



Fall 2018

From Tropes to Troupes: Misty Copeland and the Hyper-Whiteness of Ballet

Emma D. Golden
Gettysburg College

Follow this and additional works at: https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/student_scholarship

 Part of the [Inequality and Stratification Commons](#), and the [Race and Ethnicity Commons](#)

Share feedback about the accessibility of this item.

Golden, Emma D., "From Tropes to Troupes: Misty Copeland and the Hyper-Whiteness of Ballet" (2018). *Student Publications*. 700.
https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/student_scholarship/700

This is the author's version of the work. This publication appears in Gettysburg College's institutional repository by permission of the copyright owner for personal use, not for redistribution. Cupola permanent link: https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/student_scholarship/700

This open access student research paper is brought to you by The Cupola: Scholarship at Gettysburg College. It has been accepted for inclusion by an authorized administrator of The Cupola. For more information, please contact cupola@gettysburg.edu.

From Tropes to Troupes: Misty Copeland and the Hyper-Whiteness of Ballet

Abstract

In June of 2015, Misty Copeland became the first black woman promoted to a Principal Dancer in the American Ballet Theatre: a prestigious emblem of the institution of ballet, which is historically almost exclusively white. This stands in stark contrast with American sporting institutions like basketball and track and field, in which black athletes have achieved prominence. The immediately logical explanation is the financial inaccessibility of ballet to black Americans who live disproportionately in poverty and prefer athletic outlets where specialized equipment and one-on-one training are not required. However, this paper will present a second explanation for the persistent inaccessibility of ballet to black bodies. Where white hegemony is historically content to exploit black bodies for athletic advantages, ballet is a form of art before it is a conventional sport, and its rigidly white idea of beauty is considered an art worth preserving rather than a competitive landscape worth widening.

Keywords

Ballet, Race, Misty Copeland, Intersectionality

Disciplines

Inequality and Stratification | Race and Ethnicity | Sociology

Comments

Written for AFS 250: Black Bodies in American Sporting

Emma Golden
AFS 250: Black Bodies
Professor Ty Redden

From Tropes to Troupes: Misty Copeland and the Hyper-Whiteness of Ballet

In June of 2015, Misty Copeland became the first black woman promoted to a Principal Dancer in the American Ballet Theatre: arguably the most prestigious ballet company in the United States. She is not the first black dancer to succeed within a prominent ballet company – ABT's very first season in 1940 showcased an all-black cast of *Black Ritual* (Maher 2014), and in 1955, Raven Wilkinson made waves as the first full-time black woman dancer with Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo (Waxman 2018). However, beyond the exceptional success stories of Wilkinson, Copeland, or *Black Ritual*, little has evolved in terms of diversity in ballet – all levels of the hierarchy within elite companies are almost exclusively white. This stands in stark contrast with American sporting institutions like basketball, football, and track and field, in which black athletes have achieved prominence. The immediately logical explanation is the financial inaccessibility of ballet to black Americans who, as a result of systemic racism, are concentrated in poverty and prefer athletic outlets where specialized equipment and one-on-one training are not required. For this reason, sports like lacrosse, tennis, and golf remain very white. However, this paper will present a second, nuanced explanation for the persistent inaccessibility of ballet to black bodies. Where white hegemony is historically content to exploit black bodies for athletic advantages, ballet is a form of art before it is a sport, and its rigidly white idea of beauty is considered an art worth preserving rather than a competitive landscape worth widening.

Even though Misty Copeland confesses “she is the only African American in almost every environment in terms of classical ballet” (Rhodan 2016), the presence of black identities in the ballet world is not completely without precedent. The very first season of the prestigious American Ballet Theatre in 1940 showcased *Black Ritual: a new ballet with a cast of sixteen black women, choreographed to the score of La Création du monde* (Maher 2014). Beyond the fact that this was the first time black dancers appeared in a production of an otherwise all-white New York ballet company, these dancers were able to occupy an even rarer space because this ballet was staged by a white choreographer to the score of a European composer, and its costumes and sets were designed by the Russian Nicholas de Molas.

The existence of black dancers within a Euro-centric, “traditional” framework of *Black Ritual* created conflicting conditions for its dancers. On one hand, this represented an integration of ballet that opened opportunities for marginalized communities without formal experience to join high-profile troupes. On the other hand, the artistic direction of all-white leadership imposed upon all-black dancers devolved into choreographing racist tropes. A summary of *Black Ritual's* plot is as follows: African women gather and plan to sacrifice a member of their tribe, they perform voodoo-ism, and the woman elected to perform the execution “dances herself into a frenzy” and scurries away into a forest (Maher 2014). A review of the show’s premiere in *Women’s Wear Daily* described the set and costumes as representing “the primitive ritual of sacrifice with a dim background [and] figures in brilliant scarlet and harsh violet” (Maher 2014). The cast danced barefoot (whereas it would be unthinkable for professional white dancers to appear onstage without pointe shoes), and one sequence of

movement directed dancers to “knock floor, knock chest / evil eye out, rock forward and back” (Maher 2014). These elements of *Black Ritual* represent the racist trope of primitive savagery on the continent of Africa, with grunting, chest-pounding, and jumping around, and even the title “Black Ritual” correlates blackness with the performance of a sacrificial ritual.

These specific images satisfied the white western fascination with African exoticism as an aesthetic or artistic trend – coined “negrophilia” by Petrine Archer-Straw, an expert in Afro-Caribbean art (Straw 2000). This fetishization of black art and culture emerged in the 1920s and 1930s in Paris, where the *bal nègre* was a form of nightlife that showcased jazz music, “sensual dancing,” and the promise of “exotic experimentation” (Straw 2000). Straw notes that these balls were not authentic representations of black party-goers’ enjoyment, but served the interests and fascinations of observant white guests. The creation of the American Ballet Theatre imported European directors, choreographers, and stylists, European traditions of ballet, and in turn, the European phenomenon of negrophilia.

As its black ballerinas leapt barefoot across the stage wearing stereotypically “tribal” costumes and performed a representation of a sacrificial ritual, white choreographers at ABT upheld the notion that certain forms of black art existed for the fetishized entertainment of white audiences. The “exoticism” of traditionally black forms of art is one of the reasons why “in studying the performing arts in black communities, scholars tend to focus overwhelmingly on popular music and dance like Harlem Renaissance jazz,” while the scholarship on African Americans and fine art like ballet is scarce (Marcus 2014). The public response to *Black Ritual* corroborated this interest in

negrophilia, and some critics even argued that the spectacle did not go far enough. Walter Terry remarked: “where was the primitive rite? Where was the frenzy, the savage strength?” – suggesting that the technical proficiency inherent to ballet detracted from the raw “primitivism” for which he hoped (Maher 2014).

Six years after the performance of *Black Ritual*, the First Negro Classical Ballet formed in Los Angeles to celebrate black artistry rather than fetishize it. The white choreographer Joseph Rickard established the FNCB in 1946 with the goal of “multiethnic cooperation in the arts,” having observed that the relationship between white hegemony and black bodies in art is often exploitation rather than cooperation (Marcus 2014). The FNCB originated with the egalitarian intentions of giving black Americans a more accessible opportunity to participate in dance during a tense period in Los Angeles’ history, and Rickard often made personal financial sacrifices for his dancers. Yet even Rickard seemed unable to conceptualize black artistry that transcends stereotypes of African-American life. One of the FNCB’s most popular productions was titled *The Harlot’s House*, and was inspired by an Oscar Wilde poem about lost love in a brothel (Marcus 2014). The black dancers cast in this show were forced to uphold the trope of a “Jezebel:” a sexually promiscuous woman of color. Another production, *Raisin Cane*, sought to depict “aspects of black rural life” in which an uneducated character named Tom is lured by a pimp into a nearby bar with a prostitute, and a third, *Landscape*, is about the lynching of a young man in the American South (Marcus 2014). Some scholars celebrate the FNCB’s efforts to choreograph classical dance around the African-American experience, but in the context of the greater history of American ballet, the racial tropes present in these productions

symbolized a rigid preservation of traditional white ballet, and the notion that black ballet must take an exotically different form.

No other athletic activity tells rich, detailed stories in its performances, which distinguishes dance from sports like football or baseball. The history of the American Ballet Theatre stresses that from its founding, the institution of American ballet has been an artistic institution, with makeup, costumes, storytelling, and expressions of emotion prioritized alongside athletic capabilities. This also means that black participants in the art of ballet are not judged solely on their athleticism and dance skills, but also upon their artistic expression through the lens of an institution that historically values either rigidly white, Euro-centric beauty, or a racialized stereotype of African art. One reason why black ballerinas have struggled to bridge these two worlds is because of the persistent stereotype that athletic black women are more muscular and curvier than their white counterparts. Because ballet historically constructs beauty as slender, dainty “white” beauty, black ballerinas were forced to dance as tropes of African primitivism rather than alongside white ballerinas in traditional costumes with traditional choreography. An over-emphasis on black women’s aesthetics is not unique to ballet – for example, the styling choices of athletes like Serena Williams and Florence Griffith Joyner receive disproportionate attention in their respective sports – but the need for black ballerinas to satisfy critics’ aesthetic preferences is particularly emphasized in a field like ballet, which is inherently an aesthetic art form more than it is a “sport.”

The concurrent exclusion of black bodies from ballet and prominent *inclusion* of black athletes in other athletic capabilities like basketball or track and field, which are predominantly black, is rooted in the construction of “artistry” versus “athleticism.”

African-Americans' participation in sporting first began on plantations, when slave-owners permitted slaves to participate in athletic games with each other to raise their spirits and distract them from the realities of slave labor. The legacy of this relationship in which black athletes are slaves in the control of white owners, managers, and coaches still persists across major sports. In the twentieth century, some sports leagues integrated not as a moral response to social justice demands, but an exploitation of black talent to render leagues more competitive. While ballet companies are extremely competitive in their hiring and training processes, they are not competitive in the same way as other athletics in the sense of sponsoring teams, leagues, and games. Likewise, the judging of a ballet performance is partially a subjective perception of the beauty and emotion of the dance, rather than a quantifiable judgment of points scored or yards ran. For these reasons, the drive to widen the competitive landscape of sports like basketball or football by integrating talented athletes from all racial backgrounds has never transferred to ballet.

As long as the predominantly white audience of ballet continues to place a premium on Euro-centric identities and standards of beauty, ballet institutions will not be competitively incentivized to diversify and to render ballet accessible to marginalized communities. Absent of a traditionally "competitive" drive to diversify, the demands of social justice are the primary driving forces for these initiatives, for which Misty Copeland's vocal activism is central. As Copeland achieves dominance, she pushes back against the exclusion of black ballerinas from the artistry of ballet by publicly celebrating the ways she contributes to the art form. When *The Washington Post* asked Copeland: "do you feel like you identify more as an artist or an athlete," she responded

“I’m definitely an artist. I think as a dancer it’s a given . . . that we’re extremely hard-working athletes. But being an artist is so much more . . . telling a story with your body, becoming an actress on stage, transforming into these ethereal characters” (Cunningham 2015). When *Elle Magazine* asked her the same question one year later, she added: “I think dancers are superhuman superheroes. We can’t be split in two . . . so I feel like a beautiful princess athlete every day” (Dias 2016).

Black Ritual – whose cast was majority-female – was performed three times and never revived, and the experiences of black ballet dancers in the next two decades became intersectional experiences divergent across gendered lines. In the late 1950s and 1960s, black male ballet dancers were more likely to succeed than their female counterparts, as male dancers across all disciplines are historically in high demand (Patton 2011). Ballet as an art form has a heavily gendered connotation of femininity and softness, which makes the attraction and retention of male dancers challenging. In the same vein that the recruitment of male ballet dancers is encumbered by ballet’s stereotypes of femininity, black women are excluded from an art form that treats femininity as a rigid construction of *white* femininity. This emphasizes the obstacles that black ballerinas face uniquely at the intersection of blackness and womanhood. Thin white women are privileged by the narrow confines of an institution where all previously successful dancers look like them, and black men are privileged based upon the practical need for men in *pas des deux* duets and shows requiring male roles. Black women ballerinas must compete within the cutthroat expectations that ballet places on all women while also navigating a narrow, racialized definition of femininity within ballet.

Even black ballerinas in the highest echelons of their community are not immune from the racism that ensues when femininity becomes inextricably synonymous with whiteness. Barack Obama, who became a mentor figure to Misty Copeland as the two simultaneously trailblazed in historically white positions of leadership, observed to *Time Magazine* that “ballet has a very established canon of how to do things, [and] people want it to look and happen a certain way,” and in a joint interview Copeland echoed this sentiment with the sense of “otherness” she continues to feel, even amongst dancers she leads (Rhodan 2016). Copeland has been encouraged to lighten her skin with make-up (Waxman 2018), and as a young dancer, was often shunned for her muscular physique (Harlow 2018). Despite the significant strides towards equality that marginalized groups have made in the past sixty years, the racism that Misty Copeland faces in 2018 is not fundamentally different than Raven Wilkinson’s experiences as the first black full-time dancer with the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo in the 1950s. Copeland observes that “a lot of dancers in my generation have been told the same things [Wilkinson] has been told (Waxman 2018). Wilkinson risked death and arrest when she toured in the American South, before it became legal for white and black dancers to share stages. While Copeland has not experienced death threats and physical stalking by Klan members in the ways that Wilkinson has, the underlying sentiment of everything from micro-aggressions to physical violence is this: black ballerinas do not belong in a historically, rigidly white form of art.

Copeland pushes back against the concept that muscular bodies are somehow not conducive to ballet, and she cites the inherent similarities between her muscle composition and that of her white counterparts: “I have a body that a lot of white

dancers have and there's white ballerinas that are principal dancers that have larger chests than me and bigger muscles and broader shoulders and they are not told they don't belong" (Harlow 2018). The intersectional racist and sexist undertones of ballet's criticism of Copeland's body are emphasized by the medical illogic of correlating a slender body-type and success in ballet. The intense physical demands of ballet training pose high risks of musculoskeletal injury (Smith 2016), and a medical analysis of 61 different sports and physical activities concluded that ballet is the most physically and mentally demanding, followed by bullfighting and then football (Kinetz 2005). Because the idea that a woman should maintain a thin and delicate appearance while training for the most physically demanding of 61 different activities is nonsensical, and because Copeland cites white colleagues with similar builds, an aesthetic attack of Copeland is a racialized attack based on the stereotype that black women are curvier and more muscular – the same grounds by which the tennis player Serena Williams is called an "ape," a "gorilla," and a "man," and by which the gymnast Simone Biles is accused of taking steroids.

The nature of Misty Copeland's successes also challenge the narrow, stereotyped roles for black ballerinas in which her precedents were cast. As a principal dancer for American Ballet Theatre, Copeland's choreography does not include the tribal, sacrificial voodoo-ism of *Black Ritual* or the sexual promiscuity and black rural life of the First Negro Classical Ballet. Copeland has played the title role in *Firebird*, the dual lead role of Odette/Odile in *Swan Lake*, and most recently the lead princess in *The Nutcracker*: all deeply canonical and traditional roles. This represents a more authentic form of integration in ballet where, in order to succeed, women of color are not narrowly

cast into shows about African-American life, and can aspire to play classic leading ladies.

Recently, the institution of American ballet has made significant strides to diversify the faces of ballet and render the art more accessible. The directors of American Ballet Theatre and Ballet Memphis, another prestigious company, have publicly condemned the rigid beauty standards of ballet and the “unfortunate myth” that “black dancers categorically cannot become ballet dancers because they don’t have the right body” (Carman 2014). While the attitudes of ballet’s leadership may be shifting to welcome diverse dancers, other, more practical obstacles impede the participation of black Americans. Ballet is notoriously expensive, and without role models, sponsorship problems, and active outreach into black communities, this financial barrier remains insurmountable to many black youths. In their joint interview, Misty Copeland and President Barack Obama shared the sentiment that these barriers are “deep and structural . . . if there’s no dance studio at all in their neighborhood, and if their schools don’t offer any extracurricular activities at all, or if their school is chronically underfunded” (Rhodan 2016). To correct this inaccessibility, Copeland advocates for a form of affirmative action in ballet, and feels personally obligated to be the role model that young dancers lack.

The first integrations of black dancers and white institutions of ballet, in the mid-twentieth century, materialized as racially stereotyped roles and choreographies that narrowly cast black dancers while preserving the white rigidity of ballet. For decades, the existence of ballet as an “art” rather than a “sport” has placed a premium on Euro-centric artistic and beauty standards, and the pool of athletes who participate in ballet

has failed to widen alongside sports like baseball, football, and track and field. As Misty Copeland rises to prominence, she challenges the traditions that maintain ballet's exclusivity, and serves as a role model for young, aspiring black dancers in a field that historically has few.

Works Cited

Archer-Straw, Petrine. 2000. *Negrophilia : avant-garde Paris and black culture in the 1920s*. New York, N.Y. : Thames & Hudson.

- Carman, Joseph. 2014 "Behind Ballet's Diversity Problem." *International Bibliography of Theatre & Dance*, 15 (3).
- Cunningham, Lillian. 2015. "Misty Copeland's perseverance." *The Washington Post*, April 10.
- Dias, Marley and Mattie Kahn. 2016. "Ballet Saved Misty Copeland From Middle School Misery." *Elle Magazine*, September 19.
- Harlow, Poppy. 2018. "Misty Copeland says the ballet world still has a race problem and she wants to help fix that." *CNN*, 21 May.
- Kinetz, Erika. 2005. "Tips for Ballet Dancers on the Art of Staying Well." *The New York Times*, 27 September.
- Maher, Erin K. 2014. "Ballet, Race, and Agnes de Mille's *Black Ritual*." *The Musical Quarterly*, 97 (3), 390-428.
- Marcus, Kenneth H. 2014. "Dance Moves An African American Ballet Company in Postwar Los Angeles." *Pacific Historical Review*, 83 (3): 487-527.
- Patton, Tracey Owens. 2011. "I Just Want to Get My Groove On: An African American Experience with Race, Racism, and the White Aesthetic in Dance." *The Journal of Pan African Studies*, 4 (6).
- Rhodan, Maya. 2016. "Across generations and professions, a President and a prima ballerina talk about race, beauty and breaking barriers. In conversation: Misty Copeland and Barack Obama." *Time Magazine*, 28 March.
- Smith, Toby O. et. al. 2016. "Prevalence and profile of musculoskeletal injuries in ballet dancers: A systematic review and meta-analysis." *Physical Therapy in Sport*. 19: 50-56.
- Waxman, Olivia B. 2018. "A Lot Is Still So Much the Same: Misty Copeland on Decades of Racism and Ballet." *Time Magazine*, 16 January.