

Questions for *Skin Colored Pointes: Interviews with Women of Color in Ballet*

Created by Robin Prichard in consultation with the author (2024)

Undergraduate /high school student questions:

Questions for Preface and Introduction:

- Dr. McCarthy-Brown relates the story of Endalyn Taylor being told: “You don’t look like snow; you look like slush” (page 6). How might this comment affect a student? What short and long-term ramifications could result for a student from this comment?
- Dr. McCarthy-Brown discusses intersectionality in the introduction (page 9). What is intersectionality? Why is it important within Dr. McCarthy-Brown’s book about race? Why do you think she mentions it in the introduction?
- Colorism is discussed as a crucial factor in ballet education. What is colorism? Have you seen instances of colorism in your own training or education? Do you see it represented in media – movies, advertisements, tv, social media?
- The “upwardly mobile” aspirations of those engaging in ballet training is an example of intersectionality – the intersection of race and class. Dr. McCarthy-Brown discusses Brenda Dixon-Gottschild’s study about this in the first half of the 20th century (page 12). Do you find that the associations are the same in your 21st century world? Does ballet still signal upwardly mobile progress, and the attainment of culture? Is ballet still considered to be a “highly civilized” art form? How does this affect the perceived hierarchy of dance genres as civilized or uncivilized? Are there ways that this association is being challenged in your education and training?
- Dr. McCarthy-Brown states that she understands that “ballet is not racist, yet at times it has been employed by racists to uphold whiteness” (page 14). What is this distinction, and why is it important?
- Dr. McCarthy-Brown states the importance of counternarratives and says that her book endeavors to create counternarratives. Why are counternarratives critical in education? What counternarratives were crucial to your own education? Can you remember an instance in which a counternarrative changed the way you thought about an event/issue/topic?

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Questions for Background of Ballet in the United States

- Dr. McCarthy-Brown details the stereotypes of ballet and the stereotypes of black women and argues that these stereotypes are in conflict with each other, making it difficult for people to accept black women in ballet (page 16-18). How can/should this be rectified? Is the solution to change ballet so that black women fit in better? Is the solution to change the stereotypes of black women to incorporate ideas of grace, femininity, and transcendence? Or are there more options to consider? What specific strategies do you think should be used to subvert the stereotypes of both ballet and black women?
- Examine this quote: “if an organization is not working against the status quo, it is working, at times through stances of “neutrality” and “love for all,” to maintain the status quo” (page 33). What instances can you name where people or organizations have maintained a racially unhealthy status quo through the stances of neutrality or love for all?
- Dr. McCarthy-Brown admits that she has, in her past, enacted whiteness on others. Is it important to you as a reader to know that the author has made mistakes? Does it change how you read her work? And if so, how?
- Research your institution and ask the questions that Dr. McCarthy-Brown suggests: “Is whiteness affirmed? In what ways are people of Color included? What culture and cultural backgrounds are being celebrated? To this end, consider whose bodies are marked as “universal.” Look at the leadership of the company/institution. Are board members and the artistic directors white?”

Additional Chapters:

- Lauren Anderson retells her experience of believing that Alice from Alice in Wonderland has to be a White dancer; she is flabbergasted when she is cast as Alice (page 44). How does this example speak to internalized racism? How does this example speak to the need for BIPOC people in fields where they are currently under-represented?
- Can you relate a time when you realized you had expectations of Whiteness, Brownness, Blackness, etc? How did you get those messages? What should occur to challenge those messages, and how do we prevent them from becoming internalized?

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- Some have suggested that Dance Theatre of Harlem was necessary in the 1960's during the Civil Rights era and when Black dancers were breaking new ground, but that it is less relevant and necessary today. Do you agree or disagree? How do the dancer's experiences in this book influence your views? (examples: Lauren Anderson, Stephanie Marie Powell, Endalyn Taylor, and Crystal Michelle Perkins)
- Many dancers discussed how the expense of ballet was a burden on their families, and for many, class seemed to be as big of an influence on their trajectory as race. This is an example of intersectionalism – the intersection of race and class. Can you find an example in the text of how race and class impacted the dancers in the book? Can you find an example from something in your own world?
- Lourdes Lopez talks about the immense influence her mother had as a fierce advocate for her (page 55-57). What would you attempt if you had an advocate like that?

How can you be your own fierce advocate?