

Dancing Beyond Diversity: The Experiences of Black Female Ballerinas

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Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my parents Andre and Paula, and sisters Laura and Maya for their constant love & support. Love you forever and always.

Abstract

Ballet tends to reflect the intersection of femininity and whiteness, which conjure images of grace, beauty, innocence and fragility. This is the same discourse that is typically used to describe white womanhood (Fisher, 2016; McCarthy-Brown, 2011). This begs the question, “What are Black female dancer’s experiences of belonging?” Accordingly, this research seeks to understand the relationship between race and gender in the production, maintenance, and destruction of power within dance spaces. Using critical race methodologies of counter-storytelling, this research draws on Lefebvre’s (1991) understanding of social space (perceived space, conceived space, and lived space) and Black geographies to highlight and amplify the lived experiences of Black female ballet dancers. Qualitative data collection methods are utilized to explore these elements and to understand the everyday experiences within dance spaces. I will be conducting interviews, engaging in photo-elicitation, and collecting blog/social media data. This research will analyze how Black female bodies navigate dance spaces and how the interaction with these spaces influences a dancer’s perception of belonging. Accordingly, the objectives of this research are (1) to examine the ways in which experiences of space and belonging are racialized, (2) to deconstruct the historic and contemporary ideals of femininity and its interaction with Blackness, and (3) to explore how racialized ideals surrounding women’s bodies are perpetuated and/or challenged within dance spaces.

Keyword: Spatiality, Black Geographies, Race, Dance, Ballet

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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Introduction

As a Black¹ dancer, I have always been intrigued by the world of ballet. It was a world of beauty and grace, which to me often seemed out of reach. Dance has always been an essential part of my life, but I took a nine-year break between the ages of 6 and 14 from ballet. I never really understood why I left ballet, especially because it was something I truly loved. What I did learn when I returned to ballet, was how difficult it was to find a space where I belonged. I moved around to many different studios (three in one year) to find a space where I felt comfortable and could dance freely. Belonging has always been an interesting concept for me. As a young Black girl, I quickly realized that my interest often placed me in primarily “white space” (Anderson, 2015). I would choose ballet over hip-hop and was interested in gymnastics and horseback riding. It was in these spaces that I became hyperaware of my race and I found myself struggling with my identity and questioned where I belonged. This *sense of belonging* that I was searching for can be understood as deeply personal and intimate feelings of attachment that can be expressed in both social and spatial relationships (Antonsich, 2010; Yuval-Davis, 2006). These feelings can be influenced by interpersonal relationships determined by an individual’s “membership or lack of membership in a particular group as well as their position in these groups” (Yuval-Davis, 2006, p.198). As Antonisch (2010) relates, belonging can also be defined spatially, as an attachment to a place that 'feels at home' which symbolizes a space that elicits "familiarity, comfort, security, and emotional attachment" (p.646).

¹ I capitalize “Black” because “Blacks, like Asians, Latinos, and other ‘minorities,’ constitute a specific cultural group and, as such, require denotation as a proper noun” (MacKinnon, 1982: 515-516). By the same token, I do not capitalize “white,” which is not a proper noun, since whites do not constitute a specific cultural group. For the same reason I do not capitalize “women of color” (Crenshaw, 1991, p.1244).

Due to my enduring interest in ballet and my constant questioning of belonging and identity, I was intrigued by Misty Copeland's journey to becoming the first African American Principal Dancer of the American Ballet Theatre (ABT). For me, seeing Misty in a position of such prestige in the ballet world, showed me that there was a space for dancers like me. With all this attention, Misty Copeland has become the poster person for diversity in ballet, however, this made me wonder, if ballet has become diverse why are there still so few Black ballerinas? I began to question at what stage do Black girls lose interest in ballet or are they being pushed out? As someone who gave up on my dream early on, I am also interested in the experiences of other Black dancers, and I want to know what it took for them to succeed in ballet. These questions influenced the type of research I wanted to conduct, focusing on the experiences of Black female dancers and how their sense of belonging influences and is influenced by dance spaces.

Historically, the participation of Black dancers in Ballet was limited and they were often relegated to other dance forms as the belief was that "Black bodies cannot do ballet" (Brown, 2019; McCarthy-Brown, 2011; Adair, 1992, p.167). Ballet companies often validated their exclusions of Black dancers with the claim that Ballet is based on symmetry and harmony and that the inclusion of these Black bodies would 'look odd' (Adair, 1992). This perception was challenged by the creation of Black ballet companies such as the Dance Theater of Harlem and dancers who broke colour-lines and danced in integrated companies, such as Janet Collins who was the first Black Prima Ballerina with the Metropolitan Opera in New York in 1951 and Raven Wilkinson who was the first Black female dancer in the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo in 1955. Both experienced significant racial discrimination (Adair, 1992; McCarthy-Brown, 2011). Although there has been a significant increase of Black dancers in ballet as well as the success of dancers like Misty Copeland, there are still many barriers that impact their ability to be fully

accepted in these dance spaces. The biggest challenge in ballet today is the taken-for-granted presence of whiteness. For example, despite ballet's historic roots originating from Europe, discourse around ballet distances it from being a cultural or ethnic dance, deeming other cultural dance forms as being "exotic" (Fisher, 2016). This perpetuates the presumed superiority and normalcy of whiteness, and creates an environment that centralizes colour-blindness. Black dancers are therefore expected to conform to the white expectations of ballet, as opposed to dance companies making changes to better include Black dancers. For example, ballet slippers are made in 'nude' colours, such as pink or peach so that the dancer can create an invisible line from leg to toe. However, these shoes are not inclusive of all skin tones and Black dancers often have to 'pancake' (use paint, makeup, or dyes on their tights and shoes to match their skin tone) to create this desired look (Bata Shoe Museum, 2020). The challenges that people of colour face in dance are exemplified in key elements such as dancewear and hair, which are integral to performative spaces.

In this research, I explore the experiences of Black female dancers rather than Black male dancers because Black male dancers tend to be more accepted in the dance world (McCarthy-Brown, 2012). This is because their presence in ballet does not threaten the historic integrity of ballet. The Black male stereotype as the Black Buck or "the super performer" (the athlete, entertainment, or sex object) is more accepting in ballet as it does not disrupt the ideal of "White women as the object of femininity" (McCarthy-Brown, 2011, p.392). Ballet tends to emphasize the intersections of Whiteness and femininity. For example, ballet is often associated with words such as grace, beauty, innocence, fragility, etc. This is the same discourse used to describe White womanhood (Fisher, 2016; McCarthy-Brown, 2011, p.392). In contrast, Blackness is often disconnected from femininity, and Black womanhood is historically associated with three

stereotypes: the Jezebel, the Sapphire, and the Mammy (McCarthy-Brown, 2011). “[N]one of these three primary stereotypes for Black women [...] fit into the feminine identity of classical ballet” (McCarthy-Brown, 2011). Black male dancers are not expected to conform in the same ways as Black female dancers and therefore do not face the same challenges. This research looks specifically at the experiences of Black female ballet dancers as there is a confrontation of femininity and the ways in which it is defined differently for racialized bodies.

1.2 Research Question

This research will analyze how Black female bodies navigate dance spaces and how the interaction with these spaces influences a dancer's perceptions of belonging. The central research question is *what are Black female ballet dancers' experiences of belonging?* Accordingly, the objectives of this research are:

1. To examine the ways in which experiences of space and belonging are racialized.
2. To deconstruct the historic and contemporary ideals of femininity and its interaction with Blackness.
3. To explore how racialized ideals surrounding women's bodies are perpetuated and/or challenged within dance spaces.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

In this chapter, I will be discussing the current scholarship surrounding critical race theory (CRT), race and sports, the production of space, Black geographies and belongingness, as these areas of research will be informing this research project. I begin by examining critical race theory, as it is the epistemological lens through which this project is constructed. I will discuss the foundational elements of CRT and will highlight how they will be utilized throughout the research process. CRT is further discussed in the context of sports and dance to understand the centrality of race/racism in these fields and the racialization of moving bodies. I also draw on Lefebvre's conceptual model for understanding social space, which addresses how space is produced and reproduced through social interactions. This concept is expanded on by examining Black geographical literature and the racialization of space. I conclude this section by discussing the concept of belongingness and the creation of a 'sense of belonging'. This literature analysis is important in providing a transdisciplinary understanding of this research.

2.1 Critical Race Theory

I will be using critical race theory (CRT) as a theoretical framework to inform my research perspective as well as my methods. I have chosen to use CRT as it encourages a more race-focused perspective that is reflective of my lived experience. As a person of colour, race and racism has been central to how I understand and move through the world. CRT allows me to engage with scholarship that understands and challenges the racialized order of society.

Critical race theory focuses on challenging current views or thoughts through an analysis of race, racism, and power (Fleras, 2017). It acknowledges race as a social construct and

recognizes the consequences, impacts, and experiences of the construction of race, resulting in racial inequality and systemic racism barriers. Since racism is deeply ingrained in our society, these inequalities and barriers are normalized and maintain Eurocentric dominance. The impact of this power imbalance can be seen in structural and cultural aspects of society, at the institutional (macro) and individual (micro) levels (Solorzano, 1997). CRT critiques how institutions "reflect, reinforce, and advance" the values and experiences of the dominant group (Fleras, 2017, p. 160). Critical race theory incorporates five basic elements that influence research perspectives and methodology: the centrality of race and racism in society; the challenge to dominant ideology; the centrality of experiential knowledge; interdisciplinary perspective; and a commitment to social justice (Solorzano, 1997).

Five Basic Elements of CRT

The first element of CRT is the *centrality of race and racism in society*. This is the understanding that race and racism are intertwined in every aspect of society. Racism is an everyday occurrence for people of colour and can be experienced through both systemic/institutional barriers or take on an individual form such as stereotyping and micro-aggression (Fleras, 2017; Solorzano, 1997). Racism in society can be both "conscious or unconscious and it has a cumulative impact on both the individual and group" (Solorzano, 1997, p.6). This element of CRT also acknowledges race at the intersection of other forms of oppression such as gender, class, and sexuality. CRT does not view these identities in a hierarchy of oppression, rather CRT scholars look to understand how a racialized lens can better understand these experiences (Hylton, 2010).

The second element is the *challenge to dominant ideology*. CRT seeks to challenge notions of “objectivity, meritocracy, colour-blindness, race neutrality, and equal opportunity” (Hylton, 2010, p.339; Solorzano, 1997, p.6). These apolitical, neutral understandings of race assume an 'equal playing field' that treats marginalized individuals the same as dominant group members and reinforces oppressive ideologies that silence the voices and values of people of colour (Fleras, 2017; Hylton, 2012). CRT understands that power is created and maintained through the creation of knowledge and that the development of ideologies is used to justify the dominance of those in power (Hylton, 2012). CRT acknowledges and challenges power imbalances both within society and through academia. CRT recognizes that “stories or discourse have been the privilege of those historically influential in knowledge generation and research” (Hylton, 2012, p.27).

The third element is the *centrality of experiential knowledge*. CRT recognizes and legitimizes the experiences of people of colour to understand and analyze racialized power imbalances (Solorzano, 1997). CRT seeks to privilege the voices and lived experiences of people of colour through methods such as storytelling/counter-storytelling (Solorzano, 1997). Storytelling/counter-storytelling uses personal stories (autobiographical reflections), and other people's stories (biographical/third-person accounts) to highlight and discuss experiences with racism and other forms of oppression (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002). It is also important that whilst highlighting the lived experiences of persons of colour, those engaged with CRT should avoid "homogenization, overgeneralization and reductionism", as it disregards intersectionality and frames the Black experience in on singular lens (Hylton, 2012, p.29). CRT acknowledges the importance of storytelling and the sharing of experiences as an essential tool to ensure survival and liberation (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002).

The fourth element is an *interdisciplinary perspective*². CRT seeks to understand and analyze race and racism in both historical and contemporary contexts (Solorzano, 1997). This requires transdisciplinary knowledge and methods to provide a wider understanding of race in society (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002; Hylton, 2010). CRT scholars often engage with other disciplines such as women's studies, sociology, history, law, and other fields of studies to guide research (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002).

The final element is a *commitment to social justice*. Critical race theory not only seeks to understand power and race relationships but prioritizes the dismantling of discriminatory barriers and the eradication of racism, allowing for full and equal participation in society (Fleras, 2017). The overall goal of CRT is the eradication of racism in all aspects of society as it is important in addressing other forms of oppression (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002; Hylton, 2010). CRT aims to create transformative and emancipatory solutions that will inform policies and practices that will improve the lives of people of colour (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002)

CRT in Sports and Dance

CRT is underpinned by the notion that race and racism are intertwined in all aspects of society which includes sports, leisure, and the arts. These fields are ideal settings for critical race critiques because there remains a perpetuation of domination and oppression. For example, the slogan "sports for all" is based upon merit and grounded in neo-liberal ideologies that deny racialized power relations and portray sports as a benign field "where popular views of equality, inclusion and 'melting pot' idealism often go unchallenged" (Hylton, 2010, p.30). Without challenging these superficial understandings of equality and inclusion, sports become a space

² CRT scholars used interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary interchangeably to describe knowledge synthesis that goes beyond the boundaries of traditional disciplines (Solorzano, 1997; Solorzano & Yosso, 2002).

that promotes colour-blindness and "reinforces oppressions, racial inequalities, and power relations" (Hylton, 2010, p.31).

Dance is also an important aspect of culture and is therefore ingrained with social hierarchies and power relations. This means that like sports, dance can perpetuate dominant ideologies and maintain racial power imbalances. Dance creates meaning from what exists within the social world and thus embodies worldviews that are often reflective of the dominant values (Adair, 1992). Dance, specifically classical ballet, has often been linked with the dominance of whiteness. "*Whiteness*, 'is not so much a colour as a condition', which is also affected by class, gender, sexuality, and place of origin" (Harrison, 2008, p.319). Whiteness has been associated with "purity, innocence, unattainable ideals and notions of 'civilized society', these same ideals are reinforced in dance (Fisher, 2016, p.2). This is shown through the distinction of ballet from other styles of dance, that ballet is seen as prestigious and an art form, unlike tap which is viewed as entertainment (Fisher, 2016). Social hierarchies within dance are determined by dominant understandings of gender, race, and class, influencing the hierarchies of dance styles and determining who can participate.

The dominance of whiteness and the perpetuation of a colour-blind narrative in the context of dance is challenged through a CRT framework. Specifically, by drawing on CRT, this research strives to: (1) challenge the dominant ideology of whiteness in ballet; (2) highlight the centrality of race and racism as is it perpetuated through the institution of dance; (3) use storytelling as a way to emphasize the experiences of the Black female dancer; (4) draw from an interdisciplinary perspective to examine the intersections of race and gender and; (5) is committed to social justice as this research looks to understand diversity practices with

dance spaces. This focus is important for this research because the perpetuation of discriminatory practices (overt or covert) influences how dancers shape their sense of belonging.

2.2 Race and Sports

In this section, I highlight the significance of race in the shaping of sports and sport spaces. 'Race' has been understood as a social construct; however, this is not to negate the social, political and economic power in which 'race' holds. Hylton (2015) explains that "'race' matters because people are readily compartmentalized and tagged according to it" (p.2). The social construction of race has created racial hierarchies and consequently, racial inequalities. As explained by critical race theory, race and racism are intertwined in all aspects of society, including sports. Sports are social and culturally significant spaces and can be both a reflection of the wider society as well as locations that inform and change societal expectations.

Carrington (2013) explains that traditionally when race is discussed in the context of sport, it is often treated as a statistical variable without critical theorization or discussions of racism. Academics who have examined the sociology of sport and/or the sociology of race have challenged this notion by examining sports as cultural and political spaces. For example, some scholars have referred to CLR James' book, *Beyond a Boundary*, as providing a foundational analysis of race and sports, as he discussed the political relevance of cricket and the impact of colonialism on Caribbean society (Carrington, 2013). This informed a more critical approach to race and the examination of how sport helps to reshape wider social relations (Carrington, 2013). This shift has positioned sports as a productive cultural activity and social institution that is not only impacted by race and racist discourse, but actively makes and remakes ideas about race (Carrington, 2013). While there has been a shift in academic understanding of sports, mainstream

discourse surrounding race and sports still positions race as insignificant and portrayed sports as neutral spaces of inclusion, meritocracy and equality (Hylton, 2015).

Colour-blindness

Reflective of the societal perception that we exist in a ‘post-racial’ society, sports have adopted a ‘colour-blind’ approach to race. Sports institutions have long believed that they are apolitical and removed from concerns about power, discrimination, and are ‘above race’ (Love et al., 2019). In Kevin Hylton’s (2015) *‘Race’ Talk! Tensions and contradictions in sport and PE*, he explains the multiple ways in which colour-blindness is expressed in sports:

- *Abstract liberalism* draws on the notions of choice and individualism and is often used to explain (in)activity in relation to diversity and equality. This is most evident in the celebration of athletes of colour’s success as an indication that race is no longer a problem (Love et al., 2019). This concept of abstract liberalism does not allow for critical conversations about race and racism, instead creates a superficial performance of racial equality where institutions and individual are left undisturbed. These sentiments are reiterated by Anderson (2015), when he states, “what whites see as ‘diverse,’ Blacks may perceive as homogeneously white and relatively privileged” (p.11). Hylton (2015) explains that this results in the ignoring of racialized practices and the continuation of discrimination.
- *Minimization* is the assumption that reduction in explicit racism in sports means that race is no longer a problem. This is contradictory to the lived experiences of racialized athletes as problems of discrimination, and racism remain consistent. This notion also ignores the everyday racism that is more covert that is expressed through

the normalization of racial practices or is experienced through micro-aggressions. The minimization of racial experiences perpetuates the notion that race is insignificant.

The portrayal of racial processes as insignificant “is a privilege only for those located in positions of power and least likely to be affected by them” and allows for the maintenance of racial inequalities (Hylton, 2015, p.8).

- *Cultural racism* is similar to minimization in that it “emphasizes culturally specific reasons for negative racial dynamics, often justified through claims of cultural practices” (Hylton, 2015, p.8). For example, statements such as “They would rather not play football because their parents want them to be doctors or lawyers” (Hylton, 2015, p.8). This form of colour-blindness, like other forms of racism, can be used to victim blame and places the burden of racial inequity on the individual.
- *Naturalization* is often used to explain away racial phenomena with myth and stereotypes. Most often, naturalization is used to defend the ‘natural’ order of things such as reasons for particular groups gravitating towards certain sports and/or positions. This is often perpetuated through narratives that state that particular groups are more physical beings while others have a superior intellectual capacity.

A truly colour-blind approach to sports is not attainable because we do not live in an unbiased, ‘race’ neutral society, but rather society is structured by ‘race’ and racism whether consciously or not (Hylton, 2015). With a colour-blind approach, white privilege/supremacy is maintained and “racialized problems persist because ‘race’ is seen as the problem rather than the broader structural, social, cultural, historical, and economic concerns that reinforce subordination and inequalities” (Hylton, 2015, p.2). As a result, racism and racial discrimination continue to be experienced at all levels of sport.

Racism and Racial Inequality in Sports

Colour-blind ideology allows for the ignorance and dismissal of the everyday racism that occurs in sports spaces. Racial inequality and racism continue to persist and can be experienced in many ways. Racism within sports can be anything from racist abuse from fans (i.e., abusive chanting, derogatory names or items being thrown), micro-aggressions from teammates or coaches, physical and psychological stereotyping, and racial disparities in leadership and administration (Hylton, 2015; Love et al., 2019). The most persistent type of racism experienced by athletes of colour is stereotyping. A common stereotype is the notion that Black athletes are physically superior and white athletes are intellectually superior, which results in the over- or under-representation in specific sports or positions (Hylton, 2015; Love et al., 2019). This stereotype has also been persistent in the racial inequity of leadership and administration. For example, Love et al. (2019) states that while “people of colour comprise of more than 80% of all players in the National Basketball Association (NBA), but hold 30% of head coaching positions, 10% of general manager positions, and 6.9% of CEO/President positions” (p.229). Carrington (2013) discusses this as the exploitation of Black sporting labour by white owners and defines this as positional segregation.

These same stereotypes are also present in Black women’s sporting experiences. Bruening et al. (2008) discuss how stereotypes surrounding Black women’s physicality and athleticism influence their socialization into specific sports, in particular, basketball and track-and-field. They argue that interactions with socialization agents, such as coaches, teachers, and peers, steer Black women into stereotypically Black sports, creating perceptions of limited sporting options (Bruening et al., 2008). Similarly, Smith-Tran (2020) explains that Black

women are still disproportionality absent from depictions of health and fitness. This lack of depiction affects how Black women see themselves within sporting spaces, “without having relatable reference groups to look to as examples for being physically active, the chances of engaging in fitness and leisure sport diminish” (Smith-Tran, 2020, p.3). This lack of representation is also reflective of sport literature. There is limited literature that highlights the experiences of Black female athletes. Literature that discusses race and sports often prioritizes the Black male experience and literature that discusses gender, is often from a white, middle-class female lens. When looking at Black women’s sporting histories, Nzindukiyimana and Wamsley (2019) questioned whether “[Black women’s] invisibility reflects a total absence from sport or whether the existing histories that have concentrated on competitive, male sport simply ignore women’s existence in other important contexts of physical activity” (p.1290).

While there is limited literature surrounding Black women’s sporting experience (for example, Douglas, 2012; van Ingen 2013); the literature that does exist provides important insight into the intersection of different social identities. Nzindukiyimana and Wamsley (2019) state that “active participation in sports was significantly linked to socio-economic positions” (p.1293). This still remains true, as Bruening et al. (2008) explain, that African American children were more affected by access to facilities, equipment, programming and instruction than their white counterparts and since most African American families cannot afford ‘elite sporting experiences’, their children are encouraged to participate in stereotypical ‘popular’ sport. The intersection between race and social class is important to discuss as it highlights the racialized structural barriers that impact sporting experiences. The intersection of race and social class also allows for an analysis of the multiplicity of the Black identity. Another stereotype that has also affected Black athletes’ sporting experience is the assumption that all Black people are of a

lower class. As Bruening et al. (2008) highlight, there is a need to challenge the myth of the monolithic as “there is no such thing as [...] ‘the African American experience” (p. 19). Smith-Tran’s (2020) work on Black female running groups, highlights the concept of ‘minority culture of mobility’. A minority culture of mobility consists of a ‘set of cultural elements’ that help people respond to the ‘distinctive problems of being middle-class and minority” (Smith-Tran, 2020, p.5). This concept speaks to the unique challenges minorities face while navigating life in the white mainstream. Some of the issues that Smith-Tran (2020) noted were “pressure to perform well because of elevated visibility, feelings of isolation from being the ‘only one,’ and experiences of self-distortion when the dominant group pigeonholes the tokened individual into particular roles” (p.6). Often the racism faced by middle-class minorities in these mainly white spaces are micro-aggressions and due to the isolation in these spaces, they are often burdened with coping with these issues alone.

Another type of racism that is not often discussed is the concept of ‘respectability politics’. Respectability is not a new concept in sports, in fact. sports have often been used to instill “manly virtues and competencies” (Carrington, 1998, p.277). Respectability politics is problematic because it disproportionately targets racialized individuals and is used to reinforce the dominance of whiteness. Lorenz and Murray (2014) discuss this concept while examining the NBA and NHL dress codes. These dress codes were created to impose a strict off-court dress code, specifically to discourage urban, hip-hop, and ‘street’ style clothing. Lorenz and Murray (2014) explain that this dress code was in place to counter the “hip-hopification of the game” which was a perceived threat to the dominant social order. The teams stated that this dress code was in place to promote a “professional image” and that it would be “good business” (Lorenz and Murray, 2014, p.33). These dress code has been criticized for the ways in which it is used to

police Black athletes and racialized forms of expression whilst also creating an image that commodifies Black athletes for white audiences (Lorenz and Murray, 2014). Unfortunately, respectability politics is not unique to sports but is also prominent in other aspects of Canadian society such as workplaces and education systems.

Racism in sport can arise in many different ways however due to the colour-blind ideology of sports, identifying and addressing these racial inequities become difficult. Athletes who experience this racism are expected to internalize and overcome these racial challenges and when successful they are celebrated, while those who are unsuccessful have their experiences positioned as an individual failing or choice rather than the structural and racial barriers.

Spaces of Resistances

Historically, sports have been an important institution in the shaping and reshaping of understandings about race. Sports remain a social institution that is influenced by social norms and understandings, however, it can also be a tool used to resist existing political ideologies and evoke social change. Carrington (1998) explains that “sport must thus be viewed as an institution through which domination is not only imposed but also contested; an institution within which power is constantly at play” (p.279). Sports are power-laden social spaces and therefore can be spaces where certain groups can challenge dominant understandings. Nzindukiyimana and Wamsley (2019) explained that participation in sport allowed for a platform to combat negative perceptions about Black people stating, “If the struggle to combat racism is fundamentally a fight against stereotypes at the individual level, then playing ball became important social justice work” (p.1295). Sports spaces have become known to be central spaces for Black resistance.

Black sporting spaces have been known to be important in the maintenance and creation of Black culture. For example, Joseph's (2012) analysis of capoeira, showed the importance of maintaining the African roots of capoeira for Black participants as they were able to "claim it as their own more directly, without having to think of it as an exotic, Brazilian import." (p.1084). This connection is more often tied to the Capoeira Angola style as it allowed participants to experience the art as it was centuries ago on the plantations and streets. Capoeira is also inventive and adaptive to the new world. Joseph (2012) explains that capoeira as is it practice in Canada is "free of the stigma of under-class origins and the history of being a predominantly male activity" allowing it to be practiced by all regardless of gender class and race (p.1083). Black sporting spaces are important in the cultivation of Black identity and sense of sense.

Black sporting spaces also play a key role in the challenging of dominant ideals as well as creating a safe place for Black athletes to participate in sports freely. Nzindukiyimana and Wamsley (2019) described Black sporting spaces as fighting spaces and platforms used to directly confront white society from the margins. Black sporting spaces were also created as 'safe havens' from a white gaze where Black people could be themselves, or as Smith-Tran (2020) describe, a space to "de-robe" (p.5). When discussing Black Girls Run (BGR), a Black women's running group, Smith-Tran (2020) highlights the important social role this running group holds. Recreational running has been known as a predominantly white activity and often Black women who participate in this activity find themselves feeling that their physical appearances othered them and experiences feelings of isolation like the "only ones" (Smith-Tran, 2020). BGR creates a space where individuals are running alongside women who look like them, builds a sense of community and challenges the dominant narratives about Black women. Black sporting spaces can operate as "being a space removed, albeit not entirely, from the overt

practices of White racism, as a social cultural resource for Black people, and as an area that allows for Black expressive behaviour” (Carrington, 1998, p.284). Sports as an institution has been and remains a source of strength, community and identity for many Black athletes.

2.3 Production of Space

I will be using Lefebvre’s (1991) *conceptual model for understanding social space*, to understand the relationship between Black female bodies and ballet spaces. This conceptual model will be used to explore how bodies not only move through space but create/produce space and how this spatial relationship can influence a sense of belonging. For Lefebvre (1991), space is not autonomous to the structure of social relations, but spaces are products of social constructions and are therefore inherently political and ideological. Lefebvre identifies three moments of production of social space (Spatiality Triad); 1) perceived space, 2) conceived space 3) lived space (Glover, 2017; van Ingen, 2003).

Firstly, perceived space is the production and use of material or physical space. This space is understood as the interaction between the body and the material space (van Ingen, 2003; Glover, 2017). The perceived space describes not only the physical structure or buildings but also the everyday routines of those who engage with this space (Glover, 2017). Conceived space is space that is constructed through discourse and is engaged with thoughts, ideas, plans, codes, and memories, this is the production of spatial knowledge (van Ingen, 2003). Finally, lived space is social space in which life is directly lived and experienced (van Ingen, 2003, Glover, 2017). This lived space encompasses "social struggle, counter-discourse, and resistance" (van Ingen, 2003, p. 204).

Social space is created through discursive practices and is reinforced through the repetition and ritualization of norms and is understood as performative (Glover, 2017). In other words, we "do" social space through the performance of everyday life, and "social space is (re)made and (re)inscribed on the individual" (Glover, 2017, p. 882-883). Social space is created by social relationships, which can lead to social hierarchies that control who can and cannot belong. According to Glover (2017), "To understand belonging, then means, understanding power" (p.875). Lefebvre's concept of social space argues that power is expressed in the production and control of space (van Ingen, 2003). This power is perpetuated by the dominant group through the normalization of a specific social group, creating social boundaries, and determining social values (Glover, 2017).

Racial Spatiality

Power and space are further highlighted by the concepts of *racial spatiality*, which focuses on the power relations between race and space. "Racial spatiality is founded on the perception that certain racialized bodies are expected to occupy certain social spaces and, complimentarily, that the presence of other bodies creates social disruption, moral unbalance, and/or demands explanation" (Harrison, 2013, p.317). This concept explains the normalization of social power, and by extension social inequality through the defining and defending of social space (Harrison, 2013).

The intersection of race and space has a long-standing connection and is deeply socially embedded (Neely & Samura, 2011). Racial and spatial studies have examined the interaction of race and space through the process of imperialism, where "groups marked as 'racially inferior' have been 'defined, confined, regulated, and eradicated through the control of space" (Neely

& Samura, 2011, p.1934). Racial and spatial studies continue to understand the intersection of race and space as they are "continuously made and remade through interactions between groups and individuals at both the macro- and micro-levels" (Neely & Samura, 2011, p.1944). Space has been understood as an "active archive" of social processes and relationships in which race is fabricated through the interaction of people and their activities (Neely & Samura, 2011, p. 1940). Relational interactions are used to understand how the racialization of space influences identities, inequalities, and conflicts. Harrison (2013) explains that the maintenance of social power starts at the level of ideology, this ideology is a "pervasive, evasive and self-deceptive (mis)understanding of social phenomena that allow for cognitive and moral delusions necessary for rationalizing historical and contemporary subjection", this is understood as the *epistemology of ignorance* (p.317). This normalization of dominance produces a justification for oppression and is left unchallenged, resulting in everyday racism that is often hidden and endured (Harrison, 2013). From this understanding, it is evident how spaces are socially constructed and their foundation in ideology creates boundaries and restrictions for participation in these spaces.

Racial spatiality addresses structural and social forces that produce a racialized discourse of belonging and geographies of inclusion/exclusion (Harrison,2013). This highlights the importance of social relations that shape Black dancers' sense of belonging within their dance spaces. It is understood that social relations influence creativity, connections, and collaborations that are relevant to self and collective expressions. Therefore, dance will be examined through an understanding of social space, in which social and power relations are produced maintained or challenged.

2.4 Black Geographies

In this section, I will be examining Black geographical literature to deepen my understanding of Black space and place-making. Like most academic scholarship, geographical studies have historically been situated in white, Eurocentric and colonial understanding of bodies and place. This white, patriarchal, Eurocentric, heterosexual, and classed lens of ‘traditional geographies’ has influenced the geographical understanding of insiders/outside, borders and belongings by determining social difference and where social order takes place (McKittrick, 2006).

McKittrick (2006) explains that Black geographies are situated both within and outside of traditional geographies, as well as beyond, as it exposes the limitations of traditional geographies through Black social particularities and knowledge. Black geographies can be understood as both “an ontological subject of study and an epistemological way of interpreting and interacting with the world” (Allen et al., 2019, p.1002). Allen et al., (2019) defines Black geographical studies as not just the geographical study of race but is a framework that “emphasized Black experiences, as well as alternative visions and articulations of space drawn from these experiences” (p. 1002).

It is important to note that Black feminist scholars have been fundamental to the development of Black geographic scholarship (McKittrick, 2006; Hawthorne, 2019). Black feminist scholars analyze the intersections of race, gender and sexuality, allowing for a critical examination and transformation of the “power-laden category of human” (Hawthorne, 2019, p.4). Black geographies create a discourse that allows for examination of the raced, classed, gendered, and sexual body as an indicator of spatial options (McKittrick, 2006). Geographies through the lens of Black women provides an understanding of the negotiation of space and place, through the legacy of exploitation, exploration and conquest which conceptualized geography as a racial-sexual terrain (McKittrick, 2006). Katherine McKittrick, a Gender Studies professor at Queen’s

University, whose work is situated in Black studies, anti-colonial studies, and cultural geographies, published *Demonic Grounds* (2006), which researches Black women's geographies and how their lived and imagined experiences of place provide important insight into practices of domination. Black geographical knowledge is driven by Black women's geographical thought, not just intellectually but also politically. This means that Black women's contribution to Black geographies is not just an intersectional spatial lens, but rather Black women's racial and gendered geographical histories highlight the patriarchal influences of the spatial creation of power and knowledge. This occurs through "white colonial desires for lands, free labour, and racial-sexual domination". (McKittrick, 2006, p.40). As McKittrick (2006) states "Black matters are spatial matters" (p.xii).

Black geographies recognize the overlapping of material spaces and language in the perpetuation of racial displacement, or erasure, and therefore conceptualizes geographies through the intersection of the physical landscape, geographical imaginations (mapping, exploring and seeing), and the social relations in and across space (McKittrick, 2006). Due to the white Eurocentric positionality of geography, Blackness and its relation to geography existed on the margins, where "Black subjects their geopolitical concerns [are situated] as being elsewhere" (Hawthorne, 2019, p.3). This notion of placelessness was evident during and is perpetuated because of colonization. Eaves (2020) speaks to the history of cartography and the mapping of 'empty' spaces and how this discursive formation of place highlights the power of mapping and the power in which geographers hold. For example, when looking at settler-colonial landscapes such as Canada, Australia, and New Zealand, the concept of *Terra nullius* or 'nobody's land' was the claim used to justify the colonization and domination of these lands and therefore the people who occupied the land. McKittrick (2006) explains that geographies of domination can be

understood as “displacement of difference” where racism is used to determine the hierarchy of human and inhuman (p.xv). Therefore, dehumanization is necessary for both geographical and social domination.

The positioning of Blackness on the margins of geographical studies situates Black bodies and Black space only through the lens of and in relation to whiteness. The result is a binary understanding in which Blackness is equated to subjugation, oppression and dispossession, while whiteness is equated to privilege and freedom (McKittrick, 2011). Black geographies understand Black bodies and Black space not as a separate or subcategory of geographical studies, but essential to and intertwined with the existence of Western and Eurocentric geographical knowledge (Hawthorne, 2019).

Hawthorne (2019) explains that Black geographies seek to understand the complexities of Black life through “Black spatial knowledge, negotiations, and resistances” whilst also understanding “geographies of domination – colonialism, slavery, imperialism, racial-sexual displacement” (p.5). Black geographies affirm Black identities, celebrate Black life and experiences, as Black people and communities continue to resist a racist society, providing a refreshing examination of race (Allen et al., 2018). Black geographies look to analyze race, “not based on suffering but on human life” (McKittrick, 2011, p.948).

Black space vs. White space

One focus of Black geographies is the negotiations of space, this includes how Black people navigate white spaces as well as how they accept and create Black spaces. Elijah Anderson, professor of sociology and African American studies at Yale, published ‘White Space’ (2015) a key paper that outlines white urban environments that are informally “off-limits”

for Black bodies. Anderson (2015) defines white spaces as “spaces in which Black people are typically absent, not expected, or marginalized when present” (p.10) Blackness has often been positioned as placeless or ‘out of place’ (McKittrick, 2011; Hawthorne, 2019). However, Black geographies have challenged this notion by understanding and defining different aspects of Black space.

When Blackness is examined in relation to whiteness, there is often a singular narrative of Black space, in which this space is seen as a “lowly, non-negotiable, caste-like place’ often contained in ghettos” (Anderson, 2015, p.11). This understanding perpetuates the binary of Blackness equated to oppression and whiteness equated to freedom. This is an understanding of Black spaces/places (often through a US context) which “has been established during slavery and shaped by a history of state-sanctioned racial segregation” (Anderson, 2015, p.11). It is important to mention the historic and contemporary interdependency of racism and racial capitalism in the construction of this narrative as capitalism and the process of uneven development presents “a natural link between Blackness, underdevelopment, poverty and place within differing global contexts” (McKittrick, 2011 p.951). This narrative of Black space reinforces ideals of racial inferiority and shows that the conceptualization of Black space and white space are not situated as opposite and equal entities, rather it shows that racial hierarchy exists in the defining and defending of space.

When existing outside of Black space, Black people are still expected to maintain the racial hierarchy. For example, within white spaces, the ‘tolerated’ Black person is the person who remains ‘in their place’ such that they reinforce the social order of white people as dominant and Black people as subordinate (Anderson, 2015). In addition, when Black people challenge racial expectations (i.e., the Black middle class in suburbs) they can be subjected to social

(sometimes physical) consequences (Anderson, 2015). We can see the traumatic consequences of what it means to be Black in white space through the recent tragedies of Ahmed Aubrey, who was shot and killed by a group of white supremacists while jogging in a suburban neighbourhood or the near lynching of Jerry Cox while camping in Indiana. Anderson (2015) speaks to the experience of “existing while Black” and how the preconceived designations of Blackness in relation to ‘the ghetto’ influence the controlling and policing of where Black people can exist (p.12). Anderson (2015) further explains the inequalities of negotiating space as he states that “while white people usually avoid Black space, Black people are required to navigate the white space as a condition of their existence” (p.11). Therefore, Black geographies look to understand and critique “not only so-called ‘Black’ spaces but all spaces in which members of the diaspora live and participate” (Allen et al., 2019, p.1002).

The historic and geographic significance of the Black diasporic experience through the transatlantic slave trade, immigration and forced migration provides important insight into both the erasure and creation of a Black sense of place. The Black diaspora is the term used to “express the links and commonalities among groups of African descent throughout the world” (Joseph, 2012, p.1080). An examination of the Black diaspora is central to “examining how Black subjectivities operate both within and against hegemonic understandings of nations, race, place, and membership” (Hawthorne, 2019, p.5). Joseph (2012) understands Blackness and the diaspora as cultural heterogeneity in that “no single culture can be examined in isolation because ‘the peoples we study are forever subject to influences from elsewhere’” (p.1080). The diaspora is often understood through the assumption that Black cultures and identity are linked through shared experiences of oppression, racism and exclusion (Joseph, 2012). Hawthorne (2019) speaks to the “global circulation of both racisms and the politics of Blackness” (p.8) and calls on

a greater examination of Black life on a global scale. A diasporic understanding is important in highlighting Black autonomy in space/place-making. Black people and their discursively constructed and literal bodies do not simply exist in space but actively participate in the (re)producing and (re)claiming of spaces (Allen et al., 2019).

Anti-Black Violence

The understanding of Black people as placeless, or ‘ungeographical’ is rooted in violence toward Black people, particularly in the movement of enslaved people and their removal from their homelands. This narrative incorrectly describes the relationship between Blackness and geography. Geography in both the historic and contemporary sense has been dependent on the profitable erasure and objectification of Black people, stories and land, which is only made possible through violence and enslavement, making the Black experience fundamentally geographical (McKittrick, 2006).

In McKittrick’s (2011), *On plantations, prisons, and a Black sense of place*, she discusses the plantation as a meaningful geographical location in which racial violence and Black placelessness was normalized and explains that the spatial practices of the plantation are evident in the continued perpetuation of racial violence. In this article, McKittrick outlines the term urbicide which has been defined as “the murder of the city’ and the ‘deliberate denial or killing of the city’ (p.951). She uses this term to highlight how the destruction of a place consequently leads to the destruction and death of people. She further discusses how plantation discourse and well as contemporary narratives of Blackness normalizes the notion of ‘premature death’. McKittrick (2011) states that “the term urbicide puts forward, in terms of Blackness, a conceptualization of racial and geographic violence that is bound up in narratives and codes that

honour a cycle of life, wherein particular communities and their geographies are condemned to death over and over again” (p.954).

The Black person and the Black body can be examined through interactions with violence and has often been analyzed in two ways, the violent and the violated body. The ‘violent Black body’ is the narrative used to justify colonization and the ‘taming’ of the ‘uncivilized’ Black person. This allows for the surveillance and control of Black bodies with the use of violence. Similarly, the “violated body” is the examination of the violence that is acted upon the Black body. Black geography literature explores the ‘violated Black body’ through the analysis of slave ships, plantations, prisons, police violence, and sexual violence. While most literature speaks to the violence acted upon Black men, particularly in the context of mass incarceration and police violence, McKittrick (2006) speaks specifically to the racialized and gendered violence that is experienced by Black women. McKittrick (2006) explains how the racial-sexual placement of Black women within patriarchal knowledge means that “her place and body are seen to be, and understood as, naturally subordinate to whiteness and masculinity” (p.40). Therefore, Black femininity is examined “within the broader system of servitude—as an inhuman racial-sexual worker, as an objectified body, as a site through which sex, violence, and reproduction can be imagined and enacted, and as a captive human” (p.xvii). Black femininity in this context is hypersexualized while simultaneously disconnected from the fragility, innocence, and protection associated traditional femininity.

Although Blackness and the Black experience is inclusive in the understanding of violence and death, both Hawthorne (2019) and McKittrick (2011) criticize the over-emphasis on the ‘violated body’ in Black geographical literature as it (1) “singularizing” the Black experience to merely biology and (2) it presents Black life as if it is reducible to racism, violence, and death.

In addition to violence on the Black body, McKittrick (2011) speaks to the racial underpinning of modernity and how despite the necessity of transatlantic slavery and colonialism in developing the new world, Black people and Black places are situated outside of modernism, she describes them as the “unspoken labourers of modernity” (p.949). McKittrick (2011) goes further to discuss the dismissal and erasure of not just the physical labour of Black people but also the intellectual labour when she states, “those rendered less than human are also deemed too destroyed or too subjugated or too poor to write, imagine, want, or have a new lease on life” (p.955). This speaks to violence in the form of erasure, particularly the erasure of Black contribution and the death of Black thought, dreams, and future. The implication of this erasure results in the control of how Black people present themselves and their thoughts as well as controls the spaces in which Blackness can exist.

Therefore, when I discuss violence in the context of space, I speak not only to the physical violence acted on Black people but specifically to the racialized surveillance and control of Black bodies and Black spaces which can occur through exclusion, neglect, erasure and silencing of Black experiences. My research on Black female ballerinas shifts the conversation from the violent and violated Black body narrative to the moving and dancing Black body.

Place-making³ and a sense of belonging

Space and place have been previously theorized by scholars like Lefebvre who understand that space and place are (re)produced “through social interaction and are socio-politically contested” (Allen et al., 2019, Pg.1011). Lefebvre is cited often as his theories of space move beyond place as a location or a physical entity, instead, he understands space and

³ I use space and place interchangeably as they are both socio-spatial processes that move beyond static and physical locations.

place as having an active role in socio-political construction. Black geographers have expanded on Lefebvre theories and continue to critique the understanding of space as a static entity, and the idea that "...space and place are merely containers for human complexities and social relations" (Eaves, 2020, p.35; McKittrick 2006; Allen et al., 2019).

Black geographies scholarship examines racism and the hierarchy of difference in relational to space and its impact on place-making as they assert that "racism is also a *spatial practice* - space is not just a blank canvas upon which racist activity unfolds [...] space both reflects and (re)produces racism" (Hawthorne, 2019, p.5). This is demonstrated through racialized landscape practices such as "zoning, housing discrimination, redlining, or white flight", which is representative of unequal spatial power (Allen et al., 2019, p.1007). These racialized landscapes can also be sites of resistance. For example, segregated Black spaces allowed for "the growth of Black communities, the building of institutions such as Black churches, and historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) and the inspiration of rich Black cultural traditions" (Anderson, 2015, p.11). The examination of landscapes however is limited, therefore Black geographies look at socio-spatial practices beyond location and examine place-making in constructing memories, identity, and resistance as well as being essential to determining the right to belong (Allen et al., 2019).

Place-making is a "set of conscious and unconscious choices inextricably set within a network of power relations" (Allen et al., 2019, p.1010) Place-making is an important process in the (re)claiming and (re)making of a sense of place. A sense of place can be understood as "a power-laden social process that has social and material consequences for identity and group formation and the socio-spatial (re)ordering of society" (Allen et al., 2019, p.1010). Although Blackness (throughout the diaspora) is connected through geographies of domination and

oppression, a Black sense of place is experienced differently for each individual. McKittrick (2011) explains that “a Black sense of place is not a steady, focused, and homogeneous way of seeing and being in place, but rather a set of changing and differential perspectives” (p.950). A Black sense of place changes based on location, social interactions and can represent the unique spatial visions and practices of Black people.

This speaks to the importance of belonging as a subject of study, as the need for social belonging is a basic human motivation that affects how people move through and experience the world (Walton & Cohen, 2007; Mee & Wright, 2009). Belonging can be understood through the everyday negotiation of space and the interactions with formal structure and practices of belonging, which create a sense of belonging (Mee & Wright, 2009). Belonging is therefore controlled and experienced through macro- and micro-interactions which can highlight the day-to-day racialization of socio-spatial experiences (Mee & Wright, 2009). For example, Walton & Cohen (2007) speak to an experience of *belonging uncertainty*, which they have understood to be an experience in which “members of socially stigmatized groups are more uncertain of the quality of their social bonds and thus more sensitive to issues of social belonging” (p.82). Belonging uncertainty often takes the form of hypotheses such as “people like me don't belong here”, the expectation of social rejection and the mistrust of the motives behind other people's treatment of them (Walton & Cohen, 2007, p.83). Anderson (2015) emphasizes this experience when he explains that a Black person “may look around for other Blacks with whom to commune if not bond, and then may adjust their comfort level accordingly” and that “when judging a setting as too White, they can feel uneasy and consider it to be informally “off-limits” (p.10). This speaks to how the racialization of space influences Black people's choice to

participate in a space and highlights the autonomy of Black people as active contributors to their negotiation with space and place-making.

A sense of belonging is important in the construction of a Black sense of place. McKittrick (2011) defines a Black sense of place as “spaces of encounters that hold in them useful anti-colonial practices and narratives” (p.950). With this understanding, belonging and a Black sense of space cannot be achieved in spaces that still hold colonial and anti-racial meaning.

2.5 Belongingness

Belonging is deeply personal and intimate feelings of attachment that can be expressed in both social and spatial relationships (Antonsich, 2010; Yuval-Davis, 2006). Belonging can be differentiated as a *politics of belonging*, which focuses on how belonging is situated through power relationships, and as a *sense of belonging*, which emphasizes the personal and private feelings for attachment, as well as formal structures of membership.

Politics of Belonging

The politics of belonging is the creation and maintenance of boundaries that determine the division between 'us' and 'them' and is determined and reproduced by hegemonic political power (Yuval-Davis, 2006). The politics of belonging addresses the struggle in determining what is necessary for belonging, the meaning of membership, and the role of social location and identities in shaping belonging (Yuval-Davis, 2006). The notion of belonging is associated with a rhetoric of sameness often determined by the dominant group (Yuval-Davis, 2006; Mee & Wright, 2008; Antonish, 2010). This rhetoric of sameness highlights the positional power that dominant groups have in ‘granting’ belonging (Antonish, 2010). This gatekeeping of

membership leads to the distinction of 'us' from 'them' which can evoke a sense of community among people who not only understand what you say but also what you mean (Antonish, 2010). This idea of sameness can also be problematic because it means that to belong a person will have to assimilate to the language, culture, and values, however, there may also be dimensions that prevent sameness from fully being achieved (e.g., birthplace or skin colour), leaving that person to experience discourse and practices of socio-spatial exclusion (Antonish, 2010). The politics of belonging is important to acknowledge the power relationships that influence belonging and to understand belonging through inclusionary and exclusionary practices.

Sense of Belonging

Although the politics of belonging is influenced by inclusion/exclusionary practices, the creation of a 'sense of belonging' is far more personal and intimate as it is determined by a sense of self (Antonish, 2010). This notion understands (be)longing as two parts, the 'being' which is the centrality of self and 'longing' which is the fundamental human need for connection (Mee & Wright, 2009). Belonging in this understanding moves beyond the dichotomy of inclusion/exclusion as individuals can experience both moments of inclusion and exclusion simultaneously (Spaaij et al., 2014). Antonish (2010) states that the absence of a sense of belongingness is not exclusion, rather it is "a sense of loneliness isolation, alienation, and displacement" (p.649). These feelings are important to consider when looking at 'self-exclusion', as not wanting to participate can be determined by "a perceived lack of opportunity, acceptance or recognition, rather than simply free choice" (Spaaij et al., 2014, p.66). Antonish (2010) expands on this by explaining that when someone feels rejected or not welcomed, their sense of belonging becomes spoiled.

In the next chapter, I will be introducing the critical race methodology of counter-storytelling. Counter-storytelling is used to challenge the dominant and often monolithic narrative that is used to silence and marginalize people of colour's experience. For this research specifically, I will be examining the dominant narrative within the world of dance. Through discussions with Black female Ballet dancers, counter-storytelling allows these dancers to freely express and define their experiences in navigating dance spaces.

Chapter 3: Methodology

In chapter three, I highlight the methodology that frames this research. I begin by introducing critical race methodology as the framework that guides this research, as well as its justification for this study. I also explain the specific methods used to conduct this research, how participants were obtained and how I engaged with data collection and analysis. I end this chapter by reflecting on my position as a researcher.

Through this research, I seek to understand Black female dancer's experiences of belonging as they navigate dance spaces. I am therefore interested in the experiences of Black female ballet dancers including current professional dancers, and former dancers. This research looks to understand the relationship between the dancers and their dance space, to provide insights into the experiences of racialized bodies in ballet. This research goes beyond describing these experiences to better understand and dismantle the power dynamics between race, gender, and space.

3.1 Critical Race Methodology

Critical race theory provides both a theoretical and methodological framework for this research. Critical race methodologies place race and racism at the center of all aspects of the research process (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002). Specifically, critical race methodology seeks to prioritize racialized, gendered, and classed experiences of people of colour by challenging traditional research paradigms and discourses that have often minimized or silenced the experiences of people of colour (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002). Critical race methodology acknowledges that research has traditionally given preference to the “master narrative” which

privileges whites, males, upper- and/or middle-class, and heterosexuals by deeming their experiences as natural or normative (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002, p.27). Critical race methodology uses *storytelling/counter-storytelling* to give prominence to the experiences of people of colour by confronting and challenging this master narrative (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002). I will, therefore, be using counter-storytelling to highlight and legitimize the lived experiences of Black female ballet dancers.

Critical race methodology uses interdisciplinary knowledge to provide a better understanding of the experiences of people of colour (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002). This allows researchers to engage with research methods from different disciplines. To engage in *storytelling/counter-storytelling*, I used ethnographic methods of data collection to grasp a deeper understanding of the Black female ballet dancers' experiences. I detail the specific data collection methods in section 3.3 below. However, it is important to outline that due to the COVID-19 pandemic I was required to adapt several of the initial research plans, including moving exclusively to online interviews. Further details are provided below.

3.2 Participant Selection

This research focuses on the experiences of Black female ballet dancers. Therefore, the inclusion criteria for this study were self-identifying Black female dancers, who were 18 years or older at the time of the interview, and who had current or former ballet experience. The focus remained on ballet dancers rather than dancers in general due to the historical exclusion of Black bodies and the inherent whiteness of ballet. In addition, the focus on Black female ballet dancers is due to this study's examination of the intersection of gender and race and the experiences of Black womanhood as it is experienced through ballet. This research included dancers with

professional ballet experiences as they were able to speak to the broader systemic issues surrounding race within the ballet world. At the same time, the inclusion of former dancers provided a unique perspective on the experiences within the formative years in ballet and the experiences that encouraged or discouraged further participation in ballet.

Professional dancers were recruited through social media platforms, including direct messaging on Instagram. Snowball sampling and word-of-mouth were also used to broaden the sample to recruit additional participants. Direct messages were sent to over 20 dancers and resulted in 10 responses. Of the 10 initial responses, four dancers agreed to interviews, two were unable to participate and four who initially agreed did not respond to follow-up inquiries. In addition to direct messaging as a participant recruitment strategy, a research poster was shared on multiple social media platforms such as Instagram, Facebook and Twitter. This resulted in four additional dancers contacting me directly who expressed interest in the project. In total, the research included a sample of eight (N=8) participants, ranging from 21- 40 years of age.

3.3 Data Collection

Ethnographic data collection methods were utilized to understand the everyday experiences of belonging for Black female dancers within dance spaces. Specifically, I conducted interviews, engaged in photo-elicitation, participant observation, and collected blog/social media data.

Interviews

Storytelling methodology emphasizes the importance of highlighting the voices of those with the most experience. According to Solorzano & Yosso (2002), the use of another person's

story can reveal experiences with and responses to racism and sexism and “usually offers a biographical analysis of their experiences in relation to institutions and in a sociohistorical context” (p.33). I conducted a series of audio-recorded, semi-structured interviews with professional and former dancers to explore their ballet experience and to understand the lived spaced from the dancers’ perspective. I reached out to the professional dancers directly through the social media platform Instagram, as I feared dance companies would be gatekeepers to accessing these dancers. The interviews were conducted using a semi-structured interview guide designed by myself and informed by current literature. If needed, a follow-up interview took place to allow me to ask clarifying questions from the previous interview. These interviews were then transcribed verbatim and analyzed.

Photo-elicitation

In addition to the interviews, participants were asked to engage in a photo-elicitation process. This involved participants being asked to share images that represent a sense of belonging or exclusion. Photo elicitation is a method used adjacent to interviews and can often capture or explain experiences that are difficult to put into words (Harper, 2002). The use of photography can evoke a different and often deep kind of information as it can create a comfortable atmosphere that allows for freedom of thought/expression (Harper, 2002). Engaging in photo-elicitation would also allow participants to become data collection instruments and give them better control over the knowledge that is produced. Dancers were asked if they could provide any images (images of them, their dance space, costumes, or dancewear, etc.) that highlighted or helped to explain their experiences. Participants were asked to share the image in an email with a short description of the image’s significance. While four participants consent to

providing images for this aspect of the research, only two sent photos and neither provide an accompanying description. Therefore, these photos were not included in this study.

Participant Observation

In addition to the interviews and photo-elicitation undertaken with the dancers, I had proposed that I would also take classes with the National Ballet of Canada through their community recreational classes. Since dance is an embodied practice, simply observing would not provide a holistic understanding of the experience. The intent was that immersion into this dance space would inform data collection and analysis, focusing on the physical space in and around the studio, such as posters, dancewear, etc., as well as the conceived space - the language used by teachers or other dancers. Ethnographic methods emphasize the researcher as the primary data collection instrument (Fusch et al.,2017, p.925). While the intent of this research was to include a participant observation component, due to the restrictions of Covid-19, I was unable to physically enter the dance spaces. I was able to participate in the National Ballet of Canada's online dance classes however, due to it being online and being more of an individualistic experience, I was not able to investigate the social space as intended. After participating in six online classes, I decided that this method did not provide much insight on the experiences of navigating dance as a Black female dancer. While this online experience provided insight into the benefits and struggle of engaging in embodied movement virtually, this was not the scope of this research.

Social Media and Blog Data

Data was also collected from dance blogs, magazines and online articles as another method of data collection. These blogs provided an additional narrative of the Black female dancers' experiences from the perspective of current and former dancers. These articles were collected by searching “Black Ballerinas” or “Black Ballet” in *Google* and collected from *DANCE Magazine*, *The New York Times*, and *POINTE Magazine*. The articles collected were restricted by year from 2000-2020. These additional stories were important in gaining a wider understanding of Black dancers' sense of belonging.

3.4 Data analysis

To align with the critical race methodology of storytelling, the data from this research combines data gathered from the research process with the existing literature and personal experience to create a comprehensive data set (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002). This data set was analyzed using a series of qualitative data analysis methods. This research was analyzed using theoretical sensitivity and cultural intuition when creating counter-stories. *Theoretical sensitivity* is the ability to analyze or give meaning to the research situation, sensitive to knowledge and insight from previous readings, experiences with or relevant to the data (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002). *Cultural intuition*, on the other hand, is the extension of one's personal experience to include collective and/or community memory (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002). Both of these concepts are important in maintaining the authenticity of the participants' stories as well as highlighting the shared experiences of the Black female ballet dancer.

Considering theoretical sensitivity, I first reviewed the primary data collected from interviews. In chapter four, I present each participant's story individually in order to represent

the multiplicity of the Black ballerina's experience. Presenting these narratives in this way highlights that there is not a singular reality of being Black in ballet, that this experience is dependent on many factors such as country/location, studio, personal support, etc. It is important to maintain the integrity of the participants' stories as each of these stories presents its own counter-narrative. While considering the importance of cultural intuition, in chapter five, I analyze the interview data alongside the secondary data from the social media and blog posts to highlight some of the commonalities and collective memories that are shaped when navigating ballets spaces as a Black female dancer. With a CRT approach, this perspective is important as the data analysis process will move beyond presenting different experiences but will "ground those experiences within broader social, cultural discourses of institutional oppression" (Hylton, 2012, p.33).

This analysis is both inductive and deductive in nature as I have gained knowledge from the information provided by the data and knowledge informed by Critical Race Theory, understandings of social space, racial spatiality, and belongingness scholarship as a theoretical lens for this research. This analysis took place in several stages, each starting with several readings of the 'raw data'. I then compiled biographical information on each participant, including years each had been dancing, styles of dance, dance studios/companies and geographical location. The biographical information then helped me shape each participant's introduction as well as situate their experiences in a broader context. After compiling this information, I highlighted the ways in which dancers expressed elements of CRT, elements of social space, femininity and race, and experiences of belonging. This analysis was also informed by the literature. Finally, I analyzed new or unique information provided by the participants, as there were certain ideas the dancers expressed that were important to them and their experience

that may not have been discussed in the previous literature. I focused on the emotion surrounding the topic, the length in time this topic was discussed and if it was discussed more than once throughout the interview to determine the significance of this topic to the dancer's counter-story. In addition, some of the experiences shared by the participants were reiterated by other dancers in dance blogs, magazines and articles. Therefore, an analysis of the grey literature was included to support the participants' counter-stories. Each counter-story was reviewed by my supervisor, who read it through and provided feedback that was incorporated into the final draft. These counter-stories provide insight into the experiences of Black female dancers in ballet spaces and an explanation of the relational power of race, gender, and space.

Trustworthiness

To achieve the depth of information, qualitative methodologies encourage the use of multiple data sources to reach data saturation. "Qualitative research often seeks a depth of information and attempts to gain understanding and insight related to the meaning that individuals give to their experiences" (Pitney, 2004, pg.26). As a result, I use *crystallization* as a method to ensure credibility in my research. Crystallization encourages the use of multiple types of data, methods, and theoretical frameworks (Tracy, 2010). This is a nod to post-structuralism and ensures rigidity of data collection. This aligns with CRT as it recognizes the importance of multiple forms of knowledge production through transdisciplinary and experiential knowledge. I collected data from multiple and varying sources (i.e. interviews, blogs/online articles, etc.) and have highlighted multiple theoretical lenses that inform my work. The inclusion of these multiple sources of information provides a more in-depth understanding of the experiences of Black female dancers. Member checking is another method used to ensure trustworthiness. Belonging

is a highly personal and individual experience, and it is only known through the individual's understanding and meaning (Birt et al., 2016). Therefore, it was important to include the participant in the data analysis process. The interview data was returned to the participants, allowing participants to discuss, challenge, or address any misrepresentations that can occur during data interpretation and ensured that the knowledge created through this process accurately captures their experiences of belonging.

3.5 Ethical Considerations

It is important to note that prior to conducting this research, this research was reviewed and approved by the Brock University Research Ethics Board (REB). As all data collection was conducted virtually, consent and anonymity were important ethical codes that guided my research.

Consent

Prior to the participant interviews, a consent form (Appendix B) was reviewed and signed. This consent form reiterated the purpose of the study, the risks and benefits of participating in the study and what was required by the participant. The consent form also reiterated that participation in the study was voluntary and that there were no consequences if the participant chose to withdraw. In addition, prior to the start of the participant interview, I reiterated the process of consent and reminding the participant that they were welcome to refuse to answer any questions, stop the interview or withdraw from the study at any point. The consent form as well as the reiteration of consent throughout the interview process was important in gaining informed consent from all participants.

Anonymity

Anonymity was also another important ethical consideration throughout the research process. During the data collection process, I collected certain identifiers in order to organize study information including (participant's name, affiliated dance schools/studio/companies, ages, nationality, Instagram handle, telephone number, and email address). These personal identifiers were treated as confidential and were de-identified in the final document unless otherwise indicated by the participant. If participants preferred to be identified they were required to indicate that preference on the consent form acknowledging any associated risk. Participants were also reminded that consent to being identified can be withdrawn at any stage of the research process. It was important that participants had the choice to be identified, as for some there was power in keeping their identity connected to their story. This can also provide a biographical analysis that reveals one's experiences as told in third person voice (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002). For those who chose not to be identified, pseudonyms were created, and their personal information was kept completely confidential. All participants were informed that personal identifiers along with any associated documents (consent forms, audio recordings, interview transcripts, shared photos, emails, master list) were kept securely stored, with only myself and my thesis advisor allowed access to this data and that these documents would be destroyed four years after the completion of the study. Additional anonymity was also achieved with the inclusion of secondary data collection. I collected blog posts, and social media articles to allow for a larger sample size to help to maintain the anonymity of the dancers who participate in the interview process. These social media and blog post allowed for a larger range of stories and experiences so that who wanted to remain anonymous were not easily identified.

3.6 Researcher reflexivity

The process of research reflexivity is important in recognizing and accepting the ways in which our work and role as researchers are influenced by our personal understanding of the world. This provides the opportunity for researchers to highlight and address their taken-for-granted truths, unquestioned assumptions, and is a necessary process in gaining control over one's thoughts and perceptions (Emirbayer and Desmond, 2012). Reflexivity is commonly analyzed by taking into consideration one's position in social spaces, for example, racial identity, gender identity or class (Emirbayer and Desmond, 2012). I am 23-year-old Black female, from a well-educated middle-class Caribbean family. I am a university-educated student, and I grew up in a diverse community outside of Toronto, Ontario, Canada. These social identities were important in shaping my research questions, the participants I chose as well as the lens through which I analyzed my data.

A starting point for my reflexivity is my multiple identities of someone who is a female of Caribbean background living in a multi-ethnic, multi-language suburban city in Ontario, Canada. This influences how I see myself within the Black community. This identity has left me sensitive to the similar and differential differences experienced by the Black community, and the impact that location has on these experiences. As members of the African diaspora, we share in experiences of the anti-Blackness however we may differ our cultural significance and understandings, shaping the multiplicity of the Black community. As a Black woman, I understand the unique intersection of race and gender and the ways in which these identities influence how we move through space as well as how we literally create space. This overlapping experience of anti-Black racism and sexism is eloquently captured by the term misogynoir. This

term was coined by a queer Black feminist Moya Bailey in 2006. As a Black woman, I reflect on my own understanding of femininity, and my confrontations with Black female stereotypes as it influences how I view myself in this world. It is my identity as a Black woman that inspired me to focus on the experiences of Black women in the dance world and therefore influenced the participants that I chose and the questions that were asked in the interview process.

It is also important to again acknowledge the unique time at which this research was being conducted. This research happened during the COVID-19 global pandemic. While a devastating time for most people, this pandemic was found to disproportionately affect Black, Indigenous, and people of colour (BIPOC) due to existing systemic racism which put BIPOC individuals at greater risk of contracting the virus and receiving inadequate care. At the same time, there were many discussions around race and racism due to the continued violence towards Black and Brown individuals at the hands of the police, as shown by the tragic deaths of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor and the response by Black Lives Matter (BLM) and others. These incidents as well as the many others that were highlighted in this summer's protests were the turning points for this movement. As a researcher, I have to be sensitive to these topics and how these conversations impacted me as a Black woman, as well as my participants who were also Black women, particularly those who lived in the United States as the pandemic had a greater impact on their population and protest took place on a larger scale, with a more violent response from police. Due to the visibility and magnitude of these issues, they became important topics that influenced the conversations with the participants.

As this research is focused on the experiences of Black female dancers it is important to highlight that in addition to these social identities, I am also a dancer. I have been dancing on and off from the age of four in styles such as ballet, jazz, lyrical, and contemporary. While I

competed with my high school dance team, I have mainly danced recreationally, particularly while in university. As a recreational dancer, I engage in the world of dance differently than those who dance competitively or professionally. Recreational dance does not have the same pressures as competitive dance or those who dance professionally. For example, recreational dance programs are typically more open and accepting to those who do not “fit” the typical dance narrative. While I have had my own confrontations with racism and dance, as a recreational dancer it was easier for me to choose when to address it, ignore it, or leave as there were little to no consequences of me doing so. While participating in the online recreational classes with the National Ballet of Canada, I realized the privilege of control that I had. These adult recreational classes are typically more informal than traditional ballet classes as they are more focused on the enjoyment of movement and accessibility to all. Unfortunately, due to the COVID-19 restrictions that were imposed at the time of this research, these classes took place online. This online format was significantly more informal than a typical dance class. In addition, the online format made my personal home space my dance space, I used a chair as a barre, and wore whatever I felt was comfortable. Further, since the class took place over Zoom, I had the option to have my camera on or not, which gave me control of when and how I received feedback. This online format was very different from previous dance experiences. Most notably, during these classes, I was more sensitive to the changes in space than I was with my experience as a Black female dancer. My identity as a recreational dancer positioned me as both an insider and outsider, as I decided when and how I engage in the dance world. This insider/outsider identity enabled me to connect with the participants as someone who has experience in dance while still leaving space to learn from and create knowledge alongside the participants. The

acknowledgement of these identities is important in understanding how these factors shape the epistemological lens of this study and how the participants will see and engage with me.

According to Emirbayer and Desmond (2012), critical reflexivity should exceed beyond ‘who one is’ or where one is positioned within social space. For rigorous reflexivity, these authors also encourage an examination of the influences of one’s discipline and role as a scholar. Therefore, it is important to state that this research is situated in the discipline of physical cultural studies. This discipline seeks to explore the impact that sociological and cultural understanding has on sports, physical activity and movement. With this in mind, this discipline and this research more specifically, used movement (dance) as an embodied practice to inform social understanding. As a researcher in this field, I understand the importance of the body in holding unspoken truths, memories and stories in which these physical experiences can tell. With this understanding, I am also aware of the difficulty in putting these feelings and experiences into words and therefore as a researcher, I have to be mindful of not just what the participants say, but what is also unsaid. As a scholar, it is important that I am reflective of my role and my position in academia. Emirbayer and Desmond (2012) states “there are many intellectuals who call the world into question, but very few who call the intellectual world into question” (p.586). Therefore, I must speak to the privilege I hold as a researcher in academia researching this area, particularly an examination of the intersections of race and gender as it pertains to the Black female experiences in sport and movement studies, as this examination has been lacking in this field. As a master's student, I have been given a space to share these stories and highlight these experiences. Inspired by critical race scholars, my hope for this research is to continue to challenge academia to be a space in which all voices and experiences are celebrated and explored.

Chapter 4: Counter-Storytelling

In this chapter, I used counter-storytelling to illustrate the uniqueness and complexities of eight Black dancer's experiences. This presentation of the data is situated in critical race theory and the *centrality of experiential knowledge*, as it is important to challenge the notion of the Black experience as a monolithic experience. By using individual participant's stories rather than collapsing experiences into a composite story, I can maintain the integrity of each dancer's individual story and represent the multiplicity of experiences within dance spaces. In addition, by sharing these stories I can honour the experiences of all eight participants, including the four dancers in the study who requested to share their identities rather than opt for a pseudonym available through the research ethics process.

The purpose of this section is to highlight that *there are* Black female ballerinas, and their stories matter. These dancer's stories are important in creating a shift in institutional, social and cultural narratives, aligning with critical race theory. Therefore, the transcripts were analysed deductively using the central tenets of critical race theory and inductively informed by participants' experiences. To restate, the five basic tenets of critical race theory are: *the centrality of race & racism in society* – which highlights the conscious and unconscious racism that impact both the individual and group; *the challenge to dominant ideology* – which acknowledges racialized power imbalances particularly through notions of colour-blindness or race neutrality; *the centrality of experiential knowledge* – the privileging of voices and lived experiences of people of colour; *interdisciplinary perspective* – the acknowledgement of different disciplinary perspectives; and a *commitment to social justice* – which is rooted in the

acknowledgement of power and race relationships as well as the dismantling of oppressive systems and barriers. (Solórzano, 1997).

4.1 Counter-Storytelling

Table 1: Participant Involvement and Dance Experience

	<i>Dancer Experience</i> ⁴	<i>Years of dance experience</i>	<i>Dance Company</i>
<i>Daphne</i>	Professional	26 years	Dance Theater of Harlem
<i>Kim</i>	Professional	26 years	San Francisco Ballet
<i>Sasha</i>	Dance Student	16 years	N/A
<i>Frances</i>	Former	13 years	N/A
<i>Marissa</i>	Former	14 years	N/A
<i>Beth</i>	Former	13 years	N/A
<i>Giselle</i>	professional	20+ years	N/A
<i>Courtney</i>	professional	23 years	Alvin Ailey

Daphne

Daphne is a dancer from New York and a member of the Dance Theater of Harlem. She graduated from the Ailey/Fordham B.F.A program and has just completed her MFA from Hollins University. Inspired by her mother, who was also a ballet dancer, she began her dance

⁴ Dance experiences are as defined: *Professional dancer* is a dancer who is currently being paid to dance with a professional dance company; *Dance student* is a dancer who is currently engaged in dance education; *former dancer* is a dancer who has previously participated in dance.

training at the age of three at her mother's dance studio. This studio was an important place for her, not only to connect with her mother, but also in normalizing the presence of Black dancers in ballet and the everyday experiences of Black dancers. She described this experience by saying:

That was actually super exciting because not only did I get to see her teach and witness her performing, I also got to dance on stage with her a few times. So, of course, you don't really think anything of it. But the cool thing is that I've seen and been exposed to Black dancers from a very young age. So, I became normalised by seeing Black ballerinas.

This space was important in insuring that young Black dancers saw themselves in the dance world and were able to envision their success as a dancer. Daphne described the studio space and the imagery that was used throughout the space such as the images of dancers from Dance Theater of Harlem and one painting that stood out to her, she stated that *“on one particular wall, she had a Black gospel painting, like these praise dancers... On the other side, she had a Degas, the white ballerinas”*. This imagery is powerful as it highlights how the contrast of the two images. Edgar Degas is a French impressionist artist whose work primarily showcased dance and dancer. His imagery is known to emphasise the femininity of the ballerina and showcase the ‘ideal ballerina’. While the praise dancers on the other had represent the freedom of movement and the dancing Black body. This imagery encapsulates the juxtapositions of being both Black and dancer in ballet. The imagery used in the studio not only showed Black bodies dancing and moving but also showed dancers in brown tights and shoes, normalizing that imagery.

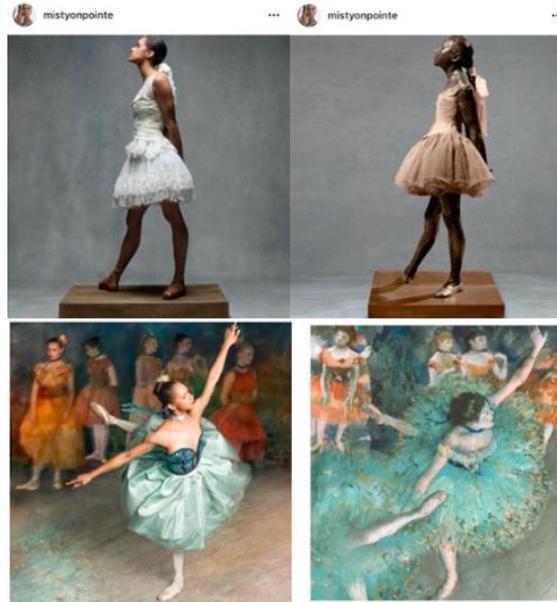


Figure 1. La Petite Danseuse. Misty Copeland recreates artist Edgar Degas’ most famous ballet works for new exhibit at the Hunter Museum of American Art

The normalization of wearing shoes and tights that matched her skin tone was an important part of her young dance experience. She shared that she had been ‘pancaking’ – painting and dying her dancewear, from a young age and that at her mother’s studio. ‘Pancaking’ was an activity that was done as a group, from gathering the spray paints to dying the dancewear, everyone was included. She explained:

We always used to have spray cans. And my mom would get it, she would go to the cobbler and get all the spray cans and all the different shades, and all the dancers would just take a spray can and spray their shoes. That was just the norm.

This is an interesting perspective to share because ‘pancaking’ is often an experience that is ostracizing, especially when you are the only one required to do it. By making it a studio wide activity it becomes a shared experience, though still one that reflects and reinforced the outsider status of Black dancers within the art form. As an adult, Daphne was able to advocate for herself,

ensuring that she wore ballet shoes that matched her skin tone. Having worn Gaynor Minden ballet shoes for a while, in 2017 Daphne asked if she could get shoes in her skin tone and the shoe company agreed. Gaynor Minden was one of the first companies to make skin tone-coloured shoes but unfortunately their success was downplayed in comparison to more traditional and popular pointe shoe companies such as Freed, a London-based company known world-wide. She explained that for her, all it took was the confidence to ask:

I wore Gaynor Minden, and I literally was getting a fitting done. And I was like, "Hey, I can I get a shade in my colour, and I were like, oh, absolutely. Like, we need to make a few more. So that's literally it, I just walked into the studio and made that happen.

For Daphne, having shoes in her colour was exciting but she also saw it was a necessary step. As a dancer, the expectation is to be provided the tools necessary tools needed to succeed, and this means having tights and shoes that match a dancer's skin tone.

Dancing at majority Black studios throughout her dance career, Daphne spoke to the benefit of these spaces in shaping how Black dancers viewed themselves within the dance world. She described these traditionally Black studios and companies as spaces that preserve Black culture and are integral to development of self-confidence and self-worth. Daphne explains the importance of this space by saying:

it makes the competition stronger for the Black dancer, I think, because it takes out skin tone, because everybody there is of colour. So, when that dancer gets into a different space, that may not all be of colour. They can hold their own in a sense. They're not thinking about am I good enough because they had to fight from their own group.

She explained that in a studio where everyone looks like you, the focus shifts to 'dancer first'. This means that the priority is on strengthening one's skill, and artistry rather than worrying

about how your race is perceived by others. These spaces become important in allowing dancers to participate freely and gain a sense of belonging. In primarily Black studios, race is no longer seen as a burden, but rather something to be celebrated. When looking further at the social aspect of these studios, dancers can connect to their peers on a different level, sharing their experiences with people who would truly understand.

The narratives may be a little bit different. The jokes may be a little bit different. The conversations about hair, the scarf, trying the makeup, learning how to do these things for your own skin tone in a group of men and women. It is a completely different world than having a young dancer of colour grow up in a white studio where the conversation about hair is different. The conversations about lighting is different, conversation about what role you're playing is completely different.

To be able to have those conversations and shared experiences is important in feeling seen and understood. This experience has been described by Smith-Tran (2020) as “de-robing”, in which Black people are able to remove themselves from the white gaze and engage in Black expressive behaviours. ‘De-robing’ is an experience within the commonly known understanding of code-switching, which is the experience of being able to present and speak differently depending on one’s environment. In this context, these primarily Black studios and companies provide a space for Black expression, within the white dominated world of ballet.

Daphne viewed experience in these Black dance community as a privilege, one that helped to normalize and validate her identity as a Black female ballet dancer. These spaces, however, could not always protect her from the realities of being Black in a primarily white art form she explains:

So sometimes I develop this new form of privilege that with my experience as a dancer growing up was somewhat normal because I had my mother. But I did experience those side eyes and I go to auditions for City Ballet or things like that. And I'd be like, wow, I really am the only [Black] person.

She also shared another moment when she was confronted by this dualistic perspective:

From very, very young... I also had the mixed viewpoints, too, because I started seeing Black Dancers on stage, so that was the norm for me. But what was shocking was when my mother took me to New York City Ballet and everybody was white. That was a shock ... it also was like, oh, this is not for me. Like really clear. Oh, you have to fight to be in this thing.

These experiences speak to difficulties in navigating contradictory spaces. These Black dance spaces become subculture within the larger dance communities. In these spaces, Blackness is the majority, however, within the mainstream dance community, Blackness is still sparse and underrepresented. This duality creates the feeling of being both an insider and outsider to the ballet community experiencing both belonging and unbelonging.

In addition to these personal experiences, Daphne continues to speak to the systemic and unconscious bias that impact the dance world. Speaking to the elitism of ballet, Daphne explains the impact of the hierarchy between classical ballet and other styles of dance: modern, contemporary, and cultural dances. This hierarchy determines where it is appropriate for Black bodies to be and what roles they deserve to play.

The Arabian is always the Black girl or the mixed girl. It's more about the contemporary when it comes to contemporary ballet. All of a sudden, all the coloured people move to the front, and they cast them as it's difficult for us to be cast in the classical.

The classical roles are rooted in Eurocentric perspectives that centralize whiteness, white stories and white bodies. This perpetuates the notion that ‘Black bodies can’t do ballet’ because they do not fit within this Eurocentric ‘classical’ ideal. Ballet companies that are more attuned to the ‘classics’ are viewed as more prestigious and are also predominantly white. This creates a hierarchy not just between dance styles but between companies. While it is argued by ballet insiders (dancers, attendees, patrons) that elitism is essential and foundational to ballet. This elitism ensures that classical ballet remains untouchable, and unattainable, ultimately leaving whiteness unchallenged.

What stands out from Daphne’s story is the desire to confront these normalized expectations. Daphne highlights the importance of Black dancers in lead roles of the princess or the queen. It is the beauty of ballet, and the imagery of the tutus and the sparkles that inspire young dancers and young Black dancers to see themselves in those roles. This speaks to the desire of young Black girls to express themselves and experience femininity.

I think we talked to a lot of these young dancers. They want to wear the tutu in the tiara. They want to be the princess or the queen. That's what they want to do. ...I think that's what's gravitating young people ...is literally what we look like. What role are we creating? How can we be an exaggeration of ourselves? And ballet and dance specifically gives you that ability to exaggerate yourself on stage.

Daphne’s experience emphasises that as a Black dancer, regardless of where she dances, her dance spaces and experiences do not exist in isolation to the normalization of whiteness and elitism that exist in ballet. It is through the acknowledgment of Black contributions to dance, the acceptance of diversity in all levels of the production, and inclusive storytelling that these taken-for-granted notions of whiteness can be confronted and challenged.

Kim

Kim is a dancer from New York and a current member of the San Francisco Ballet. Starting dance at the age of four at Ballet Hispanico, she was able to experience a wide range of dance styles including ballet, jazz, Dunham and flamenco. At Ballet Hispanico Kim truly felt welcomed into that community. She stated:

The school I went to, there was a lot of students that looked like me, even though it was like a Latinx community, and I wasn't a Spanish speaking individual. However, I felt very much welcomed and as if I was like adopted into that culture.

When Kim speaks of her experience at this school, she speaks of feeling supported and encouraged by her teachers and expressed feelings of joy, happiness, and gratitude for the opportunities that it provided her. This school provided Kim the skills and tools needed to succeed in ballet. Ballet also allowed Kim to travel the country attending schools and summer intensives in Washington, Boston and Miami. Unfortunately, it was at auditions and summer intensives, outside of the comfort of her dance community, where Kim was confronted with feelings of otherness. Unlike the diverse dance community, she was a part of, during these summer intensives, she was one of the few dancers of colour. She explains:

This feeling of other, I think the feeling of other in the ballet culture started when I went to the summer intensives, when I left my life, my little niche or my, you know, community, my dance community outside of New York City ... then at some point, I also felt like what some would call imposter syndrome.

These environments affected how she view herself in that space and created a sense of self-doubt. Imposter syndrome is an internalized experience of feeling inadequate despite success. Therefore, these feelings of otherness and this imposter syndrome can be experiences when

someone feels they are occupying a space that they feel they don't belong in – a space that feels 'off limits'. Anderson (2015) describes this experience when stating that people of colour, “when judging a setting as too white, they can feel uneasy and consider it to be informally ‘off limits.’” (p.10). Anderson (2015) also explains that for Black individuals navigating white spaces, they often have to adjust their comfort level, saying, “when present in the white space, Blacks reflexively note the proportion of whites to Blacks, or may look around for other Blacks with whom to commune if not bond, and then may adjust their comfort level accordingly” (p.10). For Kim, the presence of another Black dancer changed how she felt about the space that she was in saying, “*She wasn't auditioning, but she was attending that dance school. We talked a lot...she's also mixed like me. And yeah, I felt comfortable that she was there*”. There is comfort in knowing that you are not the only one, and especially in knowing that someone that looks like you can succeed in that space.

As explained by Lefebvre's (1991) social construction of space, belongingness within a space is determined by not only the physical space but also through discourse and lived experiences. This interaction between bodies and space is evident when comparing Kim's experience in two very different dance environments. Kim shared an experience of when she auditioned for a prestigious, primarily white, dance school:

I remember his feedback was extremely discouraging. And apparently, according to my teacher, she felt that my confidence level and my skill level went down a lot after that interaction...I don't remember feeling comfortable in that class. I felt judged.

She compared this experience to when she attended a more diverse school, saying:

[At Miami City Ballet] there's just more diversity as well. And I don't know, I just felt less foreign ...It was just like a more welcoming environment. So I remember after that my confidence level went up.

Dance is an embodied experience in which mind, body, and space are intertwined. Therefore, these experiences represent ways in which an environment could impact the mental, emotional and physical experiences of those who occupy it. Kim's experience showed that a negative experience and feelings of discomfort can influence confidence in oneself and in one's skill, impacting her ability to perform at her best. In contrast, a positive dance space in which she experienced a feeling of welcomeness allowed for confidence and growth in skill. In addition, a diverse space allows for and encourages freedom of expression.

Kim's experiences also highlight the importance of representation. Representation allows individuals to visualize themselves within a space, with an 'if you can see it, you can be it' mentality. When discussing her dance role models, Kim highlighted the difficulties in finding a dancer that looked like her and shared her experiences, she explained:

a lot of people would ask me, like, oh who do you look up to or who is your role model? And I would think like, I don't know ... there's no one that looks like me...I had Zoe Saldana, [who played Eva Rodriguez in Center Stage] like a fictional character created by Hollywood...the character kind of describes all the feeling of like how I felt. So, it was more like an educational moment of like, oh this is just how it's going to be.

The character of Eva Rodriguez in the 2000 film *Center Stage* highlighted the experience of many Black female dancers navigating white ballet spaces. In addition to being the only dancer of colour in the white prestigious ballet school, there was also an over emphasis on her 'attitude' and despite being incredibly talented, she was often overlooked for large roles. The character of

Eva Rodriguez represented more than just a Black body in a ballet film, but her character emphasised the realities of being Black in ballet and the constant fight just to be seen. Kim used this character as a role model in navigating the ballet world and to educate herself on what to be expected.

Unfortunately, for many Black dancers this experience of being both hyper visible yet simultaneously invisible is a reality when navigating race in Ballet. This concept is discussed by Maynard (2017), when analyzing the experience of Black women in relation to the police, stating that “[Black women] are both over-policed and under-protected [...] Black women’s lives are defined by the intersecting conditions of subjection, invisibility and disposability” (p. 129). In the context of ballet, Black dancers naturally stand out from the other dancers and are expected to conform to the ‘ballet ideal’ yet differential needs, considerations, and barriers are not addressed, instead these issues become an added burden for Black dancers. Acknowledging and addressing these challenges is important in feeling welcomed, as explained by Kim:

I feel a little bit more welcome when I can come into a room and say, you know, I’m Black and you’re not trying to pretend like I’m not...I’m different. I’ve got a different situation. My obstacles, my mental obstacles are way different than a lot of the people in this room.

Unfortunately, this support and consideration is not always guaranteed. A lack of support from dance institutions and the continued perpetuation of systemic barriers contributes to the racial burden for Black female dancer.

Black dancers often carry the emotional labour of negotiating the whiteness within ballet. Robinson (2019) examines that Black female dancers “have additional emotional and aesthetic labors that focus on the unique forms of marginalization and discrimination that they

face, because of their race and gender as extreme minorities within ballet” (p.10) This emotional labour can often lead to what has been understood in CRT approaches as ‘*racial battle fatigue*’. Racial Battle fatigue is the physiological and psychological strain that is exacted on racially marginalized groups and the amount of energy lost coping with racial microaggressions and racism (Smith et al., 2016, p.1192). Black dancers are emotionally burdened by systemic racism, and macro- and micro-aggression. Kim shared a few moments in which she had to confront her race. For example, she shared an experience she had with another dancer saying, “*He made a reference like, me being like dirty snow. And it was like. Supposed to be a joke, you know, and at the time it’s like your friend*”. Micro-aggressions such as this are often ‘disguised as jokes’ and are often dismissed. Due to the covertness of micro-aggressions, victims often struggle to respond, and instead internalize these experiences. Kim continues to explain the emotional burden that racism places on Black individuals. She explains that Black individuals also carry collective trauma, such as when Black folks are being killed at the hand of the police:

there’s plenty of times where I’ve had to confront my race, but and in recent times, definitely it’s you know, it’s you know, there’s been a lot of conversation, especially after the backlash due to George Floyd’s death.

Instances such as George Floyd’s death forced many Black individuals to confront the reality and ‘disposability’ of their Blackness. Due to the outrage surrounding this incident, many Black individuals called on other institutions to confront and challenge the ways in which they perpetuate racism within their own systems. As a result, there has been increased discussions surrounding diversity within these institutions. Kim explains that while these discussions are important, they need to be supported by repetitive and intentional action.

there is still this energy of not feeling quite comfortable, really on guard I should say... we've learned how to adapt to an abusive environment, whether directly or indirectly. So, for us to come back even during this time and knowing that we're being welcomed, it's going to take repetitive experiences to be able to feel welcome.

In addition, it has been the expectation for Black dancer to facilitate these discussions, again placing the burden to challenge and address racism on the dancers who are victim to it. Kim explains the impact of this saying:

To have to do the work for our people and for our community and all the time I spend on writing or trying to bring it to my company's awareness or be involved in the development of these types of conversations is less time I am spending for myself. I'm not working on my port de bras, I'm not working on my acting skills. I'm not working on my own my own self and increasing my value as an entertainer.

Despite learning in a diverse and supportive environment, Kim is constantly confronted and burdened by racism. Kim emphasised the racialization of her experiences as a ballet dancer and highlighted the everyday negotiation of being Black in ballet.

Sasha

Sasha is a Canadian university dance student. Sasha started dance at the age of six trying a wide range of dance styles including jazz, hip-hop, tap, and acrobatics (acro) but it was ballet and contemporary that she connected with the most. Growing up in a diverse community, Sasha explained that she found herself surrounded by dancers of colour, however, to see Black dancers in styles such as ballet and contemporary was still rare. She explains, *“Especially growing up [in the city], like there's a huge Black population of dancers, but not so much in*

contemporary and ballet. They were more so in jazz or hip-hop". Due to the sparseness of Black dancers in these styles, at her studio, competitions and auditions Sasha remained one of a few Black dancers in those spaces and Sasha's presence in those spaces challenged perceptions on what a Black dancer should look like. She explained some of the misconceptions are about Black bodies in ballet saying,

I was intimidated, but also, I was intimidating for some. It's very rare to see someone like me go up on their toes with arches and a slim body. We look at Black bodies and dance today and we see a big behind, we see arch in the spin, flat feet, big muscles. It's how we're built. So, when it comes to my time being at those competitions, girls would look at me like, how does she look like that.

Black dancer's physiques have been criticized as being biologically inappropriate for ballet, with an overemphasis and exaggeration of "Black features" such as larger muscles, larger behind and flat feet. This oversimplification of the Black body has been used to justify the exclusion of Black bodies in ballet and reduces Black dancers to their bodies dismissing their talent and skill. While some Black dancer may have these feature, these features are not exclusive to Black dancers and these assumptions overlook the multiple ways in which the Black body can exist in dance. This oversimplification of Black bodies can also result in some difficulties and tension between Black dancers, as in these white spaces Black dancers can be compared to one another, creating a hypercompetitive environment. Sasha shared an experience she had with another dancer in her studio, saying:

I had one Black dancer in my studio. She was allowed to wear her hair a certain way, look a certain way and do what she wanted. Mind you, she was also bi-racial...[she] was a lot bigger than me and a lot more athletic, although we were in the same studio, we

competed against each other in our categories. But she always looked the part... It was me against her all the time. You could say that we both danced extremely different, but we were both very talented. But she definitely got more attention.

In this experience, Sasha and this other Black dancer were constantly being compared based on how best they can achieve the ‘ideal ballet aesthetic’. In other words, in ballet, the more ‘white’ the more ‘right’. Due to this other dancer being bi-racial, her fairer skin-tone, her hair texture, allowed her to ‘pass’ and ‘look the part’ making it easier to be accepted in ballet. This ballet aesthetic maintains a racial hierarchy that is divisive for racialized dancers and imposes additional emotional and aesthetic labour on them. Sasha explained the impact of this saying, “*I had to work harder to get the aesthetic of what a ballerina should look like, and I also had to work harder to be seen because of my skin colour*”.

Sasha explained that through her dancer experience, she was constantly fighting to be seen and accepted. When asked to describe what belonging would feel like in ballet, she responded, “*it’s hard to say because I’ve never really felt like I belonged*”. The only dance spaces that Sasha could remember feeling a sense of belonging and community was when she went to the United States to train at Julliard and Alvin Ailey. She explained,

I think the only place I felt accepted, only two places, were Julliard and Alvin Ailey, especially Alvin Ailey because there, everyone looked like me and I looked like them, it all worked out. And we all supported each other heavily together.

While these spaces were important for Sasha in building her skill and confidence, these spaces were temporary, meaning that most times she had to rely on herself and the support of her parents to push through feelings of unbelonging. Sasha explained that this feeling of unbelonging was exacerbated when she moved provinces to further her dance education saying,

I instantly felt uncomfortable. There was only one other Black girl in my program. I was not accepted. I was heavily bullied. ... So, I would have to call my parents and say, look, listen I don't want to come home, but I'm depressed, I'm upset, and I don't know how to go about this anymore.

Sasha explained that many of the girls in this program had little to no previous experience dancing with Black dancers and so they excluded her and made her feel uncomfortable. It was interesting when Sasha shared that amid everything that took place in the summer of 2020, including George Floyd's death, the same girls who repeatedly excluded Sasha turned to her with the expectation that she would support them in their journey to understand racial inequities. She recalled the following,

The girls in my program made sure I never felt included until George Floyd. I started getting phone calls from them. How are you doing? I want to talk about this?... I remember telling one of the girls on the phone, just make sure that the next Black dancer, the next generations that come in, have a chance, have a voice and are able to feel comfortable because I didn't at all.

This exclusion had a big impact on her mental health, especially since she had limited support being away from home and her family. Sasha shared that she had one professor that became an important support network for her. This professor was a Black male dance professor who understood the environment that she was in and supported her through it. She said, *"I understood him, and he knew how to facilitate certain conversations with me versus any other professor. It was so comfortable, like I felt at home knowing he was in the studio teaching our class"*. In addition to this professor, Sasha relied heavily on the long-distance support of her family, in particular her parents. Sasha said that when things were tough, she was reminded of what her dad

would say, “*When I lived [there], I felt displaced, I didn’t feel like myself. But I always had my dad’s quote, ‘because of this [pointing to back of hand, referring to skin colour], you must work 10 times harder’*”. This is a message that many Black families tell their kids, however, this was also Sasha’s reality. She used this message to find her strength, she worked harder and danced better to prove that she deserved to be there. She described this saying,

I danced ten times harder. And that’s what pushed me I guess, the anger and frustration of not being able to make friends, not being able to talk about my problems too easily and all that. I danced so hard. And I poured out my emotions as much as I could to show people, I am Black, and this is who I am. You’re not going to see a Black dancer on stage [here] every day. And I want to show [them] what I am capable of, because I am, tired. Yeah, I danced a lot harder than I ever had in those four years.

It was in dance itself that Sasha found her strength and her resistance. While the environment that she was in was toxic, dancing was an important escape for her. In particular, Sasha spoke of *Vaganova*, a style of Russian ballet. Sasha explained that in this ballet style she was able to express beauty and grace while still exhibiting strength and athleticism. She explained that this ballet style resonated well with how she saw her Black body in ballet. Sasha said, “*Ballet overall is just so feminine, and it’s cute. It’s beautiful. It’s elegant. But Vaganova was about strength... although it was beautiful in my body, I always felt strong... Vaganova gave me a voice... took me to a place where I can definitely be myself*”.

Through all of the emotional hardships, dance remains at the center of Sasha’s experience, dance is her passion, and her strength. Through movement, Sasha can express herself and her emotions even in spaces that she was silenced.

Frances

Frances is a former dancer and figure skater. She started ballet at a young age when she attended the Alberta Ballet, however when she moved to Ontario she gained interest in figure skating, and ballet became an important component of her training. In her experience, both ballet and figure skating were similar in how they were organized. As aesthetic activities, the emphasis of Eurocentric ideals of whiteness and femininity were common in both of these spaces and as a result, Frances often found herself as the only Black person in those spaces. She recalled,

I was probably the only Black kid at the school that I danced at. That was pretty typical for me, there have never been any other Black ballerinas in my schools...I've never belonged in any space because I grew up in traditionally white communities. I work in all white environments.

For Frances, the idea of being 'the only one' and the feelings associated with being othered became normalized into her everyday experiences. As highlighted by CRT, race and racism are often centralized in a Black person's experiences and interactions. Frances explains this centralization of racism when she said, "*I think for a lot of Black people, we normalize racism, racism is something we're just trained to manage and deal with*". This has been the reality for Frances as well, she explained that in learning to navigate these predominantly white spaces, she has had to learn to adjust and understand her Blackness within white spaces, saying,

I think I'm so used to being different that I don't necessarily see how it had an impact in certain ways....so for me, humour has been something that's always kind of helped me through what has been inevitably numerous, awkward situations being the only Black girl. You know, you kind of almost subconsciously bury certain things.

In addition to her coping mechanisms, Frances acknowledged her mother as a protective force in navigating these spaces. She explains,

my mom was very good at creating very safe spaces for me... she made sure I had the best of everything...I'm sure my mom had to deal with a lot of challenges in terms of being the only Black mother in those spaces, making sure that, you know her daughter was treated the same as other kids.

This provides insight into the experiences of parents/support systems that often deal with racism as well, deflecting micro-aggressions and confronting macro-aggressions. This is important to highlight as primarily white environments not only impact the dancers themselves, but also those around them. It is important to acknowledge all who are affected by the culture of whiteness in these dance spaces.

While Frances expressed difficulty in recalling specific examples of overt racial discrimination, she describes the instinctive feeling of discomfort when present in white sporting spaces, *“I don't think I had any real overt experiences. It was more so the feeling of being different, just that knowledge that everything is a bit different for you. The hair, the makeup, etc.”*. This was a common sentiment expressed by other dancers in this study, an ever-present feeling of difference. While common, this remains a difficult feeling to contextualize, as there is no physical or verbal assault, yet there is a persistent feeling of invalidation. Similar to Sasha, Frances explains that dance itself helps to mitigate these feelings of invalidation. Frances explained that, through costumes and make-up, she can experience a sense of sameness.

I felt like, in ballet and dance, being able to put on the costumes and makeup, you kind of get to transform yourself to really anything that you want...I think it was awesome

because you got to kind of fit in, you were a part of something. You are even though you're not really like everyone, you are like everybody else.

At the age of 16, Frances decided to no longer continue with ballet or figure skating. While she is no longer dancing, she is still an avid activist for the arts and the importance of Black bodies in those spaces. Throughout the interview, Frances alluded to many systemic issues within ballet, saying *“the system is not designed to have Black dancers...it's not necessarily someone going out of their way to hurt me, but it's someone also not going out of their way to include me”*. Frances highlights the emphasis on body-image and body type in ballet and the impact this has on Black girls' retention in ballet. She reflected on her and her sister's experience in ballet saying, *“My sister, was a dancer but was not looked at as a dancer, because she had these huge boobs and this ginormous butt...My body conformed a lot more, so I didn't have those issues”*. Later in the interview she went on to say *“[in ballet] you have to make certain decisions, certain concessions to be able to fit in spaces...we start talking about that issue around weight and bulimia and anorexia and all these things, and we start putting Black kids into these spaces. Is it safe for Black kids?”* An important, but largely overlooked issue to discuss is the intersection between racism and body-image within ballet. A similar issue was discussed in *Dance* magazine in a discussion of ballet's normalization of fat-phobia and how it intersects with ideals related to race. In this article, the history of fat-phobia and its roots in “racial and religious ideologies that have been used to both degrade Black women and discipline white women” are critically examined (Marshall, 2021, p.2). This fat-phobic ideology is reflected in ballet practices through the idealization of thin, white ballerinas.

Frances further critiques the institution of ballet, explaining that ballet continues the centering of whiteness through storytelling, casting and recruitment. There remains a lack of

Black stories and experiences expressed through ballet, and very few dancers are recruited for dance companies. Frances notes *“They’re not going out and scouting in Black communities for ballet dancers necessarily, and little girls are not being told that when they grow up that they can be ballet dancer”*. It is through Frances’ current position in municipal government that she hopes to advocate for people of colour, address systemic issues and make dance more accessible to people of colour.

Marissa

Marissa is a dancer from a small town north of Toronto. She started dancing at the age of four and attended the same studio until the end of high school. While Marissa focused primarily on ballet, she also did contemporary, modern, and jazz. Dance is an important part of Marissa’s identity, and the social aspect of dance was important in creating a feeling of belonging. When discussing her studio environment, she highlighted the change rooms as an important place for social interactions and bonding with her peer saying,

The change room, you know you’d have to kind of zip your lips during dance, but when you go to the change room and you’re able to chat about the tests you have coming up, or your siblings or whatever.

Marissa describes the change room as the space in which the dancers could let their guard down, socialize freely, and just be kids. When Marissa speaks about her studio and the relationships that she had built, she emphasizes the idea of *home*, saying,

I really found my place. Looking back, I always see my dance studio as sort of like my second home because I spent so much time there...I think the community, the people, they were all kind of like sisters to me... my teachers were kind of like strict parents in some

ways which kind of makes it more homey, and they really did shape me into the woman that I am becoming...it made me feel like home knowing that I kind of had this safe space.

Marissa explained that the feelings of community, connection, and safety that she experienced at this studio were important in shaping a positive dance experience. Her ability to associate dance with this idea of home was also influenced by her relationship with her mom. Dance connected her to her mom, and this was something that she treasured. She explained,

I see [dance] in such a positive light because my mom was always there at every one of my recitals. She came to all my practices, so it was even more like a second home to me. I am so glad it's something I can still bring with me.

She also shared that this emotional connection to dance, and the ability to use dance as an emotional release was important when she was dealing with the grief of losing her mom.

Dance has always been an important component of Marissa's life however, as she reflects on her overall dance experience, she acknowledged the difficulties she faced in navigating ballet culture and the moments in which she felt 'othered'. For example, while the social culture of her studio was inclusive, Marissa didn't see herself represented through the imagery around the studio or in the dance world in general.

with the images, all white, I guess just to put it very bluntly...so I always felt like I did not look like the prima ballerinas, which were tall and blonde, and they had these gorgeous long legs and these beautiful feet.

These images are used to define what a 'prima ballerina' is supposed to look like, setting unrealistic and unachievable standards for Marissa. When considering how this singular narrative influenced self-esteem and body image, Marissa shared how these images impacted her saying,

I've never really admitted this to anyone, but like, wrapping a belt around my stomach and like thinking that if I could like tighten it. I'm thinking like, oh, that will make me smaller in my stomach area because I always saw the ballerinas that were shaped like that. I remember sleeping like that. And I mean looking back, maybe that was because of those images. I'm not quite sure, but it definitely did impact my view of body image.

Marissa's experience articulates the issues previously mentioned by Frances with regards to the ballet's body-focused ideal. Marissa further explains how this 'ballet aesthetic' is perpetuated in her classes and the standard to which she was held to:

In ballet, we'd have report cards, and I remember my teachers could be like hips, butt, stomach, legs, hair, everything. Every body part was listed on this thing and there'd be a scale, it'll be like not good, satisfactory, excellent. I remember I was quite poor all along that chart...I would say the body shape side of things, I always felt like I was under satisfactory for most things, and those report cards reminded me of that.

The emphasis on a standard body type impacts issues such as poor self-esteem, poor body image, body dysmorphia, and eating disorders. While these are issues are common amongst a lot of ballet dancers, for Black dancers, the standard of whiteness is unattainable, and these dancers and their bodies continue to be seen as not good enough.

In high school, when Marissa decided to take up running her body changed, it became more muscular, furthering her from this 'ballet aesthetic'. As a result, Marissa found herself exploring other genres such as modern, contemporary and jazz. Marissa explained that this change pushed her away from ballet, but it gave her the space to be more comfortable with her body,

When I got into high school, I wasn't focusing as much on ballet and kind of moved to those other genres that I felt safer, and I felt like I was able to kind of market my body in like a new way because then I kind of became like the jumper. And like all of a sudden, my muscles, and my big calves and everything were all like huge assets...I found a new way to remarket my body, to make me feel like I was okay.

This was a pivotal moment for Marissa in learning to appreciate her body and how her body moves. Marissa's experience provides insight into why Black dancers may choose to leave ballet and explore other dance styles. In addition, it also highlights the importance of representation and diversity in ballet, not just in terms of race but body size/type as well. Misty Copeland has also discussed inclusivity in this way, specifically the promotion of athleticism and muscularity in ballet through her partnership with Under Armour. Dancers such as Misty Copeland remain important role models for young Black dancers. However, Marissa explains that young Black dancers also need to have more role models and representation within their studios as well,

If I had been taught by someone like her [Misty Copeland] just because all my teachers were white, I felt like [she] was sort of like that celebrity that felt so far away that it didn't really feel real to me...I have never had the opportunity to ever see a Black dancer really perform.

As more Black dancers take the stage at larger companies and the increase of Black dancers on social media, these dancers become role models and are celebrated by young Black dancers. However, it is also important for Black dancers to see themselves represented at a personal level such as at local competitions or within their studios. It would also be beneficial to have a teacher who understands the experiences of Black dancers in ballet world, can guide and support dancers

through it. For Marissa it was navigating things like make-up, that this type of connection and consideration would be beneficial. She said:

We would do these workshops where they wanted to make sure we all had the same colour skin tone colours, and I'd be sitting there and I'd be like, well I can't use yours or they would be like we want you to use this lipstick colour and I put it on and you could barely see it...so I don't think they were very mindful of me or my background...I didn't really have someone to help me with that. So, looking back it would've been pretty nice if one of my dance teachers had taken me to the makeup store and done that with me and you know made sure I was comfortable.

Reflecting on Marissa's dance experience, it was the aesthetic pressures of ballet that reinforced feelings of otherness and impacted her experiences of belonging. For Marissa, experiencing belonging is associated with feeling seen, feeling safe, and being in a supportive environment. She describes this by saying,

It's just being able to come as you are no matter how you're feeling, what you look like. Anything just being able to have like a safe space to dance and emote yourself and even with ballet being do structured, there is so much beauty in the movement...I think having that space where I can freely do that and not feel like I'm being judged at the same time because I often felt like with ballet there was a lot of judgement. I always felt like people were always watching me so closely, I never felt good enough in that space.

While Marissa was able to build meaningful connections with her teachers and peers, describing her studio as *home*, she does not shy away from critique the issues of ballet culture that creates feelings of unbelonging. Dance remains an important means of self-expression for Marissa.

Beth

Beth is a former dancer from northern Ontario, Canada. She started dancing recreationally at age 8 and then moved into competitive ballet at age 13. Throughout her dance experience, Beth participated in different styles of dance including jazz, lyrical, and hip hop. While Beth preferred hip-hop for its freedom of movement and expression, she enjoyed ballet for its technicality and discipline. For Beth, dance has been an important space to socialize with friends and express her emotions. Beth explained this saying, *“like it was a good escape, kept me active which was nice. I had friends as well...when it came to the dancing, I felt like everyone else”*. Beth speaks positively about the social environment of her studio, speaking to the support she received from her teacher and her relationship with her peers.

Unfortunately, Beth did not always feel like everyone else. When navigating dancewear and costumes Beth realized that the dance world didn't consider girls that looked like her. In particular, when an aspect of the costume was required to be ‘skin toned’ this often meant beige or pink and was rarely inclusive of Beth’s skin shade, as a dark-skinned dancer.

When [the dance costumes] would be made for us, the other girls would have like beige straps and then the designer would like make Black straps for me. However, when we would order our costumes because we didn't have a designer for each routine, I would be left with the beige straps...They didn't really keep me in mind.

While pointe shoes are (finally) available in colours for Black and non-white skin tones, most dancewear stores, manufacturers and costume companies have yet to provide shade-inclusive dancewear. This means that when ordering ballet dancewear there are limited options for Black dancers like Beth, and the option for a custom designer is not always available or affordable.

This impacts how the costume looks on stage and can make the dancer stand out. This is similar to another incident Beth experienced with her shoes. She explained,

Our owner would watch all the routines and he wanted me to get beige jazz shoes to match the costumes, so I had to get beige shoes. But when I wore the shoes on stage he said it didn't look right, and that I was to wear the Black ones... which kind of sucked because I stood out. Even one of the judges commented because I was the only one with Black shoes.

A situation like this can create feeling of otherness for a Black dancer and is often the reason dancers of colour choose to 'pancake' and dye their dancewear. Unfortunately, 'pancaking' is not a commonly known practice worldwide, especially at the recreational and pre-professional level, therefore these confrontations with whiteness through the navigation of dancewear are views as normal and expected. Beth explained that she did not know about pancaking until recently, years after she stopped dance saying,

I remember the thing that went around about the pancaking, I saw that on my social media. I didn't know until then that it was a problem, like I thought it was just like my situation with my studio. But it made me realize that other people were experiencing the same thing.

This is a common sentiment expressed by the Canadian dancers in this study, as they have expressed that pink and beige dancewear is the standard and this belief to be accepted by dancers of colour. Highlighting the taken-for-granted ideals of whiteness that remain uncontested in ballet in Canada, which continue to benefit white dancers and 'Other' Black and other dancers of colour.



Figure 2. “I don't have to dye my shoes anymore”. Corps de Ballet member at the National Ballet of Canada received pointe shoes that match her skin tone.

Many of the Canadian dancers also acknowledged the sparseness of Black female Canadian dancers and the impact that had on confronting whiteness in ballet. Fortunately, social media has provided a platform for dancers of colour to share their experiences, their struggles and their success. While it is disheartening knowing others facing the same issues, there is also comfort in knowing that you are not the only one.

Beth’s incident with her shoes highlighted the issue of power dynamics in ballet. Ballet is an art form that emphasizes discipline, and the dancer is seen as the vessel for the teacher, ballet master/mistress or choreographer’s vision. This hierarchical culture makes it difficult for a dancer to vocalize their discomfort. This was shown when Beth said, *“I would have been more vocal because I knew the incident with the shoes didn't sit right with me...but I was like, my teachers wanted me to do it, so I'll do it”*. Vocalizing this discomfort is particularly difficult for dances of colour for fear of backlash or dismissal. Many dancers have expressed fears of speaking out about the racism that they have experienced because of these reasons. For example, Chloé Lopes

Gomes, a former dancer at *Staatsballett Berlin*, known as one of Europe's premier ballet companies, recently sued her company regarding her experiences including being told to apply whitening makeup. She expressed her fear of a backlash when she told the *New York Times* "I really hesitated about this because the ballet world is so small, and I'm scared I will never get another job" (Sulcas, 2020). However, since Chole's contract was not going to be renewed she felt more comfortable speaking out about these issues. In February 2021, Chloé won her case against the *Staatsballett Berlin* ballet company.

Throughout the interview, Beth expressed gratitude for her dance experience, in particular the friendships and life lessons that she gained. While dance as an institution has many issues that need to be addressed, Beth's experience highlights that dancewear, costume and makeup are the most common and most confronting issues facing Black dances at every level.

Giselle

Giselle started dancing at the age of three at a local studio in New York. Focusing primarily on ballet, Giselle attended a prestigious Ballet school from the age of nine until the end of high school and then continued to focus on ballet at a Performing Arts University. After graduating Giselle joined a few ballet companies.

When reflecting on her ballet experience, Giselle noticed that as she progressed through her ballet training, the racial diversity of her schools shifted.

I definitely think in the beginning there was a lot more diversity...so I think I was in a class with two other Black girls and there were like three or four Asian girls in the class, so even though it was like very different [the primarily Black company] it wasn't as drastic until I started high school.

For Giselle, the more she advanced through her training, the fewer dancers she saw that looked like her, an experience common throughout ballet schools and companies. A 2007 *New York Times* article “Where Are All the Black Swans?”, examined the lack of diversity in ballet, specifically at the advanced levels and in professional companies. The executive director of the School of American Ballet stated, “that gets to the City Ballet issue. We’re their academy, so what you see on the stage is reflected by what you see in the school” (Kourlas, 2007, p.3). Giselle explained that reading this article was a pivotal moment for her in understanding her experience in ballet,

I really admired Ayesha Ash, and she was the only Black dancer, Black female dancer in the company...I think I must have been a sophomore or junior in high school when the article came out ‘Where are all the Black swans?’ in the New York Times, about Ayesha Ash, and I think at that point I definitely realized that its strange to just be one of something, especially in New York...I guess it also shined a light on her experience because she never really seemed like a person who struggled ...she mentioned the isolation and like feeling held back because of her race and being the only one. And I think that definitely gave me some perspective on how difficult it might be to succeed.

Dancers like Ayesha Ash and Misty Copeland are celebrated for breaking colour barriers in ballet, but the reality of being ‘the first’ and being ‘the only’, is rarely discussed. In this *New York Times* article, Ayesha explained that as the only Black dancer she often felt separate and negated, and that she fought her way through the ballet school and had to continue to fight her way through the company (Kourlas, 2007). As a teenager dreaming of a ballet career, this article was important to Giselle as it provided her some insight into the realities and expectations of being a professional Black ballerina.

In Giselle's experience, this feeling of isolation and being 'othered', was felt during the annual photos where her position in the photos emphasised her difference as a Black dancer. She explained,

Like the annual photos that we would take for the yearbook...I'm the only Black, like person of colour, in a group of white women. I think it's pretty shocking and I'm not sure if it's entirely coincidental that I was the middle...it seems like they're trying to showcase, more young Black dancers, but they're always in the middle of a photograph and they're usually still like the only dancer of colour in the picture. I feel like that makes it worse, like personifying the problem.

These photos further single out the Black dancers and inadvertently highlight the lack of diversity within these schools/companies rather than addressing the issue. Another isolating experience for Giselle is pancaking her dancewear. As mentioned by other dancers in this study, pancaking shoes and dancewear is a process that is only required for Black dancers and is a process that is costly and time consuming. Giselle explains how she found the process frustrating, tedious and isolating,

At [the predominantly Black company] we all had to pancake our own shoes. And I really didn't enjoy it. I always thought it was so tedious and like, sometimes your colour would be out, and it was just really annoying, but obviously a necessity. And then at [the primarily white company], we were responsible for, like, pancaking our own straps and stuff before we would go on stage. And I just remember yeah, like being yelled at a few times because we get on the costume and stuff and just be thinking like, well, like if you guys did it for me, you know, we wouldn't have these problems. ... yeah, I just remember thinking, like pointe shoes and tights and costumes are part of like the requirements, and

they should be supplied, you know, like those are costumes and yes, always a burden that falls on the dancers of colour alone and can be costly and just very tedious.

Providing skin-tone coloured dancewear can combat feelings of isolation and is important for Black dancers to feel seen. Giselle explains, “*I definitely think it would help me feel more validated because it is an isolating activity that only affects brown people, like why should we collectively have to do this to assimilate to something that should just be for all of us anyway?*”. For Giselle, having these shoes would allow her to challenge dominant ideals of whiteness while also validating her Blackness in this space.

Giselle decided to take her dancer career abroad and is currently dancing with a ballet company in Europe. While this is her first year at this company, Giselle was surprised to see the difference between dancing in the US and dancing in Europe. Despite being a small company in a small European city, Giselle explained that diversity of skin shade is more accepted,

literally by skin colour, the white people are the minority in the company and all the American people are Black dancers and the rest of the dancers [are from] Spain, Italy, but they definitely have like darker skin complexions...it's a big shock in a place [like this] where most people don't look super diverse. But I was definitely surprised when I joined the company here because it definitely feels like a very authentic display of diversity.

She also explained that this diversity is also accepted and celebrated by ballet patrons and locals in the community,

I know that one of the other Black dancers who has been here the year prior to me said, because it's such a small company in a small place, and he was on a lot of the posters when he first joined, that people would recognize him and just seemed welcoming to him

within the community...it definitely feels like in Europe, the appreciation for artists extends a bit further than it does in the States.

This company's appreciation for their dancers showed that the colour and shade of the dancer does not take away from the ballet experiences and the storytelling.

While Giselle believes that this shade inclusivity is beneficial, diversity needs to expand beyond the dancer and needs to exist throughout organizations (i.e., staff, teachers, administrations, etc.) and in ballet in general, there is still a hesitancy in diversifying.

I guess just a general frustration over the lack of commitment to really diversifying ballet...it hasn't really shifted much... it's just detrimental to everyone and it detrimental to the companies to not support their Black dancers because they are beautiful, and people love to see them on stage and support the companies more...their apathy towards really becoming diverse is really disheartening, I think.

In addition, Giselle emphasized that to achieve authentic diversity, it is important that everyone is accepted, supported and provided the tools necessary to succeed. Giselle said, "equality is not equity...like even if you bring more Black artists into the room, if you don't really have the tools to support them, I think you're still going to run into the same issues". When considering the importance and the long-term benefits of this support, Giselle reflects on her experience with a primarily Black dance studio,

I think they're very important [referring to the primarily Black companies]. I think that they're essential, both my sister and I were able to train for free when we were younger, just the ease of what would be many years of financial burden for my mom to continue my training was pretty tremendous. And I think it also helps defeat like curricular racism, because even though we kind of knew as little kids that ballet was very important...we

took the other styles of dance training with the same determination, and it wasn't just like [ballet] is the elite thing. I think that's important because I don't think ballet is the only path that young dancers should pursue, and it often feels like it is.

Predominantly Black dance studios have provided this support for their dancers, creating positive dance spaces for growth and belonging. For Giselle and her family, the financial support was impactful, and the diverse curriculum, in which all dance styles were celebrated and respected, was foundational for a comprehensive dance education.

Genuine and intentional diversity is necessary for creating a sense of belonging for Black dancers. This means creating spaces and support systems that understand the Black dancers' needs and experiences. According to Giselle, belonging is dependent on feelings of comfort and confidence,

Comfort. Like feeling comfortable in your own skin as a result feeling like you belong somewhere because you don't have to put up any walls or defense mechanisms to protect yourself. And maybe confidence, I just feel like Black dancers have to question so much more than their white counterparts in so many aspects of being an artist and if they felt like it was a place where they were supported, they probably wouldn't feel that way as often.

Black dancers are often held to a different standard from their white counterparts, creating a sense of self-doubt about who they are, their skill and their place in ballet. Ballet organizations need to work towards creating environments that generate confidence and comfort so that dancers can focus on the enjoyment of dance and movement. As Giselle begins to navigate the ballet world in Europe, it has become important that she hold on to her sense of self and connect to encouraging support systems.

As a Black woman navigating the ballet, Giselle critiques the ways in which ballet defines and presents womanhood and femininity,

I do find it problematic that women are the central figures of the art form, but there's still a lot of sexism and harassment, and subservient female behaviour that's supported in the ballet world and [it is] really hypocritical because I don't think ballet would really be much without women and they're supported in some ways...I think it's a strange dynamic for young girls to experience for sure...Many stories center around the white female damsel in distress in ballet. And there's really a lot of room for growth in feminism and in Black feminism and in the storytelling of ballet. I think that it's even more limited by the people in charge because those characters could really be anyone and they're kind of choosing to perpetuate that.

Ballet is a 'feminized' art form, patriarchal ideals continue to impact ballet culture. As Giselle explained, this is evident in both the storytelling aspect of ballet as well as the power hierarchy that exist. These ideas often center the idea of female fragility, specifically white female fragility, where femininity is associated with the white damsel in distress. For Black women in ballet, there is a navigation of this patriarchal hierarchy while simultaneously being viewed less feminine. This is often experienced through typecasting, as the more feminine roles are less likely to be given to Black female dancers. Giselle highlights the concept of misogynoir experienced by Black women in ballet providing broader perspective on gender equity in ballet.

Courtney

Courtney started dancing at the age of three attending a local studio outside of Baltimore, Maryland. While encouraged at an early age to try different sports and activities, dance was

something that stuck with her. Courtney attended a performing arts high school; it is here that she began to focus on the discipline and athleticism that shapes her artistry. After high school, Courtney continued to pursue dance while also studying communication and media studies. During her final year of college, she danced with the Alvin Ailey Junior Company (Ailey II) and she is currently a member of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater company. The Alvin Ailey Dance theater company is a New York based modern dance company led by Alvin Ailey and a group of young African-American modern dancers. In addition to pursuing a professional dance career, Courtney has also started a small organization in the Bahamas, where she can teach and share her love for dance. Courtney described how dance has become a significant part of her identity,

I just enjoyed it. I just connected with it, I just loved it. It was like this untouchable thing for me. It was this innate, indescribable feeling of knowing that I was my most confident self when I was dancing...it was my confidence it was my crown, almost...by dance reassured me of my confidence of my place in the world, of my stature, my height, my beauty.

While Courtney has always loved dance, getting to this place of confidence and acceptance of her place in ballet has not always been easy. Due to the lack of representation of other Black dancers, Courtney often felt conflicted with her identity as a young Black woman and as a dancer, she often felt like who she was and what she loved had to be separate. Courtney recalled a moment in which she was challenged by this,

I had a Black girl, when I was in middle school, tell me you know, that's a white people thing. That's a white girl thing and I was like, well I just want to dance like I love

ballet...it's not their fault, that's just what they saw at that point. There weren't Black people doing ballet...in her world, there weren't Black ballerinas.

At the time, Courtney was hurt by this comment and internalized the idea that her Blackness and her love for ballet could not coexist. However, as she got older, Courtney realized that this comment was more indicative of the lack of representation in ballet and the inaccessibility of this art form within the Black community. Dancers of colour must be celebrated both within the dance world and seen within their communities, so that the concept of a Black ballerina becomes less foreign. This the perspective that motivated dancer Ayesha Ash to walk around inner-city communities in Rochester in a tutu interacting with youth to challenged stereotypes and misconceptions (Stahl, 2017). Black youth need to see themselves in these uncommon activities and spaces so that they are aware of all the opportunities available to them. For Courtney, representation in dance confirmed her belonging. She expressed this when discussing the first time she had a Black teacher,

I didn't see me in dance. I didn't have a Black teacher until I got to high school. I think at those ages, representation, it's so important to have people that look like you at the front of the room...It changed everything. Everything that could possibly change changed because I remember this teacher and she was a former Ailey dancer...I remember seeing her walking in and going to the front of the room, and I was like oh my gosh, is she here to teach us? She was just radiant, she was beautiful, she was muscular. And I didn't see it and I didn't realise that I hadn't seen it until I saw it, like this is different. Like she's at the front of the room, so can I speak more?...it just changed the way I saw my place.

This teacher created a space that was comfortable for Courtney, where she felt that she could let her guard down and express herself more. In addition, this teacher was able to exhibit beauty and

grace with a muscular body. This representation of both race and body type was important in contradicting to dominant beauty standards perpetuated in ballet and allowed Courtney to become more comfortable with her body in ballet spaces.

Courtney felt that she was fortunate to have teachers who supported her throughout her dance experience. Dance teachers are important in creating and shaping dance spaces. Courtney shared some pivotal moments where teachers expressed compassion and encouragement,

We had this amazing director, her name was Norm Pera, and she had this beautiful ability...she somehow managed to get all of us together, and she didn't care what you looked like, she demanded excellence from all of us...she paid attention to the details in a way that would make sure that we all, to the best of her ability could get on the same even playing field...so I watched her say no, you don't have to put your hair in a bun, I just want it off your face...her buying tights for people, just showing that she saw us. She saw people for who they were and what and where they came from, and she was empathetic.

Courtney attended a performing arts high school, where students from all over the city, from diverse backgrounds, came together. This teacher understood and appreciated these differences and catered to individual needs. In an environment like this, students can focus on strengthening their skills rather than trying to conform to ballet expectations. This teacher's empathy allowed Courtney to see dance as an art form that can unite people. Courtney also shared a moment with another dance teacher whose encouragement pushed her outside her comfort zone and help her to find confidence in her ability,

I had a teacher, [who] without knowing it, pointed out a subconscious thing I was doing, and I think it had to do with the fact that I wasn't the common dancer in the room... I realized that as Black women we're told to be grateful for whatever we are, just be happy

to be there and happy to be in the room, don't cause much of a scene, just blend in. I think I had actually internalized that...I was always okay with letting people push me back, so I remember one time she had been yelling at me for standing in the back too much...she stopped the music and she grabs me and pulls me to the front, she tells me 'you can't hide yourself anymore, you can't stand back there because you actually know it, you know this dance better than anybody, but you're shrinking yourself'... I watched the world that I love, tell me to just be happy to be here...I internalized that until someone literally grabbed me, physically, grabbed me and shock me to be like wake up.

There is an expectation that women in ballet are to be seen as subservient through discipline and restraint as previously mentioned by Giselle. For Black women, there is an added pressure to conform and blend in as they are often made to feel like the exception and that they should be grateful for allowance into this space. In addition, there is the fear of perpetuating racial stereotypes of the 'loud Black girl' or the 'angry Black women' and so they silence themselves or downplay their abilities as to not jeopardize the 'opportunity' to be in this space. This teacher helped her to challenge this thinking and pushed her to display her full potential.

These teachers were important in creating an environment of growth and a sense of belonging. In addition to teachers, there are many aspects of the dance space that influences this sense of belonging, such as the music. Courtney provided insight into the influence of music in dance spaces and how it impacts her connection to dance,

It also depends on the music, it depends on where the music is coming from...I can't go into each piece the same way, so I'm listening to African drums and African beats and chanting. I've been taken away and it's about who's playing the music and who's singing the music. So, if I listen to them and close my eyes and I think of where this is from

originally, this time period, what's on the drums? Goatskin? Are those bongos? Like, what is this and what is the culture behind it? So that informs what I do. I'm listening to old jazz...that's a different time period, different energy...then I could listen to classical music, which is beautiful and that's very royal...that's a different era, different entities with different instruments in a different room.

Music is important in setting the tone of a dance space by influencing the emotions associated with the space. As Courtney explained, different music, instruments and voices place her in a different mindset. The opportunity to be exposed to diversity in music is important in challenging the elitism of ballet, where African beats or old jazz is seen as equally impactful as classical ballet. The ability to move through these different genres is important in shaping a dancer's artistry however, Courtney explains that gatekeeping is still prominent within dance,

I remember the first time saw a casting notice, it said like white female dancers, I was like oh okay, but this is just the way the dance world works...the dance world typecasts. It's our nature because we're telling stories and so to tell certain stories, you need to cast the right dancer...but it can go a bit further as to 'Cinderella's always been white so she's got to be white' or this character in the leading place has always been played by a white, blonde women, so it can't be a Black dancer...where we find issues is when we start telling people, you can't, or we start telling Black women that you can't. I should be able to put on my pointe shoes and enjoy this divine classical ballet if I want to...I should be able to go into a modern dance and enjoy music from my heritage, my own culture, my own background.

The dance world still distinguishes which spaces are appropriate for Black bodies to exist in.

White privilege in dance is the ability to move freely through different genres without criticism

and consequences. Black dancers should have the same freedom to navigate all dance spaces and play lead roles. Dance companies such as Alvin Ailey are important in allowing dancers this freedom, while also highlighting the importance of diverse storytelling. Courtney explained that the diverse storytelling was important because it allowed her to personally connect to the dance,

I fell in love with dance that reflected me, that reflected my heritage. Not that I didn't love The Nutcracker... that's not my history. I grew up with a grandma who made me wear tights in the middle of a hot summer day to go to church and is hot and used fans and Black people worshipping. So, when I did Revelation, the first time I got out my fan started fanning myself, it didn't have to be taught, of course, I had to learn the choreography, but the concept of worship in a church from the Black experience, that was my life... So, I fell in love with this, it was like who I was and what I was doing were not in the same room. And it seems like I call this place called Alvin Ailey, and all of a sudden, they had built a house together, they built an organization and grew a legacy where who I was, and what I love to do were actually better because of each other, not separate.



Figure 3. 'Revelations' by the Alvin Ailey Dance Company

Courtney chose a company where she felt seen, she was represented both among the dancers and in the work that she was dancing. To her, this is what diversity looks and feels like in ballet.

I think diversity in ballet means that it should reflect the world that we live in. It comes in so many different shades, we come in so many different shades, body types, The world is not all one colour... I think it should reflect the world that we live in and not just on stage but off, the stage managers, the crew, the companies...if you're missing people from your table that can provide perspective on a world that you're not familiar with, then you're missing out.

Diversity in all aspects of dance is important in creating an environment of understanding. Taking this into consideration, it has become important for Courtney to create spaces of belonging when she teaches. Courtney has been able to travel abroad to teach dance. This has opened her eyes to the beauty of dance which she describes as transcending and universal,

I taught in Tokyo, Japan for six weeks and one or two students spoke English, everybody else spoke Japanese. I don't know how we connected on such a deep level, they understood what I was saying with my body, and I would have imagery and things... We would use gestures and all of a sudden, I forgot that we did not speak the same language...Like this gift of dance, this transcendence, this thing of dance is so much more than me. It's about people...dance is the universal language that no matter where you go, where you live in the universe, you can speak to each other through the art of dance.

Dance an important cultural aspect that connects people through movement and emotions.

Throughout Courtney's experience, her love for dance remains consistent and has shown how a positive dance environment can help to dismantle the barriers that continue to exist for Black women in ballet.

Chapter 5: Conclusion and Future Directions

5.1 Conclusion

In this research, I have examined the impact and influence of gendered and racial ideologies on the everyday experiences of Black female ballet dancers from the lens of space, place, and belonging. This research sought to analyze how Black female bodies navigate dance spaces and how the interaction with these spaces influences a dancer's perceptions of belonging. In addition, the objectives of this research were: to examine the ways in which experiences of space and belonging are racialized; to deconstruct the historic and contemporary ideals of femininity and its interaction with Blackness; and to explore how racialized ideals surrounding women's bodies are perpetuated and/or challenged within dance spaces.

Using counter-storytelling, I centered the experiences of eight Black ballet dancers. Their stories have provided insight into how Black women in ballet experience both belonging and unbelonging while navigating dance spaces. I presented these stories individually, to allow for each dancer's truths to be amplified and to speak to the multiplicity and complexity of each dancer's experiences. Counter-storytelling also provides an opportunity to highlight collective stories, as there were common ideas that resonated with many dancers. While these dancers have different experiences, through different years of dance, different studios/companies and different geographical locations, they are also connected in their experiences of Blackness in ballet, emphasizing with ways in which ballet spaces remain gendered and racialized. These dancers have all expressed that dance is central to their lives and their identity despite dance remaining a predominantly white space. This reveals that dance itself is transcending, universal and inclusive, however, dance as an institution continues to uphold patriarchal and white supremacist ideologies that continue to marginalize Black women.

The normalization of whiteness in ballet is a common barrier faced by these Black dancers and the centrality of white femininity makes navigating these spaces as a Black woman difficult. In particular, the understanding and expectation that whiteness is the standard to which everything measures, impacts all aspects of dance including the images, dancewear, casting, the curriculum, and ballet ideals/expectations. A common frustration shared by these dancers was the additional emotion and aesthetic considerations that they must continue to maneuver. For example, the struggle with dancewear. There are still studios that require dancers to wear pink/beige tights and shoes as part of the uniform or expect the dancer to pancake their dancewear, both experiences reinforce the idea of otherness. While there are dancewear companies that are starting to produce skin-tone coloured shoes and tights, these need to be more widely accepted by dance companies and studios as well as made accessible to all dancers of colour. The aesthetic expectation is also imposed on the bodies themselves, as the acceptable body in ballet is still rooted in white Eurocentric ideals of femininity, where negations of muscularity, fatness and Blackness are still contested. These aesthetic expectations are intertwined with deeply personal and emotional understandings of self, creating additional burdens of emotional labour (Robinson, 2018). Black dancers are often expected to negotiate their Blackness while avoiding the perpetuation of racialized stereotypes, controlling and regulating their performance of self. In addition, as Black dancers in ballet are still sparsely represented, individual dancers are expected to be the spokesperson for Black issues. Therefore, these dancers must navigate both internal and external confrontations with racism, resulting in racial battle fatigue. It has become essential that dancers are situated in spaces that can provide proper resources and support for these dancers.

The centering of whiteness in ballet often results in the dismissal of Black experiences, knowledge, and contributions to dance. Through the perpetuation of the idea that “Black bodies don’t belong”, Black dance and therefore Black dancers are forced to exist within the margins and their presence within ballet to remain limited and controlled. The impact of this goes beyond a lack of representation but creates a disconnect from the truth and significance of Black bodies in ballet. Many dancers share the importance of discussing Blackness in the context of ballet history, as it reiterates the longstanding negotiations of Blackness in ballet. For example, to understand the significance of Chloé Lopes’ successful 2021 lawsuit against *Staatsballett Berlin* ballet company for discriminatory practices, including being told to apply whitening make-up, it is important to return to Janet Collins’ experience in 1932 at the *Ballet Russe de Monte Carlos*, where she refused to join the company that required her to paint her face and skin white if she wished to perform (McCarthy, 2011). Recognizing the historical significance of Blackness in ballet is instrumental in the dismantling of systemic racial practices and the disruption of dominant ideologies. Predominantly Black dance studios and companies continue to be spaces for this resistance. These spaces play a fundamental role in challenging and de-centering whiteness in ballet. These spaces emphasize Black stories, situating Blackness outside of the white gaze. In these spaces, Blackness is equivalent to regality, beauty and grace, and Black culture is presented without reinforcing ideals of racial inferiority. On a more personal level, these spaces foster relationships based on common experiences and provided support for dancers to create a sense of self. These spaces allow dancers the freedom to simply be and enjoy the beauty of dance.

The freedom to exist without fear of judgement or ridicule is essential in creating spaces of belonging as it allows for self-expression, as well as confidence in oneself and ones’ skills.

When examining experiences of belonging, these eight dancers emphasized emotions of comfort, confidence, and connection. This reiterates Antonitsch's (2010) understanding of belonging, in which both interpersonal and spatial relationships elicit feelings of “familiarity, comfort, security and emotional attachment” (p.646). Belonging can be understood in two ways (1) *the politics of belonging* which refers to relational power dynamics and (2) *the sense of belonging* which is the personal feelings of attachment (Antonsich, 2010; Yuval-Davis, 2006). Power hierarchies such as race, shade (colourism), and gender are used to determine who can best ‘fit’ the ballet ideal and to distinguish who belongs. This ballet ideal is restrictive and often link to notions of sameness. However, this notion can be challenged when ‘sameness’ is no longer equated homogenous identity but rather shared knowledge and experience through dance, shifting the power away from dominant ideals. *A sense of belonging* is a deeply personal sense of self or ‘being’. Belonging in this sense is determined when understandings of self are challenged or validated by relationships and social interactions. Through compassion and empathy, as well as diversity in imagery and stories, dancers can feel seen and validated in their experiences, creating a sense of belonging. The experiences presented by these eight dancers, highlight the ways in which these understandings of belonging are at play in dance spaces and how they shape experiences of belonging and unbelonging, which are often experienced simultaneously.

5.2 Limitations

The limitations of this study relate primarily to the relational aspect of this research. One limitation of this study was gaining access to a wide range of participants. I used social media as my means of obtaining participants, which required me to send out direct messages to dancers. This meant that there was no previous relationship established and often my messages were not

seen by the dancers or were ignored. Many of the dancers I contacted were professional dancers and therefore their schedule didn't allow them to participate in the research. In one case, the dancer expressed interest in participating, however, I had no further contact with the dancer directly, instead I was passed along to representatives for the dance company, who after several emails informed me that the dancer could no longer participate in the study. It would have been beneficial for me to be connected to a dance company or organization to establish a relationship before to engaging in this research.

Another limitation was that this research was conducted during a global pandemic, as a result, this limited the spaces in which I could enter as well as how I connected with participants. Due to the pandemic, in-person research came to a halt, forcing me to adapt to virtual interactions. While the virtual interviews were beneficial in that they allowed me to connect to participants in different geographical locations, interacting virtually limited the ways in which I could engage with the participants. For example, there were some instances in which video calling was not working and voice call was used instead, this meant that I could not see the participants or interpret their body language. This made the interview feel more transactional rather than relational and I believe this may have influenced some of the responses. In addition, the inability to be physically present in the space I was examining limited the interactions I had with dancers, the opportunity to be a part of the dance community and to reflect on my own experiences of belonging. Since dance is an embodied practice, I believe that interacting with the dance space and other dancers would have provided more complexity and depth to this research.

5.3 Future research recommendations

Research that looks at the relationship between race and dance is still new, with a few notable scholars in this field, including Jennifer Fisher, Nayama McCarthy-Brown, and Sekani Robinson. When looking at the intersections of race and gender in dance, many of these scholars, like myself, have stated the importance of centering the experiences of Black women due to the specific navigation of misogynoir in ballet and the historical exclusion of Black female dancers. Future research should provide an examination of differing Black identities such as Black masculinity, as well as diverse sexual and gender identities in dance in the context of belonging. As ballet remains a ‘feminized’ art form centering white femininity and heteronormative ideals, it is important to explore how intersecting identities continue to shape experiences of belonging in dance spaces.

Moving forward, it would be beneficial to engage with more research that critically analyze experiences of belonging. Specifically, further examination of belonging through the concept of space/place and geographies. Specifically, a more global perspective of belonging to understand how different geographical locations influence the perpetuation or challenging of dominant ideologies. This research focused mainly on the Canadian and American perspective as all dancers in this study identified as Canadian or American. It would be interesting to see how different countries or locations shape racial and gendered ideologies and how this impacts the social construction of space. In addition, the examination of space and belonging from unique perspectives and differing identities such as parenthood and childhood would be beneficial.

As represented through some of the dancers’ experiences, parents can play a big role in shaping experiences of belonging. It would be beneficial to look at ways in which racialized parents experience belonging in predominantly white spaces, how is it influenced by their

perceptions of self and their role as parents. I also encourage researchers to include youth in future research in this area to provide a deeper understanding of how belonging is defined, understood and experienced throughout our lifespans. Throughout the interviews the dancers were able to reflect on their experiences in childhood, however, this understanding filters through the lens of adulthood. It would be interesting to see what images, discourse and experiences stand out to young Black dancers, as well as how they view themselves within the context of dance. Research with children and youth is important to understand how the children navigate the world, and how society influences the experiences of childhood. In addition, the inclusion of children in research also allows children to become active members of society through the creation of knowledge.

5.4 Reflection and final thoughts

Over the last year, when racial tensions were high and protest filled the streets, I struggled to find meaning in this research. I felt small and I questioned why I was focusing on dance when people were dying at the hands of the police. Reflecting on my own experiences of racial trauma, I realized that anti-Black violence exists beyond police brutality and is often experienced within our everyday relationships. I thought about my first memory of ‘unbelonging’ at the age of four, when another child told me they couldn’t play with me because I was Black. These spaces of play, leisure, sport and art are central to our understandings of race and our experiences of belonging.

I use my research to help me understand myself and to understand the world we live in. Through this research I realized how important CRT was in giving me a voice to articulate my experiences of Blackness and to critically examine race. Throughout my undergraduate

experiences in Kinesiology, there were few opportunities to understand and critically examine race. However, through this research I was able to engage with CRT and Black geographical scholarship and could situate myself in this field by examining race and human movement through dance. While this research centered Black female dancers and dance spaces, the examination of belonging goes beyond dance, as feelings of belonging and unbelonging moves through all aspects of our existence. Reflecting on this research, I was able to understand the importance of belonging and the ways in which it impacts how we view ourselves in this world. Belonging is deeply personal; it is not just being present in a space but is an experience that is felt within our souls, an innate need to feel seen, heard and connected.

When I reflect on why I chose this research and how I can position myself within the larger Black Lives Matter movement, I remember that BLM is about ensuring that Black people are seen, their stories heard and their fight to belong in society. Black stories matter, Black resistance matters, Black Joy matters; this is how I situate my work.

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Appendix A

Interview Guide

Research Question: What are Black female dancers' experiences of belonging?

Objectives:

1. To examine the ways in which experiences of space and belonging are racialized
2. To deconstruct the historic and contemporary ideals of femininity and its interaction with Blackness
3. To explore how racialized ideals surrounding women's bodies are perpetuated and/or challenged within dance spaces

Interview Questions

1. First, I'd like to get to know you a bit better
 - a. What was your first introduction to ballet?
 - What did ballet mean to you growing up?
 - b. When you think of ballet, what are some descriptive words that come to mind?
 - c. Why did you choose to dance ballet professionally?
 - Was ballet your first choice for dance style
2. Can you describe what your studios were like growing up?
 - a. When you think about your first dance class what emotion do you remember feeling?
 - b. Growing up, did you see many dancers of color?
 - Who were your dance inspirations?
 - § How have their journey/ experiences affected how you see yourself in the ballet world
 - c. Was there a moment in time when you thought about quitting dance?
 - d. What were some of the challenges you faced while trying to pursue a professional ballet career?
3. In your opinion is race still an issue in the ballet world?
 - a. Dance, and ballet specifically, is highly body centric, do you think that body shape is a bigger exclusionary factor than race.
 - b. Can you describe a moment in your dance career that you had to confront your race?
 - Have you ever felt tokenized/fetishized?
 - c. How does skin tone/shade play a role affect who is accepted or excluded from the ballet world?
 - d. Do you think that media attention around dancers such as Misty Copeland have changed perspectives around race and ballet.
4. What does femininity look like in ballet
 - a. Does this idea of femininity reflect your own experiences of femininity
 - b. How are your experiences different from the experiences of your Black male counterparts
5. What does diversity in ballet look like

- a. Is there a difference between diversity and belonging?
- b. What does it mean to belong?
 - What emotions would you expect to feel?
 - Can you describe a moment in your dance career that felt that you didn't belong
- c. What areas/sectors of ballet (management/hiring/wardrobe/casting/choreographer) do you wish to see more diversity or change?

Procedure Description and Dialogue

For all interviews the following opening dialogue will be presented before any of the above questions are asked of the participants:

Researcher: “Before we begin, I would like to reiterate the process of consent related to your participation in this study.

I am referring to an email to which you replied, which states the interview process, potential risks and benefits, confidentiality procedures and data publication methods. Do you remember replying to this email to me as the lead researcher on this study and do you still feel comfortable with giving your consent to participate in this study?”

If subject answers “yes”:

Researcher: “Wonderful, I will keep the email in my records and before we begin I will remind you that if you for any reason begin to feel uncomfortable with the questions being asked of you in this interview, please feel free to cease your involvement at any time.”

If subject answers “no”:

Researcher: “I will re-send you the email consent form and will you please read it and reply to the email before we begin the interview”. (At this point, the researcher will politely hang up the telephone and recommence the interview when the participant has read and agreed to the terms outlined in the email consent form).

If subject agrees to give consent, interview will go on as follows:

Researcher: “Great, I will keep this document in my records and before we begin I will remind you that if you for any reason begin to feel uncomfortable with the questions being asked of you in this interview, please feel free to cease your involvement at any time.”

If subject does not give consent interview will not proceed.

Appendix B

Information Consent Letter for One on One Interview

Informed Consent for: _____

Date:

Project Title: Dancing Beyond Diversity: The Experiences of Black Female Ballerinas

Principal Student Investigator:

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INVITATION

You are invited to participate in a study that involves research. The purpose of this research is to analyze how Black female bodies navigate dance spaces and how the interaction with these spaces influences a dancer's perceptions of belonging.

WHAT IS INVOLVED

As a participant, you will be asked to participate in two one-on-one interviews with the researcher. Each interview session will take approximately 30-60 minutes of your time. The interview will take place on Microsoft Teams either by call or video call, which will be chosen as preference to you. You will be asked to select an interview location that will allow for privacy and confidentiality such that you can speak without being overheard and so that you do not risk recording the voices of others. If you would prefer not to be audio-recorded during the interview process, please indicate this preference by checking the box below. If you, the participant, chooses not to be audio recorded, interviews notes will be written by hand by the researcher.

I consent to being audio-recorded in the interview process **Yes No**

In addition to the interviews, you will also be asked to share (via email/texting or by directing me to one of their Instagram posts) photos of spaces that represents a sense of belonging or exclusion. These photos will be used to provide material evidence of spaces/places of belonging and to further inform the interview. This aspect of the research process is **optional**, as you can share photos if you choose to. These photos will be treated as confidential unless you, as the participant, chooses to allow the photo to be shared as part of the final study results. Consent for including these photos in the final research can be withdrawn at any stage of the research process.

I consent to sharing photos as part of the research results **Yes No**

POTENTIAL BENEFITS AND RISKS

Potential benefits of participation include the opportunity to reflect on and share past experiences of belonging in dance spaces. This research also hopes to understand what diversity means and looks like in these dance spaces, in order to create recommendations to improve diversity in these spaces. However, since there are so few Black female ballet dancers, there is a risk that by sharing your experiences you may be identified. Therefore, all personal identifiers (your name, dance companies, etc.) will be kept confidential and will be de-identified in the final document. The researcher will also be collecting blog posts, and social media articles to allow for a larger sample size to help to maintain the anonymity of all dancers

who participate in the interview process. These social media and blog post will also allow for a larger range of stories and experiences so that dancers are not easily identified.

CONFIDENTIALITY

Data collected during this study will be stored on the researcher's personal laptop computer, which requires a password for access. The data from the interviews will be transcribed verbatim and the audio recordings and transcriptions of the interviews will be stored in a locked filing cabinet at the researcher's home office. Data will be kept for four years after which time the data will be deleted or shredded. Access to all data will be restricted to Amanda Lyn (Researcher), and Dr. Cathy van Ingen (Supervisor). Participant names and organizational affiliations will be replaced with assigned pseudonyms for publication purposes and never disclosed in written or oral presentations of the study.

If participants would prefer to be identified, the researcher would require that they indicate this preference by checking the box below and signing, acknowledging any associated risk. Consent to being identified can be withdrawn at any stage of the research process.

I consent to be identified in the research results **Yes No**

VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION

Participation in this study is voluntary. If you wish, you may decline to answer any or all questions asked throughout the duration of the interview. Further, you may decide to withdraw from this study at any time. Should you choose to withdraw from the study, all records of the interview will be immediately destroyed. No consequences will exist for participants choosing to withdraw.

PARTICIPANT FEEDBACK

The interview data and the interpreted data will be returned to you, allowing you to challenge any misrepresentations that can occur during data interpretation and will ensure that the knowledge created through this process is accurate in describing your experiences. Interview transcripts will be returned to you a week after the last interview (allowing time for the researcher to transcribe the interviews). You will have 2 weeks to review and provide feedback to the researcher, if there is no response after 2 weeks, a follow-up email will be sent. If there is no response within 48 hours after the follow-up email, then the researcher will assume that you are satisfied and will use the transcript as is.

PUBLICATION OF RESULTS

Results of this study may be published in professional and academic journals and presented at conferences. Feedback about this study will be available in the form of an executive summary upon request from Amanda Lyn via e-mail once the study has been completed.

I would like to receive a brief summary of the results of this project **Yes No**

CONTACT INFORMATION AND ETHICS CLEARANCE

If you have any questions about this study or require further information, please contact the Principal Student Investigator or the Faculty Supervisor using the contact information provided above. This study has been reviewed and received ethics clearance through the Research Ethics Board at Brock University (file # 20-001). If you have any comments or concerns about your rights as a research participant, please contact the Research Ethics Office at (905) 688-5550 Ext. 3035, reb@brocku.ca.

Thank you for your assistance in this project. Please keep a copy of this form for your records.

CONSENT FORM

I agree to participate in this study described above. I have made this decision based on the information I have read in the Information-Consent Letter. I have had the opportunity to receive any additional details I want about the study and understand that I may ask questions in the future. I understand that I may withdraw this consent at any time. By replying to this e-mail I acknowledge that I am participating in this study and that I am providing informed consent.

Signature: _____ **Date:** _____