



DIVERSITY IN COMMUNITY

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There are no glimmering tutus, no beautifully flowing orchestra music, no tortuously elegant pointe shoes, and the starkest difference, there are no white dancers. This is modern dance. To many people, modern dance and classical ballet are about as similar as black and white in movement style, in subject matter, in costumes, and in the race of its star dancers. The remarkable rise of both ballet and modern have led to a stark divide. Modern dancers are primarily black, and ballet dancers are primarily white. The history of modern dance, with its roots in traditional African and American styles, has created a chasm of race within the art of dance; while there are numerous criticisms and unanswered questions on how to handle this, many people are hopeful that the future of both modern and ballet can be one of harmony and diversity in the larger scheme of racial issues in society.

We begin with modern dance deeply rooted in African traditions and American values, ideals that overall contributed to the African American experience. The history of modern dance is rich in these stories and cultural phenomena. However, it is important to note that modern dance and African American dance formed in tandem, not in unison, due to issues of financial support and lack of education. According to Susan Manning's book *Modern Dance, Negro Dance: Race in Motion*, early modern dance had a budding patronage system and opportunities for growth. It enveloped the African American dance styles into its own techniques due to their similar movements and rhythms (Manning 4). In the early twentieth

century, a time when “it became fashionable. . . to rebel against the strictures [sic] of tradition,” says the “*Spotlight*” article “Modern Dance,” the world of dance was shocked by modern’s rejection of classical ballet. (“Modern Dance”). The leaders of this movement were Isadora Duncan and Ruth St. Denis, who had drastically different styles but equally impacted dance as we know it today with ideas of freeing movement and liberal principles (“Modern Dance”).

The next generation after early modern development was led by Martha Graham and Katherine Dunham, two famed dancers. “I See America Dancing,” an article describing modern dance’s origin, says Graham turned dance into a cultural experience, rather than just entertainment, and codified a physically grueling technique while focusing on common American experiences. Dunham’s motivation was rooted in the experiences of black cultures in America and Africa; she dignified these experiences in a way that allowed people of all colors to see the pride African Americans held for their community’s history (Warren 5).

At this same time, there was increased attention to the African Diaspora movement, which is “the mass dispersion of peoples from Africa during the Transatlantic Slave Trade,” (“African Diaspora Cultures”), and the traditions/spirituals associated with this movement. Modern dancers from a variety of racial and cultural backgrounds who were interested in these ideas of the Diaspora movement “emerged to identify and describe the black experience in America” (Warren 6). Many choreographers, such as Helen Tamaris and Lester Horton, sought tirelessly to bring representation to various ethnic groups (Warren 5). Alvin Ailey was arguably the most successful at telling the black experiences of the 1950’s through dance. He cast black dancers almost exclusively,

and his works centered around the ideas from the African Diaspora. (Warren 9).

Blacks and other minority groups were drawn to modern dance to escape the discrimination and lack of representation in classical ballet, as well as the world around them. This led to the increased portrayal of African American culture, more black dancers, and more diversity within the world of dance. Yet this community was left with a huge race gap. After the modern dance movement slowed, it became apparent that white dancers were ballerinas and black dancers focused on modern, creating a large racial divide that permeated dance cultures beyond casting or subject matter.

Racial tendencies were obvious in the dance world from first glance. Yet even modern dance itself, despite its stance as a diverse break from the whitewashed ballets, fell prey to internal racism. Edna Guy, an African American modern dancer, was barred from joining Ruth St. Denis' Denishawn company due to race. Guy had toured with the company as "essentially a glorified maid" and was shocked when St. Denis adhered to the harsh Jim Crow laws when visiting the South (Manning 3). Modern dance, which once stood as a beacon for diversity, was tinged with the pitfalls of American racist culture.

Additionally, the height of racial tensions in society was at the same time as the success of diverse and culturally prominent art groups. Creating a large, all-black modern concert-dance company with a strong concert repertoire was extremely difficult. The prime example was Alvin Ailey. Many critics examined any achievements in this task with scrutiny. The dance world examined Alvin Ailey with an extremely critical eye. He wanted to cross the boundaries of dance genres and appeal to a variety of audiences while emanating black culture and experience. This is

where the difficulty began: staying true to the ideals of Alvin Ailey while introducing new cultural topics. Thomas DeFrantz describes as the company's fame and fortune grew, many choreographers came specifically to the Alvin Ailey company to set African American-styled pieces, giving fruition to Ailey's original dream (DeFrantz 668). As Ailey's works toured the world, their pieces offered a slice of the diversity of American life, particularly the racial climate of the US, and the range of political ideas the liberal group hoped to share (DeFrantz 672). The criticisms of his works, while numerous and often tinged with racial prejudices, did not hinder the company in any way. Instead, the Alvin Ailey company continued to build a repertoire rich in traditional modern styles while staying true to Alvin Ailey's ideals of African culture and the celebration of the black American experience.

The Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater has been an important piece of my education here at the University of Missouri-Kansas City. We were watching a movie one day with the company's repertoire in it. My classmates and I were commenting on the skimpy costumes in one of the pieces. My modern dance professor, a former Ailey company member herself, laughed and said something I still remember vividly: "Oh yeah, we definitely wore that. You know I was the only white ass coming across that stage" (Hiatt). It was (and still is) funny to think about, but it left me with the questions. I decided to interview Andrew Troum, an administrative employee with the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, who was well versed in the company's history and diversity practices. Troum described Alvin Ailey's company as being founded on this idea of bringing African American stories to life, a task that "few companies have tackled, especially to such a large scale as we have" (Troum). Troum sees diversity in the company both with performers and administration that brings in a more diverse audience and more support for the works. In my

opinion, it shows the growth of diversity and representation in the company. While Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater started with only African American dancers, the company has since expanded to circulate a variety of other ethnicities, which Troum believes indicates its positive history and future. I asked Troum why diversity was important to the company, and he gave one of my favorite answers in this interview: “There are so many stories that need to be told . . . We are trying to reach out and find other stories that might not have a chance to reach the spotlight” (Troum). As I mentioned earlier, people often see modern dance as a rejection of classical ballet, with modern dancers often being people of color. He quelled this belief by saying “comparing modern and ballet is like comparing apples and oranges; it is impossible to say that modern dancers are rejects” (Troum). Another difficult topic I asked Troum about was the misconception that modern companies that are composed primarily people of color are in some way discriminatory to white dancers. Troum quickly cleared this up: “We train and give the opportunity for all ethnicities to excel” (Troum). Troum is hopeful for the future of the company, saying that it is already one of the most diverse in the world and it can only go up from where it is at today.t

Troum’s interview brought up another issue or criticism that often comes to light with African-based modern companies: the role or place of white dancers in pieces or groups that celebrate the black American experience. Helen Tamiris was one of the first dancers to address this issue. She produced a show about two African American spirituals and gave an interesting take on race in a manifesto she wrote to accompany it. In this manifesto, she describes the artist’s role to express race. However, this was not race in the traditional sense; instead of using race in terms of ethnicity, Tamiris used it as nationality. She saw race as a factor of where one is from; for Tamiris, it was the fact that she was American. Her Jewish heritage, which many recognized and called

her out for, was not seen as her race. Therefore, her piece was not one celebrating the black heritage of the spiritual musicians; instead, it was an homage to the American spirit of the music itself (Manning 2). However, many people today question the role of white dancers in these all-black modern groups founded on certain cultural ideals. Each company will have its own opinions. There is no true, definitive line about the role of whites in black companies; while it was certainly a political statement to have a predominately black modern dance company, it may simply be a technical decision to cast a white dancer in the group.

The implications of racial issues in dance have been addressed, evaluated, and reevaluated by numerous individuals within and outside the field. The question now lies in how we continue to encourage diversity in dance. When there is a wide variety of races, ethnicities, and backgrounds of the dancers on stage, it makes audience members feel as if they are represented. Representation can empower generations and can continue to increase the level of diversity in the world of dance. Additionally, dance is an art form that likes to shock the world. By pushing ideas of diversity in dancers or choreography, the seeds of these ideas can be planted in more conservative facets of society.

One thing I found to be disconcerting, regarding the issue above, was a lack of conversation. I assumed there would be little scholarly discussion about dance in general but soon came across entire journals dedicated to conversing about nearly every aspect of dance. However, there were few conversations about race in dance (let alone in modern dance specifically). Additionally, I struggled in my interview to get concrete answers to the tough questions. I felt like some questions were being ignored or left unanswered for the sake of public relations. The answers I did receive could have been a diversity statement on the company's

website. I initially panicked; had I totally missed the mark on branding this racial divide as an issue? I believe that the primary concern contributing to this lack of recognition and discussion is the fear of stepping on someone's toes. The issue of race runs into some touchy conversations about the origins of modern dance and the tarnished history of ballet; I saw this in my interview with Troum and in reading articles referenced in this work. This led me to wonder: is part of the reason society struggles to increase diversity in everyday life because we try to avoid these uncomfortable conversations about race, religion, sexual orientation, and overall background? By bringing these issues to light, it is easier to accept the problem and tackle a solution. Modern dance companies were built on this beautiful idea of diversity and inclusion of people the rest of society looked down upon; the issue now is taking this idea into building representation for all.

By making dance more accessible to everyone, regardless of their background or status, and losing misconceptions of what types of dancers excel at various styles, the dance community (particularly modern companies) can continue to provide diverse storylines and dancers. In order to do so, I think companies should focus less on archaic ideas of race and diversity introduced at the birth of modern dance. Instead, they should focus their energies on welcoming dancers of all shapes and sizes based on what they can bring to their group. The history of modern dance is a remarkable success story for the dancer of color; yet when the fire slowed, the community was left with a stark racial divide. However, there is hope that with continual support for increased diversity and representation in modern dance companies, this division can slowly become a tale of the past.

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