



## Black Ballerinas: The Management of Emotional and Aesthetic Labor\*

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*Ballet is an elite and predominantly white profession that has mirrored history. Black dancers have been historically excluded and remain severely underrepresented through controlling images, discrimination, and marginalization. As an occupation, ballet demands intensive emotional and aesthetic labor. This research relies on interviews to better understand the experiences of Black women in ballet in context. It specifically examines the ways that Black dancers negotiate two forms of labor that have typically been theorized separately: emotional and aesthetic labor. Theoretically, these findings build on and challenge conceptualizations of emotional and aesthetic labor as separately theorized social processes. In this article, I show how emotional and aesthetic labor are on dramatic display through Black ballet dancers' workplace experiences.*

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**KEYWORDS:** aesthetic labor; dance; discrimination; emotional labor; marginalization; race.

### INTRODUCTION

Work and occupations, such as ballet, are gendered, raced, classed, and embodied. Ballet has been an exclusive, white elite space that mirrors history in that it is perceived through a dominant white culture which has ignored, marginalized, and excluded Black bodies. Like a great deal of culture in the United States, American ballet was highly influenced by Black culture and Blackness, stolen and appropriated by white Americans while Black bodies remained devalued and excluded. George Balanchine—one of the pioneers of American ballet in the mid-1930s—was heavily influenced by Black culture but supported strict embodied forms of aesthetic labor for women that came to characterize “the ballerina” more generally (i.e., pre-pubescent, pure, elegant). Such an image worked in ways that further excluded Black women from ballet. Alongside this, historical “controlling images” of Black women as curvaceous, sexualized, and impure (e.g., Collins 1990) worked to systematically exclude Black women from ballet.

The experiences of Black women in classical ballet have been neglected and undertheorized in the sociological literature on work and occupational inequalities, discrimination, embodiment, and emotions. This research demonstrates how the

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intersections of race, gender, and class shape aesthetic and emotional labor within the service economy. This article addresses both forms of labor intersectionally while also providing a case study that illustrates that emotional and aesthetic labor are more intertwined than they are often presented in empirical case studies documenting each.

This research exposes how ballet is a microcosm of racism and discrimination that reflects U.S. society more generally. In this article, I examine Black women's experiences in the most elite ballet companies in the United States. Their experiences advance key debates in the sociology of work and occupations, scholarship on bodies and embodiment, and critical race scholarship. I examine the ways that Black dancers negotiate two forms of labor that have typically been theorized separately: *emotional* and *aesthetic* labor. Similar to Entwistle and Wissinger (2006), I demonstrate how aesthetic workers, in this case Black women in ballet, are more than just an aesthetic surface; they produce a racialized *self*, *identity*, and *personality* that make their occupation *both* physical *and* emotional. Building on Entwistle and Wissinger's suggestion, I show how the aesthetic labor that Black women endure in ballet cannot be fully understood without understanding the emotional labor that accompanies it; similarly, a complete analysis of the emotional labor they tolerate requires understanding the embodied consequences of this tolerance. This challenges the ways aesthetic labor was initially theorized and builds on a great deal of work that has made use of these concepts to study workplace inequality.

## THEORETICAL FRAMING: EMOTIONAL AND AESTHETIC LABOR

In *The Managed Heart*, Hochschild (1983) analyzed the service economy and creates a new sub-field in sociology focusing explicitly on emotions. Hochschild conceptualizes "emotional labor" as "the management of feeling to create a publicly observable facial *and* bodily display" (1983: 7, emphasis added), highlighting the management of feelings increasingly required in service sector occupations. An impressive body of scholarship on emotional labor finds that workers are compelled to enact specific emotional performances in ways that reproduce hierarchies of power and inequality (e.g., Grandey 2000; Hoang 2010, 2015; Hochschild 1983; Maguire 2011; Mears and Finlay 2005; Murphy 2003; Paules 1996). Some scholars have also debated, revisited, and advanced the theorization of "emotional labor" to address the issue of race as well (e.g., Kang 2003, 2010; Wingfield 2010).

Mears and Finlay's (2005) analysis of emotional labor is illustrative of scholarship highlighting "emotional labor" more generally. In their study of professional models, they found that models deploy emotional labor to collect dignity and deflect the humiliation of constant rejection and bodily judgment they encounter at work. Yet, while Mears and Finlay's (2005) analysis foregrounds models' *emotional* labor, they also allude to issues of embodiment that others have identified and theorized as an analytically separate form of labor—"aesthetic labor." As with most scholarship relying on emotional labor, Mears and Finlay do not also rely on "aesthetic labor" despite the embodied demands made in the industry they study. Consistent with work in both areas, these twin forms of labor are related to one another, as Entwistle

and Wissinger (2006) argue, however, few scholars explicitly highlight this relationship.

This *analytical* trend is by *theoretical* design: aesthetic labor was first theorized as analytically distinct from emotional labor. Building on Hochschild (1983) emotional labor scholarship, Warhurst and Nickson (2001) and Witz et al. (2003) theorize “aesthetic labor” as:

the employment of workers with desired corporeal dispositions. . . These dispositions are, to an extent, possessed by workers at the point of entry to employment. However, and importantly, employers then mobilize, develop and commodify these dispositions through processes of recruitment, selection, training, monitoring, discipline and reward, reconfiguring them as “skills” intended to produce a “style” of service encounter. (2003: 107).

Here, they argue that aesthetic labor focuses on embodied performances. While Warhurst and Nickson (2003) do address emotions as meaningfully connected with what they term “aesthetic labor,” they argue that Hochschild’s theory of “emotional labor” does not address these forms of embodied labor in great detail. Indeed, Witz et al. (2003) favor the term *aesthetic labor* over emotional labor because it focuses primarily on embodiment. Furthermore, Witz, Warhurst, and Nickson (2003) initially conceptualized “aesthetic labor” as separate from “emotional labor”:

[W]e feel that the concept of emotional labour foregrounds the worker as a mindful, feelingful self, but loses a secure conceptual grip on the worker as an embodied self. Embodiment is continually evoked. . . yet, the precise status of corporeality. . . in the managed production of feeling is analytically abandoned. (Witz, Warhurst, and Nickson 2003: 36).

Later, they suggest that emotional labor “is impeded by the way in which the corporeal aspects are retired” (Witz et al. 2003: 35). Similarly, Speiss and Waring write that “emotional labour, by itself, does not offer a sufficiently nuanced explanation” arguing that aesthetic labor is more comprehensive in ways that position emotional labor as offering a less nuanced concept (Speiss and Waring 2005: 198). Here, Speiss and Waring (2005) explicitly conceptualize aesthetic labor by separating embodiment from emotions.

Occupations such as modeling, athletics, and ballet are useful service occupations to examine because of the way that bodies are very explicitly commodified. These occupations also allow a nuanced examination of how aesthetic labor needs to include the embodied self “body/self,” which includes both the physical *and* emotional aspects of maintaining specific appearances for particular jobs. Such occupations have strict (and often racialized) requirements about appearance for all workers, but more specifically for women. Many of these occupations require specific diets and exercise regimes. For women in particular, they even have to look after their skin, shave, wax, or pluck bodily hair, maintain their hair, have a specific body image and dress in very specific ways. Challenging these requirements comes with consequences that shape employability. Notably, Entwistle and Wissinger (2006) and Mears (2008, 2014) do examine the work required to produce an appropriately attractive body for work.

Aesthetic labor also goes beyond work, which Witz et al. (2003) neglect to fully acknowledge. For instance, they do not acknowledge how aesthetic demands might structure things like weight management to “keep up appearances” at work (Entwis-

tle and Wissinger 2006: 777 and 780-781). As Entwistle and Wissinger state, “We know very little about the aesthetic labour of non-organizational bodies” (Entwistle and Wissinger 2006: 781). Not only have Witz et al. (2003) neglected to address non-service work, they have also neglected how Hochschild *does* address this connection when distinguishing between what she labels “surface acting” from “deep acting”:

The body, not the soul, is the main tool of the trade. The actor’s body evokes passion in the *audience’s* soul, but the actor is only *acting* as if he had feeling. . . This is surface acting—the art of an eyebrow raised here; an upper lip tightened there. (Hochschild 1983: 37-38).

Hochschild’s theorization of emotional labor alludes to both forms of emotional and aesthetic labor as having a kind of symbiotic relationship. Yet, this aspect of her work has been underappreciated. Whether or not theorists of “aesthetic labor” intended this, analyses of emotional and aesthetic labor in workplaces have been almost universally deployed separately in scholarship. By utilizing them separately, this body of scholarship has failed to fully appreciate the ways these forms of labor are necessarily intertwined to acknowledge both the flesh and feeling experience. Throughout my findings, I document ways that the body and self at work are intertwined in ways that are challenging to make sense of when emotional and aesthetic labor are treated as discrete forms of workplace demands. The Black women in ballet in this study demonstrate the utility of a more symbiotic understanding of the relationships between emotional and aesthetic labor and making sense of the intersecting forms of inequality these intertwining forms of labor produce and preserve.

## DATA AND METHODS

As with many occupations, there is occupational segregation within dance. Labor systems organize and create occupational segregation in ways that ensure that racially ethnic workers are marginalized within specific occupations that works to maintain racial hierarchies (Barrera 1979; Blauner 1972; Nakano Glenn 1992). Since ballet was first created in the late 14<sup>th</sup> early 15<sup>th</sup> centuries<sup>2</sup>, it has been one of the most elite and exclusive dance forms primarily consumed by the white elite. As ballet evolved, it still held onto its prestigious cultural capital and exclusivity. Dance forms such as modern, contemporary and hip hop are far more inclusive and embody greater diversity. Indeed, many of my participants shared that at one point in their dance trajectory, they were told that they would be of “better fit” in any of these dance styles as a way of pushing them out of ballet.

Brown (2018) compares Asian American and Black representation in ballet to document the overrepresentation of Asian Americans and underrepresentation of Black Americans. While the odds of becoming a professional dancer are extremely

<sup>2</sup> The origin of ballet lies in the court entertainments of the Italian Renaissance, in the late 14<sup>th</sup> early 15<sup>th</sup> centuries however, ballet as we know it today formed in the late 16<sup>th</sup> century where the production of the first wave of French court ballets was created and by the 19<sup>th</sup> century, during the Romantic era, many classical ballets were saved, that is, Swan Lake, Giselle, and La Sylphide, and are still as popular and performed today (Wulff 2008).

**Table I.** Gender and Race Demographics of Dancers in Classical Ballet Companies Across the United States, 2018–2019

	Women	Black Women	Men	Black Men	Total Dancers	Proportion of Black Women
American Ballet Theatre*	54	3	40	3	94	3.19%
Atlanta Ballet	14	0	14	3	28	0%
Boston Ballet	26	1	29	5	55	1.82%
Houston Ballet†	25	0	26	2	51	0.00%
Joffrey Ballet	22	2	19	0	41	4.88%
Los Angeles Ballet	19	1	12	0	31	3.23%
Miami City Ballet	25	1	18	1	43	2.33%
New York City Ballet	50	3	45	3	95	3.16%
Pacific Northwest Ballet	24	1	18	0	32	3.13%
Pennsylvania Ballet	20	0	17	1	37	0%
San Diego Ballet	17	0	6	1	23	0%
San Francisco Ballet	40	2	31	1	71	2.82%
Washington Ballet	16	2	12	3	28	7.14%
Total	352	16	287	23	629	

*Note:* These data only consider Corps de ballet, Soloist, and Principal dancers. Apprentice and retired dancers are not included in these figures. The numbers shown on the chart, I have identified and confirmed by each company's website and also confirmed via personal communication with companies.

\*1 Black man guest dancer.

†1 Black man and one Black woman apprentice dancer.

slim for all ballet dancers,<sup>3</sup> the prospects are even smaller for Black girls and women. Conversely, while there are less men than women within ballet as a whole, the numbers of Black women are lower than the numbers of Black men at the most elite levels of ballet. Black women make up less than 5% of ballet dancers in major companies throughout the United States (See Table I). My small sample size is all the more impressive given the size of the population of Black women dancing in the most elite ballet companies in the world. Black women occupy fewer than one in fifty dancers at this level. Additionally, the figures in Table I represent what are considered to be the highest ever rates of representation of Black women in ballet.

For this study, I interviewed 15 Black women ballet dancers who were employed by major U.S.-based ballet companies. Participants were between 18 and 85 years old. Seven were retired ballet dancers and eight are current ballet dancers (See Table II and Table III).

All interviews were recorded and transcribed, semi-structured, and followed an interview protocol. I asked questions about their occupational trajectories, childhood exposure to ballet, financial resources, family support, and the roles that they had been offered and performed. In addition, participants also completed surveys on their bodily management.

I employed several methods to recruit dancers. Following scholars like Rios (2011), my positionality as a Black woman who has practiced ballet afforded me a

<sup>3</sup> Many professional ballet dancers start at the young age of 3 or 4 (there are of course exceptions, e.g., Misty Copeland, Calvin Royal III, etc.). If the dancer's teachers see protentional in them they will advise them to audition for a summer intensive. Summer intensive are ballet camps that range between 3 and 6 weeks in which dancers will have the opportunity to intensely train with instructors from major companies and if chosen they will be invited to dance at the school and then asked to dance with the company.

**Table II.** Descriptive Statistics for Participants

	Frequency	Proportion
Age		
69–59	2	13.3%
58–49	3	20%
48–39	2	13.3%
38–29	4	26.7%
28–18	4	26.7%
Race/Ethnicity		
Black	6	40%
African American	5	33.3%
Mixed Race	3	20%
Afro-Latinx	1	6.7%
Ranking*		
Principal	3	20%
Soloist	1	6.7%
Corps de ballet	11	73.3%
Retired or Current		
Retired	7	46.7%
Current	8	53.3%

*Note:* These figures represent reported results from a sample of 15 Black women in ballet surveyed ( $n = 15$ ).

\*Ballet companies have a hierarchy which consist of core members which is called the corps de ballet then soloist and then Principal. Principal dancers dance select nights and are given lead and solo roles, soloist can have some lead roles but typically perform roles within a small group and core members perform almost every night and are the core of the ballet, that is, a lot of background roles (pbt.org 2018).

**Table III.** Descriptive Data for Participants

	Current or Retired	Ranking
<i>Aesha</i>	Retired	Corps de ballet
<i>Lauren</i>	Retired	Principal
<i>Cynthia</i>	Retired	Corps de ballet
<i>Alicia</i>	Retired	Principal
<i>Debra</i>	Retired	Principal
<i>Daphne</i>	Current	Corps de ballet
<i>Gabrielle</i>	Current	Soloist
<i>Robyn</i>	Retired	Corps de ballet
<i>Andrea</i>	Retired	Corps de ballet
<i>Tanelle</i>	Current	Corps de ballet
<i>Michelle</i>	Current	Corps de ballet
<i>Ingrid</i>	Current	Corps de ballet
<i>Amanda</i>	Current	Corps de ballet
<i>Kim</i>	Current	Corps de ballet
<i>Ashley</i>	Current	Corps de ballet

connection with participants and generated trust that provided a privileged insight into our shared professional experiences. Retired dancers were not accessible via social media and a few did not have email. I relied upon my status and networks as a former Black dancer to gain access. After conducting extensive research on the history of Black dancers, I compiled a list of names and previous employers. I also gained access to networks of former Black ballet dancers through my professional

connections as an employee of the American Ballet Theatre's Summer Intensive and a former employee at *Brown Girls Do Ballet*. These connections enabled me to connect with the dancers or to introductions through other employees within these spaces. Our shared experiences also helped to transform the hierarchy of interviewer and interviewee and produced a more egalitarian dialogue between two Black women dancers with shared experiences.

I located current dancers by looking at major ballet companies' websites and through the photos of each dancer I would write their name if they appeared to be Black. Then I would look them up on social media (e.g., Instagram and Twitter) and contact them through direct messaging or by email (if their email was available on their social media) and confirm whether they do identify as Black and if they were interested in participating.

This article also draws upon archival work and interviews. While the sample may be perceived as small, this is a problem of the population being studied being extremely small representative of other studies of ballet dancers (Coplan 2002; Hendry et al. 2019; McCarthy-Brown 2011; Rodriguez et al. 2019). As you can see in Table 1, there are 16 Black women currently dancing at these major ballet companies throughout the United States and about 17 former Black ballerinas of these same companies listed (only 10 of which are still alive). My sample involved interviewing 15 of this population of 33 Black women (only 26 of whom were alive during the period of my study). I share this to provide a greater understanding of my sample size and to call attention to the extreme lack of diversity within these major ballet companies.

Sociologists often use pseudonyms to protect the participants' privacy. Following Duneier (1999), however, I use the real names because my participants, who are public figures and did not want their identities concealed. They wanted to be identified to share *their* experiences (See Table III). I did, however, still withhold and edit information that is not in the participants' best interest to publicly share given that majority of the participants are still active within the ballet community. All participants requested to have their real names used in publications.<sup>4</sup>

I coded my interviews similar to other scholars who study emotional and aesthetic labor (Gruys 2019; Kang 2010)—by identifying and coding emergent themes to do with each. I looked for themes that focused on dancers' discussions of emotions and feelings (i.e., how they projected a specific emotion despite how they internally felt toward a director, choreographer, other dancer, and for the audience) and discussions of embodiment and appearance-based requirements (i.e., discussion concerning how they wore their hair, their costumes, their practice attire, their body image, etc.).

Consistent with Burawoy's (1998) extended case method, I noted that as I was searching to identify themes of emotional labor and aesthetic labor separately, I real-

<sup>4</sup> I received consent to use dancers' real names in publications. This was a form of agency for the Black women and men who participated in this study. This is particularly important as Black people have been relatively invisible in classical dance and ballet, having not had voice or platform to share their experiences. This research offers one such platform. I am also committed to also providing aspiring young Black dancers to connecting with the history of Black ballet dancers. Representation of Black ballet dancers can help encourage young Black girls and women in ballet to continue.

ized that I was unable to analytically separate the two. My participants described their experiences of emotional and aesthetic labor as overlapping and entangled in ways that did not precisely fit existing models and work. This caused me to examine the theories in more depth and led me to question the extent to which emotional and aesthetic labor could be analytically separated or not. My findings allow me to recognize that coding emotional and aesthetic labor separately would not work for this particular population. And understanding this overlapping helped me to better understand how their experiences were framed by the intersections of gender and race in important ways. Throughout my findings, I demonstrate how emotional and aesthetic labor are intertwined to demonstrate how emotional and aesthetic labor may work separately for some populations but for populations similar to my participants, they need to be addressed as symbiotic.

### **FINDINGS: MANAGING MARGINALIZATION, DISCRIMINATION, AND CONTROLLING IMAGES**

In 1975, the director of ABT stated “The carriage of the Black dancer is not classic. It’s the position of the spine. The litany of bodily excesses and deficiencies lay at the ready to exclude the Black body from miscegenation within the white body or corps de ballet: critics rhetorically constructed and essentialized the black dancer as possessing a too-stocky bone structure, protruding buttocks, and feet that were too flat and too large” (Gaiser 2006: 272). In ballet, these racist beliefs still pervade the industry. In 2014, the executive director of American Ballet Theatre (ABT) told *Pointe Magazine*, “I’ve heard from the mouths of dance professionals that Black dancers categorically cannot become ballet dancers because they don’t have the right body.” In 2015, the *New York Daily Post* wrote, “A lot of people feel ballerinas should all be the same color” (Keivom 2015). Black bodies are racialized as not fitting the required “look” for ballet. Consequently, Black women in ballet face forms of aesthetic discrimination resulting from aesthetic labor that they ultimately cannot fulfill.

Throughout my findings, discussion, and conclusion, I document how Black women face discrimination and marginalization while trying to navigate how they can perform aesthetic labor and the emotional impacts it has. I show how controlling images shape the roles that Black women are given despite the fact that they are also challenge the controlling image by persisting in ballet. Subsequently, I provide examples of emotional and aesthetic labor in which I address two related issues: (1) emotional and aesthetic labor are not as easy to separate as existing research implies and (2) how Black professionals within predominantly white work spaces experience marginalization and discrimination.

#### *Discrimination and Marginalization*

In 1988, McIntosh identified one facet of white privilege as the ability to “choose blemish cover or bandages in ‘flesh’ color and have them more or less match my [white] skin.” Many of my interviewees repeatedly identified their experiences of



rejection as dancers, including not being able to find proper clothing, tights, pointe shoes, and leotards that matched their skin tone.<sup>5</sup> As a consequence, each invested more labor in altering clothing they could find to conform to the (white) dress code and making it work for their (Black) bodies. This labor came at a cost, involving time, energy (dyeing tights and leotards and coloring shoes with makeup), additional financial burdens, and emotional costs associated with confronting the question of why these required tools of the trade were not made with their bodies in mind. A Black ballet dancer interviewed in *Elle* magazine in 2017 shared: “When I saw all the shades of brown tights, it gave me the courage to try Ballet myself.” My interviews attest to the constant “courage” required of Black women in ballet. Discrimination against Black women in ballet required spending more time and money experimenting with dye and makeup to fit aesthetic ideals produced, in part, to exclude their bodies. Many of my interviewees commented on the emotional labor and resilience necessary to navigate ballet’s rigorous gendered and racialized aesthetic requirements.

Costumes and makeup in ballet are mundane elements of the trade. But, as McIntosh (1988) points out, white privilege operates through the mundane; mundane experiences pile up and work to justify patterned and structural forms of rejection and discrimination. For instance, pointe shoes were created in the 1820s and it was not until 2017 that a few companies started to make pointe shoes and tights for darker skinned women. Indeed, some of my interviewees were affiliated with companies working to create new options for women with different skin tones in ballet. For instance, Daphne, an ambassador for one such company, shared: “I wear Gaynor Mindens. Gaynor Mindens has been very supportive of recognizing women of color. . . they are now trying to get pointe shoes that actually match our skin tone, and had it be normalized that you can have pointe shoes in your actual shade.” Pointe shoes, leotards, and tights reflect the racialized symbolic image of “the ballerina.”

Many forms of exclusion such as attempting to find “flesh colored” tights, leotards, and pointe shoes are being required to use lighter make up, as Janet Collins and Raven Wilkinson were, to look more European create structural and symbolic forms of discrimination that impact Black women emotionally. Now a freelance dancer, Tannelle’s experience was no different when she was required to wear a certain shade of makeup that did not complement her skin tone. Laughing, she stated, “The teachers didn’t understand that with my skin tone, I couldn’t wear the red lip that my friend Sally is wearing. And I don’t know I guess in that sense I did feel a certain isolation.” Many of the dancers in my study discussed having different outfits and makeup because what worked for other (white) dancers did not work for them. Cynthia, a former dancer for New York City Ballet, explained:

When I was dancing Cocoa in *The Nutcracker*, the costume [was] pink. So, I asked them to change the color, but they just removed the tights and I would wear it bare skinned and I would

<sup>5</sup> Ballet pointe shoes and tights are typically a blush pink color—*ballet pink*. *Ballet pink* has roots in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries as being as close to “nude” as dancers could get without causing a scandal. However, the overall idea was to match or complement the skin tone of the dancers to extend their lines and so the tights and shoes do not become the distraction. Given that ballet dancers have been predominantly white, *ballet pink* has prevailed long as a form of “tradition” and has gone unquestioned, but it has now caused a conversation of exclusion (Howard 2018).

put a big rhinestone on my naval (laughs). . . I would just use my pancake [pad used to apply makeup] that I used for my face on my shoes. . . That was difficult because all the elastic bands [in costumes] were pink. Which I never really did anything about it when I first joined. . . As I got more involved in my roles and being an artist, as opposed to a student, I started looking back at myself and started striving for perfection so I started *pancaking* my straps and stuff like that so I could look like everyone else even though I wasn't the same color. . . No one helped me with it. You just sort of do those things on your own.

When it came to issues with tights and costumes, Cynthia was far from alone. Ingrid (a current dancer) shared, "I paint my pointe shoes using BLK OPI true color." Similarly, Gabrielle (a current dancer for Ballet West) elaborated on the challenges she faced matching her pointe shoes, "We had to dye our own shoes at times and the tights are something that the company had for us. . . I eventually found like regular make up that worked for me and just stuck with that." Black dancers experience symbolic forms of discrimination through the aesthetic requirements in ballet as an industry and workplace. And while they work toward navigating ways to maintain an aesthetic that satisfies those requirements and works for them too, this process creates additional labor that comes with attendant emotional and financial burdens.

### *Controlling Images*

Controlling images are images of a subordinate group developed by a dominate group that work to justify oppression. The portrayal of Black women as stereotypical mummies, matriarchs, welfare recipients, and jezebels (video vixens) are central features of the political economy of dominance and foster Black women's oppression (Collins 1990). These controlling images exist in ballet too through the roles given to Black women and by their existence within this predominately white space, often illustrate important forms of structural and cultural discrimination and marginalization within this workplace.

Many of the Black ballerinas in this study were intimately aware of controlling images and were mindful of how they presented themselves to avoid being stereotyped. As Aesha, a former dancer for New York City Ballet, shared,

I had done the role of the Arabian [in *The Nutcracker*]. I wanted to look on and see what people were saying and one critic. . . said, and it was along the lines of, 'It was just so disturbing to see Aesha . . . up there looking just like Lil' Kim. With her dramatic make up and blonde wig.' (laughs) And I can laugh now but imagine a young adolescent me, you know, like, first time principal Nutcracker role. . . it destroyed me. . . immediately your whole body just gets heated with blood because you're so angry because, one, you know it's not true. . . It was so hurtful and. . . so opposite of who I am and what I want to represent.

Experiences dancing in *The Nutcracker* were an emotionally charged topic for every participant interviewed in this study. The performance offers a powerful example of the racialized and gendered roles specifically for Black and Asian dancers. Indeed, there have been numerous news articles written about the racial depictions within *The Nutcracker* (e.g., Crabb 2019; Fieldstadt 2019; Fisher 2018). Within this study alone, Aesha was a part of the 60% of the Black women I interviewed who were specifically assigned the role of the Arabian princess. In the ballet, the Arabian princess is portrayed as exotic and erotic wearing a bralette and the only dancer bar-

ing midriff while also requiring her to move her body in sensual ways around the male dancer with whom she is partnered. Consistent with Collins' (2002) historicization of the Black jezebel, the critic's racist comment ("...up there looking just like Lil'Kim") discursively compares Aesha's role to a video vixen. This illustrates one instance of how controlling images operate to discursively cast Black women as overly "exotic" or "sexualized." Since the music industry is still controlled by white elites—less likely to value and be knowledgeable of the diversity and complexity among Black women—Black women are routinely homogenized as "Black prostitutes" and "jezebels" (Collins 2002). Aesha understood the critic's comment to be reflective of controlling images which, for Aesha, was exactly what she has worked so hard to challenge through the images shown in her non-profit organization:

It was so powerful to go back home and do that for my neighborhood and for them to see a woman of color, other than what they see on a screen, other than the next *video chick*, other than someone twerkin' I am just so tired of that empowerment. That's fine if that empowers you, if that's what works for you then it works but I just don't want it to be the only message and the only way that our women can feel like they can empower themselves because there is another way and that's what I want for my daughter . . . I want my daughter to feel empowered and I want my community to feel empowered. I want this image [the image of a Black ballerina] to keep getting pushed so when a little, young Black girl wants to become a ballerina, society already sees her as that. Society already sees the potential to be that, so she doesn't get type casted. Society has to be ready as a whole too because artistic directors and staff are only one part but people who spend money to come to the ballet have to be mentally prepared so that when they come to see *The Nutcracker*, they don't assume that I am wearing a Lil' Kim Blonde, wig and are educated and aware that it is a veil, and we *all* wear it and just because you see a Black woman on stage, in an Arabian costume that *everybody* wears, you don't immediately go to Lil' Kim.

While the Aesha and I discussed stereotypes, another dancer, currently dancing for San Francisco Ballet, acknowledges, in the following quote, that stereotypes of Black people and white supremacy as historically embedded in ballet.

But now my understanding of race is not about malicious actions necessarily or malicious thoughts; it's just the fact of white supremacy. . . and there's years and years of what Black people are or what they should look like and all of these things and so it's not always about attacking me personally. It's about the stereotype already in place.

Similarly, another current dancer, Daphne, discussed her understanding of how employers in ballet incorporate Black women in ways that remarginalize them: "They don't want to see a Black ballerina in a bun, or a tutu or the tights, or the pointe shoe. They don't want you to look like that traditional image. They want you looking very contemporary as possible."

A retired (principal) dancer in my study reiterated what all of the previous dancers have stated in regard to challenging the preconceived notion that Black women cannot be ballerinas:

It's just a perception; it's a stupid perception that they have to deal with—it's about what people think and how Black people can't be soft and admirable. Because when I was supposed to do *La Sylphide*, they were like, "Oh, she won't be soft. I mean yeah she can jump but she can't be soft." It's just like when you have a soft dancer that needs to do something like the black swan, like the white swan and the black swan has two personalities—one is soft and one is harder or more sexier but it's the same ballet dancer with the same body, it's just a personality shift so I call bullshit on that. . . Just like the whole idea of the Black personality—you know like what's seen on TV, the media or wherever. . . like what people may think or just pure ignorance that

there is vulnerability and there is softness and there is strength and there are all these many things we can be.

The women in this study resisted being pushed out of ballet and were constantly working towards challenging controlling images by showing how multidimensional Black women can be. They all mentioned, however, how it is up to society to be open to receiving them in a multidimensional light. McCarthy-Brown (2011) has argued that this common experience of typecasting Black women in roles that reiterate controlling images of Black women works to protect racial hierarchies embedded in ballet. "An African American ballerina undermines established racial hierarchy by implying that African American women can attain a position of femininity and beauty and be acceptable objects of the white male 'gaze'" (2011: 407). Black women in ballet disrupt stereotypes and controlling images by challenging the myths that have historically worked to justify their exclusion and so casting them in roles or describing them in ways that reiterate controlling images works to (re)maintain racial hierarchies they challenge just by existing in ballet.

### THE BODY/SELF: CONJOINING EMOTIONAL AND AESTHETIC LABOR

Scholarship on aesthetic labor has focused on service industries in which workers' bodies are commodified by highly regulated and strictly managed workforces to display company branding and a corporate aesthetic (Entwistle and Wissinger 2006; Freeman 1993, 2000; Hochschild 1983; Taylor and Tyler 2000; Tyler and Taylor 1998). The body is used as an accumulation strategy to creatively discover new ways that the body can be the bearer of the labor capacity (Harvey 1998:406). The interactive service workers that Witz, Warhurst, and Nickson (2003) address are managed in relation to corporate image; models, actors, athletes, and ballet dancers, however, work on their bodies in relation to aesthetic codes in different ways and this labor is largely self-managed both during and outside of work (Entwistle and Wissinger 2006). Therefore, for these workers, their bodies are more than just an external surface but are more broadly reflective of their identity and self. Debra, a former dancer for New York City Ballet, describes how her external self was racialized and fetishized when her director asked her to perform labor at odds with the classic aesthetic of a classical ballet:

That was the look of New York City Ballet; very slicked back [bun] so we had to use a lot of hair spray and have a high bun. . . So, I wore my hair like everyone else in a high bun. . . I was a fairy, he [the director] actually wanted me to wear my hair natural and I was like, "[Director], I don't think so" (laughs). "I'm with the New York City Ballet and I don't know if I should wear my hair like that." And the music that it was, it was an opera that sort of had this African theme to it. . . and I was like, "No, I don't want to wear my hair like this on stage."

Debra describes the aesthetic labor requested by her company and the standard look of ballet with the look that the director solely requested of her, the only Black woman within the space. She expressed deep frustration but did not want to display that frustration toward the director. So, she navigated her frustration in a joking manner when addressing him. Hochschild (1983) referred to this as "surface acting," but it also involved negotiating "feeling rules" in ways other scholarship has docu-

mented as unique among Black workers (e.g., Wingfield 2010). Debra was being asked to perform aesthetic labor contradicting the ideal look required for ballet dancers while also being racially fetishized and, implicitly, asked to not be frustrated by the demand. Debra described something other women I interviewed mentioned as well: masking the humiliation and awkwardness of the situation to not offend others and to maintain “professionalism.” Other work has documented ways that what counts as “professional” behavior often works to remarginalize groups of already marginalized workers (Connell 2003).

Similarly, Aesha described an incident that might be classified as simple surface aesthetics. However, as she narrated the experience to me, it was extremely emotionally fraught for her:

I remember I was in Europe. . . and my hair was still natural, and I just had it wet, gelled and put up and as he was choreographing, he was like, “Everyone take your hair down. I want to see.” And I was like, “Ugh” (laughs), “like seriously?” And he was like, Yeah. Just take it out. . . . And it got to me, and I’m like this 100% natural girl, and I just sort of took it and just puffed it out and everyone just starts laughing and I was just like, “Well” . . . completely mortified and just to have everyone else laughing really hurt my feelings. But in front of them I had to act strong. But inside, I wanted to cry.

The emotional labor required to navigate the aesthetic demands placed on Debra and Aesha was not unique to either of them. All of the women in my study described similar emotional labor they relied on to navigate the unique aesthetic demands they faced as *Black* women in ballet. When they were fetishized and teased for their appearances in a context historically defined, in part, by their exclusion, they all described an intense emotional resilience required to persist—conveying a set of feelings they did not actually *feel*. Having to manage deep emotions while displaying a look of professionalism is a way to “induce or suppress feeling in order to sustain an outward appearance that produces the proper state of mind in others” (Hochschild, 1983: 7) all while trying to prove that their Black body can be in this space of ballet.

These Black women in my study experienced overlapping emotional and embodied demands. Indeed, as I show here, neither is completely understandable without understanding their relationship with one another. While Hochschild did not use the term “aesthetic labor,” the experiences of the Black women I interviewed reiterate Hochschild’s (1983) analysis of the relationship between embodiment and emotions present in many jobs in a service economy. My data show that aesthetic labor comes with attendant emotional labor. Here, I argue that to suggest that this labor is *either* aesthetic *or* emotional labor misses the point. Both forms of labor are racialized, have a symbiotic relationship, and produce all-encompassing forms of workplace inequality for the Black women in this study.

### *The Embodied Consequences of “Emotional Labor”*

Wingfield (2010) argues that Black professionals find themselves experiencing two types of racialized feeling rules: (1) rules that generally apply to all workers but are particularly difficult for Black professionals to follow and (2) those that differ from the rules available to their white counterparts. She shows how Black employees

find that the feeling rules in the workplace are not racially neutral and work to Black workers' collective disadvantage. Wingfield does not explicitly address aesthetic labor that might coincide with the racialized rules associated with emotional demands that Black professionals experience. Yet, consider one of her participants describing a white woman's comments about a Black woman's hair: "I work with a woman who is a complete racist and culturally clueless. And what do I do when she tells the biracial woman on our team that her hair looks like a poodle's?" (Wingfield 2010:261). This is emotional labor, but it is also manifestly about embodiment. There becomes a clash of what Entwistle and Wissinger (2006:786) describe as objectified and subjective body poses. Black employees have to identify how to navigate the demands of their work with their Blackness—as though Blackness is at odds with those demands. And, as I document in this study, these forms of inequality are on unusual display in the industry of elite ballet.

The directors, administrators, and dancers share the goal of providing emotionally fulfilling entertainment for audiences. Dancers also perform emotional labor for the directors to secure preferred roles and maintain their job similar to models who perform a specific emotional labor in front of potential employers (e.g., Mears and Finlay 2005). For Black women in ballet, however, there are gendered *and* racialized dimensions associated with this emotional labor. For example, Robyn, a former dancer for American Ballet Theatre, describes how she reached a point where the racial discrimination she faced affected her ability to perform the emotional *and* aesthetic labor demanded of a career in ballet:

[I]t got to me in an emotional way to where I couldn't move. They asked me to come to a rehearsal for *Themes and Variations* towards the end. . . It's a ballet that I adore. . . the choreography just stays in your body. . . I got to that rehearsal and I couldn't do it. I physically was messing up. I went into the dress rehearsals crying and I knew that was my bottom and it was towards the end and so it was like the best and worst time of my life.

Like Robyn, Andrea, a former dancer, also reached a point where the routine racial discrimination and rejection was overbearing for her body and self:

The company did a film –*The Nutcracker*. And I was in the snow scene. . . every year we would do *Nutcracker*, I was the lead snowflake and when we got to the film, they took me out of the part. And the Ballet mistress said to me, "You know why." I realized, you know, that you don't give a crap about me. . . And that was the main reason why I left the company. I could no longer perform the repertoires with the same energy I once had. . . My identity was being crushed. . . I didn't even care anymore.

Robyn and Andrea explain how the constant racialized demands that made their rejection in ballet seem logical or simply "business." But this trenchant marginalization and discrimination affected them so much *emotionally* (" . . . went to dress rehearsals crying") that it got to the point where they physically could no longer perform: ("I physically was messing up" / "I could no longer perform. . . with the same energy"). They were also unable to engage in a "cultural performance" (Sass 2000; Williams 2003) to "save face" to maintain their pride and continue working. It became too hard for them to shake off and they explained a point at which they could no longer manage the emotional consequences of the racialized aesthetic demands of ballet.

In the quote above, Cynthia shares an example of how she was discriminated against, because of her physical appearance and how that affected her emotionally.

[T]hey wouldn't let me take the class that I was assigned to and so I had to take the next class and he [choreographer and founder of New York City Ballet, George Balanchine] had been to the C2 [a level of ballet class organized by ability] and that's where you get picked from and I was devastated. And I thought, "I'm going to freaking work and make sure I look the part of a professional ballerina." They're not going to put me in that situation. And I cried and I was upset, and I really had to sort of pull myself through because those things sort of happened along the way. . . but if you use it to push yourself then sometimes, you're successful regardless of people's motives. . . He came back that evening. . .to that class that he forced me to take instead and then shortly after that, I was offered a contract.

The significance of the experiences of Black women in ballet as identifying both emotional *and* aesthetic labor is that racism shaped their experiences of the gendered criticisms of weight, technique, ability, and appearance that all women in ballet face and other aesthetic labor occupations. Similar to my analysis of Wingfield's (2010) study, here I show the interplay between emotional *and* aesthetic labor as best capturing the workplace inequality these women endure.

Some research on emotional and aesthetic labor focuses on the racialization of these forms for labor and attendant consequences (e.g., Wingfield 2010). The constant racialized battle of surface aesthetics and deep emotional labor led many of the Black women in my study to a point where, like Robyn and Aesha, they expressed an inability to continue to perform the emotional labor demanded of *Black* ballet dancers. Understanding this, however, requires seeing the body as more than an externalized object and illustrates how "keeping up appearances" can be emotionally fraught—and more so for some workers than others. I argue there that understanding the embodied ("aesthetic") consequences of emotional labor better captures the complexity of intersectional workplace demands that negatively impact Black women's experiences at work.

## CONCLUSION

In this article, I examine the experience of Black women working in the most elite levels of ballet in the United States and find that the emotional and aesthetic labor they endure are not discrete forms of labor. In my analysis of Black ballerinas' experiences, I discovered a more symbiotic relationship between aesthetic and emotional labor, making them more difficult to analytically separate than Witz et al. (2003) suggest.

Black bodies in ballet, as well as many other occupations, have been constantly racialized, discriminated against, and marginalized. In ballet specifically, however, we see through a racialized lens how emotional and aesthetic labor affected the experience and retention of Black women in ballet. Through subtle and sometimes blatant racism, Black women became fatigued from performing these intertwining forms of labor as the body/self have affected each other in ways that served as a constant reminder that Black bodies were not wanted within ballet. Despite breaking some of these barriers, occupational racial segregation is reiterated here through

racialized attire, criticism, and critiques of hair, in addition to even more overtly racist comments.

Building upon the research of Wingfield (2010) and others examining the workplace intersectionally, my data show how Black professional dancers performed racialized forms of gendered emotional and aesthetic labor in at least three specific ways. First, Black dancers were assigned roles reinforcing racial stereotypes and controlling images—specifically the Black jezebel. To succeed in ballet, the women in this study discussed being in demanding routines structured by racialized and gendered forms of aesthetic labor.

Second, Black women were fetishized in dance companies. They were forced to conform to a required “look” and required to move their body within both their technique classes and the repertoires they perform on stage in ways that reinforced stereotypes that support racial hierarchies and inequality. They described in detail the additional labor they felt compelled to endure to attempt to find ways of existing in ballet and appeasing employers and audiences while also using it defensively to hide their actual feelings.

Third, an analysis of how racialized and sexualized discrimination structured their emotional, aesthetic, and cultural performances shows that ballet companies remain hostile workplaces for Black women. Indeed, many of the participants in my study who had been dancing at elite levels for sustained periods of time described similar points at which the emotional costs associated with the racialized and gendered aesthetic demands were too great for them to continue to perform. This led many to leave their dance company.

Black people have endured a great amount of emotional trauma based on their physical Black bodies. My findings document ways this continues to persist, even as Black bodies gain access to formerly and formally segregated places and spaces. The body and self at work are intertwined in ways that are challenging to make sense of when emotional and aesthetic labor are treated as discrete forms of workplace demands. The experiences of the Black women in this study demonstrate the utility of understanding the relationships between emotional and aesthetic labor and making sense of the intersecting forms of inequality these intertwining forms of labor often work to support. Through a gendered and racialized lens, we see how and why emotional and aesthetic labor are intertwined. More specifically, it is not possible to separate the body from self when these Black women’s identities are viewed through their physical bodies. The discrimination and marginalization they face in ballet because of their physical bodies and the work of producing and maintaining those bodies adds, as a consequence, unique racialized and gendered forms of emotional labor that cannot be understood as separate from these embodied demands. In conclusion, as Entwistle and Wissinger (2006) argue, we must recognize the inequality produced by aesthetic labor demands in workplaces while also recognizing the emotional labor necessarily connected with these workplace demands (2006: 786).



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