

Weaving Rastafari Principles in the Contemporary Dance Course: A Culturally Responsive Pedagogy

Lisa Wilson

Dance pedagogy for teaching dance in postsecondary education has seen significant developments in recent decades. Various voices have articulated different but related contemporary approaches to teaching dance that has shifted dance teaching away from its traditional teacher-centred, authoritarian mode to pedagogies that are more student-centred, democratic and even critical. One underdeveloped dimension in the Western dance pedagogy discourse, however, is the cultural perspective, meaning how dance teachers consider students' cultural experiences in teaching Western dance. With increasing diversity in schools teachers, including dance educators, are being challenged to find diverse and culturally relevant approaches to teaching (Ladson-Billings, 2006) that will situate the content to be learned within students' cultural knowledge and understanding. This is so that learning can be more meaningful, students are engaged and empowered in their education, and can achieve. This chapter discusses the author's experimentation over four years, with shaping a culturally relevant dance pedagogy for teaching contemporary dance, based on the principles of Rastafari, to predominantly Black learners in postsecondary dance in Jamaica and South Africa.

The notion of culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP), also referred to as culturally responsive pedagogy, has become increasingly visible in global educational discourse. This has been partly due to the growing diversity in classroom populace and pedagogical shifts towards more student-centred teaching. Ladson-Billings (1994; 2006) defines culturally relevant pedagogy as teaching that recognizes the importance of including students' cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills and attitudes. Advocates for CRP such as Alton Lee (2003), Bishop and Berryman (2006) and Ladson-Billings (2006) posit that teaching that establishes meaningful socio-cultural contexts for learning, where students safely bring their cultures, who they are, their experiences, and what they know into the learning relationship, positively impacts student engagement and achievement in schools.

This argument by CRP advocates is not new. It echoes the ideas of earlier thinkers such as socio-constructivist theorist, Lev Vygotsky (1976), who long posited that students' social and cultural environment play a significant role in how students come to know, understand and interpret their worlds.

Yet as I reflected on my experiences as a Black student learning Western dance forms in Australia, the teaching of these forms in various postsecondary dance settings, and the dance pedagogy literature, I became cognizant of the sparseness of pedagogical examples of teachers who explicitly consider and explore non-dominant cultural knowledge in the teaching of Western dance techniques. It seemed that in spite of the cultural background or experiences of the learners, the teaching of Western dance forms remained steep in Euro-American traditions. In other words, there is a gap in the pedagogical research regarding culturally responsive approaches to teaching Western dance forms to learners from non-white, non-dominant cultures.

Few dance educators such as McCarthy-Brown (2009), Melchoir (2011) and Wilson (2012, 2014) have articulated experimental dance pedagogies responsive to African-American, Maori and Afro-Caribbean students' cultural experiences and identities respectively, within the context of formal dance education. It is on the premise of this gap that I present my experimental research on shaping a culturally responsive pedagogy for teaching contemporary dance to post-secondary Black learners in Jamaica and South Africa, through weaving ideologies of Rastafari within the contemporary dance course experience. In achieving levels of success with using Rastafari as a vehicle for teaching the principles and artistic processes of contemporary dance, a Western dance form, I contend that the teaching of Western dance knowledge and skills can be culturally responsive, and that such efforts will demand teacher reflexivity and creativity. In this chapter, I will demonstrate how Rastafari ideological constructs of *meditation*, *livity*, *reasoning*, *non-conformity*, and *black power consciousness* have been empowering cultural frames through which to meaningfully and holistically engage learners of African ancestry with contemporary dance.

To adequately contextualize the research, I first provide some background to the research inquiry. A brief history of the Rastafari movement follows on. The paper then concludes with a discussion on the pedagogical weavings of Rastafari in my contemporary dance lessons and its impact on students' learning of the dance form.

Context and Methods

Contemporary dance, unlike classical ballet, has no stylistic or aesthetic unity or fixed canon of movement steps. It is instead an umbrella of various cross-fertilized

practices, movement styles, and approaches aimed at exploring the full motor and expressive potential of the human body (Noisette, 2011). As such it has the capacity to nurture and develop dancers' physicality, expressivity, creativity and individual artistry in diverse ways, which is perhaps one of the reasons the form is taught in many postsecondary dance studies.

However, in a few postsecondary teaching contexts with Black learners in Jamaica, I have experienced resistance and observed a lack of enthusiasm by some students to exploring this potentially rich dance form, in particular release technique. Release technique is a dynamic style of contemporary dance that emphasizes ease of movement and fluidity and focuses on the use of energy, breath, joint articulation, body-mind connectivity, gravity and momentum to create dynamic and organic movement (Dance Australia, 2014). In experiencing release technique students' would make informal comments such as "this is so white" or "why can't we learn Horton or Dunham technique?". Even though Lester Horton, the creator of the Horton technique is white, these students associated his technique with the illustrious Alvin Ailey Dance Theater Company founded by African-American Alvin Ailey. In probing these comments further, the issue it seems was that unlike Dunham and Horton technique which embody in some ways Africanist ways of moving, some students felt culturally alienated by what they regarded as a "Eurocentric" contemporary dance movement experience.

Methods

This issue in my practice in Jamaica launched me on an action research journey in 2010 to find a more culturally relevant approach, in this case a more afro-centric approach, to teaching contemporary dance (release technique) to these black students. McMillan (2004) defines teacher-led action research as a study emerging from the teacher's practice, focused on solving a specific classroom problem with an overarching goal of improving teaching and student outcomes.

The research process began with self-reflection and personal examination of my teaching methods and teaching context in order to gain more insight into my research problem. Though I did not have a personal affinity for Rastafari ideology, in searching for a culturally responsive pedagogy for teaching contemporary dance, I could no longer overlook my Jamaican student artists' growing fascination with and practice of Rastafarian spirituality and culture. Ladson-Billings (1995) contends that teachers who desire to be culturally relevant utilize students' cultural experiences as a vehicle for learning.

As such I began to seek out connections between contemporary dance philosophies and practices and Rastafari philosophy and practice using the cyclical action research process of planning, acting, observing, developing a plan of action and reflecting (Mertler, 2009). The research action plan which set out to weave

Rastafari elements as both methodology and content within the theoretical and practical components of the contemporary dance courses I taught in postsecondary dance studies in Jamaica, and later South Africa, was implemented over four year-long cycles (2010-2014). I relocated to South Africa in 2012 and continued the action research, as it was still relevant to my teaching of this Western dance form to some African learners. Two cycles were conducted in Jamaica and 2 in South Africa. After each cycle, the research problem was re-assessed and earlier cycles of investigation were used to inform and improve subsequent cycles (Melrose, 2001) for added credibility.

Over each cycle I embarked on experimenting with various permutations and combinations of infusing Rastafari elements in my daily teaching of contemporary dance, for example, using percussive music instead of melodic music as accompaniment or Africanist vocalizations in cueing students. For each pedagogical action with which I experimented, I systematically collected information on the effectiveness of the teaching methods. Multiple sources of data collection were employed for triangulation. Data collection methods were both structured and semi-structured teacher observations, student reflections, course evaluations, class discussions and video-recordings of coursework.

Inductive analysis was used to interpret the data. The study found that grounding the contemporary dance learning experience within a Rastafari cultural paradigm was successful in bridging the gap between the black students in the study and the “white” contemporary dance experience. It also emerged that while some of the cultural infusions successfully grabbed students’ attention and interest, they did not necessarily deepen their understanding of the principles and processes of contemporary dance. However, the findings revealed that, for the black learners in the research, teaching contemporary dance principles of body-mind connectivity, breath, sensing, safe dance practice, personal expression and creativity through the lens of Rastafari concepts of *meditation*, *livity*, *reasoning*, *non-conformity*, and *black power consciousness* respectively increased students’ engagement with and depth of understanding of the Western dance form. Thereby suggesting that dance teachers can approach the teaching of Western dance forms such as contemporary dance in culturally responsive ways.

Brief History of Rastafari

Rastafari is a grass root socio-religious movement that emerged from among the poor in Jamaica. According to Rastafari history Leonard P. Howell is said to have established the first official Rasta community in Jamaica around the 1930s as a counter cultural response to the cultural, economic, political and social disenfranchisement that many blacks experienced as a result of colonial and western imperialist attitudes that prevailed in Jamaica after slavery was abolished

(Murrell, Spencer & McFarlane, 1998; Chevannes, 1998; Nettleford, 2003). Howell was appalled by the poor conditions of his fellow African brothers and sisters post-emancipation and was very outspoken against the oppressive regime of the governing white colonialists. “Central to Rastafari paradigm is an attitude of non-conformity and resistance to the marginalization and disempowerment of African cultural identities, histories and worldviews by western oppressive systems of government” (Hutton & Murrell, 1998, pp. 36-37), which they often refer to as Babylon, and Africa’s dependence on such systems, by any means necessary.

Structurally, the Rastafari movement is largely an acephalous group in the sense that it has no distinct leader, no traditional organizational hierarchy and there is no central command (Chevannes, 1998; Price, Nonini & Fox Tree, 2008). Its spirituality is also not homogenous as its various adherents live it out differently but overall the movement offers an alternative Afro-centric lifestyle and consciousness that subverts western episteme and existence.

Although Rastafarianism finds its origin in Jamaica, its worldview and influence as a cultural movement has spread across the world, including Africa, particularly among disenfranchised youths in post-colonial societies (Savishinsky, 1994; Mordecai & Mordecai, 2001). Visible elements of Rastafarian adherence are the wearing of dreadlocks, and long robes by some sects, the smoking of the holy herb, a natural food diet, and it’s socio-politically conscious reggae music. Although the movement began as a non-mainstream Afro-centric social movement among the poor in Jamaica in the 1960s, it has spread across social and geographical lines, boasting followers of diverse socio-economic status and has become a cultural force in the local and global creative industries of music and dance (Price, Nonini & Fox Tree, 2008). This study adds even further value to this social movement by finding novel applications of its ideology in the contemporary dance class.

Principles of Rastafari in the Contemporary Dance Classroom

Ladson-Billings (1995) contends that teachers who desire to be culturally relevant utilize students' cultural experiences as a vehicle for learning. Though I did not have a personal affinity for Rastafari ideology, in my search for a culturally responsive pedagogy for teaching contemporary dance I could not overlook my student artists’ growing fascination with and in some cases practice of Rastafarian spirituality and culture. As such I began to seek out connections between contemporary dance philosophy and practice and Rastafari philosophy and practice. Useful connections were found between the Rastafari principles of *meditation, livity, reasoning, non-conformity*, and *black power consciousness* and the contemporary dance principles of body-mind connectivity, breath, sensing,

safe dance practice, personal expression and creativity. The following section will give examples of this Rastafari pedagogy in action in my teaching of particular contemporary dance principles.

Rastafari Meditation and Body- Mind Connection

One connection that is important in the contemporary dance lesson is body-mind connectivity, an ability to move with increased awareness of internal sensations and feeling and increased proprioception. Body-mind connectivity in dance helps the dancer to attend closely to the processes, functions, needs, and intuitions of the body in movement or stillness. For the contemporary dancer, this heightened awareness is important to “moving from an embodied source – fully receptive and responsive to the moment of movement” (Batson, 2009, p.2). Activating this connectivity, however, demands that dancers quiet themselves enough to pay attention to their bodily communication. In an art form that students perceive to be more about “doing” rather than “being” or “sensing”, students would get agitated with being still on the floor “doing weird things”, and often struggled to find and harness the value of connecting body and mind somatically during the technique class.

Things changed when I embarked on using Rastafari meditation as a cultural referent and framework for engaging students with this kind of somatic work. Rastas practice meditation daily to attain inner peace and positivity, relaxation of mind and body. They take time away from the busyness of living to be in relationship with their inner selves, their deity and nature. My students were very much familiar with rasta meditative practices which may include chanting, reading religious scriptures, poetry, burning incense, even movements. The students offered no resistance to me borrowing some aspects of Rastafari meditation rituals for use in the technique class.

The first adjustment I made to my teaching of the body-mind connectivity principle was to refer to the somatic exploration tasks I employed as physical meditations rather than using my trained vocabulary of ‘body scanning’ or ‘mental imaging’. The small change gave students insight into the nature of the activities, that is, to focus inwardly and to channel some level of mental activity through the body, and what was expected of them. The physical meditations were developed around Rastafari meditative practices and creatively incorporated on the use incense, natural elements, quiet chanting and the reading of sensory and textural poems to support students in focusing mind and body and heightening their kinesthetic and environmental awareness.

An example of such Meditations in the Contemporary Dance Technique Class is Described Below

At the beginning of a lesson students arrive to the smell of incense and rosemary placed in bowls in the middle of the studio. Immediately as they enter the space their senses are awakened and their attention shifted away from the past to the present, the here and now. I encourage the dancers to find a comfortable place on the floor and guide them using a quiet voice, gentle strokes with the rosemary, and at times chanting to receive, sense and respond to the present sensory stimuli. These exercises then gradually develop into dancers moving slowly from floor to standing and into general space, being aware of how the stimuli motivate feelings and sensations in their bodies and their choices of movement responses. I did this ritualistic set up once per week for about six weeks, each time presenting different sensory inputs. Soon students were looking forward to the body-mind rituals and what was initially viewed by some as ‘time wasting’, ‘silly’, and ‘weird’ now had them intrigued and curious. This is what some students shared about the repackaged experience:

Susan: I appreciated the sacred space that was created for us to dance in. It is very important that we as dancers experience this type of teaching because the affective part is often neglected in the technique class.

Johnnie: I really did not enjoy lying around on the floor and thinking within when I was first introduced to the idea. It was all too slow and out there for me and I had a lot of questions. I just wanted to move. It began to make sense to me though when our teacher changed up the class and brought in rasta elements. I found that interesting, and over time I was giving more of myself to the tasks.

Other students mentioned that the added Rastafari elements, of which they were familiar, made it easier for them to trust the process of connecting on a deeper level with themselves and their dance environment. Not only did these Rastafari cultural elements create a purposeful start to the lesson but they also made the somatic experience seem less abstract allowing for increased accessibility to and engagement with the process. Drawing on students’ cultural experiences to teach this contemporary dance principle, helped to grab students’ attention, allay initial fears and discomfort with the newness of the class experiences and brought greater clarity to the learning tasks. Students were far more receptive to this new cultural framing of the body-mind somatic experience and over time appreciated the integration of mind, body and spirit in the contemporary dance training.

Rastafari *Livity*

Another concept of Rastafari that I have successfully integrated in the contemporary lesson is the concept of *livity*. *Livity* is about existing in a unified relationship with one's divine naturalness and the natural elements in the environment, so that one can experience emotional, physical and spiritual well-being (Honiak, 1998). This relationship with nature Rasta *livity* is also very much aligned with their food diet as they believe that what one eats either enhances or inhibits one's life energy or *livity* within. In other words, what one eats has significant influence on the well being of the body, mind and soul.

I use the concept of *livity* to teach both technique and health principles within the contemporary dance learning experience. In the teaching of technique, for example, to help students relax and yield to gravity rather than fall with tension, I ask them to consider the floor as mother earth and giving into gravity was a necessary way of accessing her tender life source. In African cultures, as in Rastafarianism, the earth is revered and given respect as the source of life. The notion of the studio floor as mother earth helped some students grasp the idea that the floor offered them support that was strong yet nurturing and therefore it was safe to yield to gravity. I observed that with this imagery some students were less tentative in falling into the floor and that they did so with far less tension. They were also more willing to try movements that bore weights on their hands in inverted positions due to a better understanding that the floor, mother earth, offered them active support. In the words of one student, "giving my body weight into the floor, on my hands, was psychologically easier by viewing the floor as mother earth. It made the action desirable and less intimidating, even if I did not do it fully right."

It was evident, from my observations, that the mother earth imagery resonated more with the African learners, and for this set of learners aided their understanding of the contemporary principle better than when I had previously used the imagery of the floor as one's friend.

I have also drawn on the concept of *livity* as life energy to bring students attention to their breath. Students can forget to pay attention to their breathing as they execute movements, resulting in a bound flow as they dance. I found in guiding students towards this principle that shifting my instructions from the general 'breathe' or 'use your breath' to a more culturally nuanced directive such as 'awaken the *livity* within', brought about a deeper understanding with students that not only enhanced their awareness of breath but also their emotional and physical investment into their movements. The breath as *livity* helped students to understand that breath in contemporary dance was not just about inhaling and exhaling but that it had a life energy of its own that could be harnessed kinesthetically to promote ease and efficiency of movement, stimulate movement and increase awareness of tension in the body (Giguere, 2014). I found that

accessing students' culture and providing culturally nuanced instruction enabled students to dig deeper into the contemporary dance experience.

In keeping with Rastafarian *livity* of being in natural harmony with one's African identity and heritage, I had also began to explore newly discovered contemporary dance styles that blend African or African based movement forms with western dance techniques in the contemporary course. The energy difference in the class whenever I engaged students with such fusions in the technique class was quite remarkable.

It has been my experience that weaving African movement expressions in the contemporary dance class with dancers of African ancestry energizes and enriches their learning and empowers and elevates the Black dancing body in all its configurations (from the linear to the curvy, the petite to the voluptuous, the muscular to the flabby) (Wilson, 2014). In retrospect, my formative teaching years of simply replicating the Eurocentric way I was taught contemporary dance denied students' some level of cultural embodiment in the contemporary dance class, and in comparison to the increased energy that happens whenever I explore Afro-fusion contemporary dance techniques, those classes now appear to be listless and routine.

Over the years through guest teaching, I have exposed dancers to the techniques of culturally responsive dance educators such as L'Antoinette Stines of Jamaica (L'Antech technique-a fusion of ballet, modern and Jamaican dancehall), Maxwell Rani of South Africa (Instika technique- a fusion of South African traditional dance and contemporary dance), and A'Keitha Carey of Bahamas (CaribFunk technique: a fusion of ballet, modern, Afro-Caribbean traditional and social forms, fitness and somatic principles). These dance teachers, in echoing the spirit of Katherine Dunham, have created culturally responsive alternatives to the dominant Eurocentric representations of contemporary dance. On one of those teaching occasions in a CaribFunk class taught by A'Keitha Carey to my students during the Rex Nettleford Arts Conference in Kingston, Jamaica in 2011, I observed:

The buzz in the class is palpable. Students are smiling, sweating and enjoying the looseness of the pelvis in this style. There is no struggle but a sense of ease and confidence even as they shift between fluid, collapsing and percussive energies. There is expressive life in their bodies as they find their groove.

(Class Observation notes, 14 October 2011 Kingston, Jamaica)

Not only is this approach to contemporary dance teaching a culturally responsive one, in the sense that Black students get to experience the enjoyment,

beauty and satisfaction of moving their bodies to the beat of their cultural heritage within the structures of this western dance form, but it is also a decolonizing one. It uplifts indigenous cultural knowledge and non-western corporeality that historically have been silenced or oppressed in western dance education (Wilson, 2014; Cruz Bank, 2010). With such self-validation and self-acceptance comes physical conviction in students' participation in the contemporary dance learning experience. Learning then becomes a willing act rather than a forced one, a source of mutual inspiration rather than one of total imposition.

Finally, I also use aspects of *livity* as a springboard from which to teach dancers about health and nutrition. Knowledge about and nutrition and taking care of the body should be important aspects of the dancers' training as the body is its instrument of expression. As with any musical instrument, in dance the more tuned the body is, meaning the healthier and fitter it is, the greater and longer its capacity to take risk and function expressively.

Rastas are very strict and disciplined in matters related to food. Many practice an *ital* diet which in principle generally means a diet of natural food (Mordecai & Mordecai, 2001): food from the earth (such as fruits, vegetables, produce, legumes, nuts, seed rich in natural nutrients); food without salt, preservatives, artificial flavourings, hormones or any other additives known to cause chronic diseases; and food not considered scavengers such as pork, predatory fish and some types of crustaceans which are high in toxins; and no use of hard drugs (rastas do not perceive their smoking of marijuana as hard drugs but a religious sacrament).

One activity I would ask students to do in the health and nutrition module of their contemporary dance learning is to prepare a daily meal plan that reflected their current eating habits, which they would compare against a rasta meal plan and an athlete's meal plan by a sports nutritionist. They would critique these meal plans using their knowledge about dancers' optimal performance nutritional needs.

I found that Rastafari was a useful gateway for probing matters related to dancer's health and nutrition as it stimulated students' interest in the topic and made learning less sterile. The *ital* diet being very much a visible part of the students' cultural experience along with with rastas' highly controversial sacrament of marijuana smoking created much lively debates in the theory lessons and made learning more appealing. Rather than rejecting highly contested Rastafarian unorthodoxies such as the issue of marijuana smoking, which are aspects of students' social experience from the dance class, I have come to realize that facilitating discussions around them in relation to the dancing body can nurture critical thinking. This is because these issues generate multiple and at times contrasting viewpoints for students to consider, reflect on and evaluate (Lynch, Wolcott, & Huber, 2001). This leads me to the Rastafari principle of "reasoning".

Reasoning

In Rastafari spirituality, reasoning sessions are religious gatherings, which provide a time for chanting, prayers and singing. They are also meetings where societal and global politics are meditated on, discussed and debated through a Rastafari Afro-centric lens to bring about greater understanding, and spiritual and social consciousness for its followers (Mordecai & Mordecai, 2001). One important aspect of these reasoning sessions is that they are highly participatory, democratic, unstructured and non-hierarchical. There is no appointed leadership that plans and presides over the gathering as is common in Western religious meetings (Mordecai & Mordecai, 2001). Instead, it is those who have gathered to meet who actively direct the proceedings.

In shaping a culturally responsive pedagogy for working choreographically with students in the contemporary dance repertory class, I borrow three things from Rastafari reasoning sessions: i) the exploration of social issues pertinent to Black lives as the subject matter for choreographic work; ii) the use of a participatory, non-hierarchical choreographic approach; and iii) its inclination to critique dominant, mainstream systems. I have found exploring socio-cultural issues pertinent to the lives of the students as subject matter for a contemporary dance repertory work, which they co-create, co-produce and publicly perform has helped me to shift students' mindset away from the idea of choreography simply as making a dance to choreography as inquiry and a tool for social activism and change.

Over the years, students and I have explored diverse social themes of relevance to students' lives and the culture and world in which they operate. Issues of racism, gender violence against women, notions of beauty, the phenomenon of skin bleaching (practice of lightening dark skin tones using chemical substances), and xenophobia are some examples of such culturally relevant subject matter. Either me the teacher or the students generate the themes and a cyclical process of reasoning (discussion), research, movement exploration, and public feedback occurs until the work is completed.

Rastafari "reasoning" in the contemporary dance class enables me to engage learners in the kinds of dialogue that narrows the gap between school and students' life experiences. It allows me to holistically weave through one contemporary dance experience, students' cognitive, bodily, social and political realities in a way that traditional western dance pedagogy does not. It provides, as critical pedagogue Paolo Friere (1970) would argue, a valuable opportunity to guide students towards critical understanding of their worlds so that they can take more conscious control of their thoughts, actions, and ultimately their lives.

Some movement purists may argue that the contemporary dance class should be free of such socio-political interrogation and remain steadfastly focused

on the development of physical skills. However, such perspectives, only serve to dehumanize and de-culture the dance experience of students from African cultures where dance functions as embodied storytelling. Furthermore, in this world of great complexities it is important that dancers at the post-secondary dance level not just experience the world through dance in a reductive manner, submerged in a simple reality of lines, shapes and time signatures. The current global complexities demand that dancers be developed as critical, independent thinkers and movers, with a socio-politically consciousness that moves them to act and advocate for a better world for themselves and others through their art. Contemporary dance certainly makes provision for that.

Weaving such social consciousness within the contemporary dance lesson can be a lengthy and time consuming process as it involves, discussion, research, collaboration, guided artistic practice, critical reflection, and negotiation among the students and teacher. It can also be a sensitive process as students and teacher deal with unsettling and uncomfortable issues. However, the creative product and the impact it has on the participants and the public can be deeply satisfying and transforming as evidenced in the following feedback received for the work *Uprising* created in 2014 with a cast of 18 students. *Uprising* was motivated by the media-publicized kidnapping of over 200 girls from a school in Chibok, Nigeria in 2014 by Boko Haram, a terrorist organization opposing the education of women. The work was an embodied invocation to women to rise up and be united in the fight against patriarchy and violence against women, well-known phenomena in many African societies (See Figures 1-2).

Eleanor (dancer): Personally I have learnt to understand my strength and power as a woman. I have never really thought about how important a woman's voice is until I did *Uprising*. I think it's only once you truly believe in the cause that you are able to have faith in yourself as a woman. I realized that on the second night of performance at the Baxter Festival. It was one of the performances where I really fought for the girls, and myself.

(Personal communication, 23 November 2014)

Kevwe (dancer):

During the beginning stages of the process of *Uprising* I battled to fully commit emotionally to the work because I was still trying to grasp the concept. However as time went on and the piece became a whole I found it easier to pour emotion into my movement. The performance for me was

very affective as I found myself deeply connected to the story of the girls each night. The piece is so passionate and moving! I thoroughly enjoyed performing it each time. During the piece I felt my role as a woman to be very powerful and I felt after performing such a piece that as a woman, in South Africa, I could make a difference!

(Personal communication, 22 November 2014)

Kevin (dancer):

... It was difficult to portray a violent role when you are the opposite of that nature and your beliefs go against that type of thing. I realized though from the readings and talks... that as men we too have a responsibility to challenge negative masculine behavior and I thought that by doing a good job at being terrible, it could make men feel uncomfortable enough to realize that such actions are inhumane, be it against women or other men.

(Personal communication, 23 November 2014)

Rachel (audience member):

The choreographer has clearly transmitted to her dancers a sense of the traumatic effects of the various manifestations of abuse against women, and the translation of these effects into movement are palpable. This is no mean achievement as it cannot be assumed that because such abuse is publicized and discussed, and should be relevant to the age of the dancers, that they will be able to interpret the emotions that are engendered without falling into the banal and sentimental. So for this alone, the piece is to be lauded. I was moved by the message and the outstanding crafting of the piece.

(Personal communication, 20 November 2014)

It has been my experience in threading this Rastafari construct in my contemporary dance lessons that students rarely get bored with the lengthy *reasoning* process. In contrast, they remain committed and actively involved throughout the journey, due to finding personal, artistic and cultural value in its outcome of a meaningful choreographic work.

Rastafari non-conformity and anti-establishment attitudes

Rastafari also exudes a creative consciousness that I have called on in the

contemporary dance lesson to help fire students' creativity. Rastas' fundamental rejection of Western imperialist trappings has resulted in the creation of novel substitutes that reflect the new order of rasta identity (Honiak, 1998). A prime example of this is Rastas' rejection of Standard English, the language of former colonial oppressors, as their official language. Being true to their "politics of protest" Rastas consciously changed the vocabulary and syntax of the English language to create a new and distinct communication known as 'Dread talk' or 'I-ance' (Honiak, 1998; Nettleford, 2003).

I felt that Rastafari's anti-establishment ethos and non-conformist attitudes modeled for my students a way of being and thinking that is vital to their participation in, and understanding and appreciation of, a dance form that thrives on the pushing of artistic boundaries.

Students can feel very foolish or highly self-conscious when asked to explore movement in new ways or to invent movement in the dance class. Sometimes the reason for this is a lack of confidence in their creative abilities. In moments like these I often refer to the global reach of rasta's "foolish" creative exploration in the fields of music (reggae and dancehall), cuisine (natural food products and recipes), fashion and textile (trendy hemp cloth designs), cosmetology (fashionable dreadlocks) and medicine (herbal products), to help students see the potential value of thinking outside of the box in their dance processes and to inspire some level of confidence in their creative abilities.

For example in my technique class I often include a creative task as one of my student-centred teaching strategies. In groups I would ask students to take a phrase learnt in the class (phrase A), manipulate it in any way they desire (phrase B) and then combine both to create a sequence. Sometimes students generate very wonderful new phrases that show their understanding of choreographic elements and devices, but which in my opinion do not really involve much risk taking outside their comfort zone to make their contemporary dance work edgy. One of the ways I extend students' creative capacities is to ask them, in creating phrase B, to consider movement phrase A as being oppressive and to 'think like a rastaman' in creating a counter response B phrase. Students immediately begin to stretch their imagination and open up the boundaries of the original dance phrase to include vocalizations, chanting, spoken text, ritual gestures, silence and stillness reminiscent of some of the early postmodern experimentations.

While I could have drawn on students' historical knowledge of the antiestablishment roots of contemporary dance, or postmodern artists such as Merce Cunningham, Pina Bausch, Paul Taylor, Yvonne Rainer, as frames of reference for being unconventional in their contemporary dance work, for some students these historical facts and figures are too distant from their current reality to be useful sources of inspiration. As culturally relevant pedagogical theories posit, cultural or 'home' referents in students' learning experiences are more likely

to deepen their understanding of content and motivate success in their learning. I would also add from my experience that it also enables them to experience learning from a more natural and authentic place of truth without compromising the knowledge and skills to be gained.

Discussion

Situating my contemporary dance teaching methods within the frames of Rastafarian worldview in my post-secondary teaching contexts with learners of African ancestry yielded important results for both the students and teacher. Students showed more interest in the dance form, and were more willing to explore the breadth and depth of the form, as the Rastafari lens enabled better understanding of the form's principles and added greater socio-cultural and socio-political value to their learning experience. Using Rastafari constructs as a pedagogical frame through which to demystify contemporary dance knowledge and skills shaped a novel approach to teaching the Western dance form. In fostering students' creative and critical consciousness, enabling their cultural ways of being and moving in the dance form and empowering them to academically achieve, my Rastafari pedagogical experimentation has satisfied Ladson-Billings (1995) proposed criteria for a culturally relevant pedagogy.

Despite its success, weaving Rastafari principles in the postsecondary contemporary dance lesson is not being heralded as a pedagogical tool for all classrooms with Black learners. Black learners are not a homogenous group and while there exists similarities among cultural groups, much difference also exists on the levels of the group and the individual. That which is important is for dance teachers, to be creative researchers who will immerse themselves in the cultures of their students in order to teach in a way that connects the dance curriculum to students' communities and cultural experiences (McIntyre & Rosebery, 2001). Such connections bring a sense of harmony to the dance learning experience that enables the dancer to participate with greater ease and simultaneously grow in their roles as dancers, cultured human beings and global citizens. In teaching culturally responsively, teachers need not fear that course objectives will not be met or will be compromised. It has been my experience in teaching with cultural responsiveness that more stands to be gained than lost.

In learning to be culturally responsive I had to dispose of personal biases and elitist attitudes towards students' cultural interests. Prior to weaving Rastafari in the dance classroom, I was of the perception that Rastafari was not for the educated mind or body due to its grassroot association with the uneducated masses and a sectarian tendency to wear long robes that cover the body. In addition, some aspects of the Rastafari religion contravened my own religious beliefs and as such

there was no personal affinity to its worldview and practices.

With students' strong interest in and practice of the Rastafari worldview, I engaged in a process of self-reflexivity in which I examined and questioned my own attitudes, prejudice and philosophical beliefs regarding Rastafarianism, and the how and why contemporary dance should be taught. In retrospect this self-reflexivity was necessary before I could even begin to see in new ways. As Lynch (2011) posits teachers' pre-existing cultural biases can be significant obstacles to them learning about their students' backgrounds and succeeding at making learning relevant to students' lived experiences. Such reflexivity enabled me to find pedagogical inspiration from an unlikely place and to engage with Rastafarian culture, from the fresh position of critical inquiry rather than on prejudicial and elitist grounds.

Shaping a culturally responsive pedagogy in the dance technique class begins with an acknowledgement that pedagogies for teaching Western dance techniques can be culturally dynamic and supple rather than fixed in traditions. It then demands that dance teachers engage in some levels of risk-taking, reflexivity, and creativity in order to find its dimensions. My experimentations with weaving Rastafari ideological constructs of *meditation*, *livity*, *reasoning*, and *anti-establishment*, in the contemporary dance studio with learners of African ancestry, have demonstrated that a culturally relevant pedagogical approach to contemporary dance training need not inhibit students' grasp of contemporary dance knowledge, skills and understanding, but can rather enhance learning in the discipline.

The field of dance education can benefit from more action research by dance teachers into the use of non-European methodologies or cultural frameworks for teaching Western dance techniques. While contemporary dance due to its inherent dynamic nature may be more open to such research, teachers of strongly codified Western forms such as classical ballet should also be encouraged to pursue cultural responsive teaching, particular if they work in educational settings. Not only do students stand to benefit from a culturally adapted approach to dance teaching, but also teachers. I experienced increased satisfaction from seeing students' sense of alienation with the form give way to meaningful engagement leading to quality contemporary dance work. Perhaps this is simply because, culturally relevant pedagogy in initiating the learning from the center of students' lives, as Ladson-Billings (1995) acknowledges, is simply good teaching!

Notes

1. All study participants' names are pseudonyms.
2. All photographs have been used with permission

WEAVING RASTAFARIANISM IN THE CONTEMPORARY DANCE COURSE



Figure 1. *Uprising 2014. Performance: Dance UCT, Baxter Theatre, Cape Town, Photographer: Pat Bromilow-Downing, Dancers: Darion Adams and Kaylin Coetzee.*



Figure 2. *Uprising 2014. Performance: Dance UCT, Baxter Theatre, Cape Town, Photographer: Pat Bromilow-Downing, Dancers: Darion Adams, Kyle Linde, Kaylin Coetzee.*

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