

1-1-2009

Ballet it's too whitey: discursive hierarchies of high school dance spaces and the constitution of embodied feminine subjectivities

Matthew Atencio
University of Edinburgh, ma98@uow.edu.au

Jan Wright
University of Wollongong, jwright@uow.edu.au

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Recommended Citation

Atencio, Matthew and Wright, Jan: Ballet it's too whitey: discursive hierarchies of high school dance spaces and the constitution of embodied feminine subjectivities 2009, 31-46.
<https://ro.uow.edu.au/edupapers/710>

Gender and Education
Vol. X, No. X, Month 200X, pp. 000–000

‘Ballet it’s too whitey’: discursive hierarchies of high school dance spaces and the constitution of embodied feminine subjectivities

ARTICLE: 8600 WORDS

Keywords: dance; youth culture; space; race; gender; body

Abstract

This paper investigates i) how the structuring practices and meanings associated with dance classes at an inner-city American high school operated as institutional spaces (re)producing ‘dividing practices’; ii) how these ‘dividing practices’ created and sustained social hierarchies relative to dominant notions of embodiment, ‘race’, social class, femininity, and dance; and iii) the way these dominant practices and hierarchies were managed by two ‘black’ young women at the high school in order to construct alternative modes of self-governance. The analysis highlights the critical ways in which educational dance spaces (re)produced discourses and power relations which aimed to construct ‘docile’ bodies. We suggest that the school dance programme attempted to create conditions resembling ‘higher art’ by making recourse to ‘white’ middle class values. The enactment of this particular institutional strategy led to the regulation, marginalisation, and exclusion of lower-income and ‘racial’ young women. Yet, we also illustrate how two ‘black’ young women negatively positioned by the dance programme drew upon their specific cultural and class backgrounds in order to negotiate and re-work prevailing institutional discourses; these engagements led to the creation of complex and differentiated ‘black’ femininities.

Introduction

In this paper we explore how institutionalised dance spaces within a high school in the United States (re)produce ‘racist’¹ social practices informed by particular assumptions of ‘blackness’, the body, femininity, and social class. This follows our understanding of ‘racism’ as the deployment of ‘white’ attitudes, emotions, practices and institutions that are integral to the long-term domination of Americans of colour. Central to this domination are the well-institutionalised practices of ‘whites’ that have for centuries routinely denied ‘black’ Americans the dignity, opportunities, positions, and privileges generally available to most ‘whites’ of all backgrounds (Johnson, Rush, & Feagin, 2000). These ‘racist’ institutional practices rely upon essentialist categorising whereby skin colour is linked with seemingly fixed and discernible social characteristics, temperament, intelligence, and athletic ability (Omi & Winant, 1994). The seemingly immutable status of these ‘racial’ categorisations has served to position ‘blacks’ as being naturally inferior to ‘whites’; at the same time, this devaluation of ‘blackness’ has worked to centre and privilege ‘whiteness’ as a dominant locus of power. Within the context of educational institutions, it has been argued that the deployment of ‘white’ power in ways that materially subordinate those deemed the ‘Other’ often remains obscured (Gillborn, 2006). This perspective suggests the need to uncover how seemingly ‘normal’ or ‘ordinary’ institutional practices often have negative consequences for ‘black’ students,

¹ The use of ‘black’, ‘white’, ‘race’, ‘racist’, and ‘racial’ surrounded by quote marks throughout this paper suggests that these are social, political, and historical constructs based around the categorisation of skin colour; as such, these categorisations have no ‘real’ or ‘objective’ meaning. We deploy the terms ‘ethnic’ and ‘African-American’ within quote marks to disrupt how this concept has been defined and deployed in essentialist, homogenising, and assimilationist ways.

even as these practices may be unintentional or apparently 'race'-neutral (Gillborn, 2006, p.21).

Of particular concern to this paper are the ways in which gendered and classed forms of 'whiteness' have become imbued with power relative to 'racial' logics associated with 'black' young women from impoverished backgrounds. As a way of examining the mechanisms of institutionalised 'racism' within a specific social context (Brah, 1992), we investigate how 'black' femininity comes to be negatively positioned in a high school relative to intersecting discourses of social class, 'race', and femininity. Archer, Halsall, and Hollingworth (2007) have argued that 'gender, class, and "race" relations between teachers and pupils mean that schools can be experienced as alien spaces for "other" femininities' (p.558). In particular, urban and low-income 'black' young women have been 'punished, constrained, and read negatively within schools' (Archer *et al.*, p.558). In contrast, young women from 'white' middle class backgrounds have benefited from school policies and practices which position them as being inherently 'valuable', 'good', and 'respectable' (Skeggs, 1997; Archer *et al.*, 2007).

In our analysis, then, we explore how one school (re)produces 'racist' practices associated with dance which act on young women's understandings of themselves and their bodies. We closely consider how these 'racist' dance practices appear unintentional even as they still serve to (re)produce social inequalities. Of crucial concern are the ways in which social hierarchies are maintained relative to notions of 'high' and 'low' forms of dance. Dance in western cultures has traditionally been organised according to the ranking of dance forms; these dance forms have been associated with essentialist categorisations and attributes. Mills (1997), for instance, has argued that 'students of

dance in the West learn early that ballet is the pinnacle of the dance world and ‘ethnic dance’... is at the lower rung’ (p.154). This hierarchy follows a line of reasoning whereby ‘black’ bodies participating in African dance are seen as representing inherently ‘natural’ or ‘ethnic’ qualities. This classification often includes ‘primitive’ and ‘wild’ connotations:

A review of the historical literature reveals the various ways in which African dance has been labeled as barbaric, primitive... Average descriptions of performances often included such notions of ‘wild gyrations,’ ‘loose-limbed bodies flinging around the stage,’ and the general undisciplined nature of the performance. (Mills, 1997, p.146)

In contrast, the bodily movements of ballet dancers have come to signify a higher level of artistic or aesthetic performance (Mills, 1997, p.144). As a result, performers of ‘black’ dance forms such as African and even hip hop are seen as embodying power and energy, whilst lacking in the technical and disciplinary aspects required of high level dance performers (Desmond, 1991).

Dance educators have drawn upon this notion that ballet is a higher order performing art in order to advocate for the marginalisation of ‘ethnic’ dance within the school curriculum (see McFee, 1994). Gard (2004) argues that this exclusive focus on ‘western high-culture artistic dance... leaves little space for dance forms with different cultural and ethnic roots’ within dance education (p.100). Green (2001) suggests that the positioning of classical dance as ‘normative’ and ‘civilising’ has had severe

consequences for 'black' dance students. She found that some 'African-American' students in university classical dance classes were 'pushed to the back of the room', were chastised for 'having a big butt', and were labeled as failing students because of their skin colour (Green, 2001, p.168). From this perspective, a discourse which considers ballet and modern dance as 'universal movement languages... that can (and have been) adopted "universally"' (Kaepler, 2000, p.117, parentheses in original) directly benefits 'white' dancers who are seen as the standard. In contrast, 'black' dancers are marginalised and excluded because they are linked with devalued forms of embodiment and movement.

In our investigation of a high school dance programme we explore how specific curricular practices associated with 'whiteness' are deployed in order to raise the 'standards' and 'accountability' (Gillborn, 2006, p.12) of the dance programme. We closely consider how these practices are aligned with 'white' middle class values and become linked with the school's desire to enhance its profile and respectability within broader communities. Apple (2001) suggests that schools now exist within a competitive market and are compelled to 'stress discipline and character' and position themselves as 'rigorous' and 'tough-minded' (Apple, 2001, p.5) in order to remain solvent. In this context, we address how a dance programme located within a 'demonized school' (Reay & Lucey, 2003) that is impacted by low student enrollment, budget cuts, and high 'drop out' rates employs classical dance in order to discipline and regulate 'racial' young women. We then interrogate how two 'black' young women with backgrounds in African and hip hop dancing come to engage with curricular strategies and practices oriented towards classical dance.

Dance spaces as sites of self-formation and embodiment

Our analysis draws upon the concept of ‘social space’ (Lefebvre, 1991) as a starting point to explore the relationship between ‘black’ young women and the social and institutional contexts of their dancing. Lefebvre argues that spaces are not abstract entities, but are rather ‘perceived, lived and produced’ (p.162) by the individuals that use them. This perspective suggests that spaces are constructed by and constitutive of identities, social practices, and power relations. Within ‘social spaces’, then, individuals negotiate, support, and contest dominant social hierarchies and identity categorisations. Van Ingen (2003) specifically argues that physical activity spaces are ‘linked to the social construction of dominant ideologies and to the politics of identity’ (p.210). Positions of power are conferred upon those individuals whose gendered, ‘racial’, or classed subjectivities are most valued within a particular social space. Mowl and Towner (1995) claim that it is these select individuals who are able to control and segregate these spaces by dictating ‘local codes of acceptable behaviour’ (p.103) and, in so doing, exclude ‘certain social groups from particular spaces and places at particular times’ (p.112).

Our analysis relies upon post-structuralism in order to explore how dance spaces work to create feminine hierarchies distinguished and supported by prevailing discourses of social class, gender, and ‘race’. We suggest that discourses play a crucial role in determining and (re)producing hierarchical practices. Foucault (1973) describes discourses as sets of truths which are (re)produced through power relations and social practices operating within institutional spaces such as schools and prisons. Institutions create the conditions whereby certain individuals become classified and objectified as the ‘Other’; at the same time, these individuals construct an identity relative to their

'division' from 'normalised' subjects. Institutionalised 'dividing practices' (Foucault, 1983) thus work to objectify individuals *and* provide them with the means of constructing a social identity. This Foucaultian perspective can be used in the context of school cultures. Harwood and Rasmussen (2004), for instance, use the notion of dividing practices to explain how discourses associated with 'mental conduct disorder' have become so familiar within schools that 'they appear truthful and comfortable' (p.305). Students diagnosed with 'mental conduct disorder' thus come to understand themselves as the 'Other'; that is, they come to exist as 'deficit' and 'disordered' in obligation to the dominant 'truths', power relations, and 'dividing practices' which have currency in their schools.

From this perspective, we explore how a school dance programme supported dividing practices and power relations specifically aimed at regulating and disciplining *the body*. This line of analysis is especially pertinent in the context of dance education, where dancers' bodies are controlled, corrected, and mastered and come to be 'mechanised and habituated into an ideal form' (Green, 1999, p.156). Foucault (1979) contends that institutions use surveillance, discipline, and social exclusion in order to produce 'subjected and practiced bodies, "docile" bodies' (p.138). This perspective has been used to illustrate how disciplinary practices and power relations work alongside discourses of 'race', social class, gender, and sexuality within school spaces in order to construct 'normalised' embodied subjects. Spaces such as classrooms, dance studios, and gyms are considered as being crucial disciplinary and regulatory sites where students' bodies are rendered 'docile' (Kirk, 1994; Wright, 1996; Green, 2001).

‘Practices of self’ and the re-inscription of ‘black’ female bodies

Foucault’s description of ‘docile’ bodies has been critiqued for positioning the body as passively receptive to signification and failing to account for how bodies ‘avoid and/or ignore inscription’ (Caudwell, 2003, p.375). However, Foucault’s later writings demonstrate ‘how the subject constitutes itself in an active fashion through practices of self’ by engaging with the dominant discourses that are created and imposed by societies and institutions (Foucault 1997, p.291). He contends that subjects actively negotiate and even resist discourses and power networks in order to constitute and govern themselves in ways that are more advantageous or ‘ethical’. This concept of the ‘practices of self’ has been used by Skeggs (1997), for instance, to highlight how working class young women engage with dominant notions of middle class femininity. In her study, she suggests that working class young women took up multiple femininities by assimilating, resisting, and re-fashioning ideals of the ‘respectable’ (e.g. ‘white’, disciplined, and middle class) feminine body. Through their discursive engagements the young women were able to take up social practices and identities that provided them with feelings of dignity and empowerment.

As argued by several scholars (see Desmond, 1991; hooks, 1994; Shaw, 2005), ‘black’ female bodies have been traditionally depicted as being ‘excessive’, ‘fat’, ‘primitive’, and ‘hyper-sexual’. We thus pay attention to how two young ‘black’ women encounter discourses surrounding the ‘black’ female body in their dance spaces, and come to negotiate the deficit notions associated with these discourses in order to construct embodied subjectivities.

The study

The two 'black' young women whose experiences form the focus of this paper were participants in a larger study which examined the place and meaning of physical activity in the lives of 16 young people from a culturally-diverse and low-income neighbourhood. The study was conducted by the first author. Fourteen of the sixteen participants were recruited from one local government high school, which we have called 'Thompson High'². The two other participants, who lived in the Thompson school district, attended fee-paying high schools in other sections of the city. The study drew upon an interpretivist approach to generating and analysing data. Bassey (1992) suggests that researchers conducting interpretivist studies 'see reality as a social construct' (p.7). This approach framed data as being co-produced within the research interactions; as such, generated data was considered fluid and contextual and was used to support multiple interpretations of the young people's social experiences, practices, and identities.

Semi-structured interviews were primarily used to generate data. Each participant was interviewed between five and seven times. The first one or two interviews focused on how the young people engaged with health and fitness discourses. The next three or four interviews investigated the young people's use of neighbourhood physical activity spaces. The final round of interviews addressed themes of 'race', 'ethnicity', and immigration. The young people were also observed in a variety of physical activity environments, including parks, schools, and community centres. One of the key ideas to materialise through the data analysis was that many of the young women used spaces

² The names of the high school, dance classes, performing groups, and study participants have been changed.

such as gyms and dance studios found in community centres, fitness clubs, and Thompson High School. In this paper, we specifically focus on two 'black' young women's use of dance spaces within Thompson High School.

In contrast to more affluent high schools in the city, Thompson High was often associated with poor academic performance, declining enrollments, and severe shortages of resources. Thompson High School founded a dance programme in the mid-1970s as part of the school's 'racial' integration efforts. 'Local' students who participated in the dance programme attended the school full-time and came from predominantly African-American and low-income backgrounds. In addition, students from other school districts came to Thompson to dance. These 'co-op' students came from predominantly 'white' and middle class backgrounds and did not integrate the school *per se*, as they only attended the school part-time and only took classes in the dance programme. A student dance company, the 'In Motion Dance Group', was founded in the early 1980s; this company has performed locally, nationally, and even internationally. The 'In Motion Dance Group' was considered an 'elite' company that prepared dancers for university and professional dance careers. The company had received numerous awards and subsequently promoted itself as a source of 'civic pride'. The programme director at the time of the study (2002-2006) was widely credited with revitalising the programme after his hiring in 1999. During the 1990s, the programme suffered from declining student enrollment and concomitant budget cuts as a result of increased crime and gang activity in the local community. During his tenure, the programme director was lauded by the local community for increasing enrollment, heightening technical standards, and enhancing the profile of the programme.

Of the eight female participants in the study, ‘Sarah’, ‘Carrie’, and ‘Irene’ were involved in the dance programme at Thompson High as local students. Sarah came from a ‘French-Canadian’ and ‘Hispanic’ background. Her participation in the programme was severely limited by a back injury that she suffered while dancing. Thus, in this paper we explicitly focus on the experiences of two ‘black’ young women, Carrie and Irene, who provided significant commentary about dancing in the programme.

Irene moved to the United States from Haiti when she was twelve years old. Irene lived with her father, stepmother, and older brother. Irene often described her father as being very demanding and protective. She said that her father would prohibit her from running on the school track team, for example, because he would expect her to come home after school to wash dishes and clean the house. Instead of running after school, then, her primary physical activity involved dancing in her bedroom with friends. Irene withdrew from high school during her third year of high school after she became pregnant. She then moved with her daughter into a small government-subsidised apartment.

Carrie described herself as ‘mixed black’ (from African-American, ‘white’, and Cherokee Native American backgrounds). Carrie lived with her younger sister and brother in a house that was owned by their mother. Her single mother had a full-time job working in a shipping company. Carrie’s mother often encouraged her children to participate in physical activity. She even coached Carrie’s sister’s cheerleading team. She also paid for Carrie to take dance classes at local community centres; Carrie said that she had been taking dance classes for nearly her entire life.

Irene and Carrie both had a complicated relationship with and experience of the dance programme. Their descriptions of the dance programme and their responses to it exemplify how the school dance programme created bodily hierarchies based on 'race', gender, and social class. At the same time, their comments illustrate how they were differentially positioned by these hierarchies and how they negotiated the attributions and practices associated with them in distinctive ways.

The social hierarchies of the Thompson High School dance programme

During their first year, 'local' beginner students enrolled in a 'Level A' dance course described by the dance programme director as a 'dance sampler'. They were required to take one ballet class the entire year, which was supplemented by jazz, tap, ballet, and African elective classes that each lasted for one semester. Students who had completed the 'Level A' classes during their first year then took courses during their second year which were informally categorised as 'Level A Plus'. These students took a ballet course that had a small modern dance component for the entire year, and then they took a supplementary tap and African class for one semester each. Hip hop was offered at the time of the study; however, this class has since been replaced by a modern dance class because the director did not want to fund a full-time hip hop dance instructor.

The 'local' students who progressed to the third year of the dance programme took 'Level B' dance classes in the afternoon. The dance styles offered to the students in the 'Level B' classes were tap, ballet, and modern. Those who were able to progress into the 'Level C' courses took tap, ballet, and modern again. The most advanced and exclusive dance classes were the 'Level D' classes which offered ballet, tap, and jazz.

According to the director, the number of 'local' students diminished as they progressed into the upper level dance courses. The majority of afternoon classes were filled by the more affluent 'white' 'co-op' students.

The programme director commented that the 'local' 'African-American' young women 'love African and hip hop dancing which unfortunately we don't offer in the afternoon.' The majority of these 'local' students did not progress past the first two years of the Thompson dance programme. According to the director about 60 first year 'local' students started in the dance programme at the introductory level, and only approximately five made it through the entire four years of dancing. He attributed this attrition of 'local' students to several factors. Firstly, he believed that many of the 'local' females were intimidated by the 'co-op' students who had much more previous formal dance training. He explained this further in a comment that acknowledged the disadvantage at which the local students were placed but, at the same time, he held them responsible for not taking the afternoon classes:

They (the 'co-op' students) have been dancing since three. They have more experience, I think there could be a little bit of intimidation by some of the women who have not had training. I feel like a lot of the dancers who are full time local students, they don't push themselves to dance in the afternoon.

This perspective suggests that the low number of local young 'black' women in the afternoon classes was due primarily to their lack of determination and appropriate work ethic. Although the director also cited scheduling conflicts as a possible reason for why

many of the local young women rarely took afternoon classes, at no time did he suggest that there were structural issues or that the low numbers of young 'black' women in the afternoon classes was a concern that needed addressing by the programme. As Powell (1997) has pointed out, 'black' underachievement is often attributed to the failings of the 'black' students themselves; this view ignores the role of institutional practices and structures in sustaining 'minority student failure' (p.3). The director's positioning of the 'black' young women as being unskilled, unmotivated, and lacking in work ethic demonstrates how institutional ideologies and practices work in 'subtle' and 'hidden' ways, rather than through 'crude' and 'obvious' acts (Gillborn, 2006, p.21) to disadvantage 'racial' students. From this perspective, we argue that the school ignored its own role in systematically excluding 'black' young women. Later in the paper we suggest that this exclusion of 'black' young women was linked with the school's desire to position itself as an elite-level dance programme through the intake and privileging of 'white' middle class young women.

The marked 'racial' and class divisions existing between the morning and afternoon dance classes were further exemplified in the most exclusive of the dance spaces, the Thompson performing dance ensembles. Much like the afternoon dance classes, the 'Thompson Dance Club' and the 'In Motion Dance Group' were mostly inhabited by 'co-op' students. According to the director, students needed to be 'around a "Level C"' dancer in order to participate in the 'Thompson Dance Club'. Dancers who performed well in the 'Thompson Dance Club' could then be invited to perform with the 'In Motion Dance Group'. The 'In Motion Dance Group' students were considered to be the elite dancers, with most having trained in the 'Level D' classes. The director

acknowledged that this performing group had moved beyond an inclusive approach towards a more elitist agenda: 'In the past, we just accepted whomever. We have so many kids auditioning now that we're at the level of picking and choosing who comes into our programme'.

The previous descriptions suggest that 'white' middle class young women usually matriculated from the afternoon classes into the most elite dance programme (the 'In Motion Dance Group'). The only performance group that was regularly accessed by some of the local students was the 'Thompson Dance Club'. Carrie noted that, in comparison to the 'In Motion Dance Group', this performing group was more culturally diverse and performed a broader range of dance styles including modern, African, and hip hop. In contrast, the director commented that making it into the 'In Motion Dance Group' (which was afforded the highest status in the high school and community) required that students be 'classically' trained:

They need to have classical training in dance. They need it. It is the foundation of jazz and modern and other styles of dance. So it's good to have a background in ballet. I'm looking for dancers who can move and those who can pick up material quickly, who are smart. When you have had classical training you're disciplined, you learn discipline, how to pick up material quickly.

The hierarchical structuring of the performing groups along the lines of ability was intended to help facilitate the progression of dancers into more advanced levels of dance. Yet, it systematically created conditions whereby primarily 'white' middle class young

women accessed the most valued ‘In Motion Dance Group’ and thus came to exist as the ideal. Specifically, it was the privileging of ballet over other forms of dance that set up these exclusionary conditions.

Carrie’s objectification and multiple strategies of self-formation

We now turn to discussions with Carrie and Irene to further exemplify the hierarchical nature of the dance programme and to demonstrate how the young women engaged with the meanings and practices associated with the dance spaces to constitute their embodied subjectivities. Their commentary indicated that the hierarchical practices endemic to the dance programme impacted them in distinctive ways, relative to their specific socio-cultural backgrounds.

In particular, Carrie provides a critical perspective that makes visible the segregated and exclusive nature of the dance programme. Carrie participated in the African and hip hop dance classes in the morning, and took ballet and more advanced African classes in the afternoon. Her previous classical dance training allowed her to take advanced level classes and also participate in the ‘Thompson Dance Club’ performing group. Carrie also danced regularly in a local Kwanzaa³ festival.

In the following quote Carrie described how the hierarchical practices of the dance programme were underpinned by specific notions of embodiment. This excerpt follows a section of the interview where Carrie described how the ‘black’ or ‘African-American’ young women felt ostracised because they were perceived as being too heavy or slow. Carrie’s description of the afternoon classes demonstrated how she was ‘othered’

³ Kwanzaa is a non-denominational African-American celebration incorporating African culture and ancestry.

by the 'white girls' and the teachers. Her comments illustrated the 'racial' bifurcation between the 'white' and 'black' females and the ways positions of power were bestowed upon those 'white' young women who were seemingly able to discipline and regulate their bodies.

Int: Tell me about what you were saying about girls talking about you or the competition. Is that ever apparent in any of your dance spaces?

Carrie: Well mainly in my African⁴ classes at Thompson was predominantly 'white' students because a lot of the times they had this stereotypical dancer in their mind and my physical appearance doesn't fit into their little mould. So like you know, I wasn't as skinny as the other girls, I wasn't as short as the other girls, you know. So of course they were like 'okay, why are *you* in this class?' Just little things I had to struggle with, even with some of the teachers, you know, telling me that I needed to lose a little weight for this or I need to work on, just work on my body in general. I mean it wasn't a big deal with me because I already had the self-confidence and it didn't affect me. But I've seen it affect other girls that weighed more than some of the other girls or didn't have as good feet or couldn't jump as high. So I was just glad not to have to deal with that. Every time that I don't have to deal with something like that is good.

⁴ African dance classes are no longer offered in the afternoon. At the time of writing this paper, the only dance traditions taught were jazz, tap, modern, and ballet.

Carrie's observations suggested that the teachers and the 'white girls' participated in social practices which established 'what the body should be and do' (Green, 2001, p.156); that is, the 'black' young women's bodies were expected to resemble the 'skinny' 'white' female bodies. These bodies were considered integral to higher jumping and quicker footwork (of a particular kind). Because Carrie had previous dance experience, she had more confidence in her ability to perform the requisite dance manoeuvres and did not feel strongly compelled to 'lose weight' or 'work' on her body. Yet, her comments suggested that many of her 'black' peers attempted, but struggled, to construct disciplined bodies that could perform the required 'habituated movement patterns' (p.159). Green (2001) contends that this type of bodily 'work' requires constant surveillance. Yet, even as the dance students took up self-monitoring practices in order to control their bodies, their practices and bodies reflected the discourses authorised by the teachers. As such, the 'black' young women were essentially expected to cede control of their bodies to the teachers and to the institution of the high school more broadly.

We suggest that negative stereotypes associated with 'fat' 'black' female bodies (Shaw, 2005) sustained the conditions whereby 'black' young women such as Carrie and her 'black' peers were marginalised. At the same time, we argue that the monitoring and regulation of the 'black' young women's bodies had much to do with their lower class positioning. Skeggs (1997) argues that working class female bodies have traditionally been subjected to the dominant gaze of the middle class. She suggests that the normative body is traditionally 'White, desexualized, hetero-feminine and usually middle class' (p.82). Conversely, the bodies of lower-class and 'racial' young women are considered 'beyond the regulation and discipline required to be part of social and cultural exchanges'

(p.84). This means that lower-class and 'black' female bodies are considered non-normative, 'out of control', and lacking in value. Thus, they are viewed as requiring institutional regulation and conversion so as to become aligned with the more highly-valued and normative bodies of the 'white' middle class.

In the dance spaces, then, the gaze of the teachers worked in conjunction with the teachers' comments as 'dividing practices' which supported the segregation and regulation of the lower-income and 'black' female bodies. Wright (2000) suggests that teachers' comments work to '(re)produce particular discourses which determine how bodies can be thought about and consequently how they can act in space and in relation to other bodies' (p. 40). The comments of the teachers and the 'white girls' worked together in (re)producing specific discourses surrounding 'white' middle class femininity which i) positioned the 'black' young women's bodies as non-normative; and ii) imparted powerful notions about how the 'black' young women were supposed to transform and regulate their bodies.

In relation to the dominant middle class 'white' body culture found in her advanced level dance spaces, Carrie took up a 'black' subjectivity through recourse to what she considered 'black' modalities of the body and forms of dance. For instance, she suggested that 'black' dance traditions such as hip hop and African were inherently 'fun' and 'free', and thus did not require disciplinary bodily practices. These comments were exemplified when Carrie talked about her Kwanzaa festival dancing; in this context, Carrie commented that she shared a 'common bond' with her 'black' friends, and that she did not have to 'worry about fitting in' and being 'good enough'. Carrie's 'black' subjectivity was thus maintained through solidarity with her 'black' peers in the festival

group and in her advanced dance classes. Skeggs (1997) argues that this type of collective identity was invoked by lower-class young women in her study, and reflected a 'different ethical motivation' that was not simply about constructing a more 'ethical' relationship to the self, as Foucault suggested in his conception of the 'practices of self' (p.163). Instead, the young women invested in an 'ethical' self that was aligned with and supportive of their peers: 'Their reflexivity occurs through others. Their care of the self and the technologies they work on the self are not for self-mastery' (Skeggs, 1997, p.163). From this perspective, we suggest that Carrie developed this collective 'ethical' self relative to the logics of institutionalised 'racism'. MacPherson (1999, as cited in Gillborn, 2006, p.21) defines institutionalised 'racism' as 'the collective failure of an organisation to provide an appropriate... service to people because of their colour... It can be seen or detected in processes, attitudes and behaviours which... disadvantage minority ethnic people'. In response to 'white' dominance within the dance programme, Carrie developed a 'sense of collective identity or sense of peoplehood' (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986, p.181) through recourse to the idea that 'blackness' and 'black culture' have an 'essential character' (Back, 1996, p.60).

However, even as Carrie invested in an 'ethical' self that was aligned with her lower-class 'black' peers, Carrie also assimilated to 'the norms and expectations' (O'Connor, 1997, p.597) of the afternoon classes. Carrie once commented that she also enjoyed dancing in the afternoon classes to 'white music' with her 'white friends'. She said that she sometimes considered herself to be 'white' and was able to 'fall into' the 'typical white culture'. Indeed, she argued that ballet was more 'foundational', 'educational' and 'mental', compared to hip hop and African. Due to her previous

experiences in classical dance, Carrie came to consider the morning hip hop and African dance classes that were overwhelmingly populated by local 'black' students as being 'too disorganised' and that 'the teachers didn't really have much control of the class.' Her comments thus resemble institutional 'white' desires to control 'black' bodies and students. Her contradictory opinions and identities reflect the 'conflicts and ambivalence' (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986, p.191) that face 'black' young women who want to succeed within 'white' educational contexts. It has been argued that these 'black' young women have to negotiate the burden of 'acting white', due to 'whites'' negative assumptions 'about the intellectual ability of black people' (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; p.200). In our study, 'black' young women were linked with more 'uncivilised' and 'expressive' dance styles, and were not considered 'intelligent' or 'adaptable' dancers. Relative to this discourse, we argue that Carrie came to partially invest in 'racist' notions of ballet as a higher-order dance tradition. However, we suggest that her alignment with this 'racist' discourse reflected a necessary strategy that enabled her to negotiate the highly competitive advanced dance spaces. Fordham and Ogbu (1986) suggest that 'black' students who want to 'make it' must use 'clever' and 'deliberate' strategies (p.200). Carrie's dream was to earn a dance scholarship within a prestigious university. 'Making it', then, required her to successfully navigate the elite 'white' spaces of the school dance programme, so as to gain the requisite experiences and recognition that would be necessary for admission to a university dance programme.

Irene's negotiation of the 'whitey' and 'too black' dance spaces

While Carrie was able to participate in a range of both introductory and advanced dance classes, Irene was only able to take a few introductory dance classes before she left school to have her baby. Social class and cultural differences distinguished Irene's and Carrie's participation in the dance programme. Whereas Carrie's previous dance training allowed her to participate in the school dance programme, Irene's background in dancing consisted primarily of hip hop and African dancing in a variety of non-institutional spaces. Because Irene did not have any classical dance training, she did not have the requisite abilities necessary to access the school dance programme beyond the first year. Skeggs (1997) argues that 'Class is always coded through bodily dispositions: the body is the most ubiquitous signifier of class' (p.82). Thus, while Carrie's classically-trained body could sometimes 'pass' as 'white' and middle class and provide entry to some of the school dance spaces, Irene's more impoverished and immigrant background became institutionally read through her body in ways that prevented her from accessing the 'white' middle class dance culture.

While Irene wanted to take African dance class during her first year of high school, she recalled that it was either full or it did not fit into her school schedule. By default Irene ended up taking introductory tap and hip hop dance classes. She found both classes 'boring', particularly the hip hop class. Irene commented that the hip hop class was 'irritating' because it had 'too many "black" people in one room'. She suggested that these 'black' students would 'just talk too much "head" (crap)... they won't shut up'. This type of commentary about 'black' 'African-Americans' came frequently from Irene, who considered herself to be 'black' Haitian. In another interview, she commented that 'There's a difference between "African-American" and my type of (laughs) 'black'...

Over here they act like they all hard (tough) and stuff and when they come to our country (Haiti) we'll see how they act... In America, it's like ('African-American') people could talk a lot of trash and stuff.' We argue that Irene found little value in the introductory hip hop dance spaces because she did not want to identify with what she considered to be 'ghetto' (e.g. lower-class 'black' 'African-American') identities and practices. Thus, Irene's 'black' Haitian subjectivity was sustained by her 'refusal' to be recognised (Skeggs, 1997) as 'black' 'African-American' in the hip hop classes. We now examine how Irene also invested in a 'black' Haitian subjectivity by 'refusing' to take part in what she considered to be 'white' middle class dance practices.

Upon re-enrolling in high school after giving birth to her daughter, Irene again attempted to take an African dance class. However, because students at Thompson were only allowed to take dance courses in pairs, she could only take African dance in conjunction with ballet. This requirement to take ballet eventually influenced Irene's decision to quit the dance programme entirely:

Int: So, um, you would like to African dance if you could?

Irene: Uh hmm. But, I had it in the beginning of the school year but they told me I have to take ballet with it, and I don't want to do ballet (chuckles).

Int: How come?

Irene: It's stupid (laughs). I just don't like to do 'woo, hoo!' you know how that stupid music I don't like that, it's boring, I like something that's exciting...

Int: Like...?

Irene: African dance (laughs).

Int: You think it's exciting?

Irene: Yeah, I mean you go, you move places and it's, I mean, it's fast and ,
um, ballet's like slow rhythms, I don't like that I never liked ballet
anyways, so. Probably why I don't like it now. But... hmmm, they
tried to have me take and I was like 'nah'.

Later in the interview:

Int: Why didn't you take the ballet class?

Irene: I didn't want to do ballet it's too 'whitey' for me. 'Cause I don't like
all that music crap. I wanted to take African but I never did.

'Whitey', according to Irene, was used to describe affluent and 'cheery' 'white' young women who participated in activities such as cheerleading. Thus, by invoking the descriptor of 'whitey', Irene came to regard the behaviours and activities endemic to ballet dancing as being representative of the 'white' middle class. In this context, African dance symbolised an oppositional practice that was 'not a part of white Americans' way of life' (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986, p.181). Irene said that she preferred African dancing because it was 'different from America'; that is, it involved elements such as 'the drums', 'the beat', and clothing such as 'skirts' and 'scarves' that were not sanctioned by the dance programme.

Irene avoided taking ballet, and, because ballet held such a prominent position in the dance programme, was excluded from the school programme more broadly. We speculate that Irene ‘chose’ not to participate in the dance programme because she realised that she could not ‘act white’ (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986), nor could she attain the more institutionally valued and respected form of middle class femininity (Archer *et al.*, 2007). Furthermore, Irene’s negative portrayal of the ballet dancers (e.g. they do ‘woo, hoo!’ and listen to ‘stupid’ and ‘crap’ music) suggested that she *did not want to* invest in practices and behaviours associated with the ‘white’ middle class; like other young women from lower-class backgrounds, Irene came to view this social group as ‘a source of ridicule and contempt’ (Skeggs, 1997, p.94).

Discussion

Our analysis of one high school dance culture suggests that, indeed, ‘skin color “differences” continue to rationalize distinct treatment of racially identified individuals’ (Omi & Winant, 1994, p.60). The young women’s comments revealed how the standardisation of ballet and modern dance created conditions whereby classically-trained bodies associated with middle class ‘whiteness’ became imbued with a higher institutional value. In this context, ‘local’ ‘black’ young women who wanted to dance were systematically devalued and marginalised.

These conditions were set up and maintained by the director, who valued ballet for its seeming ability to instill young people with a sense of discipline, intelligence, and adaptability. As a result, the majority of the high school dance classes and programmes were structured to develop ‘docile’ bodies that could be subjected to ‘technical’ and

'disciplinary' training. This emphasis on creating 'docile' bodies served to exclude 'black' young women such as Irene who enjoyed other less-disciplinary and more energetic dance forms such as African and hip hop. Furthermore, the few 'black' students such as Carrie who were able to access the programme were subjected to disciplinary regimes which worked through the teachers' gaze and negative comments. We suggest that these 'dividing practices' were aimed at controlling and transforming 'black' feminine 'indulgence'; that is, these institutional practices were employed in order to discipline and recuperate lower-income 'black' young women who were seen as lacking control of their bodies (Green, 1999). At the same time, we contend that the director of the dance programme valued classical dance performances because they represented higher artistic merit and thus came to be greatly valued within local, national, and international communities. The director acknowledged that enhancing the reputation and recognition of the programme was necessary to protect the programme from budget cuts which had recently impacted Thompson High School and the local school district more broadly.

It was precisely the school's desire to (re)produce elitist conditions through high culture dance that Carrie and Irene negotiated and contested in distinctive ways. Irene, for example, participated in the dance programme in quite limited ways because she did not want to take ballet and participate in practices that she saw as unappealing and representing 'whitey' (e.g. 'white' middle class feminine) values. Ballet thus worked as an important mechanism through which Irene came to be devalued within and eventually excluded from the school dance context.

Irene's marginal positioning in the dance programme was also supported by the social conditions existing within the 'black' 'African-American' hip hop classes. Irene commented that her participation in the 'hip hop' classes was severely inhibited by the behaviours and attitudes of the 'black' 'African-American' students. However, Irene's marginalisation within the hip hop space only minimally contributed to her lower status in the dance programme since hip hop was so devalued within the overall dance scheme. Thus, even if Irene would have thrived in the hip hop classes, this hip hop dance background would have only provided her with limited status and abilities; she would still have had significant difficulties in accessing the majority of the dance classes and performing groups which were overwhelmingly structured by classical dance.

Irene came to enact a 'black' Haitian subjectivity by 'refusing' and 'dissimulating' (Skeggs, 1997) what she considered as being middle class 'white' American *and* lower-class 'black' African-American cultural practices. In comparison, Carrie made much more significant investments in the distinctive 'racial' dance cultures operating in the dance spaces. While she had previous experience in hip hop and African, her family situation and social class background also provided her with some classical dance training. As such, she could access a range of dance spaces, and even aligned her self with the dominant classical dance culture that most often benefited her 'white' middle class peers. We suggest that Carrie made recourse to middle class 'whiteness' because she had dreams of becoming a dancer at the university level. Yet, even as she could draw upon classical dance and came to invest in the dance programme accordingly, she was still subjected to 'dividing practices'. Thus, even as she could 'pass' within many of the dance spaces, she was still considered the 'Other'. In recognising that she could

never completely escape her deficit positioning relative to perceptions of the ‘fat black female body’ (Shaw, 2005, p.151), Carrie took up specific embodied practices. For instance, she commented that ‘I know when I’m auditioning for a role, I try twice as hard because I know I’ll have to because sometimes there is that stereotype’. Furthermore, as part of resisting her devaluation by the dance teachers and the ‘co-op’ students, Carrie came to take up an ‘ethical’ self that involved recourse to a collective ‘black’ identity. She commented that ‘you don’t always see that the “African-American” culture needs to be slim or skinny, you know; it’s not that important’. In contrast, she suggested that ‘in the predominantly “white” culture it’s like, on TV and in the media you always see the skinny figure because that is who they identify with, they try to be very skinny’. She also added that compared to ‘whites’, ‘black’ dancers were more interested in ‘freedom’, ‘fun’, and the ‘rhythm’ and the ‘beat’. Thus, even as she deliberately invested in ‘whiteness’ in order to cope with the conditions within the elite dance spaces, Carrie also came to invest in essentialist notions of ‘blackness’ in order to ‘generate dignity, deflect degradation and help others’ (Skeggs, 1997, p.163).

Conclusions

In our analysis we drew upon post-structuralism to investigate the institutional power and discursive constellations operating in the context of one urban high school’s dance spaces. In outlining the social practices and hierarchies that were endemic to these spaces, we suggested that the high school dance programme was set up in ways that worked to benefit ‘white’ middle class students ‘at the expense of oppressing their black counterparts’ (Nayak, 2003, p.142). We argued that this particular dance programme,

located within a 'demonized school' (Reay & Lucey, 2003) that was constantly threatened with academic restructuring and even closure, came to devalue those forms of movement and embodiment associated with the 'black' 'Other'. We suggest that the school dance programme employed classical dance as a disciplinary and normalising practice in order to achieve 'higher' artistic status. The ways in which the dance programme sought to subjugate and exclude the 'racial' 'Other' by rendering their bodies 'docile' through specific curricular practices speaks to the obscured nature of 'racism'. In revealing the seemingly 'normal' and 'everyday' operation of 'racist' practices within the dance programme, we advocate for more empirical accounts of young people's social practices and identities. These type of empirical accounts play a vital role in illustrating how institutions often employ curricular practices that negatively impact upon 'racial' students, even as these practices appear to be impartial or inadvertent (Gillborn, 2006).

At the same time, we also attach great importance to young people's capacity to actively engage with prevailing 'racist' practices in order to construct an alternative set of embodied practices and subjectivities. Our findings demonstrated how two 'black' young women actively took up specific practices and subjectivities in order to 'establish a sense of self-worth' within an educational context in which lower-income 'black' femininities were systematically devalued (Archer *et al.*, 2007, p.558). The young women's engagements with (and disengagements from) the dominant cultures operating within the dance programme was integrally linked with their desire to resist or avoid disciplinary bodily practices. Thus, our analysis illustrates that bodies are not simply 'passive' and 'compliant' (Grosz, 1994, p.144), but rather exist as 'centers of perspective, insight,

reflection, desire, agency' (p.xi) which are drawn upon to contest institutional desires to construct 'docile' bodies and 'normalised' subjects.

In our analysis of school-based dance, then, we have shown that 'racial' students negatively positioned by educational structures can take up a range of embodied practices in order to constitute their subjectivities. However, in suggesting that 'there is a multiplicity of femininities' (Reay, 2001, p.163) made available to 'racial' young women in their school spaces, it is also important to stress how these femininities are differentially constrained and subsequently constructed. We demonstrated that Carrie and Irene took up distinctive practices and subjectivities from each other relative to their unique social class and cultural backgrounds. The differentiated ways in which these two young women were institutionally positioned, and came to enact distinctive sets of social practices and identities accordingly, further illustrates the 'complex messiness' (Reay, p.164) of school cultures that are seemingly 'racially' integrated and socially-democratic. From this perspective, we suggest that additional studies are needed to reveal how 'othered' young women might re-work established institutional practices and discourses in complex and even contradictory ways. This line of inquiry would shed further light on the consequences of 'racial' young women's self-forming practices by demonstrating how these practices might serve to benefit (or even hinder) 'racial' young women's educational experiences and also impact upon prevailing school structures and strategies.

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