

INVISIBLE IDENTITIES AND INTERSECTIONALITY IN DANCE: FINDING VOICE IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Abstract

In this article, I discuss the term intersectionality and how I am engaging with it from the perspective of curricular reform in dance. I share my experiences with academic racism and sexism through autoethnography that is prescriptive, descriptive, and reflexive in its approach. I will discuss my experiences in various institutions and the behaviors of faculty, administration and students. I will engage with personal narrative to illustrate the culture in which I am immersed—academe. It is my hope that sharing my personal experiences in a reflexive manner will encourage the reader to survey, investigate, and analyze the culture from an interpretive and investigative lens, surveying the multiple layers of consciousness and realities that exist. I argue that “Studying others invariably invites readers to compare and contrast themselves with others in the cultural texts they read and study, in turn discovering new dimensions in their own lives” (Chang 34). I am interested in exploring strategies that will encourage and support junior faculty of color find voice who may be experiencing racism and sexism. I am also investigating how to implement these strategies, exploring what are some helpful resources, and what are the methods for self-care and healing.

Introduction

Autoethnography is an excellent instructional tool to help not only social scientists but also practitioners –such as teachers, medical personnel, counselors, and human service workers—gain profound understanding of self and others and function more effectively with others from diverse cultural backgrounds.
(Chang 13)

In this article, will I share my experiences with academic racism and sexism through autoethnography that is prescriptive, descriptive, and reflexive in its approach. My goal is variegated as it includes opportunities for healing and recovery. I will discuss my experiences in various institutions and the behaviors of faculty, administration and students. These perpetrators are most often untouched and unaccountable. My aim is also to offer aid and support for other young scholars and students of color who may be experiencing similar incidents, “The problem is that you really can't talk about this issue: it's taboo. To do so is tantamount to grousing -- as outré as scratching and farting at a

cocktail party. And in large part this is why the system has been allowed to perpetuate itself, unchecked” (Ho 2015).

I will engage with personal narrative to illustrate the culture in which I am immersed—academe. It is my hope that sharing my personal experiences in a reflexive manner will encourage the reader to survey, investigate, and analyze the culture from an interpretive and investigative lens, surveying the multiple layers of consciousness and realities that exist. I argue that “Studying others invariably invites readers to compare and contrast themselves with others in the cultural texts they read and study, in turn discovering new dimensions in their own lives” (Chang 34). I am interested in exploring strategies that will encourage and support junior faculty of color find voice who may be experiencing racism and sexism. I am also investigating how to implement these strategies, exploring what are some helpful resources, and what are the methods for self-care and healing. I will also discuss the term intersectionality, how I am engaging with it from the perspective of curricular reform, how the term was introduced and how it has been applied in Black Feminist Thought. Lastly, I will discuss my interest in intersectionality and how this moniker can be applied to dance curriculum in higher education focusing specifically on erasure, invisibility, silencing, and voice.

Intersectionality

I was first introduced to intersectionality in my US Women of Color class, what was prominent for me was the discussion of identity politics (race, sex, class, sexuality, ability etc.), how these identity characteristics were erased, and how minorities suffered oppression. The article that I read specifically addressed violence, oppression and

intersectionality against women of color. Through the reading, I was able to extract certain theories and frameworks and apply them to my discipline (dance). Kimberlé Crenshaw discusses ideas that are truly profound, simplistic, yet prolific. When discussing identity politics, she states that we are not a part of a monolithic entity or group, each of our identities are comprised of various and contesting identities (Crenshaw 1997). Acknowledging these differences should not be threatening, in fact it should be viewed as “an opportunity for bridge building and coalition politics” (Crenshaw 1997, 180). I found that her ideas of coalition and (re) construction, focusing on intersectionality as a form of advocacy, provided voice for the oppressed which elicits consciousness thus encouraging freedom for all students.

Focusing on Kimberlé Crenshaw’s analysis of intersectionality and how it relates to Black Feminist Thought, I would like to engage with intersectionality in such a manner that (re) imagines a future for dance curriculum in higher education, specifically in the area of curriculum development. Crenshaw’s definition of the term aggravates oppression (race, gender, class, sexuality, and ability) illuminating how Black women have been erased from particular analysis (social/political), reflecting solely on the experiences of the white female and the Black male (Crenshaw 1997). This invisibility is reminiscent of the erasure of the epistemologies of people of color in dance curriculum in higher education. Intersectionality is not a new idea or concept that just infiltrated the 20th century. The concept of multiple and simultaneous oppression was formally and pervasively discussed in the 1800’s and was inherent to The Combahee River Collective’s mission of addressing the multiple and simultaneous oppressions experienced by Black women (Smith 2013). Terms that were previously employed to

discuss multiple oppressions were “interlocking oppressions,” simultaneous oppressions,” “triple jeopardy,” “triple oppression” or any other similar expository term (Smith 3).

Kimberlé Crenshaw, author and professor of law first introduced the term intersectionality in 1989 in her groundbreaking essay, “Demarginalization in the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics.” The article discusses race and gender and how the experiences of women of color are not addressed or reflected in “discourses of either feminism or antiracism” (Crenshaw 1989). Women of color, in this instance are marginalized due to this intersectionality. Crenshaw discusses the structural, political, and representational dimensions of intersectionality. Her mission is to fracture ideas that gender and race are “exclusive” and “separable” and are inclusive of the multiple identities of women of color (Crenshaw 1989).

Subjugated Knowledge

“Subjugated knowledge’s which are located ‘low down on the hierarchy’, far enough away from and sufficiently non-challenging to the mainstream that their ‘validity is not dependant on the approval of the established regimes of thought’ (Carty 22).

Our subjugated knowledge (the experience of the ‘other’ and research or discourse concerning the ‘other’) has rendered us invisible. This positionality places us as the insider within. We simply exist in the institution and in departments, not being seen or heard. This invisibility and marginalization has been imposed upon us by the “community of experts” who consist of white males who challenge new knowledge. This “new knowledge...violate these fundamental assumptions ... likely to be viewed as anomalies” (Carty 20). This “new knowledge” has been rejected by some institution’s

and dance departments, “the history which Black women [and other people of color] bring to academia is not recognized because academic discourse can only reflect the interests and concerns of its creators . . . Eurocentric, white, and male” (Carty 17). This discourse does not include the perspective of scholarship of people of color. Academia and departments across the nation have proven to be impervious, omitting and excluding people of color in scholarship, in history and on campuses across the nation.

What exactly is this history? This history includes colonialism, racism, and sexism. I reflect on Dr. Brenda Dixon Gottschild’s discussion of the term “home truths” as discussed in the text *Digging the Africanist Presence in American Performance: Dance and Other Contexts*. Gottschild states that home truths are “an indisputable fact or basic truth, especially one whose accuracy may cause discomfort or embarrassment. It hits you, so to speak where you live” (Gottschild 46). Gottschild brings to the forefront the continued “historical and systemic denial and invisibilization of the Africanist presence in American culture” (Gottschild 50) from the perspective of slavery and the ramifications and implications of the players (the oppressed and the oppressors). Through Gottschild’s lens, I encourage the reader to investigate what happens when this trilogy (colonialism, racism, and sexism) cohabits and intermingles in the academy, transferring this “discomfort and embarrassment” about the history of slavery into dance departments across the nation? What is its effect on scholars of color in the academy, particularly in the dance world? My interest concerns issues pertaining to scholars of color, specifically scholars working in the area of dance in academia. I am exploring this population of underrepresented minorities who are teaching scholarship pertaining to the study of dance

from a non Western perspective which rearticulates ideas and epistemologies concerning people of color.

Intersectionality and Feminist Scholarship

Intersectionality is a useful tool for a deep analysis of systemic and organized oppressions examining various domains of power: structural, disciplinary, hegemonic and interpersonal (Smith 2013). Sojourner Truth's infamous speech "Ain't I a Woman?" at the 1851 Woman's Convention in Akron, Ohio is an illumination of the discussion of intersectionality and the deeply embedded racism that existed in the "suffrage movement." Truth, upon her standing to voice her thoughts was immediately asked to refrain from speaking because her area of concern did not fall in alignment with the ideas of white women. This is an example of the silencing that women of color experience, "Women of color aren't taken seriously because there exists a bias that is extremely destructive: the perception that they are tokens, that they are penny-ante players in the high stakes intellectual poker match" (Ho 2015). When Truth finally spoke, she articulated the difference of oppression of white and Black women stating, "That man over there says that women need to be helped into carriages and lifted over ditches, and to have the best place everywhere. Nobody ever helps me into carriages, or over mud-puddles, or gives me any best place! And ain't I a woman?" (Smith 3). This speech exemplifies the argument concerning the lack of relationship and solidarity between white women and Black women, arguing that "women's experiences and women's aspirations do not include or speak to Black women, Black women must ask, "A'int we women?" (Smith 4).

What Happened To You?

My Dear Friends,

I wanted to inform you that after many hours of thought---tears, stress, and fear has prompted me to leave my tenure track academic position. I know that I have shared some of my situation with you and hopefully my letter of resignations will bring clarity of all that I have endured. Thank you for the prayers and the kind words. I have officially resigned and look forward to a new life with God's blessing upon me. I love you all.”
(Carey 2012)

This email was written to inform those that I had been sharing my grief with concerning the bullying harassment, racism, and sexism that I was enduring which subsequently resulted in severe illness that I was resigning due to the lack of administrative support.

This was an attempt for me to “reclaim my power and dignity” (Carey 2012).

“The oppressors, who oppress, exploit, and rape by virtue of their power, cannot find in this power the strength to liberate either the oppressed or themselves.”
(Freire 44)

I assert that the oppressed find agency through voicing their fears, dismissing the silencing that occurs in struggles of power, the oppressors can then find liberation by addressing their fears of those that they find different. Helping the oppressed find voice is the task that I have undertaken. Paulo Freire’s work is intriguing and substantial in my research due to its emphasis on the minoritarian and its social justice implications. Like Freire, I hope to create a curriculum that will be constructed through the voices of people of color (students and faculty) who speak from the often silenced space and place in academe and develop a model for a dance curriculum that creates a sense of autonomy and consciousness thus encouraging freedom for all students and faculty. The task at hand was in finding agency and the power to stand in moments of alleged overt and covert biases and prejudices. The following are a few examples of what have been told to me:

- You are arrogant and have no problem with self promotion (White male—Spring 2012).
- At a job interview at an institution in the mid west I asked if the students I taught had issues with diabetes (White female—October 2012).
- The curriculum cannot change (White female—Fall 2013)!
- I received an email from a colleague devaluing my personal experiences with racism (White male—Fall 2014).
- Just because you have TM next to your name doesn't mean you know everything (White male—Spring 2015).

These very specific examples have fueled my research that continues to develop as I journey across the country teaching my ideas concerning fusion, feminist/womanist thought, cross-cultural studies in dance and critical race theory.

My Research

In my doctoral studies, I am interested in curricular reform through the lens of critical race theory and critical pedagogy. This interdisciplinary approach is an investigation of the invisibility and erasure of identity, citizenship, and culture in curriculum. Critical Theory troubles the politics of “race, class, and gender” seeking to provide a sense of agency and license denouncing oppressive forces, actions, and attitudes. This transformative framework investigates historically the elements that have contributed to these conflicts—social, political, emotional etc. (Creswell 30). Critical Race Theory (CRT) is of prime significance to my research and this discussion. The theories propagated by the literature that I am investigating serves not only as a framework but also as a methodology for social change and activism. Creswell states “Critical race theory (CRT) focuses theoretical attention on race and how racism is deeply embedded with the framework of American society” (Creswell 31) and in dance

curriculum. I am interested in what pedagogical methods can be constructed to address race inequalities and biases in dance curriculum. There are several questions that I am investigating:

1. Who are the major theorists discussing Critical Race Theory? How might their discussions connect to pedagogy and dance curriculum? How do these conversations relate to the broader discourse of space, place, and transformation?
2. What might Critical Race Theory and Critical Pedagogy provide for technique and theory dance courses? What implications are suggested in introducing these “new” methods and theories into the curriculum?
3. How do dancers negotiate these themes in the curriculum? Where do they locate themselves in this discussion and what resistances and/or transgressions are performed?
4. What programs are instituting these methods and frameworks in their curriculum?

The next leg of my journey involves my attempt to “fix” these issues.

How to Fix This?

Throughout my reading and research, I narrowed down six pertinent points that I believe are essential in the move towards attaining equality in academia and dance departments in the country for faculty of color. This may seem like a utopian ideal to some but we must start somewhere. The more we provide discourse and scholarship concerning these issues, the greater ability there is to facilitate change, change in approach to language, behavior, curriculum and programming:

1. “In addition to programs that support diversity, having a college president or chancellor who is demonstrative about his or her commitment to diversity . . . ” (Fields 5).
2. “Creating a hospitable environment for Black faculty, revising the standards upon which tenure is granted, facilitating peer mentor relationships, expanding the

ranks of Black students, and including Blacks in the decision-making process can improve the morale of Black faculty” (Fields 5).

3. Supporting the implementation of “faculty development programs” (Fields 7).
4. “Women and faculty of color must be made full institutional partners by being duly awarded tenure and promotion” (Evans 133).
5. Recognize the need and the inclusion of diversity roundtables and anti racist workshops (Evans 137) in intuitional orientations and literature.
6. “. . . Recognize other forms as technique, and make this recognition explicit . . .” (Monroe 42).

Coping Mechanisms

What is the strategy for survival in the academy? Carty offers advice on navigating academia as a female scholar of color:

“ . . . Learn the process of how the dominant knowledge forms are validated and given legitimacy for what counts as knowledge. This understanding is, of course, necessary for a Black woman if she hopes to negotiate and maneuver her way through academia” (Carty 23).

Henry and Glenn provide several strategies that I am in the process of implementing in my own life as I continue on my journey of healing. Mentoring is a major component in strategically circumventing some of these issues. It is paramount that women seek mentors of color in the academy. The lack of critical mass often times creates an obstacle, forcing women of color to seek support outside the department and/or the institution:

“Black women would be served best by same-race female mentors because they would ‘understand the complex intersection of race and gender in the academy and society’ more than from other racial backgrounds” (Henry and Glenn 6).

Seeking relationships through external sources are strongly encouraged. Support groups within the “church, social organizations, family and friends” provide much

needed emotional and mental support. “Connecting through spirituality” is also highly recommended. Attending church and engaging in other spiritual activities support inherent cultural connections within the Black community. This interaction encourages and promotes identity and is a “means to deal with career-related challenges.” Spirituality is suggested as a vehicle to counter marginalization, isolation and oppression in academia, “researchers have defined the role of faith and spirituality as a coping mechanism...an identity construct that is emphasized in the Black women’s plight to develop a positive identity” (Henry and Glenn 6).

“Connecting through professional organizations” locally and nationally has proven to be immensely beneficial. Professional organizations provide a community that is more inviting and supportive than the academy. I would also add to this topic reading scholarship on this subject. Both have proven to be highly profitable. After my ordeal, I joined the American Association of Blacks in Higher Education and I am looking forward to connecting with the organization entitled Sisters of the Academy in the near future.

Conclusion

In my investigation and research, I found that Crenshaw’s theory is saturated with strengths, emphasizing not only a framework for an analysis that seeks to provide voice for marginalized people, particularly women of color but it also provided insight into how these intersectional oppressions (class and racial differences between women; racism and sexism; reproductive rights; and domestic violence) are illustrated in the various structural, political, and representational dimensions. Crenshaw suggests that race is

important and that intersectionality offers a form of resistance and positionality for the minoritarian. This is crucial in the work that I am interested in concerning curriculum development in higher education.

Employing intersectionality as a framework, I argue that dance curriculum in higher education excludes the voice and epistemologies of the person of color oftentimes neglecting (their) race, class, culture, sexuality, ability etc. in the construction of curriculum. As Sojourner Truth's infamous speech challenges the audience to identify her, a Black able bodied female as "woman," I challenge academe to include and acknowledge the voices and philosophies of people of color in curriculum, proposing that they are "human" and their voices and lived experiences are relevant and essential in curriculum. Centering on the politics of knowing and consciousness and how this is paramount in education, I engage in Black Feminist Thought, Critical Race Theory, Critical Pedagogy, and Critical Curriculum Studies as a framework for this (re) imagination. My goals are to develop a (a). Praxis that addresses social justice; (b). Consciousness; and (c). Transformation in curriculum and pedagogy. I am interested in intersectionality as methodology and how this feminist agenda can enable an investigation towards a transgressive discourse that can be applied to an educational policy/politics. The authors discussed provide considerations for approaches to further my analysis, construction, and discourse on a transformative curriculum.

The voices of people of color have been erased and the fact that this has not been addressed (enough) reifies this racist construct. Claiming and identifying that current curriculum is oppressive and functions within a politic of domination—specifically movement choices and cultural interests pertaining to technique, choreography,

pedagogy, and curriculum is an enormous feat. Through my own speaking out and finding voice, I have been faced with micro and macro aggressions that have been used for silencing. Moving forward, I am interested in challenging theories that exclude people of color and their identities (class, sex, sexuality, ability, etc.). Through this examination of how people of color are subordinated by this erasure, my goal is to assist them in finding identity and citizenship within these oppressive constructs. Through the exploration of intersectionality, I aim to provide voice to the marginalized student of color in higher education; this voice should be identifiable in a curriculum that reflects their history, culture and identity.

As a non-traditional professor, I demolish and rupture the perceived archetype of professor. What is the model of professorship in the academy? Old school, White and male? As I maneuver through campus with my fro hawk, skinny jeans and stiletto's, students and faculty wonder, "who is that?" For some, I just don't fit in. That is exactly why I need to be here. I argue that students of color are seeking a tangible and accessible resource and reference, one who connects with them racially and culturally, a professor who is a reflection of the 21st century. My demeanor, attire, tattoos, and awareness and concern for the things that are important to them is what has attracted them to me and what has strategically placed me in the position of mentor. My sister girl flare, diva style, island gal moves, no-non sense approach and popular culture vernacular makes me an anomaly. I am boldly promoting substandard subjugated knowledge, providing multiculturalism, diversity, and feminist/womanist thought to a population of students that are craving this consciousness. This "new" knowledge is a much needed paradigm shift that should extend across the country, penetrating dance departments nationally.

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