

**GESTATIONAL OCCLUSION: THE EMBODIED EVOLUTION OF WHITENESS IN
THE CONTEMPORARY WHITE DANCING BODY**

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ABSTRACT

How does Whiteness exist in the contemporary White dancing body? This research stands on three pillars – delving into the concept of Whiteness, analyzing the White dancing body and how it performs in terms of racialized perception absent of personification, and the concept of the contemporary in relation to artistic practice in a racialized dance canon – to investigate how Whiteness manifests through the body. Sources from critical race theory, mainly Ian Haney-Lopez’s *White by Law: The Legal Construction of Race* (2006), and performance studies, Brenda Dixon Gottschild’s *Digging the Africanist Presence* (1998) and *The Black Dancing Body* (2008), are evaluated next to the development of a choreographic work, *amniotic threading* (2022), researching the DNA that comprises my own contemporary White dancing body to produce a new line of thought on how Whiteness inherently prevails in contemporary dance culture within White dancing bodies. After establishing how movement artists develop an embodied practice through a process analogous to gestation, in which a hybridized embryo of technique is cultivated containing genetic lineage of each technique and movement aesthetic embodied by the dancer, this process is analyzed next to Sara Ahmed’s *The Phenomenology of Whiteness* (2007), which posits that White bodies gaze outwards to the world around them, orienting their body in such a manner that the world unfolds from them.

I pose that Whiteness inherently exists in the contemporary White dancing body as an occlusion that conceals its fundamental artistic development in favor of producing a neutral culture for contemporary dance to evolve into. Proposed here is the notion that this inherent outward gaze that distinctly characterizes Whiteness might by its very nature increase the amount of culturally signified movement material that White dancing bodies are taking into the

gestational development and embodied evolution of their individual artistic practice. The innateness of the outward gaze and lack of inward gaze occludes the ability to perceive the extent of cultural aesthetic threads comprising their rich dance lineage, therefore perpetuating the cycle of cultural theft and misappropriation, reifying Whiteness through the artistic development and embodied evolution of the White dancing body.

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INTRODUCTION

How does Whiteness manifest through the White dancing body?

What lives within my White body? What does the presence of my White body inflict on the space and the people in it? How can I continue to live within and honor the dances that have shaped my artistic identity? What is my Whiteness? Can I evolve it? Should I? These are questions I have asked myself repeatedly as I grow further into my identity as a White woman while simultaneously honing my artistic practice, which has developed from the study of African Diasporic Dance, specifically West African, Jamaican, and Afro-Cuban dances. While my body and mind have been invigorated by my journey in this practice, I cannot ignore the friction of racial tension of these dances on my body. While there is always care to be taken within cross-cultural education, there is extra complexity in this circumstance, which is marked by centuries of violence and dehumanization brought about by those who have shared my skin on the cultures I now cite as pivotal to my identity as an artist.

Today, my artistic practice is largely influenced and centered around values and principles of Jamaican and Afro-Cuban dances. Alongside a movement base grounded in Africanist aesthetics, my choreography largely embodies notions of death and rebirth through the power of the pelvis, stemming from the Jamaican danced funeral rituals Kumina and Dinki Mini as well as channeling forces of water and wind from the Afro-Cuban Orishas Yemayá and Oyá. While I cite these dances as foundational to my embodied evolution as a dancer, Western tendencies are still present in my body, having become enmeshed with practices of these non-Western forms. Before coming to New York City, I thought that my movement aesthetic clearly showcased the African Diaspora. However, those who meet me in classes here are shocked to learn my dance

background and the dances and aesthetics centered in my practice; to them, my movement is similar to every other contemporary dancer in the city. When I began to pursue my M.F.A. at Sarah Lawrence, I was struck by how similar my technical tendencies were to those who have never formally studied dances of the Diaspora. This provided me firsthand experience that allowed a fuller understanding of how contemporary dance has absorbed Africanist aesthetics and assimilated them with the hierarchical forms of ballet and modern dance, suppressing the Black voice – a suppression that has been extensively analyzed in cultural studies, Black studies, dance studies, and other relevant discourse. Whiteness, and its practices of appropriation and dominance, reigns supreme in the White-dominated dance world, as it does in the White-dominated societal world.

In a 1993 interview with Charlie Rose, Toni Morrison posed this simple but profound question to White folks, “what are you without racism?” (1993) With this question, and this interview as a whole, Morrison brought to my attention the severity of dependency Whiteness and White identity have on the continuation of racism. Throughout the interview Morrison asserts that racism affects more than just people of color, it also affects White people. Speaking to White individuals, Morrison states, “If you can only be tall because someone is on their knees then you have a very serious problem.” (1993) This problem is the innate and taught tie we as White people have to racism as an identity. Whiteness, as it is seen today, is a relational characteristic, only existing as a comparison to others via racism and supremacist hierarchies. Morrison’s interview shifted my anti-racist work into a deep exploration into what Whiteness is on its own accord, and in turn how its existence is inherently tied to racism.

The notion that in order to dismantle something one must fully understand its totality comes from Thomas F. DeFrantz, who in his published performance *White Privilege* (2018)

states that “understanding how systems of oppression operate needs to lead to resistance against their continuation”. (35) Connecting Morrison with DeFrantz, one conclusion remains: understanding the totality of Whiteness – what it encompasses, what it is connected to, and how it performs – must lead to a dismantling of the supremacy it has put into place at the heart of our society. Not only is dance, and particularly contemporary dance, relevant to this investigation given the question of how Whiteness exists in my White body as a dance artist, but other scholars have previously posed the relationality between dance and societal elements. Brenda Dixon Gottschild, who states in her article *The Diaspora DanceBoom* (2012) that “the dance world is a ‘microcosm’ of the greater societal world, and that many of its problems and oppressive actions are mimicked within the dance world.” While Morrison and DeFrantz speak on racism and Whiteness, the connection between White bodies, the physical entity through which Whiteness manifests through, is missing. Thus, I intend to focus this investigation of Whiteness through the lens of White dancing bodies as a starting point in this larger dismantling work of White supremacy. Perhaps, as Gottschild proclaims, once Whiteness in the microcosm of the dance world is more clearly understood, we can begin to see the larger picture in the macrocosm of the societal world.

This excavation into Whiteness through dance is not a new methodology. In her book *Digging the Africanist Presence in American Performance: Dance and Other Contexts* (1998), Gottschild examines where Africanist values and aesthetics already exist in what is categorized as “American Dance”. I would go a step further and claim that what is spoken as “American Dance” is actually “Black Dance” masquerading as “White Dance”, as much of Gottschild’s discussion involves White choreographers and their companies performing material largely influenced by Africanist ideology through the guise of White bodies on a proscenium stage.

Gottschild uses the term “European” whereas I am pushing this farther to be categorized more broadly as “White” in order to connect to the White supremacist values that dictate the larger American society, historically stemming from America’s European roots. Gottschild states in her first chapter, “My purpose here is not to valorize Africanisms by comparing them with Europeanist phenomena, but to show that the latter are dependent on the former, and that, overtly and subliminally, these invisibilized influences significantly shape European American experience.” Throughout seven chapters she reveals the hidden “invisibilized” Africanist aesthetics present in prominent “American” art, such as the ballets of George Balanchine, a Russian immigrant who largely choreographed in the United States. Balanchine’s work is still studied today and many claim him as the “father of American ballet”. Gottschild uses her in-depth knowledge of Africanist dance values to uncover the reality of what makes Balanchine’s work different than other ballets, or what makes it “American” rather than “European”.

Gottschild states,

The most noticeable is the new approach to movement vocabulary, which he introduced to the ballet stage. The displacement and articulation of hips, chest, pelvis, and shoulders, instead of vertical alignment of the torso; leg kicks, attacking the beat, instead of carefully placed extension; angular arms and flexed wrists, rather than the traditional, rounded *port de bras*, all of these touches usher the viewer into the discovery of the Africanist aesthetic in Balanchine. (70)

I will discuss the literature that exists detailing this movement and outlining how it can be distinguished culturally and racially in the section “How does the White dancing body perform?”, but for now, it is important to notice the methodology Gottschild uses here, as I intend to use it in my own approach. Gottschild takes into account the space and identity of the choreographer, the ballet stage and Russian immigrant George Balanchine, in her examination of the movement quality and apparent aesthetic – namely, the disjunct between the two. It is my

intention to analyze who is performing the work in question and what it is being categorized as in order to uncover how Whiteness is operating within at the level of individual performance.

Gottschild's assertions here are foundational to my own, and I'd be remiss to omit acknowledging the significance of her work in my own research. A large hesitation has stemmed in my research process from the fear that I am perpetuating the very thing I am studying: White appropriation of Black knowledge, art, labor, and culture – to name a few. However, I cannot change the fact that Gottschild's work has guided me here, nor would I want to hide that fact. Actually, it is that complexity that I am interested in studying and am forcing myself to lean into. Ananya Chatterjea writes in her book *Butting Out* (2004), "while it is important to be sensitive to the host of existent hostilities and prejudices that might jeopardize intercultural research here, it is equally important not to let them paralyze such projects." Through my research I have identified a gap in the work presently existing on dismantling Whiteness – that we do not fully understand the very thing we are trying to dismantle, and have missed the potentially crucial step of examining how Whiteness naturally manifests in the mere presence of White bodies, even if it is unintentional by the White person. I believe that work is important and so I must not let my own identity halt the process. I am White, and much of my influence has come from Black artists, especially Black women. Rather than try to hide that and further perpetuate this cycle of appropriation and Whiteness, I am claiming it and working as transparently and carefully as possible to not overstep.

I. Defining Terms

Three terms are important to define before moving forward into deeper analysis: White, White dancing body, and contemporary. Subsequent sections are devoted to defining and

grasping the totality of these terms, but for now, I will introduce their definitions in the context of this thesis. These terms comprise the three pillars holding up the overarching question of this research, *how does Whiteness manifest in the White dancing body?* Before proper analysis can be conducted on the larger question at hand, it is important to fully grasp the smaller questions present and implicated: *What is Whiteness? How does the White dancing body perform?* and *How does the White dancing body exist in the contemporary?* While the subsequent examination of these pillars, and this larger thesis question relies on the research already existing on aspects of this topic, my own interpretation and analysis as a White dance artist is at the crux of the presented discourse and so it is important to clarify how I am defining and using the existing terminology at the center.

a. White

In the first section of this work, *What is Whiteness?*, I will consider facets of Whiteness and its societal effect on White people. I am characterizing White at its most basic and socially understood identity, any person with light skin and European features, also known as “White passing”. In this definition I am not taking into account individual ethnicity and heritage, because my purpose here is to examine the effects of social perception of race absent of personification. In examining Whiteness through the lens of dance, I have to take into consideration how White dancers are most often observed and reviewed: by an audience that has no personal connection to them. Ethnicity and heritage are undoubtedly important to the totality of one’s identity, including the identity of White-presenting individuals. In order to understand how White privilege takes effect at this stage in my research, however, I have narrowed my analysis to audience perception of bodies on stage in terms of performance, technique, and aesthetics.

It is important to note here the capitalization of White and Whiteness. In preliminary writing pertaining to this research I began to question the use of the lower case white next to the capital Black. I have come to understand the importance of capitalizing Black in reference to the people and culture that have built American capital without any compensation. Until reading an opinion piece in The Washington Post by Nell Irvin Painter, I assumed the use of lowercase in “white” was used to apprise the use of capitalization of Black; a signal of antiracial respect. However, Painter asserts that White should be capitalized alongside Black in antiracial work, as it strips away the veil of racelessness and neutrality that White people have historically leveraged. She cites the National Association of Black Journalists, who in June of 2020, in the wake of the George Floyd protests rocking the nation, recommend “that whenever a color is used to appropriately describe race then it should be capitalized, including White and Brown,” and furthers on her own that the use of lowercase for White “[allows] the comfort of [their] racial invisibility; they should have to see themselves as raced” (Painter 2020). Therefore, for purposes of this research, and any subsequent writing I may produce, I will capitalize White when it is referring to the race and racial identity.

b. White dancing body

Brenda Dixon Gottschild coined the term “white dancing body” in her 2008 book *The Black Dancing Body: A Geography from Coon to Cool*. In her chapter *Black White Dance Dancers* Gottschild tackles the precarity of naming dancing bodies and dances in terms of racial perception as well as outlines her distinctions for what comprises “black dance” and “white dance”. Generally speaking – a more thorough dissection of these terms can be found in the second section of this work – “black dance” encompasses techniques and aesthetics originating

in West Africa prior to the Transatlantic Slave Trade and “white dance” comprises codified technique originating from Europe in the 1500s. While I agree with the distinction of these two aesthetic categories brought forth by Gottschild in terms of qualitative movement, I also believe that physical racial markers of the dancers themselves play a huge role in how we view what is “White dance” and what is “Black dance”. For purposes of this thesis, I define the term “White dancing body” as any White body on the stage or in a rehearsal/classroom setting that is moving to produce dance, regardless of the physical movement aesthetics that are being performed. In this definition, White dancing bodies can move within any cultural aesthetics. I am interested in how we perceive those aesthetics through our racialized perceptions of those bodies, and in turn the implications of those perceptions.

c. Contemporary

SanSan Kwan references the temporality involved in the term contemporary in her article *When is Contemporary Dance?* (2017), acknowledging that one aspect of the category “contemporary dance” is referring to the dances that are occurring today, in this time. In his article *What is The Contemporary* (2011) Giorgio Agamben defines the contemporary as “he who firmly holds his gaze on his own time so as to perceive not its light but rather its darkness....To perceive, in the darkness of the present, this light that strives to reach us but cannot – this is what it means to be contemporary.” (13-14) I relate this notion of the contemporary to anti-racist work. The darkness of our current time is one in which our society is still held hostage by White supremacist and racialized values, and anti-racist work acknowledges the strides we have made to overcome this, the existing light, while being realistic in the large strides we must take to dismantle the racial hierarchies. While much of my research thus far has

been critical of Whiteness and White people, I recognize that there are many White people striving to fully dismantle the system and give up their privilege, as I have had conversations with and have gotten to know multiple artists in the New York City metropolitan area within the past four years who claim antiracist work at the forefront of their practices. They are the ones acknowledging and lifting up the dances we have historically deemed as less than in comparison to traditional Western forms such as Ballet and codified Modern techniques. It is between the two notions set forth by Kwan and Agamben that I define contemporary in the context of this work. The contemporary, and specifically the contemporary White dancing body, is the dancer of this current time who is devoting their practice to antiracist work while still under the grip of systemic racism and White supremacist values; they are perceiving the light, as Agamben references, while still presently in the dark. Particularly, I am looking at my fellow NYC dance artists, those who have produced and are developing their artistic practice in this East Coast artistic mecca's contemporary dance scene. There of course are other White movement artists, in and outside of NYC, of this time that are not holding anti-racist work in their artistic practice. What is of interest here, and of value, is the examination of how Whiteness prevails and performs through White dancing bodies, further perpetuating a racist system, even when a dedicated desire to dismantle that very system is present.

What is Whiteness?

Before we can look at how White bodies operate on stage and perpetuate Whiteness, we need to first understand what we are examining – namely, what is Whiteness? Sara Ahmed states in her article *A Phenomenology of Whiteness* (2007) “race does not exist, or is not real....

Phenomenology helps us to show how whiteness is an effect of racialization, which in turn shapes what it is that bodies ‘can do’....exploring how whiteness is ‘real’, material and lived.”

(150) One of the ways we can look at what White bodies can do is through the lens of privilege.

Looking at Peggy McIntosh’s 1989 text *White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack*, we can connect White privilege to bodily autonomy of walking into a store without fear of

harassment or driving a car without fear of targeting by police. White privilege is the power that

the White race has afforded to those socially categorized as “White”, and if Whiteness and the

White race are phenomenological entities, White privilege is the ontological effect and

performative affect of the socialized, experiential ideology that race puts forward. Whiteness is

both ontological and phenomenological, and in order to critique the system at large, we need to

examine both the real and the constructed. In *Critical Race Theory: An Introduction* (Delgado

and Stefancic 2017) the authors stress that through the lens of critical race theory we must look

at race being two-fold if we are going to dismantle it completely.

...our system of race is like a two-headed hydra. One head consists of outright racism – the oppression of some people on grounds of who they are. The other consists of white privilege – a system by which whites help and buoy each other up. If one lops off a single head, say, outright racism, but leaves the other intact, our system of white over black/brown will remain virtually unchanged. The predicament of social reform, as one writer pointed out, is that ‘everything must change at once’. Otherwise, change is swallowed up by the remaining elements, so that we remain roughly as we were before. Culture replicates itself forever and ineluctably. (90-91)

Delgado and Stefancic demonstrate in their hydra metaphor the importance of tackling the totality of Whiteness in anti-racist work. If we only work to unpack racism – the phenomenological – and not embodied privilege – the ontological – the hydra of our racialized society will never be defeated. In this section, I break down the phenomenological side of Whiteness: why/how it exists and how it hides, as well as the ontological side of Whiteness: how it is embodied.

In the case of Whiteness, taking into account its placement in the racial hierarchy, we are asking how it “came to define itself” (Delgado and Stefancic 2017, 85), as its origins in the United States lie in the legal system, stretching back to the mid-late 1800s. Whiteness was defined in relation to “other”; those who qualified as “White” were allowed to legally emigrate and were given the rights of an American citizen, and those who did not qualify were deemed “not White” and were not considered for naturalized citizenship. Laws were designed to include White people in systems that uplifted them in society while simultaneously moving anyone designated as non-White downward. These lines were arbitrary and subject to social delegation, where individuals with Armenian and Turkish ancestry, for example, did not categorize neatly into “Black” or “White”, thus their fate was left up to the discretion of the individual court. (Haney López 2006) Whiteness, as a socially constructed race, was written as a concrete identity at the highest vantage point in our law. Ian Haney López acknowledges the concocted identity of the White race in his book *White By Law: The Legal Construction of Race* (2006), “Critical race theory increasingly acknowledges the extent to which race is not an independent given on which the law acts, but rather a social construction at least in part fashioned by law.” (9) While race, and specifically Whiteness, were constructed in our judicial system, they are enforced and

maintained by society. Through its legal origins we see Whiteness as distinction of “us” and “them”. “Whiteness exists as a pole around which revolve imaginary racial meanings. As a category, it depends upon these revolving meanings, this other-demonization and self-deification.” (Haney López 2006, 130) Through Haney López’s analysis, we can understand how Whiteness exists as the place at which others are defined; it has an outward gaze as opposed to an inward gaze.

Sara Ahmed echoes this notion in her article *A Phenomenology of Whiteness* (2007). Ahmed states that “Whiteness could be described as an ongoing and unfinished history, which orientates bodies in specific directions, affecting how they ‘take up’ space.” (150) Combining Haney López’s and Ahmed’s ideas, we can come to the understanding that *Whiteness is a power to orientate oneself in space towards others*. Haney López furthers this discussion on orientation by posing, “races are relational constructions...Whites have fashioned themselves as the superior opposite to those denigrated others designated non-Whites” (2006, 142) Here we see how Whiteness has oriented itself to the top of the racial hierarchy, existing in a calculated and favorable opposition against anyone categorized as “other”.

Ahmed links the legal and social discussion surrounding Whiteness to the physical body, and asks “how bodies become white”. (156) Haney López offers an answer to this, by discussing in his chapter *White-Race Consciousness* how people become and remain White by their social contexts and the choices they make in those contexts. He acknowledges that ancestry and physical racial markings play a role in how we are initially sorted into our social contexts at birth, but the choices we make to live complacently or shake the container are what make us white. “It is in this ability to choose, an admittedly constrained ability but one nonetheless always present, that Whites as individuals and as a community possess the power to dismantle

Whiteness.” (134) Race does not exist in the physical world, but rather is a human invention. White people, as they are categorized today, have the choice to retain White privilege or disintegrate the entire system that formulates race, an imagined idea, as a living entity in our society.

Not only does Whiteness place White people at an advantageous orientation in our society, but it also conceals itself, as one privilege of Whiteness is to not notice one's own race, but rather take racial status for granted, capitalizing on its positionality of outward gaze. White skin has historically been positioned as the universal neutral racial signifier, wherein race itself becomes invisibilized when advantageous. Nell Irvin Painter refers to this as “unraced individuality”, referencing the common mentality of White people to not see themselves as having a race, whereas any non-White individual is fixed in a “pronounced group identity” based on their perceived race. (2020) As discussed in the Introduction of this thesis, an important action in dismantling White supremacy is to take away the privilege of invisibility that Whiteness and the White race exploit. Both Painter and Ahmed note the potential importance of studying Whiteness, not only as a tool in thoroughly understanding the system we are tackling, but also as a way to strip away its complacency in invisibility. Painter remarks on the “severely under-theorized” nature of Whiteness compared to Blackness (2020) and Ahmed poses key questions including, “If whiteness gains currency by being unnoticed, then what does it mean to notice whiteness? What does making the invisible marks of privilege more visible actually do? Could whiteness studies produce an attachment to whiteness by holding it in place as an object?” (2007, 149) There is an obvious discomfort with confronting one's own identity, which is perhaps one of the reasons White people have chosen to ignore their Whiteness and maintained an imagined a state of racelessness thus far. I posit that the continued and diligent theorization

and examination of Whiteness will aid in the dismantling of White supremacy. White people commonly equate the dismantling of White supremacy and the current system as a threat to their livelihood. However, I urge my fellow White people to examine their Whiteness in order to understand how the system also holds us hostage; perhaps situations that appear to benefit us are actually concealing more malevolent effects. How can we evolve alongside the progression of the world if we don't understand who we are and our placement in it?

Now, how do we connect White bodies to Whiteness? Ahmed poses that White bodies are what Whiteness drags along, creating a spatial relationship that inhibits White people from viewing the effects of Whiteness on them. "White bodies are habitual insofar as they 'trail behind' actions: they do not get 'stressed' in their encounters with objects or others, as their whiteness 'goes unnoticed'. Whiteness would be what lags behind; white bodies do not have to face their whiteness; they are not oriented 'towards' it, and this 'not' is what allows whiteness to cohere, as that which bodies are oriented around." (156) What if we flipped this orientation, effectively stripping away the privilege of occlusion? What will we find when we shift the orientation from the external to the internal? One theory proposed by David Roediger, an American historian, brought forth by Haney López (2006) is that Whiteness is "not a culture, but the absence of culture. It is the empty and therefore terrifying attempt to build an identity based on what one isn't and on whom one can hold back" (118) While Haney López disagrees with this notion, and argues that this is the case simply because our social landscape of Whiteness has made it so, I find value in looking at where Whiteness is because of the social landscape it has created. How does this emptiness function and in turn drive us? Kenneth Hoover stresses the dire need to establish a full sense of self within society in his text *The Power of Identity: Politics in a New Key* (1997), stating "...identity is driven not simply by ego, or some abstracted sense of

self, but by the imperative of achieving a sense of competence and integrity amid the promptings of physical changes and the interplay of powerful social forces.” (20) American culture is defined as a “melting pot” of immigrant cultures rather than a singular identity. The social forces driving a need to fully form one’s identity motivates White bodies in a melted cultural environment to fill up their sense of self with whatever cultural identity is readily available. Therefore, in the case of the White American individual, appropriation, an inevitability in a cultural vacuum, is at the forefront of cultural identity, as it is necessary in order to fill out and fully form that individual’s identity.

How does the White dancing body perform?

I use the term White dancing body in reference to Brenda Dixon Gottschild, who examined this concept in her 2008 book *The Black Dancing Body: A Geography from Coon to Cool*. Similar to methodologies put forth in her book *Digging the Africanist Presence*, I build off her definitions and categorizations for specifying the body I am examining in this thesis. Gottschild begins her chapter *Black White Dance Dancers* by acknowledging that there is really no existence of “black dance”, “white dance” or corresponding bodies. However, she pushes forward stating,

The black dancing body (a fiction based on reality, a fact based upon illusion) has infiltrated and informed the shapes and changes of the American dancing body. Until racism and white-skin privilege are no longer an everyday issue in American life, I believe that there is good reason to use a terminology of difference (black dance; black dancing body) that allows us to honor these contributions. (14)

Rather than ignoring the importance of studying the distinction between Black and White dancing bodies, Gottschild recognizes that this distinction is an existing presence within the framework of how we see dance, as it coincides with the imagined but present racial society. In order to uncover the extent of how Whiteness has infiltrated and nested within the dance world, we need to distinguish between what is supported by Whiteness and what is not. Gottschild describes the existing paradox of naming racialized dances and dancers, as “there is and there isn’t a black dancing body, [and] white and black bodies are and are not the same.” (2008, 28)

There is not a Black or White dancing body since race is a constructed entity that does not truly exist, but because of the deeply rooted violent acts of racism on racialized bodies, it is vital that we acknowledge the existence of perceived race on performing bodies. Toni Morrison speaks on the dangers of ignoring the presence of race in her 1992 book *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness*

and the Literary Imagination. “The act of enforcing racelessness in literary discourse is itself a racial act. Pouring rhetorical acid on the fingers of a black hand may indeed destroy the prints, but not the hand. Besides, what happens in that violent, self-serving act of erasure to the hands, the fingers, the fingerprints of the one who does the pouring?” (46) While Morrison is speaking on contents and perceptions of American literature, I think it holds value in the discussion of dancing bodies. The metaphor of pouring acid to destroy fingerprints to erasing authorial claim of cultural significance depicts the violence of cultural misappropriation. American dance and performance culture being built upon the backs of the African Diaspora via the Transatlantic Slave Trade is undeniable, and White dance artists habitually choreograph and perform forms and aesthetics from Black dance without crediting Black dance artists, further perpetuating the stealing of Black culture in the service of White culture. While Gottschild names “the black dancing body” and “black dance” to highlight the invisibilized influence of Black culture in American dance, I am digging into the White dancing body and its relationship to White and Black dance to demonstrate how Whiteness as an act of filling oneself with appropriated identity is inherently embodied by contemporary White dancing artists.

As a part of the methodology for her 2008 book, Gottschild interviewed a variety of prominent, working dance artists, asking them questions that guide the chapters of the text. One question she poses is “What is black dance?” (2008, 14) One interviewee, Seán Curran, claims “dance that is made by, performed by a black person, or a white person doing a black person’s dancing or choreography....It’s not just about who’s making it, if they’re black, or who’s doing it, if they’re black. I think it goes deeper than that....I think Tywla [Tharp] has made black dance.” (14) It appears that Gottschild quotes Curran to assert that Black dance can exist in a White body, with Twyla Tharp cited as an example. So, if Black dance can exist in a White

body, how can we spot it? Gottschild details out what comprises “African aesthetic” and “European aesthetic” in her chapter *Black White Dance Dancers* (2008), which I have broken down into the table below.

Africanist Aesthetic	European Aesthetic
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bare feet in sold contact with the earth • The ground as a medium to caress, stomp, or to make contact with the whole body • A grounded, ‘get-down’ quality • Body asymmetry • Polyphonic feel to the dance/dancing body • Articulation of the separate units of the torso 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Erect spine • Verticality • Diatonic feel to the dance • The torso is held still • The limbs moving away from and returning to the vertical center • Reach upward and outward

While I agree with the distinction of these two aesthetic categories brought forth by Gottschild in terms of movement, I also believe that physical racial markers, as mentioned by Haney López as a factor deciding which bodies are “White”, play a huge role in how we view what is “White dance” and what is “Black dance”. Gottschild furthers her distinctions of Europeanist and Africanist bodies, stating that through the lens of the other, Europeanist dancing bodies are “rigid, aloof, cold, and one-dimensional” whereas Africanist dancing bodies are “vulgar, comic, uncontrolled, undisciplined, and, most of all, promiscuous.” (2008, 16) These body descriptors made by each culture on the other are the first illustration of societal cultural perceptions permeating perceptions of dancers. While Gottschild claims these as descriptors of movement, I

view them as personality characteristics, i.e. aloof, cold, and vulgar, promiscuous. At second glance, while these may describe how one views the other as dancing bodies, I postulate that they stem from societal beliefs about the person that the racialized body represents.

Miguel Gutierrez offers insight into racialized perceptions of bodies that saturate performance. In his article *Does Abstraction Belong to White People?* (2018), Gutierrez cites various experiences that have left him wondering about the role race plays in contemporary dance and the apparent gap between how artists of color and White artists see the level of affect.

Who has the right not to explain themselves? The people who don't have to. The ones whose subjectivities have been naturalized. It enrages me. No, it confuses me. I'm all for being confused, for searching, for having to do a bit of work. But the absence of explanation is somehow ... somehow ... somehow what? (2018)

I interpret Gutierrez's words as referring to the unspoken apparent rule in dance that allows White dancers to create work that is not affected by their physical racial markers, while performance by artists of color is viewed with their skin as the subject. bell hooks speaks on this notion in a different context in her book *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (1994). In a discussion about body language and positions of teachers in classrooms, hooks unknowingly connects to Gutierrez's article by declaring, "The person who is most powerful has the privilege of denying their body." (137) Considering White dancers are inherently connected to their White privilege, we can recognize the leverage associated with that privilege, and in this case the ability to have their work be seen as "abstract" rather than "racially-charged", regardless of the movement material – regardless if the movement itself is "Black dance" or "White dance". "The erasure of the body encourages us to think that we are listening to neutral, objective facts, facts that are not particular to who is sharing the information." (hooks 1994, 139) The neutrality of the White body granted from the erasure of

their race encourages audiences to view White dancing bodies as objective, regardless of the dramaturgy of the piece they are in or the physical choreography.

Not only does this dichotomy allow White artists to create works in any realm they choose for themselves, it casts artists of color into dancing objects. Sarah Bellamy wrote a powerful piece in the wake of the George Floyd protests that rocked America in 2020, and in it she declares that White people “want bodies, not brains; performance, not people.” (2020) While Bellamy is not speaking about dancing bodies and dance performances, the mirroring is uncanny. In American culture, White dance artists are positioned in the role of abstract thinker and performer, our knowledge spanning across disciplines and modes of thought, whereas artists of color are perceived as representing and performing content that fits snugly in their “pronounced group identity” (Painter, 2020). Hope Mohr discusses the racialized perceptions of artists in her book *Shifting Cultural Power* (2020), stating,

Denying the subjectivity of abstraction is a way of hiding. As discussed elsewhere in this book, working in abstraction and ambiguity is a privilege that white choreographers have historically enjoyed. Whereas audiences often read the work of a choreographer of color as being about their racial identity, regardless of the artist’s intentions, white choreographers have the luxury of being able to choose to work in abstraction – to take their subjectivity out of their work. How can white abstraction acknowledge its own whiteness?
(82)

Racialized perceptions of bodies on stage may initially appear to stem from audience and critic review, however, Mohr points out that this perception may start at the site of the White body prior to its review, as she calls for abstraction by White artists to notice Whiteness. I speculate these perceptions may actualize in the development of the dancer’s training. I defined White dancing bodies as any White body on the stage or in a rehearsal/classroom setting that is moving to produce dance, regardless of the physical movement aesthetics that are being performed. I

specified that White dancing bodies can perform any movement aesthetic, and that what makes them White is the physical representation of their ethnicity: a representation that claims for its subject neutrality and racelessness. Movement aesthetics only achieve neutrality when existing in a White dancing body; these same forms are only emphasized in their actuality when performed by dancing bodies of color. While I agree with Gottschild's delineations between the Africanist and European dance techniques and bodies, I think there has been a distinct evolution in the American White dancing body implicitly tied to racism and theft of culture. Due to the close proximity and magnitude of influence Black culture has had on American White culture repercussive from the Transatlantic Slave Trade, a White dancing body has emerged in the contemporary that produces and embodies both Europeanist and Africanist aesthetics – despite only claiming the magnitude of Europeanist influence. The White dancing body today is a site for cultural assimilation housed under the racial perception of “White”.

How does the White dancing body exist in the contemporary?

Blending the definitions brought forth by Kwan (2017) and Agamben (2009), I defined the contemporary White dancing body as the dancer of this current time, in which we remain under the grip of systemic racism and White supremacist values. While much of my research thus far has been critical of Whiteness and White people, I acknowledge the White people in the dance world striving to dismantle the system and renounce their privilege. Some are recognized, such as Hope Mohr, the author of *Shifting Cultural Power*, and Stephanie Mas, former member of Urban Bush Women; others are emerging artists like myself who are committed to developing and grounding their developing processes in anti-racist and decolonized work, stepping out of Western dance to acknowledge and lift up the dances we have historically deemed as less than. I have cited authors and artists that have already done the work to identify the racial gap in the dance world and unpack the entity of Whiteness. What is missing from this conversation is the analysis of the contemporary White dancing body – the artists that want to strip away their White privilege but are largely unsuccessful due to the dominating nature of Whiteness that is attached to White bodies. How does Whiteness still manifest through these bodies even in individuals actively trying to strip away its tie to privilege and oppression? I pose that this is the source of the hydra Haney López urges us to simultaneously cut away at. It's not enough to rid the dance world of the obvious and outward racist participants and practices, we need to dig out the root of this racism: the Whiteness that exists and transmits through the contemporary White dancing body.

Connecting back to Toni Morrison's question "What are you without racism?" (1993), what is the contemporary White dancing body without racism? To simplify this further: what is the

contemporary White dancing body without appropriated material? While appropriation is inevitable in art, it has particular connotations for White artists. “Everything is up for grabs, and everybody does it, on all sides. On the other hand, given that racism and white-skin privilege make the playing field a grossly uneven ground, it is important to acknowledge and examine the issue, should we ever hope to get through it and transcend it.” (Gottschild 2008, 21) What if we examine this issue through the practice of identifying non-White movement philosophies in White bodies, divorce them, and see what remains? I explored this practice in my creation of my work *amniotic threading* (2022), which I will analyze in the final section of this thesis, but the basis for the choreographic investigation of separating appropriated material from the White body stemmed from the desire to understand the extent to which Western dance practices are existing on culturally appropriated movement principles. In my own investigation, I found, without surprise, that the movement qualities and choreographic choices openly derived from Africanist principles were the ones praised and perceived as the most interesting to my colleagues, and the material performed by the dancer embodying a “stripped away” version of the choreography felt lacking.

Gottschild references Trisha Brown, what many would call the mother of NYC contemporary dance, and a White woman, in *The Black Dancing Body* (2008). In discussing what constitutes White dance, Trisha Brown was a common figure in Gottschild’s interviews.

When asked what images came to the mind’s eye when I used the term ‘white dance’, several interviewees named Trisha Brown, the renowned postmodern dancer-choreographer, as the object of their gaze. But a dancing body like Brown’s could not have come about without the influence of a jazz (read, black) aesthetic working on her, albeit subliminally. (22)

From here, it's plausible to categorize Trisha Brown as one of the "White dancers dancing and choreographing Black dance". Much of Brown's work is influenced by jazz and social dance, a fact Brown reveals to Gottschild in her interview, proclaiming that her work has "been African all along". (23) Until reading this I would also categorize Trisha Brown as a White dancer/choreographer. While this could be due to the fact that Brown racially appears White, I feel it's more complex than that. On one hand, one could argue that appropriation of Black dance is inevitable in our current society. Gottschild speaks of this claiming, "In the dances created in the United States and Europe by blacks and whites during the previous century, these aesthetic strains are no longer separate but are, as Marlies Yearby points out, 'interconnected and mixed up just as much as the blood is.'" (2008, 16) However, as also previously noted by Gottschild, appropriation is an inherent part of art, and the appropriation of Black dance aesthetics by White artists holds a specific consequential connotation of exploitation. Gottschild further posits that these aesthetics along with other African Diasporic forms are perhaps appropriated purposefully, as they are "made to approximate a look and texture, feel and shape, that will meet with the aesthetic approval of the appropriating culture before they can be assimilated." (2008, 21) Whether done with malicious intent or not, White dance artists have embodied and choreographed within forms and aesthetics of the African Diaspora without crediting, or even having studied these forms in their original format. Since these dances have been assimilated to such a degree to meet the approval and acceptance of White dance culture, it can be hard to recognize that it is indeed appropriation, and the lack of credit and internal acknowledgement to those who originated these dances turns the common appropriation into misappropriation.

In the past seven years I have been actively identifying myself as a White dancer, and in the most recent four years I have been involved in the New York City dance sphere, working in

various positions at Movement Research, pursuing my Masters of Fine Arts at Sarah Lawrence College, and taking classes and workshops at *Movement Research* – with faculty such as Marjani Forté-Saunders, Tere O’Connor, Angie Pittman, Vicky Shick, and Thomas F. DeFrantz – *Cumbe Dance* in Brooklyn, where I’ve continued my study of Afro-centric dances, and the *2019 Generative Dancer* workshop with Urban Bush Women. In most of these spaces, if not all, there has been a vocalized and programmed anti-racist agenda. I have also noted that many White dancers engage in movement prompts and choreography in ways that embody Africanist principles, such as through activation and accentuation of the pelvis and spine, bare feet in conversation with the ground or floor, and a polycentric and asymmetric body positioning. Some of these dancers, like myself, have training in forms of the African Diaspora, but more often than not White dancers credit their technique to a background in modern and contemporary dance. There is no innate malevolent intention here, they are simply existing and learning in a canon that thrives off of appropriation and the uplifting of White artistry. But is this really White artistry, or is it Black artistry masquerading in a White body without appropriate citation?

At this point, as Gottschild and Yearby point out, Black dance aesthetics have been intermixed with White dance aesthetics to such a degree that they have become their own cultural aesthetic popular in contemporary dance. Failing to credit and provide overdue reparation to the Black communities that have created the dances that are funded by White-led institutions and foundations to be performed on stage by White dancing bodies for largely White audiences impedes the opportunity for contemporary dance to diversify its ideologies and produced performances, further perpetuating White supremacy. In the Winter of 2017/2018, I attended American Dance Festival’s Winter Intensive in NYC. As a part of their programming, the students and faculty attended a performance by Dorrance Dance at the Joyce Theater in

Chelsea. While Dorrance Dance is a tap dance company, and is committed to antiracist work, they are not specifically the movement practitioners at the forefront of my analysis of contemporary dance. There is, however, a relative connection to the contemporary within tap dance. In a discussion the following day, a faculty member recounted their experience observing the mostly White audience's reactions to a tap section performed by the sole Black performer as reminiscent of "a minstrel show". At the time I was struck by this comment, but in the years since then I have shifted my attention to audience demographics at performances I attend because of this observation. Due to my interests, most dance performances I attend are primarily choreographed and/or performed by BIPOC artists. At venues such as Danspace Project, I have noticed a demographic of around 50/50 for presenting White/POC audience members; at venues such as The Joyce and Jacob's Pillow, the demographic is if not all, mostly White patrons. I note that this data is observational, biased and lacking formulation, but it still gives me pause; it also cues to larger institutional racist structures in place that extend past the dance world and into the societal world. As of April 2022, tickets for performances at The Joyce and Jacob's Pillow are on average \$46 and \$71, respectively, whereas the highest price of a ticket at Danspace Project is \$25 (The Joyce Theater (2022); Jacob's Pillow Dance Festival (2022); Danspace Project (2022)). Connecting back to Miguel Gutierrez's article *Does Abstraction Belong To White People* (2018), there is also a sense of belongingness in these spaces, begging the question: who do these venues welcome?

Ian Haney López speaks of the societal paradox of promoting anti-racist work while simultaneously aiding in the progression of White supremacy and claims,

...we are headed towards a hierarchy of *colorblind White dominance*. This looming racial paradigm has three central elements, which I discuss in turn: (1) continued racial dominance by Whites; (2) an expansion of who counts as White along socio-racial

rather than bio-racial lines; and (3) a colorblind ideology that simultaneously proclaims a robust commitment to antiracism yet works assiduously to prevent effective racial remediation. (148)

In order to fully promote anti-racist and decolonized culture of dance in America, we need to be honest about what White dancing bodies are practicing, teaching, and performing – and accurately claim it as Africanist. As it exists now, the contemporary White dancing body is the body that holds misappropriated material while preaching anti-racism and decolonization, unaware, or choosing to ignore, that their own body is the very thing perpetuating it.

Gestational Whiteness: Choreographic research in *amniotic threading* (2022)

Alexandra enters, moving in the front most space. Bounded by the line of twine dividing the stage at the diagonal – one end attached to the mound of interwoven twine, the other drifting off to a space beyond the stage – she moves from her outermost organ, her White skin, drawing direct and sharp lines through the space with her limbs, her torso anchored and still. As she travels up the diagonal cord, Lily and Chloe soar in, molding their surrounding space sanctioned by the twine with their spines and pelvis, respectively. As Iris progresses the center of the intricately woven mass of twine, I take hold of the space on a mission to better understand the strands of my own artistic development and embodied evolution.

As I pursued my Master of Fine Arts in Dance at Sarah Lawrence, a program predominantly focused on making work, I began to question my relationship with choreography and how it integrates into my artistic practice. In December 2019 I performed my first work choreographed in this program, *White pelvis, Art*. In the final weeks leading up to the performance, as I shifted my choreographic focus from embodied research into performative technique, I realized how uninterested I was in the performance itself; what impassioned me and expanded my artistic practice was the choreographic process. Taking my education into my own hands, I decided to refocus my MFA into exploring how the choreographic process transformed my theoretical research. In this sense, the performance is not a finite representation of analytic elements, but rather a pillar of research existing at that moment in time. *amniotic threading* (2022) takes a microscopic and metaphorical look into the gestational development of my own contemporary White dancing body at the very point in which Africanist aesthetics fertilized with my Western tendencies to form a new dancing body, one conceived of DNA interwoven with

principles previously perceived to be in opposition of one another. Using the choreographic process as an integral research tool, I sought to develop a work to answer the following questions: how do my opposing cultural influences negotiate and share space within my embodied practice? How does an embodied unraveling of the mind affect the evolution of an artistic practice? Where is my Whiteness held in my body?

I've always considered myself as having two separate, albeit inherently connected, evolutions as a dancer. One began when I was a child and placed in ballet as I passed through adolescence, resulting in a dancing body founded in Western dance practices: the typical White dancing body that Gottschild outlines. The other began development much later in my life, when I was introduced to dances of the African Diaspora, catalyzed by empowerment sourced from my pelvis and spine. Throughout my study of Jamaican folk dances, particularly the funeral dances of Kumina and Dinki Mini, the conceptions of death and rebirth have become central to my artistic practice. In these dances, participants honor the loss of a loved one with the use of their pelvis, almost mocking death and flaunting their ability to make life even in light of death. The pelvis is proudly displayed and used as a catalyst for movement, reinforcing the power of birth in the face of death. (Carty, 2010) My artistic practice largely centers around the pelvis for the same reason; I view the pelvis as a source of empowerment, connecting it to our ability to evolve through cycles of rebirth. While I was developing *amniotic threading* (2022) as a research tool in this larger investigation, themes of birth and evolution inherently were present and thus became pivotal source of information through this study.

Alongside themes of rebirth through the embodied connection to the pelvis, a search for unraveling identity was also at the forefront. In the spring semester of my first year as a graduate student, Kyle Bukhari introduced Irit Rogoff's *What is a Theorist* (2004) in our graduate

seminar. Rogoff speaks of a theoretical unraveling and an undoing of one's self as "a journey of phases in which the thought we are immersed in is invalidated. Those moments of silent epiphany in which we have realized that things might not necessarily be so, that there might be a whole other way to think them..." (98) This notion of undoing oneself to uncover a truer idea of that self immediately connected to my antiracist work as a White person; the act of unraveling one's psyche in order to undo the racism embedded within to evolve towards possessing a more authentic anti-racist perspective with growing awareness of one's true self. I began to question how I could embody theoretical unraveling to undo my White dancing body as a choreographic practice. Thus, I brought twine, and particularly tangled up twine, into my research. After spending about a year exploring how I could embody entanglement and disentanglement physically within the twine, I brought a dancer in to observe it alongside my most central movement practices. I knew this twine was a larger metaphor than even Rogoff's theoretical unraveling (2004), but it wasn't until Dean Moss, an advisor on the first iteration of this work, *amniotic threads* (2021), noted that a singular strand of thread stemming from my knotted mass of twine resembled an umbilical cord that I fully grasped the theory embedded in this work. The knotted mass of twine (see Figure 1) was representative of a placenta and specifically the gestation and evolution of my embodied practice: the transformation of my artistic identity through my study of African Diasporic dances. All at once, the nature of the work materialized: my dancers represented aspects of both balletic tendencies strongly and stubbornly tethered to my embodied practice and the West African, Jamaican and Afro-Cuban principles foundational to my development as a movement practitioner. Rather than studying how these negotiate space, I was examining the gestational period in which these techniques grew and emmeshed into each other to create my current practice.



Figure 1 - Elle Cherry approaches twine placenta in *amniotic threading* (2022), Photography by Maria Baranova

Angela Garbes speaks candidly about the placenta in her book *Like a Mother: a Feminist Journey through the Science and Culture of Pregnancy* (2019). She states that the placenta, from her experience birthing one, is a “gnarly tangle of bound and naked blood vessels” (Garbes 2019, 65) as it is comprised of a complex villous structure, containing both maternal and fetal cells which progressively converge throughout the pregnancy. (Kapila and Chaudhry, 2021) In both my own practice and the choreographic task given to my dancer, I imagine each strand and line of twine to be representative of one granular aspect of my entire artistic practice and my identity as a dancer and as a White woman, with all of these points intersecting at places of knotting. These strands appear to me as raw and exposed facets of theory in the physical world, tangled and bound in such a way that they form their own entity, their own organ. Garbes also notes that

the placenta is “the site of the first communication and cooperation between mother and child, but also their first conflicts and negotiations,” (2019, 66) furthering the connection to this work, as it so aptly describes how all aspects of my artistic identity negotiate and form space together in my embodied practice. In mammalian pregnancy the DNA that molds the placenta comes from both the mother and father, with the mother’s already existing in the body from her own conception fertilizing with the father’s. (Garbes 2019, 62) The “mother” in my metaphor is ballet, as this technique was the first I learned as a dancer and the “father” is the addition of Africanist aesthetic and principle that have become equally weighted in my practice to mature my artistic practice to its current state.

From these analyses, I came to the conclusion that the evolution of one’s artistic and embodied movement practice mirrors gestational development of a fetus. As dancers, when we are exposed to new modes of movement or techniques, that information is stored in our muscle memory, enmeshing together to expand our practices and develop an individual technique through motor development. This process is universal to all dancers, whether it be from study of form or creative inspiration. The intersection of racialized culture in this development, particularly Whiteness, comes into fruition when examining what information dancers are taking in and how it is fertilized with existing movement practices to evolve into a richer dancing body. In the second section of this thesis, *What is Whiteness?*, I interrogate the gaze of Whiteness, combining theory from Haney-Lopez and Ahmed to conclude that Whiteness holds an outward gaze to the world rather than an internal gaze towards oneself. I question here if this inherent outward gaze of White bodies, which establishes these bodies at the point in which the world unfolds from (Ahmed 2007) effects the extent of cultural movement material that White dancing bodies are taking into the gestational development of their individual artistic

embodiment while occluding the ability to perceive this extent. Perhaps this outward gaze increases the amount of embodied information taken into one's self and since White bodies lack an innate internal gaze, White dancing bodies are not privy to understanding the totality of their development, essentially rebranding it as it fertilizes with previously grounded technique into the guise of neutrality stemming from a perception of racelessness. In this instance, Whiteness manifests in the body not only as a breeding ground for appropriation, even when there is no intent for misappropriation, but also as an occlusion to one's own development and intrinsic complacency in cultural theft.

CONCLUSION

Embodied evolution of Whiteness in the contemporary White dancing body

Throughout this study I have analyzed how Whiteness exists in and signifies dancing bodies. From analysis of pivotal sources such as Brenda Dixon Gottschild's *The Black Dancing Body* (2008), Ian Haney-Lopez's *White By Law: The Legal Construction of Race* (2006), Sara Ahmed's *A Phenomenology of Whiteness* (2007), Angela Garbes' *Like a Mother: a Feminist Journey through the Science and Culture of Pregnancy* (2019) and my own choreographic work *amniotic threading* (2022), I have come to the conclusion that Whiteness orients White dancing bodies towards cultural movement material that is then developed into their own embodied practice. However, since Whiteness occludes an innate internal gaze, White dancing bodies do not recognize the remnants of cultural material as belonging to a culture, but rather identify it as a facet of their own personal movement practice, therefore taking away its proper ownership and continuing the cycle of cultural theft and misappropriation.

This conclusion was reached after extensive research of the question *How does Whiteness manifest through the White dancing body?*, built on three pillars: *What is Whiteness?*, *How does the White dancing body perform?*, and *How does the White dancing body exist in the contemporary?* The first hypothesis I worked through stemmed from David Roediger's assertion referenced in *White By Law* (2006) that the White body is empty, a vessel devoid of cultural identity. Considering the scope of this research existed in New York City, I initially connected this notion of the body as an empty container to the commonly known metaphor of the United States, and its populous cities as being a melting pot of different cultures. While there is a uncanny mirroring in the two containers – a pot filled with melted cultures assimilated into a

singular unit and a body filled with appropriated and assimilated cultural material – this theory was only supported in the United States and further perpetuated the dehumanizing notion of dancing bodies separate from personhood.

As I was annotating and reviewing the primary sources – Gottschild, Haney Lopez, and Ahmed – I was concurrently choreographing and developing *amniotic threading* (2022). Without the embodied and dramaturgical research of that work, which developed alongside critical analysis of the selected literature, the presented conclusion of Whiteness orienting White bodies to an outward gaze, occluding an internal gaze that would allow White dancers to recognize their embodied evolution as artists, would not have been formulated. *amniotic threading* was performed in April 2022 as a component of my Masters of Fine Arts degree. Since this work was created as an incubator for theoretical research to permeate into embodied practice, the performance itself was not choreographed to explicitly convey the presented theorem of Whiteness' gestational occlusion, but rather to perform the progression of this research at that given time. I recognize the infancy of this theory at this stage. In consultation of this thesis, a member of my cohort at Sarah Lawrence, Allysen Hooks, questioned the obstacles, and lack thereof, that a White-led society has placed in front of bodies of color and White bodies, respectively, and in turn the effect these barriers have on the orientation and gaze of these bodies. This train of thought connects discourse of White dancing bodies back to White bodies at large, and warrants deeper analysis. The presented conclusion here is merely a starting point for much larger and complex research.

While it was necessary to delve into the granular aspects of how Whiteness inherently exists inside White dancing bodies for this given study, there are significant additional relevant factors to analyze. In my research process I encountered many topics implicated in the larger

question of how Whiteness is embedded into contemporary dance. Questions of socio-economic status arose, as the originating descriptors for “white dancing body” and “black dancing body” brought forth by Gottschild included cultural aesthetics and principles that have a relationship to class, i.e. bare-footedness and erect stature. Class re-emerged as I began to question what is produced on stages today and how it is reviewed, bringing monetary funding and access to professional artistic development into light. I also encountered an abundance of information and supporting evidence for the study of contemporary dance artists in New York City not only relating to foundations, residencies, performances, and reviews, but also in regards to the weightedness of Trisha Brown in Gottschild’s examination of Black and White dancing aesthetics. In my experience thus far in New York City, I have come to recognize the immense lineage and succession of Trisha Brown’s technique and choreographic approach on emerging dancers in this city.

The next logical step I see for this research is to begin an extensive study of performances produced at main and “downtown dance” stages across New York City, as well as the class offerings at prominent institutions for dance education, such as Sarah Lawrence. Which artists are being funded? How are resident artists and grant applications chosen? Who sits on selection panels? Who curates performance seasons? What work is getting positive reviews? What is the relationship between choreographer and reviewer in terms of cultural background? Is there a central technique or embodied approach being taught to emerging dance artists? These questions are not asking for demographic information based on race, but rather vital information that will reveal the extent to which Whiteness has taken hold in the current dance climate in this artistic mecca, as well as its relation and effect on contemporary White dancing bodies.

The deconstruction of the current racial system that allows for White appropriation of Black thought and culture in America is imperative. I am calling for my fellow White artists, both inside and outside of the dance community, to deeply and honestly interrogate the strands of culture that have comprised your artistic development. What can you do to ensure that your body and mind are not implicated in the continuation of a White-dominated artistic and global society? How can you continue to evolve into a richer artistic identity in the contemporary, re-orienting yourself to an innate internal gaze showcasing the extraordinary complexity that is held in your body? How can we evolve together, uplifting the breadth of knowledge in our lineage?

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