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Artificial Authenticity: The Role of Whiteness in Dimming the Sparkle of Samba

I was never allowed to self-tan. My mom did not want my body to soak up the inconceivable amounts of chemicals in the products. The other girls at the competitions didn't seem to mind drenching their bodies with dark brown creams, gels, and sprays. It was a competition custom; part of their routine. At 12 years old, I would sit on the sidelines and watch as the highest class would perform. They all wore tans. I would roam around the hall and browse the products vendors were selling: dance shoes, hair pins, hairspray, and self-tan. Tanning was not only a small element of a costume, it had become a necessity. It was what gave dancers a form of legitimacy, placing them at the top of the dance-class hierarchy. The nostalgia of this experience ignited a curiosity. It made me wonder about the unspoken history behind this perceived obligation. There is a need to perform a certain identity on the dancefloor, one that is notably not White. Ballroom dancers want to create a more genuine embodiment of the Latin dances. However, the alluring aspect of the "non-White" identity is determined by Whiteness itself. The "authentic" characteristics of Latin and Black identity adopted by White Ballroom dancers allows for an appeal to the White gaze in the form of a racially fluid identity.

Numerous scholars have centered their research on the interconnection between Samba and race and identity. Juliet McMains evaluates the links between the customary practice of fake tanning in dancesport and the identity and images it projects. She uncovers its purpose as a way for competitors to "negotiate their own racial and class positions" (55). Through the development

of costuming practices, Latin dancers conform to the embodiment of “Latin-ness” that these practices encourage. McMains examines their “racially charged” effects and impact on Latin communities. She points out that despite White dancers appearing with tanned skin, spectators will still recognize them as White. They are, therefore, able to express certain appealing characteristics of non-White communities without “forfeiting White racial privilege” (57). Competitors preserve their class and racial privilege while borrowing desirable “exotic” traits commonly associated with Latin communities. Similarly, scholar Joanna Bosse defines the dancesport setting as one where “problematic constructions of Whiteness and otherness are embodied in performance” (19). This article explores the categorization of dances within dancesport and how this instigates problematic differences in the depiction and perception of Whiteness and “otherness.” Although scholarly conversation addresses the relation between Ballroom Samba and race, they were lacking in explicit statements on the origin of this connection. My paper seeks to not only extend the conversation surrounding White dancers’ adoption of racially charged characteristics, but also bring light to the history that has been left behind. In the history of Samba, Afro-Brazilian Samba dancers had to dim their authenticity in order to appeal to the Whiter upper-class. They were obligated to leave the parts of themselves that were shaped by authenticity behind. However, physical features such as hair, accessories, and skin color still remain. On the other hand, Ballroom Latin dancers craved a more authentic look on the dancefloor, and as a result they embodied characteristics that were left of Afro-Brazilian dancer’s identity. Subsequently, they labeled themselves as “more authentic,” when in reality, the characteristics that seem desirable to them were only acceptable because the true Afro-Brazilian identity had already been shattered. Authentic characteristics that were overpowered by Whiteness still lie in Rio de Janeiro in 1888.

The History and Rise of Samba

The name “Samba” derives from the word “Semba,” brought to Brazil by enslaved Africans primarily from Angola. “Samba” is also associated with prayer and the summoning of one's inner god. Samba's origins lie within traditional religious ceremonies as it was danced to invoke the saints and gods. Religious houses, where many of these ceremonies were held, were established in the region of Bahia, also known as “Little Africa,” in Brazil. The religious ceremonies incorporated both music and dance, resulting in the emergence of Samba as a dance style and musical genre being closely interlaced. The region of Bahia encompasses the birth of Samba as a musical genre, revolving around the beat of the African drum. Additionally, the traditional Semba music from Angola is at the heart of Brazilian Samba. Succeeding the abolishment of slavery in Brazil in 1888, newly freed enslaved Africans from Bahia migrated to the capital of Rio de Janeiro. This marks a shift in the status of Samba in society, leading to the establishment of “Escolas de Samba,” meaning “Samba Schools.” The schools' purpose was to provide poor communities and neighborhoods with a “creative and artistic outlet.” However, Samba gained a poor reputation because of the upper class' twisted perception. It was labeled as “obscene, improper, and in bad taste” and thus prohibited from being performed in all capacities (Romero). According to Samba pioneer and Brazilian singer Angenor de Oliveira, Samba was something to be performed in secret as it was “a thing of bums and bandits” (qtd. in Romero). Moreover, despite the abolishment of slavery the upper-class and elites, mostly consisting of Whites, regarded Afro-Brazilian communities as comparable to witchcraft and sorcery, and therefore something to be feared. Nevertheless, groups of dancers from the Escolas de Samba, known as blocos, gathered to celebrate Carnival by dancing and singing in the streets. Most of these groups consisted of Black communities, often referred to as “slum-dwellers.” Living on the

outskirts of Rio in hillside slums referred to as Favelas, the Black communities would get attacked by police for dancing Samba on the streets (Raphael 74). The dance style had to be approved by the larger White society in order to be recognized and appreciated. At the time, Samba was associated with the Afro-Brazilian community, which were seen as plaguing the city in its attempt to develop into a European-style capital. However, innovation and technology, such as the invention of the radio, played a significant role in the popularization of Samba. Popular musical artists and composers began to buy or even steal the compositions of Black Samba School composers. Since Samba was deeply rooted in community practices, composers never thought it could possibly be monetized. Consequently, they would oftentimes get exploited by popular White singers who were secretly willing to pay large amounts of money for these pieces (Raphael 74-75).

Carnival Samba and Ballroom Samba: A Juxtaposition

On the other side of the world, Ballroom dancing was rising in popularity. In the early 1920's, clubs in London started to hold ballroom competitions, including only a few styles. However, due to its huge success, bigger competitions were held incorporating various different styles, including Latin ones. The first World Championship was held in Germany in 1936. However, a lack of criteria to guide judging and performance led the Imperial Society of Teachers of Dancing to step in. Established in England, the ISDT were responsible for the creation of standards for each dance. These standards were especially useful for judges since they were now able to rank competitors ("Ballroom Dance Competition"). Although, there was no sign that these standards align with the authenticity of the dance style. The standards were simply created by a presumably White and European board and accepted as the "proper way" to perform each dance. This includes the insistence on what they believed to be correct technique, movement, and

essential features. In 1920 Brazil, the larger White society started to take a liking to Samba. While racist ideologies remained, Black people were now allowed to participate in the Carnival celebration, having previously been entirely excluded. 1928 marks the year when the first Samba School entered themselves into a Carnival competition. Samba Schools would receive financial support from the government on the condition that they conformed to certain restrictions when participating in the Carnival parade. The parades were structured in a way that allowed the city's elites to judge each entry according to certain criteria. However, reminiscent of Ballroom competitions, these standards, according to Alison Raphael, "had nothing to do with the samba, its origins, its essentially Afro-Brazilian flavor, or the popular culture it represented" (78-79). In other words, the elites allowed their own perceptions to control what they found was significant about the parades, diminishing the importance of essential characteristics associated with Black communities. In attempts to make the dance and music style more appealing, the White elites coerced Samba Schools to closely conform to their desirable aesthetic.

Similarly, Ballroom competitions are set up to be judged by "elites." The judges are oftentimes ex-professional or amateur dancers whose supposed superiority places them in the high-status position of being a judge. While White dancers already suited the acceptable aesthetic of a Western world, their version of conforming occurred in their adaptations of the most desirable characteristics of Blackness and Latinness. As Juliet McMains points out, White dancers are able to express certain appealing characteristics of non-White communities without "forfeiting White racial privilege" (57). Competitors preserve their class and racial privilege while borrowing desirable "exotic" traits commonly associated with Latin communities. Although Ballroom dancers did not have to give up their personal characteristics to gain appreciation, the need for a balance between their Whiteness and non-Whiteness became

essential to their performance. To be taken more seriously by judges and spectators, applying traits, such as tan skin, was necessary. Dancers want to present themselves as authentic, passionate, and serious in their attempts to embody the Latin dances. Furthermore, hierarchies were established within the underprivileged Samba School communities themselves as they were in contest with one another, fighting for the increasingly large prizes of the Carnival competitions. As quoted in Raphael's article, a major Samba School composer explained "The lucky ones with a friend at a radio station and a little more money to spend..." (79). This hierarchy is reproduced in Ballroom competitions. "The lucky ones" become dancers whose coaches would also be judges, or who could afford private lessons each week and a beautiful new dress, perfectly tailored to enhance the movements of their bodies.

This juxtaposition of Carnival Samba and Ballroom Samba elucidates the impression that the two are entirely interconnected. Ballroom Samba is essentially a product of the evolution of Samba in Afro-Brazil, yet is classified as mainstream because of its Western roots. Ballroom Samba never had to transform itself to become more White, but would rather build on its racial privilege to create the ideal version of Samba. Its development was completely constrained by the White perception, as they exerted their vision, desires, and pleasures onto it. However, something that is entirely consumed by Whiteness may seem boring or "normal." They, therefore, applied stereotypical traits of Black and Latin identity to produce something attractive. Through the perspective of racial stereotypes, Black people were designated as being intuned with nature, closer to the Earth. They were perceived as having more heart or soul. Black Hawk Hancock argues that, "If Whites are awkward and arrhythmic, then Blacks are rhythmic and graceful. Within the context of performing dance, if Whites are marked as restrained and rigid, African Americans are seen as expressive and dynamic" (787). They continue to argue that the

appeal for White people to identify with African American culture is a direct rejection of “White societal norms.” Furthermore, “Whites are afforded the luxury of “playing” Black through cross-cultural consumption, while simultaneously never having to endure the consequences of being Black in White America” (Hancock 788). The luxury of Ballroom is not only presented in its glamorous and elegant form but also in dancers’ power to perform Black identity with the absence of antagonism. Moreover, Latin identity was stereotypically associated with passion and sensuality. Latina women were especially seen as sexy and feisty. This further acts as a liberation from White cultural norms as White dancers create a form of flexible identity that is entirely malleable to their desired outcome. According to Sheila Bock and Katherine Borland, practices in dance contribute to “forms of self-fashioning aimed in part at liberating the dancing subject from restrictive and disciplinary identity categories” (1). Dancers are once again participating in a fluid racial identity to emphasize the most desirable parts of each race.

The Role of Costume: Dasha Chesnokova

The version of authenticity displayed by Ballroom Latin dancers is entirely determined by Whiteness. The manifestation of seemingly desirable traits of non-White communities are simply based on stereotypes and appropriation constructed by White society. The key factor for a dancer to realize these traits is costume. The process of hand-picking characteristics that have been constructed in a way that is appealing and acceptable to White society is undoubtedly reflected in costuming. As a dancer, no matter movement, expression, or behavior you are never truly embodying the desired identity of “White yet ‘different’” until you get into costume. Costuming is crucial to building a character. By wearing certain elements of costume a dancer can appeal to the need to appear “exotic” while feeling safe in their Whiteness. Costuming is temporary; White dancers are able to preserve their racial identity, ensuring a maintenance of

their privilege. There is a clear demonstration of this interaction in professional Ballroom Latin today. Dasha Chesnokova, one of the most outstanding professional Ballroom Latin dancers in the world, provides an exemplary exhibition of this idea. Dasha has competed and placed well in some of the most prestigious Ballroom Latin competitions. She is notorious for her exceptional technique and ravishing presence on the dancefloor. Her influence on the Ballroom world is evident, her most viewed performance being a Samba choreography with 32 million views on Youtube. Additionally, she is recognized for her distinct look and style, which are shaped by three main features: large hoops, intricate hairstyles, and artificially tanned skin.

Hair

During the 2019 UK Open, Dasha Chesnokova walks onto the stage for her presentation dance with her partner Stefano Di Filippo. She wears a striking gold and green dress with her signature hoops, hair slicked back into a tight, shining braid. As she walks down the steps toward the dance floor, her hair catches your eye with its shining beads and distinct style. Starting from the front of her head and reaching back to the start of her singular braid, her hair has been separated and parted into smaller strands, each one individually slicked back. Throughout the strands little gold beads have been attached, creating a texture which undoubtedly resembles that of cornrows. Originating from ancient Africa, cornrows is a traditional braiding style symbolizing African pride and heritage. They are especially important in the history of slavery as they play a crucial role in the remarkable innovation and genius displayed by enslaved communities. Cornrows became a tool for communication as enslaved women, in particular, braided intricate patterns into their scalps to act as coded messages. These patterns and messages encompassed escape plans, an idea developed by Benkos Biohò in Columbia. Biohò was born into African royalty and lived on the Bissagos Island when he was captured by the Portuguese to

become a slave. Eventually, he was sold to a Colombian businessman; however, managed to escape and establish an intelligence network within which the idea of using cornrows as maps was born (Ajao).

Cornrows became a symbol of freedom and resistance for enslaved Africans, yet as cornrows were integrated into modern day style, Black people would face scrutiny and discrimination for their hair. Meanwhile, White individuals were able to appropriate and steal these hairstyles without facing the same repercussions. In other words, White people wear these hairstyles without fear, while Black people face oppression for embodying their pride and culture. Moreover, White people not only appropriate Black hair culture, but also benefit from it (Mejía Chaves and Bacharach). This is the case for Dasha Chesnokova as she uses cornrows in a stylistic manner in order for her look on the dance floor to appear more interesting and appealing. She wants to further enhance her performance of an identity that is fundamentally different from her own to gain the attention and praise she desires. On a dance floor of numerous dancers, it becomes crucial to find ways to stand out, to grab the attention of the audience and the judges. As Chesnokova walks onto the floor her hair immediately catches our eyes, compelling our gazes to linger on her as she performs. Therefore, appropriating Black hair transforms into profit.

Hoops

If there is one thing Dasha Chesnokova can be credited for it is her experimentation and variation when it comes to dresses. Dasha will often sport numerous looks in a single competition alone, changing her costume for each round. However, despite the many changes in costume, Dasha will almost never be seen without one element: big hoop earrings. Whether intentional or not, it has become one of her signature looks over the years. She usually matches

them with her dress; gold hoops with her silver and gold dress for the 2020 UK Open or red ones matching her bright red dress in Italy. Her hoops act as an extension of her costume and resultantly as an extension of the identity she is performing. Despite the contemporary perception of hoops as a trendy, fashionable accessory, hoops have a deep rooted history in the discrimination of non-White individuals, but also in the empowerment of people within these communities.

The first hoops earrings date back to 2500 B.C.E in Nubia, Africa, which is now known as Sudan. Their popularity eventually spread, and became a significant symbol, especially in Egypt. They believed hoop earrings enhance a person's beauty, hence its popularity among Egyptian royals. Eventually, hoop earrings entered American and European fashion. In the 1900s, hoop earrings were heavily associated with Black and Latin American culture. A decline in their popularity thus occurred so as to not risk being allied with immigrants or non-White Americans (Davis). Nevertheless, hoops continued to evolve as a symbol of strength, identity, and resistance. They were empowering and ignited pride, especially in young Latinx and Black women. As reporter Sha Ravine Spencer remarks, "hoop earrings are a right of passage and often symbolize growing up, stepping into your own identity, and celebrating ethnicity" (qtd. in G. Garcia). Similarly, Sandra Garcia describes hoops as an extension of herself. Nevertheless, she quit hoops as she got older, fearing the possibility of seeming "too loud, too visible, too ghetto, too Black." The desire to connect with one's culture was met with derision and racism (Pivet). White people eradicate this connection through appropriation. Furthermore, the style was only ever associated with positively connotated words, such as "fun," "trendy," or "classic," until they were worn by White people. The integration of hoops into everyday White popular fashion was the deciding factor in deeming hoops as not only acceptable, but also the perfect way to dress up.

Although hoops lost their negative image, they never lost their link with Latin or Black identity. Therefore, White dancers are able to comfortably wear them and simultaneously appear as “different.” The sexualization and exoticization of what Joanna Bosse calls the “racial other” is entirely at play (19). Dasha Chesnokova can wear her hoops without fear. She is aware, or rather unaware, that she will not be considered unprofessional or out of place for her choice of accessory. Rather, she will identify with the exact descriptions of her performance she is looking for.

Skin

As a spectator, you never really witness dancers getting into costume. One second they could be wearing a tracksuit and the next a hot pink fringe dress. However, the first step of transformation always occurs a few days before competition. I would always know when my fellow dancers had a competition approaching. The sharp line of suddenly tanned skin running across their jawlines was always a telltale sign. I would watch them at competitions too. While we waited for our turn on the floor, I would watch as they lathered on layer after layer of bronzing gel, desperately trying not to stain their dresses while staining their skin. The dance floor may seem like a colorful place of neon yellows, bright pinks, and sky blues twirling around. What remains unseen are the smudged brown stains of bronzing cream that has been sweated off throughout the night, staining the insides of those dresses. The ease with which dancers apply synthetic skin to appeal to a perspective that sees them as equal is in complete opposition with the difficulty of giving up entire parts of your identity and origin to appeal to a perspective that sees you as lesser. In other words, self tan is the overarching element of costume that encompasses the tension between appropriation and conforming. While Dasha Chesnokova is not alone in this practice, it does complete her look. Without the tan, the immersion of herself

across the barrier of White to “White yet ‘exotic’” or “exciting” is incomplete. It is the final step that allows dancers and spectators to feel close to something alien to them. Furthermore, as mentioned earlier, wearing a fake tan was correlated with the highest level of competitive dance. A deeper skin tone was coded as superior only when worn by someone who could wash it off; only when the identity that the tan symbolized was disposable.

Historical Framework

Afro-Brazilian Samba and European Ballroom Samba have commonly been depicted as separate from each other, Ballroom Samba being perceived as an inspiration of Brazilian Samba. Nevertheless, a historical framework exists through which we can understand their interconnectivity. This framework encompasses the transatlantic slavetrade. From the 16th to the 19th century, 12 million Africans were enslaved and sent to the Americas (Lewis). The majority of them were sent to Brazil, a country experiencing a steady rise in sugar production. By the 17th century, Brazil had become the world’s largest producer of sugar because of the increasing demand of the European market (Bushnell et al.). This drastic increase was a reflection of an evolving sugar addiction in Europe due to the introduction of coffee, tea, and chocolate. Their arrival resulted in a boom in sugar consumption, “making sugar more popular than alcohol ever did” (Mucci). Mass slavery and sugar production in Brazil demonstrates the control of desire on the way we conduct, not only ourselves, but also the world. White desire, specifically, was a driving factor in the economy. This transatlantic framework is entirely reflected in the development and expansion of Samba. The same way enslaved Africans labor was the heart of the Brazilian economy, Samba or productions by Samba Schools became the heart of Carnival, providing Brazil with an enormous attraction. Moreover, Portuguese colonists were the catalyst to producing sugar at an industrial level in Brazil, further implying that this production was

determined by White people. Similarly to how the production of sugar was determined by White desire, the symbolic characteristics of Samba were constructed by Whiteness as well, and absorbed by European Samba to appeal to European desire. Furthermore, sugar was perceived as a luxury at the time, belonging to the upper class. Comparably, Ballroom dancing conducts itself on a luxurious basis, radiating glamor and exclusivity. In other words, White desire continuously outweighs rational and ethical action. A “libidinal economy,” as French philosopher Jean-François Lyotard would call it; the idea that “‘desire’ always escapes the generalizing and synthesizing activity inherent in rational thought; instead, reason and desire stand in a relationship of constant tension” (qtd. in Wolin). Segregation and racial differences would not exist without European and White desire to believe in their own superiority.

Considering the work of painter and sculptor Titus Kaphar, we can imagine a world where the tension in the “libidinal economy” is subdued. A world where we did not place non-White individuals in the background. In his Ted Talk on amending history through art, Kaphar says, “What I’m trying to do, what I’m trying to show you, is how to shift your gaze just slightly...” He says this as he paints white paint mixed with linseed oil over the White people in a portrait. Our attention is now entirely centered around a young Black boy who, in the original painting, did not have his own moment to shine. He is not erasing them from the portrait, in fact he very much acknowledges their presence, he is simply asking the question “can we amend history?” As this White paint will eventually begin to fade, the faces of the other present characters will emerge; however, we will now see the portrait as a whole. People will ask questions and show interest in all aspects of the painting, not only the White characters who were first seen as most significant. Inspired by his gesture, my point is not to tell dancers to “stop Samba” or to completely get rid of the style. On the contrary, this research paper attempts to

highlight the experiences that are so often dimmed. Just like Kaphar is not claiming that we need to erase our history, I am not claiming that we need to erase Ballroom Samba. All I hope is to further stress the importance of re-centering experiences of people who never got the opportunity to thrive.

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