

From Something, to Nothing, to Something Else
A Personal Essay by Nicola Bullock
presented at The Collegium for African Diaspora Dance, 2014
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My name is Nicola Bullock. I am a dancer and choreographer, I live in Durham, I am a woman, and I am white.

I was slated to present a paper at the Collegium this weekend. For reasons I discuss later in this essay, I will not be doing that.

In lieu of writing an academic paper, I wrote this personal essay. In it, I have documented my experiences in researching and preparing for the academic paper I thought I would write - beginning with my decision to apply and ending with the realization that this conference is not the right home for my voice right now. This essay addresses some of the issues that I have had navigating (my) whiteness and dancer/choreographer identity in a black academic space.

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I decided to apply to the Collegium for African Diasporic Dance after seeing a performance of the North Carolina Dance Festival (NCDF) in September of 2013 in Raleigh, NC. For context, a little background on the NCDF is necessary.

According to its website, the NCDF is “an annual showcase of North Carolina dance artists that travels to five communities statewide.” Choreographers from around the state apply to tour with the festival, and eight of them make it in each year.

Watching the show in September, two things struck me. First, everyone on stage looked white¹ to me; second, every piece was done in the style of either ballet or modern². Both of these things left me with some questions, which did not get answered when I went home and read what the North Carolina Dance Festival has to say about itself on its website.

¹ This is an extremely simplistic statement, if not downright racist. The reason I reduce, here, the performers' skin color, features, and body shape (not to mention their origins, history, heritage, ethnicity, and nationality) down to one label - “white” - is to be honest about how and what I, and I think others, see from the audience. From my seat far away, looking at them under bright stage lights, all of the performers looked white.

As to what I mean by “looked white,” that is harder. They looked like most of the people who host the news, like almost all of the people with late-night talk shows, and like 100% of past presidents of the United States. They don't look like the people whose mugshots are on the news every evening, or members of the house bands on late-night TV, or the 44th president of the United States.

² One company defines itself as a “contemporary hip-hop” company on its website, and the hip-hop influence is apparent in the dancers' use of weight and acrobatics; however, I would argue that the format of the company's dance work, as well as its heavy reliance on ballet dancers, makes it more of a “contemporary, with a few hip-hop dance moves and stylings thrown in” company.

Founded in 1991, the NCDF lists three goals on its website. They are:

- 1) to increase the audience in NC for dance by increasing awareness of the wide variety of dance artists we have in the state.
- 2) to provide an opportunity for artists to show their work and be viewed as valuable professionals.
- 3) to create a sense of community among the state's choreographers and performers, enabling the state's dance artists to see each other's work and perform together.

In the words of NCDF (also on their website), "the touring roster consists of eight artists/companies... Sometimes, one or two additional artists will be invited to perform so that the final product is a well-rounded Festival encompassing different points of view, ethnicities, and varying career stages."

The NCDF seems to invite racial diversity in theory, but not in practice³. I found the uninterrupted whiteness of the dancers disquieting in and of itself, but paired with the audacity of the festival's name⁴ and its stated goals, the lack of racial diversity⁵ felt impudent and irresponsible.

The second issue, of only ballet and modern dance being represented onstage, reflects the same issue of theory vs. practice - namely, that if the NCDF cites "increasing awareness of the wide variety of dance artists we have in the state" as one of its primary purposes, it must feature more than two varieties of dance artists⁶ in its festival.

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These issues (lack of racial and stylistic diversity) are issues about which I have never had to think very hard. I'm white. I grew up in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, where as a child I trained in modern and jazz dance at a local dance studio. I studied dance and psychology at Barnard College in New York City, and upon graduating I moved to

³ Based on the show that I saw.

⁴ Given the nature of the Festival's name - sweeping and broad in scope - the Festival should be sweeping and broad in its representation of North Carolinians and our diversity of dance styles. On the night that I went, it was neither.

⁵ 22% of North Carolinians self-identify as Black or African American alone according to the US Census Bureau. Another 8.7% are Hispanic or Latino. Together, this makes up more than 30% of the NC population. It made up 0% of the dancers onstage (I'm not sure of the choreographers).

⁶ In a word search, the words "ballet" and "modern" were found a total of 0 times on the NCDF's website.

Brooklyn and began taking hip-hop classes at Dance New Amsterdam. Four years later, I moved to Durham, North Carolina, where I continue to dance and make dances.

I offer this bio as an introduction to who I am⁷. When I look onstage and see white bodies, I understand their bodies as neutral, as blank, as universal. When I see black and brown bodies onstage, I see “Other.” I don’t know if that’s because I am white, or because I have really effectively internalized white supremacy⁸; I think it’s mostly because I’m white. I also believe, however, that the United States is a white supremacy, and that the people who live here are cultured to see whiteness as the norm, the default (not to mention the superior). As far as identifying with white bodies goes, it can be difficult to know where one (my born race) ends and the other (my cultured racism) begins.

This way of viewing white and non-white bodies onstage has rarely been challenged, and I haven’t much questioned it. In part that is because I grew up doing and seeing, modern dance⁹. As a child and teenager, I went to see shows at the American Dance Festival, spent two summers studying modern at the North Carolina School of the Arts, and left North Carolina for Barnard in order to pursue my dreams of becoming a dancer in New York City. The only reason I could go to an Ivy-League school and study modern dance is because it has been accepted as a form of “high art¹⁰.” This means that it gets more attention from academia, more funding from grant-giving organizations, and more spots on the programs of eminent performance venues

⁷ Or who I think I am, or who I would like to be, or who I am afraid that I am. Or some combination thereof.

⁸ White supremacy is an historically based, institutionally perpetuated system of exploitation and oppression of continents, nations, and peoples of color by white peoples and nations of the European continent; for the purpose of establishing, maintaining, and defending a system of wealth, power, and privilege. (Definition by Mickey Ellinger and Sharon Martinas).

⁹ This is not to say that modern dance is white dance. It has borrowed (appropriated?) movements and rhythms from African Diasporic Dance, as well as from other communities and cultures around the world. There is a Toni Morrison quote (see footnote 13) that helps explain this. Non-white dancers and choreographers tend to identify themselves as such, whereas white dancers and choreographers say nothing about their identity, only about their genre or style of dance. Thus, if a troupe calls itself a “modern dance troupe” that means white; a “_____ -modern dance troupe” (African-American, Asian-American, Hispanic, etc.) means there are people of color directing and dancing in that troupe.

¹⁰ “High art” as something that is deeper, more meaningful, universal, timeless, and transcendent than other forms of expression. These other forms include “low art”, “folk art”, and “pop art.”

than most other forms of dance¹¹. Because I have always done modern dance, I have benefitted from the systemic racism that furthers the ends of modern dance over other dance forms. I have given very little thought to what happens to African Diasporic Dance and dancers both within and outside the realm of modern dance because I simply haven't had to.

I did start thinking - actively and consciously, as opposed to in passing or infrequently - about institutionalized racism and discriminatory power structures a year and a half ago, when I decided to make a dance piece about identity, race, and power. My homework involves reading a lot, talking to a lot of different types of people, and making a lot of mistakes (this one I don't plan so much, it just happens). And as time passes, I am learning to recognize where and how systemic racism and colonialism¹² play out in the world. It's kind of like a different lens through which I see a different reality. Perhaps a more real reality. Perhaps just a more comprehensive one.

It was this lens through which I watched the North Carolina Dance Festival performance. Systemic racism and colonialism were playing themselves out in front of my eyes, and like a kid who learns how to read and wants to teach her little sister, I wanted to tell everyone what I had seen.

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The month prior, I had received an email informing me of the Collegium for African Diasporic Dance at Duke, in which there was a link to its online application. After my experience at NCDF, I wrote an abstract that encompassed, what I thought, was everything that people at this conference - any conference on dance, but especially an African Diasporic one - needed to know. Inspired by a Toni Morrison quote¹³, I titled the

¹¹ The histories of African Diasporic Dance and modern dance are inseparable, and for more on their relationship, I suggest reading Susan Manning's "Modern Dance, Negro Dance: Race in Motion". Their inseparability does not mean that African Diasporic Dance, as distinct from modern dance, receives the same treatment that modern dance does by academies and institutions of power. And by treatment I mean money.

¹² I use the word "colonialism" here to describe the relationship between an institution whose self-image includes seeing itself as a non-invasive champion of diversity, and the people it claims to serve.

¹³ "In this country American means white. Everybody else has to hyphenate."

paper “_____ - American : How white gaze and high society have excluded dancers and dances of the African Diaspora from modern dance.” The abstract reads as follows:

Over 100 years ago, modern dance was created by, and for, white people. It has joined the ranks of ballet as “high art,” sanctified by performance venues, educational institutions, and audiences as worthy of time, study, and money. Despite over 100 years of sociopolitical growth within both the modern dance world and America as a whole, a white perspective of modern dance - that is, the lens through which a white dancing body is seen as speaking universally and a black dancing body is seen as speaking for the “Other” - still prevails. This culturally reinforced perspective excludes dancers and dances of the African Diaspora from opportunities and recognition.”

I submitted the paper. And I got in. I was excited and terrified and imagined myself as something of a revolutionary.

In hindsight, I’m surprised by how blind-sighted I was by this next part; one might suppose that having given some thought to institutionalized racism and colonialism in dance, I would have realized it sooner. But no.

The realization is this:

Research on white gaze and high art is research done through the lens of whiteness. On whiteness¹⁴.

Consumed as I was by the subjects of white gaze and high art, I hadn’t noticed that I typed out the word “white” a lot more than “black” and read more about Isadora Duncan than Pearl Primus. I learned where white gaze came from, how it evolved, and what it sees today. I developed a theory of how modern dance joined the ranks of ballet as “high art.” More dangerously, when I did turn my attention to Pearl Primus, I looked at

¹⁴ Also, there are books about this. I didn’t know that, either, and I hadn’t read any of them at that time. I don’t read very much in the way of dance research or criticism. I am a dancer and choreographer, and I think I’ve tended in that direction rather than an academic one because I like to move more than I like to sit still. I recognize the need for and value of written histories, and all of the civil rights-era African-American/black people I talk to about race say “know your history!” This makes me think that I should learn my history, and books are a great way to do that.

what the white reviewers had to say about her, not the African-American ones; I judged Katherine Dunham according to a white supremacist standard of success, not an African-American or pan-African one¹⁵.

At about the same time I started questioning my methodology, I realized that the point of the Collegium for African Diasporic Dance might not be to tell a(nother) history of whiteness. It might, in fact, be to center a conversation of dance around blackness, and of blackness around dance.

Up to this point, the process of researching and writing an academic paper had been personal in how deeply I cared about the subject matter, and how much I wanted everyone in the world to know that there is racism and white supremacy in dance. The moment I saw that I had played into the exact hegemonic systems that I was trying to condemn was the moment, as the title of this essay states, that I went from something (amazing truth-teller multifaceted dancer of justice!¹⁶) to nothing.

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I had a slight crisis of identity at the thought that I was nothing, so I reached out to a lot of people to talk it through. I spoke to peers, mentors, academics, dancers, and friends. Through these conversations I came to know who to expect at this conference a little better: academics (who will have read or written about racism in dance before), black people (who know better than I do that there is racism in dance), and black academics. I worried that as a white non-academic dancer/choreographer presenting research on racism in dance ¹⁷, the audience would be either bored or insulted.

I thought of other things I might write about for the conference. I considered interviewing black dancer and choreographer friends of mine about their experiences

¹⁵ I imagine these standards might be quite different. I don't know how, but I think they are. That thought comes from James Baldwin, a gay black male writer who questioned the intrinsic value of a country (the United States) that judges success by the size of a person's car and her ability to forget her past. I hope that not all peoples judge success by these standards.

¹⁶ I am aware of the uncomfortable relationship this label shares with the concept of the "white savior." I don't think I wanted to be a white savior. I think I just wanted people (everyone) to know that racism is both real and insidious. And I think sometimes white people can hear this message better if it comes from a white person. That's part of the whole problem.

¹⁷ I had pretty much abandoned the idea of reporting on my original abstract topic by this point, but as they say, "There's nothing harder than letting go of a bad idea."

with racism in the dance world, transcribing their stories, and reading one or two for the conference. I thought it would take me (Nicola) out of the picture, and let the people who live the oppressed experience be the ones to report on it. A prestigious dance academic warned against that idea, saying that I would be telling the stories of the audience members back to themselves¹⁸. He also implied that I would be exploiting the black dancers whose stories I covered in the paper by taking their stories and using them to further my own ends.

Around that time, I gave up on the idea of writing or presenting an academic paper. I thought that I might talk for twenty minutes about something or other, sit down, and hope for the best. I considered telling my own story, of choreographing a dance piece about race, power, and identity, and all that I have learned in that process. I liked this idea the most, because finally it felt like I wasn't pretending to know anything I didn't know from my own experiences as a white dancer and choreographer. It seemed like the only idea I had that wouldn't do more harm than good.

But this idea never sat right with me either. I couldn't figure out how to justify talking about my experiences as a white woman at a conference that exists to discuss and contemplate dance around the center of blackness.

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What made my decision was a blog post by Mia McKenzie¹⁹ entitled "4 Ways to Push Back Against Your Privilege." If it wasn't clear already, in the worlds of race and dance, I have a lot of privilege²⁰. In her blog post (which came out last Monday), McKenzie writes of four ways a person can push back against their own privilege; number three was "Shut Up." When I asked myself if I had anything to contribute to a conversation on African Diasporic Dance, the resounding answer was "I don't know enough about it yet." I decided to attend this conference as a participant in order to take

¹⁸ Not literally - but assuming that there are a lot of African-American or black people at the conference, my accounts of third-party African-American or black dancers might be, again, boring for or insulting to the audience.

¹⁹ Who founded and runs the website 'Black Girl Dangerous.' I admire her for the fearless way she shares her perspective on difficult subjects. I sometimes do not agree with her, but I always appreciate her voice.

²⁰ Being a woman in pretty much any field, including dance, is not a privilege. That subject is for another essay at another conference.

in everything I can this weekend, talk to everyone here, and learn about African Diasporic Dance and Dancers through the experiences of people who have lived and know it²¹.

I notified the Collegium committee about my decision to withdraw from presenting, and asked them if I could distribute a personal essay instead. The Collegium received my news very kindly and invited me to offer copies of this essay to audience members during my panel slot.

One of the reasons I wrote an essay is to acknowledge that the place I left at the conference needs to be filled; another is to acknowledge my own work around the subject of African Diasporic Dance. I have learned so much through this process- I read books, I watched videos, I talked to people, I wrote, and I made mistakes. It has been life altering, and I am very grateful for the generosity of the Collegium to encourage me to document it in an essay, not to mention the opportunity to present and think about all of this in the first place.

The third reason I wanted to write a personal essay and distribute it at the Collegium is because I have bumped repeatedly into one question that I cannot answer for myself during this process. Unlike a lot of what I have written about so far (the awakening to and unpacking of my own internalized racism and white supremacy), this question is meant to be shared, and it cannot be answered by one person. The question is: Is there space for me ²², a white non-academic dancer and choreographer, in African Diasporic Dance? If so, what? And how? If not, why? And when? Does African Diasporic Dance want someone like me in the conversation? How/when/where can I contribute? Onstage? Offstage? In academic settings? In places of community building? In just showing up? In not showing up?

These are some of the questions that I will be thinking about, and navigating, this weekend. If you'd like to connect about them, please talk to me or send me an email at nicolajoy@gmail.com.

From my heart - Thank you - Nicola Bullock

²¹ It must also be said that I was also on a panel with two other presenters, both of whom are speaking on Katherine Dunham. I want her to be the focus of the panel, not me. Also, I'm not sure my personal story has a place next to Katherine Dunham's story at this time.

²² Me, and other white people who want to help undo racism and white supremacy and destroy existing hegemonic norms and practices, while treading as lightly and respectfully as possible.