

*** contacting * improvising ***
recognising institutional racism in our dance classrooms
essay by Dr Adesola Akinleye

'the world that I and other dancers are together exploring is inseparable from the world we are together creating.' – Sheets-Johnstone

As we read well-worded acknowledgements of the need for action in response to #BlackLivesMatter, it is hard not to feel a sense of *too little, too late*. The recognitions by large dance organizations, of horrendous deaths and injuries made familiar in news reels are, of course, important and a necessity. However, how they become a shift, a felt change in society, in the dance studio, on the Zoom session screen, is much more layered, and involves the minutiae of the everyday as much as it does the manifesto of institutions. How personal and institutional equal opportunity statements manifest in the balance of a foot on the Marley dance floor, the bend of a knee, the intake of breath before a jump, is intersectional, multi-layered, and drenched in history. We know this is pressing because there is an experience of trauma shared across the site/sight of racism that limits the possibilities for what the artform of dance can be and how we, as a community, can (be)come together as we emerge into a world of COVID-19.

'One factor seems clear about...interlocking oppressions. They take both active forms, which we can see, and embedded forms, which as a member of the dominant groups one is taught not to see. In my class and place, I did not see myself as a racist because I was taught to recognize racism only in individual acts of meanness by members of my group, never in invisible systems conferring unsought racial dominance on my group from birth.

Disapproving of the system won't be enough to change them...To redesign social systems we need first to acknowledge their colossal unseen dimensions. The silences and denials surrounding privilege are the key political tool here...What will we do with such knowledge? As we know from watching men, it is an open question whether we will choose to use unearned advantage, and whether we will use any of our arbitrarily awarded power to try to reconstruct power systems on a broader base.'
(Peggy McIntosh, 1988, onwards from p.189)

Engagement with embedded forms

Whether one is being discriminated against or one is contributing to the systems of discrimination, there is an aspect of invisibility playing a role in the slipperiness of privilege and prejudice. But seminal works by those such as Angela Davis (1983), W. E. Du Bois (1903), Cheryl Harris (1993), and Peggy McIntosh (1988), suggest we cannot sit by and wait for all the intricacies of a problem to become visible before attempting to tackle it. As movers, doers, we understand the notion of thinking in action, and that doing-as-response can be considered and constructed. Moreover, we have a unique voice, as activity in the dance studio draws on our shared embodied knowledges. Dance endows us with knowledges that advance our understanding of the felt, poly-rhythmic, haptic world. We can demonstrate the importance of this beyond the dance studio walls and computer screens, through the world we create within them. ([note September meeting Breakout room prompt¹](#))

'Thinking and doing are not then polarized but mutually illuminating: dancers are not then mindless, any more than philosophers [or politicians] are disembodied.'(Sheets-Johnstone, 1984, p. 128)

**I suggest three scores for this improvisation/conversation on the anti-racist dance classroom :
Justice, Education, Personal Work**

Dance has taught me, and I firmly believe, that the lived experience is poly-rhythmic. For this discussion I am suggesting a strategy for engagement as three rhythms, (justice, education, and personal work) that act as *scores*. I am suggesting these three rhythms as scores for conversation. I think it is important to unweave these three and listen to them individually because

¹ [September meeting breakout room prompt: part of the approach to an anti-racist classroom is for all people \(teachers and pupils\) within the room to develop a practice of noticing their own power? This also resonates with owning the power of dance knowledges within a culture that oppresses embodied knowledges.](#)

sometimes we address the issue of racism as if it were a single cord/chord. In other words, sometimes the response to one of these rhythms below is either seen to be enough to cover the whole symphony of the issue, or at times a note is drowned out because it is misdirected.

These scores do not aim to try to *understand* racism in the dance class but to start to make unavailable the psychic, physical, and emotional spaces where racism can lurk. In doing this we could then start to recognize it, because it becomes out of place, uncamouflaged, and dislocated. Therefore, the three areas discussed here are about healing the wound enough to look at it, they are about trying to stop the bleeding, because current news footage has underlined that racism is not an old scar, it is a festering wound that continues to haemorrhage. (note [Breakout room prompt²](#))

When looking at scores we can draw on the following techniques* :

- This is about Power and Entitlement
- 'Race' is a social construction
- Dance spaces are not neutral because of the history of dance
- Dance aesthetic is not dance technique

Rhythm 1: Justice

(witness, acknowledge, 'that shouldn't have happened', I hear you')

To reframe the power (and damage to the art form itself) we need to acknowledge and witness the victims, address the abusers, witness the historical injustices, speak out to say 'this should not have happened', 'I hear you'. Many of the letters and statements of intent made as institutional responses to #BlackLivesMatter attempt to do this. But it is important to recognize the process is never fully satisfying: how can anything be enough to undo the trauma that brought the issue to the fore? Truth and reconciliation are part of this process where we can look at the system and own our role: in it when we have been victims, when (through listening) we realize we have been perpetrators.

'the body is not an instrument for a dancer in the same way in which a violin is for a musician or a brush for a painter. We cannot help but see the peculiarly intimate and sui generis sense in which the dancer ...use themselves...' (Joseph Margolis in *Sheets-Johnstone*, 1984, p. 73)

How can the dance studio be the site/sight for witnessing each other, for listening to each other? Within dance scholarship, the studio is questioned as a site/sight of exchange, transaction. There is ongoing debate about authoritarian 'v' authoritative 'v' democracy in the educational dance space. How can we expect to suggest we witness and hear racism in a space (dance studio) that is historically and figuratively quiet? (note [Breakout room prompt³](#))

Resources: (Akinleye, 2018; Gottschild, 1996, 2003; Thompson, 2014)

² [Breakout room prompt: discuss process as a practice for dealing with racism rather than fixing: rather than fixing issues which involves assuming understanding of another person's somatic experience, what kinds of energy does it take to create an on-going responsive and nurturing space for a variety of pupils. Where and how is that energy sapped?](#)

*The word 'techniques' is used here to refer to actions/thoughts that stop one from getting or inflicting injuries, just as a dance techniques stopped one from getting injured and help one move forward creating physical ideas.

³ [Breakout room prompt: What is the goal of teaching a student to dance? How do we notice, teach, discuss, encourage students we find unattractive, aesthetically difficult, ugly, have an 'attitude'? Aesthetically, 'Unattractive' and 'ugly' are often linked to 'different'. Where is the notion of 'difference' in our classrooms?](#)

Rhythm 2: Education

(understanding, comprehending the nuances of the system, what is this system?)

To look at the nuances of the system, to theorize/shape/examine. To investigate 'what is this system?', 'how does it work?'. To look at what dance has been used for within colonization and other power structures.

"How does the human body dance the world?" What we want to examine...is the possibility of understanding dance as an incarnation of a civilization's world view. (David B. Richardson with Sheets-Johnstone, 1984, p. 48)

This is, in part, about addressing the curriculum. When we broaden the knowledges we teach, we leave less space for the claim of ignorance of injustices. This requires the recreating/rewording of how we assess what dance manifests as, and what value it has. This involves discussion about assessment recently had across dance HE, on how we avoid teaching dance as if it were a fixed set of aesthetic properties to be reproduced in order to get a one-time 'A' grade. Within a system where we place *dance* outside the body of the student, giving them the goal to attain it and put it on like a suit, of course it will not be a genuine language. It will feel like, and become, an oppressive shaming of selfhood in order to fit ones' body inside a (power) aesthetic, rather than a movement technique. Resources: (Arday & Mirza; Bernasconi, 2001; DeFrantz & Gonzalez, 2014; Gottschild, 2003; Hooks, 1992; Shea Murphy, 2007; Smith, 1999)

Rhythm 3: Personal work

(what is/has my role been in that system? where is my power in it/to change it? committing to change)

This is about the micro-aggressions that by their nature are hard to call-out. On the one hand, standing next to a colleague and when the chair of the meeting keeps addressing you, saying '*Well luckily, XXXX is right here next to me and she is more qualified than I am, as you know*'; or, on the other hand, saying '*I am right here*' to those in the meeting who refuse to make eye contact with you. Standing up for those who get ignored and speaking out for yourself when you are the one being ignored. To commit to do the work, to keep looking at the system. It involves fighting the inner perfect, demure dancer who does what they are told very well: a trope that is so engrained in the social-psyche of what dancers are, that it is hard not to turn to it when we feel unsure. This is a hard task because the personal work is personal! It changes what you think of yourself. ([note Breakout room prompt⁴](#))

'to come to grips with experience as it is lived is a difficult task: to fathom the essential nature of the experience dance (rather than objective nature of the movement, for example) is neither a simple matter nor is it an irrevocably conclusive task...' (Sheets-Johnstone, 1984)p 136

To ask where you draw on your own experiences to normalize other people's. To ask when you accept entitlement or insult. To minimize others' experiences in order to keep your own memories, or sense of self, intact (I have to minimize her wounds because that is what I have done to my own wounds; or I have to minimize her wounds because if I don't I have to change my own history and how I contextualize myself). This personal work is about having the courage to be incomplete, in process.

Resources: (Johnson, 2003; Ogundipe-Leslie, 1994; Trask, 1993; Van der Kolk, 2014)

A final riff

It can feel as if we are in a beautiful world working relatively well, and then it is brought to your attention that something *bad* happened in that beautiful world. We then work to get things back to that same beautiful world before you noticed the *bad* thing happened. But at its root what that *bad thing* happening is underlining, is that the world you thought you were in never existed. Trying to get back to the model before the *bad thing* happened is trying to get back to a fiction (that never existed in the first place). Privilege is when you believe '*we just need to get back to the beautiful world*' and you find it hard to believe we can't just find a way to get back there. Becoming aware of privilege involves the

⁴ Breakout room prompt : What micro-aggressions are specific to dance? How do we show solidarity for each other in the wider institutions we work in?

frightening concept that if the beautiful world never really existed, then we do not really know where we are going (we just know where we do not want to be). We do not know what a just world looks like, feels like, tastes like, sounds like. Therefore, the goal, at this point, is not to *fix it* or reaffirm how you will go about fixing it. The goal is to be willing and committed to be a part of making it.

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Play-list (for those who think through moving)

- *Stand together* (feat. Rhoda Dakar) by Dub Pistols – Addict
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ktNP4XwY8KM>
- *Julie* by Rhiannon Giddens – Freedom Highway
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tYuqnUs9gP8>
- *Ghosts* by Ibeyi – Ibeyi <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZIAX-QrpiOE>
- *To be Young, Gifted and Black* by Nina Simone – Forever Young, Gifted & Black: Songs of Freedom and Spirit <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RTGiKYqk0gY>

Visual and other resources

- A Conversation on Race and Privilege with Angela Davis and Jane Elliott
- University of Houston: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S0jf8D5WHoo>
- James Baldwin Debates William F. Buckley (1965):
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oFeoS41xe7w> (JB speech begins at 14.04 if you cannot watch the whole film)
- Shirley Anne Tate:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bbLXxRSKi5s&list=PL521ADEA73AB9F2F3&index=81>
- **The characteristics of white supremacy culture:** <https://www.showingupforracialjustice.org/white-supremacy-culture-characteristics.html?fbclid=IwAR0g6GmDtyWjhCljCEiKrJsX2u5kJh2jWcTpzFT1yImXUWM5bEwa4cIDXRA>
- From *Dismantling Racism: A Workbook for Social Change Groups*, by Kenneth Jones and Tema Okun, ChangeWork, 2001)
- And then this is a link to a comprehensive list of writing video and podcast :
bit.ly/ANTIRACISMRESOURCES

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