teachers will appreciate the “head tail” connection reference.

“Would you call your experience taking Modern I, technique?”

“No. It was more like being in the moment, not technique like ballet. We did spinal articulations and contracting and releasing your ribs, your shoulders and hands; it was like intricate movement. It increased my stamina, and improved my technique and ability to let go. I find myself stuck in modern class, not fully dancing throughout the entire space. This class helped me open up and find different ways to move my body and be comfortable with it.”

Evidenced by Rose’s statements, dancers will often use the word “technique” with the assumption that the term signifies the same movement or set of skills for all. The pervasive assumed meaning of “technique” in dance refers to ballet technique. This idea is perpetuated by shows such as FOX Television’s *So You Think You Can Dance*, where the judges lavishly praise a hip-hop dancer when he performs contemporary or jazz choreography. “It’s amazing a b-boy, and untrained dancer can perform such a technically demanding piece!” a judge might gush after a b-boy extends his legs and points his feet. Of course, their response blatantly discounts the dancer’s training in his form.

Modern dance technique is varied, and defined differently from dancer to dancer dependent upon her training. Like many departments throughout the country, we do not teach a specific codified modern technique. Thus, I asked my colleagues, who teach modern technique and pedagogy, to define technique. Rather than focus on specific bodily movements, one teacher easily responded, “Technique is the skill you need to do anything. It’s a system of training typically using repetition that facilitates the ability to do anything.” While another specifically focused on anatomy, “It is a system of neurological pattern; the principle of specificity.” Their responses echo French sociologist Marcel Mauss’ article, “Techniques of the Body.” Mauss argues that the taken for grantedness of rote bodily activities like walking, sitting, and eating, are not natural to human beings. Instead, they are unconsciously developed, culturally specific skills that “can be classified according to their efficiency, i.e., according to the results of training.”<sup>8</sup> Rose, the student interviewed above, also identified technique as “skill,” nevertheless, she notes that the Contemporary African class improved her technique even if she does not identify it as technique because it contradicts ballet’s adherence to alignment.

Ballet is not the enemy here, but the extent to which it is wielded in the ether as the par exemplar technique makes it a little too bossy. Faculty within my department, in all areas of the curriculum, dance making, history and theory, pedagogy, and technique, find they have to do double duty to help students (un)learn ideas about what makes a strong dancer.

My colleagues and I engaged in a frenzied email exchange after we reviewed “Belinda,” a graduating senior’s, teaching philosophy, in which she declared, “Ballet is the foundation of all dance.” Now, we have heard this statement many times from first year students of all races and ethnicities who have only taken ballet and jazz, or who have never taken a ballet class in their lives until they entered our studios. In these instances, we know that we must work against popular media representations of what it means to be a dancer. Our first year students for example, identify technique as the ability to acquire specific skills like “the splits,” multiple pirouettes, or an arabesque above a ninety- degree angle. In fact, this is what many of them write in their journals when they discuss their technique goals. When these young dancers wave the ballet “flag,” I quickly ask them how ballet has influenced their hip-hop, tap, salsa and/or African dance training. Bewildered for a moment, they slowly nod their heads with the recognition that the skills they learn in ballet are not necessarily the same skills they need to dance other forms. Our job as teachers is to help them understand how the various dance techniques they learn can complement each other.

I expect this naïveté from young students who have yet to read the books and articles contextualizing ballet within its specific socio-cultural history. Or have yet to meet a technically proficient modern or contemporary dancer who has never taken a ballet class. Or a ballet dancer who has difficulty dancing other styles. Fortunately, the pedagogy faculty assures that when they ask the upper division students on the teaching track to define technique, these students focus more on the process than a final static position. Our advanced students define technique as the ability to employ weight, momentum, inversions, and spine articulations throughout a modern dance class. Ballet develops the use of weight and momentum as well; but ballet urges the dancer up and away from the floor, it does not encourage her to roll on it, or walk on her hands. Accordingly, when Belinda, the graduating senior, defined ballet as foundational, it struck a dissonant chord with a faculty that works to contextualize all forms within their specific socio-cultural contexts. And who trains students to dance with the awareness that they constantly physically fuse a myriad of dance forms in their bodies.

“How could this happen?” Everyone felt implicated and at fault. Belinda’s history teachers failed to give her enough articles on how ballet is not the root of all dance forms. Her ballet teachers failed to teach; as one instructor noted, that ballet is a contemporary “lived movement practice” and not an “outdated performance aesthetic that one has to study to be appropriately ‘educated’ in dance.” Her pedagogy teachers failed to communicate how those ideas silence students in her class who may not excel at the form. Yes, we all took the blame, but the fault does not lie in individuals; instead, it lies in institutions and infrastructures that reify monolithic ideals. In dance, these ideals reflect European movement aesthetics. As long as modern and ballet are referred to as “technique” and other forms are relegated to electives, it does not matter how much we attempt to facilitate students’ (un)learning. Until we recognize other forms as technique, and make this recognition explicit, they will continue to compartmentalize what they learn in history, and what they dance in reality. Dance curricula are not the only impediments to embodiment; lived experiences of *who* should dance *what* dance forms also inform thoughts around technique.

## **Who's Dancin' Who?**

As a dancer I cannot begin to count how many times I have heard that I need a solid ballet foundation in order to become a proficient technical dancer. I am sure other dancers can attest to this as well. As a black-multi racial dancer, I have often felt shut out in many regards to the art form I practice. I personally identify myself with ballet. The bulk of my training has been in ballet with a mixture of other genres such as: jazz, modern, and capoeira. But having studied ballet for almost a decade now, I am ashamed to say I feel singled out sometimes, or rather left out because I am the only black male. I admit that sometimes it works to my advantage being the only one of my particular race or gender, but more often the other dancers find me unapproachable, the teachers would not give me corrections even if I knew I was doing something wrong.<sup>9</sup>

Throughout this essay, I identify the race of my students to illustrate the diversity of my departments' student body. I have had classes where the majority of my students are African American and Latina/o, or where half of the students are white and the other half a mixture of African American, Latina, and Asian American. This demographic changes as students advance or fail to advance through the program. In the upper division theory and technique courses, serious "whitening" happens. Finances, a change in majors, failing, or not being able to meet the technique requirements can all explain this phenomenon. Nevertheless, it is a fact; the lower division courses, particularly the introductory technique classes, resemble those of the Alvin Ailey School, and the upper division technique classes resemble the Merce Cunningham Company. Hence, part of my motivation to explore this topic is to understand how to maintain the rich diversity within my institution onward to graduation, and to encourage diversity within dance departments throughout the U.S.

## **Black Girl Dance/White Girl Dance**

In my earlier years of dance training I grew up with the idea that ballet was an American "white girl" dance. It was almost portrayed that if you were white, American, and a girl that you knew how to do ballet.<sup>10</sup>

"I hate it when people say I dance like a black girl. Or say I dance good for a white girl."

"Me too, I think it's kind of offensive. Like because I'm white I shouldn't have rhythm."

“Well what does it mean to dance like a black girl?” I ask the two annoyed white, female students.

“It basically means, you can move your hips and have rhythm.”

I follow up with another question, “Well who typically says this to you?”

“Umm sometimes its black men, if you’re at a club.”

“I was in a hip-hop group one time, and I was the only white girl, and the black girls were surprised I could dance. I know they meant it as a compliment, but I think it’s rude.”

“Yeah, that’s kind of true though, it is surprising when you see a white girl, well, dance like a black girl,” a black female student chimes in.

“Okay, but what does that *mean*?” I ask again, trying to get the students to explain what they sense.

“I don’t know, they can dance, like really dance,” the black girl explains with a flustered smile on her face.

“So, if a black girl, dances ballet well, is she dancing like a white girl?” I ask.

“Umm yeah,” the same black girl responds, vigorously nodding her head.

Somehow, this topic consistently surfaces within my dance history class. The course interrogates the impact colonization has had on dance practices throughout the world. Therefore, it lends itself to wonderful conversations regarding race, class, gender, appropriation and a plethora of other topics relative to the relationship between the colonized and the colonizers. Although today’s students arguably have a different perspective on race than students entering the academy a decade prior, preconceived ideas about which bodies should dance which style, remain a constant.

Black girls/dancers shake their hips; have rhythm, and the ability to “get down.” In the cultural imaginary,<sup>11</sup> the black dancing body excels in vernacular forms, marked “low art.” White girls/dancers move ahead or behind the beat, with rigid hips that they cannot separate from their waists. Audiences do not expect fluency in vernacular forms from the white dancing body, but the anticipated gift of gracefulness and elegance will serve them well in the “high art” forms of concert dance.

Consequently, the cultural imaginary frames black dancing bodies, and the dances they dance as vulgar, excessive, hypersexual, and low class. While white dancing bodies and their dances enact chastity, decency, and aloofness.<sup>12</sup> My students' remarks and journal excerpts prove these stereotypes harm all despite their pervasiveness throughout American culture.

With their meticulous analysis of the performance and construction of race, specifically "whiteness" and "blackness" in concert dance, dance scholars attempt to reconcile these injurious stereotypes. Dixon-Gottschild assures that the notions of "black dance" or "white dance" are misnomers, but "the habit of racism has rendered us unable to put the fusion of American cultural creations into words from the vocabulary at our disposal."<sup>13</sup> Susan Manning's significant text, *Modern Dance Negro Dance: Race in Motion*, contextualizes this "racist" development of and relationship between "black" and "white" modern dance from the late 1920s to the late 1980s. While Manning's work integrates the heretofore, segregated history of modern dance, Thomas F. DeFrantz's edited volume, *Dancing Many Drums: Excavations in African American Dance*, marks the discursive difference between "black" and "African American" dance.<sup>14</sup> DeFrantz argues that "black dance" references the Afrocentric tone of the 1960's Black Arts Movement, while "African American dance" is a less political contemporary term. *Dancing Many Drums* is the first scholarly anthology to theorize, document, and historicize African American dancers and dances. DeFrantz continues to unpack the construction of African American dance in *Dancing Revelations*, which documents Alvin Ailey's choreographed articulations of an "African American ethos" and the impact Ailey's work continues to have on modern dance and its consumers.<sup>15</sup> In *I Want to Be Ready: Improvised Dance as a Practice of Freedom*, Danielle Goldman steps away from the confines of the concert stage and urges dance scholars to consider the "tight spaces" created by race, class, and gender in improvisational dance contexts.

Rather than merely historicize the advent of black bodies dancing in this country, the scholars mentioned above illuminate how the inevitable bumps, grinds, lifts, and slides between all bodies in the United States, shape dance in America. The ways in which we define technique in the academy however, continues to create distinctions between which dance forms are "appropriate" and "inappropriate" for the academic dance space. The demarcation of appropriateness, arbitrarily defines where dancers will dance specific styles of dance. It also segregates students and discredits their movement practices.

## **Space, Place, and the State**

Why can't a hip hop dancer major in hip-hop dancing? Why does everyone require passing all four levels of ballet and modern? They should at least have hip-hop, jazz, and African as high up in the scale. Have everyone complete different levels of each dance style, not just ballet and modern.<sup>16</sup>



The above excerpt from a student journal suggests that as long as ballet and modern dance remain the gatekeepers and valued mode of training dancers in the academy, dance educators will continue to perpetuate the racist infrastructure upon which most institutions of higher learning were built. I do not intend to dub the teachers and administrators, of which I am one, racist. Rather, I am identifying racist infrastructures, and the extent to which the construction of curriculum unconsciously reinforces them.

In her comprehensive study on cultural diversity in curricula of dance departments throughout the U.S., dance scholar, Nyama McCarthy-Brown, traces the history and construction of the field of dance education and identifies its monolithic roots. McCarthy-Brown notes, Margaret H'Doubler, the mother of dance education in the academy and the subsequent teacher of generations of dance educators, was a product of the early 1900s. The racist ideals of the time influenced her creation of the field of Dance Education, as she shunned jazz dance, and excluded black music and dance from her curriculum.<sup>17</sup> McCarthy-Brown reminds us that H'Doubler's "mono-cultural values were part and parcel of the landscape of dance in higher education. . . [and] her influence on the field cannot be overstated."<sup>18</sup> Compared to the early 1900s, dance educators have obviously made great strides in how we educate dancers within the academy. Not only is black music and dance a part of dance curriculum, hip-hop studies is a burgeoning field in the academy. As a discipline, hip-hop studies critically examines hip-hop as a product of black cultural production, and how it impacts the global market. But, in dance, we have yet to shake the ideology that informs what makes a good dancer. That is, we still adhere to European aesthetics, which value the lines of ballet technique to the rhythmic isolations and contractions of dances influenced by the African Diaspora.

French philosopher, Luis Althusser's "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," reveals how the academy mandates "aesthetics." Althusser suggests that all State institutions function to reproduce the ideals of the ruling class. As an apparatus of the State, all private and public schools, "teach[es]'know how' but in forms which ensure *subjection to the ruling ideology* [emphasis in the original] or the mastery of its 'practice'."<sup>19</sup>

Race, class, gender, or geography does not solely determine how specific bodies should dance. Yet, academic dance departments enforce rules of aesthetics, which reflect the preferences of the ruling class, marked "white," and discourage the practices of the "other." As aforementioned, Dixon-Gottschild reminds us that the American dancing body reflects the intercultural fusion of two or more cultures living side by side.<sup>20</sup> And, arguably, students who enter the academy today experience this within their bodies more than students of past generations. The pervasive exploitation of hip-hop, and hip-hops' influence on Indie rock and pop, assures that more students nod their heads and sway their hips to the beat with confidence. The rigidity of dance technique requirements in the academy, however, creates a schism in students.

Students believe that the improvised footwork, breaks, and jumps danced at nightclubs and recreation centers, will not serve them well in their collegiate dance departments. They quickly learn to compartmentalize these physical experiences as “other,” and fully participate in the colonization and disciplining of their bodies by dance curriculum that continues to hold onto antiquated ideas about what it means to have “good technique.”

Even I grimace as I write this. I feel the sting of what is not meant to be an insult, but will consequently be depicted as such. As dance educators, we collectively work to provide our students with information that will make them competitive in the work force. We train our students to not only be good performers, but to also work as dance writers, choreographers, teachers and administrators in dance or a career field of their choice. To compare this to colonization seems unfair. We simply reify the colonial model however, with dance training that continues to reflect hierarchal ideas of the body and how it moves. The history of colonization in this country and throughout the world informs these ideals. Dance technique curricula that privileges modern and ballet by requiring the majority of credits in these courses and relegating all other dance classes to electives, reflects the colonizers reactions to “natives” with bent knees, rounded torsos, stomping feet, and jiggling flesh. They admonished them, took away their drums, covered their bodies, and instructed them to straighten their legs, still their hips, extend their torsos, and quiet their feet. The natives/enslaved learned that survival meant looking and acting like the new ruling power and therefore, relegated their movement practices to after hours when the safety of nightfall decreased the likelihood of discovery. Our students learn to do the same. They perform their jazz, hip-hop, salsa, and other movement practices outside of their dance departments, and struggle to create dance works which reflect the modern and ballet sensibilities they’ve acquired in “technique” class.

The ideology that specific dance styles should be rehearsed and performed in predetermined and separate places then, exemplifies French philosopher, Michel de Certeau’s theorizations on “spaces” and “places.” In *The Practice of Everyday Life*, de Certeau delimits place as a fixed location ruled by “the law of the proper;” place infers stability.<sup>21</sup> Contrapositively, space is mobile, and actualized “by the ensemble of movements deployed within it.”<sup>22</sup> Space is neither stable nor proper, and allows for spontaneity, improvisation, and fluidity. Yet, over time, de Certeau surmises, “space is a practiced place.”<sup>23</sup> The manner in which students learn to dance explicates this concept.

The law of propriety might designate dance studios as the appropriate “place” for students to learn various dance forms, but *dancing* occurs in insurmountable “spaces.” Over time, if dancing repeatedly happens in a random space, a static location, such as a living room, hotel lobby, McDonald’s parking lot, or any of the kind, that space habitually used for the practicing of dance becomes a place delineated for dancing. The bodies in the space, not the structure, or the law, make it so. Dance departments in academia also function as a “place,” the static proper location where appropriate dancing happens. The designation of “technique” determines propriety.

But, again, many of our students learn to dance in undesignated “spaces.” Even those trained in dance studios, the proper place, and who learn modern and ballet, the proper techniques, rehearse their skills in their bedrooms, at weddings, concerts, parties, or church fashion and talent shows. Those who learn how to dance in “spaces” designated as “places” for other purposes might find the dance place of the academy challenging unless they are disciplined to practice in this place. Unfortunately, this disciplining communicates that the movement practices they entered with are somehow invalid.

The rhetoric of “the American Dream” imagines institutions of higher learning as opportunities for greater mobility and freedom. Ideologies that continue to reflect the desires of the State constrict these liberties. As black, feminist scholar and cultural theorist, bell hooks, affirms:

If we examine critically the traditional role of the university in the pursuit of truth and the sharing of knowledge and information, it is painfully clear that biases that uphold and maintain white supremacy, imperialism, sexism, and racism have distorted education so that it is no longer about the practice of freedom.<sup>24</sup>

My use of hooks here may seem as though I am imagining a dance utopia where all dances are created equal. And all academic dance departments have enough faculty and studio space to offer multiple levels for all forms. This is not the case. Yes, I believe we all yearn to have ample faculty to teach an assortment of techniques and an abundance of studios in which to teach them. But, I am not suggesting that dance departments offer multiple levels of every form. I do believe, however, in the benefits of training dancers in the forms that comprise the American dancing body, which I identify as West African, ballet, and modern dance. In an interview with a bi-racial (African American and white) student new to West African and modern dance, the student reflects on her experience taking West African for the first time and the impact it had on her dancing. Her reflections support my thesis:

I feel like they complement one another. Even in West African, when using my lower half, I’m more grounded in the floor. I’m still using my core and that sense of the centering and the line from top of the head to bottom of the feet. Even in West African, using my lower half, I still have to spot. Taking those different styles makes you a well-rounded dancer. In ballet I’m centered and upright and in West African I’m more grounded. And everything in between, the jazz, modern, hip-hop, tap, trickle in between, then it’s not that much of a challenge. You have one end of the spectrum and the other. My body knows how to be grounded which is the West African and how to be centered which is ballet, all the other stuff in between is different levels of the two.

This student recognizes the relationship between her West African and ballet training, but most students need assistance drawing parallels and articulating the myriad of movement practices in their bodies. Dance educators, in all parts of the curriculum, must help them connect the lines to the isolations.

## **Shifting the Canon**

Most of my students come to the program saying they want to be in a dance company, well, Ron K. Brown, Urban Bush Women, this is who is representing the U.S., West African, African Diasporic dance forms, if you want to be in a company this is who is touring. They don't realize which companies are touring—African Diasporic, West African dance, contemporary modern dance, hip hop, house dancers, this is who represents the U.S.

The above quote is from “Ruth,” a white teacher of West African and modern techniques. On the first day of classes, Ruth plans to announce which companies tour and receive government funding. She hopes that her announcement will help contextualize the importance of West African dance. Ruth's modern technique class draws from what she refers to as “West African, American release and improvisation forms.” Ruth and I often discuss race, class, and gender in dance and how we are situated in the academy as white and African American female artists and scholars. I cite our conversation at length here. Ruth's experience as a dancer and teacher of West African technique surmises the arguments made in this essay. Notably, dance educators need to re-imagine the academy as a “space” for dancing, instead of a “place” to reify established dance techniques. Moreover, epidermal reality does not designate who should dance which style or form.

In one of our casual conversations, Ruth shares, “When I'm in Africa, I feel like I'm a good teacher. But when I come back to the states [teaching within the academic structure] makes me feel like I don't know what I'm doing,” she laughs. This brief phone call inspired me to ask her about her experience teaching West African forms in the academy. Below are excerpts from our conversations.

RM: Just talk about student expectations.

R: These students are coming from jazz and ballet studios with maybe classical modern training. And, maybe hip hop, without understanding the roots or culture of hip hop. They have preconceived notions about dance. I think it [technique] should be called movement practice not technique. It's open and a lot of things fall under that.

RM: What's been your experience introducing West African forms to your classes?

R: Teachers of African and African Diaspora forms have to work harder than ballet faculty, for example, to contextualize the forms although they [the students] are misinformed about that too. But, European knowledge is in the air. From my experience we have to contextualize, give a cultural context, why the movement is important, just as important as doing *tendu*. As a white woman, students assume similarities and there are. I come from a studio and had to learn these forms. I had to learn and (un)learn, where the dance comes from, where it's practiced, [and] who does it.

RM: So, how does race factor in?

R: There's definitely race and social assumptions around technical training. They think this is a social dance *everyone* can do it. It's not really *everyone* can do it. And it's practiced in clubs, parties, social dance circles. There's a context of where the music and dance develop together. They're really born from a social context. Studios are mirror, square. What West African teaches is to listen in a way that they don't have to listen. It's very cultural.

RM: What do you mean, "they don't have to listen?"

R: White people! White culture, it's not part of the context. Music is important.

RM: Rhythmic music is important. It's at all functions in African American culture.

R: Yeah. Music is ingrained in African Diaspora cultures. It's really a paradigm shift of who's in power teaching what. How do you shift a canon? Shifting canons is threatening. It's a lot of responsibility put on teachers of African Diaspora forms.

I imagine many a hackle will rise with my inclusion of a white woman discussing her experience teaching West African forms. Historically, white people are always afforded more opportunities than black people to speak for and about "blackness." I did so to provide an example of how teachers are figuring out how to teach the fusion of practices in their bodies to their students, and to further illustrate that the practices in the body are not solely determined by race. Rather than teach a traditional West African class, Ruth pulls from her training in modern dance, specifically release and improvisation techniques and West African. And, as Ruth identified at the beginning of this section, funding opportunities appear to be greater for companies that do so.

In 2010, the Bureau of Education and Cultural Affairs (ECA) of the U. S. Department of State and the Brooklyn Academy of Music (BAM) launched *DanceMotion USA* “to showcase contemporary American dance abroad.”<sup>25</sup> Joseph V. Melillo, BAM’s executive producer, selected three dance companies to perform, teach workshops and master classes. Company members also participated in interviews and discussions with international artists and audiences. The program endeavored to buttress the diplomatic efforts of the United States.<sup>26</sup> Hence, in 2010 from January to March, Brooklyn’s, Ronald K. Brown’s *Evidence, A Dance Company* traveled to South Africa, Nigeria, and Senegal. New York’s, *Urban Bush Women* taught and performed in Brazil, Venezuela, and Colombia. Lastly, San Francisco’s, *ODC/Dance* performed “diplomacy” in Thailand, Burma, and Indonesia.

Based on the success of the pilot tour, *DanceMotion USA* added a fourth company to the 2012 program and has invited a yet to be determined international company to the United States. In a 2010 interview with the *Wall Street Journal*, BAM president, Karen Brooks Hopkins, explains the choice as an opportunity “to have a true exchange,” and “a way to engage America in a dialogue . . . It means more opportunity for American artists to go out and foreign artists to come in. It’s about transcending language and getting the spirit of America out there.”<sup>27</sup> In 2012, Los Angeles’, *Jazz Tap Ensemble* will tour Mozambique, Zimbabwe, and the Democratic Republic of Congo; Philadelphia’s, *Rennie Harris Puremovement* will tour Egypt, Israel, The Palestinian Territories, and Jordan; New York’s, *Séan Curran Company* will tour Kazakhstan, Kyrgyz Republic, and Turkmenistan; and Boise’s, *Trey McIntyre Project* will tour China, South Korea, Philippines, and Vietnam.

Though a worthy endeavor, my intentions here are not to interrogate and challenge the ideology behind *DanceMotion USA*’s exportation of contemporary dance as a U.S. cultural artifact. But rather to note, of the seven selected companies four, *Evidence, A Dance Company*, *Urban Bush Women*, *Rennie Harris Puremovement*, and *Jazz Tap Ensemble*, directly engage Africanist Aesthetics or African dance. In the academy however, we continue to identify dances of the African Diaspora as electives. Current dance scholarship works against the “elective” delegation. Dance history and theory curricula throughout U.S. colleges and universities endeavor to reflect the diverse cultural influences that construct American concert dance. It is time for how we train our dancers to do the same.

It is not enough to simply suggest to a student that he take a West African dance class for example, as an elective. Electives are optional classes, not foundational. To change the tenor of the academy from one of antiquated exclusion and compartmentalization, to one of contemporary inclusion that acknowledges fusion, we must revise our use of the term “technique.” All dance forms have technique. Modern dance and ballet are forms of dance with their own specific techniques. They are not the only “technical” dance forms. Dance administrators are certainly allowed to shape their programs how they see fit, but semantics are important. What we qualify as appropriate dance technique, often reifies the not so subtle racist infrastructure of American colleges and universities.

The advent of Black/African Studies departments and programs were obvious interventions to the systemic racism of our State institutions. The onus to police racism in its many forms however, is not solely the duty of the “ethnic” studies scholars. All scholars must work to unearth inequalities embedded in their curriculum. It might seem like I am, as we say in the vernacular, “putting a lot on it”—this notion of technique. I am. Technique is a loaded word. I do not expect dance educators to delete the word from our dance curricula, nor is this my desire. Rather I call for specificity. So that the next time a student queries, “What about my technique?” the teacher will have to ask, “Which one?”

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> We have changed this policy since the writing of this essay.

<sup>2</sup> Many dance studios specializing in jazz, participate in extremely competitive dance competitions. This training differs greatly from modern dance training in the academy.

<sup>3</sup> We did not discuss dance writing, but noted that the students seem to have the ability to contextualize dance forms within their specific socio-cultural and historical contexts in their theory and history courses.

<sup>4</sup> Brenda Dixon-Gottschild, *Digging the Africanist Presence in American Performance: Dance and Other Contexts*. (Westport: Greenwood, 1996),16.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 52& 71.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.,4.



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<sup>8</sup> Marcel Mauss, “Body Techniques.” In *Sociology and Psychology. Essays* (London: Routledge, 1979 (1950), 97-123.

<sup>9</sup> Excerpt from a student essay.

<sup>10</sup> Excerpt from a student essay.

<sup>11</sup> In *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, writer Toni Morrison argues that early American writers constructed the perception of “blackness” as the “savage” antithesis of the “purity” of “whiteness.” The image of the savage black body thus, continues to circulate throughout the American cultural imaginary. Please see, Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993).

<sup>12</sup> For a riveting discussion on this topic please see, Brenda Dixon-Gottschild, *The Black Dancing Body: A Geography from Coon to Cool* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>14</sup> Thomas F. DeFrantz ed., *Dancing Many Drums: Excavations in African American Dance*. Madison (University of Wisconsin Press, 2000), 16.

<sup>15</sup> Thomas F. DeFrantz, *Dancing Revelations: Alvin Ailey’s Embodiment of African American Culture*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), vii.

<sup>16</sup> Excerpt from a student journal.

<sup>17</sup> Nyama McCarthy Brown, “‘The Proof is in the Pudding:’ An Examination of How Stated Values of Cultural Diversity are Implemented in Three Selected Dance Department Curricula” (Ph.D. diss., Temple University, 2011), 24.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>19</sup> Luis Althusser, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses.” In *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971), 133.

<sup>20</sup> Dixon-Gottschild, *Digging the Africanist Presence*.

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<sup>21</sup>Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Translated by Steven Rendall (Los Angeles: University of California Press 1984), 117.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 29.

<sup>25</sup> *DanceMotion USA*. “About” <http://www.dancemotionusa.org/about.aspx>

<sup>26</sup>*DanceMotion USA* press release “Bureau of Education and Cultural Affairs of U.S. State Department and Brooklyn Academy of Music” (*DanceMontion USA Press Release Final*, pdf).

<sup>27</sup> Pia Catton, “BAM Gets Cultural Diplomacy Nod: Heads *DanceMotion USA* Program After a Sucusseful Pilot.” *The Wall Street Journal* (New York) December 15, 2010. <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748704694004576019751021251930.html>