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Tap Dance In Post-Secondary Dance Education: Why is it Disappearing and How Can We Fix It

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In 2019, an open letter from the dance department at Barnard College shocked dance students with their decision to discontinue all tap courses from Barnard's dance curriculum (Telman). This decision was supported by Barnard and Columbia students as well as dance professionals from outside the University community, which disheartened Barnard's tap students and tap Professor Margaret Morrison (Telman). This letter is only one example of an ongoing movement by university dance programs across the country to no longer recognize tap dance as a relevant dance form and cut it from their programs. In programs where tap is not fully cut, it is often sidelined as an optional extracurricular in many cases. In the 2022 general major requirements for the Loyola Marymount University dance department, the section of dance technique requires students to take classes in both modern and ballet every semester at their skill level and at least 4 semesters of jazz (LMU). Tap is offered as an elective and, along with hip hop, is an optional course with no semester requirements (LMU). The majority of dance programs around the country follow a similar format, with ballet and modern at the forefront of the curriculum. Explanations about why tap is marginalized in university dance programs today could result from the continued dominance of ballet in the majority of these programs (Monroe 38). It follows that with ballet at the forefront of dance curriculums, dance forms such as tap and hip hop are pushed to the side in favor of styles such as modern and jazz, which share many technique similarities with ballet. The fraught racial histories of both tap and ballet contribute to their respective statuses in post-secondary dance programs in the U.S. today. This paper will examine why tap retains its elective status in our curriculums today, and what solutions dance educators and dancers propose towards a shifted narrative.

The history of tap dance is intrinsically tied to the history of racism and race relations in the United States. In Constance Valis Hill's book, *Tap Dancing America*, she discusses how tap

derived from complex interactions between Irish indentured servants and enslaved Africans in the 1600s, and how the art form evolved from the ensuing three hundred years of social and musical exchange between these two marginalized groups (Hill 1). Although today Irish Americans take part in the privileges of 'whiteness' in American society, this was not the case for the majority of American history and only emerged in the 1950s and 60s through generations of assimilation into the white American melting pot (183). For centuries, Irish Americans labored and lived alongside African Americans and were marginalized alongside them as well (9). Hill discusses how Irish folk dance even became associated with 'negro' styles of dance, stating, "whites confused any kind of Negro dancing with the lowly Irish jig." (1). Because tap came from two groups who faced great amounts of discrimination, it is no surprise tap dancing was deemed a "low" art unworthy of the concert stage at its inception and was limited to vaudeville, variety stages, and movies (3).

Many college dance programs in America have been built around the ideology of ballet and modern technique being the primary foundations of their students' dance training (Monroe 41). This coincides with the classification of tap as an excess/elective/not foundational artform and the value, or lack thereof, placed on tap in university curriculums. Dance educator Raquel L. Monroe argues in her article, '"I Don't Want to Do African ... What about My Technique?:' Transforming Dancing Places into Spaces in the Academy," that dance curricula reflects colonial structures and unconsciously reinforces racist hierarchies by privileging ballet and modern dance as preferences of the white ruling class (38). Monroe's article is referring to the marginalization of African dance techniques, but her message still applies to tap in the critique of the centrality of ballet in college dance curriculums. The uplifting of ballet as a primary dance technique in American dance education has been reinforcing Eurocentric and colonial thinking

for decades and directly affects the role of tap in college dance curriculums today. In the words of dance educator Robyn Watson, “How is it that an art form that originated in the sacred soils of the enslaved American South gets passed over in favor of a European Court dance?” (Watson). Tap has not been given its credit as an artform in dance training today despite it being a uniquely American artform and a key record of the long history of perseverance and survival of marginalized groups in this country.

The marginalization of tap in many dance curriculums is a product of the treatment of ballet technique as the foundation for all dance training. Dance forms that do not derive from ballet technique or forms where ballet technique is not applicable are subsequently put aside and not treated as a necessary form for students to learn (Monroe 39). This prioritization of ballet, as well as modern and jazz, technique is reflected in the majority of college dance curriculums, including our own at LMU (LMU). When dance departments treat ballet technique as the overarching foundation of dance, it reinforces that message in the minds of students (Monroe 42). This attitude may contribute to the decline in tap in these dance curriculums because, not only is it being offered less and less, when it is offered, students may be less inclined to take it because they feel they are getting ‘less’ out of it in terms of credit/units than classes in the technique category. This lack of interest in tap, and other forms that do not follow ballet technique, by students can then reinforce universities’ decisions to completely cut these classes from their programs.

In Monroe’s article, she writes about how the majority of first year students in her program come in with the preconception of ballet as the foundation of all dance (42). As such, many of her students also come to her each year saying they did not want to take African because

they did not want to lose their "technique." In response, she states, "By naming ballet and modern dance 'technique' and setting high standards of achievement in these forms while relegating other dance forms to the category of 'electives', students conceptualize expertise in ballet and modern dance as the pillar of their education on which their future dance careers depend" (39). In an interview with dancer, choreographer, and Professor Heather Cornell of Hope College, she shared how she started tap classes when she was a student at York University because she loved the artform. She was however, required to have these classes at midnight because they were not allowed to tap dance at York University as it would 'ruin their technique' (Cornell). A recontextualization and redefinition by universities of what 'technique' really is will be necessary for the future survival of tap and other non-Eurocentric dance forms in college dance curriculums.

Another way tap is further delegitimized in college programs stems from the way it is taught. Tap, and Black culture itself, has a long history of being appropriated by white artists. Through minstrelsy and black face, white dancers profited off of caricatures of Black people's lives through song and dance and later in the white washing of Hollywood. Dancers such as Fred Astaire, Gene Kelly, and Ginger Rogers are still more popular household names today in tap than Black tap pioneers such as Bill "Bojangles" Robinson, Alice Whitman, and John Bubbles (Watson). After generations, this appropriated version of tap is what the majority of Americans know, and is the version being taught in many dance schools (Watson). Therefore, it is important for colleges that are considering reintegrating tap into their curriculum to teach the artform in its full embodiment with its cultural context and musicality. Robyn Watson notes this importance at the end of her article, "Op-Ed: Why Tap Classes Should Be Required in College Curriculums." She states this tap requirement should not be made about just checking a box, but

dance departments should devote the necessary resources to the program and do their research to ensure their tap teachers are high-quality (Watson).

Therefore, it is not enough just to require tap, we must examine the way tap is taught. Heather Cornell suggested in our conversation that another way to make tap recognized as a legitimate artform in post-secondary dance education is to recognize the multidisciplinary aspects of its pedagogy and its proper place in both the dance and music spheres. This means tap should not exist solely in the dance department but also in the music department. She states that part of why tap has no footing in dance programs and keeps getting kicked backwards is because it is classified soley as a dance form, ignoring its pedagogy in music (Cornell). When you cut off the limbs of an artform it is not going to thrive. By just classifying tap as dance, we are cutting off huge pieces of its identity and pedagogy. This along with the appropriated version of tap already taught in universities further delegitimizes the form. If these issues were corrected and tap was taught within its full historical and cultural context, it has the potential to bring in a multitude of students who want to learn.

In Cornell's take on how tap needs to be taught and classified, she offers that tap needs performance, theory, survey, and history, just like any music program needs. As of now in university dance pedagogy, tap is only given studio time and a bit of tap history thrown into general dance history if you are lucky (Cornell). These 1-1.5-hour studio classes are not enough to get all of the components tap needs to be taught in full. Another way she believes tap should take cues from music pedagogy is through the inclusion of private lessons (Cornell). Private lessons are required for most music degrees and the same should be for tap dance. You can only get so far in a group class and the real work is done one on one with mentors. She also brings up

an unexpected advantage of zoom tap classes during the pandemic, in which a teacher can work with students individually and isolate their sounds by muting the rest of the class so they can still work on their own.

Cornell views this work of teaching tap as the multidisciplinary artform that it has always been as the way forward for breaking down the division between music and dance in general. Similar to only adding a tap requirement for dancers, only adding a music requirement is putting a surface level fix on a deeper problem. We have arbitrarily disconnected music from dance and that barrier needs to be bridged both ways since these artforms are interdependent and live and breathe together (Cornell). In a conversation with musicians, Cornell asks them if they are afraid to dance and they all responded by saying 'yes.' Similarly, when talking to dance students, she realized a majority have little to no musical knowledge. This treatment of music and dance as separate is prevalent in college curriculums and Cornell cites the influence of Eurocentric approaches to dance and music as being responsible for this trend. In other parts of the world such as Latin America, dancers learn music and musicians learn dance and do not see themselves as one or the other but simply as all artists (Cornell). Therefore, bridging this gap between music and dance is another way we can work towards decolonizing dance programs by lessening the dominance of Eurocentric thinking in our curriculums.

In Robyn Watson's article on why tap should be a dance requirement, she also writes about how tap can contribute to decolonizing dance curriculums (Watson). Watson starts off her article with statistics on the presence of tap in the 30 high ranking college dance programs in the United States. Out of the nineteen schools it is offered, only Oklahoma City University requires majors to take more than a beginner course and many prestigious dance programs, such as NYU

Tisch School of the Arts and SUNY Purchase, do not offer any tap dance courses at all (Watson). In a time when many dance programs around the country are starting conversations about decolonizing their programs and decentralizing Eurocentric dance forms in their curriculums, Watson suggests we look no further than tap to start this process. Tap is a uniquely American artform that is steeped in Black American cultural knowledge. The artform that came from those who built this country should be just as, if not more, revered as the artform that came across the sea from European courts (Watson). By uplifting tap, we are uplifting marginalized voices in dance who have been put aside in college dance curriculums for decades.

Watson also emphasizes that further integrating tap into dance curriculums means not only promoting tap technique courses but tap history courses as well if programs are committed to decolonizing their curriculum (Watson). Learning the history of tap dance can be instrumental for dance students to understand African American history and the cultural significance of tap dance. Having this knowledge will work towards fostering a community in university programs that acknowledges the contributions of marginalized dancers to the foundations of other forms we practice today such as jazz and hip hop, as well as American culture overall.

In the story mentioned at the beginning of this paper on the discontinuation of tap at Barnard College, the letter also stated that tap history courses would be cut along with tap technique courses (Telman). Both tap students and tap faculty were outraged by this decision that would erase the legacy of Blackness from the dance history curriculum. In response, the student tap club, 'UnTapped,' started an Instagram page to highlight the Black legacy of tap dancing, researching, and spreading sources about influential dancers and their achievements (Telman). When asked why they started this work, one student stated, "As tap dancers, it's important for us

to know the history of our own art form and also to push for anti-racism in the dance industry" (Telman). This response from the 'UnTapped' club is an example of how understanding the role of tap history and Black history in dance can inspire students to take action to change the long-held Eurocentric notions of the dance community.

The cultural impact tap can have on dancers can also be seen in the online series, "Diary of a Tap Dancer V.6: Us," created by Ayodele Casel and Torya Beard and commissioned by the New York City Center. In episode 6 of the video series, Black tap dancer Ryan Johnson, the co-founder and artistic director for SOLE Defined, shares his story on how the history of tap has inspired him to use the artform to reclaim Black narratives and promote social justice. In the video, Johnson discusses how tap dance is a transcript of his experience as a Black American navigating white spaces and trying to combat systems of oppression (Johnson 0:24-5:18). In reference to the enslaved Africans and later African Americans who created and passed down tap, he says it is their sacrifice that inspired him to work harder and challenge the learned behaviors of a white patriarchal society to create systematic change (Johnson 0:24-5:18). Johnson's story, and the story of tap students at Barnard College, are two examples of the impact tap history has on dancers to understand Black history and be inspired to recognize and fight systemic racism.

Along with promoting decolonization and cultural awareness in students, tap also has many other benefits for dance students, no matter which dance style they are choosing to pursue. With knowledge of the basics, tap can give dancers a new understanding of musicality, rhythm, and storytelling (Watson). New York City Ballet principal dancer Russell Janzen discusses other benefits of tap dance in his article, "Contemporary Partnerships." In this article he discusses the

legacy of heteronormative and antiquated gender roles that have long dominated ballet and still have a firm hold on the art form (Janzen 907). As a male dancer, he has been affected by the traditional secondary roles of male dancers to ballerinas that is engrained into gendered ballet training. When Janzen understudied in a piece called, *The Times Are Racing,* choreographed by Justin Peck, he recalls how Peck developed a movement vocabulary for this dance that mixed tap dancing with ballet (Janzen 918). In this piece, all dancers wore sneakers. The absence of pointe shoes and the added movement vocabulary from tap worked to break down the gender constructions engrained in traditional ballet partnering movement. Janzen explains, "The percussive footwork was no different for the men than it was for the women; lifting and supporting were done by every dancer in the cast…partnerships were not limited to male-female, and in moments of symmetry in the choreography it was only symmetry of movement, not of physical type or gender identification" (919). In this example, tap and ballet worked together to break down traditional constructions of gender for dancers. Even though these dance forms could not be more different, knowing tap technique expanded the limits of what Justin Peck as a ballet choreographer could do to contemporize the dance form through movement that was not so rigidly gendered.

Altogether, it is clear that tap is being overlooked in post-secondary dance programs and this is due to the dismissive attitudes towards the artform that have persisted since its inception from marginalized groups, the Eurocentric tradition of treating ballet as the foundation of all dance technique, and the way tap is being taught when it is offered in these dance programs. From the dancers, students, and educators who have advocated for tap, it is clear that if given the resources and attention it needs by universities, tap could thrive and have a multitude of benefits for dancers studying any discipline. The investment in tap by college dance programs will also

benefit institutions who are committed to decolonizing their curriculum, promoting marginalized voices in dance, and creating a socially conscious dance community.

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