



Black Swans Shattering the Glass Ceiling: A Historical Perspective on the Evolution of Historically Black Ballet Companies— From Katherine Dunham to Arthur Mitchell

Citation

Jackson, La'Toya Princess. 2019. Black Swans Shattering the Glass Ceiling: A Historical Perspective on the Evolution of Historically Black Ballet Companies— From Katherine Dunham to Arthur Mitchell. Master's thesis, Harvard University Division of Continuing Education.

Permanent link

<https://nrs.harvard.edu/URN-3:HUL.INSTREPOS:37370971>

Terms of Use

This article was downloaded from Harvard University's DASH repository, and is made available under the terms and conditions applicable to Other Posted Material, as set forth at <http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.InstRepos:dash.current.terms-of-use#LAA>

Share Your Story

The Harvard community has made this article openly available.
Please share how this access benefits you. [Submit a story](#).

[Accessibility](#)



Black Swans Shattering the Glass Ceiling: A Historical Perspective the Evolution of Historically Black Ballet Companies— From Katherine Dunham to Arthur Mitchell

The Harvard community has made this article openly available. [Please share](#) how this access benefits you. Your story matters

Citation	Jackson, La'Toya Princess. 2019. Black Swans Shattering the Glass Ceiling: A Historical Perspective the Evolution of Historically Black Ballet Companies— From Katherine Dunham to Arthur Mitchell. Master's thesis, Harvard Extension School.
Citable link	http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.InstRepos:42004127
Terms of Use	This article was downloaded from Harvard University's DASH repository, and is made available under the terms and conditions applicable to Other Posted Material, as set forth at http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.InstRepos:dash.current.terms-of-use#LAA

Black Swans Shattering the Glass Ceiling: A Historical Perspective
The Evolution of Historically Black Ballet Companies—
From Katherine Dunham to Arthur Mitchell

La'Toya Princess Jackson

A Thesis in the Field of Dramatic Arts
for the Degree of Master of Liberal Arts in Extension Studies

Harvard University

May 2019

Abstract

This thesis is an intervention in the ballet field, seeking to provide an Afrocentric historical perspective on the evolution and history of ballet in the United States. Drawing on the work of Brenda Dixon Gottschild, I explore African diasporic traditions and Africanist aesthetics in classical ballet, and I reconfigure Katherine Dunham and Arthur Mitchell to situate their works within the American ballet canon. I explore Katherine Dunham's role as founder of Ballet N gre (the first black ballet company in the United States) and Arthur Mitchell's role in the evolution of the "Black Ballet Aesthetic." I also examine the "Classic Black" era to document the histories of American Negro Ballet, First Negro Classic Ballet, and New York Negro Ballet. I give historical context leading up to the founding of Dance Theatre of Harlem. I analyze the emergence of the Black Ballet Aesthetic and how companies like Ballethnic Dance Company have taken the torch from Katherine Dunham and Arthur Mitchell to found a sustainable classical black ballet company and bring it successfully into the twenty-first century.

What I call the "Dunham Effect" is the foundation set by Katherine Dunham. It has enabled other black ballet companies to follow her blueprint for creating black ballet companies and developing a black ballet aesthetic.

I examine Eurocentric aesthetics fused with Afrocentric aesthetics to highlight a cross-cultural exchange of dance traditions. I explain how black ballet companies used this fusion to connect their ballet stories to the black experience, answering W. E. B. DuBois' call for black artists to create art that resonates with black audiences—a call that

sparked the Negro Arts Movement. The success of the ballet companies that emerged as a result of the Dunham Effect is evident in the work of classical black ballet companies like the Dance Theatre of Harlem and Ballethnic Dance Company.

This thesis documents my original field research into the origins and history of five classical black companies. Field interviews with artistic directors, founders, and dancers from the “Classic Black” era reveal the challenges these companies and dancers faced even as they were determined to preserve their history, their art, and their legacy.

In additional investigation, I examine how early black ballet companies established and maintained their classical ballet foundation and performed classical works in spaces that typically did not welcome black dancers. My research sheds new light on how early black ballet companies like the American Negro Ballet, New York Negro Ballet, and First Negro Classic Ballet have been left out of history, while simultaneously providing insight into why it is important to preserve the work of these companies. I analyze how the Black Ballet Aesthetic evolved within these companies while also documenting how the companies that were created sparked a Black Ballet Renaissance by creating their own original works and story ballets that speak to the black experience. I seek to preserve their work while also providing a comprehensive history lesson that will further cement their legacy not just within the context of black history but more widely within the canon of American history.

Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to the loving memory of my great-grandmother Sedalia Carey Johnson, for believing in my dreams and giving me the wings to fly and soar beyond the stars.

Acknowledgments

I would like to first thank the Theater, Dance, Media faculty and staff for believing in my work and providing me tools to cultivate my skills as a researcher and practitioner. Additionally, I would like to thank the Office for the Arts at Harvard, the Harvard Dance Program, and the Department of Music at Harvard for providing me the resources to explore my artistry.

This thesis could not have happened without my co-directors Jill Johnson and Whitney Cover. I offer thanks to both directors for being instrumental in my development of performance research and for their guidance at the very beginning of my journey as a graduate student. Many thanks to Dana Knox, Deborah Foster, and Jack Megan for helping me navigate the Arts and Humanities at Harvard. Additional thanks to my research advisor Dr. Talaya Delaney and my academic advisor Sarah Powell, each of whom provided support, insight, and guidance throughout this entire process. My thanks goes as well to Widener Library, the Harvard Theatre collection at Houghton Library, the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, and the Columbia University Libraries.

I am extremely grateful to Ms. Nena Gilreath, Mr. Waverly Lucas and the Ballethnic Dance Company family, my first ballet teachers, for inspiring me to reach for the stars and pursue my passion as a ballet dancer, and for nurturing my passion for ballet. Thanks to Mr. Arthur Mitchell for speaking with me and encouraging me to “make your presence known in the world.” I am forever grateful to thank Michael and Lori Armstrong in addition to Anna Glass, executive director of Dance Theatre of Harlem, for connecting me to all the right people to make this research possible. Thanks to Ms. Lydia Abarca Mitchell for embodying the elegance and grace of a ballet dancer and for taking time to sit down with me to share her experiences as one of the early company members of Dance Theatre of Harlem. Thanks to Mr. Homer Bryant for his thoughtful interview

and sharing rare photos from the Homer Bryant Collection. Thanks to Dr. Halifu Osamare and Patricia Wilson from the Institute for Dunham Technique Certification for giving me insight into the world of Katherine Dunham. Thanks to Joanna Dee Das for taking time to speak with me and point me in the right direction in my research of Katherine Dunham. I am also grateful to Joselli Deans, Theresa Ruth Howard, and Nailah Randall-Bellinger for providing me insight and direction in terms of the accuracy in my writing and documentation of history and for introducing me to the work of Brenda Dixon Gottschild. Discovering her work inspired me immensely in this process and I owe great gratitude to Deans, Howard and Dixon Gottschild for paving the way for researchers such as myself to explore cultural and historical studies in the realm of black performance with the care, love and attention—providing a voice for African American artists in this space. Additionally, I'd like to thank my dance instructor Nailah Randall-Bellinger from introducing me to Dunham *barre* work and giving me a glimpse into the beauty that is the Dunham Technique.

Finally, I am especially grateful to Missy Dugan and the Boys and Girls Club of Metro Atlanta for investing in my education and Jacqueline Glaster and Ms. Keesha Boyce-Gaskins for encouraging me to pursue my master's degree at Harvard University. Additional thanks to June Pickett for supporting me throughout my entire journey as a graduate student. Also, many thanks to Cherie Potts for editing and formatting this thesis. Lastly, my work at the Boston Ballet was instrumental in giving me the passion to explore this topic. My sincerest gratitude to the Psi Omega Chapter of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority for your love and support during this process. Many thanks to Nina Vansuch, Josh Kraft, the Boys and Girls Club of Boston, and the Kraft Family Foundation for providing me the resources needed to get through my program.

Table of Contents

Dedication.....	v
Acknowledgements	vi
List of Photos.....	xii
List of Figures.....	xiv
Introduction	1
Katherine Dunham and Arthur Mitchell as Pioneers	7
Theoretical Foundations	8
Definitions	9
Research Methods	12
Thesis Overview	13
I. Katherine Dunham and the Dunham Effect	15
The Early Years.....	18
Founding Ballet Nègre	22
The Gatekeepers and Conventional Aesthetics of Ballet	23
Creating Space for Blacks in Ballet.....	26
The Emergence of Ballet Nègre	27
Original Works by Ballet Nègre.....	30
After Ballet Nègre	31

II.	The Legacy Tree: The “Classic Black” Era.....	33
	“Classic” and the Classic Black Era.....	34
	American Negro Ballet.....	37
	Ballet Theatre: The Negro Unit.....	45
	First Negro Classic Ballet.....	48
	New York Negro Ballet.....	53
	Alvin Ailey Dance Theatre.....	58
	Capitol Ballet.....	60
III.	Ethnicity, Classicism, and the Black Ballet Aesthetic: Refining Technique	
	in the Age of Arthur Mitchell and Dance Theatre of Harlem	62
	Understanding Technique.....	65
	African and European Forms of Dance	66
	Russian Influence and European Aesthetics in U.S. Black Ballet Companies.....	66
	Tracing the Russian Technique	67
	George Balanchine: Neoclassical and African Influences in the	
	Balanchine Aesthetic	69
	George Balanchine, Arthur Mitchell, and New York City Ballet	71
	Becoming Arthur Mitchell	74
	Dance Theatre of Harlem: The Company.....	75
	Dance Theatre of Harlem and the Black Ballet Aesthetic.....	78
	Embracing Ethnicity and Classicism in Dance Theatre of Harlem.....	80

	Africanist Presence: From Dance Theatre of Harlem to Ballethnic Dance Company.....	82
	Embracing Black Classicism and the Black Ballet Aesthetic	86
IV.	Black Ballet Renaissance: Infusing Africanist Aesthetics Into Reimagined Storytelling in Classical Ballet	87
	Africanist Presence, Stylization, and Cultural Representation in Southern Ballets.....	91
	The “Classic Black” Era and Southern Ballets.....	92
	<i>Mardi Gras</i> , by New York Negro Ballet.....	93
	Racist Overtones in Response to <i>Mardi Gras</i>	96
	<i>Creole Giselle</i> by Dance Theatre of Harlem	97
	<i>Urban Nutcracker</i> , by Ballethnic Dance Company	102
	Black Culture and “Southern Ballet”	104
	Oral History and African Traditions in Ballet.....	105
	The Africanist Presence and Black Ballet Aesthetic in Reimagined Storytelling	107
V.	Shattering the Glass Ceiling: Dance Theatre of Harlem, Ballethnic and Beyond.....	109
	Elitism, Economic Advantage, and Financial Privilege.....	111
	Pointe Shoes, Elitism, and Barriers of Entry	113
	Elitism and the Politics of a White Body Aesthetic	114
	The Politics of Excluding Black Ballerinas.....	116

Reframing and Re-situating Ballet	119
White Privilege and Elitism in Ballet.....	120
Defining a Professional Ballet Company	121
Economic Aspects of the Glass Ceiling	122
Economic Empowerment in the Arts	124
Black Ballet Dancers and Assimilation.....	125
Summary and Conclusion: Preserving the Legacy Tree	126
Preservation and Survival.....	130
Epilogue.....	132
Bibliography	136
Appendix: Photo Galley	144

List of Photographs

Photo 1.	Dance Theatre of Harlem and Arthur Mitchell	1
Photo 2.	Katherine Dunham	15
Photo 3.	Ruth Page in her ballet <i>Love Song</i> , 1936.....	19
Photo 4.	Katherine Dunham, Demonstrating a Balletic Line	24
Photo 5.	James Truitte and Bernice Harrison	33
Photo 6.	Dancers from American Negro Ballet, 1937.....	38
Photo 7.	Ballet Theatre, Negro Unit, performing in <i>Obeah (Black Ritual)</i>	46
Photo 8.	Members of First Negro Classic Ballet	51
Photo 9.	Alvin Ailey	59
Photo 10.	Dance Theatre of Harlem performing <i>Concerto Barocco</i> , choreographed by George Balanchine.	62
Photo 11.	Agrippina Vaganova, circa 1910.....	68
Photo 12.	Arthur Mitchell and Diana Adams, in <i>Agon</i>	72
Photo 13.	George Balanchine and Arthur Mitchell	73
Photo 14.	Lydia Abarca, <i>Dance</i> magazine, May 1975	77
Photo 15.	Company Dancers, Dance Theatre of Harlem.....	80
Photo 16.	Nena Gilreath and Waverly Lucas	83
Photo 17.	Nena Gilreath and Waverly Lucas, co-founders of Ballethnic Dance Company	87

Photo 18.	Delores Browne.....	95
Photo 19.	<i>Creole Giselle</i> , Virginia Johnson and Eddie Shellman, Dance Theatre of Harlem	97
Photo 20.	<i>Creole Giselle</i> , Virginia Johnson, as a Wili, and Lorraine Graves, as Myrtha, Queen of the Wilis.....	101
Photo 21.	<i>Urban Nutcracker</i> , Ballethnic Dance Company	103
Photo 22	Ronald Perry, Lydia Abarca, and Arthur Mitchell.....	109
Photo 23.	Rhonda Sampson and Homer Hans Bryant.....	128

List of Figures

Figure 1.	Anna Pavlova and the Ballet Russe, 1926 theater program	21
Figure 2.	The Playbill: Lew Leslie's "Blackbirds of 1939"	41
Figure 3.	Lavinia Williams and Jon Edward, dancing in premiere of <i>Firebird Suite</i> ...	43
Figure 4.	Program from First Negro Classic Ballet performance, sponsored by Zeta Phi Beta	52
Figure 5.	Program for New York Negro Ballet, London Performance	55

Introduction

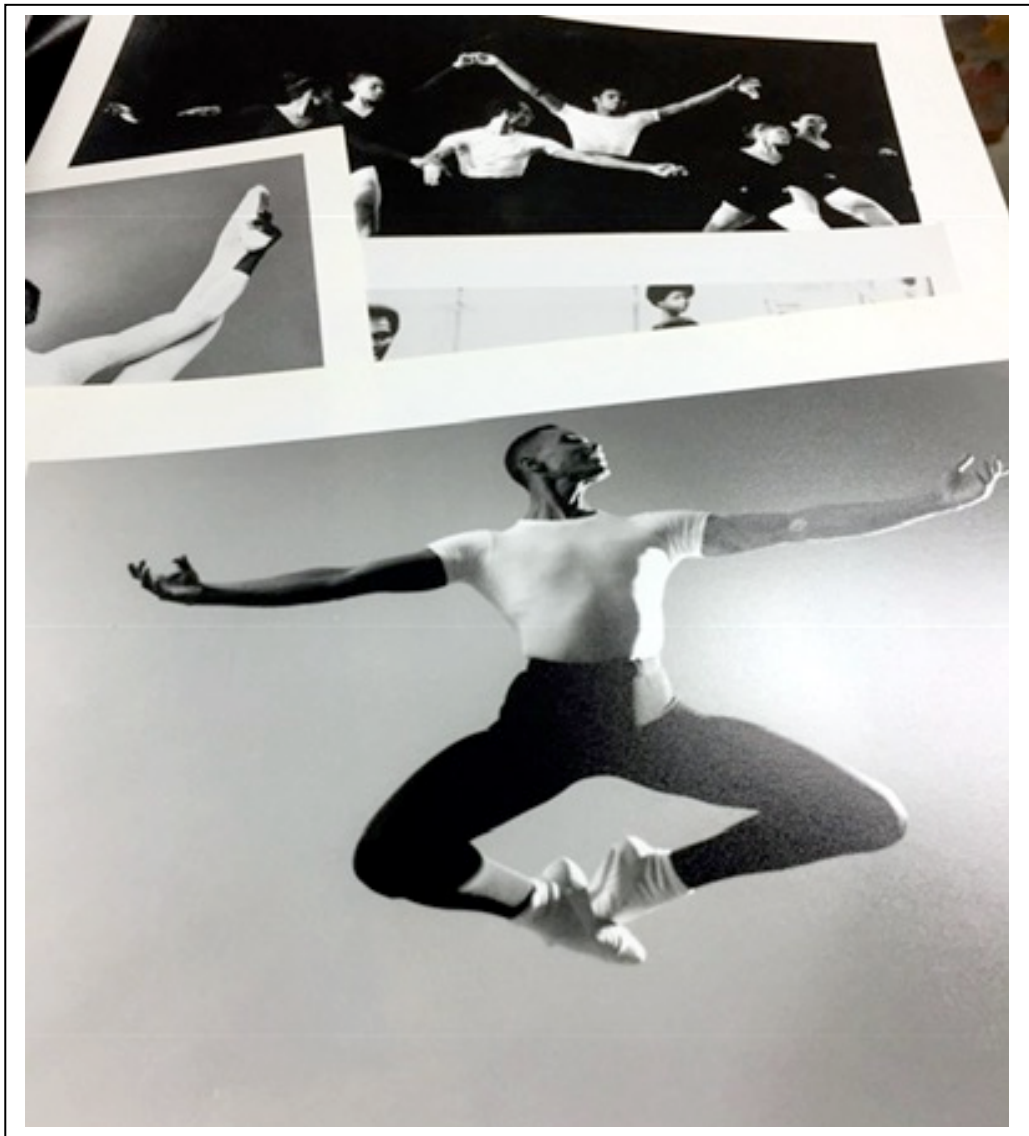


Photo 1. Dance Theatre of Harlem (top), Arthur Mitchell (lower)

Source: Homer Bryant Collection, provided to thesis author by Bryant.

Historians and scholars have thoroughly documented and researched ballet's lineage in America. The long and rich history of American Ballet Theatre and New York City Ballet is well documented and can be traced in numerous books, publications, and academic writings. Ballet emerged in Europe and has its roots in Western culture. American ballet history has thus been told from a Eurocentric perspective and the historical form of ballet in the United States has been influenced by European aesthetics.

However, the evolution of ballet in the United States is more complicated, as there are also numerous African American ballet dancers and African American ballet companies that have been instrumental in the growth of ballet in the United States, especially in the early twentieth century. Unfortunately, their histories as well as performances and original works are largely missing from the archive of the broader history of ballet in the U.S.

In 1996, author Naomi Jackson wrote about attending the CORD Special Topics Conference in which one of the topics was "African-American Dance: Researching Complex History." Brenda Dixon Gottschild was a keynote speaker at that event, and she said: "As Americans, we all have been influenced by both European and African traditions" (Jackson 107). Jackson noted that many scholars at the conference questioned "the existence of a singular Euro-Centric dance tradition" (107) saying that "African-Americans embody a distinct history, and that . . . must be acknowledged" (108). African Americans and their contributions to ballet history in the United States have been largely ignored. Jackson further noted that the scholars in attendance felt that presentations about dance history "erased the African-American perspective, African-American agency, and in many ways kept the discourse of dance history in an all 'white' arena" (109). Both

Jackson and Dixon Gottschild believe that more research should be done on lost figures in ballet history and questions about modes of representation of race in American dance should be explored. Dixon (1990) noted: “Dance researchers should work to document, define, and analyze Black dance and the Black-rooted parts of American dance” (120).¹

It is this sense of urgency and the implicit call to action that caused me to investigate American ballet history with the aim of providing a historical perspective that focuses specifically on figures like Katherine Dunham and Arthur Mitchell, bringing them to the forefront while also tracing the emergence of classical black ballet companies in the twentieth century and exploring these two dancers’ critical roles in the telling of American ballet history.

This thesis focuses on classical black ballet companies and their influence on ballet in America, providing a history of ballet from an Afrocentric perspective. The apparent failure to document the histories of black ballet companies in America—if left unremedied—ultimately erases their existence from American dance history.

My research places African American dancers in the forefront of ballet’s emergence in America and redefines the definitions of the words “classical” and “ballet” by challenging the European construct of classical dance in which words like “primitive” and “modern” are weaponized to exclude black ballet dancers and companies. My reimagining of ballet history reconfigures and situates Katherine Dunham and Arthur Mitchell within the ballet canon while also situating black ballet companies in the archives.

¹ Note that Brenda Dixon is now known by the name Brenda Dixon Gottschild. One of my citations in the Bibliography can be found under her former name, Brenda Dixon.

My methodology draws on the work of several black scholars who reject the traditional historiographic approach of telling dance history. One is Brenda Dixon Gottschild, whose research focuses on “Africanist presence in American culture and the sociopolitical implications of its invisibility” (*The Clarke Forum* 1). Another is Joselli Deans, whose research documents biographical accounts of black ballerinas. Reimagining ballet history through an Afrocentric lens, my work embraces Dixon Gottschild’s approach to reveal “Africanisms in modern and post-modern dance and American ballet” (as cited in Clarke 2009) to establish an Afrocentric historical perspective of ballet. I use this approach to highlight Africanisms in American ballet thereby creating space for this history to be included in the canon of American ballet history.

Throughout this thesis, I reconfigure and situate the roles of Katherine Dunham and Arthur Mitchell in the American ballet canon. I chart the history of classical black ballet companies to track classicism and African diasporic aesthetics in their technical foundation and I examine performances of original ballets to identify influences from African and European traditions.

I also draw on the work of Francesca Castaldi to create a dialogue between the past and present. Castaldi believes that dance as an art form in the African diaspora is communal wherein “the collective body is in dialogue with past generations” (Castaldi 3). She notes that in West African traditions, dance is a privileged space in which the dancing body communicates with ancestors, and “proclaims the continuity between the material and the spiritual, which in turn links the past and the present” (3). It is this reclaiming of history by linking the past to present that I explore by presenting my

research as an evolutionary history in which the past and present are in conversation with each other.

I contend that presenting an evolutionary history is imperative in telling the history of American ballet in order to include and understand the contributions of black ballet dancers and show that the past is indeed a direct pipeline to the present as it relates to how the ballet landscape has evolved, particularly as it pertains to the contributions of black ballet dancers. In general, dance historians have yet to incorporate the history of black ballet dancers and their contributions to the evolution of ballet in America. Consequently, that telling of ballet history in America has been confined to a singular Eurocentric approach. I fully acknowledge the reality that ballet is an art form that first developed in Europe. However, American ballet history presented only from that perspective excludes the role that black ballet dancers have played in shaping the ballet landscape in America.

Dance As a Theatre Art, a collection of essays edited by Selma Jeanne Cohen and Katy Matheson analyzes dance history from 1581 to 1974, including an in-depth history of the evolution of ballet. The text features historical accounts, documentation, and musings, most from European writers. In the introduction, the editors note that their retelling of dance history focuses specifically on Western traditions and that they omitted the history of non-Western dance “because their inclusion would have eliminated the possibility of any in-depth study” (Cohen and Matheson 3). However, I would argue that to omit non-Western dance, specifically from Africa, not only creates a hierarchy in the dance world but also reinforces the notion that European history and Western traditions are the only ones worthy of consideration. As a result of such omissions, scholars and

dance historians classify the infusion of ballet with an African dance tradition as modern dance. This separation creates a divide and reinforces the idea that black ballet companies, even those with a classical ballet foundation can only be classified as “Other” because they do not fit into the European construct of dance. When this history is recounted through a Eurocentric lens it centers European and Western history as the ‘only’ history, which in turn makes the history of dances of the African diaspora virtually invisible.

Telling ballet history through a Eurocentric lens gives rise to a hierarchy of ballet in which European aesthetics and traditions of Western culture are valued over African diasporic experiences and cultural traditions. For instance, how do we define the word *classic*? What is classical? What is technique? How do we define the word *ballet*? Who defines what is good technique versus bad technique? The very foundation in which technical proficiency in ballet is measured is through the lens of a Eurocentric aesthetic. As a result, ballet holds onto white hegemony and creates barriers to inclusivity in American dance expression. However, if we define the word *classic*, redefine what it means to be *classical*, and understand the development of technique from not just a Eurocentric lens, we can then shift our perspective and include traditional dance with an Africanist presence and, more specifically, trace African diasporic classical dance and traditions directly to the continent of Africa where dance is embedded in the culture. I argue that when historians include only ballet in their definition of “classical dance,” they are defining “classical” through a Eurocentric lens.

When we shift how we tell the story of American ballet history, we then set the foundation to include in the conversation the contribution of black ballet companies and

classically trained black dancers, thus reshaping how the present-day ballet landscape approaches diversity and inclusion—not just by including token black dancers in professional companies but by also investing in the development and sustainability of black ballet companies. Thus, taking an Afrocentric perspective for my telling of ballet history in America places the history of black dancers at the forefront, giving voice to their experiences—retelling, reshaping, and reimagining the historical perspective. Black ballet companies are an integral part of America’s ballet origins, and they deserve historical consideration and recognition for their contributions in shaping America’s ballet landscape in the twentieth century.

Katherine Dunham and Arthur Mitchell as Pioneers

Katherine Dunham’s contributions to ballet are often left out of conversations about American ballet because most scholars focus primarily on her work as a modern dancer. For context, my research focused specifically on Katherine Dunham’s early years in Chicago and her role in launching the first black ballet company in the United States. It is not that Katherine Dunham has been excluded from American dance history; rather, despite being a pivotal ballet figure, she has been erased from the ballet canon. I contend that her work is best understood through her origins as a ballet dancer and her classical training. To ignore Katherine Dunham’s contributions to ballet not only places her in the category of “Other” as an “outsider” in ballet history but it also neglects to address the reasons *why* she was rejected from the ballet world and how that rejection led to the creation of her own technique in which one of the foundational components is classical ballet. Dixon Gottschild intimates that when black dancers perform in white spaces “We

face the American cultural reflex of seeing Blacks as outsiders in any White context” (Dixon, 118). In this context, Black ballet dancers are not only seen as outsiders in the world of ballet, but their contributions to ballet history in the United States are virtually invisible in public discourse. I acknowledge that Dunham’s role and contributions to modern dance are immensely important. Her work as a scholar in dance anthropology and studies in the Caribbean are of great significance. However, my research goes further, seeking to situate Dunham as a pivotal figure in American ballet history.

While Dunham is one of the pioneers of black ballet in America, Arthur Mitchell is also a key figure. In a 2018 article, the *New York Times* crowned Arthur Mitchell “ballet’s Grandfather of Diversity” (Kourlas). As the proverbial “godfather” of black dance, Mitchell took the baton from Dunham by creating a sustainable classical black ballet company. My research tracks the classical ballet foundation of Katherine Dunham and Arthur Mitchell, and provides an in-depth analysis of the black ballet companies that emerged from the 1930s to the 1990s.

Theoretical Foundations

Writers Jonnie Greene and Dawn Lille Horwitz spent years researching the experiences of black ballet dancers who performed with black ballet companies during the Classic Black era (1930s-1960s) prior to the founding of Dance Theatre of Harlem. Their research resulted in a traveling exhibition entitled “Classic Black” which premiered at the Dance Collection of the New York Public Library in 1996. The exhibition included oral histories and historic photos of black ballet dancers from the American Negro Ballet Company and the New York Negro Ballet company. Almost 20 years after the opening of

that exhibition, Theresa Ruth Howard, former dancer of Dance Theater of Harlem, began a website to document the history of blacks in ballet. As the founder and curator of “Memoirs of Blacks in Ballet,” Howard documents the history of black ballet dancers such as Arthur Mitchell and other key figures from the “Classic Black” era. In an effort to continue the work of Greene, Horwitz, Deans, and Howard this research builds on the foundation they set and aims to move the field forward.

Definitions

Black Ballet Aesthetic: This defines the style and look of ballet technique on the black dancing body, mostly developed within Historically Black Ballet Companies. In a telephone conversation with Theresa Ruth Howard (2019), she coined the term “Black Ballet Aesthetic” and says the Black Ballet Aesthetic utilizes “classical ballet to show the elasticity of ballet technique” and “incorporates the social and cultural identity” of descendents from the African diaspora. For the purpose of this research I use her term Black Ballet Aesthetic in reference to an Africanist presence and aesthetic in black ballet companies that utilize classical ballet as their foundation.

Black Ballet Renaissance: I use this term to refer to original ballet works and cultural productions created, produced, and performed in the twentieth century spanning the decades from the 1950s through the 1990s. In these works, black ballet companies and choreographers depict the black experience on the concert stage.

Classic Black: Defined as a time period during which classical black ballet companies emerged, i.e., the 1930s through the 1960s. Companies in the Classic Black era

included: American Negro Ballet, Dance Theatre of Harlem, First Negro Classic Ballet, Hessler Ballet, Negro Dance Theatre, Negro Dance Unit, and New York Negro Ballet. It is important to note that the early black ballet companies from the Classic Black era used the word *ballet*, but some scholars defined them as *modern* companies. While these early Classic Black-era ballet companies incorporated ballet techniques in their ballet classes in an effort to refine and enhance their technique, dancers in some companies (e.g., American Negro Ballet and Negro Dance Theatre) danced barefoot in their performances and presented modern dance choreography in their ballets. I explore this practice in depth as I track the evolution of ballet technique in the HBBCs. When I use HBBC, I am also referring to the Classic Black-era ballet companies since they played a significant role in building a foundation from which the professional classical black ballet companies arose.

Classical: A derivative of the word *classic*, I define *classical* as a work of art that is timeless and valuable. My definition includes and refers to longstanding, ancient, established traditions with exemplary standards. My definitions of *classic* and *classical* give context to my use of the word *classical* and enable me to identify HBBCs as classical ballet companies. I do this not only because of their use of classical ballet technique, but because of their use of traditional dance styles from the African diaspora which I also establish as “classical” dance forms. This allows me to explore Brenda Dixon Gottschild’s terms “African-based,” “Africanist Presence,” and “Africanist Aesthetic” as part of the realm of classicism.

In the Eurocentric canonization of ballet history, classical dance and its refined technique are attributed to European aesthetics, with greater value placed on Western European dance and cultural influences. In my reimagining of the word *classical*, I reframe the definition of “classical dance” to include indigenous arts and traditional dances from the African diaspora to situate African dance influences within the “classical dance” category. I highlight the value of the technical development in dancers who incorporate both ballet and African dance styles to add further technical proficiency to their always-expanding dance training. Because these companies have created timeless and valuable work that makes them “classic,” I bring works in their repertoire to the forefront, desirous of awakening interest in their works for further consumption, research, and engagement in public discourse.

Historically Black Ballet Company (HBBC): I use this term to define a professional ballet company that employs a majority of black, classically trained, highly skilled technicians who perform ballet works. Many professional ballet companies have a ballet school affiliated with their company where they train ballet dancers in the company’s preferred method of classical ballet technique. I tracked the technical training and professional works of these companies. I examined their fusion of ballet technique with cultural traditions from the African diaspora and the creation of original ballet stories by black ballet companies that connect to the African American experience. I looked at how these companies maintain the classicism of ballet while infusing elements of African and African American

traditions to create roots in classical ballet and make something that is uniquely their own.

Research Methods

My research includes a number of oral histories from dancers as primary sources. I also include primary source materials such as original diaries, journals, and interviews to accurately document the history of dance companies and tell their stories.

I conducted personal interviews with the following:

Lydia Abarca-Mitchell	Waverly Lucas
Homer Hans Bryant	Arthur Mitchell
Joselli Deans	Dr. Halifu Osumare
Joanna Dee Das	Nailah Randall-Bellinger
Nena Gilreath	Mel Tomlinson
Theresa Ruth Howard	

Bryant gave me access to his Homer Bryant Collection, which contains photos from his time with Dance Theatre of Harlem. I met Joanna Dee Das when I attended the Dunham Symposium presented by the Dunham Institute. Dee Das gave me guidance during my research of Katherine Dunham's early years. I met Dr. Halifu Osumare, a personal and professional friend of Katherine Dunham, and she gave me insight into her time with Katherine Dunham and direction on how to find primary sources regarding Dunham's early work.

I spent considerable time in the New York Public Library, after being granted access to the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture. There I found the Classic Black Exhibition scrapbook, located in the New York Public Library for Performing Arts.

Additionally, I found personal interviews with Arthur Mitchell, and the American Negro Ballet Company Scrapbook.

Thesis Overview

Chapter I tracks the early origins of ballet in North America and Katherine Dunham's role as a pioneer and founder of Ballet N gre, the first black ballet company in the United States. This chapter looks into her early years as a ballet dancer at the University of Chicago and explores her relationships with her ballet teachers, Ruth Page and Mark Turbyfill. I also lay the groundwork to explore the origins of what I call the Dunham Effect.

Chapter II explores the history and lineage of early Classic Black companies: American Negro Ballet, New York Negro Ballet, and First Negro Classic Ballet. I also examine the history American Ballet Theatre's Negro Unit to track the emergence of black ballet dancers in a white ballet space.

Chapter III examines ethnicity, classicism, and the development of the black ballet aesthetic in the age of Arthur Mitchell and Dance Theatre of Harlem. I consider the history and development of Russian ballet technique in classical black ballet companies and examine the dichotomy between ethnicity and classicism in understanding the black ballet aesthetic.

Chapter IV examines the black ballet renaissance in which I analyze "Southern Ballets" created by "Classic Black"-era ballet companies. I look at the cultural significance of adapting performances such as Dance Theatre of Harlem's *Creole Giselle*

and Ballethnic Dance Company's *Urban Nutcracker* into their own versions of storytelling.

Chapter V explores elitism in ballet, DuBoisian theory, and how HBBCs have been instrumental in shattering the glass ceiling. I examine the challenges these companies have encountered in their efforts to preserve their legacy, and I look for answers as to why they lack the resources and support that would enable them to be sustainable and preserve their legacy.

In Chapter VII, the conclusion, I provide a summary of my research and why preserving the history of black ballet companies and the pioneers is absolutely necessary.

Dixon Gottschild asked the question: "Must the black roots of a particular dance be reaffirmed publicly?" ("Black Dance and Dancers and the White Public" 117). While she was speaking specifically about how choreographic aesthetics in black dance maintain artistic integrity in white spaces, the question remains: "How do we as researchers examine black dance in white America?" (Dixon 117). More specifically, how do we create a space for the contributions of black ballet trail-blazers to be acknowledged, reaffirmed, and revered in the realm of classical ballet? My research aims to acknowledge, affirm, and preserve the contributions of these trailblazers.

Chapter I

Katherine Dunham and the Dunham Effect



Photo 2. Katherine Dunham

Source: <https://www.taminoautographs.com/products/dunham-katherine-signed-photo>.

Classical ballet is revered as an elite, quintessential art form in which technical proficiency and high achievement are measured by codified ballet technique derived from European traditions and aesthetics. As a codified technique and choreographic form, ballet is presented primarily in white spaces, and ballet performance works target white audiences. However, African performance and theatrical dance are intrinsically linked with the emergence of classical dance in America in the early twentieth century, particularly with the evolution of classical black ballet companies in the United States. It is this cross-cultural exchange of African diasporic traditions with classical ballet, fusing European and Africanist aesthetics together, that gave voice to the black experience in American classical black ballet companies. Dixon Gottschild notes that any attempts to examine black dance should be done “in the context of their Black origins as well as in the context of a White, Western frame of reference” (“Black Dance and Dancers and the White Public” 120). This chapter examines ballet in the context of its white origins while also situating Katherine Dunham as a central figure in the emergence of ballet in the United States in the early twentieth century.

At the turn of the twentieth century, African Americans began discovering their own gifts and utilizing their talents to progress the African American community. W. E. B. DuBois believed that the emerging proliferation of art in the early 1920s gave rise to a theatre that called for a new birth, a new hope, and a new spirit within the African American community. This “renaissance” created a new generation of artistic brilliance in the African American community as part of the “New Negro” Movement. In an article titled “Criteria of Negro Art” (1926), DuBois argued that the use of art as an instrument for racial advancement awakens the spirit of African Americans and provides an outlet

for African American artists to tell stories of the African American experience. DuBois asserted that art is “the apostle of beauty” and the artist is “the apostle of truth” (26). Katherine Dunham, a central figure in the arts movement, is the epitome of DuBois’ philosophy as an “apostle of truth.” At the start of her journey as a dancer, she used art to uplift and empower the black community and ballet was the launching point.

In her Ph.D. thesis, Jessica Zeller asserts, “Contributions of African American dancers, teachers, and choreographers are an integral part of America’s ballet lineage that took shape during the early twentieth century” (Zeller 66). At the pinnacle of North America’s ballet lineage in the early twentieth century was Katherine Dunham, who fused the European ballet aesthetic with Africanist aesthetics. Dunham’s formalization of the Dunham Technique was instrumental in introducing black ballet aesthetics into classical dance. Dunham deconstructed and reconstructed a codified technique that disrupted conventions based on her own training as a classical ballet dancer in the early stages of her dance career. Building on Dunham’s work as a ballet dancer, I complicate the history of ballet’s migration from Europe to America and juxtapose it with the emergence of black concert dance in the United States. With this emergence, I explore the introduction of classical ballet into Dunham’s early career.

It is possible to examine Katherine Dunham’s roots as a ballet dancer and to place her contributions into the canon of ballet while still honoring her role as one of the pioneers of modern dance. Ironically, her history as a modern dancer and her work in the Caribbean is well documented, while her work in ballet is overshadowed and largely ignored. Furthermore, Dunham expressed a desire for people to connect with her early work in Chicago. In an interview with *Dance Magazine* Dunham stated: “I surely do wish

someone from the old background would do the Chicago period, which after all was the real formation ground” (Barzel 92). Therefore, I believe it is imperative to honor Dunham’s wish and examine her ballet years in depth in order to provide historical context, to understand her role during the rise of ballet in the United States, and to learn how the collusion of several viewpoints regarding blacks in ballet at the time were key to the rise of classical black ballet companies.

The Early Years

Ballet captured Katherine Dunham’s imagination at an early age. Joanna Dee Das notes: “Ballet offered fantastical narratives of beautiful fairies, queens, and young maidens pursued by handsome, wealthy men; the ballerina aesthetic emphasized ethereality and grace” (Dee Das 16). This inspired Dunham’s passion for ballet. Her fascination with ballet instilled in her a love and appreciation for the art form, and she ventured out to pursue a career as a ballet dancer while studying at the University of Chicago. In her biography of Katherine Dunham, Ruth Beckford said that Dunham envied the girls who had studied ballet. Beckford, herself a dancer with the Katherine Dunham Dance Company, was also Dunham’s long-time friend and confidante, and she documented personal accounts that were told to her by Dunham. Beckford’s book includes a conversation in which Dunham says she “admired the graceful movement of the arms, or *port de bras*, and the beautiful tutus” and was “fascinated by the strange hard-toed shoes they wore on the tips of their toes *en pointe*” (Beckford 21).

Dunham’s desire to become a ballet dancer inspired her to study the craft of ballet. She enrolled at the University of Chicago in 1928 where she met her ballet

teachers, Mark Turbyfill and Ruth Page, both of whom were important figures in the early years of ballet in America. She also studied ballet with Adolph Bolm and Ludmilla Speranzeva, a former dancer of the Moscow Theater.

Dunham's ballet teachers were influential in shaping her early ballet career—both positively and negatively. Her mentor and ballet teacher Ruth Page is viewed by many as one of the inventors of American ballet. Joellen A. Meglin refers to Page as an



Photo 3. Ruth Page in her ballet *Love Song*, 1936.

Source: Photo by Maurice Seymour, Courtesy DM Archives.
Dance Magazine, <https://www.dancemagazine.com/tbt-ruth-page-2505011665.html>.

early architect of American ballet (Meglin 1). Page danced briefly in Anna Pavlova's company as part of Pavlova's final South America tour from 1918 to 1919. With just one or two degrees of separation, Pavlova's influence on Ruth Page could have had an indirect effect on Dunham. Page said that Pavlova sparked an entire generation of dancers, while Beckford noted: "At the time, no serious black concert dance group existed after which she could pattern her ideas, therefore she had to resort to the white *Ballets Russes* as a model" (Beckford 27). Pavlova's arrival in America with the *Ballets Russes*, and Page's association with Pavlova, had a profound impact on Dunham's desire to explore her own passion for ballet.

When ballet arrived in North America in the early 1900s, the art form was in its infancy and new to American audiences, a "lavish, aristocratic court art, a high—and hierarchical—elite art" (Homans 448). Because of ballet's roots in European aristocratic society, ballet not only had to find a way to exist in a democratic society art form but also to define itself to American audiences. In her book *Apollo's Angels: A History of Ballet*, Jennifer Homans notes, "Ballet came to America through vaudeville, variety shows, and musicals" (Homans 449). For context, vaudeville served as a training ground for young performers by combining theatrical traditions like musicals, variety shows, comedy, and minstrelsy.

The turning point for American ballet came in 1910 when Russian-born dancer Mikhail Mordkin performed with Pavlova at the Metropolitan Opera House during their joint tour of the United States, dancing in Serge Diaghilev's *Ballets Russes* (see Figure 1). Pavlova also toured the vaudeville circuit appearing alongside minstrel shows as "Pavlova the Incomparable" (Homans 450).

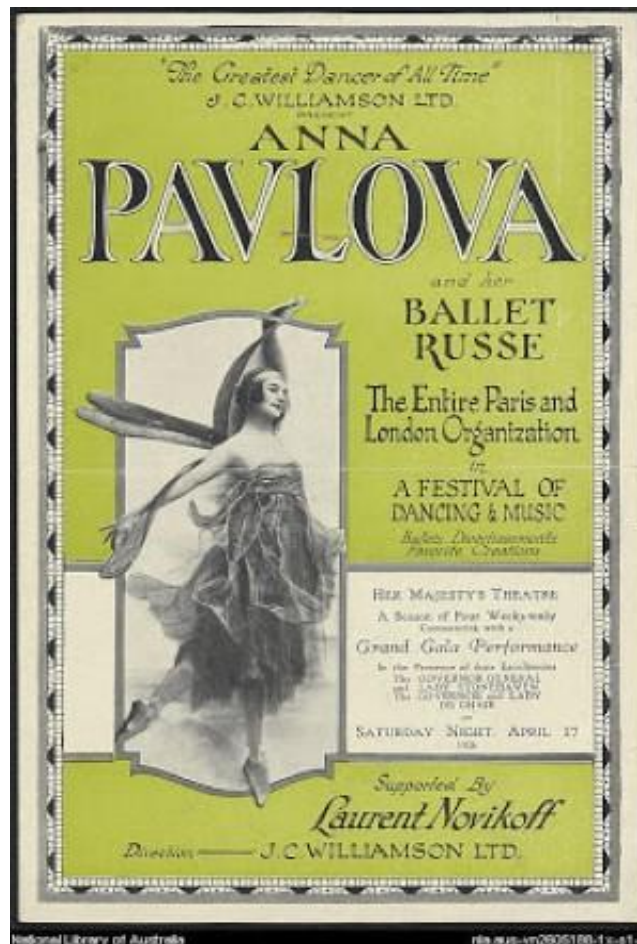


Fig. 1. Anna Pavlova and the Ballet Russe, 1926 theatre program.

Source: Williamson National Library of Australia, Canberra. <http://melbourneblogger.blogspot.com/2012/12/anna-pavlova-meringue-with-cream.html>. Retrieved 20 March 2019.

Just as ballet was introduced to American audiences through vaudeville, African American performers also crafted their artistic talents on the vaudeville circuit. Nadine A. George notes: “At the dawn of the twentieth century, professional African American dancers were employed primarily in vaudeville” (George 59). She also notes that early African American performers on the vaudeville circuit “helped pave the way for others

by battling institutionalized racism and restrictions placed on black artistic expression” (George 53).

Founding Ballet Nègre

As classical ballet began to emerge as a codified art form in North America in the early twentieth century, Katherine Dunham was in the early stages of establishing her ballet company. She offered dance classes in Chicago and taught using the foundational components of classical ballet. Her early exposure to classical ballet played right into her desire to establish herself early on as a ballet dancer. But a lack of resources and little support for an African American woman in pursuit of a career in classical dance meant she faced many challenges—starting with finding a place to rehearse. Many dance studios refused to accommodate Dunham and her students because they were black. Author Joyce Aschenbrenner notes Dunham’s first studio was a converted barn; at one point Ruth Page loaned her money to rent a studio. Russian-born American dancer Adolph Bolm also rented studio space for classes, but they were not allowed to continue because management did not want blacks in the building. Thus, in the beginning, at least, Dunham could offer classes, but eventually Dunham and Mark Turbyfill gathered together their best students to form a ballet company called Ballet Nègre in 1931.

In her book, Aschenbrenner (who obtained Ruth Page’s memoirs) notes that Page referred to Dunham as “a discovery of the poet Mark Turbyfill” (Aschenbrenner 23), and Page acknowledged that Turbyfill wanted Dunham to become the first black ballerina. In his writings about Katherine Dunham, Turbyfill (who danced in the corps de ballet of Chicago Grand Opera Company), stated:

I recall feeling that there was perhaps something a little eccentric in my nature that caused me to accept Mary Hunter’s urgent request, namely,

that I undertake the training of an ambitious Negro girl who had never had a lesson in her life in the art, but who wanted to become a ballet dancer (Barzel 93).

It was Turbyfill who encouraged Dunham to start her own ballet company and while founding a ballet company was uncharted territory—especially a performing ballet company comprised of black dancers—Turbyfill wanted Katherine Dunham at the helm of creating an all-black ballet company. At the time, black performers were relegated to minstrelsy, social dances, and vaudeville circuits, but Turbyfill believed in Dunham’s ability as a ballet dancer to introduce a performing black ballet company to new audiences.

The Gatekeepers and Conventional Aesthetics of Ballet

At that time (1931), a black ballet company was unheard of, and several critics argued that black bodies were not fit for ballet. Dunham’s own teacher, Ruth Page, discouraged Dunham from pursuing a career in ballet. Although Page was an important figure in Dunham’s career, she held narrow-minded views about blacks in ballet. Her views about blacks in ballet mirrored those of the larger society. Writing in *Dance Magazine*, Page said she told Turbyfill that Dunham would never be a classical dancer (Barzel 98). Page’s limited view of Dunham’s ability to succeed as a ballet dancer highlights the rejection that Dunham faced—which in turn changed the trajectory of Dunham’s career as a ballet dancer. Page believed that Dunham “started training too late to develop a ‘real talent’ for classical ballet” (Barzel 97). Page’s view of what constitutes “real talent” demonstrates how whites were the gatekeepers and excluded blacks early in the field of ballet. Aschenbrenner notes: “Page also maintained that the time was not yet

ripe” for black ballet dancers (27). White dancers and ballet audiences could not (and would not) envision blacks in ballet.

Many believed that blacks did not have the right physique or the artistic intelligence to dance ballet. In a *New York Times* article, Jack Slater asserted that critics dismissed black dancers from ballet because they thought black bodies did not fit the ballet “aesthetic.” Slater noted that critics complained, for example, that black dancers’ feet were too big or too flat to create the clean lines needed in classical ballet, and “black skin would destroy the illusion of symmetry of the corps de ballet” (Slater 1). In ballet, dancing bodies display an erect body posture in which body positions and the



Photo 4. Katherine Dunham, Demonstrating a Balletic Line.

Even though barefoot, the turned out feet, high arch, and front attitude are classic ballet positions, showing the black dancing body in a balletic form with an Africanist aesthetic.

Source: Memoirs of Blacks in Ballet website. <http://mobballet.org/index.php/2017/07/21/1931-katherine-dunham-forms-les-ballet-negres/>

execution of clean lines are quintessential in creating geometrical optics, designs, and patterns in ballet. Dixon Gottschild notes, “the geometry of line is an all-encompassing obsession in ballet, an ideal that must be worked toward every part of the body—from feet to head and everything in between” (138).

According to Cohen and Matheson, the balletic turn out was first documented in 1588 in *Orchésographie* “which provides the first specific definitions of the proper placing of the dancer’s feet at the beginning of steps, the basis of what have become the five positions of classical ballet” (7). Consequently, the aesthetics of an acceptable ballet dancing body developed out of European tradition, and because of this many criticized the black dancing body because they simply could not envision black ballet dancers recreating the same aesthetic as their white counterparts.

Critics also believed that black dancers could not identify with the art of ballet because it developed out of sixteenth-century European courts and was an art form with roots in European royalty. Ballet first manifested in Italy as part of elaborate pageants to celebrate grand occasions. Karel Shook notes “the term ‘ballet’ derived from the Italian verb *ballare* (to dance)” (Shook 11). According to Cohen and Matheson, the word *ballet* can be traced to *balletti*, which referred to the “staged or semi-staged, versions of the social dances of the day, some of them originating in the protocol of court etiquette” (6). Ballet migrated to France where it became popular among the royals and flourished in the court of King Louis XIV. He staged productions of opera and ballet to entertain court noblemen, but he also developed an affinity for dance. The king wanted to become a professional dancer, so he established the first formal French academy in Paris in 1661.

Creating Space for Blacks in Ballet

Given the opportunity, black ballet dancers had the potential to be just as good as white ballet dancers. However, there was no available space in which black ballet dancers could learn, practice, and perfect the art. It was for this reason that DuBois championed the idea of African American artists creating their own spaces for African American artists, performers and audiences. DuBois believed in the “ideal of fostering and developing the traits and talents of the Negro” (*Criteria* 11). He argued: “We can go on the stage; we can be just as funny as white Americans wish us to be; we can play all the sordid parts that American likes to assign to Negroes; but for anything else there is still small place for us” (*Criteria* 21). Thus, Katherine Dunham’s quest to develop the talents of black dancers, at a time when blacks had limited exposure to ballet, was a fulfillment of DuBois’ desire for blacks in the arts. As she set out to learn the art of ballet, she also opened the door for others to explore an unknown world with her.

And she persisted. Shattering the myth of black dancers’ inferiority when it came to ballet, the emergence of black ballet companies in America not only counteracted the negative images attributed to African Americans but also shattered the myth that the black dancing body is not suited for ballet. Thus, the responsibility of black artists and the development of a black ballet company placed Katherine Dunham at the forefront: not just starting a movement for black ballet dancers, but putting forth a central message of self-reliance in the African American community.

The Emergence of Ballet N gre

In an article written for *Abbott's Monthly*, Mark Turbyfill writes about Dunham striving to establish a new company. In his article, Turbyfill documented how black ballet emerged in North America, detailing Dunham's desire to pursue ballet with her own all-black ballet company named Ballet N gre. Turbyfill acknowledged that the development of a black ballet company began in the mind of a young Katherine Dunham. In 1983 *Dance Magazine* obtained access to Mark Turbyfill's diary in which he documented Dunham's creation of her all-black ballet company. She was the nucleus of the company, and Turbyfill played an integral role in bringing the dream to fruition. Dr. Halifu Osumare points out that it was significant that Dunham needed a white counterpart to create inroads in dance since few black dance studios existed. Turbyfill's connections helped secure support and funding for Dunham's ballet company. If not for Turbyfill's support, Ballet N gre would not have been born since without that endorsement, Dunham would not have been given the opportunity to work, dance, and teach in a space that was earlier unwilling to accept blacks. Without that support, it would have been nearly impossible to be taken seriously as a black dancer aspiring to study ballet. Another supporter emerged in Marion Neville Drury, a book reviewer who provided her services in the early formation of the company. Turbyfill noted that "the novelty of a Negro ballet appealed to Marion, and she offered her services as secretary and general factotum" (Barzel 94).

In the July 1930 issue of the *Chicago Herald-Examiner*, the Ballet N gre was cited as "an experimental ballet on Negro themes, for which Eric DeLamarter, assistant conductor of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, is composing music. Mark Tobey, well-

known artist of New York, will probably design the settings and costumes for the ballet” (Barzel 94). This was one of the first announcements of Ballet N gre’s debut as a professional performing company. The announcement cited works that were created for the ballet as it slowly evolved into a company.

Turbyfill was excited that their plans for a “Negro Ballet” were catching on. The company developed letterhead and stationery, and had access to a theatrical producer, composers, an attorney, a sculptor, and a newspaper publisher. Turbyfill says it took a long time, but the idea eventually caught on. He said: “Although deferred, when it did catch on, the Negro Ballet was astonishing in character” (Barzel 94). He referenced Dunham as a ballerina, stating “the satisfaction of seeing our potential ballerina come on top” (Barzel, 94).

Turbyfill’s diary shows a month-by-month record of the time spent developing the “black ballet project,” and he gives insight into the obstacles they faced while trying to start the company. He speaks of Dunham’s “hidden fear” in the early stages, and while he does not elaborate on what her fear was, one can surmise that the fear of exploring uncharted territory in a space that was less than accepting must have been terrifying to her.

Turbyfill quotes Dunham as saying: “Periodically, the Negro makes some startling innovation, some rich contribution to America’s art The Negro sang, wrote, acted, and now he is about to dance” (Turbyfill 64). Dunham went on to say:

There are those who will remind us that the Negro has been dancing since the dawn of history; but, perhaps, unfortunately, civilization draws a sharp distinction between an uncurbed, purely racial expression, governed solely by rhythm and emotion, and the crystalline symphony of the traditional ballet (“Shall We Present to the World a New Ballet?”, 64).

Osumare, a personal and professional friend of Dunham, who worked with her in her later years, said that Turbyfill helped Dunham use ballet to break the general public's stereotypical views and expectations of black dancers. Osumare asserts: "Because of strict segregation in 1931, she had to convince the black middle class of the importance of her interpretive style of concert dance" (Osumare Interview 2018).

Dunham was keenly aware that dance was still taking form and making its way as a tangible form of artistic expression in the realm of black dance. She was aware of the difference between the natural movement of black bodies and the importance of incorporating the refined technique of ballet to give black bodies an opportunity to explore movement. She understood the importance of combining the formal and refined technique of ballet with the instinctual, innate movement that already exists in black people. Dee Das notes: "For Dunham, ballet was a template, a 'geometric design' that would enable African Americans to transform their cultural practices into a theatrical form" (Dee Das 23).

Dunham's founding of Ballet N gre created a space in which black dancers were not only exposed to ballet, but they became integral to helping shape the art of dance for the black dancing body. Dunham herself said:

We are not suggesting that the darker ballerina confine herself to the ballet of Pavlova. We would merely place at her disposal the technique which would enable her to express her own individuality and the genius of her race. After this we leave it to the tom-tom, the jungle, the heat of the sun, the depth of rivers, primal gods, bondage, the cotton fields, and even, if you will, to a recent lynching in Texas, to provide material for a school of ballet, not so much to present a historical panorama of the Negro, as to express the wealth of his heritage in plastic and geometric design. Thus we can create a genuine choreography, a dance form symbolic of a self-conscious race ("Shall We Present to the World a New Ballet?" 64).

Turbyfill describes Ballet Nègre's founding as "the real seed" and "the forming of the dream." He said:

The soul of the Negro Ballet had made itself articulate. We had discovered the *esprit de ballet*; it remained for us to create the *corps de ballet*. To do this it was necessary to gather Negro composers, painters and designers. The next was to develop solo dancers. ("Shall We Present to the World a New Ballet?" 93)

Original Works by Ballet Nègre

Ballet Nègre debuted its first performance at the Chicago Beaux Arts Ball, dancing to a score written and directed by Eric DeLamarter entitled "The Dance of Life," and played by the Chicago Symphony Orchestra. Turbyfill noted that although there were no dancers on stage while the orchestra played, he said: "There were words of the scenario quoted in the symphony program, suggesting the choreography that might have been" (Barzel 96). The ballet scenario imagined by Turbyfill, in which he envisions Dunham dancing an adagio, reads as follows:

That fantastic jungle in which the Black Flowers of the ballet first stir is a region not to be found on an ordinary map. Amidst that strange and fleshly architecture of leaves and monstrous flowers with bellies and mouths. torturous and choking vines. the Black: Flowers stir and feel the vehement urge of the thrusting jungle; to rise out of the darkness, free in the light to blossom, to scatter pollen and seed. seeking to conquer the earth. . . . Men and Women look into this prodigious struggle, and see mirrored therein their own struggle. In the development of the them, all blend in the swift-turning girdle of Mother Earth, entwined in a gigantic, human garland, the destiny is synthesis. (Barzel 96-97)

Turbyfill expressed excitement about the successful debut of the company in Chicago. He noted that the company's most successful piece was its performance of *Negro Rhapsody*. Ruth Beckford wrote: "Katherine's choreography of *Negro Rhapsody* was well received, but so were the other numbers in the show" (Beckford 27). Although performances of

Negro Rhapsody were well received, Dunham's ballet company was short lived and did not last beyond 1931.

After Ballet N gre

Several obstacles led to the early demise of Ballet N gre. Most notable was the fact that blacks in general knew little about ballet, and black dance in America was still in its infancy. Furthermore, attitudes toward blacks in ballet made clear that whites had difficulty processing the idea of blacks in the classical arts. Agnes de Mille, one skeptic of an all-black ballet company, told Mark Turbyfill she thought it was impossible for a black ballet company to exist. In Turbyfill's diary, he wrote that de Mille thought the idea of an all-black ballet company was totally wrong. Turbyfill noted: "She reminded me that it has never been done, that it isn't physiologically in the picture" (Barzel 94). In an interesting bit of irony, de Mille would later choreograph Ballet Theatre's Negro Unit, which I discuss in more detail in the next chapter.

European dance critic, Andre Levinson, penned a critique in which he asserted that a black dancer should not be taken seriously as an artist based solely on "extraordinary rhythmic gift alone" (Turbyfill 64). In response, Katherine Dunham asserted, "Nevertheless, the true Negro artist has been acquiring sophistication, and we glimpse the first dawn of Negro dance as a classic" (Turbyfill 64).

Dunham continued to make waves in ballet, even after her ballet company folded. She danced in Ruth Page's 1933 ballet *La Guiblesses* with an all-black cast. This was Dunham's first major professional appearance in which she danced in a supporting role, with a score composed by African American composer William Grant Still. She

eventually went on to dance the lead in that ballet at the Chicago Civic Opera, and her dance ensemble also danced in George Balanchine's *Cabin in the Sky*. *Dance Magazine* referred to Dunham's career in the 1930s as "the lost decade." But Dunham herself noted that the time she spent in Chicago during her exploration and studies as a ballet dancer, and the formation of Ballet N gre, was a critical time for her. Dunham's handwritten letter to Turbyfill attributes the significance of this time period. As a creative visionary, she opened the door for the creation of classical black ballet companies and defined a black ballet aesthetic, providing opportunities for black dancers and developing the artistic talent of future creative black visionaries. She paved the way for black choreographers and artistic directors to rely on their own resources to create their art. Using art as a vehicle of truth and the artist as a messenger of truth, Katherine Dunham used the art of ballet to expose the world to the black dancing body and provided a space for black ballet dancers to explore the possibilities of a professional career as a ballet dance. Joanna Dee Das notes that Dunham reshaped black dance through ballet. She answered W. E. B DuBois' call for black artists to create stories that would tell about the black experience and connect to the black community. Because of Dunham's foresight as a visionary, other black ballet companies emerged after Ballet N gre.

Chapter II

The Legacy Tree: “Classic Black” Era



Photo 5. James Truitte and Bernice Harrison.

Source: “Classic Black” Exhibition, New York Public Library.

Katherine Dunham set in motion a ballet renaissance within the “New Negro” Movement. Her innovative approach in response to W. E. B. DuBois’ call for a new spirit within the African American community became the launch point for Historically Black Ballet Companies (HBBCs): American Negro Ballet, New York Negro Ballet, and First Negro Classic Ballet. Dunham planted the seed that enabled these companies to emerge as the next crop of companies in the Classic Black era. These companies are a direct result of her vision—to create an all-black ballet company; I call them branches of the Dunham legacy tree.

Jonnie Greene (1997) and Dawn Lille Horwitz (2001) spent years researching the experience of black ballet dancers, and the efforts of those writers can be seen in the “Classic Black” traveling exhibition. In a *New York Times* article entitled “Classic Dance and Race: A Story Still Unfolding,” Jennifer Dunning said:

Put together by Dawn Lille Horwitz, whose oral histories were the inspiration for the show, and Jonnie Greene, who designed it, “Classic Black” examines the careers of black ballet dancers from the late 1930s through the 1960s. (Dunning 19)

“Classic Black” is the perfect phrase to define an era of history in which black ballet companies were finding their footing, branching out, and adding to Katherine Dunham’s legacy tree on which others could build.

“Classic” and the Classic Black Era

Oxford Dictionary defines the word “classic” as “a work of art of recognized and established value” (Craine and Mackrell 75). In this thesis, I establish the word “classic” to mean a work that is valued and timeless. I contend that black ballet companies from the 1930s to the 1960s fit well into this definition, for they are indeed “classic”; they fit

the “Classic Black” landscape, and they are branches on a firmly planted legacy tree.

Katherine Dunham not only laid the foundation but she sowed the seed and became the root from which the branches grew. They emerged from an era that contained precious hidden gems of an undiscovered history of black ballet companies.

The “Classic Black” model provides a new lens for exploring the history of black ballet companies, and by expanding the model, I am able to incorporate the history of black ballet companies into the “Classic Black” framework. Before Katherine Dunham started Ballet Nègre there were few ballet companies, black or white, in the 1930s. Jessica Zeller said: “Leon Danielian, a dancer with the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo, described the situation for ballet dancers in America in the 1930 noting, ‘There was no American company’” (Zeller 25).

Ballet Nègre, was one of the first ballet companies in North America. However, beginning in the early 1900s to the late 1940s, regional companies and ballet schools began to sprout all over the country. In New York City, the Metropolitan Opera Ballet School was established in 1909—the first ballet training institution in America with an all-American *corps de ballet*. In the Midwest, the Chicago Ballet was established in 1910 as the Chicago Opera Ballet, performing at the Chicago Grand Opera Company. The *Chicago Review* noted that Mark Turbyfill was co-founder of the Chicago Ballet with Ruth Page (*Chicago Review* 33). In 1919, Ella Gordon established the Gordon School of Dance NYC in Harlem for black ballet dancers. In 1926, Essie Marie Dorsey opened a ballet studio in southwest Philadelphia. Dorsey’s dance school offered ballet, tap, and social dancing classes. Her students performed at teas, benefits, and NAACP meetings. In

1926 Mikhail Mordkin established the Mordkin Ballet at Carnegie Hall,² and in 1929, the Atlanta Ballet was established by Dorothy Alexander as the Dorothy Alexander Concert Group.³

Other ballet companies, comprised solely of white dancers, came along in the 1930s: School of American Ballet, founded by George Balanchine in 1934 (which is also the official school of the New York City Ballet, founded in 1948 by Balanchine and Lincoln Kirstein); the Littlefield Ballet founded by Catherine Littlefield in 1935, which disbanded in the 1940s but is often mentioned in archives documenting the history of ballet); and the Ballet Theatre in 1939 (later renamed American Ballet Theatre in 1957).

My research led me to the inescapable conclusion that only white companies have well-documented histories; the histories of black companies like Ballet N gre and other “Classic Black” era ballet companies are omitted from the canon. I also identified another relatively unknown company named Negro Dance Theater, founded in 1954 in New York City as an all-male ballet company directed by Aubrey Hitchens, an Englishman from Cheltenham.⁴ Companies such as these were instrumental not only for enabling audiences to see black ballet dancers on the concert stage, but also because they were part of a pivotal turning point in the development of the black ballet aesthetic. For these reasons, I argue that the histories of these early Historically Black Ballet Companies are equally important to document in the full history of ballet in America.

² The company reorganized in 1939 into Ballet Theatre and again, in 1956 changed its name to what is known today as American Ballet Theatre.

³ In 1940, the name changed to Atlanta Civic Ballet, and changed again in 1967 to the Atlanta Ballet.

⁴ My thesis research focused on the histories of black ballet companies comprised of both male and female dancers. While equally valuable in their own right, other types of companies are outside the scope of this thesis.

One black ballet company not yet mentioned, but an important part of 1930s dance history, was Eugene von Grona's endeavor to create an all-black ballet company. His effort brought forth American Negro Ballet, most certainly a result of the Dunham Effect, and another fine branch on the legacy tree planted by Katherine Dunham.

American Negro Ballet

Eugene von Grona was a German professional dancer and choreographer. As a child he visited the United States frequently, finally immigrating permanently in 1925. He made his first appearance on the American dance stage at a modern dance convention at the Waldorf Astoria in 1926. Thereafter he produced several dance recitals around New York City, and in 1934 he established the American Negro Ballet. A quote from a "Theater Off the Park" program in October 1983 said: "Always breaking new ground, Van Grona⁵ brought to the concert scene the Black Artist when he established the First American Negro Ballet in 1934" (American Negro Ballet, NYPL, n.d.).

In a 1980 National Public Radio interview with von Grona, it is clear that he hoped the American Negro Ballet would solidify its place in history by introducing black dancers to the concert stage and demonstrating their ability to perform in a professional setting. Although he incorrectly called his company the "first" Negro ballet company, he followed Dunham and Turbyfill's blueprint, giving black dancers an outlet for exploring their artistry in the ballet world.

⁵ His name was spelled incorrectly in the program. Shown there as Van Grona, the correct spelling is Von Grona.

Von Grona said when he came to America he felt compelled to do something. He said he was perceived as an “undesirable subject” in Germany because he used Jewish jazz and Russian music in his performances. Von Grona said:

I started this group with the colored people, it was the First Negro ballet I called it at that time. Negro is a classic name. We called it the First American Negro Ballet . . . that was in '34. My wife and I started this group. (American Negro Ballet scrapbook, NYPL)

Establishing the American Negro Ballet changed the ballet landscape because it challenged the way blacks were presented in ballet. This company began the development of a black ballet aesthetic, which would evolve even further with the New York Negro Ballet. Von Grona said he invested all his money and trained the company’s dancers for three years before their debut performance at Lafayette Theatre on November 21, 1937.



Photo 6. Dancers from American Negro Ballet, 1937

Source: Theresa Ruth Howard, *Memoirs of Blacks in Ballet*

It is important to understand how the racial dynamics of the time informed the black ballet aesthetic. Attitudes that were pervasive in the white ballet landscape also had a considerable impact on the black ballet landscape, and the opinions and perceptions of white dancers, critics, choreographers, and audiences informed what dancers should look like. These attitudes showed that when black dancers train and perform in predominantly white landscapes, then black dancers are constrained by stereotypical views of what their bodies can do. Thus the need to develop a black ballet aesthetic emerged in response to a rejection of white expectations of the black body. When successful performances by American Negro Ballet, First Negro Classic Ballet, and the New York Negro Ballet addressed these racial stereotypes, they were simultaneously challenging the pervasive notion that black ballerinas were untrained, that they could not look like ethereal white dancers, and that they were unable to present the same aesthetic and look as white dancers. These companies were pivotal in challenging the racial narrative of the time, enjoying success in spite of fewer opportunities, resources, and employment for black ballet dancers—they changed the ballet landscape forever.

Before the company's debut, von Grona encountered the same kinds of obstacles as Katherine Dunham and Mark Turbyfill. In an interview, he said that the Metropolitan Opera House refused to give the company space to stage their performance, so they opted to rent Lafayette Theatre. They sought grants and funding for the ballet but were continually refused.

In the program for American Negro Ballet's performance of *Firebird Suite 1938* it states: "In his search for expression the Negro has made several attempts to enter the serious dance but has been handicapped by economic conditions and the lack of artistic

opportunity” (American Negro Ballet scrapbook, NYPL). The “Story of the Ballet” portion of the program noted that the imagination of the “Negro” left a permanent impression on the arts, but the talents of African Americans have been confined to jazz and “African rituals” (American Negro Ballet scrapbook, NYPL). It mentioned that dance forms were limited, and the program called for “more intellectual resources of the race.” To that end, the company sent out letters hoping to engage the public in the company’s performances. Their intention was quite clear. In one of its audition announcements, the company’s mission is described thus:

It is one of the aims of The American Negro Ballet to reveal to the world the great possibilities in expression and interpretation which exist in the Negro race. This it intends to accomplish by world wide presentations of the greatest classics as interpreted by the American Negro. (American Negro Ballet scrapbook, NYPL).

While the company is most noted for using modern dance, there were traces of ballet technique and training among its dancers as a result of the three years von Grona spent developing technique in the company. The Playbill for *Lew Leslie’s Blackbirds of 1939* (see Figure 2), stated that von Grona created an “organized Negro dance group which, through several years of intensive training, has achieved a technique on a level with the greatest existing ballets” (American Negro Ballet scrapbook, NYPL).


Von Grona spoke about the meaning of ballet and how he used it to define his company. In an undated article (likely from the late 1930s), he said: “Ballet has always been a misunderstood word” (American Negro Ballet scrapbook, NYPL). It is true that the word “ballet” had several meanings at that time because ballet in America was still in its infancy. Often the word “ballet” was used to describe a full-length performance that

HUDSON THEATRE

DIRECTION SAM. H. GRISMAN

FIRE NOTICE: The exit, indicated by a red light and sign, nearest to the seat you occupy, is the shortest route to the street.
 In the event of fire or other emergency please do not run—WALK TO THAT EXIT.
 JOHN J. McELIGOTT, Fire Chief and Commissioner

THE • PLAYBILL • PUBLISHED • BY • THE • NEW • YORK • THEATRE • PROGRAM • CORPORATION

BEGINNING SATURDAY EVENING, FEBRUARY 11, 1939		MATINEES THURSDAY AND SATURDAY
---	---	--------------------------------------

LEW LESLIE

presents


LEW LESLIE'S BLACKBIRDS OF 1939

A Harlem Rhapsody

Music by Rube Bloom	Lyrics by Johnny Mercer
Additional music and lyrics by Dorothy Sachs and Louis Haber; Vic Mizzy and Irving Taylor and Abner Silver, Mitchell Parish and Sammy Fain	
Choral arrangements by J. Rosemond Johnson	Choreography by Eugene Van Grona
Orchestral arrangements by Ferde Grofe and Ken Macomber	
Settings by Mabel A. Buell	Costumes designed by Frances Feist
Entire show conceived and staged by Lew Leslie	

ACT I.

1—INTRODUCING VAN GRONA'S NEGRO SWING BALET IN "CHILDREN OF THE EARTH," featuring Beryl Clarke and Al Bledger. Danced by the Misses Hazel Spence, Wahneta Talley, Violet Gray, Hettie Stephens, Elizabeth Thompson, Beryl Clarke, Lavinia Williams, Marion Brown, Beryl Murray, Verona Blackburn, Dorothy Jones, Edith Ross, Edith Hurd, Mary Tennant, Willard Taylor, Renu Roma. The Messrs. Al Bledger and Coleman Hill.

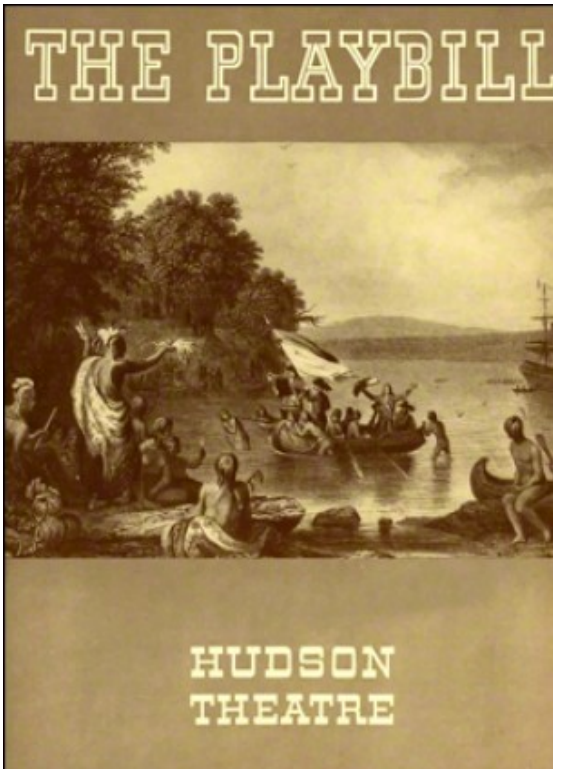


"What's all the shootin' for?"

100 PROOF

U. S. BOTTLE W

Copyright 1938, National Dist



THE PLAYBILL

HUDSON THEATRE

Fig. 2. The Playbill:
Lew Leslie's "Blackbirds of 1939"

Source: <http://www.playbill.com/playbillpagegallery/inside-playbill?asset=00000150-aea3-d936-a7fd-ecf7ea460001&type=InsidePlaybill&slide=1>.
 Retrieved 20 March 2019.

followed a storyline, with characters, a plot, props and sets. In that sense, “ballet” did not necessarily mean a technical definition in which dancers performed using classical lines and erect body positions. Von Grona explained that Webster’s Dictionary defines “ballet” as a “theatrical representation in which a story is told and actors and characters and passions represented by gestures accompanied by music and dancing” (von Grona). Going further, he said: “Do it on toes while observing technical rules and you have ‘classic’ ballet. Do it on the flat of your feet with another set of rules, and it’s ‘modern’ ballet.” His descriptions give added context to how American Negro Ballet company was received and how it was viewed as a company.

American Negro Ballet was often referred to as a “modern” company even though it also performed classical pieces like the aforementioned *Firebird Suite*. In one version, Lavinia Williams and Jon Edward danced the leads (see Figure 3). A critic wrote that the company’s performance of *Firebird* showcased future possibilities for black ballet dancers. In a December 1937 article in *Vogue Magazine*, the critic wrote:

Some might possibly object that a Negro interpretation of a classical ballet would become stiff and artificial . . . for this is the first attempt to develop the natural talents of the Negro through the refining technique of the ballet. (American Negro Ballet scrapbook, NYPL)

In another review the company’s performance is acclaimed as:

Rich bronze bodies in a setting of exotic splendor dancing Stravinsky’s “Firebird Suite.” A revolution in choreographic conception!—Bach’s religious music in somber Gothic style—the romance of Negro life on a plantation—then night—and bacchantic revelries rising to an unforgettable classic of symphonic jazz—the delicate interpretation of Debussy in a vision of dark dances, white powdered hair and diaphanous gowns—such are the colorful spectacles presented for the first time to an eagerly awaiting world. (American Negro Ballet scrapbook, NYPL).



Fig. 3. Lavinia Williams and Jon Edward, dancing in premiere of *Firebird Suite*.

Source: *Afro-American*, November 27, 1937. Manuscripts, Archives, and Rare Books Division, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York Public Library.

Von Grona's company also gave considerable time to performing the music of Bach, Duke Ellington, and W. C. Handy, with a live orchestra directed by Dean Dixon. A 1937 *Time* magazine review of the performance stated that "blacks were officially presented as art" ("Black, Black" 61). But it also said the company's attempt to fuse ballet technique with a "hot-cha" failed, noting that the performance was better suited for the Cotton Club (61).

Presenting black art through the lens of a white person's gaze limited how critics of the time viewed blacks on a mainstream stage. White reviewers only envisioned the depiction of black life through slave narratives, blackface, and minstrelsy. Critics were more engaged with black dancers who performed barefoot rather than a black dancer in pointe shoes. Dancing to the music of Bach; that was much harder to envision than a black dancer dancing barefoot to jazz or traditional African drumming. Houston Baker coined the phrase "mastery of form," arguing that African Americans had to "master the form" of performing for white American audiences.

The American Negro Ballet was embraced as a much-needed addition to the dance world: "To the dance world, which has been forced to content itself with the familiar performances of known organizations, the American Negro Ballet comes as a much needed boon" (American Negro Ballet scrapbook, NYPL). Pictures show the company dancing barefoot, and company correspondence describes it as a modern dance ensemble. An announcement on the company's letterhead reads: "Inasmuch as only the modern dance technique is employed by this ballet, toe work, etc...will not be used, and the chief requirement for qualification consist of talent, musicality, appearance and character" (American Negro Ballet scrapbook, NYPL).

While American Negro Ballet was lauded as a modern ballet company, it is important to document the company's history in the larger context of how ballet was taking shape for black dancers at the time. Dance scholar Joselli Deans notes that the company is "often incorrectly referred to as an African American ballet company" (Deans 162). However, the company holds an important place in ballet history because many of the black ballet dancers who went on to careers in the ballet world first trained

and performed with the American Negro Ballet Company during its early years. While the company eventually had to close its doors, its roots and branches are important parts of the Dunham legacy tree.

Ballet Theatre: The Negro Unit

In the midst of American Negro Ballet's launch and subsequent demise, Mikhail Mordkin gathered the best of his American students and in 1937 formed the Mordkin Ballet. In 1940 it changed name to become the Ballet Theatre, and in 1956 changed name once again to what is now the American Ballet Theatre. In a 1938 newspaper interview, author Jessica Zeller noted Mordkin's reason for starting Ballet Theatre: "I want to make ballet for everybody" (64).

When Ballet Theatre opened in 1940, it included the Negro Unit, but ironically the black ballet dancers—although given an opportunity to dance—still were not given the same opportunities as their white counterparts. Agnes de Mille choreographed *Obeah* (*Black Ritual*) with a cast of 16 African American ballerinas from the Negro Unit—the first time black ballet dancers appeared in an all-white ballet company. The dancers included Lavinia Williams and Janet Collins.



Photo 7. Ballet Theatre, Negro Unit, performing in *Obeah (Black Ritual)*.

Source: Memoirs of Blacks in Ballet website. <http://mobballet.org/index.php/2017/07/21/1940-negro-unit-of-ballet-theater-was-founded/>. Retrieved 20 March 2019.

However, the black dancers were at a disadvantage because de Mille thought they were untrained and limited in their technical ability even though most of them had professional experience. Erin K. Maher asserts:

Accounts of the production by de Mille and others have characterized the dancers of the Negro Unit as a group of untrained amateurs, but most of the women in the cast brought training and professional experience in at least one type of dance—including ballet (Maher 392).

Many of the dancers in the Negro Unit had trained, danced, and performed, but the idea that black ballet dancers did not fit in with the aesthetics of a white ballet company was a prevalent one. Author Adrienne McLean notes that in most mainstream

European arts forms the human body is only acceptable if it is “or can be made to appear, white” (15). McLean also spoke of the term *ballet blanc*:

A term coined by Théophile Gautier in 1844 in protest against the domination of the ballet stage of the time by white gauze, tulle, and tarlatan, such that “white was almost the only color in use. It can be applied even more literally to the racial politics of ballet.” (McLean 56).

Interestingly enough, the word “aesthetic” can be interpreted in myriad ways. I define the word as the quality of movement, with refined technical elements and principles that emphasize how the movement is presented visually. The aesthetic visually captures beauty in motion through movement and execution of technique. It also communicates how the artistic integrity of a work is presented. As it relates to technique, the aesthetic is how the technique is executed and how the body presents it. As it relates to style, the aesthetic is how dancers interpret technical elements and present them with their own artistic flare. All of this creates a beauty that defines the specific use of the word “aesthetic.”

I have already explained the importance of understanding the racial dynamic that flows through an aesthetic. Attitudes that were pervasive in the landscape of white ballet of the time also had an impact on how black ballet dancers were utilized by white choreographers, many of whom believed that the bodies of black ballet dancers had inherent limitations. That meant choreographers created works predicated on their belief that these limitations would prevent black dancers from presenting the choreographer’s definition of a proper ballet aesthetic. Because of this, black dancers were relegated to modern dance choreography which tended to place them in the category of “Other.” Because white choreographers could not envision black dancers creating a ballet aesthetic that would be pleasing to white audiences, the choreography developed by white

choreographers for black dancers placed limitations on showcasing their talent as ballet dancers.

As a result of these widely held views, Ballet Theatre and other white ballet companies that emerged during the time prevented black ballet dancers from excelling in their companies. While the Negro Unit of Ballet Theatre created a small step toward including black ballet dancers, most still experienced exclusion. In the biography of Janet Collins, co-written with Yaël Tamar Lewin, Collins said that black ballet dancers were not rewarded for their work: “Shockingly, while white corps dancers were paid up to forty dollars per week during this season, the dancers of the Ballet Theatre’s Spanish Unit received only twenty, and the Negro Unit only ten” (Collins 115).

After the Negro Unit performed three times, the group disbanded. McLean noted: “Although the work was viewed more positively than works from that season, *Obeah* soon disappeared from Ballet Theatre’s repertory, along with the Negro unit itself (McLean 56). The result was that other HBBCs continued to form in the 1940s.

First Negro Classic Ballet

In 1946, a white man named Joseph Rickard from Ann Arbor, Michigan, opened a dance studio in Los Angeles where African Americans could train in classical ballet. After witnessing an aspiring black ballet student turned away from ballet classes, Rickard not only offered ballet classes to that student but also to the student’s mother, Bernice Harrison, who went on to become the prima ballerina in his company known as First Negro Classic Ballet (FNCB). Rickard turned an abandoned ballroom near downtown

Los Angeles into a dance studio and used chairs as a *barre* (the training apparatus for ballet dancers).

When the company started, most of the dancers were in their twenties and thirties. Kenneth Marcus noted: “What united them was their dream of learning and performing classical dance” (“A New Expression for a New People” 25), and they gathered every week to take classical ballet classes with Rickard. Marcus contends that what set FNCB apart from other black companies of the time was its emphasis on classical ballet. He said the company presented performances about blacks and by blacks, and provided what no other company was doing—ballet performances that attempted to express the black experience in America. The company’s repertoire consisted of music from African American composer Claudius Wilson, a New Orleans-born musician with a degree in music from Dillard University. Original works, themes, and music of the company centered around the black experience, telling the story of the African Americans.

Not only did FNCB successfully use the ballet vocabulary, but the company also produced the first black ballerina to perform *en pointe*. Marcus noted that while Janet Collins is often regarded as the first African American prima ballerina, in fact Bernice Harrison preceded Collins. She was the prima ballerina for the FNCB, and as Marcus described them, they were “A group of five dancers [who] became stars of the FNCB: Bernice Harrison, Graham Johnson, James Truitte, Yvonne Miller, and Theodore Crum” (“Dance Moves” 496).

According to Dawn Lille Horwitz, FNCB also may have been the first black ballet company to have black ballerinas dance *en pointe*. In general, ballerinas who danced *en pointe* were perceived as ethereal beings who created an illusion of defying gravity.

Italian ballet dancer Amalia Brugnoli is credited as the first to perform in pointe shoes in 1832. Swedish ballet dancer Marie Taglioni is also credited as one of the first ballerinas to dance *en pointe* in *La Sylphide* in 1832. Dance writer Tobi Tobias says Taglioni “embodied the primary aesthetic of thrust dancing in her time. She personified the impulse of the soul that prefers the ideal to the actual, otherworldly joys to the ones within the common grasp, imagination to reality” (49). Dancing *en pointe* represented a hierarchical rise in the ballet world, and many believed that black ballet dancers simply did not fit the aesthetic making it difficult for white audiences to envision a black ballerina dancing *en pointe*. Additionally, black ballet dancers received minimal training in pointe shoes, thus further limiting their opportunities to dance in major performances *en pointe*.

It was George Balanchine who reshaped how American dancers viewed pointe work. Scholar Whitney Laemmli asserts that Balanchine “redefined *who* used the pointe shoe and *when* they did so as well” (Laemmli 11). Balanchine’s requirement that all his dancers take classes and dance on pointe was the turning point at which American ballet dancers began adopting pointe work into their repertoire. As ballet began to evolve in its use of pointe, black ballet companies also began to train black dancers *en pointe*, and the First Negro Classic Ballet became the first company in which black dancers were presented *en pointe*.

First Negro Classic Ballet made its debut on October 19, 1947 in Danish Auditorium on West 24th Street in Los Angeles. The company’s first professional performance was in November 1949 at Santa Barbara’s Lobero Theatre. Newspaper clippings from the time picture dancers in classical ballet positions, with the women in

pointe shoes and the men in black ballet shoes. Many in the audience were critical of the performances when the dancers danced on pointe. Viola Hegyi Swisher notes that the “toe shoes should have been left in the dressing room” and criticized Bernice Harrison’s arch, saying, “A ballerina without a proudly arched instep must work for that precious curve” (Classic Black Archives, NYPL).



Photo 8. Members of First Negro Classic Ballet.

Text of newspaper caption: **BALLET DANCERS**—The dancers above are rehearsing one of the scenes from a ballet they will perform when Joseph Rickard presents them in recital on October 19.

Source: Classic Black Exhibition, NYPL

Despite such criticism, the company was well received in the community and welcomed as a company that not only embraced classical training for black dancers but also a company that showcased black composers, black artists, and the black experience in a classical art form. A program from the company's 1951 performance, presented in cooperation with Zeta Phi Beta Sorority, documents the company's repertoire (see Figure 4). It included *Variations Classiques*, with music by Bach and danced by Graham Johnson, Bernice Harrison, Yvonne Miller, and Theodore Crum; then *Cinderella*, with music by Claudius Wilson, and Bernice Harrison dancing the role of Cinderella; and finally *Pagliacci* with music by Claudius Wilson and Graham Johnson as the lead dancer. The program noted: "The First Negro Classic Ballet is under the exclusive management of Mary Bran" with Joseph Rickard as the sole choreographer (see Figure 4).

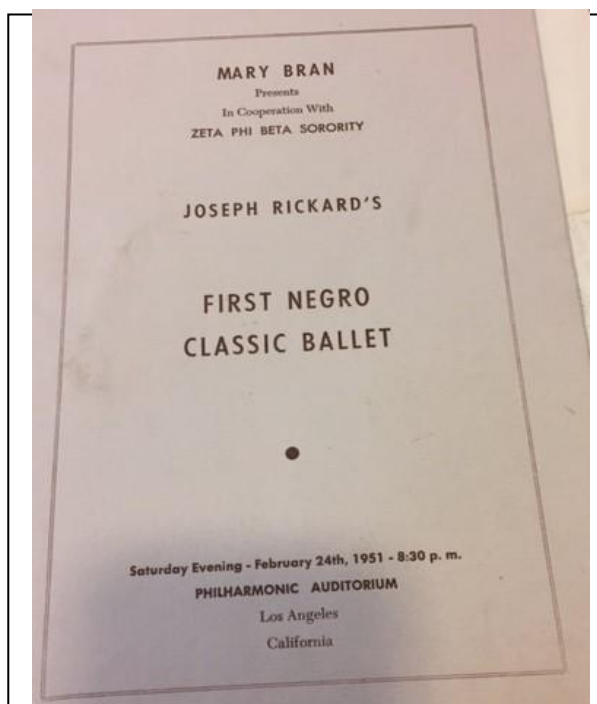


Fig. 4. Program from First Negro Classic Ballet performance, sponsored by Zeta Phi Beta

Source: Memoirs of Blacks in Ballet website. <http://mobballet.org/index.php/2017/07/21/1931-katherine-dunham-forms-les-ballet-negres/>.

Like other black companies, First Negro Classic Ballet faced financial challenges which became a major roadblock for the company. Marcus noted that the company refused to perform commercial Broadway works or other popular dance forms not within the realm of ballet: “To give in to the marketplace would have betrayed its mission of focusing on classical dance” (“Dance Moves” 515). However, the company’s strict focus on ballet made it difficult for the company to find financial contributors. Although the company successfully toured the West Coast, it was unable to secure funding for a European tour in 1951. The company did manage to secure support from another black ballet company that was emerging at the time, the New York Negro Ballet. Edward Flemyng (known by many as Ward), a New York choreographer, approached Rickard with the idea of merging the two companies.

New York Negro Ballet

New York Negro Ballet was presented as Les Ballet Nègres in 1955 when it performed at the Brooklyn Academy of Music. In the book *The Black Tradition in American Dance*, Richard Long notes several names used by New York Negro Ballet during the company’s beginning stages. He said: “Les Ballet Nègres, created in 1955, was know in 1957 as the New York Negro Ballet, and ultimately at a 1958 YMHA concert as Ballet Americana” (Long 123).

In 1956, Rickard’s company, First Negro Classic Ballet, merged with New York Negro Ballet and the merged company embarked on a tour of Great Britain. Figure 5 shows a handbill advertising the performance in London. Once the merger was in motion and the tour booked, Edward Flemyng and the administrators officially adopted the name

New York Negro Ballet, with Rickard as the resident choreographer, and Claudius Wilson as the resident composer. Prima ballerina Janet Collins was asked to join the tour but declined the invitation. She did attend a few rehearsals and said of Flemyng: “Ward had the intention—he had the money at the time—to bring in as many people with certain expertise as he could” (Lewin 146). Horwitz, who wrote about the company’s tour in Great Britain, noted: “The New York Negro Ballet began as a small group of black dancers, all of whom were studying with Maria Nevelska, a former member of the Bolshoi Ballet, who had a studio at No. 605 Carnegie Hall” (“The New York Negro Ballet in Great Britain” 317).

New York Negro Ballet’s dedication to developing classical technique in black dancers was evident in its rigorous training schedule. Dancers trained daily: one ballet class every day on weekdays, three ballet classes on Saturdays, and two ballet classes on Sundays. Horwitz notes that the original group of dancers included: Ward Flemyng, Thelma Hill, Anthony Basse, Charles Neal, Elizabeth (Betty Ann) Thompson, and Cleo Quitman, with Maria Nevelska as their teacher. It was Edward Flemyng’s charm and sophistication that helped garner financial support for the company, even while he also performed as one of its principal dancers. Flemyng also understood the need for an all-black classical ballet company at a time when progress for black dancers in the ballet world was extremely limited.

LYCEUM THEATRE - SHEFFIELD
 Proprietors : SHEFFIELD LYCEUM THEATRE LTD. Managing Director & Licensee : JOHN BEAUMONT
 Telephone : SHEFFIELD 22640

Commencing **MONDAY, 30th SEPTEMBER** For One Week
 MONDAY - FRIDAY at 7.0 SATURDAY at 5.0 & 8.0 MATINEE : WED. at 2.30

FIRST TIME IN ENGLAND
 PETER DAUBENY
 presents

the **NEW YORK**
NEGRO
BALLET

Artistic Direction : Ward Flemyng Theodore Hancock

Guy Allison	Anthony Basse	Delores Browne
Candace Caldwell	Sylvester Briscoe	Georgia Collins
Theodore Duncan	Ward Flemyng	Roland Fraser
Patricia Griffith	Thelma Hill	Frances Jimenez
Bernard Johnson	Graham Johnson	Yvonne McDowell
Charles Neal	Cleo Guitman	Eugene Sagan
Helen Taitt	Elizabeth Thompson	Carol Ann Wise

BALLET ORCHESTRA CONDUCTED BY EDWARD CLARK

Regisseur : Thelma Hill Ballet Master : Michel de Luty
 Decor by Richard Lake Costumes by Bernard

Music by Brahms, Lecoq, Morton Gould, Claudius Wilson

AMERICA'S MOST NOVEL AND EXOTIC COMPANY

PRICES OF ADMISSION (including tax)

Evenings & Saturday Matinee :	Boxes 47/6.	Stalls 8/6, 6/6, 5/-	Dress Circle 8/6	Circle 7/-
Matinees (Mid-week) :	Lower Balcony 2/6	Upper Balcony 2/- (unreserved)	Dress Circle 6/-	Balcony 1/6
	Stalls 6/-, 4/6, 3/-	Back Circle 3/-		

Fig. 5. Program for New York Negro Ballet, London Performance.

Source: Classic Black Exhibition Scrapbook, NYPL.

The creation of an all-black ballet company not only pushed the field forward at the time, it gave black dancers an opportunity to both dance ballet and also create their own stories, music, and art. Delores Browne, a member of the New York Negro Ballet, described the attitudes of both blacks and whites regarding the all-black ballet companies of the time. Speaking at the 1996 “Classic Black” symposium, Browne described her experience of being part of an all-black ballet company as similar to that of the Negro baseball leagues, proclaiming, “Separate is never equal” (quoted in Dunning 19). Other black dancers at the time had similar experiences as they sought acceptance into the white ballet world. In Joselli Deans’ dissertation, she wrote that Browne believed Edward Flemmyng understood the need to move the field forward in a way that other black dancers at the time did not. Deans quoted Browne as saying that “black dancers at the time questioned why Flemmyng was creating a black ballet company” (Deans 209-210) but agreed with the need to create jobs and opportunities for black dancers.

New York Negro Ballet may have been the first all-black classical ballet company to compensate its dancers. According to Deans, the New York Negro Ballet company was a union company that had to abide by union rules. Deans noted: “NYNB was an American Guild of Music Artist company and work days ran according to union rules. The company would rehearse all day with appropriate breaks five to six days a week” (Deans 212). No records have been found that document any union affiliation or compensation of dancers who were members of Ballet N gre, American Negro Ballet, or First Negro Classic Ballet. Given that these companies also lacked sufficient funding to sustain themselves, one can conclude that the early companies also lacked the funds to compensate the dancers. Thus, for the New York Negro Ballet, funding was a major

factor in the company's ability to employ and retain dancers in compliance with union rules. Deans notes that the company did not have a hierarchical structure that gave principal dancers and soloists a higher wage. Instead, all dancers were paid equally. Further, Jennifer Dunning notes that the company was funded by New England philanthropists Theodore Hancock and Lucy Thorndike, and this funding was essential for enabling the company to sustain itself.

While the philanthropy of European Americans provided funding for the company, the New York Negro Ballet was under the direction of black leadership. Not only did it give performance opportunities to classically trained black ballet dancers, but it also created original story ballets that presented the black experience. African American fictional characters were at the forefront, revealing the innovation and determination of visionaries in the company to create art, in a classical form, that connected the characters to the experiences of African Americans. This opened the door for black ballet companies to create and perform classical art that resonated with black audiences by telling the stories and incorporating the cultural traditions of blacks from the African diaspora.

The company also provided opportunities for African American composers to compose original music. When the company toured Great Britain, it was accompanied by an orchestra, and many of the works performed were original story ballets that told the stories of African Americans such as *Raisin' Cane*, *Folk Impressions*, and *Mardi Gras*. *Raisin' Cane* was a story ballet with three scenes choreographed by Graham Johnson and music written and conducted by Claudius Wilson. The ballet is set in New Orleans and

tells the story of sharecroppers working on sugarcane plantations who discover the night life of the city after a long working day.

New York Negro Ballet also hoped to perform in London but plans fell through, and the company returned to the United States in November 1957. Shortly after its return to New York, the company encountered a series of challenges. Most unfortunate was the death of its major financial contributor, Lucy Thorndike. Despite efforts by Theodore Hancock to solicit additional funding to support the company, ultimately he was unsuccessful, and financial support for the company ended. In 1958, the company regrouped under the name Ballet Americana, but it too faded away. Several dancers from New York Negro Ballet tried to make successful careers in the ballet industry but many went on to find success as modern dancers.

The New York Negro Ballet provided a solid blueprint of what an all-black, classically trained American ballet company could look like, and it set the stage for dance pioneer Arthur Mitchell to move to the forefront. Horwitz states: “Ward Flemyng’s ‘dream’ for a Negro ballet became a reality when Arthur Mitchell founded the Dance Theatre of Harlem in 1969” (338).

Alvin Ailey Dance Theatre

As New York Negro Ballet was fading, a group of black ballet dancers began performing around New York with modern dance pioneer Alvin Ailey, which resulted in the founding of the Alvin Ailey Dance Theatre (AADT) in March 1958. While AADT is a modern dance company, it is important to record its history in the Classic Black era.

The company enjoyed great success as a professional company that employed black dancers, many of whom were trained as ballet dancers but found a home with AADT.



Photo 9. Alvin Ailey

Source: <https://alvindaily.wordpress.com/2014/12/14/why-is-alvin-ailey-so-awesome-a-personal-opinion-about-the-dance-master/>. Retrieved 20 March 2019.

AADT is another branch of Katherine Dunham's legacy tree. Scholar Thomas DeFrantz notes that Ailey "sought to fill the void left by the closing of the original Horton and Dunham schools via a new institution that would emphasize shared resources and experiences to benefit a larger group of African diaspora dance artists and their audiences" ("Composite Bodies of Dance" 661). Additionally, the "Classic Black" exhibition features a young Judith Jamison who would later become the artistic director of AADT. Jamison, Joan Myers Brown, and Carmen de Lavallade are among the many talented, classically trained black dancers from the Classic Black era who found success

as modern dancers. Lack of opportunity in the ballet field resulted in these dancers finding success as modern dancers.

Capitol Ballet

One other black ballet company emerged before Arthur Mitchell founded Dance Theatre of Harlem. In 1961, Capitol Ballet was founded in Washington, D.C. by Doris Jones and Claire Haywood. Capitol Ballet developed as an extension of the Jones-Haywood School of Ballet, also in Washington. According to Joselli Deans: “Capitol Ballet, founded by Doris Johnson and Claire Haywood in Washington, D.C., was a successful regional ballet company from 1961 to 1979” (Deans 161).

Many of the dancers who trained at the Jones-Haywood School became professional dancers in other HBBCs. Among the most notable was Sylvester Campbell, who trained at the Jones-Haywood School and went on to become one of the lead dancers in the New York Negro Ballet. Both Campbell and Arthur Mitchell, along with Carmen de Lavallade, were invited to perform and choreograph with Capitol Ballet. Campbell said he and Mitchell made appearances with Capitol Ballet, and many of the dancers from that era felt a sense of pride working with the company. In an interview conducted by Dawn Horwitz, when Campbell was asked if he classified the Capitol Ballet as an “advanced-student company” Campbell said: “Yes. But excellent dancers—very professional. There was nothing amateur about them” (Horwitz 29).

Nevertheless, the company suffered the same fate as its predecessors. In 1983, the company suspended performances for the season because of financial pressures. In 1988 the company performed on a limited scale before shifting its focus to the Jones-Haywood

Junior Dancers. An article in the 1990 *Washington Post* noted: “The Capitol Ballet—the only company apart from DTH focused on providing opportunities for black dancers in the field of classical ballet—has suspended performance plans for this season due to insufficient backing” (Kriegsman 1990).

Although many of the black ballet companies during the Classic Black era were short-lived, they opened the door and paved the way for classically trained black dancers like Arthur Mitchell to chart a new course for black ballet dancers in the dance world with the founding of Dance Theatre of Harlem.

In this chapter I have identified how the development of historically black ballet companies changed the ballet landscape and challenged the way blacks were presented in ballet. The development of these companies were a prelude to the emerging black ballet aesthetic. Black ballet companies developed alongside white companies during the “Classic Black” era, and the emergence of an aesthetic that complimented the black body helped to solidify an identifiable performance quality for black ballet dancers.

Chapter III

Ethnicity, Classicism, and the Black Ballet Aesthetic:

Refining Technique in the Age of Arthur Mitchell and Dance Theatre of Harlem



Photo 10. Dance Theatre of Harlem performing *Concerto Barocco*, choreographed by George Balanchine.

Source: <https://www.dancetheatreofharlem.org/our-history/>.

In this chapter, I explore both African and European forms of dance. I do this to contextualize the specific techniques that black ballet companies adapted from each form. I explain the difference between technique and style as it relates to the development of aesthetics. That leads to a brief history of George Balanchine, neoclassicism, and the influence of Africanist aesthetics on Balanchine's own aesthetic, which gives context to Balanchine's work with Arthur Mitchell. Lastly, I examine Africanist presence in the black ballet aesthetic of Dance Theatre of Harlem's visual representation of blackness in everything, even down to spraying ballet tights and ballet shoes brown—how this carried into companies like Ballethnic Dance Company.

We now have arrived at a point of reclamation. Up to this point, "Classic Black"-era ballet dancers and companies have been classified as "Other" because early gatekeepers of ballet argued that black ballet dancers were not (or could not) perform classical ballet. The politics of aesthetics have been mobilized to erase and ignore early black ballet dancers like Katherine Dunham and Classic Black-era ballet companies from the American ballet canon. The black ballet aesthetic drew from different influences, but at its core it is classical ballet—simply ballet technique executed by the black body. The black ballet aesthetic is a highly stylized form of dance that has not been analyzed in a technical lens like other forms of ballet. This is significant because it reveals forms of prejudice, omission, and the continuing denigration and erasure from America's ballet history. It is also imperative to understand ethnicity and classicism in ballet by examining both Africanist and European aesthetics to define what Theresa Ruth Howard calls "the Black Ballet Aesthetic" (Ruth Howard Interview 2019).

Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines classicism as “adherence to traditional standards.” Traditionally, classicism in ballet has been defined through a European lens which has excluded African diasporic traditions. However, in the black ballet aesthetic, ethnicity and classicism are intrinsically linked.

Arthur Mitchell, co-founder of Dance Theatre of Harlem, helped to shape and define the black ballet aesthetic. I believe the black ballet aesthetic is best understood as a fusion of classical ballet technique with stylized forms of black dance methods. I also think the black ballet aesthetic is inherently connected to classical ballet as a European form, and Africanist modes of dance as an African form. By situating the aesthetic within a technical and formed tradition that fuses European and Africanist forms of dance, it still remains ballet. I do this in order to explore ethnicity and classicism in the development of the black ballet aesthetic and to create space for black dance to exist as a classical dance idiom.

According to Dixon Gottschild, Dance Theatre of Harlem mastered European-style ballet. However, based on my reading of her book, I realized that many of the dancers who were interviewed expressed concern that classifying black ballet dancers as a subdivision of ballet created separation. They were reluctant to be classified as “black dancers” or for their work to be categorized as “black dance” because of the possibility of separation or being perceived as “other” or put in a subdivision. While I agree that such separation creates an element of subordination, I also believe that by embracing black classicism and defining a black ballet aesthetic, these ballet forms can be analyzed through the theoretical framework of the aesthetic, thereby establishing the work of these companies as classical ballet. Reshaping the narrative and incorporating the work of

black dancers and their contributions to the field of ballet gives agency for inclusion, not separation.

Understanding Technique

Technique can be defined as a codified system of movement and exercises that develop form. There are several schools of ballet that help inform the technique (e.g., the Russian school, the French school, the Italian school, etc.). These are not the only types of technique, however. Other codified techniques include: Martha Graham, Horton Technique, Dunham Technique, West African dance, and the umbrella of jazz dance that includes the Luigi technique, Bob Fosse, and Hip Hop. Although ballet technique is used as a way to measure the technical proficiency of a dancer, it is equally important to acknowledge the proficiency level of training in the aforementioned forms in order to truly be considered a fluid dancer in those forms. Thus, a dancer trained in West African dance or the Dunham Technique is equally as skilled and proficient as a dancer trained in ballet.

There is a difference between technique and style. Technique performed with style creates a particular aesthetic. For instance, George Balanchine's style of neoclassicism involves swift movement that emphasizes speed and agility, athletic dance quality, and abstract arm and hand placement—infused with Africanist influences and combined with Russian ballet technique, resulting in the “Balanchine Aesthetic.” Therefore, while the black ballet aesthetic looks different in different companies, what unifies the aesthetic is specific characteristics, an attention to form, the fusion of style

with technique, the dancers, and choreographic form. Essentially, the black ballet aesthetic for a black ballet dancer serves as a cultural transformation.

African and European Forms of Dance

Dixon Gottschild explains that the Africanist aesthetic of dance consists of “grounded movement characterized by body asymmetry . . . an overall polyphonic feel to the dance/dancing body . . . articulation of the separate units of the torso . . . and a primary value placed on both individual and group improvisation” (*The Black Dancing Body* 15). In contrast, the European aesthetic of classical dance consists of upright movement with an erect spine and vertical alignment. Dixon Gottschild notes that differences in aesthetic language between people of African and European lineage account for the misunderstandings in how each understands the other. However, Dixon Gottschild also argues that with dance created in the United States, the aesthetic differences are less separate and often interconnected. Introducing an Africanist aesthetic into classical dance creates a place for the black classicists to exist in the realm of classical ballet, placing value on African diasporic traditions and making space for these traditions. I argue both European and Africanist aesthetics are intrinsically linked in America’s dance lineage, including modern, jazz, *and* ballet.

Russian Influence and European Aesthetics in U.S. Black Ballet Companies

As Historically Black Ballet Companies were developing, they drew from Russian ballet technique. According to Horosko, Russian-born and trained dancers like Maria Nelveska and George Balanchine were among “the first to settle in America and

bring to American dance their traditional method” (Horosko 36). Russia-inspired dancers and teachers provided the technical foundation for black ballet dancers and imparted the classicism of Russian ballet into the fabric of these companies. For instance, classicism was quite apparent in productions by the First Negro Classic Ballet, whose founder, Joseph Rickard, was inspired by Polish-Russian dancer Bronislava Nijinska. Praising First Negro Classic Ballet, Marcus said, “Everywhere the troupe went, it demonstrated beautiful and nuanced dancing” based on the “model of Russian ballet” (“A New Expression for a New People” 24).

Likewise, the New York Negro Ballet demonstrated a significant Russian influence in their technique. Its dancers studied ballet with Maria Nevelska, a former dancer with the Bolshoi Ballet under Alexander Gorsky. Nevelska credited Gorsky with helping to transform the strong and mechanical dancing, influenced by the Italian style, “with demi-plié and straight knee jumps” (Nevelska) that later became central to the technique of the black ballet companies.

Tracing the Russian Technique

Two of the most notable figures in ballet made their mark in Russia. Modern Russian ballet technique formed around 1847 in the Russian Imperial Theaters. Marius Petipa was influential in developing the central elements of Russian ballet, as he “expanded the choreographic structure” and “defined the very essence of classical ballet” (Homans 269). Some argue that the geometric design in classical ballet derived from Petipa’s choreographic influence. His aesthetic in *The Sleeping Beauty* became the defining point of classicism in which the choreographic elements in ballet were “perfectly

constructed models of classical principles” (Homans 276). According to Homans, each dance in *The Sleeping Beauty* “traces a symmetrical path across the floor with clear lines” and “sharp diagonals . . . and these same lines and diagonals are then reflected and reproduced in the geometry of the steps themselves” (276).

Another central figure in Russian ballet technique was Agrippina Vaganova who took the influences of Petipa, Enrico Cecchetti, and Christian Johansson and moved them into the twentieth century. Vaganova codified and articulated Russian ballet technique and preserved it in her book *Basic Principles of Classical Ballet*. She derived her inspiration from observing the two dominant systems of ballet teaching at the end of the nineteenth century: the French and the Italian schools. The French school emphasized fluidity, tranquility, and softness in the *port de bras* with elegant, light, and graceful



Photo 11. Agrippina Vaganova, circa 1910.

Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vaganova_method#/media/File:Agrippina_Vaganova_-_Esmeralda_1910.jpg.

movement; the Italian school (under the direction of Enrico Cecchetti) emphasized sharp and difficult movements with power, strength, and endurance of the toes for long balances that some critics considered tricks.

Vaganova's approach emphasized the importance of body placement, relying on science, anatomy, and the physiological structure of the body to devise exercises in which a dancer could study and execute the proper alignment of the body. Vaganova emphasized mastery and artistry of the dance, incorporating the fluidity, elegance, softness, and grace of the French School while infusing the strength, athleticism, and virtuosity of the Italian Cecchetti method. This hybrid, called the Vaganova technique, is what makes it uniquely Russian and the sustainability of the technique created a generation of dancers who carried the influences of Russian ballet into the twentieth century, finally making its way to black dancers.

George Balanchine: Neoclassical and African Influences in the Balanchine Aesthetic

Born in St. Petersburg, Russia, George Balanchine studied ballet there but immigrated to New York in 1933. He opened the School of American Ballet in January 1934 in conjunction with Lincoln Kirstein and Edward Warburg. Balanchine sought to train American dancers with his own method and style of teaching. According to Robert Gottlieb, "He had no intention of imitating the repertory or the style of the *Ballet Russes*" (Gottlieb 76). He borrowed from his own experiences at the Imperial Russia but he sought to develop an American ballet aesthetic: neoclassical.

His 1934 creation of *Serenade* is an example of the neoclassical style and was the first American ballet (Gottlieb 76-78). Neoclassical style incorporated the romanticism of

ballet with modernity, and Balanchine's neoclassicism reflected the "swift invention that seemed almost impromptu; consideration for the comfort of his dancers and respect for their abilities; sureness; joy in demonstration" (Gottlieb 78). Balanchine's aesthetic captured the glamour and sophistication of European classicism: speed, craft, and agility combined with the dramatic, erotic, and mysterious. It also borrows from Africanist and European influences. His style was influenced by black dancers, and he was interested in the black dancing body.

He began to incorporate Africanist influences in combination with contemporary moves like "Charleston steps, flat feet, acrobatics, turned-in legs, and jazzy elements drawn from black dance (particularly the thrust-forward pelvis that became a Balanchine trademark) with pure Petipa classicism" (Jack 5). The "Charleston" became popular during the Harlem Renaissance in the 1920s, evolving out of a jazz composition by African American pianist James P. Johnson. The dance included an "extravagant shimmy," a "quiver of the body," "use of the torso," and "movement of the hips, thighs, and buttocks" (Emery 226).

Joshua Cohen's essay *Stages in Transition: Les Ballets Africains and Independence, 1959 to 1960* (2012) suggests that interest in African-based art forms in concert dance in America developed in the early 1920s with vaudeville performers. Vaudeville performers like Bert Williams and George Walker incorporated ties to Africa in dances like the "Cakewalk." Cohen states that in the early twentieth century, "African and African-derived music and dance had come to occupy a more relevant cultural and artistic space that can be summed up as mere exoticism or entertainment" (Cohen 13). Taking Cohen's argument a step further, one can see the refinement of black dance in the

U.S. as African American dancers, and white choreographers like Balanchine, began to explore the realm of classical ballet.

Coincidentally, jazz dance is a fusion of European and African derived movement and sound aesthetics. Thus Balanchine's interest in polyrhythmic movement was also influenced by black dancers and jazz music. He became interested in African diasporic movement, working with Katherine Dunham, for example, and casting her in a major role in the Broadway musical *Cabin in the Sky*. His style included African-derived jazz—even though the Africanist presence in his style is rarely given credit.

The evolution of black dance and of ballet in America in the twentieth century is intrinsically linked, and Balanchine's style and aesthetic are examples of the cross-cultural exchanges between the two. Black dancers have influenced ballet and pushed it forward. Thus, it is no coincidence that Balanchine looked to Arthur Mitchell as one of his principal dancers in New York City Ballet.

George Balanchine, Arthur Mitchell, and New York City Ballet

Arthur Mitchell joined New York City Ballet in 1954 and worked his way up to the role of soloist. He was the first African American to join the company and danced with the company for 15 years. Balanchine created and choreographed dances specifically for Mitchell, including the role of Puck in *Midsummer Night's Dream*, and the lead in *Slaughter on Tenth Avenue*.

In 1957, the *pas de deux* in *Agon* was choreographed on Arthur Mitchell and Diane Adams. *Agon* is an abstract ballet that includes a 12-tone score by Stravinsky, and that role immediately thrust Mitchell into the performing spotlight. In a public discussion

at Ballethnic Dance Company in Atlanta, Mitchell said when he danced in *Agon*, he encountered racism because people did not want him to touch or partner with a white ballerina (“Arthur Mitchell Project” 2014). The racial undertones in the ballet challenged the public perception of African Americans on the classical ballet stage.



Photo 12. Arthur Mitchell and Diana Adams, in *Agon*.
Photo credit: Martha Swope

Source: <http://dancetalks.org/2016/01/24/arthur-mitchell-and-dance-theatre-of-harlem/>.

Agon debuted at the height of the civil rights movement when it was rare to see black dancers perform on the same stage as white dancers; for many audiences, it was inconceivable that a black male ballet dancer would dance sensually with a white ballerina. Recounting his performances of *Agon*, Mitchell said he encountered racism, and there were people who were enraged by the interactions between the two dancers. People did not want him to touch or partner a white ballerina. Nancy Reynolds notes:

With all its complexities of music and choreography, and the brilliant way their parts are interlocked, a major element in making *Agon* so “explosive” was the fact of a black man (Mitchell) partnering a white woman (Adams), lifting her, guiding her, supporting her even while lying on the floor, while she, on a single pointe, loomed above him, or while, raised in the air, she displayed her crotch to the audience. (Reynolds ~2)

Other audience members interpreted the racial undertones of *Agon* as a story about submission. Mitchell recounts that when Balanchine was questioned about his decision to cast Mitchell in productions, “George said, if Mitchell doesn’t dance, New York City Ballet doesn’t dance” (“The Arthur Mitchell Project” 2014).



Photo 13. George Balanchine and Arthur Mitchell.
Photograph by Martha Swope

Source: 1963. NY Public Library Digital Collections, Billy Rose Theatre Division.
<https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/26ae9170-cc9c-0131-0819-58d385a7bbd0>

With his sensitivity to racial tensions, the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. was what impelled Mitchell to start Dance Theatre of Harlem. He said he wanted to go

back to the community where he was born and do something positive for people there: “I said I’m going to go back to the community I started the Dance Theatre of Harlem. February 11, 1969” (“The Arthur Mitchell Project” 2014).

From the very beginning, Mitchell encountered racism when he started Dance Theatre of Harlem (DTH) and began teaching. People questioned how, as a black man, he could teach ballet. But he knew that dancers from Harlem would represent a shift in culture, not only for black dancers but for ballet everywhere in America.

Becoming Arthur Mitchell

While the early Classic Black ballet companies were instrumental in introducing classical ballet technique into their companies, it was Mitchell who not only refined classicism in black ballet companies but he also changed how blacks in ballet were perceived and embraced in dance. As a protégé of Balanchine, Mitchell took the baton from Katherine Dunham and created a sustainable classical black ballet company that lasted well into the twenty-first century. He studied at Dunham’s School of Dance in New York City, where he met his long-time business partner Karel Shook and together they created the Dance Theatre of Harlem in 1969.

Mitchell’s background as a classical ballet dancer navigating the dance world as an African American helped make the company authentically black by embracing the traditions and cultures of the African diaspora, while also embracing the classicism of the European art form, and creating a space in which dancers were free to explore both idioms in one setting. Mitchell was acutely aware of the impact he was making as an African American classical ballet company that challenged how the world viewed blacks

in classical dance. Mitchell said when he created DTH, “I was the only African American in a major ballet company in the world. The dancers said to me ‘you don’t have a chance’” (“The Arthur Mitchell Project” 2014). As an African American navigating the classical dance world, he knew he had to be the best, so he studied everything to excel in excellence. He studied tap, opera, music, voice, and diction. He said whatever they offered him, he studied, and he imparted this spirit of excellence to his dancers. He understood the importance of the perception of African Americans at that time, and perseverance was the key to survival—particularly in ballet.

Dance Theatre of Harlem: The Company

Prior to the founding of Dance Theatre of Harlem, the earlier “Classic Black” companies were unsuccessful in their attempts to bring classical dance full circle for black ballet dancers and ballet audiences in the United States. The creation of Dance Theatre of Harlem expanded the threshold for black ballet dancers, creating a centralized location where black dancers could learn, develop, and study classical ballet technique in order to sustain a lasting career as a professional classical ballet dancer. Shook said: “It took the advent of the Dance Theatre of Harlem in 1969 to consolidate black ballet and bring it in full force across the threshold of classicism” (Shook 22).

Early company members included: Lydia Abarca, Homer Hans Bryant, Lorraine Graves, Virginia Johnson, Gail McKinney, Walter Raines, and Shelia Rohan. Abarca was with the company from its inception and is an important figure in the company’s history, with direct knowledge about how the ballet aesthetic developed in its formative years. In my wide-ranging interview with Abarca, she said the company held classes in a garage

which they transformed into a dance space. She recounts: “There were *barres* on the wall and a low-rise platform” (Abarca Interview 2018) They trained daily, not just in ballet but also in modern and West African dance—but the emphasis was on classical ballet. Shook demanded clean lines and taught with repetition. Homer Hans Bryant, another original company member, also talked about Mitchell’s use of brown tights, which helped to create the sought-after black ballet aesthetic. Bryant said, “Mitchell developed the idea to paint the shoes and dye the tights” (Bryant Interview 2018).

Lydia Abarca was also the first black ballerina to be featured on the cover of *Dance Magazine*. An article in the *Washington Post* described her as “regal on toe and sensual at the same time” (Darling) but the newspaper also recognized the burden she carried as one of the first prima ballerinas who was part of an African American classical ballet company. Arthur Mitchell was also acutely aware of the burdens that African Americans faced being the “first.” As a result, Abarca said Mitchell demanded the best from them all: “I got that we were important, and that we were pioneers; Arthur never let us forget that” (Abarca interview 2018). Development of the black ballet aesthetic not only included learning technical components of dance; it also included how the DTH dancers presented themselves off stage. Mitchell required his dancers to present a certain image in public. They always had to be presentable, dress impeccably, and assume a commanding presence when they walked into a room. He was



Photo 14. Lydia Abarca, *Dance* magazine, May 1975

intent on ensuring that he and the company members always presented a refined and dignified image of African Americans, challenging the often-negative public perceptions of black people.

Significantly, in 1971 DTH shared the stage with New York City Ballet for a single performance choreographed by Mitchell and Balanchine. The *New York Times* documented this occasion writing:

The Dance Theater of Harlem, the two-year-old black ballet company founded by Arthur Mitchell, and the New York City Ballet will share the State Theater stage Thursday night for a single performance of a ballet choreographed by George Balanchine and Mr. Mitchell. . . . Some will wonder how the whole thing could have been done. How could two companies, so seemingly apart in years of performing experience, appear in the same ballet? And how does one co-choreograph a ballet any way? (Kisselgoff).

In the same article, Balanchine explains that the idea to bring both companies together was a good one. Their work together shows the importance of DTH's place as a classical ballet company in the same vein as New York City Ballet. As such, DTH shares the same prestige and history as the New York City Ballet, although it is not always recognized as such. Mitchell's work with Balanchine helped to solidify the legacy of DTH in American dance history.

Dance Theatre of Harlem and the Black Ballet Aesthetic

The relationship between Mitchell and Balanchine provides some insight into how Mitchell structured his own company. Mitchell and Shook's development of classicism in DTH was directly influenced by Balanchine. In the December 28, 1987 issue of *The New Yorker*, Mitchell noted that Balanchine saw his ideal dancer as "having a short torso, long arms, and a small head" (quoted in Dixon Gottschild 7). Mitchell pointed out that Balanchine's ideal ballerina makes black ballerinas the perfect candidate for a Balanchine inspired aesthetic. He said, "There was the fallacy that black people could not do classical ballet, and I said 'Who said that?' I said, 'Well I'm going to change it'" ("The Arthur Mitchell Project 2014" 2014). Mitchell drew inspiration from Balanchine, incorporating the speed, craft, and agility of neoclassical dance influences into the black ballet aesthetic, making it the signature brand of Dance Theatre of Harlem. Balanchine's neoclassicism was one of the foundational components of the black ballet aesthetic developed in DTH.

There is a difference between technique and style. Theresa Ruth Howard defines technique "as a codified system that is built on the body while creating a system of

movement; a study of what the body can do and then creating a curriculum and system around that” (Howard Interview 2019). In comparison, she asserts, style is what the technique looks like and how the technique is presented. Essentially, the black ballet aesthetic is not just technique and not just style; the black ballet aesthetic is all about presentation. The aesthetic is reflected in how arms are presented, how moves *en pointe* are presented, and how this presentation reflects cultural identity. Howard went on to say that DTH codified the black ballet aesthetic as its brand and this aesthetic included skin tone ballet tights that reflected the dancers brown skin along with brown ballet shoes. Additionally, Balanchine’s neoclassicism combined with stylized Africanist aesthetic movements gave DTH its signature ballet aesthetic. The black ballet aesthetic also includes what Arthur Mitchell called “za”—a term he used when choreographing a phrase. In my interviews with dancers Lydia Abarca Mitchell, Homer Hans Bryant, and Theresa Ruth Howard, each one talked about Mitchell’s use of the word “za” when he wanted to emphasize presentation in the movement. “Za” also incorporated what Howard explains as “the natural regal royalty that comes from Africa and the way we have to present to ourselves as African Americans” (Howard interview 2019). Balanchine’s neoclassical fused with sultry walks on pointe, skin tone tights and ballet shoes, stylized arms and classic geometric ballet lines are all apart of the black ballet aesthetic perfected by the Dance Theatre of Harlem.



Photo 15. Company Dancers, Dance Theatre of Harlem.

Source: Homer Bryant Collection

Embracing Ethnicity and Classicism in Dance Theatre of Harlem

Arlene Croce believes “black classicists are classicists with a difference” and she asserts: “Classical norms are set by classical dancers” (quoted in Dixon Gottschild 118). DTH’s classicism is rooted not only in the nuances of the Mitchell-Balanchine relationship but it also has roots in the Vaganova technique. In Shook’s book *Elements of Classicism*, he calls his book a manual for the technique taught and practiced in the school of Dance Theatre of Harlem. Shook’s book expands on the classical foundation of ballet and embraces the ethnicity and culture of black dancers by reiterating that “diverse

elements of heritages and cultures can find a natural place in the serene realm of the *arabesque* and the *entrechat*” (Shook 16).

Ritualistic dancing and African traditions in ballet are a key part of the black ballet aesthetic present in DTH. Traditional dances derivative of the African diaspora are communal, spiritual, ancestral—and when they are incorporated in European traditions of classical dance, there is a cross-cultural exchange that happens organically between the two. This creates the black ballet aesthetic. Embracing and incorporating ethnicity in classical dance challenges the ways ethnicity and culture are perceived in the world of ballet, and shifts the perception of classicism to a more progressive view in which traditional African dances are now also embraced as classicism. Shook argues that the spirit of the dance is just as important as technique and classicism. He said good dancers understand ritual and the spirit and primitive expressions instinctively, “and maintain it even in the purest of classical ballets” (Shook 16). It is this understanding that makes the black ballet aesthetic both regal and expressive, and because of this, black ballet dancers, especially those from DTH, manifest freedom of expression.

Mitchell embraced the ethnicity and culture of black dancers while instilling in his dancers a sense of pride. In a break from the tradition of wearing pink tights, Mitchell required his dancers to wear flesh-toned tights and spray-painted shoes that matched the dancer’s skin color because it accentuated the lines of black dancers. But it was difficult for black dancers to find tights and shoes in their skin tones, so the dancers used a unique formula of dye and shoe spray. Waverly Lucas, a former DTH company member, said Mitchell had a unique understanding of what was necessary for black dancers to have a voice in classical ballet. Bryant contends that the importance of skin-tone tights is that it

accentuates the beauty of the skin and reflects the color of the dancers' faces and arms. Bryant recalls when Mitchell first started DTH, black dancers were wearing the customary pink tights and pink shoes and "then one afternoon Mitchell said 'Something is wrong, your tights do not match your face and your arms!'" (Bryant interview 2018). Mitchell conceived the idea for dancers to dye their tights and spray paint their shoes because it would make the dancers more comfortable in their skin. Bryant said "It is empowering when you look in the mirror and you see brown arms, brown legs, brown shoes, the lines look much cleaner.." (Bryant Interview 2018) When black dancers wear pink tights, their legs present an ash color and it does not match the natural color of the dancers and DTH company dancers were much more confident when they wore skin tone tights and shoes. Bryant says it was empowering because they felt better about themselves, and they looked better as a corps de ballet. Mitchell wanted his dancers to represent the best as black dancers because they were trying to prove a point. Bryant says Mitchell always reminded the dancers that DTH was much "bigger than us" and that "black folks can dance classical ballet" but can also embrace the beauty of their own blackness (Bryant Interview 2018). He understood the importance of representation and the importance of instilling a sense of pride in his dancers. This understanding created a passion and understanding for dance as an art form outside of the confines of European classicism.

Africanist Presence: From Dance Theatre of Harlem to Ballethnic Dance Company

Dance Theatre of Harlem took a page from Katherine Dunham by embracing cultural traditions and dance styles that came from the African diaspora. Because of her

foresight—infusing ballet with African and Caribbean styles of movement to create the Dunham Technique—Mitchell incorporated this practice into his company by requiring his dancers to learn and study dances derived from the African Diaspora. According to Bryant, Mitchell had them dance classical ballet to James Brown or to African drums. DTH dancers trained in West African dance and began to infuse Africanist aesthetics and storytelling into their original productions such as Geoffrey Holder’s *Douglas* and Arthur Mitchell’s *Creole Giselle*.

Waverly Lucas, co-founder of Ballethnic Dance Company, the first classical black ballet company in Atlanta, Georgia, says he was inspired to create his company after dancing as a company member with DTH and falling in love with African dance. Lucas and his wife Nena Gilreath, also a former member of DTH, developed a black ballet

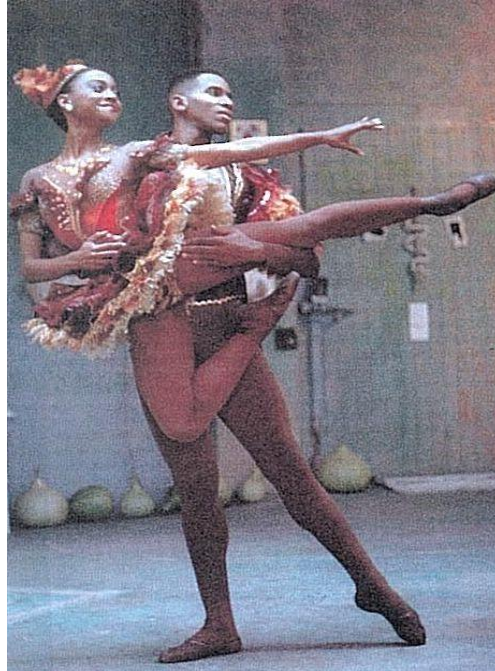


Photo 16. Nena Gilreath and Waverly Lucas

Source: Ballethnic Dance Company Archives

aesthetic for Ballethnic which infused both the Dunham technique and West African dance with classical ballet.

While Ballethnic is modeled after DTH and has a strong focus on classical ballet technique, Ballethnic also has a strict focus on the development of West African dance technique. Dancers are required to train in West African dance and learn specific styles, particularly Mendiani, which Lucas coined “Mendiani en pointe.” Mendiani en pointe requires strict training on pointe in the Vaganova system for at least three years. While training on pointe and learning classical ballet, dancers also study West African traditions, call and responses, intricate footwork, isolations, and hip movement in the mastery of Mendiani en pointe. Also called Manjani or Mandiani, this dance style originated in Upper Guinea. Eric Charry notes that Mendiani is a celebratory dance, done at night, leading into “circumcision and excision surgery” (Charry 220). Although the origins of Mediani are quite alarming, the Mediani dance that has now been adopted into most American black dance companies as a dance that celebrates West African ancestors in an attempt for African Americans to connect with ancestral roots. In the early traditional Mendiani dance, the *Manjani* was danced by the best young female dancer in the village; in Ballethnic’s reimagined Mendiani en pointe, only the best, most proficient *en pointe* ballerinas are cast in roles which require the execution of Mendiani en pointe. The cross-cultural exchanges that occur have a direct correlation with the fusion of Africanist diasporic cultural traditions in classical black ballet companies like Ballethnic and in original productions by DTH like Geoffrey Holder’s *Dougl’a*, which incorporated these influences. This fusion of classical ballet with West African traditions developed

specifically from influences of the Dunham technique and DTH's introduction of classicism to black ballet dancers.

While Ballethnic transformed Mendiani to Mendiani *en pointe*, it was Les Ballet Africains that was instrumental in bringing other West African dance traditions to the United States. According to authors Benjamin Talton and Joshua Cohen, "Les Ballets Africains, the world's first professional and international touring African performance company, arrived in New York in January 1959" (Cohen and Talton 12). The company toured throughout Europe in the 1950s with shows that featured West African dance styles, choreography, stories, and music. The authors contend that the history of Les Ballets Africains is an important part of scholarly discourse because of the significance of the company's performing arts practices at a time of liberation struggles in Africa and America. The company's U.S. tour brought an exchange of cultural traditions in the performance arts space of the African diaspora. Indigenous arts from West Africa migrated to the United States in the form of music, dance, and cultural traditions. That had a direct impact on cross-cultural exchanges displayed in the Africanist aesthetic of classical black ballet companies in the U.S. As early as 1934, African dance teacher Ismay Andrew taught African dance in Harlem at the Abyssinian Baptist Church. In the 1940s, African artists such as Guy Warren from Ghana and Nigerian-born artist Michael "Babatunde" Olatunji helped the Africanist aesthetic emerge in black dance. These African-based artists were instrumental in introducing indigenous art forms from West Africa to black performers and the American theatrical stage.

Embracing Black Classicism and the Black Ballet Aesthetic

As we consider these ballet companies, it is imperative to recognize that they have been historically black, yet their ability to master classical ballet while also incorporating Africanist aesthetics makes them invaluable. Bryant contends that although classical ballet remains predominantly white and Eurocentric, companies like Dance Theatre of Harlem and Ballethnic Dance Company and emerging black ballet aesthetics like Mendiani en pointe and Hiplet make the art form “Afrocentric which pulls from communities that are urban and reflects the diversity of dancers in the African American community” (Bryant interview 2018s).

Reshaping, reimagining, and redefining the classical ballet space by giving it roots in Afrocentricity creates a space in which blacks can co-exist in the classical ballet space while creating and developing their own systems of classicism. Theresa Ruth Howard contends there is significance in Nena Gilreath and Waverly Lucas branching off from DTH and naming their company Ballethnic (Ballet/Ethnic) taking the black ballet aesthetic and purposely infusing their work with African movement and motifs. Embracing the beauty of diversity in the classical ballet space is to embrace the practices put in place by Katherine Dunham and Arthur Mitchell, in which the ballet—companies and audiences alike—can see the culture, heritage, and ethnicity of black ballet dancers fully represented on major ballet stages.

Chapter IV

Black Ballet Renaissance:

Infusing Africanist Aesthetics Into Reimagined Storytelling in Classical Ballet

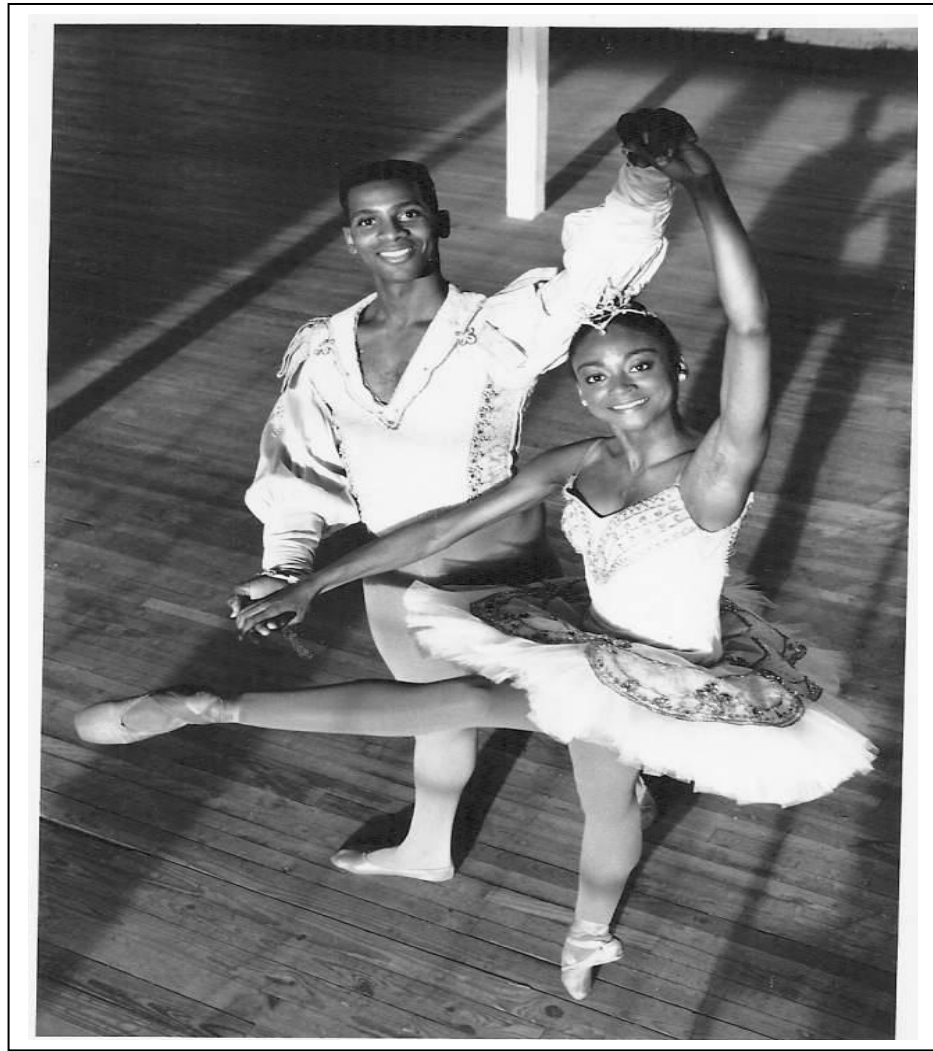


Photo 17. Nena Gilreath and Waverly Lucas, co-founders of Ballethnic Dance Company.
Source: Ballethnic Dance Company archives

Historically Black Ballet Companies (HBBCs) adopted classical ballet forms as a way to depict the African American experience on stage. HBBCs took classical ballet forms and infused them with black aesthetics, providing an Africanist presence in theatrical dance to give representation to black ballerinas, dancers, and choreographers on the ballet stage. Dance educator Nailah Randall-Bellinger notes that “beyond the black vernacular,” white ballet companies, choreographers, and audiences were “exposed to black ballerinas” (Randall-Bellinger Interview 2019). As a result, black companies created space for their own works to be presented on stage. In a critical inhabitation of these forms, these ballet companies created classical ballet works while producing decidedly black productions. Drawing from these forms, these companies created works they felt connected to by infusing their own experiences, aesthetics, and culture into the art form. These companies not only embraced European aesthetics and classicism, but they infused European aesthetics with Africanist aesthetics to create original story ballets. Randall-Bellinger explains that in addition to borrowing from the classical ballet codification of movement, black ballet dancers found it necessary to “include their voice by giving ballet a more personal interpretation of who they were” (Randall- Bellinger Interview 2019).

Creative visionaries transformed the stage and ushered in what I call a “Black Ballet Renaissance” which included rich storytelling through the art of ballet. Included in this renaissance are original stories developed by First Negro Classic Ballet, New York Negro Ballet, Dance Theatre of Harlem, and Ballethnic Dance Company. To gain a fuller understanding of the importance of these companies, one must look at their original ballet works, but also at their reimagined storytelling in the narratives of ballets like *Giselle* and

The Nutcracker through cultural reproductions of what I refer to as “Southern Ballets,” that is, ballets that depict black Southern living.

In this chapter, I look at why these ballets were situated in the South and how African American culture was used. Drawing inspiration from Southern black culture, these productions brought Africanist aesthetics into reimagined stories in classical ballet by connecting ballet to the “souls of black folk.” I also make a comparative analysis of how the black ballet aesthetic is used to create these reimagined classical ballet stories. I will analyze the *Mardi Gras* ballet (1957) produced in the “Classic Black” era, as well as DTH’s *Creole Giselle* (1984) and Ballethnic’s *Urban Nutcracker* (1992). I look at *Creole Giselle* and *Urban Nutcracker* as reimagined stories with Southern influences that depict black middle-class and upper-class experiences in the American South. I explore these works as cultural productions, and I argue that their presentation of black life in the South kicks off a Black Ballet Renaissance. Like the Harlem Renaissance, I use the term “black ballet renaissance” to refer to original ballet works and cultural productions created in the twentieth century by black ballet companies and choreographers in which the black experience is explicitly depicted on stage. These works are significant in pushing the trajectory of the black ballet movement. I also dive into both Eurocentric and Afrocentric aesthetics to examine what it means to reimagine the stories of *Giselle* and *The Nutcracker*.

While the storytelling in productions of these ballets reflects the black experience, there are several layers to peel back as I explore the presentation of black culture in these productions. Layers include:

- examining the use of the black body and how the black ballet aesthetic showed up on stage;
- exploring elements of Africanist-inspired themes on stage and how the use of these elements invoked Africanist aesthetics in costumes and music; and
- exploring intra-racial dynamics and relationships on stage.

Depictions of intra-racial class stratification are most noticeable in *Creole Giselle*.

The cultural significance of class stratification in the black community is important as we come to understand that black culture does not reflect only slavery, poverty, the “deeply afflicted,” or “the metropolitan ghetto” (Anderson 181). It is important to note that *Creole Giselle* and *Urban Nutcracker* specifically depicted black middle-class and upper-class society, also called “The Black Elite.” Representation of black elitism on stage is also explored in this chapter to set the stage for the next chapter where I explain why the art of ballet has been embraced by The Black Elite.

Though other ballet productions could, of course, be included, the focus of this chapter is on the specific ballets that include Southern black culture influences. I also briefly explore Ballethnic Dance Company’s *Flyin’ West*. Although it is set in the American West, I bring this ballet into the conversation in order to examine oral history tradition in black culture and how this translated into a cultural ballet production on the concert stage. Black culture is rich with representations of community from all walks of life, this culture are related experiences will be analyzed in this chapter.

Africanist Presence, Stylization, and Cultural Representation in Southern Ballets

When I mention the “Africanist Aesthetic” or “Africanist Presence,” I am specifically referring to Brenda Dixon Gottschild’s terminology that denotes “African-influenced aesthetics, values and practices in performance” (quoted in Kortiz 219). Africanist aesthetics and presence show up on stage in the music, in the setting, and in the cultural representation of black experience that draws from African diasporic influences. When I talk about the “Black Ballet Aesthetic,” I am speaking specifically of the stylization of ballet technique performed by the black dancing body. Africanist aesthetic and presence are more about the representation of black culture in the visual elements of the performance on stage, whereas the black ballet aesthetic is about how ballet technique shows itself on the black dancing body.

While the black ballet aesthetic includes a stylization of classical ballet technique, it also creates a new and unique level of classic ballet. Looking at how black people move within the style of ballet to translate how stories are told on stage using the black dancing body gives it cultural representation. The stylization and use of the black ballet aesthetic in works like the Southern ballets includes: timing change, syncopated steps, affectation in the approach of an arabesque, the timing of *bourrées*, even music choices. Randall-Bellinger notes that when looking at *Creole Giselle* and how the ballerinas moved differently as they tell the story, “we’re looking at how black people move within the constraints of ballet. Yes, ballet is there but the stylization gives it a cultural representation” (Randall-Bellinger Interview 2019).

The “Classic Black” Era and Southern Ballets

The earliest history of “Southern” ballet can be traced back to the original works of the New York Negro Ballet and First Negro Classic Ballet where their “Southern Ballets” were typically set in New Orleans. This is no coincidence, since the resident music composer of First Negro Classic Ballet was Claudius Wilson, from New Orleans. Wilson was an African American composer who wrote music specifically for ballet. Marcus states that Wilson built on the traditions of the Harlem Renaissance, most notably “the search for ethnic identity and heritage in folk and African culture” (“Living the Los Angeles Renaissance 63). Wilson’s background as an African American composer is deeply embedded in Southern black culture. He received his bachelor’s degree in music from Xavier University, a Historically Black College and University (HBCU) situated in New Orleans. HBCUs are immersed with black culture, and Wilson’s roots, combined with his experiences at Xavier, explain the influences that appeared in the music composed for ballets performed by First Negro Classic Ballet and New York Negro Ballet. Wilson was a classically trained musician who integrated African American musical forms including jazz into his compositions. As resident composer for the First Negro Classic Ballet, Wilson composed *Harlot’s House* based on the poem by Oscar Wilde. It was one of Joseph Rickard’s earliest creations for First Negro Classic Ballet, first performed by that company at the Lobero Theater in Santa Barbara in November 1949 (“A New Expression for a New People” 26).

Two other original ballets were performed by New York Negro Ballet that not only fall into the “Southern ballet” category but also reflect the fusion of ballet and African American culture that would later be seen in DTH’s reimagining of *Giselle*. First

was *Raisin' Cane*, performed by New York Negro Ballet in 1957, with music written and played by Claudius Wilson. It was a story ballet in three scenes with choreography by Graham Johnson, and showcases African Americans living in a village outside of New Orleans after the sugar cane harvest. The other ballet was *Mardi Gras*, set in New Orleans and performed by New York Negro Ballet during their tour of Great Britain in 1957.

Mardi Gras, by New York Negro Ballet

The 1957 performance of *Mardi Gras* reflected traces of Dunham-inspired aesthetics. It fuses classical ballet with ritualistic dancing, Afro-Caribbean influences, and New Orleans imagery and was heavily influenced by Katherine Dunham. The ballet was choreographed by Ernest Parham, with music composed by Les Baxter. At the time, Parham was a member of the Dunham Company and utilized influences from Dunham to choreograph the ballet. Dawn Lille Horwitz notes that the ballet included “a prologue, with a bird as the symbol of Mardi Gras; a quadrille; a carnival scene, with a flirt; a love dance; and a ritual led by an ancestral figure and featuring a group possessed” (“The New York Negro Ballet in Great Britain” 327).

Traces of the black ballet aesthetic in *Mardi Gras* were apparent; one reviewer noted the “spectacular agility” of the performances (*Scottish Daily Express* 1957). Agility is one of the stylistic choices often seen in the black ballet aesthetic. Quick and rapid movements executed on pointe in which the performance takes on a different feel and meaning for black dancers. It invokes a feeling in the human spirit that awakens what DuBois called the “souls of black folks.” In black performance, how the dancers move

determines the experience that black audiences (in particular) have; the black experience in performance is about the stirring of the soul. Dixon Gottschild explains that “soul and spirit are *embodied*” and soul represents attributes of the “body/mind that meditates *between* flesh and spirit” (*The Black Dancing Body* 223).

As it relates to black performance, soul and spirit are manifested in the “*feel* of a performance” (*The Black Dancing Body* 223). In ballet performances, the feel of the performance is different for black ballet dancers, which in turn projects to the audience differently than the feel of a performance by a white ballerina or corps de ballet. What distinguishes the two is that soul and spirit are intrinsically embedded in the performance of black dancers, and an instant connection is established because of the way the presentation moves the audience.

In its essence, the *Mardi Gras* ballet invoked both soul and spirit. The dancers in *Mardi Gras* danced with “verve and vitality” which demonstrates the performance’s high energy with a spirit of enthusiasm and vigor. In African American performances, the manifestation of soul is displayed in the energy the performance gives to both the performer and the audience. African Americans embody soul and spirit in all forms of expression, which manifests differently on stage for black performers. Soul and spirit are instinctive in black dancers and both are fundamentally linked to the Africanist aesthetic with a “radical juxtaposition of unanticipated elements,” “polyphony and syncopation,” and “ephebic energy” (*The Black Dancing Body* 223). Whether performing an adagio with slow, breathtaking movement, or high-energy staccato, or allegro movement, black ballet dancers are a visual embodiment of soul and spirit using their bodies to create an extraordinary experience.

Mardi Gras also represents authentic blackness while highlighting classical ballet technique. As one critic noted, Delores Browne “performed her adagio with breathtaking aplomb” (Herring, 27). Browne’s performance in *Mardi Gras* is a visual representation of the black ballet aesthetic in which her adagio performance was considered breathtaking. Calmness and self assurance in her performance presented an innate confidence that was also on display in the presentation of the black ballet aesthetic. Invoking soul and spirit in every performance is an essential part of the Africanist presence and aesthetic displayed in ballets like *Mardi Gras*. Agility, aplomb, grandiosity, and cadence on stage are visual representations and the physical embodiment of soul in the black ballet aesthetic. As far back as the *Mardi Gras* ballet, we can see a visual manifestation of the infusion of this aesthetic on the concert stage.



Photo 18. Delores Browne

Source: *Memoirs of Blacks in Ballet* website: <http://mobballet.org/>

Racist Overtones in Response to *Mardi Gras*

In the same Glasgow (1957) review, the critic wrote: “Like a tribal dance from darkest Africa, the lean-hipped men and wide-eyed women retain their best for their final dance” (Classic Black Archives, NYPL). Later the reviewer said: “It is called ‘Mardi Gras,’ but with the chatter of drums and the haunting loneliness of reed instruments coming back-stage, your thoughts drift to the darkest continent.” In an attempt to praise the ballet for being an “African ballet,” another review referred to dances from “darkest Africa,” which is not only racist but a misinformed attempt to praise the ballet’s “natural exuberance” while injecting “ethnic undertones” (*Daily Record*, 1957).

Mardi Gras was authentically black, but the presentation of blackness on stage to a white audience somehow denoted “darkness.” Interestingly enough, the word “black” is looked at as a dirty word. *Black* is politicized and weaponized against African Americans to the point where some people have stopped using the word altogether. Not only does this speak to erasure, but it reinforces a negative connotation to the word *black*. There is nothing wrong with using the word *black*. Injecting blackness into anything, whether it is art, music, or ballet, not only makes it beautiful but it gives it soul and a stirring of the spirit that is innate in the “souls of black folks.” The use of Africanist aesthetics in *Mardi Gras* actually invoked authentic blackness into ballet on the concert stage. The Glasgow dance critic noted that the “ballet is worth seeing.” However, the reasons are different for a white audience compared to a black audience. For the white audience, it is more about the white gaze; for the black audience, it is about connection to the spirit, seeing something reflective of themselves on stage.

Creole Giselle by Dance Theatre of Harlem

Dance Theatre of Harlem produced its first full-length ballet production of the nineteenth-century classic *Giselle*, reimagined as *Creole Giselle*, in 1984. *Creole Giselle* takes the classical forms of ballet but tells a decidedly black story on stage. Arthur Mitchell took the story of *Giselle* and infused its classicism with Africanist aesthetics to tell the same story. Jack Anderson (dance critic for the *New York Times*), in his book *Ballet and Modern Dance: A Concise History*, notes that *Creole Giselle* “preserves *Giselle*’s traditional choreography, but transplants the action to the Louisiana bayous in the nineteenth century” (Anderson 158). With the help of designer Carl Michel,

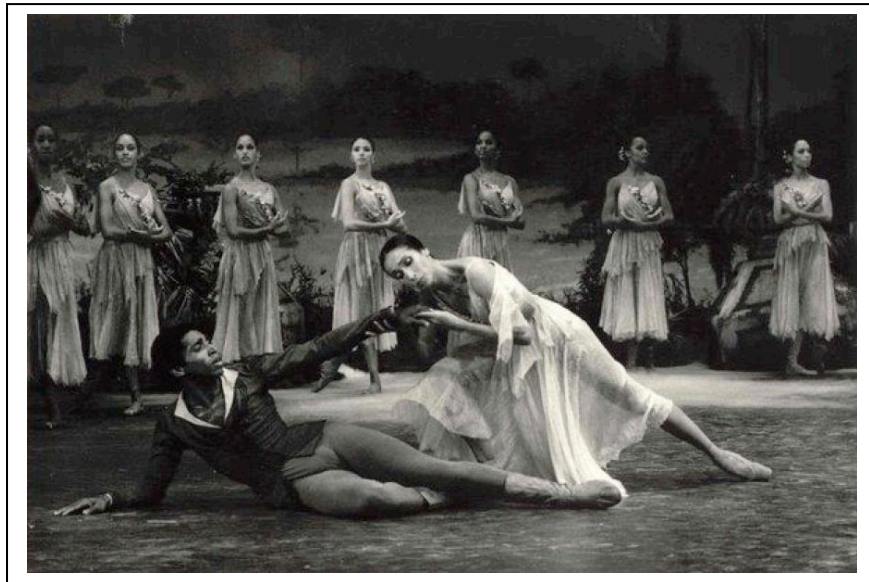


Photo 19. *Creole Giselle*, Virginia Johnson and Eddie Shellman, Dance Theatre of Harlem.

Source: <https://i2.wp.com/outandaboutnycmag.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/5e601487bd0bc3d47209b0aef163463.jpg>

Mitchell envisioned a new story and created new scenery for *Creole Giselle*. He explained his reasoning for situating *Creole Giselle* in Louisiana by saying:

It was a time when social status among freed blacks was measured by how far one's family was removed from slavery: the community's "aristocrats" looked down on those whose immediate family had been enslaved. ("The Arthur Mitchell Project" 2014).

In *Creole Giselle*, the music, and choreography is the same as the original *Giselle* but *Creole Giselle* is essentially a hybrid mix of Eurocentric aesthetics with Africanist aesthetics. It showcases the mix of race and class in black society, provides a social commentary of intra-race relations while also highlighting America's racial divide. So while the choreography, music and narrative elements were the same as the original *Giselle*, the mixture of classical ballet with African American culture now "reclaimed as a part of African American heritage" (Gaiser 270) presented an Africanist presence in which Mitchell made deliberate choices as to how to present black culture in this particular production.

Giselle is a story about haunting and the supernatural. In the original libretto, written by Théophile Gautier with the help of beginning librettist Jules-Henri Vernoy de St. Georges, *Giselle* is a peasant girl who is deceived and betrayed by her lover. She takes her own life only to be resurrected in the after-life by the spirits of other maidens who also have died of a broken heart. *Giselle* was first performed at the Paris Opera on June 28, 1841.

It is important to understand why *Creole Giselle* was situated in New Orleans. In this reimagining, *Giselle* is a free black peasant girl who falls in love with a poor farmer. The setting is a plantation in New Orleans, and the setting in Act Two is a graveyard that is haunted, as it is in the original *Giselle*. In the original *Giselle*, Wilis are supernatural

beings that are part of Slavic culture. In *Creole Giselle*, as a Wilis she is an African American woman transformed into a supernatural on a plantation in New Orleans. The story invokes haunting, spirits, and ghosts, so situating *Creole Giselle* in New Orleans—which has its own history with ghosts, spirits, and magic—was a conscious decision. It is especially significant since African Americans (particularly in New Orleans) have their own unique history with spirits, haunting, religion, and spirituality.

DTH's *Creole Giselle* reflected the experiences of African Americans in the United States. The setting in a Louisiana plantation captured the story of Louisiana's free "colored society" in 1841. According to Alice Dunbar-Nelson, the free black society can be traced back to articles in the Black Code of 1724. Just as there was aristocracy in the European royal courts from which ballet derived, there was also a racial caste system developed among blacks which essentially created an interesting power dynamic within the black community. This resulted in the development of "The Black Elite" which derives from the W. E. B. DuBois' "Talented Tenth" theory.

The power structure of the Black Elite developed out of a caste system that arose among free blacks and slaves. Dunbar-Nelson notes that there was, in the early days of slavery in Louisiana, the "very beginning of that aristocracy of freedom" in which "a free person of color [was] set as far above his slave fellows as the white man sets himself above the person of color" (Dunbar-Nelson 12). The rise of a free black society in Louisiana created an upper class of blacks. As this new class of blacks emerged, other attributes were equally important in creating a racial caste system within The Black Elite in Louisiana. Mixed-race blacks, mulattoes, and Creoles established a hierarchy within

this new class of blacks: Creoles were placed in a category above mulattoes and free blacks. Nelson explains:

It was this Creole element who in 1763 obtained a decision from Louis XV that all mixed bloods who could claim descent from an Indian ancestor, in addition to a white, outranked those mixed bloods who had only white and African ancestors. (Dunbar-Nelson 9).

She further elaborated that the “true Creole is like the famous gumbo of the state—a little bit of everything, making a whole, delightfully flavored, quite distinctive, and wholly unique mixture” (8). *Creole Giselle* is a similar type of mixture, with European dance traditions merged with African diasporic traditions; like a perfect gumbo, it includes a little bit of everything to make a distinctive and unique work of art.

Watching *Creole Giselle* versus *Giselle*, there is a noticeable difference in how the story conveys meaning. In the original *Giselle*, the dancing is beautiful and ethereal; in *Creole Giselle* the dancing takes on other meanings with its beauty and sublime nature when projecting the black ballet aesthetic. The soul and spirit of Virginia Johnson, dancing the role of Giselle, are felt with each move—as if she is carrying the soul and spirit of her ancestors when she rises *en pointe* in an arabesque and holds the position with strength and grace. It is one thing to execute a beautiful arabesque; it becomes totally different when one sees the movement executed by a brown ballerina, in brown tights, wearing brown pointe shoes, elevating to the heavens and reaching for something greater. This is the black ballet aesthetic—projecting the souls of black people.

The grace of a black ballerina takes on yet another kind of feeling in the dance, conveying status, elevation, and transformation in a society that has ignored, rejected, and silenced African Americans. The most powerful scenes and dancing in *Giselle* (either version) involve the Wilis as they convey the transformation into the supernatural. In that

context, particularly for black dancers, dancing the scene of the Wilis in *Creole Giselle* helps the audience embrace the image of a corps de ballet of black ballerinas as ethereal, sublime beings dancing classical ballet roles like Giselle and Myrtha, Queen of the Wilis. The setting is not only haunting and breathtaking, it also showcases the innate strength possessed by each of these dancers as they represent something otherworldly, something bigger than themselves onstage and, yes, offstage. Otherworldly indeed, as the concept of black ballet dancers presented this way was not only a never-before-seen phenomenon, it was a supernatural occurrence, given the fact that decades prior, many critics deemed it unnatural and impossible for black dancers to dance ballet.



Photo 20. *Creole Giselle*, Virginia Johnson, as a Wili, and Lorraine Graves, as Myrtha, Queen of the Wilis

Source: *Pointe Magazine*, <https://www.pointemagazine.com/5580-2412849115.html>

Urban Nutcracker, by Ballethnic Dance Company

Just as DTH reimagined *Giselle* as *Creole Giselle* by situating the ballet in New Orleans and relating it as a story that connects with the African American experience, in 1992 Ballethnic Dance Company reimagined *The Nutcracker* as *Urban Nutcracker*, situating it in Atlanta on Sweet Auburn Avenue. Set in the 1940s, *Urban Nutcracker* tells of an affluent black family in Atlanta, Georgia. This ballet uses the same classical elements from *The Nutcracker* while incorporating imagery and inspiration from Southern middle-class and upper-class black culture. In a 1997 *Dance Magazine* article, Nena Gilreath, co-founder of Ballethnic Dance Company, says the company deliberately used earth-tones—amber and chocolate—for the costumes in *Urban Nutcracker* to “represent the richness of different skin tones rather than everybody being in the pink hues” (quoted in Sims 70).

Creating a ballet in which the dancers and the costumes are reflective of the African American experience opened the door to an entirely new audience, allowing them to see themselves reflected in the characters on stage. Not only could audiences relate to the characters, but they could envision a ballet in which the dancers look like themselves, with the same skin tone and range of colors in the costumes. The beauty of *Urban Nutcracker* is that it maintains the tradition of the original ballet, uses the same Tchaikovsky score, and keeps the choreography true to its classical form. The choreography in *Urban Nutcracker* does not deviate into hip hop or jazz styles.



Photo 21. *Urban Nutcracker*, Ballethnic Dance Company.

Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f1rxFA9Y6as>

Ballethnic Dance Company's *Urban Nutcracker* situates the story in the Sweet Auburn district, giving the ballet roots in African American culture. It maintains the magic of the original ballet with whimsical characters reimagined as Reggae dolls, black Russians, and a black Mother Spice with her young, black spice drops. The Sugar Plum fairy is reimagined as Brown Sugar, and the Cavalier Prince is Chocolatier. The local magician Drosselmeyer is reimagined as Professor Isaac, taking its inspiration from Father Henry J. Bowden, an African American Episcopal priest in Atlanta who served the diocese from 1935 until his death in 1995. Waverly Lucas, co-founder of Ballethnic Dance Company said that after interviewing Father Bowden, he created Act I of *Urban Nutcracker*. When he learned the history of the Yates & Milton drugstore and historic Auburn Avenue in Atlanta, Lucas said he was inspired to model the characters in Act I of *Urban Nutcracker* after the upwardly mobile black families that lived on Auburn

Avenue, which was home to many successful black businesses at the turn of the twentieth century.

According to Alton Hornsby, the Auburn Avenue of the 1950s had a reputation as “the richest Negro street in the world” and was given the name “Sweet Auburn Avenue” by John Wesley Dobbs, a powerful political leader in the African American community. Auburn Avenue’s black business district included the businesses of Atlanta Life Insurance, the second largest black insurance company in the United States, founded by Alonzo Herndon in 1905; the *Atlanta Daily World*, the first black-owned daily newspaper, founded in 1923 by William Alexander Scott II; and Atlanta’s first black-owned office complex, the Rucker Building built by Henry A. Rucker in 1904. Also situated on Auburn Avenue is the birth home of Martin Luther King, Jr. and several black churches including Bethel AME, Ebenezer Baptist, and First Congregational, all of which were instrumental to social justice movements that were born during the civil rights era. Sweet Auburn Avenue was also the epicenter of African American artistry, and home of the Top Hat Club, established in 1938, a venue where many popular music artists performed.

Black Culture and “Southern Ballet”

Why were many of the original ballets from HBBCs situated in the South, resulting in what could be called “Southern ballets”? According to Paul Sites and Elizabeth Mullins, areas of the South produced numerous elite members of African American communities in the 1930s and 1940s, continuing into the late 1970s (Mullins and Sites 271). The South had the largest number of educated free blacks arising out of

the Reconstruction era with the establishment of Historically Black Colleges and Universities by the Freedmen's Bureau and other northern missionaries. Atlanta was one of the major cities with high numbers of educated blacks after the founding of Atlanta University in 1867. Shortly thereafter came Morehouse College (1867), Clark College (1869), Morris Brown College (1881), and Spelman College (1881), creating the Atlanta University Center, the largest consortium of higher education for blacks in the world. Alton Hornsby Jr. notes that the Atlanta University Center "was the catalyst for the development of substantial black middle and upper class in the city" (Hornsby Jr. 12). Education was the gateway for The Black Elite in African American communities, and the rise of an educated class of blacks led to the creation of a hierarchy within the African American community.

Situating scenery and storylines of these original ballets into a Southern milieu allowed for ballet companies to depict aristocracy in black life while also giving the companies the freedom to showcase the sublime ability of black ballet dancers, enabling existence in a space where they were free to embrace the beauty of their own culture and traditions.

Oral History and African Traditions in Ballet

While HBBCs sometimes looked to the South to draw inspiration for their original story ballets, there are also other African diasporic traditions in other original ballets. Dance Theatre of Harlem's *Dougla*, and Ballethnic Dance Company's *The Leopard Tale* and *Flyin' West* are good examples. Most notable are the depictions of liberation in the stories of *The Leopard Tale*.

The use of spirituals and the depiction of slavery, oppression, and the westward journey are very much apparent in the ballet *Flyin' West*, based on African American playwright Pearl Cleage's play *Flyin' West*. Cleage tells the story of former slaves migrating west after the Civil War. Set in 1898, the play uses oral history to convey the story through the play's primary role, Miss Leah, a 73-year-old former slave who seeks to claim her property under the Homestead Act. Using the tradition of oral history, Miss Leah recounts her days in the field and the terrors of domestic abuse.

Ballethnic Dance Company adapted Cleage's play into a ballet using spirituals, the spoken words of poet/writer Maya Angelou, and original music from William Grant Still, an African American composer who achieved significant success during the Harlem Renaissance. He was the first black composer to conduct a major symphony orchestra, the Afro-American Symphony, and his symphonic poem was performed by the Los Angeles Philharmonic in 1936. According to Kenneth Marcus, no other black composer of music achieved that success that Still did at that time.

Ballethnic's *Flyin' West* combines all the classical elements of ballet with African American traditions to create a story that tells the African American experience. Scholar Gail Jackson explains that the use of spirituals and written narratives in early publications of black drama and the use of spirituals in black literature and black performance gave African Americans an outlet to pass on their stories while maintaining their own sense of history and tradition.

The Africanist Presence and Black Ballet Aesthetic in Reimagined Storytelling

Infusing the black ballet aesthetic into *Giselle* and *The Nutcracker* reimagines narrative elements to communicate something different to both white audiences and black audiences. To white audiences, the reimagined ballets communicate that blacks are able not only to perform ballet but also challenges the limited perceptions that many people may have about blacks and African American culture. To black audiences, these ballets present something familiar, something that resonates with the soul, gives feeling and meaning, while representing blacks in this classical art form. Companies who undertook these reimagined ballets made deliberate choices regarding stylization, aesthetics, and the look of the ballet in order to challenge assumptions about blacks on the ballet stage as well as to tell stories of the black experience from their own perspective. Such productions not only show the reach of black culture, but they also depict a specific vision of blacks in ballet. The politics of that vision are the focus of the next chapter.

Shattering the myth of inferiority, the emergence of original ballet productions in HBBCs counteracted the negative images attributed to African Americans. Thus, the responsibility of the black artist in developing black theatre, black ballet, and black arts was to create and develop stories that authentically reflect the black experience. Classical black ballet companies epitomize Du Bois' philosophy of an apostle of truth that uses art to uplift and empower the black community. The emergence of black ballet companies gave rise to the creation and storytelling of black life. Along the way, a black ballet renaissance emerged, in which these companies used ballet to depict stories that represented blacks throughout the African diaspora. An exploration of these gifts gave

rise to a new generation of artistic brilliance in the African American community during the Harlem Renaissance, into the dawning of the Black Ballet Renaissance.

Chapter V

Shattering the Glass Ceiling: Dance Theatre of Harlem, Ballethnic, and Beyond

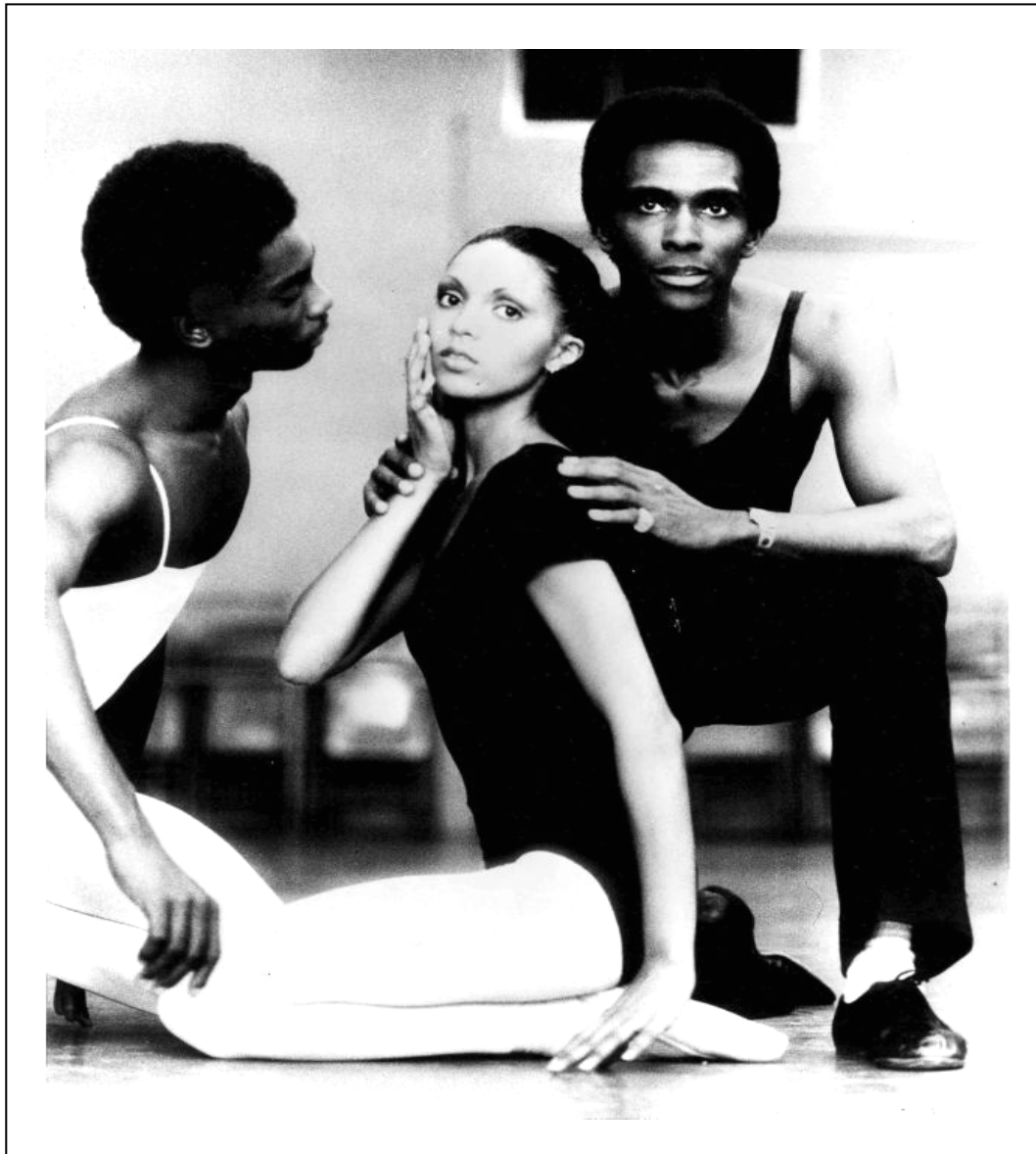


Photo 22. Ronald Perry, Lydia Abarca, and Arthur Mitchell.

Source: Cooper, "Memoirs of Blacks in Ballet," 2017.

As discussed at several points in earlier chapters, ballet is an industry filled with elitism, and this elitism creates a glass ceiling that is difficult for black ballet companies to penetrate. That glass ceiling also hinders black dancers and other blacks from progressing in leadership positions at major ballet institutions. Ballet was and still is seen as a white European aesthetic, which creates a hierarchy in how ballet is defined within the dance world. Visionaries like Arthur Mitchell, Joan Myers Brown, Homer Hans Bryant, Nena Gilreath, and Waverly Lucas have reimagined a space in the classical ballet world in which black ballet dancers are given opportunities to soar beyond the glass ceiling, shattering it in myriad ways as they move upward.

I use the term “glass ceiling” to refer to elitism, omission, and rejection of black people in every aspect of the ballet industry. Even though this glass ceiling remains, black dancers have broken into it, little shards, breaking away, one piece at a time.

Earlier barriers to entry prevented HBBCs from taking their rightful seat at the table. I would say that the gatekeepers in the ballet field—choreographers, critics, artistic directors, and funders—continue to make ballet an elitist industry in which black ballerinas, black ballet companies, and black choreographers are regularly marginalized, excluded, ignored, and left out of the conversation altogether. A ballet mistress at a major ballet company recently confirmed this when she said to me, “Ballet is an elitist field.”

There are many who still hold racist perceptions about blacks in ballet. Systemic and institutionalized racism is prevalent in all aspects of the field, and biases show in various ways, from management roles, to funding support, to ignoring or erasure of black dance history, to the rejection of black bodies in major ballet companies. Finally, there are also socioeconomic ramifications of elitism in the white and black spaces.

In this chapter, I explore financial privilege and white privilege in classical ballet. I draw parallels between the black and white worlds to demonstrate the hierarchical structure of ballet and the ensuing elitism. Elitism in the white world of ballet essentially creates a glass ceiling for blacks that has proven difficult to penetrate. In contrast, elitism in the black community has been used to challenge how blacks were perceived by the white world and to promote economic advancement with the establishment of sustainable black companies. I also explore body aesthetics, black and white, by examining pointe work and drawing parallels between pointe work and elitism. Finally, I define what it means to be a professional ballet company and I situate HBBCs as professional black ballet companies that employ black ballet dancers. I examine systemic racism in the ballet field and how elitism in white spaces has had an adverse effect on the preservation of HBBCs.

Elitism, Economic Advantage, and Financial Privilege

Exploring elitism in ballet presents many complexities, beginning with the denial that elitism exists. To be sure, there are adverse effects of elitism, especially as it affects HBBCs. There is also an embraced elitism even among members of the upwardly mobile black community (The Black Elite) who are often revered and celebrated in HBBCs. In the early twentieth century, many blacks embraced DuBois' "Talented Tenth" theory, which some would say helped in the creation of black elitism in the African American community. Exploring the complexities of elitism in the ballet world and in the African American community illuminates how HBBCs have navigated elitism in both realms, as well as the challenging limitations that have been placed on them.

Elitism in ballet developed almost inevitably because of its origins in the aristocratic environment of monarchs, with royal courtiers as the ballet audience in nineteenth century France. In the twentieth century, similar kinds of elitism appeared, fed by emerging financial and racial barriers. Historically, those who trained in ballet, particularly in the United States, were from wealthy families and only the privileged were afforded access to obtaining quality training and opportunities enabling them to pursue sustainable careers in the ballet field. White ballet dancers fared better professionally—not because of talent but because of access to the tools and resources that enabled them to cultivate their talent. Financial privilege afforded wealthy whites and the Black Elite opportunities to study ballet. While those with financial advantage in upper-class black society had the means to access ballet, white privilege in combination with wealth afforded white dancers even more advantage.

It must be said that elitism does not exist solely in the white ballet world. It also exists in the African American community where ballet is embraced as a sign of upward mobility, and access to study and training in ballet is considered a privilege. Ballet is often regarded as an elite art form, so studying ballet is an elite achievement among the black bourgeoisie. DuBois laid out his criteria for art, carving out a social class of African American elites who would emerge as a special elite class of blacks and lead the African American community to upward mobility. DuBois stated that African Americans must have a “cultured aristocracy” (“Talented Tenth” 359). Thus, an elite social stratification emerged in which the bourgeoisie became recognized as The Black Elite. Studying ballet and dancing on pointe falls into the category of having arrived in the social class of African American elitism. Those with financial resources had the means to

access ballet. Many black ballet dancers, often from low-income families, were prevented from entering the field because they lacked financial resources. Ballet requires considerable financial resources and commitment in order to become successful, thus making the field accessible only to an elite few—usually white, very few black.

Pointe Shoes, Elitism, and Barriers of Entry

Other barriers of entry for blacks in ballet prevented African Americans with financial means from advancing in the art form. Racial privilege in ballet as it relates to the white body aesthetic, specifically when it comes to the anatomy of the feet and dancing on pointe, has been used as a barrier of entry into ballet. Something as simple as pointe shoes are a sign of elitism in ballet. Dancing *en pointe* is the highest level of achievement in classical ballet. Thus, when a dancer receives pointe shoes, it is not just a sign of technical proficiency, but also a sign of status, symbolizing that the dancer has arrived and has been elevated above other members. Dancing advanced repertoire is a dancer's highest goal, so when she receives pointe shoes, it immediately implies an air of superiority. It is no coincidence that the word *elevé* in ballet means to rise, since training *en pointe* consists of executing multiple *elevés* in order to gain strength in the legs and feet. Italian performers were the first to introduce toe dancing, and when it was first introduced it was considered a stunt move. Homans attributes toe dancing to Amalia Brugnoli who was described as performing a spectacular trick in which “dancers blithely hiked themselves onto the tips of their toes and perched there for all to see” (Homans 138).

It was the Italian ballerina Marie Taglioni who refined toe dancing into the poetic, ethereal, elegant expression that is now pointe dancing, giving the illusion that the dancer is floating on the stage. This illusion of elevation inadvertently became a barrier to access because dancing *en pointe* was viewed as a symbol of an angelic, white, Eurocentric aesthetic. Seeing a black ballerina *en pointe* became a source of contention because audiences could not envision a black dancer in the realm of ethereal dancing *en pointe*. Metaphorically, dancing *en pointe* is a symbolic representation of class, elitism, and superiority in ballet. The status that came with being given pointe shoes was yet another sign of elitism in ballet and another way to discriminate against black ballerinas.

Elitism and the Politics of a White Body Aesthetic

There are other barriers facing black dancers who want to enter ballet. Beyond skin color, feet and hips have also been weaponized against the black dancing body and have resulted in ballerinas not advancing to pointe work. The white body aesthetic, specifically prejudices about the anatomy of black feet and the ability to dance *en pointe*, have been used as another barrier to entry into ballet. White ballet teachers, choreographers, and companies have long held the view that black ballet dancers' feet were too flat for pointe work, harking back to the days when a high arch was revered, almost obligatory, in ballet. The anatomy of a black dancer's feet and hips have also been cited as reasons why black dancers cannot advance in ballet or into pointe work. Some choreographers and teachers believe that black ballet dancers have flat feet or a too-low arch. Most believe that the ideal ballet foot has an even toe length, which creates stability when balancing on pointe. They also have rubber-band-like flexibility combined with the

ability to stretch or point from the ankles through the feet and still maintain a high arch. Feet with limited flexibility can only partially pull their arches up or the arches become rigid and can't move at all, which results in flat feet. I believe—and it has been proven—that elitist expectations of a particular body aesthetic begin with training and execution in pointe work.

Ballet epitomizes the white aesthetic. Adrienne McLean notes that dancers within the art form are only acceptable if the body can be “made to appear white” (McLean 56). This is where body politics come into play—dehumanizing the black body and creating an image of white perfection that excludes black bodies. Dance educator Nailah Randall-Bellinger explains that “creating the ‘other’ dehumanizes that which is not white” (Randall-Bellinger Interview 2019). Because major ballet companies search for perfection, their idea of perfection is an inherent rejection of the black dancing body. Ballet is such a refined technique and there is a constant search for refining and perfecting the technique. This search for perfectionism adversely affects black ballet dancers because the Eurocentric aesthetics of classical ballet have often been used against black dancers to reject them from the art form. Their bodies and skin tone do not fit into the perfectionism of the Eurocentric aesthetic, so black ballet dancers rarely have the opportunity to rise to the top.

In recounting her time at the Atlanta Ballet, Nena Gilreath remembers having to powder her skin so she could look sufficiently pale to fit the aesthetics of the Wilis in *Giselle*. Many African American ballet dancers also resorted to “passing”—light-skinned black dancers posing as a white person—in order to be accepted in major companies and fit into the aesthetic of those companies. Gilreath said it was difficult to conform to the

uniformity of the company; she said some black dancers even resorted to wearing two pairs of pink tights in an effort to make their legs look whiter. The history of African Americans passing as white is well documented, along with the history of lighter-skinned African Americans in major ballet companies. Companies who do accept light-skinned African Americans then laud themselves as a symbol of progress in the advancement of black dancers in American ballet. Prevailing attitudes among white audiences, choreographers, and artistic directors is that a black body in the line throws off the look in the corps de ballet. Such attitudes continue to promote ideas that dehumanize the black body. Although dancers like Misty Copeland are enjoying fanfare and adulation in the ballet world, the historical achievements of other chocolate ballerinas are neglected. A good example is Lauren Anderson, who made history in the Houston Ballet as one of the first African American ballerinas to become a principal at a major ballet company.

In the racial politics of ballet, white is considered ethereal, angelic, and pure while black is considered dirty, dark, and evil. Applying the white aesthetic more literally to the racial politics of ballet, the color black does not fit into this white vision of beauty. In traditional European ballets, the story ballets use the color black to denote evil. Story ballets like *Swan Lake* and *The Sleeping Beauty* the color black is applied to the evil character. The character Odile is the “bad” swan in *Swan Lake* and her costume is all black; the main character Odette, the “good” swan, is a white swan maiden, wears white, and the heroine of the story. This is just one example how the color black is used in ballet, by associating black as “bad.”

The Politics of Excluding Black Ballerinas

Gilreath said that one of the challenges she faced as a dancer in a major ballet company was that people in leadership at the companies did not see her as one of them. Gilreath says: “It’s a kind of self-identification, so when someone looks at me, they don’t see themselves, so they don’t see my ability to progress to the highest level” (Gilreath Interview 2018). They simply see a black dancer.

One example is American Ballet Theatre’s Negro Unit, which was established to segregate black dancers rather than give them full opportunity to perform. This reflected life at a time in America when blacks were physically segregated from whites in every aspect of living and the climate of the country at the time reflected a strict racial divide. Another example was the Negro Leagues in baseball—a separate unit created to keep black players separate from their white counterparts. During this time many dance companies segregated their performers, and black dancers in major ballet companies were often given token roles. Randall-Bellinger explains, “When we look at the journey of black ballerinas who became modern dancers by default, we have to consider the racism that existed within the construct of a ballet dynasty” (Randall- Bellinger Interview 2019). Agnes de Mille created the ballet *Obeah (Black Ritual)*, but she, too, held racist views regarding blacks in ballet, dismissing Katherine Dunham as a ballet dancer when Dunham sought the lead role in the ballet. Katherine Dunham, Judith Jamison, Carmen de Lavallade—all three were skilled dancers capable of succeeding as ballerinas. De Lavallade is just now becoming recognized for her work with American Ballet Theatre, but because of racist attitudes prevalent at the time, she had to explore other opportunities outside of ballet to gain further success as a dancer.

Black ballerinas like Lydia Abarca-Mitchell, Janet Collins, Virginia Johnson, Debra Austin, and Lauren Anderson have historical achievements in the world of ballet, but little or no recognition for their accomplishments. Abarca-Mitchell pointed out that as black ballet dancers in the Dance Theatre of Harlem “we did not have the fanfare” (Abarca Interview 2018). Yet, she was not only one of the first ballerina to dance for a major ballet company (prima ballerina with Dance Theatre of Harlem), she was also the first African American ballerina to be featured on the cover of *Dance Magazine*. This is why black ballet companies like Dance Theatre of Harlem and Ballethnic Dance Company are so important because they enable dancers like Lydia Abarca-Mitchell to be at the forefront. Additionally, characters like Brown Sugar in Ballethnic Dance Company’s *Urban Nutcracker* provide more opportunities for black ballerinas to shine on stage.

The world is satisfied with having only one black ballerina represented at a time, but by preserving the legacy of black ballet companies, the world gets to see an array of black ballerinas featured on a national stage. Many U.S. ballet companies are satisfied with having just one or two black dancers, whether in the corps de ballet, or as a soloist, or as a principal dancer. In the major ballet companies, if there is at least one black dancer in the corps de ballet, their diversity quota is filled. Waverly Lucas says: “When you have black ballet companies, it balances that out” (Lucas Interview 2018). Black ballet companies provide opportunities for professional black ballet dancers to be represented in lead roles in original ballet productions.

Reframing and Re-situating Ballet

Dixon Gottschild notes that black influences in black choreographic works are often regarded as black dance; likewise, black ballet companies are often categorized as black dance companies by white audiences “because, in general terms, the White public considers that, *regardless of style, Black dance is what Black dancers do*” (“Black Dance and Dancers and the White Public” Dixon 118). Dixon Gottschild argues that being labeled as black dance relegates black companies “to a separate status that classifies them as different, somehow, from the New York City Ballet” (118). Arlene Croce asserts that “subdivision is one way of holding on to the exclusivity of an art form” (quoted in Dixon, 1990, 117) and the gatekeepers of ballet have held onto the exclusivity of ballet by excluding the works of black ballet choreographers and relegating their works into a subdivision of “other.”

Works created by HBBCs are, at their core are ballet works, and should be classified as such. Randall-Bellinger suggests that if we examine the word “ballet,” for example in Italian and Spanish, its simple meaning is “to dance.” Likewise, the word “classical” can mean classical Indian dance, classical African dance, and other forms of classical dance, not just ballet. Somehow the word “ballet” has become synonymous with “a Louis XIV idea of dance” (Randall-Bellinger interview 2019). She also points out “how confining” and “restrictive” Europeans have made the term “ballet,” in which the traditional Eurocentric definition of the word has been used as a means of exclusion.

Similarly, the word “classical” (as a derivative of “classic”) and “classic” mean timeless. Who decided that ballet can only be viewed through a European lens and is therefore classical or classic or timeless? If Africanist elements are added when

presenting a ballet, it can still be classical. It is still, at its core, *ballet*, it is still timeless.

Dixon Gottschild stated:

Black dancers—or, more clearly, dancers of African and African diasporan lineage . . . who openly embrace Africanist dance forms, face the added jeopardy of a language that basically states that one form is normative and others inferior and/or auxiliary (19).

Adding stylistic elements, black storytelling, and black bodies does not make it any different than traditional ballets that have been heralded as classical. In a panel held at Lincoln Center, a DTH dancer told the assembled group that Arthur Mitchell encouraged his dancers to be not just classical but classic. Mitchell's definition of classic means timeless. Black ballet companies are just as timeless, and their works are classic. It has been the gatekeepers of ballet who have defined what is "classical," and they have created an elitist, hierarchical structure that excludes the work of HBBCs.

White Privilege and Elitism in Ballet

White privilege and elitism shows themselves in white ballet companies in ways that lead to exclusion. White choreographers like George Balanchine and William Forsythe have added elements of style to classical ballet to create an aesthetic that is still defined as classical ballet. If black choreographers do the same, it is referred to as "other." This denotes privilege afforded to white dancers and choreographers in the ballet world. Choreographers like Forsythe stylize movements by using pop culture music, and it is acclaimed as revolutionary; black ballet choreographers do the same thing but do not receive the same recognition. Even though a work like *Creole Giselle* uses ballet vocabulary and is revolutionary, it is not viewed as a great work. So, the question remains: why?

Randall-Bellinger explains that even though Balanchine had his own style and aesthetic, “that stylization can be attributed to the black moving body” (Randall-Bellinger Interview 2019). She asks: if Balanchine’s stylization and choreography are acceptable enough in the classical ballet canon, then why not the black ballet aesthetic? If we include Balanchine’s work we must also include the work of Arthur Mitchell and everyone else in classical ballet who used/uses stylization. Randall-Bellinger argues “it’s not just white people that used a stylization of classical ballet” (Randall-Bellinger Interview 2019). This paradox—that white choreographers can add certain elements of style to classical ballet to create an aesthetic and it is classified as classical ballet, but when black choreographers do the same it is considered “other”—showcases white privilege, elitism, and exclusion that is still prevalent in the ballet world today. Black ballet works created by HBBCs and black choreographers are, at their core, ballet works and should be classified as such.

Defining a Professional Ballet Company

What defines a professional classical ballet company? How do ballet companies sustain themselves—especially Historically Black Ballet Companies? There are business logistics and standards that must be considered when striving to sustain a professional ballet company, such as a company’s ability to pay its dancers and the number of dancers under contract. Waverly Lucas defines a professional ballet company as an entity in which the dancers are paid regularly to perform. Lucas, a former DTH dancer, said that Arthur Mitchell was instrumental in helping to crack the glass ceiling when DTH became one of the first black ballet companies to employ black ballet dancers and give them

professional contracts. In addition, the dancers take ballet classes and train regularly, and they perform classical ballet repertoire. A professional ballet company has an elite level of training, and dancers are employed based on their technical proficiency and artistry. Nena Gilreath explains that a professional ballet company establishes a methodology and standards for training, rehearsals, and quality of dance provided by the company.

Gilreath defines professionalism as having a core group of people who maintain a high degree of commitment and devotion to their craft, so when performances take place, there is a level of consistency that professional dancers put forward because it is their job to do so. A professional black classical ballet company possesses all the qualities of a professional classical company, and black companies should rival any major ballet companies while holding themselves to the same standards of excellence.

Economic Aspects of the Glass Ceiling

Additional factors make up the glass ceiling in ballet, but funding is at the top of the ladder. Lucas said there is “a perpetual ceiling as far as funding” for black ballet companies (Lucas Interview 2018). Funders often cap the amount of their contributions to black ballet companies, while other funders do not give at all to black companies. For example, a major ballet company like Boston Ballet can partner with well-known corporations via sponsorships and partnerships. Such funding opportunities are virtually nonexistent to black ballet companies. Even obtaining loans has been difficult, putting these companies at a disadvantage. Without funding resources, it is difficult for HBBCs to retain quality dancers because of limited funds to pay them. Gilreath said that while there are many black ballet dancers now receiving ballet training, it remains a fact that

there are still not enough job opportunities for black dancers “because there’s only so many dance positions available” (Gilreath Interview 2018).

Dance Theatre of Harlem stopped functioning as a dance company in 2004 because it was burdened with a \$2.3 million-dollar deficit and could not financially sustain the company. While its ballet school remained open, the professional company went on a hiatus for nine years, finally reopening once again in 2013. During the hiatus, company dancers began leaving for other companies, and DTH lost many of its valuable dancers. Lucas said the hiatus created a void in the ballet space that had earlier balanced ballet and showcased black dancers. Whereas before people could look to DTH for unique presentations of beauty in classical ballet, the *New York Times* noted that “there was a gaping hole in the classical ballet space when the company disappeared” (Kourlas). Preserving the legacy of black ballet companies is virtually impossible without funding support, and for this reason there are few classical black ballet companies. Lucas acknowledges:

We have so few black dance companies, and those black dance companies do not receive anywhere near the support of other organizations. It puts us at a different position with challenges that other organizations never have, but being held to standards that are greater than theirs to prove that we belong. (Lucas Interview 2018)

Ballethnic Dance Company is one of the few professional black ballet companies that remained viable after DTH went on hiatus. Ballethnic employs black ballet dancers, gives them contracts, and provides opportunities for its dancers to dance classical ballet repertoire on a major dance stage. Lucas notes that without DTH, the number of jobs available at the time for African American ballet dancers diminished because mainstream

white companies only offered jobs to a select few black ballet dancers, especially ballerinas.

It should be noted that even today major ballet companies limit the number of opportunities for black ballerinas, with black male ballet dancers given more roles and opportunities than black ballerinas. This is why companies like DTH and Ballethnic are especially important because they provide a space in which black ballerinas can dance a variety of roles and be paid to do so.

Economic Empowerment in the Arts

When W. E. B. DuBois convened the NAACP annual conference in 1926, he revered the black artist and was most concerned with using art to change the public perception of African Americans while also giving black intellectuals and artists a space to create art that reflected the experiences of black people. Arthur Mitchell, Nena Gilreath, and Waverly Lucas understood the importance of using art as one validation of black humanity and a powerful tool for bringing economic, political, and intellectual uplift into the building of the African American community. The support of the African American community for the arts allows artists to present images and stories of the black experience while at the same time laying a solid foundation for inclusion, economic empowerment, and sustainable black institutions that thrive within the community. Black artists who create their own opportunities have not only taken the reins to control their own destiny, but they are essentially adding cracks in the glass ceiling by embracing the power of art as an economic and artistic tool for advancement.

While ballet has been embraced as a sign of upward mobility in the black community, HBBCs face continuing discrimination as they strive to penetrate the ballet industry. Gilreath believes that

most of the barriers that black ballet companies, of which there are very few, have faced are resource and resource development” She noted further that even with the greatest commitment, dedication, desire, and talent, the resources often are not available for black ballet companies (Gilreath Interview 2018).

Furthermore, it is the racist attitudes of the ballet world that have hindered the success of Historically Black Ballet Companies. Many are unable to attract high-level, visible board members who can raise money to support the companies. Most black ballet companies do not have full-time development directors, so the task often falls to support staff who go with the development director into the community seeking to raise funds.

In other instances, donors and benefactors have traditionally shut these companies out from receiving funding even as they provide resources, funding, and support to major white ballet companies. This, in and of itself, showcases the level of elitism faced at the highest levels of the ballet world because funding sources play a major role in the sustainability and survival of these companies. Lack of resources and funding continues to create the highest glass ceiling facing HBBCs.

Black Ballet Dancers and Assimilation

In addition to financial challenges, classical black ballet companies must compete with major ballet companies for quality black ballet dancers. Once a dancer reaches a certain level of training they seek to assimilate into a major company, which of course has an effect on the pool of talent available to HBBCs. The desire to assimilate threatens

the legacy and sustainability of black companies. Many African Americans subscribe to the idea that the white man's water is better and colder, while failing to realize the gems that reside within their own community. This is particularly true for black ballet dancers, and it is why many black ballet companies have struggled to keep their doors open. Both Lydia Abarca-Mitchell and Nena Gilreath assert that many of the well-trained black ballet dancers receive their foundational ballet training at black ballet academies like DTH and Ballethnic. But once they achieve some level of recognition, they neglect to attribute their training to the black companies because they believe that having the name of a major ballet company on their resume looks better. Dancers want to prove that they can succeed in the major companies as well because even if they have had success in a black company, they want the stamp of approval from major white ballet companies. If DTH and Ballethnic were able to retain the dancers they develop and train, these companies would thrive at the same level as the major companies.

Some dancers from the "Classic Black" era expressed concerns that black ballet companies were inferior or subpar to the elite standards of ballet. One dancer even questioned if black ballet companies had any impact at all. Some ballet dancers from that era were not happy that companies were labeled "all black." I believe it is important to recognize the rich history and legacy that these companies have created, and the ballet world (and the art world as a whole) needs to explore how their contributions have helped to inspire a generation of black dancers while also providing opportunities to black ballet dancers—opportunities that many of them never would have received at the major ballet companies.

There are those, both black and white, who believe that just because something is black, it is inferior. DuBois noted:

Colored people have said: 'This work must be inferior because it comes from colored people.' White people have said: 'It is inferior because it is done by colored people.' But today there is coming to both the realization that the work of the black man is not always inferior. ("The Study of the Negro Problem 17).

Perceptions of "black" or anything associated with "blackness"—even within the black community—is often met with a perception of inferiority. Dance companies that reflect the beauty and accept the uniqueness of black dancers are not inferior. They are gems to be cherished and treasured. A corps de ballet with all black dancers—with all of the black bodies in line—showcases the different shades of black bodies.

Conforming to the standards of ballet is a challenge for every ballet company, but most especially for black ballet companies, because they are trying to achieve the aesthetic or the appeal of a European standard even as the ballet world "completely ignores the intrinsic beauty that we have within ourselves" (Lucas interview). That was the genius of Dance Theatre of Harlem and Ballethnic Dance Company. Both companies showcased the beauty of black ballet dancers, the beauty of various skin tones, the beauty to be found in African diasporic traditions, and the beauty of presenting classical ballet that uses black dancers who are just as technically proficient as their white counterparts.

Summary and Conclusion: Preserving the Legacy Tree



Photo 23. Rhonda Sampson and Homer Hans Bryant.

Source: Courtesy of Homer Bryant Collection.

The pioneering efforts of all black ballet companies have yielded a training ground for black ballet dancers who might otherwise be shut out of major companies. This legacy and history of HBBCs must be preserved, maintained, and revered—not as something to be ashamed of, but as something to be embraced, that captures all the unique history of dance and traditions from the African diaspora. It is the ability of these companies to create and choreograph original stories that captures the essence of the black experience.

Katherine Dunham laid the foundation by planting what I call the “legacy tree” out of which grew black ballet companies of the “Classic Black” era. She was considered “other” in both the ballet and modern dance worlds, and she was rejected. In response, she created The Dunham Technique, put it on the black body and created something that black dancers could do. Today, people recognize the importance of her work. Randall-Bellinger noted that Dunham was a magnificent dancer who would have done extraordinarily well in either/both realms of ballet and modern. Yet she was excluded from both, and “because she wasn’t considered either, she made a lane for herself” (Randall- Bellinger Interview 2019).

Nena Gilreath said Dunham showed that black dancers can have classical training but still move in a stylish, organic, creative, and exciting way. Her dance style was dynamic, but it had elements of classicism within it. Embracing an Africanist presence while embodying the black ballet aesthetic, Dunham showed “you can be the classical, you can be the sassy, you can bring in Caribbean influences, you can bring in all the influences of everything we are as black people” (Gilreath interview 2018).

Dunham laid the groundwork when she started the first black ballet company in America, leading to the creation of ballet companies of the “Classic Black” era, including American Negro Ballet, First Negro Classic Ballet, and New York Negro Ballet. Dance Theatre of Harlem and Ballethnic Dance Company followed as professional black ballet companies that employed dancers and produced professional ballet productions for the stage. Waverly Lucas said, “Arthur Mitchell was instrumental in giving us a fundamental base and understanding of who we were as African American classical artists” (Lucas Interview 2018).

In 2014, Ballethnic spearheaded the “Arthur Mitchell Project,” an initiative in which Arthur Mitchell went to Atlanta to hold master classes and workshops with Ballethnic dancers. The co-founders of Ballethnic understand the historical importance of leaving a legacy and continuing to promote and cultivate the African American experience through classical dance as an important mission of the company. Gilreath says “unless people are seeing things in a culturally diverse setting, there is always going to be that glass ceiling” (Gilreath Interview 2018). She contends that is why there is a need for companies like DTH and Ballethnic, so they can tell stories in which African Americans hold powerful leading roles—in story ballets that have traditionally reflected lead characters with Eurocentric aesthetics.

Preservation and Survival

Dance derivative from the African diaspora is communal, spiritual, ancestral; it is about survival. My aim in this thesis was to tell the story of hidden figures in ballet, because I believe it is time for black ballet companies be examined and included in the

full conversation of American ballet history. Incorporating a lineage that began with Katherine Dunham, then moved to Classic Back, to Arthur Mitchell and Dance Theatre of Harlem, to Ballethnic Dance Company—situating their histories in the greater context of classical dance in the United States—gives voice to a legacy that is often just a historical footnote.

Katherine Dunham and Arthur Mitchell provided nourishment and substance for the legacy tree to grow and for black ballet companies to thrive. As a result, several branches of that tree have emerged in the form of other classical black ballet companies that have grown to sustain themselves while bearing the fruits of the tree. According to Lucas, both Dunham and Mitchell were the inspiration behind the founding of Ballethnic Dance Company, which is now successfully sustaining itself in the twenty-first century. HBBCs are important because they create a balance and provide opportunities for black ballet dancers in a space where doors would otherwise be closed to them. In no way do I wish to ignore the struggles of black dancers in other genres like modern, tap, jazz, or hip hop. However, I do mean to show that African American dancers have been present in all genres of dance.

Today, scholars can track the origins and development of black ballet companies, their technical development, and the original story ballets that have emerged from these companies. The history of ballet's emergence in America is fundamentally linked to the history of black dance. In order to tell the story of ballet's lineage in America, a reimagining of how ballet history is presented is essential to ensure that all perspectives are given voice in the entire canon—not only in American ballet history but also in Africana studies, American history, and African American history . My goal was to

reimagine this lengthy history by providing an Afrocentric perspective in the retelling of ballet's history in America.

Epilogue

When I first started work at the Boston Ballet, I was excited to be working in the ballet industry. But it was my personal encounter with the glass ceiling during my work at the Boston Ballet that helped to fuel this research. As a result of my own experiences, I have developed a uniquely personal perspective.

Boston Ballet is a major ballet organization, with access to major funding and resources. Yet there are no black people in leadership positions within the organization. In my own experience at the company, I have observed a lack of leadership roles afforded to blacks in the organization, and in my own struggle for equity within the organization I have come to realize just how thick the glass ceiling is.

As of this writing, there is only one black ballerina in the company who is (ironically) a former Dance Theatre of Harlem principal dancer. Chyrstyn Fentroy joined the Boston Ballet in 2017—the first black woman to join in over a decade. She was promoted to second soloist in 2018, but she still has not been given the role of principal dancer. In the announcement of her arrival to Boston Ballet, it was noted that “black ballerinas in major dance institutions, though more numerous (and more visible) than in prior decades, remain relatively anomalous” (Gray).

The glass ceiling represents not only a lack of opportunities for black ballet dancers, but also the exclusion of original works by black ballet companies. It ignores the work of these companies, and instead gives preference to major ballet companies that are

seeking funding sources, organizational support, and support infrastructures—all vital in the sustainability of these companies. When I worked and danced at Ballethnic Dance Company, I saw up close how it managed to produce high-quality work—on par with that of Boston Ballet and other major ballet companies—with limited resources. That helped me realize that the glass ceiling is perpetual, that it exists not just for black dancers but in every aspect of ballet. In the organizational structures of major ballet companies there is a lack of black artistic directors, executive directors, and choreographers, as well as an overall lack of opportunity for black dancers to achieve higher positions within the ballet field.

My research leads me to conclude that the reason why many of the Historically Black Ballet Companies of the twentieth century have been largely ignored, omitted, or erased from the ballet canon—as well as a broad acceptance of a black ballet aesthetic—is because of elitism and the hierarchical structure in the ballet field, which has created this glass ceiling in every aspect of the industry. From Katherine Dunham’s *Ballet Nègre*; to the “Classic Black”-era companies like American Negro Ballet, First Negro Classic Ballet, and the New York Negro Ballet—they all have encountered the glass ceiling, unable to acquire sufficient organizational support, funding, and resources to sustain themselves. Yet, like black swans, they stood out. Each produced excellent technicians and laid the foundation for companies like Dance Theatre of Harlem and Ballethnic Dance Company to succeed and sustain themselves, even with limited resources and support.

In August 2018, I attended a panel discussion at the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, titled “50 Years of Dance Theatre of Harlem: Experiencing History

on Pointe and in Color.”⁶ I also observed and enjoyed a performance by the Dance Theatre of Harlem at the Lincoln Center. It would be the last time I would interact with Arthur Mitchell. About a month later, he passed away. But his legacy to me is rich, with one thing standing out. He said to me: “Make your presence known in the world . . . stand tall . . . don’t look down . . . speak with confidence. . . . There are millions of people in the world and you have to stand out.” He said it sternly, but his words came from a place of care and support. He wanted me to be confident in my ability to present my work and to stand with pride. He gave me the same kind of correction years ago when I took his master class at Ballethnic Dance Company as part of the Arthur Mitchell Project. He commanded total confidence from all of his dancers.

This thesis is personal and scholarly at the same time. It is personal because the experience is mine; it is scholarly because I am documenting information that has been hidden, ignored, minimized, or erased. As a black ballerina, my experience at Ballethnic Dance Company, coupled with my current work at the Boston Ballet, has given me a unique perspective for this research. It also has fueled my desire to intervene in the field, share my love of the art form, and give voice to the hidden figures in ballet.

I used the words *Black Swans* in the title of my thesis because typically the black swan has been viewed as a black sheep, an ugly duckling, a castaway, an underdog. In *Swan Lake* the black swan is an evil character. Association with the word “black” often carries a negative connotation. But I know that black swans are not awkward, ugly ducklings. Black swans stand out. They make their presence known. In a lake full of swans that blend together with each other, the black swan stands out, commanding

⁶ For more information see: <https://www.facebook.com/events/169171863749092/> Accessed 25 March 2019.

attention. It is a graceful being and, as Dixon Gottschild notes, “the black swan preempts the white one” (*The Black Dancing Body* 7). Australian biologist Tim Low describes the swan as “a symbol of what is impossible” (Low). The black swans in this thesis represent the black ballerinas, black choreographers, and black ballet companies who have achieved what would at times seem impossible in the world of ballet. They have remained in the shadows for far too long, and it is time to bring their stories into the light. These hidden figures in American ballet history are black swans. They are original, they are unique, and they have challenged the ballet landscape in myriad ways, putting cracks in the glass ceiling that hopefully will soon shatter and make room for an equitable existence for all dancers.

Thus, with the confidence, assurance, and the grace of a black swan, and taking Mr. Mitchell’s advice to heart, I present this research as my way to stand out, to make my presence known in the world as I place into the dance canon my perspectives on the history of blacks in the ballet field, a history that deserves—no, requires—preservation.

Bibliography

- Acocella, Joan Ross. "The Negro Leagues." *Village Voice* (19 March 1996), p. 85.
- . "Van Grona and His First American Negro Ballet." *Dance Magazine*, 56 (1982): 22.
- Allen, Zita. "Arthur Mitchell's Dance Theatre of Harlem: The Early Years." Exhibition at Columbia University, 2018.
<https://exhibitions.library.columbia.edu/exhibits/show/mitchell/dance-theatre-of-harlem--compa/zita-allen>.
- American Negro Ballet Company scrapbook. New York Public Library. Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, n.d. <http://archives.nypl.org/scm/20924>.
- Anderson, Jack. *Ballet and Modern Dance: A Concise History*. Trenton, NJ: Princeton Book Co., 1986.
- Aschenbrenner, Joyce. *Katherine Dunham: Dancing a Life*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2002.
- Baker, Houston A. *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance*. University of Chicago Press, 1987.
- Barzel, Ann. "The Lost Ten Years: The Untold Story of the Dunham-Turbyfill Alliance." *Dance Magazine* (December 1983): 93-98.
- Beckford, Ruth. *Katherine Dunham: A Biography*. With Foreword by Arthur Mitchell. New York: M. Dekker, 1980.
- Bolshoi Ballet website. <http://www.bolshoiballetacademy.com/bba-programs/bolshoi-ballet-academy-teachers-certification-program>.
- Bradburn, D. "Black Ballet Archives Go to Huntington-Library + Record of the First-Negro-Classic-Ballet Founded In 1946." *Dance Magazine*, 69 (1995): 34.
- Bryant, Homer Hans. Personal interview with the thesis author, 23 July 2018.
- Castaldi, Francesca. *Choreographies of African Identities: Negritude, Dance, and the National Ballet of Senegal*. Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2006.

- Chapman, John. "The Aesthetic Interpretation of Dance History." *Dance Chronicle*, 3 (1979): 254–274.
- Charry, Eric. *Mande Music: Traditional and Modern Music of the Maninka and Mandinka of Western Africa (Chicago Studies in Ethnomusicology)*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000.
- Clarke Forum for Contemporary Issues. "Brenda Dixon Gottschild." 2009. Retrieved from <http://clarke.dickinson.edu/brenda-dixon-gottschild/>.
- Cohen, Joshua. "Stages in Transition: Les Ballets Africains and Independence, 1959 to 1960." *Journal of Black Studies*, 43/1 (2012): 11-48.
- Cohen, Selma Jeanne, and Katy Matheson. *Dance as a Theatre Art: Source Readings in Dance History from 1581 to the Present*. Second ed. Princeton, NJ: Princeton Book Co., 1992.
- Cooper, Caryn. "Broadway World Interview: Launch of Memoirs of Blacks in Ballet with Theresa Ruth Howard." *Broadway World*, 1 March 2017. <https://www.broadwayworld.com/bwwdance/article/BWW-Interview-Launch-of-Memoirs-of-Blacks-in-Ballet-with-Theresa-Ruth-Howard-20170301>.
- Craine, Debra, and Judith Mackrell. *The Oxford Dictionary of Dance*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010.
- "Creole Giselle." Dance Theatre of Harlem, Arthur Mitchell, Artistic Director. 2005. DVD.
- Darling, Lynn. "Harlem's Prima Ballerina Abarca on the Brink of Stardom." *Washington Post*, 4 October 1979. https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/lifestyle/1979/10/04/harlems-prima-ballerina-abarca-on-the-brink-of-stardom/5463caf0-254b-41e4-bd7b-852b365a94ab/?utm_term=.4dbe16257766.
- Deans, Joselli A. "Before the Dance Theatre of Harlem: Delores Browne—Black Ballerina" In *Dancing the African Diaspora*. Thomas F. DeFrantz, ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019. <https://exhibitions.library.columbia.edu/exhibits/show/mitchell/dance-theatre-of-harlem--compa/-before-dance-theatre-of-harlem>.
- . "Black Ballerinas Dancing on the Edge: An Analysis of the Cultural Politics in Delores Browne's and Raven Wilkinson's Careers, 1954-1985." Ed.D. Diss., Temple University, 2001. ProQuest Dissertations and Theses.
- . Personal interviews with the thesis author, January 13, 2019 and February 17, 2019.

- Dee Das, Joanna. *Katherine Dunham: Dance and the African Diaspora*. Chapter 2: "Becoming a New Negro in Chicago." Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017.
- DeFrantz, Thomas F. *Dancing Revelations: Alvin Ailey's Embodiment of African American Culture*. "Revelations 1962," 3-25. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006.
- DeFrantz, Thomas F. "Composite Bodies of Dance: The Repertory of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater." *Theatre Journal* 57 (Dec., 2005): 659-678. https://www.jstor.org/stable/25069735?seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents.
- . (ed.). *Dancing Many Drums: Excavations in African American Dance*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2001.
- Dixon, Brenda. "Black Dance and Dancers and the White Public: A Prolegomenon to Problems of Definition." *Black American Literature Forum*, 24 (Spring 1990): 117-123. DOI: 10.2307/2904070.
- Dorris, George. "Balanchine on Stravinsky." *Opera Quarterly*, 22 (2006): 136-138.
- DuBois, W. E. B. "Criteria of Negro Art." *The Crisis*, 32 (October 1926): 290-297.
- . "Krigwa Players Little Negro Theatre." *The Crisis*, 32 (1926): 134.
- . "The Study of the Negro Problem." *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 11 (1898): 1-23.
- Dunbar-Nelson, Alice. "People of Color in Louisiana." Chapter 1. In Sybil Kein, editor. *Creole: The History and Legacy of Louisiana's Free People of Color*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2000.
- Dunning, Jennifer. "Classic Dance and Race: A Story Still Unfolding." *New York Times* 24 February 1996. <https://www.nytimes.com/1996/02/24/arts/classic-dance-and-race-a-story-still-unfolding.html>. (Accessed 21 February 2019.)
- Emery, Lynne Fauley. *Black Dance from 1619 to Today*. Trenton, NJ: Princeton Book Co., 1988.
- Gaiser, Carrie. "Caught Dancing: Hybridity, Stability, and Subversion in Dance Theatre of Harlem's *Creole Giselle*." *Theatre Journal* 58 (2006): 269-289.
- George, Nadine A. "Dance and Identity Politics in American Negro Vaudeville: The Whitman Sisters, 1900-1935." In Thomas F. DeFrantz, ed. *Dancing Many Drums: Excavations in African American Dance*. Madison: University of Wisconsin, 59-79.

- Gilreath, Nena. Personal interview with the thesis author, 7 July 2018.
- Gottlieb, Robert. *George Balanchine: The Ballet Maker*. New York: HarperCollins/Atlas Books, 2004. Print.
- Gottschild, Brenda Dixon. *The Black Dancing Body: A Geography from Coon to Cool*. First ed. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003.
- . *Joan Myers Brown and the Audacious Hope of the Black Ballerina*. New York: Palgrave, 2012. Print.
- Gray, Arielle. "Chrystyn Fentroy—First Black Woman to Join Boston Ballet in a Decade—Debuts as Snow Queen in *The Nutcracker*." WBUR Radio, 30 November 2018. <https://www.wbur.org/artery/2018/11/30/chrystyn-fentroy-the-first-black-woman-to-join-boston-ballet-in-a-decade-debuts-as-snow-queen-in-the-nutcracker>. Retrieved 25 March 2019.
- Green, Dan S. "W. E. B. DuBois 'Talented Tenth': A Strategy for Racial Advancement." *Journal of Negro Education* 46 (1977): 358-366.
- Greene, Jonnie. "Classic Black: Dancers and Dance." *Dance Magazine*, vol. 71, no.2, 1997, pp. 86–91.
- H.H. "Beat Out That Jungle Rhythm." *The Daily Record*. 1957, pp. 9.
- Hering, Doris. "Reviews." *Dance Magazine*. Vol. 32 no.8, 1958, pp. 27.
- Homans, Jennifer. *Apollo's Angels: A History of Ballet*. New York: Random House, 2010.
- Hornsby, Alton. *Black Power in Dixie: A Political History of African Americans in Atlanta*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2009.
- Horosko, Marian. "In the Shadow of Russian Tradition." *Dance Magazine*, 1971. Audio CD, NY Public Library. <https://www.worldcat.org/title/interview-with-maria-nevelska/oclc/79681894>. (Accessed 22 February 2019.)
- . Interview with Maria Nevelska. Audio CD, NY Public Library. <https://www.worldcat.org/title/interview-with-maria-nevelska/oclc/79681894>.
- Horwitz, Dawn Lille. "A Conversation with Sylvester Campbell." *Ballet Review* 42 (2014): 24–34.
- . "The New York Negro Ballet in Great Britain." In Thomas F. DeFrantz, ed. *Dancing Many Drums: Excavations in African American Dance*. Madison: University of Wisconsin, 2001: 317–339.

- Howard, Theresa Ruth. Personal interviews with thesis author, February 2, 2019, and February 19, 2019.
- Jack, Damien. "George Balanchine, 1904-1983." Dance Heritage Coalition, 2012. Available from: http://www.danceheritage.org/treasures/balanchine_essay_jack.pdf. Retrieved 21 March 2019.
- Jackson, Gale. "The Way We Do: A Preliminary Investigation of the African Roots of African American Performance." *Black American Literature Forum* 25 (1991): 11–22.
- Jackson, Naomi. "African-American Dance: Researching a Complex History." *Dance Research Journal*, 28 (1996): 107–110. doi:10.1017/S0149767700004472.
- Kein, Sybil (ed). *Creole: The History and Legacy of Louisiana's Free People of Color*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2000.
- Kisselgoff, Anna. "Harlem Company to Share Stage with City Ballet." *New York Times* 3 May 1971. <https://nyti.ms/1QDaTAy>. Retrieved 23 March 2019.
- Koritz, Amy. Book Review of Brenda Dixon Gottschild, *Digging the Africanist Presence in American Performance: Dance and Other Context*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1996. In: Koritz, *Canadian Review of American Studies*, 27 (1997): 219–221.
- Kourlas, Gia. "Arthur Mitchell: Ballet's 'Grandfather of Diversity'." *New York Times*, Obituary, 5 January 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/05/arts/dance/arthur-mitchell-harlem-ballet-lenfest-center.html>.
- . "A Phoenix is Rising on Point." *New York Times*, 5 April 2013. <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/04/07/arts/dance/dance-theater-of-harlem-starts-new-life.html>
- Kriegsman, Alan M. "Harlem Ballet Cancels Season." *Washington Post*, 1 February 1990. https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/lifestyle/1990/02/01/harlem-ballet-cancels-season/b4d1ca31-04e7-49c9-bfed-9b7f5d9cf76a/?utm_term=.baf64eb7d4d
- Laemmli, Whitney E. "A Case in Pointe: Romance and Regimentation at the New York City Ballet." *Technology and Culture*, 56 (2015): 1–27.
- Lewin, Yaël Tamar, and Janet Collins. *Night's Dancer: The Life of Janet Collins*. Indianapolis: Wesleyan Publishing, 2012.
- Long, Richard. *The Black Tradition in American Dance*. New York: Smithmark, 1995.

- Low, Tim. "Black Swan: The Impossible Bird." *Australian Geographic*, 11 July 2016. <https://www.australiangeographic.com.au/blogs/wild-journey/2016/07/black-swan-the-impossible-bird/>. Retrieved 25 March 2019.
- Lucas, Waverly. Personal interview with the thesis author, 7 July 2018.
- Maher, Erin K. "Ballet, Race, and Agnes De Mille's Black Ritual." *Musical Quarterly*, 97 (2014): 390–428.
- Marcus, Kenneth H. "Dance Moves. An African American Ballet Company in Postwar Los Angeles." *Pacific Historical Review*, 83 (2014): 487–527.
- . "Living the Los Angeles Renaissance: A Tale of Two Black Composers." *Journal of African American History* 91 (2006): 55–72.
- . "A New Expression for a New People - Race and Ballet in Los Angeles, 1946-1956." *Journal of the West*, 44 (2005): 24–33.
- McLean, Adrienne L. *Dying Swans and Madmen: Ballet, the Body, and Narrative Cinema*. Camden, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2008.
- Meglin, Joellen A. "Ruth Page: Early Architect of the American Ballet." Dance Heritage Coalition, 2012.
- Merriam-Webster Dictionary, online. Definition of Classicism. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/classicism>.
- Mitchell, Arthur. "Ethnicity and Classicism: A Beautiful Connection." *Journal of Education*, 166 (1984): 144–49.
- . "Arthur Mitchell Project at Ballethnic Dance Company," 18 September 2014.
- Mitchell, Lydia Abarca. Personal interviews with the thesis author, 13 April 2013 and 17 July 2018.
- Nevelska, Maria. Interview, 1971. <https://www.worldcat.org/title/interview-with-maria-nevelska/oclc/79681894>.
- New York Negro Ballet, performance of *Mardi Gras*. Review: "Now—Ballet and Variety All in One Show." Glasgow: Scottish Daily Express, September 9, 1957.
- Osumare, Halifu. Personal interview with the author, 14 August 2018.
- Randall-Bellinger, Nailah. Telephone interview with the author, 10 March 2019.

- Reynolds, Nancy. "Dancing On Balanchine's Stages: Arthur Mitchell In The New York City Ballet," 2018. Available from: <https://Exhibitions.Library.Columbia.Edu/Exhibits/Show/Mitchell/Arthur-Mitchell-Artist/-Dancing-On-Balanchine-S-Stage>. Retrieved 21 March 2019.
- Rodriguez, Judith Green. "Ballethnic Explores Issues of Identity Two Premieres Full of Energy, Unity." *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, 15 October 1999: G3.
- Schwartz, Peggy, and Murray Schwartz. *The Dance Claimed Me: A Biography of Pearl Primus*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2011.
- Shook, Karel. *Elements of Classical Ballet Technique: As Practiced in the School of the Dance Theatre of Harlem*. Trenton, NJ: Princeton Book Co., 2004.
- Sims, Caitlin. "The Mouse Queen's Revenge' or the Other Nutcrackers." *Dance Magazine* 71 (1997): 68-71.
- Sites, Paul, and Elizabeth I. Mullins. "The American Black Elite, 1930-1978." *Phylon*, 46 (1985): 269-80.
- Slater, Jack. "'They Told Us Our Bodies Were Wrong for Ballet'." *New York Times*, 27 Apr. 1975: 111.
- Swisher, Viola Hegyi. "First Negro Ballet Upsets the Stereotype Attitudes." Newspaper clipping. Classic Black Archives, New York Public Library. Undated.
- Talton, Benjamin, and Joshua Cohen. "Stages in Transition." *Journal of Black Studies*, 43 (2012): 11-48.
- Time Magazine*. "Black, Black." November 1937.
- Tobias, Tobi. "Hunt the Slipper—Taglioni's Shoe: Memory & Memorabilia." *Dance Now*, 12 (2003): 47-53.
- Tomlinson, Mel. Personal interview with the thesis author, 13 April 2013.
- Turbyfill, Mark. "Paintings." *Chicago Review*, 28 (1977): 33-40.
- . "Shall We Present to the World a New Ballet?" *Abbott's Monthly*, 1 (1930): 62.
- Vaganova, Agrippina. *Basic Principles of Classical Ballet*. 1948. New York: Dover Publications, 2012.
- Verdy, Violette. *Giselle: A Role of a Lifetime, With the Text of the Ballet Scenario Adapted by Théophile Gautier*. New York: M. Dekker, 1977.

- von Grona, Eugene. "Eugene von Grona Talks About Struggles to Get Black Ballet Started in America." Interview, National Public Radio, 2 July 1980.
<https://www.worldcat.org/title/eugene-von-grona-talks-about-struggles-to-get-black-ballet-started-in-america/oclc/931749005>.
- Wisner, Heather. "Grace under Fire." *Dance Magazine*, 75 (2001): 66–67.
- Witchel, Leigh. "Notes on Arthur Mitchell Coaching the Pas De Deux in 'Agon': Another in a Series of Reports on the George Balanchine Foundation Interpreters Archive Project." *DanceView*, 19 (2002): 11–15.
- Young, Harvey. *The Cambridge Companion to African American Theatre*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013.
- Zeller, Jessica. "Shapes of American Ballet: Classical Traditions, Teachers, and Training in New York City, 1909-1934." Ph.D Diss. Ohio State University, 2012.
https://etd.ohiolink.edu/!etd.send_file?accession=osu1336152425&disposition=inline.

APPENDIX

PHOTO GALLERY



Mildred B. Haessler Ballet Company, Chicago, Illinois, founded 1937.

Source: Classic Black Exhibition, NY Public Library.



20th Anniversary Program, June 16, 1957
Mildred B. Haessler Ballet Company, Chicago, IL

Source: NY Public Library for the Performing Arts



Mildred B. Haessler, founder of Haessler Ballet Company,
 assisting Bernice Harrison and Janetta Webb, June 1957.

Source: NY Public Library for the Performing Arts

-4-

<p style="text-align: center;">CARTER and CARTER REALTY and BUILDERS</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Featuring Beautiful Monterey and King's Lake Resort Lots 2 Hr. Drive from Chicago 6209 Langley Avenue MU. 4-7408</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">CONGRATULATIONS In Your Twentieth Year A FRIEND</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">Greetings from DR. FREDERIC WATSON</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">BEST WISHES IN THE YEARS TO COME A FRIEND</p>
<div style="display: flex; justify-content: space-between;"> <div style="width: 45%;"> <p>Our Hearty Congratulations on this 20th Anniversary presentation MR. and MRS. JESSE THORNTON</p> </div> <div style="width: 45%;"> <p>Our Compliments To RUTH MEADORS from LESLIE and EVELYN MEADORS</p> </div> </div> 	
<p>Allen J. Erdrie TELEPHONE DELAWARE 7-5332 Ted Johns Stanley L. Moss</p> <p style="text-align: center;">OLD TOWN FLOWER & PATIO SHOP</p> <p>1822 NO. WELLS CHICAGO 14, ILLINOIS</p>	<p style="text-align: right;">FAXFAX 4-6000</p> <p style="text-align: center;">JULIAN A. BLACK, INC. REAL ESTATE & INSURANCE</p> <p>550 E. 61ST STREET CHICAGO 27, ILLINOIS</p>
<p>Best Wishes on your 20th Anniversary Presentation DR. and MRS. WILLIAM H. HUDSON</p>	

Program celebrating 20th Anniversary of Haessler Ballet Company, page 4.

Source: NY Public Library for the Performing Arts



First Negro Classic Ballet Company, founded by Joseph Rickard.
Rickard is center, back row.

Back row (l-r): Theodore Crumb, Graham Johnson, Rickard, Jimmy Truitte, Roy Carrington
Front row (l-r): Bernice Harrison, Bobby Reinhardt, Jeanie Thompson, Perlie Hollins,
and Ruth Ann Giles.

Source: Classic Black Exhibition, NYPL for the Performing Arts



American Negro Ballet, circa 1939.
Edith Ross, Berle Murray, and Lavinia Williams

Source: NYPublic Library




American Negro Ballet Company
March 19, 1967

Source: Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, NYPL.

Saturday, April 29, 1939

REVUES

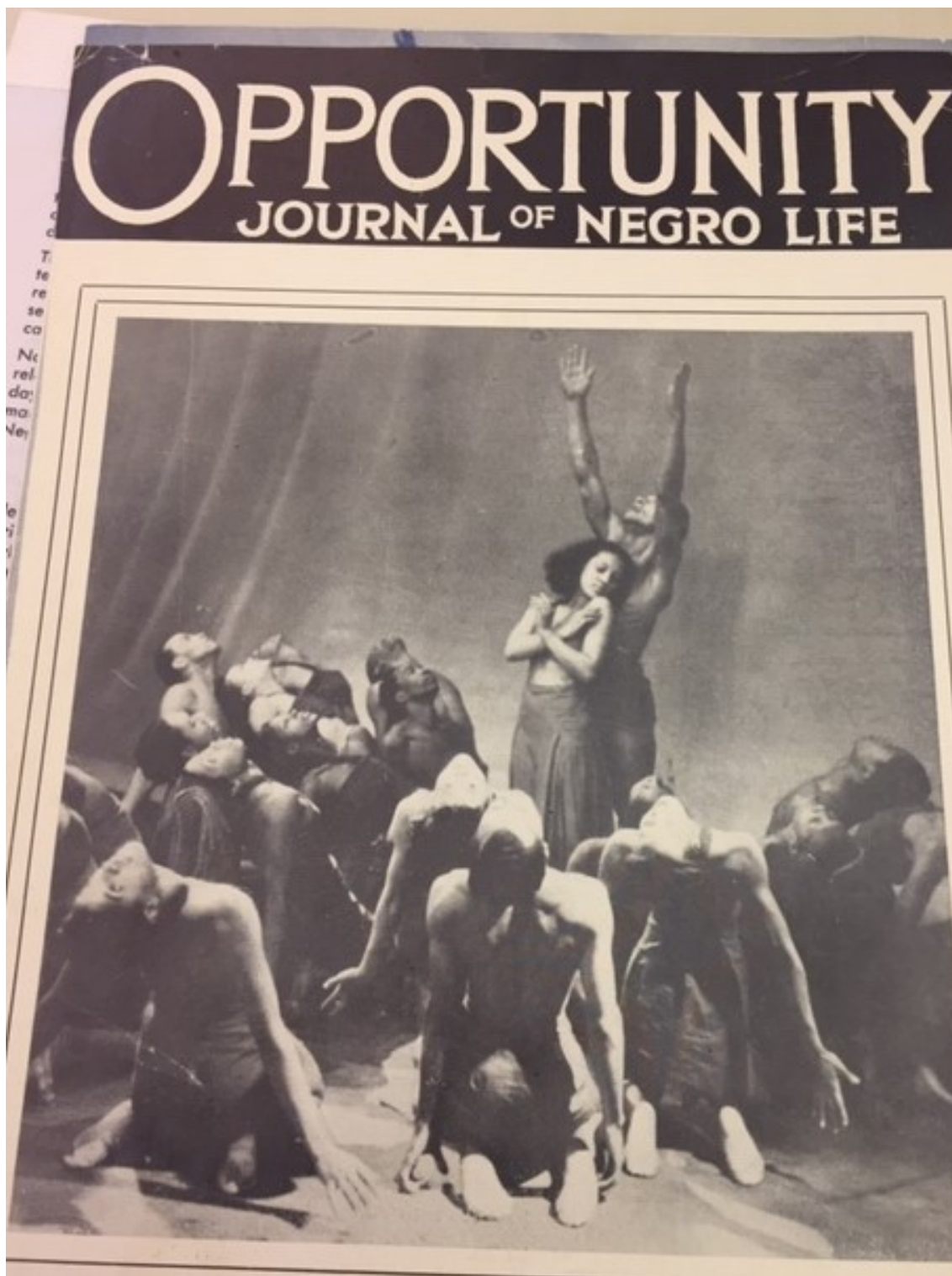
Ballet Dancers Attract Crowd



These talented girlies are members of Von Grona's American Negro Ballet, now stirring comment in appearances at the Apollo theatre where, with the 14 others in the unit, they are replacing the regular house chorus. Left to right they are: Edith Ross, Beryl Murray and Lavina Williams.

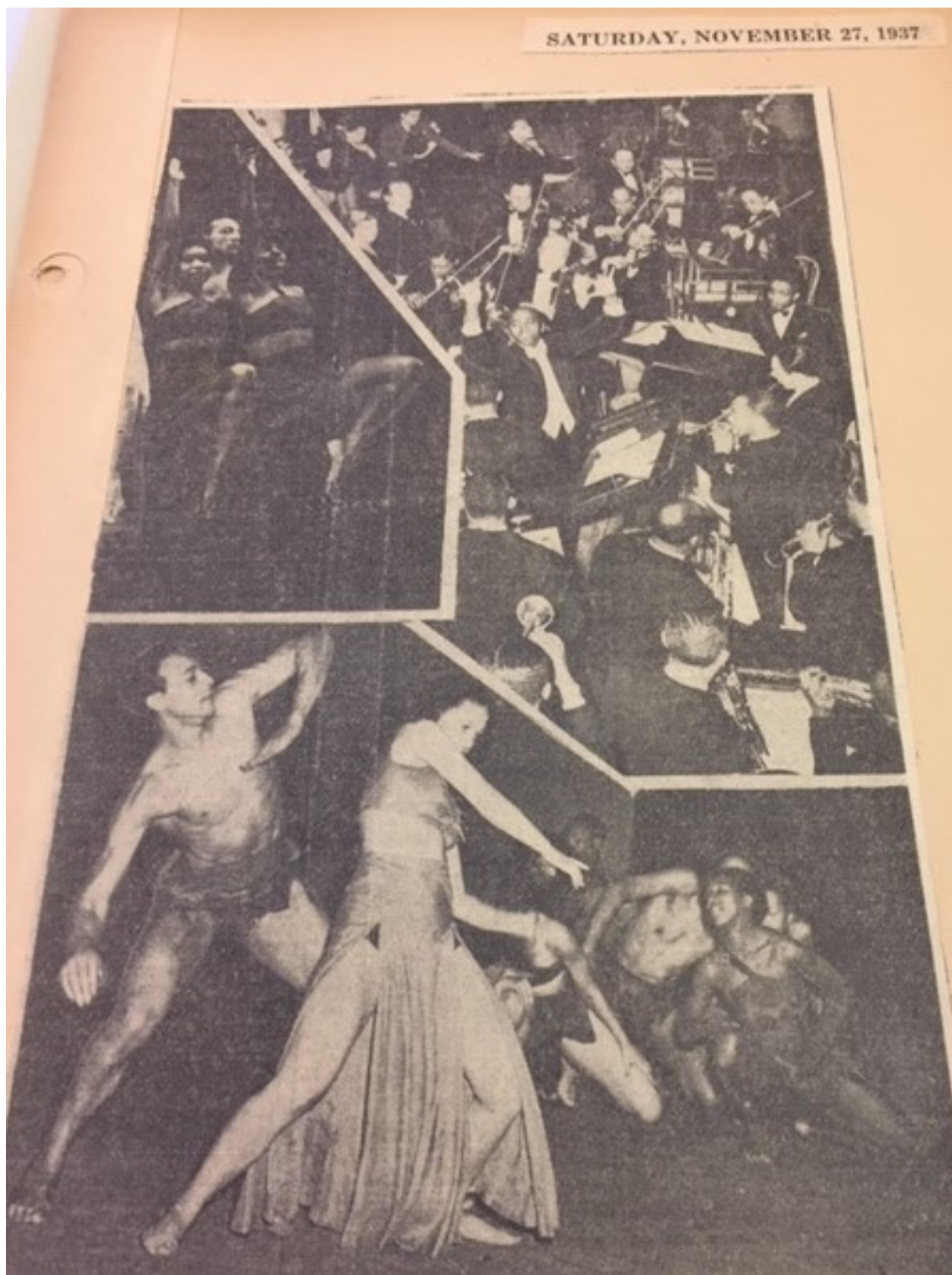
Newspaper article re American Negro Ballet, April 29, 1939
l-r: Edith Ross, Beryl Murray, Lavinia Williams

Source: Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, NYPL.



American Negro Ballet
Cover of *Opportunity: Journal of Negro Life* (1923-1949)

Source: Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, NYPL.



American Negro Ballet, in performance with live orchestra, Lafayette Theatre.
November 27, 1937.
bottom center: Lavinia Williams,

Source: Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, NYPL.

BALLET

This audience of balletomanes and critics has journeyed to Harlem and payed \$5 a ticket to see the first American Negro Ballet.



Here are members of the ballet taking a curtain call at the end of the performance. The audience was enthusiastic.

American Negro Ballet Company
top: Lafayette Theatre audience
bottom: ballet company members acknowledging applause for premiere

Source: Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, NYPL.

This Thing Called Rhythm



Pictured above is the American Ballet group, which is under the direction of Eugene Von Grona, the ballet master. The group is planning a very ambitious program that may take them into the Metropolitan Opera House. Plans are also on foot to show the group in Europe.

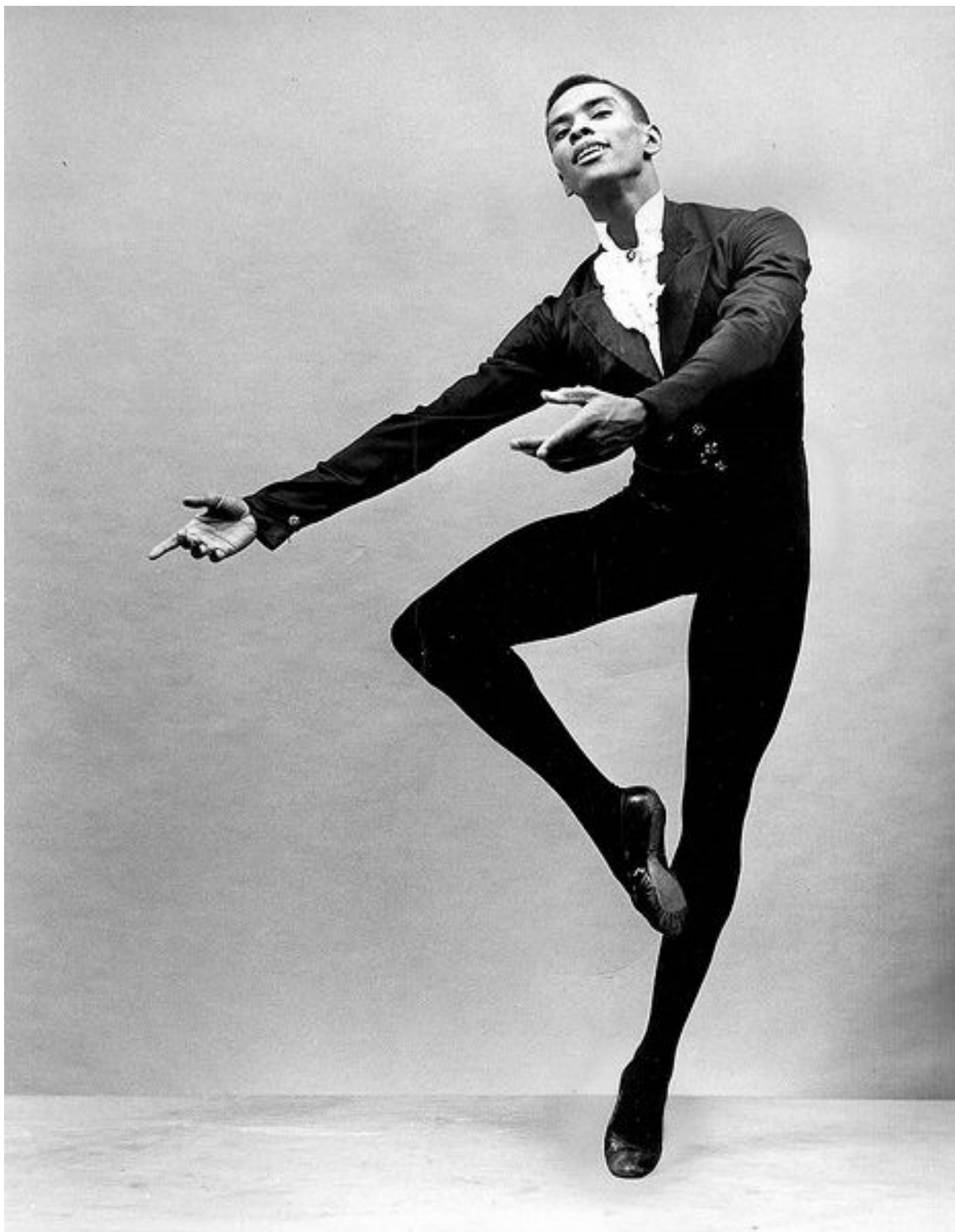
American Negro Ballet Company

Source: Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, NYPL.



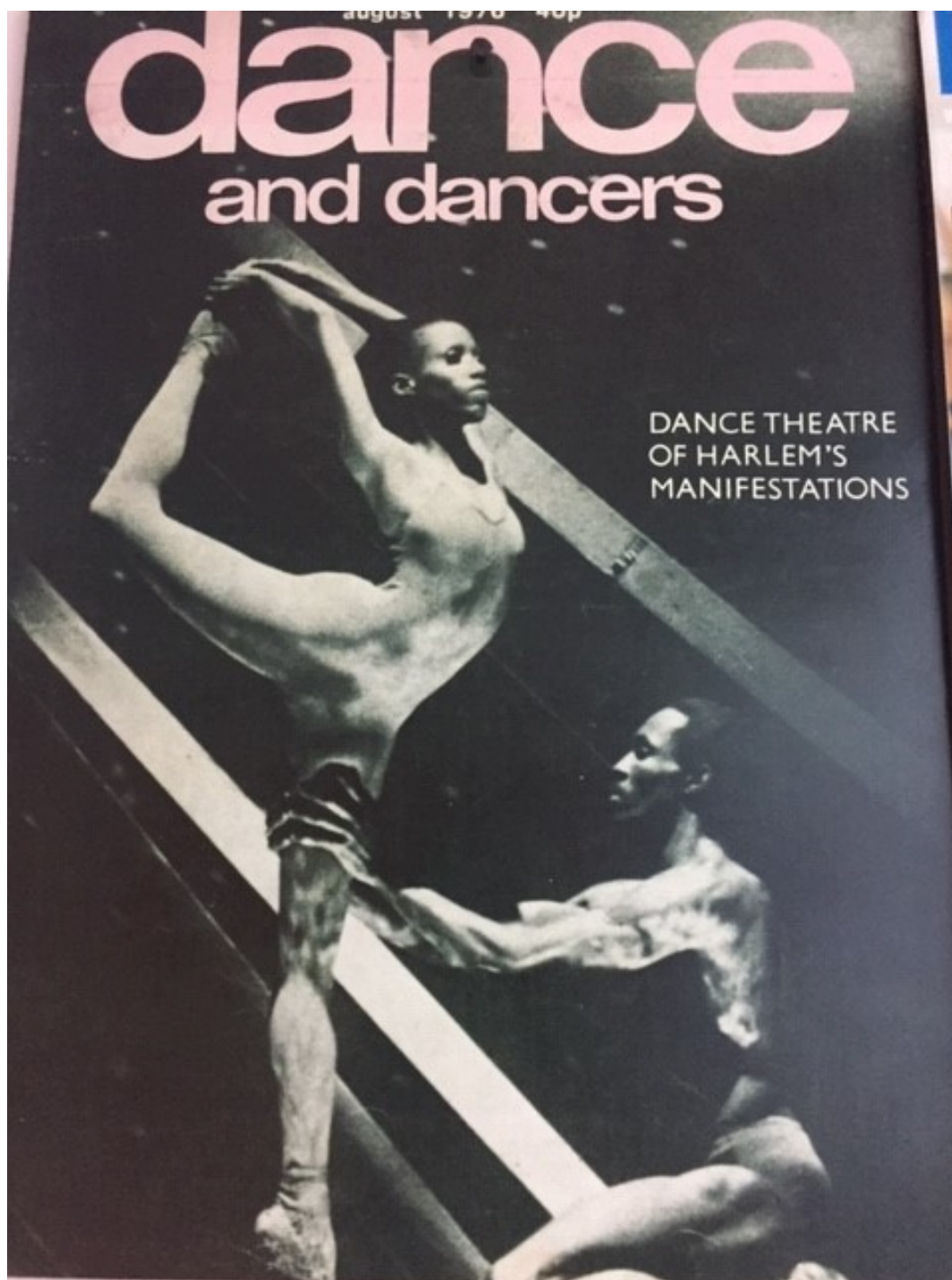
Arthur Mitchell and George Balanchine

Source: Arthur Mitchell Exhibition, Columbia University Libraries



Arthur Mitchell

Source: Arthur Mitchell Exhibition, Columbia University Libraries



Dance Theatre of Harlem
Cover of *Dance and Dancers Magazine*, August 1970
Rhonda Sampson and Homer Hans Bryant, dancers

Source: Homer Hans Bryant Collection



Dance Theatre of Harlem: Princess Margaret and Arthur Miller

Source: Homer Bryant Collection



Dance Theatre of Harlem
Arthur Mitchell, coaching (left)

Source: Homer Bryant Collection



Dance Theatre of Harlem
Rhonda Sampson and Homer Hans Bryant, dancers

Source: Homer Hans Bryant Collection