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Ballets Russes and Blackface

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Abstract: Prompted by Achille Mbembe’s reading of how racial assignation functions, this article examines the recurrences of two blackface ballet characters, the Golden Slave in *Schéhérazade* and the Blackamoor in *Petrouchka*, on twentieth and twenty-first century dance stages, in exhibits, research, and pedagogy. The company that first performed these racist stereotypes, the Ballets Russes, has been canonized as crucial to the emergence of modernism in the performing arts more generally, although consistently Orientalized in the process. The designation of works revolving around racist stereotypes as ‘masterpieces’, and their constant re-iteration amounts to complicity with racism that is not limited to ballet stages.

Key Words: Ballets Russes, blackface, canonization, decolonization, Diaghilev, Fokine, Petrouchka, racism, *Schéhérazade*, Orientalism

On Assumptions and Invisibility

Despite good intentions, we are all complicit. Upon retrospect, when my book on the Russian dancer Vaslav Nijinsky came out in 2014, I really should not have agreed on the cover, which reproduced an illustration of the ballet *Schéhérazade* (first performed in 1910) by the French artist Georges Barbier.¹ For me, Barbier’s image was about how the Ballets Russes as a company *is still represented* – that is, the legacy of Orientalist

readings of the Russians dancing who they really were when they thought they were representing their cultural others through broadly accepted stereotypes. However, for anyone else, the image simply reproduces a racist stereotype of a man *in blackface* kneeling in front of a white woman.

The man in the picture is Nijinsky, the Polish-Russian figurehead of the company, known for his virtuosic dancing; the woman is Ida Rubinstein, the Jewish actress known for such femme fatale roles, not her dancing skills. In terms of contemporary theories on race, there is a strange discord of who represents what in this image: Nijinsky is white performing not-white, Rubinstein is not-white performing white. However, although Rubinstein's Jewishness is frequently mentioned in research (e.g. Vertinsky 2014), the fact that Nijinsky is in blackface is never discussed as a fundamentally racist trope. Similarly, dance scholars have repeatedly noted the anti-Semitic prejudice in the reception of the Ballets Russes Orientalism, directed against the designer of *Schéhérazade*, Léon Bakst, but also against the prominent French Jews financing Diaghilev's enterprise.² How the Golden Slave and numerous other blackface and brownface characters in the Ballets Russes repertory constantly escape notice perhaps indicates lack of sufficiently interested parties in the reception of the company, including research, where also contemporary materials in Russian are conspicuously absent. The power of the canon lies in forcing us into complicity at the face of offensive content.

My interest in canon formation originally led me to sources in Russian because these tell a remarkably different story of the Ballets Russes as a company than the one repeated time and again in the textbooks of dance and even much of academic research. In an overview of the first Ballets Russes season in Paris in May 1909, the critic of one of

the leading theatrical papers in Russia wrote: “I have not encountered a single review in which, amidst all the compliments, there would not suddenly appear 'furious, hoarse, wild, exotic, barbarian' or some such expression.” (‘N.N.’ 1909, 359, my translation) The implication being that these were not words to be used of Russians, the critic also complained that this was not how Russian opera had been discussed the year before. Later, with Russian critics questioning both the aesthetic of and publicity for the Ballets Russes, it was in the interests of the Diaghilev coterie to buy into the Western Orientalizing rhetoric of the company. They did so wholeheartedly, denigrating Russian reviews as merely the outmoded opinions of a backward people, who did not understand the radical modernity of the artists involved in this export campaign of Russian art.³ This later version is what much of the subsequent research uncritically repeats.

Upon closer reading of pre-war reviews in France and Britain in particular, the critic of *Teatr i iskusstvo* was more than prescient: from the first, something in the Ballets Russes catered to Western sense of cultural supremacy over Russia. Time and again, one encounters accolades where the Russians are the last barbarians in Europe, as the novelist Jean-Louis Vaudoyer (1910) characterized them: people who had *remained* barbarians, left behind in time as was their Julian calendar (quite literally “behind” the Gregorian, in the twentieth century by 13 days). The Russians were *children*, they were *primitives*, they were *the opposite of the West*, and their dancing was simply *in their nature* – and as such, beyond analysis.⁴ Worse, it is precisely the critics most frequently cited in research who do this, using almost the same expressions of the dancing Russians as they would have used of any non-Europeans.

That “almost” is significant, here. In contemporary theories of race, Russians were definitely white. Even as the anti-Semitic prejudice against Bakst’s designs proved the Russians’ Asiatic tendencies, it also emphasized how most of the company was acceptably white, if not quite as white as their audiences (e.g. *Current Opinion* 1913). Early twentieth-century racism in Europe rested on the biologized conflation of ethnicity, nation, and race, and consequent elaborate hierarchization of white races, plural, as superior to other races (e.g. Dyer 1997, esp. 11–13). Russia was in the East, and easily included in the Orient, especially given its unified landmass so unlike the Western European empires.

As subjects of an empire second only to the British one in size, the Russian creators of the pre-war Ballets Russes spectacles obviously thought that in works like *Schéhérazade* they were simply participating in the contemporary trend of Orientalism – fanciful representation of the East distant in time and space – even if the location of their Orient differed from the respective Orient of Britain or France.⁵ But as Vaudooyer’s (1910) words reveal, they were frequently read *as Orientals*, as being of the Orient rather than representing it. As Edward Saïd ([1978] 1994, esp. 56–57) reminds us, the key characteristic of the Oriental in Orientalism is that they are silenced, rendered mute, exotic objects on display rather than as subjects with agency. In the corporeal roles of a silent art – dance – the Russians could be framed as “authentic” bodies, accurately expressing the Russians’ Orientality. For this reason, Russian critical opinion did not matter, and has not mattered since.

Through selective citation from the contemporary press and outright exclusion of contemporary Russian dance discourse, dance research has reproduced a power hierarchy

where the West speaks the truth for the rest. Time and again, we are told that the most insightful critics are precisely those who attributed the Russians' creative processes to racial difference, as something that could not be emulated by Occidental minds and was therefore separate from the development of Western art (as with the frequently praised Jacques Rivière, see 'J.R.' 1913). The discourse is overdetermined by the voices of people for whom the Russian ballet was infantilism, cruelty, barbarian luxury, foreign gestures and feline flexibility in violent color and sheer insanity, to paraphrase Camille Mauclair's (1912a) specifications – authors who also tended to condemn any deviation thereof (1912b). Over the past century, this Orientalist preference for exoticization has resulted in a veritable rewriting of the history of the art form that severs the close ties of the Ballets Russes to ballet on contemporary European variety stages in favor of flimsy connections to American so-called pioneers of modern dance – a move that effectively positions America as the future of dance.⁶

In picking the cover for my book, however, I failed to see that the racism evident in the blackface character of Nijinsky cannot substitute for this Orientalism because neither phenomenon is lodged somewhere back in time but continues to be present in the canonization of the company. In the following, I outline how blackface roles figure in two works used as exemplary of the Ballets Russes repertory in the canonical narrative, and how these figures conjoin with Orientalism and the Orientalization of Russia. The Golden Slave in *Schéhérazade* and the Blackamoor in *Petrouchka* stand out as focal characters around whom the plots of these celebrated ballets revolve. Yet, they are but the most prominent examples of blackface, a practice so commonplace in the Ballets Russes spectacles that it is confounding how research has not already addressed this topic in

depth.⁷ Building on postcolonialist theory, especially Achille Mbembe's (2017, esp. 66–70) analysis of the three ways in which racial assignation functions, I argue that simple acknowledgement of blackface as a past, racist practice is insufficient to counteract the effects of the canon in the present. Since canons are upheld through repetition and reperformance, unconditional praising of ballets with stereotypically racist main characters also effectively reproduces their racism as unmarked and neutral, making research complicit in the continuation of the silent (white) approval of such hostile stereotypes. I end by proposing three strategies of resistance as starting points to critical engagement: naming willful ignorance for what it is; calling out scenarios of authenticity and modernity for the fictions that they are; and acknowledging that histories, plural, are unstable, political statements in the present for the future.

On Excusing Blackface I: The Whitening of the Orient

Spotting blackface hardly requires skills in Russian. As the Ballets Russes employed only white dancers, black characters like the Golden Slave of *Schéhérazade* or the Blackamoor in *Petrouchka* were danced by white dancers in blackface. Yet, when, in 2013, I pointed out to a senior colleague that no-one has actually discussed *Schéhérazade* as a performance of blackface, they dismissed my concern with “But nobody performs *Schéhérazade* anymore!” Their argument was that the work is too racist to be performed, which certainly *should* be the case: the ballet revolves around the threat of miscegenation, the illicit fondling of white women by black men, and culminates in the death of the transgressors. Unfortunately, it is a repertory staple, especially for Russian companies:

the Mariinsky company, for example, currently performs this ballet in an evening of one-act works by Mikhail Fokine.⁸

Yet, even if *Schéhérazade* would not still be present on ballet stages, its status as a masterpiece gives it currency in the dance discourse, to the extent that it is uncritically referenced in new work.⁹ Such reperformances rely on the canonical status of the work in the broader discourse of dance. In addition to dance critics referencing these works as canonical masterpieces, the numerous centennial celebrations of the Ballets Russes 2009 onwards have all reproduced the designs and photographs of the 1910 production in academic conferences and symposia, in museum exhibits and catalogues, in apparel, posters and postcards, in advertisements, press materials, reviews and puff pieces of all these. The reproduction cycle of the canon constantly re-performs the blackface characters as acceptable, even as exemplary performances in works deemed “masterpieces” in the dance canon. For over a century, these re-performances have established *Schéhérazade* as the epitome of the Parisian Orientalism of the Ballets Russes. Each performed return to a purported masterwork also restages its inherent racism as integral to the canon of the art form precisely because the re-performances are silent of this unnerving aspect of what is being reproduced.

Because of the status of the Ballets Russes in the canons of dance, in fine art, and in music, blackface is more than “a necessary evil” in a past work or a sign of “a different time”. At best, reviews and research alike excuse re-performances of blackface as remainders, as historical documents of an otherwise exemplary work of the pre-war Ballets Russes aesthetic. Yes, without the blackface figure of the Golden Slave, the history would not be representative of the company; but why is naming the figure *as a*

blackface stereotype seemingly impossible? After all, both scholars and audiences have long been critical of the precedents that *Schéhérazade* emulated: “black” slave figures populated Marius Petipa’s *La Fille du Pharaon* (1862, set in Egypt), *Le Roi Candaule* (1868, set in Lydia (Turkey)), *La Bayadère* (1877, set in India), and *Le Talisman* (1889, also India) amongst others. (See e.g. Ziter 2003; Issiyeva 2013) As the formal debt of the Ballets Russes to this tradition (known as “old ballet” in Russia) has been comprehensively outlined in research (e.g. Scholl 1994), one could reasonably expect any analysis of the genealogy of Orientalism or intertextual references in the Ballets Russes repertory to discuss the blackface legacy as well. Over the past decade, the stereotypically racist characters of ballets like *The Nutcracker* – that most popular ballet on American stages, as Jennifer Fisher (2003) has attested – have been repeatedly called out for such racist representation (e.g. Angyal 2010; Robb 2014; Culp 2017), so the question remains: what makes the Ballets Russes exempt from criticism? Why have the reproductions of Bakst’s designs or photographs of dancers in blackface roles not been called out when displayed in recent exhibitions?

One reason to this critical silence may be the apparently easy distinction of *Schéhérazade* as staged today from the blackface version of the 1910s. As with re-performances of *Les Danses Polovtsiennes* and other Orientalist Fokine works with brownface characters,¹⁰ the dark brown body-paint used for the Golden Slave – as well as for the Chief Eunuch and the other black slaves in this imagined harem – has all but disappeared in present-day versions. Today, the darker skin of the principal male dancer seems more akin to the muscular, tanned whiteness of bodybuilders and peplum films as discussed by Richard Dyer (1997, esp. 48–51, 162–165) or to representations of Latin-

ness Juliet McMains (2001) has called brownface in competitive dancing. In the harsh stage lighting, the (artificially) tanned male muscles show to their advantage, but they are also read as emphasizing the “maleness” of the dancer in comparison to the whiteness and “fragility” of the women led on or symbolically ravished by these macho stereotypes.

As Dyer (1997, esp. 48–51, 70–80, 162–165) notes, the tanned body in peplum films is analogous to the colonialist project, in which whiteness is ascribed to a body as a rarefied and endangered status, threatened by the non-white Other. However, as white is a non-color, its application to racial categorization results in complex gradation, a multiplicity that not only strengthens the hegemony of the white over the non-white but establishes a hierarchy within whiteness of those white and those not-white-enough. This multiplicity of whiteness, in turn, confuses the simple categories of “race” still prevalent in the American discourse, drawing attention to “race” as a fundamentally white fantasy of dominance (Gilroy 2000, esp. 12–23; Mbembe 2017, esp. 173–177). McMains (2001, 55) similarly points to how dancesport is steeped in “Eurocentrism and white-dominated systems of logic by which the industry is structured”, including a kind of privileged borrowing of affective characteristics associated with non-white ethnicity.

The slippery plurality of what counts as whiteness that Dyer and McMains discuss draws attention to how the whitening of the Golden Slave has not affected the staged othering of these roles. Although issues with early twentieth-century dance photography are well known, a comparison of twenty-first century productions to surviving images show where the choreographed otherness – brown or black, Oriental or Moor – is effectively independent of skin tone and costume. The choreographic othering takes place through the grotesque in character dance (exaggerated *en dehors* movement, “broken” lines of the

body), a deliberate rejection of the ideals of classical roles. Splayed fingers or exaggerated gesticulation (including facial expressions like leering) also apparent in the reperformances of these parts are similarly transgressions of what is considered aesthetically appropriate in ballet.¹¹ In other words, choreography already others such roles through gesture and composition that no amount of whitening or changes in costuming can erase. Such othering is particularly apparent in works like *Schéhérazade* where the music does not support the plot of the ballet.¹²

To praise such gesticulation as particularly truthful to the character or as requiring excellent acting skills merely strengthens the underlying formal argument whereby these gestures, expressions, and movement qualities are “wrong” for the art form – the reason they are used for blackface characters representing the ultimate other of ballet. After all, in the 1910s, the opposite of ballet in the dance discourse was not modern dance but the Afrodiasporic syncopated rhythms of ragtime. The contemporary rhetorical distinction created between the (race-appropriate) staged “natural” dancing, especially the dancing by whites of their cultural others, or ballet, and the seedy underside of the metropolis ruled by ragtime (as outlined in e.g. Caffin & Caffin 1912, 259–278) begs the question how much of the Ballets Russes required the blackface roles to emphasize commitment to a racialized aesthetic of whiteness through distinguishing themselves from contemporary popular dance culture.¹³

Historically speaking, the lightening of the Golden Slave’s skin began in 1916, when the Ballets Russes toured the United States. The narrative of *Schéhérazade* punishes the illicit sex between the Golden Slave and the Sultana, Zobéïde – the Sultan, Schahriar, kills the slave and the Sultana kills herself to deprive her husband the pleasure

of murdering her. The scenario titillated not just for equating the Orient with sex, violence, and the femme fatale, but because it replayed the threat of miscegenation for almost exclusively white audiences – and did so in a fashion that did not conform to American minstrelsy tropes, which guarded against transgressions of the color line. In a racially segregated country, *Schéhérazade* was too indecent and incendiary, even for advocates of the company: within days of its first performances, the management had to concede to change the hue of the blackface characters to a lighter shade of brown. (More in Järvinen 2010, 84–85, 100n25–27)

However, there is no evidence that the change was permanent, nor that audiences would have stopped reading the Golden Slave as anything but a stereotypical blackface male role. Although the Orientalism of *Schéhérazade* gradually went out of style, images of dancers in this role from the 1930s and 1940s still show them in full blackface.¹⁴ It is rather curious that now that the racism of blackface has become less acceptable, the body paint of the Ballets Russes blackface figures has literally become invisible: many recent online descriptions of the character claim he is covered in “gold body paint”¹⁵ altogether erasing the pre-eminence of blackface roles in the Ballets Russes productions and severing the connection between an offensive practice and the black-and-white reproductions of Nijinsky and other celebrated dancers in blackface. This is an indication of how canonization protects white fragility by silencing and outright eliminating disconcerting evidence and criticism of the practice.

On Excusing Blackface II: The Modernist Masterpiece

The excusing of *Schéhérazade* as a product of its time indicates how blackface is often discussed as antithetical to modernity, a remnant of earlier times, even when contemporary politicians get caught wearing blackface “for fun”. For this reason, it is curious that another ballet with a principal blackface character is focal in the discourse of the modernity of the Ballets Russes company. Unlike *Schéhérazade*, which relied on (parts of) the pre-existing symphonic work by Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov, *Petrouchka* (1911) is canonized as a masterpiece of modernism in both ballet and in music, given Diaghilev commissioned Igor Stravinsky’s famous score.¹⁶ In the canonical history, where *Schéhérazade* is represented as the best example of Oriental splendor by the Ballets Russes, *Petrouchka* gets to epitomize the modernity of this company, firmly lodging it in the sphere of the avant-garde.

Like *Schéhérazade*, *Petrouchka* is rich in its intertextual connections, references to works like the Petipa–Tchaikovsky *Nutcracker*, to Russian popular and modernist theatre (notably Aleksandr Blok’s *Balaganchik*: Braun [1979] 1995, 61–68), possibly even Commedia dell’Arte (Bowden 1999). Most notably, it ransacks the Saint-Léon–Nuittier–Delibes *Coppélia*, which also has a saber-wielding Moor character in the second act (Austin 2016, 75–79). Unlike *Schéhérazade*, *Petrouchka* fulfils the conditions of an original work in all its aspects, from music and libretto to sets, costumes, and choreography, even if the legend of how its creators joined forces to ensure the creation of a total work of art is, at best, an exaggeration. As modernism, however, the work is attributed with timelessness: a masterpiece significant in the ever-shifting now, not just at the time of its making, or of the time that it represents in the manner of *Schéhérazade*. *Petrouchka* has been repeatedly praised for having a trans-temporal quality that allows

new audiences to appreciate the struggle of the eponymous main character as “universal” (e.g. Austin 2016, 81–82). Through the association with modernism, *Petrouchka* is thus freed from being considered merely a product of its time in the manner of *Schéhérazade*.

But as with *Schéhérazade*'s Golden Slave, at the heart of the plot of *Petrouchka* is a blackface character of the most racist kind: the idiot Blackamoor, the stereotypical stupid black brute. If the Golden Slave is the threat of the over-sexualized black man who has to be killed at the end of the work because he has sullied the white woman, the Blackamoor is the threat of the killer, the primitive other, the rebellious slave who would not remain content with his lot. Together, these characters are, as Stuart Hall (1997, esp. 262–264) has shown, the two most common negative stereotypes about black masculinity that still haunt the lives of black men. Just as the narrative of *Schéhérazade* is about the erotic titillation of a black slave fondling his white mistress, the plot of *Petrouchka* hinges on the behavior of the Blackamoor, who is the object of desire for the Ballerina character, and who kills the eponymous hero also in pursuit of the Ballerina. (The Ballerina, of course, is the sole character without a room of her own, and no agency beyond desiring the Moor.) From the perspective of the twenty-first century, if *Schéhérazade* embodies the white supremacist fear of miscegenation, the eponymous hero of *Petrouchka* is an incel troll.¹⁷

How the Blackamoor has figured in research effectively makes visible how much of the appraisal of modernism in dance rests on presumed whiteness of this modernism – how black dance is still segregated from white with decidedly racist overtones, and how whiteness is assumed unmarked and neutral (e.g. Manning 2004). The one book solely on this ballet, *Petrouchka: Sources and Contexts*, edited by Andrew Wachtel, briefly notes

that both the Moor and the Magician (called in English sources “Charlatan”) are Oriental characters (Wachtel 1998, 27). Yet, given the Moor’s focal role in the work, the authors are quite silent about this role and consequently, of their own celebration of a work with a blackface character. Tim Scholl (1998, 46–49) sees the Moor’s dance as a novel caricature of classical roles in ballet but *not* as a racist caricature of black people – he simply does not go there. Janet Kennedy (1998, 63) discusses the Moor’s chamber as a reference to Matisse, and sees the fact that one of Benois’s sketches explicitly titles it a “zoo” as hailing Benois’s childhood visits to the Shrovetide fair, completely ignoring the association made between people of African descent and animals in racist rhetoric, and the displaying of exotic others on European fairgrounds. (Cf. Eichberg 1990)

This erasure of the Moor’s narrative position in the ballet is also painfully evident in music scholarship. In Richard Taruskin’s *Stravinsky and the Russian Traditions*, not only the Blackamoor’s blackness or behavior is not an issue (Taruskin 1996, 678–681) but the music of the third tableau deserves one mention (Taruskin 1996, 1447) out of context of the rest of the discussion on this composition. This reads as evasion, because for anyone trained in classical music, the Moor’s theme in low woodwinds and cymbals, especially as developed in the third tableau, characterizes the Moor as an Oriental and as a simpleton in ways as audible as the (slowly) dancing bear in the fourth tableau. The acoustic marking of similarity between the Blackamoor and the bear is as deliberate as the snakes on the walls of the Moor’s room. Indeed, watching Tero Saarinen’s (2001) or Mauro Bigonzetti’s (2005) versions, I have been struck by how much Stravinsky’s narrative music conditions the reading of the choreography: the music calls attention to how the male dancers take up space, how distinctly their masculinities are construed in

movement, and in Bigonzetti's version, how Latin dance steps are used to distinguish between the two male roles.¹⁸

The manner in which the Moor's theme clashes with the high, militaristic brass of the Ballerina's during their brief duet illustrates the characters' mutual incompatibility. However, it also draws attention to the function of the Moor as everything Petrouchka is not: he is not Othello, a decent man despite being black; nor is he Harlequin, mischievous and witty (as Bowden 1999, 37 claims). In the music as in the narrative, he is set up as a bit slow, animal-like, not-modern. Whereas the audience is expected to identify with the suffering of Petrouchka, the Moor is set up to be laughed at as he attacks a coconut and, failing to crack it open, immediately prostrates himself in superstitious servitude.

Like the figure of the Golden Slave, the Moor's characterization does not derive from the stereotypes of American minstrelsy, which is not to say that blackface minstrels would not have figured in how racist representation functioned in Fokine's choreographies. After all, American minstrels, especially comic duos, had been performing in major European cities at least since the 1870s as part of the wider adaptation of the international variety theatre act circuit. (Gerstner 2017, 183–191) If anything, the presence of such racist representations on contemporary stages normalized them for audiences of the 1910s. However, it is notable that, prior to the First World War, the Ballets Russes did not reference stereotypical "deepest Africa" narratives common both in minstrelsy and in African-American ragtime, and all but one of their works (the Nijinsky–Debussy *Jeux*, 1913) were explicitly set in the distant past.¹⁹ As the name of the character suggests, the Blackamoor of *Petrouchka* built primarily on a much older

European Islamophobic tradition of blackface – and this Orientalizing context is what made the figure similar to the Golden Slave.

In Early Modern Europe, “Moors” and black Africans had figured in Catholic Nativity scenes and were staged as jealous Venetian officers and fierce Saracen pirates. Over centuries, this blackface performance tradition even colonized some of the self-representations of African and Afrodiasporic people.²⁰ For Russians, the “Moor” (апан) was literally an Arab, and primarily associated with the (Orthodox) Christians’ fight against Islam – a Spanish Reconquista imagined onto the conflicts against the Ottoman Turks on the Balkan peninsula that continued well into the twentieth century. In the decade prior to the First World War, Russia’s interest in the Black Sea access to the Mediterranean contributed to the wars in the Balkans, staged by Panslavists as Russian defense of southern Slavs and by Western observers as evidence of Russian expansionism – or the Eastern tendency to war-mongering, Russian and Turk painted with the same Orientalizing brush. (Hobsbawm [1987] 1989, esp. 312–315; Kern [1983] 2000, 252; Lieven 2000, 128–130, 134, 228) The rhetoric of “the conquest” of the West by the Ballets Russes and their original state support from the empire’s coffers predisposed critics to see correspondences between Diaghilev’s company and Russian actions in the Balkans, if only in terms of military references and satire.²¹ For Russians, the Russo-Turkish war of 1768–1774 during the reign of Catherine II the Great held particular symbolic import as a precedent to current imperialist politics in this part of Europe. Still seen as the era of Enlightenment in Russia, the Catherinian Era was also propagated by the circle around Diaghilev’s *Mir iskusstva* magazine as exemplary of *zapadnik* (Westernizing) nationalism: the Empress supported arts and sciences, including ballet, as

well as colonialist expansion.²² Enlightenment Orientalism also served as the visual model for both the blackface figures discussed in this article.

As Achille Mbembe (2017, esp. 66–70) has analyzed, the logic of racial assignation functions in three interlinked ways: first, through occultation and denial that emerge as willful ignorance on the part of the white spectator; second, through restoration and disguise that relegate the other's otherness into the realm of the unrepresentable; and third, through frivolity and exoticism that marginalize the Other as spectacle through disguise. Mbembe's example of all three is the character of the black slave in a feathered turban that is such a staple in colonialist representation, especially from the eighteenth century onwards. Although Mbembe focuses on the French colonialist project, Russian nobility, too, acquired black slaves as status symbols and signs of their own whiteness. (Novikova 2017, esp. 33–37) One such representation that both Léon Bakst, the designer responsible for *Schéhérazade*, and Aleksandr Benois, the designer and librettist of *Petrouchka*, may well have seen is a 1743 equestrian portrait of Empress Elizabeth of Russia with a black page by Georg Christoph Grooth (1743) – a painting in the collection of the Hermitage museum.

Benois painted a series of images the Empress Elizabeth (see e.g. Benois 1903), but it is the manner in which he represents the Blackamoor in his two 1906 paintings *The Bath of the Marquise* (Benois [1906] and image in Mamedova n.d.) set in the same period that give lie to any pretense that the characters of *Petrouchka* would have arisen as a critique or irony of Bakst's *Schéhérazade*. In both paintings, a leering Blackamoor is positioned as a voyeur in the shrubbery as an eighteenth-century noblewoman bathes in a pool of a formal garden in the French style. Even before these paintings that associate the

Blackamoor character explicitly with the threat of miscegenation, Benois had already used the figure to conjoin racism with both the Enlightenment and enlightening children: in his 1904 *Azbuka* or *ABC Book*, the letter A is illustrated by a black page, Arap (Blackamoor). The Arap is almost identical to Benois's later designs for the eponymous character in *Petrouchka*. (Taruskin 1996, 679; Kennedy 1998; Novikova 2017) Having accompanied the reader throughout the book, at the very end of the *Azbuka*, the Arap is shown not having learned that much as he scribbles in his bad handwriting about learning to read and write Russian – very poorly.²³ The crooked mirror to the assumed diligent student, the Arap's judgment is placed in doubt: he is not “mischievous” as Kennedy (1998, 58) claims but unaware of his errors and self-aggrandizing, epitomized by his wide-spread stance and exaggerated gesticulation. These same gestures are repeated in Fokine's choreography for the Blackamoor (Fokine 1961, esp. 192).

Like the Arap, the ballet's blackface character is un-Enlightened, ruled not by reason and learning but by violence, instinct, and superstition – according to Benois [1941] 1945, 326): “the embodiment of everything senselessly attractive, powerfully masculine and undeservedly triumphant.” In contrast to the rebellious Petrouchka, the Moor is a happy slave to the Magician, ready to subjugate himself if defeated – by an inanimate object, no less. Anything he might attain by his violence is, according to the designer, *undeserved*. The choreographer Fokine (1961, 185) agreed: “The Moor is the personification of the stupid self-satisfaction of the extrovert, the happy-go-lucky pet of fortune.” Together with the full objectification of the Ballerina (who is well-nigh absent in the accounts by Benois and Fokine), this emphasis on the Moor's success as *not his due* but nevertheless emphasizing the *failures* of the insufficiently masculine Petrouchka

character, aligns the narrative with white supremacist and incel rhetorics of the twenty-first century.

Before returning to Mbembe's analysis, it is crucial to note how these blackface characters signify in Russia, today. The tones of imperialist expansion not unrelated to beliefs in Russian exceptionalism have made the Ballets Russes a particularly apt symbol for Russian neo-nationalism. For Russian fans of ballet today, the Fokine choreographies are a new addition to the official canon, part of the new post-Soviet discourse of the early twentieth-century conquest of the West by Diaghilev's company. Specifically, these works are a source of national pride because they are represented as showing Russian art to have been *in advance of Europe* at the time.²⁴ Whereas the Petipa tradition of Orientalism was never in question in Russia, the fame of Fokine and the Ballets Russes was resuscitated as part of the post-Communist re-evaluation of Russian cultural legacy in the 1990s. The Fokine works became the epitome of the so-called "Silver Age" of the turn of the twentieth century – artists and works that the Communist Party had viewed with a great deal of suspicion.

The significance of the Ballets Russes to the new nationalist ideology about Russia's role in world history is nowhere more evident than in the framing narrative around the 2014 Sochi Winter Olympics, which opened with a film showing the Russian alphabet (see Ernst 2014). In this alphabet, the letter и (i) stands for *imperiia*, Empire; and the letter p (r) for *Russkii balet Diaghilego*, Diaghilev's company. The only reference to dance in the film, this effectively makes the Diaghilev troupe the penultimate representation of Russian dance and ballet – the incongruous image of ballerinas in tutus accompanying the letter only emphasizes this reinterpretation. Irina Anisimova (2018,

esp. 141-142) rightly characterizes this appropriation of artists who made their careers outside of Russia as typical to the conservative and imperialist ideology of “the Russian world”, “an imagined diasporic community united by ideals of culture and language”, which has been used to justify Russian (military) interventions beyond its territory. Moreover, the alphabet around which the story is told is explicitly framed as that of the Aleksandr Benois’s *Azbuka*, seen at the very beginning in the hands of a suitably blond little girl. One copy of this book, now at the Houghton library, used to belong to princess Anastasia Romanova (Stinchcomb 2014). Whether any association to the Romanovs is intentional in the film or not, knowing the connection exists makes it difficult not to see “Liubov” (“Love”) as connoting the family quite literally *canonized* in Russia in 2000. Benois follows the Arap with the fairy-tale witch Baba Yaga, but in the Olympics version, the turbaned black page is followed by ч for чучело, probably because this image includes a (stuffed) bear, a symbol for Russia (as in the mascot of the 1980 Moscow Olympics). The pages then flip, and the filmed alphabet arises, only to conclude in я, the last letter of the alphabet that is also the Russian first person singular. First seen on Liubov’s t-shirt, я becomes the last letter of Россия (Russia) as the girl takes her place in a group of six equally white and blond kids. This all-white Russia in jeans and t-shirts is striking in contrast to Soviet representations of the multiethnic imagined community of the Communist international. If anything, this journey to the “I” of “love” recalls the affective economy of white supremacist love as discussed by Sarah Ahmed (2004). How the Ballets Russes figures in the neonationalist discourse explains something of why Russian companies in particular still unabashedly celebrate works with blackface figures.

It also evinces that ballet discourses are never just about formal characteristics of dance or the knowledgeable discourses of critics and scholars.

On the Turbaned Other: Racial Assignment and Disguise

Of Mbembe's three interlinked ways of racial assignation, the re-performances of blackface characters and the discourse surrounding them exemplifies willful ignorance on the part of the white spectator. The evasions that take place when ballet aficionados are confronted by the fact of their condoning and propagating the normalcy of racist behavior (as in Fisher 2011, 58) are symptomatic of this first point. Any insistence upon necessity or importance of "accuracy" and "authenticity" of staged representation, or upon exceptions to the rule as making the rule irrelevant (like Frederic Frank's 1981 *Schéhérazade* for The Dance Theatre of Harlem) function as excuses to continue this status quo – a situation dictated by white voices for presumably white audiences in institutions dominated by white norms (as in Tobias 1981).

As feminist canon-critical researchers have noted (Nochlin 1989b, esp. 145–158; Citron 1993, esp. 19–22; DeNora 1995, 5–8, 186–191), hegemonies perpetuate themselves by assimilation of alternative interpretations as much as through excluding or silencing them. Any postcolonialist critique of a colonialist work, for example, tends to be either dismissed as irrelevant to the transcendent value of the artwork or as merely individual opinion, at best marginal and at worst outright misinterpretation of the master narrative. To be critical of the canon to the extent of calling out racism or sexism is therefore to risk one's career and position within the discipline, an intimidating prospect even for someone with privilege.

In dance, the conservative justifications for upholding the canon resolve into arguments about guarding the authors' intent and legacy in performances that seek to preserve whatever is understood as "the authentic and the original work" for future generations. Little is usually said of how such efforts frame blackface as a *formal* characteristic: the claim that these works are, effectively, "classics" impervious to criticism that should be taught because of their inherent aesthetic value normalizes the racist order. "Classical" here refers not to an opposition to modernism as style or ideology but rather to an attitude whereby no true learning can take place without accepting the aesthetic superiority of particular masterpieces, seen as particularly characteristic of an important choreographic author and/or instrumental to later developments in the art form. (Genné 2000, esp. 133–134) In excusing offensive representation by recourse to "tradition", on the other hand, recalls similar arguments made in the Dutch case of Black Piter (see Wekker 2016, 139-167) or the contested blackface figure of the King of the Moors in the Nordic Star Boys plays – cases that are fundamentally about the power of representation.

The Golden Slave and the Blackamoor, the Black Piter and the King of the Moors, and the Sultan of *Schéhérazade* and the Magician of *Petrouchka* are all costumed alike: bedecked with luxurious fabrics, turbans and jewelry, especially pearls. Their repertory of gestures and affects is similarly limited to the colonialist imagination where representations of blackface are not understood as having effects on lives of black people and black communities. (Hall 1997, esp. 271–276; Wekker 2016, esp. 153–157) As such, they represent what Mbembe, in his third point about racial assignation, calls marginalization through disguise. By being set apart through Orientalized costume, the

character is likened with the costume's material properties and easily objectified. But the costume and the make-up of the blackface figure do more than the turban of the eighteenth-century page. The exotic dress now trivializes the character, evident in how all these figures are represented as either meant for children, reproducing children's entertainment, or requiring a childish mindset of joy and delight. In reality, of course, their purpose is to indoctrinate those who have not yet accepted prejudice as truth, to train parents and children alike the expected response to a black(face) figure – dehumanization and dismissal through laughter, horror, or both (see e.g. Wekker 2016, 150–152 on the “children's entertainment” defense). What is rendered unrepresentable – Mbembe's second point – is the humanity of the character stripped of agency in the name of “tradition” and “truthful” or “authentic” representation that are never the traditions, truthful, or authentic from the perspective of black individuals. Willful ignorance then excuses this degradation, refusing the Other all agency and conflating them with pre-existing stereotypes designed to focus attention on the excellence of white people.

Safeguarded by the willful ignorance of the white spectator, this unrepresentable and yet trivialized blackness of the Blackamoor character is emblematic of the racism prevailing in the dance canon. The choreography of the black body's otherness in relation to the normative whiteness surrounding it on stage goes beyond skin tone or dress. Drawing attention to the colorful dress of the Golden Slave or fanciful décor of the Blackamoor's surroundings effectively directs attention away from how bodies are choreographed to represent a stereotype, and, in the case of *Petrouchka*, composed on the level of the music to be read in a particular, stereotypical way that prohibits individuality. Brown make-up to darken the skin of the dancer, or, in more recent examples, typecasting

a non-white dancer (as with Carlos Acosta's Golden Slave in the 2013 Classical Selection performances of *Schéhérazade* in London or Shevelle Dynott's Moor in the English National Ballet 2009 *Petrouchka*) can never dismantle the racism of the choreographic and narrative dimensions of these works. On the contrary, typecasting makes the dancer complicit in racist representation, and at its worst, enables a reading in which the racist stereotype can be attested as "truthful" by the non-white body dancing the role.²⁵

To elaborate a little further on Mbembe's analysis, any canon of art functions to deny its inherent racism and reliance on the colonial other as the provider of exotic materiality that still is bare materiality without agency. As in the portrait of Empress Elizabeth (Grooth 1743), the slave's body is a status symbol, a property without a proper name – in other words, the Golden Slave and the Blackamoor are not coincidentally but *emblematically* unnamed. The slave, as Mbembe (2017, 36, 153) points out, never has a right to a name. Defined solely by their role, their relationship to whiteness, none of the slave characters in the pre-war Ballets Russes works had names (in *Petrouchka*, *Petrouchka* is, in effect, the only character with a name). Unlike *Zobéide* and unlike *Petrouchka*, even beyond program notes the Golden Slave and the Blackamoor are clearly and fundamentally deprived of agency in the narrative: they do not act but rather *react* to their surroundings.

If contemporary sources naturalize the blackface character as a black character in that no distinction is made between character and racial epithet in program notes and reviews,²⁶ in scholarship, the erasure of blackface takes place in outright erasure of the purported race of the character or worse, conflation of the character with the white dancer. The metaphors used in primary sources and reminiscences to describe Nijinsky's

or Orlov's representation of black otherness – bestiality, danger, lack of refinement and control – now populate research. Characterizations of Nijinsky as “wild and uncontrolled” (Bellow 2013, 38) “sex incarnate, [- -] erotic primitive” (Garafola 1989, 32, 33) even ascribe the role as illustrative of the “self” of its original performer along the same lines that Fokine (1961, 155–156) copying Beaumont (1913, 1-3) did. Nowhere is this conflation of the role with the dancer's self more evident than in the queer reading of the Diaghilev company, where the performance of Nijinsky as the Golden Slave becomes a performance from which we can learn non-hegemonic masculinity.²⁷ That the character is also a stereotypical representation of *black* masculinity is not even worth a mention as fans laud whatever they imagine Nijinsky to have been on stage and off. For Kevin Kopelson (1997, 61), the Golden Slave is Nijinsky, “a tragic early gay death” instead of a spectacle of violent murder of a black character. In similar vein, Michael Moon also equates Nijinsky with his roles, representing the dancer as virtually Diaghilev's slave, his mental illness caused by the open secret of living in a closet:

Nijinsky's attempts to become similarly autonomous were a disastrous failure for a variety of reasons, not the least of which, I suspect, was the relation of his fame to the specularization of the imputed 'lack of masculinity' that restricted him to the margins of identities of which 'ordinary masculinity' was an indispensable component. (1994, 64)

Whereas in primary sources Nijinsky is the quintessential minstrel, supreme in his channeling of non-white maleness, in reminiscences and research he is conflated with the slave, and specifically, *Diaghilev's* slave (a trope largely due to Grigoriev 1953, 32). “Nijinsky” thus becomes mere material for erotic fantasy, an object to be used or

discarded at will. With the historical person rendered inarticulate, as silent as his art form,²⁸ any desires can be projected onto his absent body, which Kopelson (1997, 66), in a characteristically Orientalist move, claims both “ultra-natural” and “ultra-artificial”, the qualia of the gay, the balletic, and – as if to exemplify the hierarchy within the plurality of whiteness – the Russian. The artificially darkened skin of this allegedly natural dancer trained to the artifice of ballet is utterly invisible, erased from the analysis of a performance the researcher imagines from photographs of said blackface role. Instead, the exotic, dancing Russian is noble savagery peeking under the layer of silks, the quintessential slave subjected to the researcher’s dominating gaze and sexual imagination, as once more the artificiality of ballet masks the hypersexual beast within.

Strategies for Resistance?

The erasure of the racist underpinnings of celebrated works is epistemological violence. It raises the question what is so terrifying in the blackface figures of the Golden Slave and the Blackamoor that they cannot be critically encountered in research? Fundamentally, what is at stake, here, is what the Ballets Russes actually justifies in the canon of dance, that list of “works everyone should know” where the nature of this knowing is indexical, not epistemological. The canonical work is deemed canonical through a circular argument that explicates how the work (and its designated author) deserves attention precisely because it references earlier canonical works and is referenced in turn by later canonical works. Who selects what qualifies as worth inclusion or when and why such inclusion takes place is silenced. Although usually represented as such, canons are neither neutral, homogenous, nor unchanging. On the contrary, as Linda Nochlin (1989a, xvi,

33–59) has noted, canonization is fundamentally a colonialist endeavor seeking to legitimize cultural imperialism. Merely adding to the canon cannot therefore counteract the power hierarchies producing and upholding canonicity of some but not others, as it obscures how the canon reflects the discriminatory structures of professional art making and the accompanying ideological assumptions about propriety, creativity, genius, and so on. (Nochlin 1989a; Battersby (1989) 1994, esp. 10–13)

In art dance, the canon dictates what of the past gets remembered, re-rehearsed, and re-performed – in other words, whose works get given the necessary time and funding of preserving them in the repertory and which works become reference points in histories of the art form. In this regard, what substantiates the Ballets Russes as “vanguard” and justifies their importance is the exclusion of contemporary women ballet choreographers through the myth that ballet prior to Diaghilev was in “decline”, and that only this company made ballet art again at a time when the future of art dance was epitomized by American pioneers like Isadora Duncan. As Sarah Gutsche-Miller (2015) has shown, historical source materials do not bear out either part of this myth: non-balletic art dance was not an American invention, and ballet was not seen to be in decline by critics who actually followed dance. Russian critics were, in fact, quick to note that French accolades of the Ballets Russes came from authors uninterested in dance as an art form. Conversely, the company’s impact abroad was kept marginal precisely because their art was seen in racial terms, at the end of the regular theatrical season, and as apart from the local discourse on dance. (Järvinen 2008)

The reason this last argument is particularly pertinent is that, as Thomas DeFrantz has succinctly put it, over the past decade or so we have seen “a bourgeois retreat into

travel to dance festivals and art galleries as a standard of dance research, and a displacement of progressive minoritarian performance practices for the sake of a new canon of (unmarked) white dance artistry” (2007, 189–190) In the light of the Eurocentricity of what qualifies as “vanguard” in the art form, and the manner in which this vanguard performance is supported by (white male European) philosophical tradition in dance scholarship, decolonialization of the discourse as well as the practice is more than urgent. It is crucial that we note prejudices in how both performances and texts interpellate canons and through this constant hailing, reinforce those earlier works’ canonical status, fixing them as edifices that should not be critically dismantled. Scholarship has to go beyond reading new work as referencing the already hegemonic white vanguard of dance, and recognize how aesthetic value is linked to economic and social value – not “neutral” but deeply embedded in formalist traditions of exclusion of the not-white-enough. (See e.g. Jackson 1999; Seetoo 2013, x, 28, 44; Gutierrez 2018)

Revealing how not only representation but academic research is characterized by willful ignorance is but a first step in resisting the canon. Tracing out the long lineage of racism masked as Russian ingenuity, the Orientalism of Bakst or Benois turned into a representation of Oriental authenticity and artistic genius, and a repertory that keeps circulating racist representations as natural and unquestioned – these all reflect a larger question of how white bodies in ballet are represented as neutral and somehow “unmarked”, much as in philosophy, where the white male body is the standard by which everyone else is measured (Dabashi 2015, 30–36). Because of the prevalence of the “classical” conservative modes of thinking, the hegemonic histories of the hegemonic dance form that receives the majority of both sponsorship and public funding are in dire

need of rewriting and restaging, a decolonializing practice that would, for example, combat the constant erasure of already existing histories of black dancing bodies (e.g. Howard 2015; Bourne 2018) or institutional barriers (Brown 2018) contributing to the whiteness of the form.

To counteract occultation and denial, it is therefore necessary to make visible how “modernity” is defined in dance and in ballet in a manner that represents the racialized Other as mere material for white authors in the Eurocentric idiom. How past works representing contemporary life or imagined futures have been represented as unworthy of serious attention, whilst repertoires churn out new versions of the fantastic, exotic, and retrospective tradition in support of colonialism or “the Russian world”. Historical references and historical narratives are too often seen as conditioning what can and cannot be claimed of the past when in actuality history is always written in the present for the future. In Eurocentric forms like ballet, it is the archive, not the repertoire, that can contest the canon.

If the first strategy is naming, the second strategy could be calling out scenarios of authenticity and modernity as toxic fictions. “Ethnographic authenticity,” regularly used as a justification for canonization of works of art that exemplify racist, sexist, and colonialist attitudes towards the Other, simply excuses racist, sexist, and colonialist attitudes. For example, Fokine is praised for the “ethnographic authenticity” of the dances he composed: “In these ballets Fokine worked primarily as an ethnographer,” writes Garafola (1989, 12) of the choreographer’s 1906–1918 character dance work. As with similar anecdotes told of Denishawn (Shawn 1929, esp. xi), the stories of Fokine’s travels (including Fokine 1961, esp. 56–59) not only reproduce precisely the power structures

that recent ethnographic theorizations have sought to contest but they *also* mark the dances of the Other as something to be picked up *in a matter of days*, often in contrast to the years of arduous training required of understanding white forms of dance such as ballet. As such, they treat all corporeal knowledges as subsets of European ballet or American modern dance paradigm, and simultaneously relegate all other forms of dance as the subject of ethnochoreology, not art.

Through the idea of modernism, further occultation of racism occurs in the discourse, because modernity is, historically speaking, entangled with European colonialism: the colonies both enabled European modernity, and were justified through the need for modernization (as bringing this European modernity to the colonies). Modernism as an aesthetic paradigm, although seemingly about aesthetics of form, is equally indebted to colonialism. The re-appropriation of *ukio-e*, the Floating World, by impressionist painters, the exotic other of Gauguin's Tahiti, or the so-called "primitive" masks so lauded in the paintings of Picasso and yet simultaneously eroded as merely ethnographic objects, not art – formal innovation is the colonial other regurgitated by the European singular authors. These examples from painting could as well be from other arts: the arabesques of Debussy or *The Heart of Darkness* of Conrad (1899) could not have emerged except from this encounter, a fascination with the exotic that is still somehow frivolous, as Mbembe (2017) points out, something practically forgotten in the name of originality, another fictional characteristic of the avant-garde, as Rosalind Krauss (1988) has argued.

If the first strategy was naming the issue, and the second making the repeating scenarios visible and subject to criticism, the third strategy could be called a strategy of

active resistance that involves epistemological and ethical questioning of the self. Any researcher, in their choice of topic, is bound to the canon by strings too often invisible and uncontested – such as my ill-advised choice of a cover image. This is what I meant by “being complicit”: becoming aware of the complexities involved in the formation of subject positions, the painful acknowledgement of years of indoctrination, is as crucial to understanding privilege as it is to any resistance.

As Dabashi (2015, esp. 24–26) shows, it is important not to claim for the Other a hegemonic role in the name of justice, because this would be to simply replace one cantankerous power structure with more of the same. Rather, we should all resist the colonial heritage of the canon through making ourselves aware of our own formation as subjects, including, as Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999) and Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2018) have attested, the positional superiority of Western knowledge and academic disciplines. The more entrenched and hegemonically white our discipline, the more we are each and every one of us called to interpellate that epistemology, to refuse to perpetuate sexist and racist canons, to cite also those who are not the always-already cited, and to learn to dismiss the dead white men who haunt our formation as subjects. There is no counterargument to justify racist representation.

I am not claiming this is easy: outspoken critics rarely get promoted in the system, especially when they belong to small minorities or hail from outside the hegemonic Anglophone world. It almost seems that any attempt at questioning the existing, larger disciplines imbued with a sense of history and self-worth lands one in one of the more recently-founded “interdisciplinary” marginal departments that serve the double function of a safe haven for misfits and a safeguard against any need of the older, established

disciplines to change. However, because we are all complicit, change requires not individual excellence but strength in numbers, an intersectional alliance across minoritarian positions, with shared expertise in every possible front. A revolution that acknowledges, in the words of Emma Goldman (1931, 42), “everybody’s right to beautiful, radiant things” like dancing.²⁹

Notes

¹ I have explicitly requested no images to be included in this text. Instead, external links to specific images are provided, but the reader is cautioned that their content is quite disturbing. The Barbier image (Barbier 1913a, n.p.; 1913b), used for the cover of Järvinen 2014 had been previously used as a cover for at least one book on the Ballets Russes and included as an illustration in several of them.

² On this anti-Semitism, see e.g. Garafola (1989, esp. 284, 476 n 80). However, as with non-conformist reactions to the eroticism of the spectacles, most of this anti-Semitic prejudice was never committed to print.

³ Most notably, the staunchest Russian defender of Diaghilev’s enterprise, Valentin Svetlov – see e.g. Svetlov (1911) citing Reynaldo Hahn.

⁴ Vaudoyer (1910). Similarly, ‘W.R.T.’ (1912); Hamilton (1916).

⁵ Russian “Orient” included, for example, the Caucasian colonies of the empire, but as Kemper (2018) has discussed, Russian Orientalism and Orientalist rhetoric was nuanced beyond simple othering of non-Russian people already during the late Imperial period. See also Lieven (2000, esp. 216–217); Saïd ([1978] 1994, esp. 9–10); Petrone (2002, esp. 178–179). For anyone sensitive to this distinction, the mixed reactions of the makers of

the Russian Ballet spectacles to how they were received as “Asiatics” or “Orientals” are quite evident: e.g. Nijinsky (1916); Benois (1941) 1945, 150.

⁶ As Sarah Gutsche-Miller (2015) has shown, there really was no “decline” in ballet in France prior to Diaghilev. On the similarity of Diaghilev’s enterprise to these variety theatre ballets, see Järvinen (2008). On the “new ballet” as preceding Duncan’s visits to Russia, see e.g. Krasovskaia (1971, i:110–111, 116–128).

⁷ For example, Johnson (1913, 68) on the black slave of *Cléopâtre* (1907/1909) and Johnson (1913, 216–219) on “Negroes” in *La Tragédie de Salomé* (1913), illustrated in Debey 1913. Black slaves also appeared in *La Légende du Joséph* (1913) guarding Potiphar’s wife and in the revival of *The Sleeping Beauty* in 1921. In 1926, Danilova danced a blackface role in Balanchine’s choreography *Jack in the Box*; the following year, *The Triumph of Neptune* included a blackface role called “Snowball”. Blackface was a constant in the repertory of the Ballets Russes.

⁸ See Mariinsky Theatre 2020a: performances for *Schéhérazade* announced for October 16, 2020 and November 29, 2020; Mariinsky Theatre 2020b: *Petrouchka* is announced for May 19, 2020, and the age limit is given as ”6+”. Needless to say, the choreographer Mikhail Fokine also performed blackface roles: see Michel Fokine and Vera Fokina in *Schéhérazade* n.d.

⁹ Amongst others, Jean-Christophe Maillot’s choreography for Les Ballets de Monte Carlo (2009); English National Ballet’s 2009 version; or Kenneth Greve’s 2010 choreography for the Finnish National Ballet; in contemporary dance, Florentina Holzinger and Vincent Riebeck’s *Schönheitsabend* (2017). I would like to point out that

it is completely possible to reference the work critically, too, as in the 2009 Alonzo King's LINES Ballet *Scheherazade*. On this company, see Jensen (2005, esp. 220–289).

¹⁰ *Les Danses Polovtsiennes* (Polovtsian dances) was an Orientalist dance in Borodin's opera *Prince Igor*, representing the wild Polovtsy tribe performing to the civilized Russian ambassadors. It was one of the most successful and most frequently copied of the Ballets Russes works and in their repertory throughout the company's twenty-year history. Photographs of the dancers (see *Adolph Bolm in The Polovtsian Dances from Prince Igor composed by Alexander Borodin* n.d.; *Photograph of Bronislava Nijinska and V. Karnetzky in Polovtsian Dances from Prince Igor* n.d.) show them wearing body make-up and leotards darkening their skin.

¹¹ For example, *The Kirov Celebrates Nijinsky 2002*. The Liepa version of *Schéhérazade*, claiming genealogical prestige through the corrections made in the choreography by Mikhail Fokine's granddaughter Isabelle Fokine, is, if anything, more racist as a result than memory-based versions.

¹² The plot of Rimsky-Korsakov's tone poem is a different Orientalist imaginary, describing scenes narrated by Schéhérazade in *The Thousand and One Nights*. This conflict between the plot heard and the plot staged was often negatively noted in contemporary reviews – for an overview, see *Rampa i zhizn* (1910).

¹³ It is particularly dangerous to read contemporary descriptions of Nijinsky's dance as reproducing Afrodiasporic popular dance movements. To call recollections of Nijinsky spinning on his head (as reported by Beaumont ([1940] 1951, 36), also Morand 1952, 251) evidence of breakdancing (Kopelson 1997, 72) is not just to underestimate the skill required of these dance forms, but erode how these much later recollections position the

movement they describe. By asking "whether that tremendous strain on his spine could possibly have affected his brain," Beaumont ([1940] 1951) specifically posits Nijinsky's un-balletic spin as a potential cause of the dancer's later institutionalization. In similar vein, to even suggest the deliberate Orientalization of Russia by Diaghilev's coterie "almost [-] Negrified Russia" (Taruskin 2017, 430) is to equate the oppressor with the oppressed.

¹⁴ E.g. Eglevsky, Dolin, and Rubinstein, to name but three: see *Jeanette Lauret and Andre Eglevsky in the ballet 'Scheherazade'* n.d., *Anton Dolin as the Golden Slave in Scheherazade, Covent Garden Russian Ballet Australian tour 1938 or 1939*, or *Martin Rubinstein in costume for the Golden Slave in Scheherazade, Borovansky Ballet 1938 or 1939*.

¹⁵ This seems to emerge from the National Gallery of Australia 2010 online exhibition, later reproduced in an erroneous Google Doodle 2017 as well as other articles mentioning *Schéhérazade* (e.g. Molloy 2017).

¹⁶ E.g. for Jordan 2007, 30–32 "Petrushka is Fokine's finest work," and a first step in Stravinsky's progress towards "pure dance" (a modernist term par excellence); similarly, Taruskin 1996, esp. 661–662 on this work as epitomizing the ideals of the *Mir iskusstva* circle, a masterpiece that "richly deserves the reverence [- of being -] preserved intact".

¹⁷ This is a reference to the internet subculture promoting misogyny and racism as the right of the "involuntarily celibate" predominantly white men. Several white terrorists have self-identified as incels in recent years. See e.g. Ging 2019; Beauchamp 2019.

¹⁸ Fokine 1961, 183 claims the "not pleasant" music for the Moor nevertheless created a "superbly complete image" of the character. As Jordan 2007, 130 notes, "new

choreographers, with rare exceptions, have respected the original stories” of both *Firebird* and *Petrouchka* in part because “the music is programmatic and amply illustrates the forces at work.” For some such examples, see Jordan 2007, 132–134, 138–140.

¹⁹ *Petrouchka* was set in St. Petersburg of the 1860s, even if some critics (e.g. Toye 1913) read it as a representation of twentieth-century Russia.

²⁰ E.g. Goldberg 2014, esp. 86–88; Cole 2012, 224–225. “Moor” derives from Mauretania, the Roman province denoting North African parts of that empire. In the Catholic European tradition, one of the three Magi, Caspar, was a Moor (see e.g. van Bijlert 1640–1650) and performance traditions of such mystery plays that continue, like the Nordic Star Boys plays, this character is in blackface.

²¹ In the review of the opening performance of 1909, the critic of *Le Figaro*, Miguel Zamacoïs, called the Théâtre de Châtelet the “hospice” of this Russian “army” (‘Un Monsieur de l’Orchestre’ 1909). In response to *The Rite of Spring*, the editor of the same paper, Alfred Capus (1913) emulated the Balkan peace treaty of May 30, 1913. Samuel L. Bensusan (‘S.L.B.’ 1913) similarly commented on Stravinsky’s music in terms of the warring sides in this conflict. Cf. the military metaphors Benois 1909 uses of the season.

²² Of the numerous strands of Russian nationalism in the late nineteenth century, the *zapadniki* or Westernizers sought to emulate Russia as a European power, over and above the pre-Petrine traditions embraced by the Slavophiles. Järvinen (2014, 193–197, 202–208, 232–233) on how the Ballets Russes figured in these nationalist discourses.

²³ “Я * выуч*ился ч*итать и* писать по русск*ий*”, where * indicates a correction: “I * learn*ed how to re*ad and* write in Russ*ian”. See reproduction in Stinchcomb 2014.

For a detailed analysis of the elitist, sexist, and colonialist ideology apparent in the Benois illustrations, see Weld 2018, 36–42.

²⁴ This, too, is a distortion of the historical record. The argument that the Ballets Russes showed Russian art as “in advance of Europe” was first made to defend Nijinsky’s choreographies of 1912–1913, attacked in the French press for not being sufficiently exotic and Oriental. In contrast, many Russian dance critics of the 1900–1910s attacked the Ballets Russes as decadence, evinced by Rubinstein being able to star in *Schéhérazade* with barely any ballet training and the focus on revealing costumes and short works with repetitive choreographies. See Järvinen 2008.

²⁵ For black ballet dancers and blackface, see Bourne 2017, esp. 93–95, 278; also Brown 2018 on institutional racism.

²⁶ See e.g. Théâtre National de l’Opéra 1910. On navigating the subtle differences between respectable and insulting characterizations of non-white people in (the reception of) the Ballets Russes, see e.g. Järvinen 2014, 256n18.

²⁷ Much of this interpretation rests on Cyril Beaumont’s “Introduction” to Robert Montenegro’s 1913 book on Nijinsky, in which Beaumont claims Nijinsky incapable of dancing conventional male roles (1913, 1–3). After the dancer’s institutionalization in 1919, detractors of his fame represented this as proof of the dancer’s effeminacy, used as a code word for homosexuality. See Järvinen (2014, 125–132) on effeminacy, “European affectation,” and erotica.

²⁸ On Nijinsky as deliberately silenced to render him like his art form, see Järvinen 2014, 173–182.

²⁹ My sincere gratitude to all those colleagues, too numerous to mention, who supported what has been an excruciating writing process involving all too many ugly histories and resistance from figures of authority. Particular thanks to Thomas DeFrantz for reading a draft version, as well as Ramsay Burt, Meiver de la Cruz, Rosemary Candelario, Royona Mitra, Stacey Prickett, and Prarthana Purkayastha for encouragement in times of need.

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