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Conversations on Race and Dance

THESIS

submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements
for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

in Dance

by

Lauren Gibson Etter

Thesis Committee:
Associate Professor Jennifer Fisher, Chair
Associate Professor S. Ama Wray
Professor Alan Terricciano

2019

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**DEDICATION**

To my mother

who taught me the value of apologizing, learning better, and doing better.

"In the transformation of silence into language and action, it is vitally necessary for each one of us to establish or examine her function in that transformation and to recognize her role as vital within that transformation."

- Audre Lorde, *The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action* (43)

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Perhaps most importantly, I acknowledge and bow to the generations of Black people, Indigenous people, and People of Color to whom I and this nation owe the greatest apologies and debts. I regret that I am so late in doing my work to do better by my fellow humans, and I pledge to continue with action to work toward antiracism in myself and in my communities for generations to come.

**ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS**

Conversations on Race and Dance

By

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Master of Fine Arts in Dance

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Dr. Jennifer Fisher, Chair

This ethnographic research project explores how identity and experience shape our understandings of race and racism, and how these understandings influence the frequency, quality, and productivity of conversations concerning race and dance in the United States.

Using self-reflexive ethnography practices, I question my role as a white woman when it comes to dealing with racial issues in the dance community, and present the opinions, attitudes, and experiences of eleven dance artists from across races, generations, genders, and roles in the dance community, whom I interviewed. Their thoughts, supported and deepened by the work of dance studies scholars like Brenda Dixon-Gottschild, Thomas DeFrantz, Ananya Chatterjea, and Susan Manning, as well as critical race theory scholars like Imani Perry and Kimberlé Crenshaw, serve to help explain obstacles present when talking about race and dance in a post-2016 United States.

## INTRODUCTION

"You white girls run this school." I was a freshman in high school and this remark from a youngish white male history teacher in the hallway confused me. I followed the rules. I was hardly involved at school beyond my academics. I spent most of my time in the dance studio, so I never joined any clubs or teams, much less student government. "What did I do that meant I had power in my school?" wondered thirteen-year-old me. I didn't ask that question out loud then, but I think deep down, I knew the answer.

When my parents decided to move out of New York City and into the suburbs, it was important to them to continue raising me in a diverse community. They wanted me, their white daughter, to have opportunities to know people with experiences different than my own in my formative years. They chose Stamford, CT, a city with a population of 100,000 residing in both multi-million-dollar single family homes and government-funded housing projects. I always attended public school where the student body was relatively diverse, but while the public schools represented a cross-section of the youth of Stamford, we didn't all have the same education experience. As we got older and the time came to send some students to accelerated learning programs, things changed. My classes became whiter and whiter (this also happened in dance as we became more advanced), and by the time I went to high school in 2002, I interacted with most students of color only in the hallway. Even the cafeterias segregated themselves. (I recently saw an article published in the school newspaper stating that this practice still occurs, sixteen years later, though it has lessened since the 80s, and that a recent student-initiated effort to integrate the cafeterias and promote inclusivity has been moderately successful.)

It would be many years before I could articulate the answer to what it meant to run my school, which was nothing I *consciously* did. It was what my *whiteness* did, and the way of being

I had learned through my whiteness. As a kid, hearing that comment was the closest I ever came to having a conversation about white privilege. My parents, teachers and mentors had taught me to be respectful of everyone, no matter who they were, but they had never said out loud that because of my skin color, I gained unearned benefits that others weren't afforded. Evidence of this was all around me, but I never *understood* it. I didn't have to.

The first time I was explicitly asked to examine my privilege or heard the phrase "unconscious bias" was at twenty-five, as part of a course on teaching trauma-informed yoga to youth with a Canadian organization that works with incarcerated kids. It was the first time I took part in thoughtful conversations that informed how my whiteness affected my relationships with my dance students, and how my thoughts, words, and actions were informed by my whiteness. I started talking with my friends and brought it up with my parents. Their value of diversity was precisely why they chose to raise me where and how they did, but I wondered why we had never talked about race out loud before.

Coming to terms with what my whiteness meant initially brought up feelings of defensiveness and guilt, as it does for many white people who realize that the history of and mere presence of their bodies can cause real damage to others, and that our actions and words may be unintentionally racist and harmful (Billings, 10). This defensiveness to being challenged racially, as Robin DiAngelo explains, can be described as white fragility, which functions as "white racial control," and it works to maintain the racial status quo, where white people have more power than people of other racial groups (DiAngelo, 2). White silence and defensiveness around race can be just as violent defensiveness. By avoiding the discomfort that might come with having conversations about race and racism, white people are effectively accepting race relations as they are (DiAngelo, 245). I realized that I am part of the problem, that by not addressing and

understanding my privilege and how it affects my behavior, I am complicit in systemic racism. This goes further than my initial understanding that my *whiteness* meant I ran my school; my whiteness informed my experience and my thoughts, and thus my words and actions. Unexamined, my words and actions, or lack thereof, perpetuate the racist status quo.

Imani Perry, in her book "*More Beautiful and More Terrible: The Embrace and Transcendence of Racial Inequality in the United States,*" suggests that systemic racism is kept alive through individual actions and choices, not just through institutional policy. It is worth quoting Perry in full here, as she draws an important distinction between structural racism and the responsibility each of us have in furthering racial inequality:

> If we identify racial inequality exclusively in terms of impact, institutional formations, and unconscious bias, we limit our belief in our capacities to change the society in which we live. If we locate the problem outside of our conscious actions, we also move it beyond the realm of individual or small-scale community intervention. In order to advance racially democratic principles, we have to maintain some belief in will, deliberation, and agency (Perry, 20).

Institutions are made of people, and each of these individuals' decisions can—consciously or unconsciously—either work in service or opposition to racism. This framing of racial inequality leads me to question when my actions, as a white member of the dance community, serve to perpetuate racial inequality in our field, even when my intention is to combat racism.

As time went on I started to think more about the fact that I was almost never part of or witness to interpersonal conversations that were openly and explicitly about race within the dance community—not during my time as an undergraduate dance student at NYU—not during my time as a freelance dancer and choreographer in New York—not during my time as a ballet and modern teacher for kids in New York. The only place I had these conversations was at the non-profit dance school in Connecticut where I had studied and later taught. Logic leads me to

assume that this was this due to the fact that these spaces, perhaps with the exception of the non-profit school, were largely dominated by white people.

The rise of social media and the documenting and sharing of images of black people being killed by white police has led to increased discussion about blatant, institutionally sponsored racism on the internet and a heightened sense of racial tension in our communities, but I didn't hear these issues being discussed within the circles of the dance community where I traveled. Were they simply not happening? Did they happen somewhere I, as a white woman, wasn't privy to? Was I not paying enough attention? Was some fearful part of me purposely not engaging in conversations about race in the dance field? If I was afraid, what was it that scared me? These fears—of saying the wrong thing, of appearing naïve or ignorant, of being perceived as racist—were part of my privilege, my white fragility, rearing its ugly head.

Upon arriving at UCI for graduate school and considering what might be my thesis topic, I had two choices that excited me. 1) How can we teach ballet in a responsible, holistic way to all sorts of bodies and students; and 2) Why and how are black women excluded from classical ballet, which eventually led me to ask: what is the state and nature of conversations about race in the dance community in the United States? The former topic, while I believe it is important and worthwhile, and it would have addressed issues of power and privilege to some extent, felt safe to me. The latter scared me. I didn't know if I, as a white person, was allowed to ask these questions out loud. Shortly after arriving to campus, I was fortunate to attend a workshop called *Undoing Racism*, conducted by the New Orleans-based People's Institute for Survival and Beyond (PISAB.) The fears that I experienced were expressed by many others, and it was made clear to me that movement toward racial equity in our society must be made in multiracial

community. Supported by guidance from my professors, I realized that it is not only okay for me to ask questions about race, it is my civic, moral, and humanist duty to do so.

With the realization that if I am experiencing fear in talking about race, other people must be feeling similarly, and with encouragement from both white people and people of color who are responsible, activist-minded members of the dance community, I decided to gather my courage, learn to breathe and move through my discomfort, and get over the fact of my whiteness enough to have conversations about race. I deserve no accolades for doing this. It is simply what needs to be done to address the topic.

I started with Brenda Dixon-Gottschild's *The Black Dancing Body: A Geography from Coon to Cool*, published in 2003. Dixon-Gottschild explained her hope that the book would "help bring dance and performance to prominence in the current discourse on cultural studies and identity politics." Recognizing that dance studies was becoming more interdisciplinary, she joined scholars who "do not shy away from tough issues and place the interrogation of race, gender, and class at their center" (Dixon-Gottschild, 2003, 11). *The Black Dancing Body*, an ethnographic study of how that body has been viewed and experienced in the United States through interviews with a diverse group of renowned dance professionals, inspired me to take a similar approach for my project. I would face my discomfort by listening to and learning from a diverse group on the topic of conversations about race and dance. We would talk about complex identity issues *out loud*. What would follow for me would be the continuation of a life-long journey toward understanding how I can learn to be a more effective and responsible agent for change.

## METHODS AND DEFINITIONS

I set out to find dance professionals who would be willing to talk with me. It was important that the group be racially diverse, and in order to look at how conversations about race in dance have evolved in recent decades, they needed to come from different generations as well. In an attempt to gain an understanding of conversations about race across the dance field, I reached out to artists who inhabit different spheres of the community; they include dancers, choreographers, academics, directors, and educators. Representing different genders and sexual orientations was important as well. The more voices and range of experiences I could include, the better, as our experiences are shaped not just by how we are racialized in society, but the other aspects of our identities as well. (Questions about this concept of "intersectionality," a term coined by critical race theorist Kimberlé Crenshaw, came up in different ways throughout the interviews and are addressed later.) Some individuals I contacted did not respond, but mostly, I was met with enthusiasm and a willingness to speak. Ultimately, I was able to interview eleven artists. Most of the interviews were conducted in person in New York during July and August of 2018, but due to the location of some respondents, some interviews were conducted over Skype or FaceTime throughout the Summer and early Fall of 2018. It is important to me to honor the language and experience of each of these individuals, and so I audio-recorded all of the interviews and then transcribed the content. Some respondents read and commented on transcripts later to ensure their thoughts were presented with clarity and integrity. In one instance, the respondent, a white woman, reflected on her words and reconsidered how some of her initial remarks might be received. With her permission, I have opted to present her original marks, unedited, anonymously. She is one of two respondents who are presented anonymously. The second, who elected anonymity from the outset, is a mixed-race, up-and-coming, female

choreographer who felt that she could not be entirely honest about the topic if her name were attached to her observations, for fear of possible negative effects on her blooming career.

To support and perform analysis of the content of the interviews I conducted, I turn to the work of dance scholars like Dixon-Gottschild, Thomas DeFrantz, Ananya Chatterjea, and Susan Manning. To give context and depth to understanding the accounts of my interviewees, I turn to some critical race theory like that of Imani Perry and Kimberlé Crenshaw, social justice scholarship of Angela Davis, whiteness studies literature like that of Robin DiAngelo, as well as the stories and work of those who have taken part in and reflected on their conversations about race.

Some of the professionals I spoke with already had years of experience talking about race and dance. These conversations took on more complex and nuanced issues that surround the topic. For others, while they had previously thought about race and dance and perhaps even brought the concept into their work in some way, this was the first time they had had a one-on-one conversation about it. Whatever their level of experience with the subject matter, there is value in each of their stories. To understand each artist's thoughts about conversations about race in dance, I used "reflexive ethnography," which Soyini Madison describes as ethnography carried out with a "concern for positionality" (Madison, 8). In order to perform this research and present it in a responsible manner, I heed Madison's suggestion that researchers must "acknowledge our own power, privilege, and biases just as we are denouncing the power structures that surround our subjects" (Madison, 8). My role as a white researcher would inherently influence the work and likely the levels of trust respondents had in me. To be sure, I still, and will likely always, have blind spots. My hope is that this project, and its extension into how I live my life, does more good than it does harm.

Interview questions that were posed appear in the appendix. I started each interview by asking how the artist uses or understands the word or concept of race. There was a wide range of responses. Oxford dictionary defines "race" as "each of the major divisions of humankind, having distinct physical characteristics" (oxforddictionaries.com). In regard to its usage, Oxford writes "in recent years, the associations of race with the ideologies and theories that grew out of the work of 19th-century anthropologists and physiologists has led to the use of the word race itself becoming problematic. Although still used in general contexts, it is now often replaced by other words which are less emotionally charged, such as people(s) or community" (oxforddictionaries.com). The definition of the concept of race in America I use is one that stems from that of the People's Institute for Survival and Beyond (PISAB), an anti-racist organization which has honed their definition over years of anti-racist work. Their definition was presented in their *Undoing Racism* workshop, which I participated in in January, 2018. The definition I use is as follows:

> Race is a specious categorization imposed upon all individuals, created originally by white people as a means of asserting and justifying white supremacy over black people, indigenous people, and people of color, which permeates our society and has very real ramifications on each of our psyches and life experiences.

I distinguish between black people, indigenous people, and people of color because, as Angela Davis explains in her *The Meaning of Freedom and Other Difficult Dialogues*, "differently racialized populations in the United States… have been targets of different modes of racial subjugation" (Davis, 168). While these terms still make large generalizations about cultural identity, many in the field of racial activism currently use these categories to distinguish racialized experiences more specifically than the previously used term "people of color" to house all individuals who are not white.

Collective knowledge about race and racialization continually deepens and shifts, but too often, mainstream white culture develops ways of discussing and addressing race in a manner which removes the burden of antiracist work from the shoulders of white people, leaving the labor to black, indigenous, and people of color. The cultural understanding and use of the word "race" have evolved since its early usage in the fifteenth century, when the European notion of labeling people based on skin color was born in order to justify their colonization and lucrative enslaving of Africans (Kendi). After the U.S. Civil Rights movement, while outright racism became relatively taboo in white America, it still remained a part of the fabric of American culture (Billings, 16). Politicians skillfully shifted toward a "race-neutral framework," but racism still informed government and institutional policy and kept white Americans in power (Steinberg).

As critical race theory (CRT) developed in the mid-1980s, the understanding that race is a political and social construct rather than a biological reality became more mainstream. With its beginnings, CRT pointed out discrepancies between ideologies of and the resulting impact caused by allies who all saw "themselves as fully embracing the normative commitment to 'racial equality' (Crenshaw, 1259)." Through "activists' demands that elite institutions rethink and transform their conceptions of 'race neutrality' in the face of functionally exclusionary practices," CRT contributed to the understanding that racism is more than "matters of individual prejudice or a by-product of class" (Crenshaw, 1260). Yet, as Angela Davis explains, there are many individuals today who still cling to ideas of race neutrality and to a civil rights era vision of racism: one characterized by overtly racist individual remarks or actions and ignorant to its grip on societal structure (Davis, 170-171). Davis suggests that the persistence of these archaic and limited understandings of race and racism prevent us from seeing the severe consequences of

systemic racism for black people, indigenous people, and people of color today. She describes how the rise of neoliberalism contributes to a persistence of ignorance.

> Neoliberalism sees the market as the very paradigm of freedom, and democracy emerges as a synonym for capitalism, which has reemerged as the telos of history. In the official narratives of U.S. history, the historical victories of civil rights are dealt with as the final consolidation of democracy in the United States, having relegated racism to the dustbin of history. The path toward the complete elimination of racism is represented in the neoliberalist discourse of "color-blindness" and the assertion that equality can only be achieved when the law, as well as individual subjects, become blind to race. This approach, however, fails to apprehend the material and ideological work that race continues to do (Davis, 169).

Critical race theorist Imani Perry describes race as "something that happens, rather than something that is. It is dynamic, but it holds no objective truth" (Perry, 24). For Perry, "race is not simply created; it lives [through] expressive culture: language, dress, style, and regional affect 'associated with' racial groups. Race acquires meaning through and with all of these things" (Perry, 25). My experience growing up as a white person in America means that my experience of being racialized is entirely different than that of many of the artists of color with whom I spoke. As Sarah Ahmed describes in her "A Phenomenology of Whiteness," my life experience is defined by "I can," as opposed to the "I cannot" that infuses the reality of a black person, indigenous person, or person of color in a society where whiteness provides power and safety. "If whiteness allows bodies to move with comfort through space, and to inhabit the world as if it were home," Ahmed writes, "then those bodies take up more space" (Ahmed, 159). The ways in which whiteness claims space through physical dancing bodies is worthy of more attention than I give it here, but for the scope of this project, I remain focused on the state of conversations about race in the dance field.

Just as my whiteness has shaped my existence by being a factor in every interaction I've ever had, teaching me how I was allowed to function in society (without my realizing it, since

white bodies aren't forced to face their whiteness) so, too, would the fact of my race play a role in the conversations I would have during my interviews. The same was true of the respondent; each individual brought a lifetime of being racialized or not and learning to navigate through the world based on that fact. For the black people and people of color whom I spoke with, this likely meant needing to learn an entirely different way of navigating from my own. Ahmed explains, "Colonialism makes the world 'white,' which is of course a world 'ready' for certain kinds of bodies… Bodies remember such histories, even when we forget them" (Ahmed). My body will feel my whiteness and I will inherently know the "I can" which Ahmed references. I may reap the benefits of my whiteness, which come at a cost to those who feel and know Ahmed's "I cannot," whether or not I become conscious of my advantage.

Throughout this process, I have attempted to remain conscious of the "great distraction of my Whiteness," as Ananya Chatterjea describes it. In other words, even in instances where racial equality is the goal, the bully that is whiteness can take up all of the space, eclipsing more nuanced multicultural perspectives (Chatterjea, 13). While my whiteness is not a factor that can be removed from these conversations, I am inspired by Chatterjea and by those I interviewed to develop a broader and deeper awareness of the ways that issues of race and identity intersect beyond the duality of just "black" and "white" and how this dualistic view reinforces neoliberalist and simplistic views of race and racism. I am also inspired to think in ways that actively challenge the white dominant status quo. I have done my best to deeply listen to and learn from the black people and people of color who have trusted me to take on this project, acknowledging my problematic position of authority as a white person and embarking on the work with honesty and vulnerability.

Before my conversations, and given my own experience, it seemed that fear was a main obstacle to having frequent, forthcoming, and productive conversations about race. "Fear associated with race shows up in all kinds of places: at town meetings on health care and gun control, on the front porch of one of Harvard's elite professors, hourly on cable news channels or in night court in any large city or small town," writes David Billings in his *Deep Denial: The Persistence of White Supremacy in United States History and Life* (Billings, 14). If fear shows up in all of those spaces, then there is no reason to think the arts, and dance in particular, would be exempt. American culture, which is rooted in white supremacy and the racism and fear that it cultivates, shapes American artists. American dance, its creators, teachers, critics and patrons are subject to that American history.

## DANCE AND RACE IN THE UNITED STATES: WHAT WE ALREADY KNOW

Dance in the United States, like the country itself, has been shaped by the people that inhabit it. At the same time that Europeans were colonizing North America, bringing with them their tradition of social dance and ballet, the African people they enslaved brought with them their own dance traditions. The cultural traditions of indigenous Americans—who were displaced and killed by Europeans, as well as immigrant populations—Asians, and Latinos—also influenced dance in America as we know it today, but these influences have tended to be glossed over or omitted completely in Western dance history. Over time, American ballet, modern, and social dance evolve through the influences of diverse populations of Americans, though the picture of history is one largely presented by and of white people.

Building on the earlier generation of scholarship that I've already discussed, an explosion of work in dance studies today examines the ways in which the overwhelmingly white "grand narrative" of Western dance history perpetuates the colonial racial status quo, presenting more responsible ways of looking at dance history from an anti-racist stance. Anthea Kraut, with her *Choreographing Copyright: Race, Gender, and Intellectual Property Rights in American Dance* (2016), analyzes how race and gender are intertwined with issues of dance as property and purposefully makes visible choreographers and performers not typically included in the grand narrative. *British Dance: Black Routes* (2017), edited by Christy Adair and Ramsay Burt stemmed from a research project meant in part to explore why the perception and reception of British dancemakers of the African Diaspora do not reflect their multitude of significant contributions to Western dance, and aims to "write Black British dance artists and their legacies back into history" (Adair, Burt, 1). The 2018 second edition of *Rethinking Dance History: Issues and Methodologies*, edited by Geraldine Morris and Larraine Nicholas, presents several scholars, including Takiyah Nur Amin, Royona Mitra, and Prarthana Purkayastha, who acknowledge in varying ways through their work that some "voices are commonly obscured by racist and colonial ideologies (Morris, Nicholas, 4)."

In my experience, this decolonizing method of telling the story of dance history has not made it into many undergraduate classrooms or dance studios, and there are plentiful examples of the story of Western dance history being told today in the same white-washed, Eurocentric ways we have always known. One such example is the third edition of Jack Anderson's *Ballet & Modern Dance,* published in 2018. In a forty-one-page chapter titled "The Phoenix of Modern Dance," two pages are dedicated to a category called "Black Choreographers." The opening paragraph to this section describes the contribution of the entirety of black dancers as singular: a

"dance form of great energy that can both rage at oppression and comfort the afflicted" (Anderson, 199). This segregation problematically presents a limited and misleading picture of African American contributions to the history of dance, arguably one created through white hegemony.

Dixon-Gottschild clearly describes what she calls the Africanist influence on American culture, and specifically on social dance forms and ballet in her *Digging the Africanist Presence in American Performance: Dance and other Contexts.* George Balanchine, in his creation of American ballet, drew from cultural traditions and styles of those African people who were brought to America against their will, whose traditions and aesthetics became integrally woven into the fabric of American culture (Dixon-Gottschild, 1995). Ananya Chatterjea, in dialogue with Dixon-Gottschild, contests previous grand narrative histories which present individuals like Balanchine as "genius" and revolutionary to the trajectory of Western dance. For Chatterjea, "the monolithic construction of a historical narrative of Western dance, particularly of modern and postmodern dance, as anything less than an intercultural study, must be fraught with denials about what lies at the base of these outbursts of creative activity, such key moments of breakaway from tradition" (9).

In moments where the influences of African American culture, indigenous culture, or immigrant culture on Western forms is admitted, it is often done so in coded ways that do not actually offer credit to the influential peoples, serving to "invisibilize" them, to use Dixon-Gottschild's term (1996). Heather Watts, a white woman and former New York City Ballet principal, in an interview for the *Ballet Review*, provides an instance of such invisibilizing. "Balanchine said to Judy Fugate [a white former NYCB principal] and me in 1975 or 1976, 'You know dears, it's jazzy.' Now in 1976, we still knew what 'jazzy' was. Try saying that to, you

know, Unity Phelan [a white dancer, currently a soloist with NYCB]. Jazzy? What does that mean to her? Are we using the right word?" (qtd. in Langlois, 55).

Watts' comments suggest the inadequacy of Balanchine's use of the word "jazzy," in an effort to acknowledge Africanist influence on his choreography. To say "jazz" doesn't help make visible the contributions of black culture to ballet's evolution. Watts seems to also be alluding to the idea that dancers at New York City Ballet in the 70s would have had a better understanding than today's company members of the fact that jazz culture is black culture, suggesting that as facts of history get further away, whiteness becomes more dominant while some contributions go on being invisibilized. Watts states that she "teach[es] context," and that she believes that as an educator or repetiteur, "you have to find new words or explain to them what the Charleston was if you want to go back that far and talk about jazz as slightly dangerous. Prohibition. Bathtub Gin. Flappers. It's got to be more than 'jazzy' (qtd. in Langlois, 55)." Even with this description, as Watts attempts to contextualize jazz, she does not mention African American dancers or contributions, effectively continuing to white-wash, and in fact potentially reinforcing stereotypes of black people as threatening.

As a young dance student who grew up in the 90s, most of my training was in ballet and modern dance. The lineage of many of my ballet teachers descended from Balanchine, and yet, I don't remember even being told the movement was "jazzy," and I certainly never heard any mention of Black or Africanist influence. As Dixon-Gottschild explains, "that which is unnamed or misnamed remains mute, inconsequential, and insignificant" (1995). The story told to me and countless other young ballet students was that Balanchine was inspired by the urgency and sharpness of movement and life in New York City. This half-truth continued even in my undergraduate studies in the BFA program in dance at New York University. Not until my time

in graduate school when I was first introduced to the work of Dixon-Gottschild were the facts of Balanchine's influence revealed to me.

This elitism and erasure of multicultural influence on ballet continues today, though there has been some shift in the dominant (white) narrative of black dancers in ballet with the promotion of Misty Copeland, American Ballet Theater's first black principal dancer. Theresa Ruth Howard and her *Memoirs of Blacks in Ballet* project details and celebrates a long history of black ballerinas, but there have certainly been few that have been accepted into the highest ranks of major ballet companies in the US, and that number is even fewer when considering the number of black dancers with skin that is darker than Copeland's. Only in late 2018 did Freed of London begin manufacturing pointe shoes in several shades of brown instead of only providing pink shoes, which dancers with brown skin would have to dye themselves to make them "nude," a process that was expensive and time-consuming (Marshall). Some dancers feel that although this is progress, "more tones" are still needed (Marshall).

Like ballet, the modern dance world has also seen the erasure and exclusion by white people of black people, indigenous people, and people of color. Anthea Kraut details one such instance where Agnes DeMille, commonly credited for innovating the blending of several dance styles in her choreography for *Oklahoma!*, neglected to acknowledge that Katherine Dunham had previously been pioneering such a fusion of styles, with which Dunham publicly expressed her annoyance in an interview with Constance Valis Hill years later (qtd. in Kraut, 181). Dunham's codified modern dance technique is comparable in depth and value to that of her white contemporaries whose techniques are similarly disseminated through generations, like Lester Horton, Merce Cunningham or Martha Graham. Dunham's technique is a founding force in American modern dance and elements of it are infused into many classes, but her technique often

goes uncredited in the studio. Looking back, Dunham technique was certainly included in my modern classes during my time as a young dancer, but it was not until later, learning some basics of Dunham technique from someone trained specifically in the style, that I realized how much of her work had been namelessly integrated into the foundation of my modern training.

As early as the late nineteenth century, issues of cultural influence and race in dance were being passed over by white people. Women presented in the grand narrative as mothers of American modern dance, like Loie Fuller, Ruth St. Denis, and Isadora Duncan, participated in Orientalism, essentially culturally appropriating from Eastern cultures. This theft of culture and property was carried out by "abstracting and aestheticizing them, and/or combining them with Western 'expressive' styles, all the while wrapping their resulting choreography in the discourse of the modern and the artistic" (Kraut, 62). Susan Manning details what she calls "metaphorical minstrelsy, whereby white bodies made reference to subjects of color," focusing on these occurrences in the mid-twentieth century (Manning, 2004, 118). In her analysis of a 1937 piece by Helen Tamiris, *How Long Brethren,* Manning describes this "metaphorical minstrelsy" in action. The piece, intended by Tamiris and accepted by audiences as a "leftist masterpiece," cast white women as representations of black people facing oppression, thus erasing the actual experience of these black men (Manning, 1998, 27). Any issues of appropriation or misrepresentation apparently went unnoticed, or at least were not commented on by white society, but were very much noticed by the black press (Manning, 1998, 39). Manning explores how the piece was still heralded by later generations looking back at it. She writes that "the paucity of contemporary comment on the work's casting points toward pervasive conventions that were all the more powerful for remaining unarticulated" (Manning, 1998, 28). Lack of acknowledgement that this "metaphorical minstrelsy," white women presented as representative

of the experiences of black men, points to (white) modern dance's claim to unmarked universality, and works to maintain the colonial racial status quo. Some might argue that the piece was a product of the time, and should be viewed as such, but this actively erases those of the same era who were facing and resisting racial oppression.

Later, according to Dixon-Gottschild, the Judson era of the 60s and 70s would continue to uphold this notion of the white universal body. "'Downtown dance'—also known as postmodern dance—", Dixon-Gottschild explains, "…emerged from downtown Manhattan venues like Judson Church…; it is the code for white dance" (2003, 20). The postmodern work of this time, made by virtually all white people, sought to operate through "colorblindness," or racial neutrality. In this way, white-dominated dance culture continued to be silent when it came to race. White bodies remained racially unmarked; whiteness was presented as limitless (Manning, 2004). Manning terms this assertion of whiteness in modern dance "mythic abstraction," which "staged universal subjects without the mediation of bodies marked as culturally other" (2004, 118). I suggest that this denial of racialization of white people by white people establishes a precedent that discourages conversations about racial identity in the dance world.

The Civil Rights movement came and American dance companies were established that created opportunities for black people and people of color: Dance Theater of Harlem (founded in 1969), Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater (1958), Ballet Hispanico (1970). African-American choreographers were exploring the "breakdown of the myth of cultural purities and essential notions of whiteness and blackness," making invaluable contributions to the evolution of American modern dance (Chatterjea, 111). This continued as more companies exploring the complexities of identity and community began to emerge in the 80s, with companies like Bill T.

Jones/Arnie Zane Dance Company (1983), and Urban Bush Women (1984). For Chatterjea, it's striking that many "black choreographers and dancers did not feel encouraged to join the postmodern dance movement, even though several of the white choreographers were ostensibly sympathetic to the 'black cause'"(112). "How deeply are hegemonic structures entrenched into the sociocultural fabric that, despite critiques of institutionalization that have come from the successive waves of the postmodern movement, the dance scene continues to labor under exclusions and failed understandings?" Chatterjea asks (112). These exclusions, as Chatterjea suggests, continue today in many major modern dance companies that emerged from the postmodern lineage, and they are certainly present in the elitist world of ballet, which remains "the kingdom of the pale," as Jennifer Fisher details in an essay on ballet and whiteness, drawing on Brenda Dixon-Gottschild's observation in the 1990s that ballet is the "last bastion of white supremacy in the concert dance world" (qtd. in Fisher, 585).

The privileging of white, Eurocentric forms and bodies is also present in educational dance institutions. According to Julie Kerr-Berry, these institutions are more problematic than the professional performance sphere. She questions why curricula in dance programs remain Eurocentric, "fail[ing] to fully represent American dance;" she cites a 2010 study by Doug Risner, which demonstrates an overwhelmingly white faculty in these programs (Kerr-Berry, 50). Kerr-Berry turns to Susan Leigh Foster to problematize labels such as "world" and "ethnic" in curriculum, which, according to Foster have "worked euphemistically to gloss over the colonial legacy of racialized and class-based hierarchizations in the arts" (qtd. in Kerr-Berry, 50). In regard to pedagogical practices, Kerr-Berry explores how white instructors practice white hegemony in their teaching in a variety of ways: by not acknowledging issues of access and

opportunity in racist dance histories, by not acknowledging cultural roots in various dance lineages, or by expecting students of color to make work about their racial identity.

Nyama McCarthy-Brown, with her 2014 article "Decolonizing Dance Curriculum in Higher Education," points to evidence of "racist and classist hierarchies in dance" by examining the curriculum requirements and mission statements of several university dance departments. In many programs where progressivism is claimed, more time is in fact given and value placed on dominant culture forms like ballet and modern over African dance, tap, or "world dance." One department she studied still used the outdated and problematic term "ethnic dance" to name a focus of their program. McCarthy-Brown has carried on to strategize about how to remedy the exclusivity of higher education dance programs with her book entitled *Dance Pedagogy for a Diverse World*. The book explores "culturally relevant teaching," and provides theoretical and practical methods which "may ensure that students historically marginalized by way of culture, race, class, gender, sexual orientation, or limited physical abilities are empowered to and not oppressed through education. These frameworks recognize the systems of power that govern educational settings in the United States and understand that these systems do not support all students" (McCarthy-Brown, 16).

In critical dance studies, interventions on the dance field's Eurocentric narrative from scholars like Brenda Dixon-Gottschild and Thomas DeFrantz have explored how systems of power have engendered concepts like "black dance," and question why there is no "white dance" (Dixon-Gottschild, 2003; DeFrantz, 2002). DeFrantz, in the introduction to his *Dancing Many Drums*, explains that even after the development of critical race theory and the more widely held understanding that race is not a biological fact, but a social construct, "still, the use of 'race' as an identity marker has not disappeared from the academy, nor have forms of racism abated

simply because theorists have identified ‘race’ as a construction. Instead, ‘race’ has taken on more complex nuances of meaning and usage” (DeFrantz, 4). DeFrantz describes his strategic use of the terms “black” and “African American,” traversing between the two depending on who he is speaking to and what he is speaking about. I quote him in full here as he highlights his considerations about racial language pertaining to the context of a conversation.

> To black students I say “black” unless I’m trying to historicize an event, in which case I’ll rely on the more ponderous term “African American.” But if my class has international or white students, I tend to say African American exclusively. I like to think that the seven syllables, or two written words, indicate a stratification of inquiry that forces the listener or reader to consider the implications of cultural hybridity and invention. The words stop the eye, ear, and tongue. But in conversation with someone I do not know well, I always catch my slippage of using ‘black’ to a person who is not African American. For me, ‘black’ as a descriptive marker is reserved for conversation with those who might be able to imagine its implications in the United States, including a history of political and economic inequity, institutionalized social affliction, and spiritual resiliency (4).

As race is a myth constructed by white people (Kendi), who today are able to move through the world without an understanding of what it is to be oppressed because of one’s “race” (DiAngelo), DeFrantz and others who are forced to quickly develop this understanding use and develop racial language in a way that challenges the centering of whiteness. This purposefully specific language of self-identity runs in opposition to white people’s use of terms like “black dance,” which as DeFrantz writes, “seems to have been invented by white critics as a shorthand for work they felt uncomfortable with or ill-prepared to address” (5). Claire Craighead explains that the term black dance “set[s] up an oppositional discourse of ‘the other’” and “politicizes dance work made or performed by individuals of color… implying that it exists within the racist superstructure of white dance” (20).

Randy Martin, in his *Critical Moves,* describes with a broader perspective how dance by its nature of bodies in motion, and social politics are in constant dialogue with each other. He

writes that “dance must be suffused with the politics of all the various domains of society to the point that it cannot be free of any of them” and that dance is not immune to the various forms of oppression that plague our society (Martin, 15). Martin implies that as dancers, our external selves are subject to interpretation and assumed meaning by audiences viewing our moving bodies. It is impossible to separate the politics of our physical bodies from our dancing, and yet, very often, this relationship is not openly discussed in the dance community, particularly in white-dominated spaces. Black people and people of color continue to assert their rightful place in the landscape of dance, which brings up the body politics that are typically ignored in white arenas.

There have been some efforts from general interest dance publications to bring the conversation about race and dance to the broader United States dance community. In 2005, *Dance Magazine* published an article by Dixon-Gottschild titled “Whoa! Whiteness in Dance?” in which she addressed some issues explored in her *Black Dancing Body*, citing her examples of Africanist influence on ballet and referencing Joann Keali’inohomoku’s article “An Anthropologist Looks at Ballet as a Form of Ethnic Dance.” In this way, *Dance Magazine* provided an opportunity for members of a wide dance community to consider what whiteness means in dance in America. Gia Kourlas later echoed Brenda Dixon-Gottschild’s 1990s assessment of ballet as upholding white supremacy, penning her “Where Are All the Black Swans,” in the *New York Times*, pointing out how in 2007, the year of publication, neither American Ballet Theater nor New York City Ballet had ever seen a black female principal dancer and highlighting the isolation and oppression that black ballet dancers face.

*Dance Magazine* has continued to publish writing, particularly by Theresa Ruth Howard, that questions issues of race and dance, especially since the founding of the Black Lives Matter

movement in 2013. An article in *Dance Magazine* in 2016 by Brian Schaefer explores what race means to the dance community in this historical moment. "…As the Black Lives Matter movement has returned race to the center of the national debate," he writes, "it has galvanized some artists of color and challenged white dance audiences to confront their discomfort with racial issues" (Schaefer, 38).

Although racial strife has always existed in the U.S., its dance community now lives within the country's post-2016 political divisiveness, where the social understanding of civility has been pushed to the extreme, and overt racism and hate-based violence has become part of the public discourse. This is the era of social media, which can function as an alternative space to mainstream, white-dominated media. It would be impossible to track all of what is being said about racial issues on platforms like Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and podcasts, but in the din, there are many people of color, particularly black women, who are leading the way in racial justice work. Women like Rachel Cargle, Layla F. Saad, Catrice Jackson, Ericka Hart and Rachel Ricketts have authored books, designed workshops, and created spaces on social media platforms that prioritize the healing of black people, indigenous people, and people of color over white comfort, encouraging white people's self-work toward antiracism and productive conversation amongst ourselves. Podcasts like *Code Switch*, Kimberlé Crenshaw's *Intersectionality Matters*, and Shaun King's *The Breakdown* all provide opportunities to get educated about race in America and can be crucial to having conversations on the topic. An online summit called *Honor, Don't Appropriate Yoga* created by Susanna Barkataki, a South Asian woman who is a yoga teacher and practitioner and racial justice activist, took place in February 2019 and provided videos of conversations between Barkataki and a wide range of guests addressing issues of accessibility, inclusion, and appropriation. Participants listening to these conversations

at home could engage in online conversation with each other. Tools like these are in their infancy and have the potential to revolutionize how we learn and talk about racial issues.

Of this digital age when information from across space and time is readily available to us, Takiyah Nur Amin writes that it prompts many to suggest "the world is changing" (Amin, 2017, 1). But Amin also challenges this "taken-for-granted refrain." "…I am not sure it's the world that is changing as much as our understanding of the complexity around us that is in flux," she writes in her forward to Nyama McCarthy-Brown's *Dance Pedagogy for a Diverse World*, published in 2017 (1). Amin explains "it feels more accurate to suggest that with increased access to media and information for many and the possibility for communication across perceived boundaries, our ever-changing world requires that we make space for nuance, challenge assumptions, assimilate information once overlooked and engage in the re-making of ourselves to attend to this re-making of our world" (Amin, 2017, 2).

## THE INTERVIEWS

In this section, I consider what was shared with me by respondents. I've used the questions I asked as an organizational strategy for their responses. Some topics are preceded with an impressionistic experience of my own regarding the question that will follow. I acknowledge that, in many ways, this writing barely scratches the surface of what all needs to be unpacked in regard to these questions in both my personal growth and education as well as in the dance field as a whole. I have done my best to recognize where my own privilege and situation in authority as a white person and as the researcher may have skewed responses or my perceptions of them.

“HOW DO YOU USE OR UNDERSTAND THE WORD OR CONCEPT OF RACE?”

In our visually-oriented culture, the color of one’s skin is conflated with one’s “race.” This over-simplification of who a person might be affects the way one is perceived and thus often has power over the way one lives one’s life in response to those perceptions. So, even though most of the artists I spoke with agree that from a scientific perspective, race as we seem to commonly think of it does not actually exist, it still has power. A powerful thing that doesn’t exist—it is not surprising, given this contradiction, that talking about race can be confusing.

What came to mind when asked how to define “race” varied for respondents, but many artists expressed a desire to look beneath the superficial nature of the word “race” to what they feel are more relevant and productive ways of considering identity. Alexandra James, choreographer and Admissions Director at the Bates Dance Festival who identifies as a black woman, explains the limitations of “race” as a concept saying, “the more I exist in the world, the more I come to realize that the idea of race is less indicative of who a person is or who a group of people are and start asking questions about experience and culture, and those things become more interesting to me than whatever confines race could ever define.”

Racial categorization and language have become so deeply rooted in our society—in systemic, psychological, and interpersonal ways—that getting away from them can be difficult. Despite the “one dimensional” aspect of race, as Endalyn Taylor described it, referencing one’s skin color, the term is still widely used. Often, using generalizing labels can become a necessary evil in order to address issues of racial inequality or oppression. One respondent, Michael Sakamoto, Asian American scholar and interdisciplinary dance artist of the butoh legacy, described these conflicting perspectives. As a scholar, he identified race as “what it really is, as in a construct.” As an artist, though, racial language becomes a means to approach the subject

matter of his work. “While I don’t in my personal life like to talk about race per se,” he explained, he does use racial language in his choreographic process. Sakamoto’s work explores his dancers’ identities: their “ethnicity, their nationality, their language, their culture, and so how their race becomes identified in everyday life becomes a part of the conversation.” Parijat Desai, an Indian-born choreographer and performer who was raised in the U.S., echoed this, objecting to the term “race,” and “only us[ing] it because other people use it.” In other words, to challenge the racial status quo in America, speaking in terms of this fabricated concept becomes necessary in order to communicate that which is detrimental to life chances for people of color.

Often, in the U.S., the word “race” conjures the idea of a binary of black and white. Some respondents expressed a desire to intervene on that simplification, suggesting that we as human beings are more diverse and complex. Ananya Chatterjea writes about this limited and limiting binary: “Most of the time the conversations around these issues are formulated in strictly bichromatic terms: white versus the rest, a tendency that only reifies the picture and prevents vital dialogues across populations of color” (13). Desai echoed this in our conversation, asserting that “‘race’ pits us as opposites with some people in between… In using the word ‘race,’ or in thinking in terms of black and white, we’re just reinforcing a false concept of ourselves as humans. We are not opposing elements. We are not a dichotomy. We are an infinite array of variations on a theme.” Chatterjea, through her analysis of the work of African American choreographer Jawole Willa Jo Zollar and Indian choreographer Chandralekha, suggests an understanding that while both of these women have a “similar politics of resistance” (13), they are complex individuals whose work is made of much more than just their marginalization by whiteness.

In essence, most of my respondents expressed their belief that the idea of race, which strives to neatly place each of us in one of very few boxes based on what we look like outwardly, is a gross oversimplification of who we are as individuals. The "infinite array of variations," to borrow Desai's term, among people of color as a collective exists within one particular race as well, as there is not just one way to be Asian or White or Black. Sakamoto, who describes himself as a globalist, has lived in Asia but does not claim to be from there. Instead, he focuses on his connection to Asian culture. He addresses the multiplicity of ways to be Asian and his belief that it is important not to speak for others who may claim their Asian identity in a different way. "There are Asian American artists who I deeply appreciate…as doing the hard labor of improving communication and understanding between communities in our country, but the way they go about it in terms of how they label and imagine their own Asian American-ness may not be something that I identify with. I may do it differently."

The feeling that identity is complex and that race limits the possible expression of who we are was also a common theme across my conversations with respondents. Choreographer Liz Lerman, a white Jewish woman, described how she thinks of issues surrounding race as "complicated, in that we seem to go through different periods of time where we simplify it, and when we simplify it, it gets even more problematic." Lerman also brought up the idea of Jewishness, explaining that "although I know that Jewish is not classified as a race… to me, it's a civilization and it's as much a part of who I am, but in the context of racial politics today, I have to own my whiteness even though I am more informed by my Jewishness."

The concept of race can be particularly challenging for those with a hyphenated identity, who embody more than one race and feel connected to more than one culture. One mixed race, 30-something, up-and-coming choreographer describes a "personal grappling" with her racial

identity. She decided after some consideration not to have her name used in this work for fear of how her honesty would be taken by the dance community—likely in particular by those who have given or may in the future give her professional opportunities. For her, the question of racial identity has been a lifelong conundrum. Half white and Jewish, half Jamaican, this artist spent most of her youth denying her blackness. “I’ve had to go back and find myself in some ways, and I’ve had to come to terms with having an identity that doesn’t attach to all that much. It makes me feel like I don’t deserve to be able to comment on who I am and what I see.” Because she doesn’t fit neatly in one racial box, her exploration of self-identity has felt confusing.

Related to the idea of complex or hyphenated identity is the concept of intersectionality. Coined by Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, mother of critical race theory and professor at Columbia Law School, the term intersectionality addresses how our social identities and realities are shaped by systems of power and oppression, and how one individual may experience the effects of multiple forms of systemic oppression. This concept emerged as a theme of this project. For many, intersectionality seemed an integral part of exploring who people are beyond our race. In reference to her identity as a Black woman, the mixed-race respondent who wished to remain anonymous expressed her belief that her experience of prejudice regarding both her gender and her race is significant, particularly when her identity is juxtaposed with her professional role as a ballet choreographer. Responding to the focus on racism over other systems of oppression in PISAB’s *Undoing Racism* workshop, Endalyn Taylor, a Black woman, teacher and scholar, previously the director of the Dance Theater of Harlem (DTH) school and principal dancer in the DTH company, questioned whether or not we need to isolate race as a stand-alone issue in order to make strides toward racial equality. In the PISAB workshop, it is

made clear that the task at hand is to focus solely on racism in America, based on the organization's founding principle that work against every other form of oppression will not be effective as long as the effects of race and internalized racial oppression still exist. As the organization posits, only when race issues are dealt with well and fully can we move beyond race. Taylor wonders if this is true.

Underlying every conversation had for this project, as well as most every conversation I've taken part in beyond the limits of this project, is a fundamental desire to celebrate our difference as individuals and in cultural collectives coupled with a simultaneous longing to recognize our commonality and shared humanity. While individuals arrive at this aspiration with different life experiences and thus, differing understandings of what it feels like to be excluded or eliminated because of one's outward appearance and what it means to enact that harm, it seems that many in the dance community express a belief in strength and unity through diverse humanity. Respondent Alexandra James highlighted the numerous ways that the dangerous simplicity of race can play a divisive role in society, but remarks that it can also be something positive in that it can allow us to attach ourselves to cultural identity. Of the systemic social realities created by race, she says, "Some… are affirming. Some of them are really negative. Some of them are dangerous. Some of them help us celebrate who we are, but they exist along a really broad spectrum."

Parijat Desai shared that recognition of our shared humanity, pointing out that "if we think about things genetically, our notion of race doesn't really hold up." She explained her understanding that "on a genetic level, we are much more similar than we are different—in our biologies." And yet, we cannot ignore the fact that the concept of race infiltrates our social systems and institutions and shapes different realities for us based on our skin color. Desai

acknowledged that “though our biologies belie a greater similarity between all human beings, race is so powerful and it defines our everyday experience. It defines the way we organize ourselves in society.”

Some in the dance world do not have the understanding that race is a social construct and in a seemingly genuine effort to love their fellow dancers and humans equally, claim to “not see color,” a too-common stance taken by those who don’t experience the negative and life-altering effects of racism—those of us who benefit from white privilege. One respondent, a white woman who danced for New York City Ballet and today directs a ballet school in the Northeast, when asked to define the word race, responded that she “just think(s) of the human race.” (I include her anonymously in order to present her unedited comments, as she requested to edit some statements after reflecting upon them later). As a white person, I understand her impulse, but have learned that this is one of many forms of racial bypassing and perpetuates white supremacy (Pike). While this notion may seem like a virtuous stance to white people, and points to the fact that beneath our exteriors we are the same, this claim to “color blindness” ignores the context in which we have historically lived, and currently live, as racialized beings. It says to people of color that we do not acknowledge a part of their humanity, and that we do not care enough to see the severity of the negative impact made on their lives because of their skin color.

The up-and-coming, mixed-race choreographer introduced earlier addressed this racial bypassing when speaking with me. She suggested that eliminating the concept of race altogether in an effort to focus more on our similarities than our differences, to just see one human race, would result in a “whitewashing,” a further overtaking of white dominant culture, and an erasure of the celebration of culture and heritage, a generalizing impulse that is socially violent for black, indigenous, and people of color.

In his defining of the concept of race, Flavio Salazar, originally from Colombia, who danced with American Ballet Theater (ABT) and now teaches in the ABT's Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis school, shares how he has tried to celebrate diversity while striving for unity. He describes lining up students in a ballet class from shortest to tallest, like a corps de ballet, and asking who spoke Spanish. He asked a student from South America to count the dancers, one to thirty-two, in Spanish. He then asked the same of a student who spoke Chinese, another Korean, Italian, and Hebrew. When they finished, Salazar asked the students to reflect on the way each language, each dancer, sounds different, but delivers the same information. "That's how we need to dance," he suggested to the young dancers. "Each of us has a different sound, but one is one, two is two, thirty-two is thirty-two. It's the different sound and we have to give the audience [our] sound, but be in sync with everybody." In this way, Salazar asked his students to move beyond the visual simplification of race to explore more meaningful aspects of our different identities. And yet, here, the issue of assimilation to a White European cultural aesthetic comes up for me. The celebration of different "sounds," to use Salazar's metaphor, is secondary to the uniformity of ballet, which has largely excluded people of color. In order for people who do not fit the European mold that is traditional to ballet to be accepted in that world, they must shed parts of themselves; they are asked to assimilate or are excluded for not fitting in.

Clearly, individuals are positioned to approach conversations about race in different ways, as the lived experiences of race are different for every one of us, and we are not all provided the same education on the concept. All of the respondents who are Black, Asian, or Latino expressed a desire to focus on other aspects of identity and culture, suggesting that they are tired of being defined by race. Moreover, several of the Black and Asian respondents described a sense of being on guard—a heightened sensitivity of how they might be perceived or

what response they might receive when taking part in a conversation in "mixed company," as Sakamoto put it. Alexandra James described a practice of assessing the situation during a conversation about race in an academic situation where there are presumably white people present. Endalyn Taylor described the fear of being labelled an angry black woman. The mixed-race respondent who prefers anonymity cited her fear of how her honesty in our conversation might negatively affect her career.

As James explained, those of us who benefit from white privilege and might have the best of intentions in regard to issues surrounding race are likely focused on not appearing racist—on being viewed as a good ally—when taking part in conversations about race. Understanding the way race functions requires nuanced and thoughtful conversation that goes beyond concern for our own reception, but for white people, that concern can often stem from a place of ego, while for black people, indigenous people, and people of color, their fear is rooted in a history of oppression and violence inflicted by white people. With these differing positionalities on what race is and how it functions, it is no wonder that it is difficult terrain.

"DO CONVERSATIONS ABOUT RACE DIFFER BETWEEN DIFFERENT SPACES IN THE DANCE COMMUNITY?"

*The modern dance company that I performed with in New York from 2012-2015 included one Japanese dancer and one Chilean dancer, but was largely white during my time with them. The for-profit ballet school where I taught in New York was overwhelmingly white, both in leadership and student body, for the five years I taught there. I was never part of, nor witnessed a conversation about race in either of these spaces. In my undergraduate experience at NYU's Tisch Dance, race did not come up beyond minimal consideration in dance history. In graduate school, the topic comes up often amongst my cohort, and in some classes when the professor believes in the importance of social issues being discussed. Certainly, there are opportunities for education and conversation on race across the UCI campus, though they are usually extra-curricular and many don't take advantage of these opportunities.*

In this section, my focus remains on race and ballet for a considerable space. This reflects the focus of my respondents, who almost all shared many ways in which the form is fraught with racial politics. Ballet has long been an elitist and exclusive form, created for white people by white people (Dixon-Gottschild, 1996). For many white people in the ballet community, the thought that someone who is not white might feel oppressed or ostracized might not have occurred until recently. The white woman respondent mentioned earlier described several moments during her time as a company member in New York City Ballet (NYCB), when she had a realization related to race. In one instance, the company was performing *Swan Lake* and the ballet mistress instructed the dancers playing swans to pancake their skin so that it would be very white and to "not miss any parts." Aesha Ash, a dark-skinned black dancer who was in the corps de ballet at the time, came back to the dressing room visibly upset by this. Previously, racial issues in ballet hadn't occurred to the respondent.

The recent upsurge of conversation surrounding Misty Copeland and her place as the first African American woman to be promoted to principal dancer status in American Ballet Theater (ABT) has brought popular attention to racial issues in ballet. Salazar remarked that he is now more aware of bodies of different colors performing on stage. He described a heightened sensitivity to his students' skin color and what that might mean about their identity, asking them questions about where they are from so that he might have a better awareness of their background and experience. As a teacher in ABT's Project Plié, the company's diversity initiative for which Copeland is the public face, Salazar credited Copeland for creating an opportunity for conversation and change regarding racial inclusion in ballet.

As the white ex-NYCB dancer's realizations indicate, ballet is slow to integrate, and even slower to realize the harmful power of the white dominant racial status quo. Rather than

challenge the form to evolve and make changes in its aesthetic, gate-keepers have demanded outsiders fit into the standard mold. Many might question how progressive Copeland's inclusion in the still white-dominated ballet world really is. Her skin is fairly light, and on stage, her presence does not disrupt the classical look of unison that ballet has always required. Michael Sakamoto mused about Copeland's physical appearance, guessing that "however curvy or not she is, she's growing up in [the ballet] world and she's getting told directly and indirectly that she is too curvy, that she is too dark, that she does stand out in a way that doesn't match the aesthetic of other dancers." He questioned the idea of assimilation of people of color to white culture and aesthetic, versus celebrating their identity as distinct from and equal to dominant culture. "When people say a black dancer can do ballet just as well as a white dancer, my question is well, do ballet, yes, but with the same aesthetic? Would you want to?"

The diversification of ballet is a torch that has been taken up recently by many mainstream institutions. ABT's Project Plié is one example. NYCB and The School of American Ballet's (SAB) Diversity and Inclusion initiatives, including a Visiting Fellows Program which seeks "classical ballet instructors with a proven commitment to teaching students from diverse backgrounds," reports that in the 2014-2015 Winter term, 51% of new students in the Children's Division self-reported as being a student of color (sab.org). (This does not give any distinction between African American students, Indigenous students, Asian students, or any indication of how many of these students have dark skin, and antiblackness is certainly an issue as large ballet companies accept dancers of color.) In 2018, *the Equity Project: Increasing the Presence of Blacks in Ballet* was established, a collective comprised of 21 major ballet institutions, including SAB and ABT. This effort, spearheaded by the International Association of Blacks in Dance seems unique in that it strives to get to the root of the issues of racism, oppression and exclusion

by looping in scholars and educators to help the companies involved learn how to be inclusive (iabdassociation.org). NYCB and ABT also now have diversity consultants on call.

The mixed-race, up-and-coming choreographer who wished to remain anonymous for this project has choreographed new works for ballet companies and schools similar in stature to the two aforementioned companies, and she grapples with the diversification of ballet. She described the general difference in the physique of a black or brown body versus a white or even yellow body and that accepting those bodies into the ranks of a classical ballet company will change how it looks. “There is really no perfect answer for increasing diversity and maintaining what the ideal for what ballet should or has looked like. That’s the conversation that no one’s willing to have,” she said, “because the minute we start talking about black bodies, it gets really icky, and so we end up with these circuitous conversations that never really land on the problem.” In other words, is ballet ready to produce a corps de ballet that is not identical? Is it ready to recognize the beauty and strength of diversity?

As much as ballet has been identified as a very white world, Liz Lerman pointed to some similarities that occur in modern dance. She described that “the downtown avant-garde scene became more and more a bastion of white privilege, but because we all see ourselves as radical, we didn’t have to own up to it.” Several of the artists I spoke with described the postmodern, downtown (New York) dance scene as upholding the racial status quo. “…Rarely do discussions in this category include any more than a token representation of artists and choreographers of color,” writes Chatterjea, “which reaffirms the general conception that post-modernism in dance is a phenomenon limited to Euro-American artists” (108). Of postmodern dance, Sakamoto suggested that it is “conceptually more white than ballet because it’s… intellectually dedicated to eviscerating racial markers, identity markers, except in the case of being conceptual signifiers.”

In other words, by emphasizing the universal body, modern and postmodern dance privilege whiteness in a particular way.

Dana Thomas, an NYC-based modern dancer and educator and a Black woman, has spent time in many parts of the dance community, from the DTH ballet community to downtown modern to Afro-modern to Broadway and uptown modern dance. She talked about the majority of her experiences being in environments that were either mostly white, where she felt like the token person of color, or that were all people of color. Very few of her experiences have been in communities that were fully integrated. Thomas recounted several troubling instances in mostly white spaces where what she describes as "coded language" is used to conceal overt racism. In one such instance, an audition for the Metropolitan Opera, where dancers dedicated the day to the audition process, giving up time and income, Thomas made it to the final cut. She was the only person of color who made it to this stage, and after spending hours of time and energy, she was not cast and was told that they were looking for a "more ghostly appearance."

Another space in the dance community where conversations about race may not come up is in higher education. As McCarthy-Brown demonstrates with her "Decolonizing Dance Curriculum in Higher Education," many collegiate dance departments' curricula are Eurocentric, placing more value on traditionally white forms like ballet and modern, even when the mission statement of the program claims progressive ideals. Parijat Desai explained that these sorts of institutions "might be a little less connected to or affected by really current dialogue about things like race, or how race and identity play into artmaking now." She described what she views as a disconnect between the contemporary professional world and a training program that has developed through the lineage of European classical forms. "I think when people are tied to technical excellence," she mused, "there is, at least right now, a racial or power dynamic, which

privileges—this is all changing now—but it generally privileges European forms." Her observation was that even if these conversations happen within higher education, that they may be more "surface" in nature.

As these conversations become more common in academia, issues of culture, nomenclature, curriculum, and more may naturally arise. Endalyn Taylor described an instance in a meeting where a conversation arose about assimilation and the challenges that students of African American descent might face as they study in an area of dance that has not traditionally celebrated their identity, like ballet. She described how the conversation shifted to focus on white students who might face similar challenges in studying hip hop and that her immediate response was to "put a wall up," deciding not to pursue the topic, knowing that white privilege means that white people are able to "be wherever they want to be" without being questioned.

> So to hear that kind of put a wall up for me initially and then I had to go okay, you also have to listen and understand and see the other people's perspectives as well, so that [conversation] I felt did not really result in much for me because I put up a wall. But in thinking about it now, maybe instead of putting up the wall and shutting down, it could have been an opportunity for me to speak up and say is this the same? Or to say yes, I hear you and I understand you, but let's look at systemically a greater, broader history of being excluded from opportunities.

In essence, Taylor advocated approaching conversations like these with openness and compassion, but also with a firm understanding of the systemic nature of racial oppression. Taylor's example highlights the issue that if white people do not speak up about these issues, that labor is left to of those who are marginalized.

Liz Lerman explained her efforts to work toward what she calls "aesthetic equity," a decolonization of curriculum, at Arizona State University. She described a "steamy pot" of styles present in the university's dance community, and a wish to have more accurate nomenclature to name programs and styles. She observed that in order to facilitate that from her position as a

white woman, she needs a better knowledge of the dance forms. “It makes me wonder how I can gain the knowledge to be both a better teacher and better participant in the conversation. Right now, the best I can do is to support the people who are pushing the conversations.” She wondered if the university’s current program label “Urban arts,” for students “interested in melding intersectional embodied practice, social justice and urban arts culture” (filmdancetheatre.asu.edu) might be named that because “people are embarrassed to say black.”

The question of aesthetic equity, and decolonizing curricula is one that is present in how dance history courses are taught as well. Certainly, in my undergraduate dance history experience in the dance department at NYU’s Tisch School of the Arts, less time was devoted to artists of color who contributed to the field. I have become aware of courses being taught at similar programs today where artists of color are grouped together by their race instead of being integrated into the canon of dance history. This perpetuates the dangerous “single story” narrative, a term first used in 2009 by author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie in her Ted talk explaining that a people are more than the stereotyped image that is presented to us. Presenting black choreographers in this segregated manner suggests that all black choreographers are the same and are capable of telling only one story—that of oppression and othering. This problematic telling of the story of dance history leaves, as Adichie puts it, “no possibility of a connection as human equals” between black choreographers and white choreographers. It also lessens the possibility for a productive conversation about race in the dance field.

## “HOW DOES RACE FACTOR INTO YOUR TEACHING AND/OR ARTMAKING?”

*Until investigating my whiteness, I’d never felt compelled or required to make dances that addressed my race—I never had any reason to feel it was necessary. In teaching ballet and modern to a diverse student population, I eventually became conscious of the fact that my whiteness influenced my relationship with my students of color, and that they might not feel*

*accepted in the field. I've made shifts in my language, in the resources I provided, in the way I incorporate dance history into lessons, and in my suggestions about curriculum. These continually evolve as I keep educating myself and come to more deeply understand my role in dismantling white supremacy.*

In regard to teaching and artmaking, several respondents brought up the question of permission to speak or capitalize on subject matter or experiences of a marginalized culture not one's own because it can often be read as cultural appropriation. Seán Curran gave the example of Heidi Latsky, a white woman who has a dance company of mixed ability dancers who perform in wheelchairs. As a guest artist in a choreography class at NYU, Latsky presented a piece which was set to rap music that used the n-word, created by three black men, who had been paralyzed and were also wheelchair users. Curran recalled that when the students in this choreography class viewed Latsky's piece, their contributions to a conversation with her centered around the creative use of bodies who were in wheelchairs to create innovative dance. When Latsky left the room, however, the students immediately began questioning and attacking her music choice as cultural appropriation. They had not been told yet that the musicians were also wheelchair users, a fact which Latsky uses to justify her use of music that addresses the black experience. Perhaps the power dynamic in the room—Latsky being a guest artist and a white woman, the viewers being students and some of them students of color—contributed to the dishonest or incomplete feedback initially shared with the artist.

For Curran, as a white artist or teacher, issues of permission and power are often at play. Curran described teaching a contemporary class at NYU's Tisch Dance with a diverse group of students, which was accompanied by an African drummer. He taught a combination that included elements of dances from Haiti, Puerto Rico, Ghana, and South Africa. He called it his "mamby pamby white boy Afro-Haitian combination" and included brief lessons about Nelson Mandela and Desmond Tutu. He described this strategy as "a way to wake [the students] up

and… connect with joy, because it's really fun to do." He wondered, "am I allowed, as an Irish American white gay man… am I allowed to do that?" In other words, is Curran culturally appropriating? Or is he, by citing the sources of what he is teaching, filling important gaps that might otherwise be left in the dance education of these students?

Liz Lerman, with a piece of hers called *Healing Wars*, addressed issues of power and permission by exploring the notion of "black people continuing to take care of white people's bodies." The piece is centered around the idea of "how you do healing in the midst of warfare." For the piece, which was set during the American Civil War, Lerman purposefully cast a woman of color in the role of a spirit whose "job was to help soldiers cross over after they had been killed in battle." Lerman noted that of that character, "not a single audience member or critic spoke to [the] color" of that character. They were also not the only black person in the piece, and Lerman commented that perhaps she should have spoken more directly to the casting of a black woman as the spirit. She wanted to point to the fact that black people are often expected to take care of white people. Additionally, Lerman shared that one black woman who was to play the spirit role felt that the piece did not sufficiently address slavery. Lerman described several ways in which she thought the piece did address the topic of slavery, but for the artist playing the spirit role, it was not enough. Lerman "felt troubled by that conversation," wondering if she was right. "[Does] anything that covers the Civil War period have to address that much more deeply than I had?" she wondered. Lerman also expressed her dissatisfaction with "the idea that a white person cannot take on black themes," with the view that as artists, "it's a big part of our job to put ourselves into each other's shoes and skins," but that "we need a lot of protocols to do that well."

Parijat Desai described how when teaching intercultural choreography, she asks questions like: "What are our rights when we draw on different forms and what are our responsibilities as

artists," or "Are we appropriating?" Desai said that teaching and artmaking for her are modes of self-expression. As a young dancer, she discovered that by fusing jazz dance and Indian classical dance, she could celebrate her hybrid identity as an Asian American. Similarly, Endalyn Taylor described her realization that celebrating the parts of her which "went against the grain of many of the ideas about what a ballet aesthetic should be" enabled her to "[find] her stride" as an artist. She came to appreciate that she "had something else, and that something else is all of the cultural things, the residue of my life, on my skin and in my body and in my soul," and she teaches ballet from that perspective, encouraging her students to bring what is unique about themselves to their study of the form. Flavio Salazar shared that when he learns one of his students is Latino, he asks them to speak Spanish with him, encouraging them to celebrate their culture and sense of self and creating a feeling of belonging for them in the American ballet community.

The mixed-race, up-and-coming choreographer described her struggle with deciding what to say with her choreographic voice. Earlier in her career, she made abstract ballets which reflected her experience and training. As she started to get commissions to choreograph, some of them came from companies that celebrated Latinx or African American culture. While she was not instructed to make work explicitly about race or culture in these instances, she was encouraged to keep the company's missions of cultural celebration in mind. She explained her thought process: "So there's no pressure to create anything beyond an abstract work of any sort, but there's this push and pull of who am I? Who are they? Why are we doing this? Does it matter that I am not exactly sure that I want to create a strong statement on race? Does it matter that I don't feel strongly about it? Should I feel badly about that?" This expectation of marginalized people to make narrative work about their experience of oppression, while white people are expected to make abstract work is a concept Liz Lerman brought up as well.

When I asked Gus Solomons, Jr., a veteran Black choreographer, performer, and critic who was a notable contributor to the emergent postmodern dance scene in New York of the 60s, if race factors into his teaching and artmaking, he replied that it became a topic in his choreography in 2014 with a piece he made that year, a solo for himself called *I Used to be Taller* for Dance Now NYC, a downtown New York dance festival. Like the mixed-race, up-and-coming choreographer, Solomons questioned what is expected of him as a black man in a white-dominated dance scene. He described the piece: "I made a verse and it was an accumulative verse: 'I used to be taller. I used to be skinnier. I used to be impatient. I used to be sadder. I use to be happier,' etc. The last line is 'I used to be whiter.' It ends with my hands up, and I do it in a very bespoke suit, so that's kind of a comment about where I am or where I'd rather be, where I'd rather not be." It seems that this is Solomons' grappling with the resurgence of blatant racism seen in the US in recent years, which he described had remained dormant during the post-civil rights era.

Just as understandings of race influence choreographers and teachers, it can influence how dancers in performance are viewed. Alexandra James said she often has conversations about defining "black dance." She asked, "Does it have to be Alvin Ailey and do I need to do see *Revelations* in order to experience black dancing? Or can I just be myself in the space and isn't that also the thing? Just… because I've never experienced slavery, does that mean I'm not making work that's black enough?"

Michael Sakamoto questioned what it is for a performing dancer to "stand in their own truth," in that they fully own and present all of the parts of their identity, versus a dance style that "eviscerate[es] racial markers, identity markers," which, for him, is the task of postmodernism. He explained that "race is, among other things… in the American dance community, a

superficially acknowledged, but largely unseen element or factor… When I say unseen, I mean, do you really see me? Do you really see not just what I look like, but what that means, who I am? Where I'm from? What are all the other traits and characteristics attached to the fact that I'm in a brown body or a black body or an Asian body or what have you?" In order for dancers in those bodies to really be seen, as Sakamoto described it, he believes honest conversations are required where choreographers, presenters and funders talk "about not only what they think, what they know, but really what they don't know." He suggests that vulnerability is required from all parties in order for dance audiences to fully see and appreciate the bodies on stage and the spirit or humanity they envelop.

"DO CONVERSATIONS ABOUT RACE WITH PEOPLE WHO ARE CATEGORIZED AS A DIFFERENT RACE AS YOU DIFFER FROM THOSE WITH PEOPLE OF THE SAME RACE?"

Both Dana Thomas and Alexandra James talked about an understanding of shared experience in conversations about race with other people of color. James explained that in a diverse setting where white people are present who she may not know, there is some "time spent feeling the room" to assess what is understood and where people are coming to the conversation from. She explains that "getting to the meat" of what is important to her to discuss is often possible, but it takes a different sort of navigation than it would if she were speaking to those who have a shared experience. Thomas explained that she feels choreographers and directors of color can "envision [her] on stage… without bias" in a way that perhaps their white counterparts cannot.

Parijat Desai and Liz Lerman both provided examples in which a white person's unawareness of privilege (for Lerman, herself, in this instance) affected a conversation. Desai described a meeting she attended about a potential project of hers. She was accompanied by a representative from the organization supporting the project, who Desai described as a well-intentioned white woman. When the time came for Desai to speak about her work, the white woman interjected. "'If I may,' she said, but she didn't direct the 'if I may' to me. She directed it to the interviewer… I don't have animosity toward her," Desai explained, "but it was a teachable moment. It's different from somebody yelling at you 'Go back to your country!' which I've experienced, too. It's a more nuanced thing, but I think it's an opportunity for dialogue." Generously, Desai planned to speak with the white woman afterward about this interruption, explaining that she felt comfortable doing so in this instance, knowing her intentions and personality.

Lerman's story in regard to coming to terms with her privilege was about a community collaboration she took part in as choreographer with a gospel choir in Detroit. She explained how she and the choir director, a Black man, "could get along about everything except postmodernism. We had real fights over this and it was pretty glorious, but that was a heads up to me. That experience was a real heads up to me, not to just assume that my tools were of equal value, and also that I had the right to have them. That's when I started questioning them as they are."

From these stories and my own experiences, it seems to me that trusting relationships across racial difference are essential in order for these conversations to be both productive and safe for black, indigenous, and people of color. For white people in these conversations, the necessity is to listen, not with the intent to respond, but to understand the experiences of people

of color. It seems that for black, indigenous, and people of color, if trust is not established, these conversations may feel unsafe and/or unproductive.

## "IS TALKING ABOUT RACE IN THE DANCE FIELD DIFFICULT?"

*Before I was able to own my complicity in white supremacy, which has led me to see what conscious action I can take against it, I found it difficult to talk about race. The more I participate in these conversations with both other white people and black, indigenous, and people of color, the easier it gets, and the clearer to me my responsibilities become.*

Many respondents discussed fear as a major obstacle in conversations about race. Alexandra James explained that "it's terrifying in many ways because it asks you to be vulnerable. It asks anybody to be vulnerable, to confront their own identity, how it relates to any one person, how it means they might have hurt somebody in the past. It might ask you to consider your choices moving forward and change them." As a white person, it is easy to retreat into the comfort of privilege in silence rather than face a difficult conversation. Barbara Applebaum suggests that for white people, vulnerability is essential in approaching these conversations. From a pedagogical point of view, she frames moments of discomfort as opportunities for profound learning about not only the other but also about oneself, and suggests "reconceptualizing vulnerability as encompassing an openness to change, dispossession, and willingness to risk exposure" (Applebaum, 870).

Both Alexandra James and Endalyn Taylor described different types of fear, depending on one's identity. Taylor shared her opinion that black people who might speak out about racism fear being labeled the angry black person. This trope, assigned by those who either don't understand or don't care about systemic racism, both stereotypes black people and minimizes the righteous anger over oppression and violence inflicted on them over generations. Taylor

observed that white people fear being labeled racist, or perhaps giving up the power and privilege that we have always had.

Dana Thomas and Liz Lerman both expressed concern that even if a conversation about race in dance does not seem difficult, it does not mean it will be productive. Thomas described the feeling of being "in a zoo," her racialization picked apart and gawked over, and her frustration when then no action is taken and no change is made. Lerman expressed her understanding of this frustration of inaction, and suggested the need for "protocols" in order for these conversations to be more productive. I understand her desire for conversations around what can be a difficult topic to have some purpose and order, and initially, this sounded reasonable to me. However, in a conversation with JoVia Armstrong, the percussionist and composer with whom I am collaborating on the choreographic portion of this thesis and a black woman, she pointed out her realization that this call for protocol may in fact act as a form of "tone policing." This is when white people demand that black people, indigenous people, and people of color deliver their opinions in a manner that white people deem appropriate. Tone policing, as Ijeoma Olou explains, "shifts the focus of the conversation from the oppression being discussed to the *way* it is being discussed," (206) and prioritizes white comfort over the issues at hand and the emotion that comes with them for black people, indigenous people, and people of color. bell hooks, in a conversation with Stuart Hall as part of a series called "Uncut Funk" referenced a similar sort of tone policing within the feminist movement, explaining that "this is part of what has led to a certain kind of collapse within feminism, this desire to restrict the boundaries of how we talk about certain things, a certain kind of overlay of heavy-handed political correctness" (12).

Lerman is well known for her Critical Response Protocol framework, which many in the dance field turn to as guidance for thoughtful discussion and feedback on an artist's work. She explained that some people of color have approached her in regard to applying that framework to conversations about race. Other people of color, she explained, have said they "need these protocols to come out of our own world." When I confirmed with Lerman that I would like to use this clip for the audio for my choreography, she responded negatively. She felt that her statement sounded too authoritative, and that she did not believe that applying protocols, whether hers or someone else's, to conversations about race, was the *only* way for these conversations to be constructive. Ultimately, we re-recorded this thought of hers to reflect this less definitive opinion. I felt that it was an opportunity to highlight some potential difficulties in conversations about race when white people get involved. Certainly, there is value in the fact that Lerman was willing to reflect upon her statement and responded with what she felt was a more responsible thought. Lerman's shift in thought brought up my own ideas about how to be a white person who takes responsibility for my words and actions surrounding race. What should transparency and ownership look like for me when trying to act in allyship? Am I willing to be vulnerable, to make mistakes, and be open and transparent about taking responsibility for them and questioning my thoughts and behavior?

A lack of honesty and transparency around conversations involving race was also a recurrent theme amongst my respondents. Dana Thomas explained that she thinks "some people are dishonest during the conversation. If people get afraid when talking about racism, they make themselves seem like they have no issues with it, when they're really not understanding the white privilege that they have, [or] maybe the discrimination they've cast upon someone." The mixed-race, up-and-coming choreographer I spoke with echoed Thomas' sentiments, adding that

"sounding uneducated or dense about what is really at hand" is another fear factor for her when entering conversations about race and dance.

Michael Sakamoto explored the idea of fear as well, questioning who might face fear as a difficulty when approaching these conversations. "People whose work depends on not considering race, people whose dance form or aesthetic is endemically rooted in whiteness, people whose work is safely about race but not perhaps as fully engaged as it could or should be," might be scared, he suggested. He went on to say that if he made that comment "in mixed company, or in public, immediately someone in that meeting or in that group is going to counter out loud or in their own head, well who are you, or who is anyone to define what enough consideration of race is?" His answer was that it's *his* right to define adequate consideration of race, as a person of color.

Based on information from the respondents, fear of causing harm or fear of being harmed do make conversations about race in dance difficult, and keep them from being productive avenues for change. It would seem that as long as unexamined privilege remains, those distinct fears will continue to inhibit these conversations.

### *"DO WE NEED TO HAVE CONVERSATIONS ABOUT RACE IN THE DANCE FIELD?"*

*Unearthing the ways that I uphold white supremacy has required and will continue to require self-reflection and self-education. This is self-work that I alone can do, but through relationship with others—through conversation—I can actively challenge the racist status quo. Antiracism, after all, is founded in a belief in humanity. Dance presents an opportunity to speak up not just in words, but with our whole selves.*

Most respondents answered in the vein of "of course we should be talking about race in dance," though, as evidenced earlier, some were more concerned with other social power structures which impose a hierarchy on our society, like gender or physical ability. Gus

Solomons Jr. expressed a belief that in the spaces where he has danced, there is not a need for conversations about race to arise, and is more concerned with issues surrounding physical ability. Today, while he has conversations about racial tensions in post-Trump America, he expressed more concern over other issues of exclusion in the dance community. Solomons was one of the artists Brenda Dixon-Gottschild spoke with for her book, *The Black Dancing Body*, published in 2003. In the book, Solomons speaks on a variety of topics concerning race and dance: experiences and viewings of the black dancing body, attitudes of black dance audiences versus white dance audiences, white dancers' stereotypes of black dancers, and more. In 2010, *Dance Magazine* published a letter from Solomons that addresses the lack of dancers of color in ballet. Clearly, Solomons has spoken about race and dance before. When, toward the end of my interview with him, I asked if he thinks we should be having conversations about race in dance, his answer was no, that he would rather talk about art. Perhaps he is tired of a lifetime of considering race and dance and wishes we could get on with other, more interesting topics. Perhaps this was not a conversation he was interested in having with a young white woman conducting research on the topic.

Alexandra James explained that having conversations about race in dance is "absolutely" necessary in that "it's about revealing the humanity in all of us, and recognizing and validating experience and life." While she recognized the uneasiness that may come with these conversations, "there's too much at stake not to have these conversations." James, whose son was in the room with her throughout our FaceTime conversation, explained that part of her role as a mother to him is to participate in talking about how race affects our lives.

> I've got this guy to be worried about, so I feel like the least I can do is offer myself in a way that feels much less risky and also affirming and life-giving in a lot of ways, too. I can put myself through therapy in this way, to engage in ways that feel productive for me personally, productive for artmaking, for what I think means perhaps a shift in perspective or ideology or engagement going forward.

James was the only respondent who spoke directly to the need for conversations about race in dance for the sake of future generations. All of the other respondents are educators in some compacity and their work implies similar commitment to the world we are leaving to the next generation of dancers, dance makers, and our community.

Perhaps most importantly, Endalyn Taylor pointed out that while these conversations are vital to antiracism work, they also require action. For people in positions of power, often white people, that action might mean stepping back to create opportunity for black people, indigenous people, and people of color. It means speaking up against the myriad ways that white supremacy shows up, whether interpersonally or institutionally. It means amplifying voices of black people, indigenous people, and people of color by demanding they always have a seat at the table.

## CONCLUSION

From the outset of this project, it was obvious that my position as a white woman would influence my research and the resulting outcomes. My relationship with each of my respondents varied. To some, I am a friend and colleague; to others, a previous student. For several, our first interaction was our video chat interview. I had shared experience with some in regard to race in our dance careers, and have a completely different experience of race than many others who agreed to speak with me. These differences in position are an essential consideration in trying to arrive to any sort of conclusion, and it is safe to assume that they impacted how our

conversations went. While in some ways, the fact of my whiteness and my perspective of the dance world may be seen as a limitation of the project, it is a basic common denominator which must be questioned and challenged in order for me to fully see myself, and others, and my role in talking about race. In some ways, by often centering my whiteness in this work, I am merely serving white supremacy, though I hope that through centering and problematizing its dominance, this work also serves to subvert racial norms.

Simultaneously, my role in editing and re-presenting the thoughts of all of the individuals who spoke with me, both as part of this writing as well as in audio excerpts incorporated into the choreographic portion of this project, is certainly a limitation as well as an ethical point with which I struggled throughout the process. My choices of what portions of the interviews to include or exclude, as well as the new context within which I place their thoughts has the unfortunate potential to act in upholding dominant norms, rather than to challenge them.

To be sure, the small pool size of interviewees (eleven artists) limited the scope of this project, and the questions I asked influenced the thoughts respondents shared. Markedly, the common objection to the term and concept "race" itself meant many of my questions, which all used that word, were framed in a way which perhaps put a sort of hindrance on the respondents to answer fully. I wonder if more nuanced thoughts about race and dance would have been shared had my questions referred to identity, nationality, or even gender.

The choreographic portion of this thesis, titled *Taboo: Conversations on Race and Dance*, was presented on May 10th and 11th at 7pm in the UCI Claire Trevor School of the Arts Experimental Media Performance Lab and was made in collaboration with six undergraduate dance majors, Kyla Chaney, Carrie Cox, João Ducci, Nola Gibson, Samantha Lin, and Gabriela Maduro. Audio excerpts from the interviews, which I edited, were supported by original

compositions by JoVia Armstrong as well as music by Kronos Quartet and served as the sound component to the choreography. Through the creation process, the dancers/collaborators were encouraged to bring their own experiences and understandings of racial identity and dance. The piece acted as an embodiment of the interviews and the ideas they explored. Even with all of the stated possible limitations of this study, my hope is that this research and both its written and choreographic representations serve to normalize conversations about race in the dance field and to encourage individual consideration about what each of our roles should be when taking part in these conversations.

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## APPENDIX: INTERVIEW INSTRUMENT

How do you use or understand the word or concept of race?

Do you have conversations with people in the dance field about anything to do with race?

Does the topic of race ever come up in your professional dance life? Why or why not?

Where is it more likely to come up? Does the conversation differ in different spaces of the dance world?

When you think of your artmaking and your teaching, how does the concept of race figure into your thought process?

Do you think talking about race in our field is difficult? Why or why not? What's your reaction to these conversations?

Are conversations about race different when speaking with someone categorized as the same race as you versus someone categorized as a different race than you?

Do you think the role of race in concert dance has changed in the last decade (or in your professional experience so far, for a younger person)?

Do you think we all need to be having these conversations in our field? Why or not?