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CHAPTER 21

Black Star, Other Fetishized: Carlos Acosta, Ballet’s New Cosmopolitanism, and Desire in the Age of Institutional Diversity

Lester Tomé

Abstract

Focusing on Carlos Acosta, the Cuban performer who became the first black principal dancer of London’s Royal Ballet, this chapter proposes that a new cosmopolitanism characterizes contemporary ballet. Such cosmopolitanism, informed by the institutionalization of diversity, is achieved through the presence of Latin American and Asian dancers in European and North American companies. Inclusion of the subaltern lends these institutions an image of multiculturalism and globality that increases their social capital. Yet, ballet’s new cosmopolitanism impels subaltern dancers to negotiate the fraught politics of moving from the periphery to the center, where they find themselves both valued and devalued for their race and nationality. This essay interrogates situations in which ballet’s emerging displays of diversity, while ostensibly fostering recognition of the subaltern, may prove cosmetic and not transcend coloniality. Problematic politics of desire underlie ballet’s new cosmopolitanism whenever subaltern bodies, as in Acosta’s case, are racialized, consumed for erotic pleasure, and fetishized as signifiers of diversity. Against a background of growing xenophobia and paired with this hedonistic consumption of the other, some forms of institutionalized diversity characterize a Marcusean regime of repressive tolerance in which multiculturalism is celebrated onstage while offstage the other is stigmatized as a burden to the nation.

Introduction: The Diversity Turn and Ballet's New Cosmopolitanism

Since the seventeenth century, dancers moving across courts, empires, nation-states, continents, and geopolitical blocs have articulated varied conceptions of cosmopolitanism in ballet. Afro-Cuban dancer Carlos Acosta exemplified ballet's newest expression of cosmopolitanism, which references diasporic multiculturalism in a context of globalization, during his tenure in London's Royal Ballet (1998–2016).¹ The distinctive feature of this new cosmopolitanism is the presence of the subaltern subject—deemed a racial and cultural other—in troupes across Western Europe and North America. Acosta has been among a number of Latin American and Asian dancers (from Cuba, Argentina, Brazil, China, Japan, South Korea, and other locations) who in recent years have occupied visible positions in ensembles such as the Royal Ballet and American Ballet Theatre.

Ballet's new cosmopolitanism may be a function of the international competition for top talent among companies that, to maintain their world-class status, must recruit globally. However, institutional discourses of diversity have also shaped this cosmopolitanism. The so-called diversity turn, fully underway by the late 1990s, normalized diversity as a value formally endorsed by government, business, education, and art institutions (Vertovec 2012). In this context, ballet ensembles must fulfill expectations of diversity to maintain their social capital as institutions that represent global cities and multicultural nation-states.² Indeed, dance critic Nadine Meisner (1998) greeted the Royal Ballet's enlistment of Acosta as an opportunity for the ensemble to claim relevance within the conception of the state promoted by Tony Blair's New Labour—as multiculturalism became a policy framework of the British government.

Just as the English choreographer of Bangladeshi descent Akram Khan came to popularly

embody British multiculturalism and London's globalism in the contemporary dance genre, Acosta emerged as their poster child in ballet. The diversity turn has afforded visibility and agency to diasporic dancing bodies, but it has also forced them to negotiate their relationships to political discourses and forms of artistic consumption that at times confound the celebration of multiculturalism with the objectification of cultural difference (Mitra 2015, 15–19, 25–27). Turning to Acosta's personification of ballet's new cosmopolitanism, this essay scrutinizes the ambiguous ideology of diversity in multicultural settings—an ideology that fosters recognition and representation of the subaltern, but which does not always transcend coloniality. Critics of the shortcomings of institutionalized diversity, such as Slavoj Žižek, note that multiculturalism operates as the cultural logic of late capitalism and fuels a postmodern racism that reduces the appreciation of cultural difference to aestheticized hedonism (2007, 162). In Paul Gilroy's view, post-imperial melancholia resulting from “lingering but usually unspoken colonial relationships and imperial fantasies” (2004, 109) complicates multiculturalism in a British consumer culture that commodifies racial difference (137).

Jennifer Fisher rightfully contends that, to a large extent, ballet remains an institution that “patrols its borders on the levels of looks and body type,” including skin complexion (2016, 585). However, ballet's new cosmopolitanism has eroded the exclusivist notion of ballet as a practice of European or Euro-American white bodies. While acknowledging this progress, I question situations in which ballet's emerging displays of diversity may be banal or even reproduce coloniality. My inquiry into the politics of ballet's new cosmopolitanism responds to a call, articulated in the field of diversity studies by scholars such as Sarah Ahmed (2012), to expose apparent formulations of inclusivity and thus incentivize a more integral pluralism. Interrogating the discourse of institutionalized diversity in this manner is a critical task for

dance scholars. Tangibly indexing human difference through the display of bodies, dance is a privileged medium for producing instant images of racial and ethnic heterogeneity. Taking advantage of that instantaneity, institutions such as arts centers, media organizations, and universities can exploit dance as a shortcut for showcasing diversity through strategies of window dressing. The display of different bodies may be where diversity starts but not where it should end.

Through an analysis of Acosta's career in the Royal Ballet, I propose that ballet's new cosmopolitanism impels subaltern dancers to negotiate the politics of moving from the periphery to the center, where they find themselves both valued and devalued for their race, ethnicity, and nationality: these markers of diversity make such dancers an asset to dance institutions yet expose them to colonialist subjection. Thus Acosta had to strategically battle the administration of the Royal Ballet for full control over his body and raise his own worth as a commodity in the economy of diversity. Also examined here is the dancer's dazzling rise to celebrity in the UK media, the outcome of public fascination with the journey of a black man from a Havana slum to the Royal Ballet. The media's frequent repetition of Acosta's life story spectacularized his otherness, re-inscribing the dancer's blackness through racial stereotypes and rendering him an object of sexual desire. I contend that problematic politics of desire underlie ballet's new cosmopolitanism whenever the bodies of subaltern dancers are not only consumed for erotic pleasure, but also fetishized as signifiers of institutional diversity and displayed to audiences for hedonistic appreciation of multiculturalism. Ballet's new cosmopolitanism becomes trivial if it operates as a comforting staging of diversity for audiences of predominantly white spectators in the Global North. I claim that, against the background of growing xenophobia in the UK, such functioning of institutionalized diversity characterizes a regime of repressive tolerance, in which multiculturalism is celebrated

onstage while offstage the other is stigmatized as a burden to the nation. Without a doubt, Acosta's popularity rightly reflected his stature as a dancer of exceptional talent. At the same time, his notable fame manifested as cosmetic diversity, for in this case the overexposure of one black body concealed the palpable underrepresentation of black dancers in British ballet.

From the Periphery to the Center: A Hazardous Journey and Clash

Carlos Acosta joined the Royal Ballet in 1998. Reminiscing about the dancer's early days in the ensemble, then-artistic director Anthony Dowell explains that Acosta excelled at learning the troupe's heritage repertory but struggled with the London weather and the process of acculturation. Dowell remarks, "When young artists from other backgrounds and cultures join a company as established and world-renowned as The Royal Ballet, there is sometimes a period of adjustment to the new surroundings and customs they are faced with" (*Carlos Acosta* 2015, 1). This observation intimates condescendence. Associating Acosta's youth to his culture, Dowell voices a colonialist discourse that infantilizes the subaltern and, in this case, overlooks the dancer's maturity at the time of his appointment. In reality, Acosta arrived at the Royal Ballet with credentials that were tacitly recognized by his hiring as a lead dancer. By then, he had been a principal dancer of the English National Ballet (1991) and Houston Ballet (1993–1998). It is disconcerting that Dowell conflates the expectable challenges of adapting to different weather and social norms with what he sees as a straining transition for dancers from "other backgrounds and cultures" to the "established and world-renowned" Royal Ballet—that is, a move from the periphery to the center in the colonialist world order. Almost inadvertently, the Royal Ballet's position of supremacy in the colonialist cultural hierarchy comes into consideration. Dowell's slip reminds subaltern dancers that their presence in the cultural core of the metropolis is a source of friction and that, just as

mundane issues of weather and social norms must be resolved, such political friction must be dealt with.

Indeed, the subaltern actors of ballet's new cosmopolitanism face the fraught politics inherent to their ambiguous role in the maintenance of the center-periphery structure of the international ballet establishment. On the one hand, these dancers' talent and origins in places like Cuba upend the assumption that the location of ballet expertise corresponds with white bodies or a presumed center of European and North American institutions. On the other hand, by joining European and North American companies these dancers aid in reproducing such troupes' status as constituents of an influential center that concentrates resources, opportunities, and cachet. The transference of human capital from the periphery to the center, which consolidates these very same categories, is one feature of ballet's new cosmopolitanism. Through its global recruitment of virtuosos like Acosta, the Royal Ballet effectively upholds its position atop the international ballet community as a highly selective organization of first-rate, *diverse* performers. Paradoxically, these dancers contribute with their own subalternity, even if it is a source of friction, to the enduring international dominance of ensembles like the Royal Ballet. Their condition as other has become indispensable for ballet organizations of the Global North to cultivate the image of transnationalism and diversity that has come to be equated with excellence and world-class standing in contemporary culture—a premise that Ahmed develops in her analysis of diversity in British academia (2012, 108–9).

Even though ballet's new cosmopolitanism exalts the diversity that subaltern dancers lend to ensembles in locations like London, these dancers' ethnically marked bodies remain embattled entities whose skills and otherness are simultaneously valued and devalued—

bodies caught in the clash between institutional diversity missions and the subsisting colonialist ideology implicit in Dowell's words. In traversing this minefield, Acosta defied patronization and spoke against racism.

In his autobiography, Acosta (2007) recounts his debut with the Royal Ballet, in one of the various solos of William Forsythe's *In the Middle, Somewhat Elevated*: "The role did not allow me to show my full potential" (279). Next, Dowell sought to cast him as Mercutio in Kenneth MacMillan's *Romeo and Juliet*. However, Acosta insisted on being cast in the title role of Romeo, in accordance with his rank of principal dancer. When Dowell responded that Mercutio would be a great introduction to the ballet for a dancer beginning his career, Acosta clarified that he was *not* starting his career. The first black principal dancer of the Royal Ballet, aware that race could be a factor in how far he could go in the company, drew a necessary line to disrupt the emerging pattern of casting in parts below principal roles: he would perform as Romeo or not appear at all in the ballet (280–81). Years later, as an advocate for black ballet dancers, he attributed the incident to conservative artistic leadership. Wondering whether Dowell had feared that British audiences might have found a black Romeo shocking, Acosta stressed that it is the duty of those responsible for casting to change the public's attitudes. He added, "When it comes to choosing a prince [or other lead role] for a ballet, we must emphasize that it is not a question of being black; no, it is a question of whether a black or mulatto dancer has the talent to bring to the prince or hero role. So give them the chance to surprise" (quoted in Willis 2010, 142).

Through his tactical stance not to accept secondary roles, Acosta succeeded in making his contractual position as a principal dancer unequivocal. He left the management with no choice but to cast him accordingly. Although his demand to dance as Romeo remained a

point of contention between the artist and the administration—it would take him eight years to perform that role—soon after the aforementioned argument Acosta began to appear in other leading roles across a varied repertoire that comprised the full-evening ballets *La fille mal gardée*, *Coppélia*, *Giselle*, *Swan Lake*, *Raymonda*, and *Manon*. By the end of Dowell’s tenure as artistic director in 2001, Acosta had also performed lead parts in Nijinsky’s *L’après-midi d’un faune*, Balanchine’s *Agon*, Tudor’s *Shadowplay*, and MacMillan’s *Gloria*, among other works (*Carlos Acosta* 2015, 151). Nevertheless, the dancer encountered fresh difficulties when Ross Stretton became the new artistic director. In Acosta’s opinion, Stretton disliked him, underutilized him, and denied him opportunities to perform (Siegle 2003).

In the competitive world of ballet, dancers of all nationalities and racial identities commonly express frustration for not being cast in certain works or having to wait years for them. Therefore, it could be tempting to explain the casting problems encountered by a black dancer like Acosta as no different from those experienced by other performers. Some could argue that Acosta’s success proves that, far from facing limitations, he had the opportunity to dance an extraordinary number of roles out of reach to most performers. But this would ignore ballet’s history of casting black dancers below their level of competence (Dixon Gottschild 2003, 74, 87).

Situations in which talented black performers experience negative casting decisions are difficult to rationalize just in terms of the competitiveness of the profession. In a field in which racism has been systemic, dancers of color, by necessity, ponder the meaning behind the opportunities denied to them. Acosta’s retelling of his argument with Dowell and his assertion that Stretton disliked him register his suspicions of discrimination. Such suspicions are inferred, too, in an interview in which Acosta recalls that the perception that he was an

exuberant Cuban man contributed to his typecasting in cheerful athletic roles, even though he had joined the Royal Ballet to play “more than the jester” (Mackrell 2003). He explains, “On the surface, I never had any problem. But I know that some opportunities were not given to me because of stereotypes” (quoted in Kisselgoff 2002). Acosta sensed that racism operated subliminally, beneath the veneer of his success, because, even as his repertoire grew, those making casting decisions had to “think twice” (2002) about giving him roles that had never before been performed by a black dancer.

To some extent, ballet’s new cosmopolitanism empowers subaltern dancers by generating a demand for their otherness. As indicated above, they possess the attribute upon which an ensemble’s cosmopolitan image hinges: a body that explicitly and instantly signifies multiculturalism and globality. The institutional value attributed to a “diverse” body transforms that body into a commodity. Yet, any notion that institutional demands for diversity make the journey to professional self-realization easier for these subaltern dancers is disproved by the energy they must exert to affirm their full worth within the organization. Possessing a body symbolic of diversity is not the same as having control over a commodity that remains vulnerable to colonialist subjection and exploitation. Subaltern dancers must do the labor of emancipating their bodies from colonialist power, of wrestling with institutions for control of their own bodies.

Confronting Dowell about casting was just one of Acosta’s strategies to rebalance the power relationships between subaltern body and institution. At times this negotiation played out through self-presentation and performance of his social persona, as when, suspecting that his Cuban personality was the source of typecasting, Acosta assumed a patrician British demeanor in his social interactions. He explained that this was a tactic to alter institutional

prejudices about which roles he was well suited for (Mackrell 2003). In a society highly stratified in terms of class, the tensions about nationality and race experienced by diasporic dancers are intrinsically connected to institutional perceptions of their social class, cultural capital, and position in a British hierarchy of distinction. Arguably an instance of disciplining the subaltern and of docile conformance with Dowell's prescription that foreign dancers adapt to British social norms, Acosta's embodiment of gentility was, in the first place, the astute subterfuge of an artist who used the performative tools of his profession for self-benefit. Historically, the embodiment of gentility, a cornerstone of the ballet aesthetic, has been a mechanism of power production that has established this dance form's privileged social status. In transposing the enactment of refinement from the studio and the stage to offstage behavior, Acosta redeployed the technical expertise of a body trained in ballet to counter coloniality in a contemporary context.

Through the summer of 2002, Acosta performed to great acclaim as a guest artist of American Ballet Theatre (ABT) in New York. He situated himself as an artist who, in the words of *New York Times* critic Anna Kisselgoff (2002), belonged "in the ranks of the idols"—namely, Rudolf Nureyev and Mikhail Baryshnikov. When the possibility arose to sign a long-term contract with ABT, Acosta took the opportunity to instead consolidate his position in the Royal Ballet, which, now under the direction of Monica Mason, had to lure him back to London (Willis 2010, 145–46). He rejoined the ensemble with the undisputable authority of a star on high international demand. Just as his artistic standing grew, his sign value as a symbol of globality and multiculturalism increased in significance following the broadcast of "Carlos Acosta: The Reluctant Ballet Dancer" on BBC1 (2003). The television program, which told the story of his life, highlighting his Afro-Cuban identity and working-class origins, transformed Acosta into a national celebrity in the UK. Banking on his stardom,

he formally renegotiated his appointment with the Royal Ballet. In 2003 his title in the troupe changed to principal guest artist, which allowed him to dance in the ensemble's regular seasons and exert more agency in choosing his repertoire, while enjoying the freedom to produce his own shows for London venues such as the Sadler's Wells and the Coliseum and guesting with the Paris Opera Ballet, the Mariinsky Ballet, and other international companies.

The Black Body in Ballet: Unexpected Other and Object of Desire

Afro-diasporic British dancers attest to the violence of customarily being othered within UK dance institutions. Among them, even those born in the UK or those working in genres not directly associated with Afro-diasporic dance experience their Britishness as racially marked. To institutions, they are not simply British dancers. Instead, they are one-dimensionally categorized as *black* British dancers, and their work is equally essentialized as *black* dance regardless of whether they agree to such labeling (Akinleye 2018, 2–3; Namron 2018, 28–23). Thus they are confined to the liminal position of other within their own national community, to the in-between space amid Britishness and blackness that institutions construct by regarding these categories as distinct. A similar in-betweenness characterizes the situation of the subaltern dancers of ballet's new cosmopolitanism. Their bodies are pushed and pulled in different directions—asked to assimilate to the hosting troupe and country, as demanded by Dowell, while simultaneously being re-inscribed as the other whose foreignness and racial difference must be highlighted as signs of institutional diversity. Ballet's new cosmopolitanism showcases ethnic difference in ways that subscribe colonialist practices of othering the subaltern. Being black, Cuban, and of a working-class background, Acosta was variously constituted as other. Indeed, the discursive construction of his otherness came into sharp relief in the seemingly endless accounts of his life story in the British media—through

coverage of such frequency and scale that the emplotment of the dancer's life events amounted to a mediatized spectacle of otherness.

Constructing a rags-to-riches tale, the 2003 BBC1 feature on Acosta's life recounted the dancer's journey from a marginal Havana neighborhood to the Royal Ballet, from poverty and obscurity to wealth and fame. The same narrative had been frequently related in the UK press in the years since Acosta's arrival to the Royal Ballet (e.g., Bishop 1999; Franks 1999; Meisner 1998). However, its dissemination by the BBC turned it into a subject of national interest and triggered further retellings in other media outlets, including newspapers, magazines, radio shows, and TV programs, culminating in the biographical movie *Yuli* (2018).³ The multiple iterations of the story stress the improbability of the dancer's trajectory to success, fixating on his black working-class origins in Cuba and the dire circumstances of his childhood.

We learn that Acosta grew up in a crowded apartment where there was no running water and food was scarce. At times, what little food was available was offered to the *orishas* in the family's *santería* altar. The child often skipped school to breakdance and play soccer. He roamed through the city with other truants, stealing food and committing petty crimes. The boy's father, a long-haul truck driver, was often absent from home. For two years, while the father served time in prison, the family had to survive without an income. When he was home, the father was a stern figure who beat the misbehaving boy. It was the father's decision to enroll him in a ballet school, hoping that it would keep him out of trouble. But the child despised ballet and continued to play truant. Over the next few years he was expelled from the ballet school, readmitted, expelled again, and ultimately transferred to a different ballet school in a province far from home. The teenage Acosta ultimately fell in love with ballet and

dedicated himself to fulfilling his potential through hard work. He burst into international fame with a winning streak in the ballet competitions of Lausanne, Paris, and Vignale in 1990. Contracts with the English National Ballet and the Houston Ballet ensued—and, at the end of his journey, with the Royal Ballet.

Essential to this narrative's appeal is the uplifting message that those thus far excluded from ballet can overcome barriers of race, social class, and nationality to succeed in and transform the field. From this perspective, Acosta's journey functions as an inspirational story for young black and working-class artists, from the UK or elsewhere, who dream of a career in ballet. Yet, in the sensationalist media retellings of this narrative for a mainstream audience, the spectacle of Acosta's otherness overshadows the theme of inclusivity.

Stories such as Acosta's, about how black dancers arrive to ballet stages, follow a pattern of scrutiny of the black dancing body "through the lens and theory of difference" (Dixon Gottschild 2003, 27). In fact, the narrative of Acosta's trajectory constructs almost all dimensions of his persona as markers of difference. References to ethnicity, race, religion, class, hobbies, geography, social behavior, and family history stage a hyperbolic otherness that stands in contrast with the imagined identity of ballet dancers. For audiences, the fascinating appeal of the Acosta narrative resides, precisely, in the apparent incongruity between this antipodal other and the world of ballet—which, despite its evolving diversity and cosmopolitanism, in the public imaginary remains associated with whiteness and the middle to upper classes.

In ballet, the subaltern body, and the black body specifically, is still perceived as an *unexpected* body—as an occurrence that elicits curiosity and thus necessitates explanation.

Biographic questions about how black dancers enter ballet haunt these dancers and constitute a discursive frame through which they are observed, and their presence made sense of. The unending media retellings of Acosta's trajectory are the product of this fascination with the black dancing body's journey to the ballet stage. (In the US, this phenomenon has visibly manifested in recurring media accounts of the biography of Misty Copeland, the black prima ballerina of ABT.) Far from normalizing the figure of the black ballet dancer, a narrative that spectacularizes otherness and exploits the public's curiosity so that the same story can be repeated over and over, in sensationalist tone, is a narrative that continues to relegate the black body in ballet to the realm of the extraordinary. This discourse inscribes the black body in a ballet history of the deviational and anecdotal—subsidiary to the dominant ballet history that upholds the white body as unquestioned protagonist.

Similarly to black British dancers whose identities are externally constructed as always already black, Acosta entered public discourse as a racialized figure defined first and foremost by blackness. Journalists labeled him the “black Baryshnikov” (Bishop 1999; Sanghera 2004) and compared him to a panther (Dougill 2004; Monahan 2010). Allusions to blackness were encoded in additional descriptions of Acosta's dancing as animalistic (Franks 1999), feral (Vine 2010), and feline-like (Bishop 2002), including the remark by the Spanish ballerina Laura Morera, a fellow Royal Ballet dancer, that it was Acosta's animal energy that made dancing with him so exciting for her (*Carlos Acosta* 2015, 11). Such discursive animalization followed a colonialist pattern of representing the black dancing body as primitive and less than human (DeFrantz 2001, 345). Underlying this characterization of Acosta is a cultural practice of demanding of black dancers an abundance of charisma and physicality (Osterweis 2013, 54–55). In this sense, the pleasure of watching or dancing with a virtuoso like Acosta was ideologically mediated.

The racialization of Acosta also operated through mediatic sexualization of his figure. Consistent with the historical constitution of the black dancing body as an object of colonialist desire (DeFrantz 2001, 344), audiences and media invested Acosta with sexual icon status. Although the dancer pushed back against this objectification and insisted that he be judged solely on his artistic achievements (Patterson 2009), many interviews and reviews rampantly fetishized him. Coverage of Acosta frequently dubbed him the “Cuban sex missile” (Warren 2002, Patterson 2009), and it was even suggested, to detriment of his professional merits, that he owed his success to the fantasies he inspired on ballet’s mostly female audiences (Sanghera 2004, Nicoll 2010). The extent of this discursive violence was epitomized in an article for *The Times* titled “My Date with God’s Gift to Women” (Vine 2010, 1), in which the reporter openly acknowledges her titillation with Acosta and captions a photograph of the dancer, “Sex on legs.” Hinting at this sexual objectification of Acosta, his Royal Ballet colleague Natalia Osipova commented that when dancing with him she felt “like a woman” (*Carlos Acosta* 2015, 45).

Coming mostly from white women, these articulations of physical attraction to a black man could be interpreted as expressions of an unprejudiced attitude toward interracial romance. But this perspective is tangled with the fact that underlying ballet’s new cosmopolitanism are complex politics of desire for subaltern bodies. Through consideration of Acosta’s case, I propose that the subaltern body, historically eroticized and exoticized for the pleasure of the colonialist gaze, can be objectified even further when it occupies the ballet stage, a site that for centuries has served the tantalizing function of displaying the human figure for audiences’ erotic gratification. In the context of ballet’s new cosmopolitanism, desire is institutionalized as desire for bodies that visibly signify diversity. Organizations and communities aiming to

diversify load the subaltern subject with desirability, fetishizing it as the entity that represents multiculturalism and globality. Related patterns of consumption of the other are at play in the sexual/exotic objectification of the subaltern and the institutional demand for the display of his body, for in both senses the subaltern can fulfill hegemonic desires.

Hedonistic Consumption of Diversity in the Regime of Repressive

Tolerance

The mobilization of Acosta into an object of desire underscores the propensity in the Global North toward hedonistic consumption of dancing bodies marked as diverse. In this capacity, ballet's new cosmopolitanism could be a platform for staging comforting spectacles of what Ahmed deems "feel good" diversity (2012, 69). Royona Mitra's (2015) examination of the work of Akram Khan points to manifestations of this dynamic in the context of British contemporary dance. Khan has achieved recognition for the innovative choreography and compelling theatricality of his works, which vividly evoke his experience of diaspora and hybridize the aesthetics of contemporary dance and kathak. Since 2000, he has captured the imagination of audiences through danced articulations of British multiculturalism. However, as Mitra indicates, Khan's pieces are presented mainly in "sanitized and safe" venues that commodify otherness for its consumption by "predominantly white audiences" seeking to celebrate diversity "in a way that makes them feel like they understand difference" (Mitra 2015, 25). Not all spectators might fall in this category or relate to Khan or Acosta in this manner, but if an important number of them do, as Mitra suggests, then we must ask: Whom are stagings of diversity for? What is the symbolic function of subaltern dancers in this form of cultural consumption?

For institutions, diversity is oriented not only toward internal transformation, but also toward the construction of a public image. Ahmed equates this dimension of institutional

diversity to public relations, insofar as it entails a strategy for cultivating good will among a public that has come to expect diversity (2012, 143). In the case of ballet, this means that diversity initiatives cater not only to the demands of the subaltern for inclusion in ballet schools and ensembles, but also to the desire of the dance form's public—that is, an audience predominantly white, educated, and from the middle and upper classes—to participate in the acclamation of multiculturalism and globality. Regular remarks by dance critics about the underrepresentation of black dancers in British ballet troupes—sometimes in the form of direct calls for greater inclusivity—exemplify this external pressure on dance institutions (e.g., Meisner 1998; Bishop 1999; Goldhill and Marsh 2012).

In the consumption of diversity by dominant groups, the politics of colonialist desire intersect the politics of colonialist guilt. Ahmed illustrates this point through her analysis of the blockbuster film *Bend It Like Beckham* (2002). In the film, Jess, the daughter of Indian immigrants, succeeds in her aspiration to play soccer in spite of her father's opposition. Decades earlier, the father had been an accomplished Indian cricket player who upon migrating to the UK was denied the chance to play. Excluded from British cricket clubs, he gave up the sport. Now he sought to prevent Jess from playing soccer, in part because of her gender, but, above all, so that she did not suffer the indignity of racial exclusion. Unlike her father, who withdrew from the game, she finds the courage and determination to put discrimination behind her and persevere in the sport. Ultimately, she is embraced by her British teammates. Ahmed contends that this story displaces the responsibility for inclusion from the colonialist subject to the subaltern subject: it is the latter who must overcome the trauma of being a target of racism as the first step toward being included in a multicultural society. For Ahmed, such displacement of responsibility was crucial to the popularity of the film with the mostly white British audience. In her opinion, the focus on Jess's tenacity and

the uplifting conclusion of the narrative allow spectators to indulge in a celebration of inclusivity that temporarily alleviates any guilty feelings of direct or indirect responsibility for the British history of racism and xenophobia (2012, 165–67).

As in Jess's narrative, the Acosta story foregrounds an archetypal diasporic subject who works hard to fulfill his talent, fights obstacles, pushes barriers, and, in the end, gains access to spaces that had been out of reach. Taking this similarity into account and building upon Ahmed's proposition, I argue that, like the film's storyline, Acosta's trajectory constitutes an uplifting tale for audiences, a paean to multiculturalism that, appeasing colonialist guilt, creates the occasion for the inspirational appreciation of diversity. This perspective sheds additional light on the public obsession with Acosta's rags-to-riches fable. Ultimately, as an object of desire Acosta satisfies not only exotic and erotic fantasies; he also realizes a dominant audience's desire to "feel good" about diversity and find release from any sense of shame for the legacy of coloniality. Moreover, he fulfills a desire for consumption of diversity as a form of cultural capital and as a requisite of a prevailing cosmopolitan taste. These uses of diversity to assuage culpability, generate uplift, and build cultural capital are as hedonistic as the exotic and sexual fetishization of the subaltern.

Engagement with diversity at this level of hedonistic consumption of the other obscures the xenophobia and racism that, as Žižek rightfully points out, have been concurrent with the normalization of multiculturalism as an institutional mission (2007, 162). It is notable that Acosta's transformation into a UK national celebrity and icon of diversity took place against the background of growing suspicion of immigrants and racial minorities in the wake of the terrorist attacks in New York in 2001 and London in 2005. Reaching the mainstream, a virulent brand of nationalist ideology blamed immigration and multiculturalism for the

emergence of terrorists in the homeland and, after the financial crisis of 2008 and the ensuing cuts to social programs in the UK, protested the state's distribution of scarce economic resources to minorities (Silj 2010, 9; Malik 2010, 54–58). Such nationalism, intertwined with post-imperial melancholia, has advocated a retreat from multiculturalism, wishing instead for a “magical rehomogenization of the country” (Gilroy 2004, 126).

The diversification of ballet ensembles is no trivial accomplishment. Nevertheless, in a sociopolitical context of increasing xenophobia and racism, ballet's new cosmopolitanism, like other expressions of institutionalized diversity, risks conforming to what Žižek categorizes as a Marcusean regime of repressive tolerance that accepts the “other deprived of its substance” while offstage the “real” other suffers the consequences of bigotry (2007, 162). According to Herbert Marcuse (1969), dominant groups coopt tolerance to hold on to power by alleging that other constituencies' expressions of dissent and the state's tolerance of that dissent are proofs of freedom and democracy, when, in reality, free speech, tolerance, and democracy are empty concepts—having lost their effectiveness under circumstances in which the ruling classes control the economy, technology, education, the press, and the political institutions. Building on Žižek's assertion that an equivalent form of false tolerance can inform the ideology of multiculturalism, I propose that, in dance and the rest of the cultural arena, institutionalized diversity holds the potential to equally enact a regime of repressive tolerance in which the subaltern is hedonistically celebrated as a titillating object of desire and benign actor in comforting spectacles of inclusivity. In situations in which coloniality colors institutionalized diversity or in which performances of diversity make us forget how, offstage, immigrants and racial minorities are rejected as a burden to the nation, subaltern bodies are, to borrow Marcuse's words, “tolerated within the narrow limits set by the hierarchical structure of society [and thus] the tolerance shown to them is deceptive” (1969,

116).

In a regime of repressive tolerance, hedonistic multiculturalism rings most hollow when it coalesces around cosmetic diversity that exploits bodies of color as ornaments, ostentatiously showcasing them in order to conceal what might be their actual underrepresentation in organizations. The extensive media coverage of Acosta aided in portraying the Royal Ballet as an institution composed of dancers from all over the world, highlighting the globality of ballet's new cosmopolitanism. Indeed, Acosta's tenure with the company coincided with a substantial internationalization of the Royal Ballet, which hired dancers not only from the UK, Italy, Spain, Russia, Canada, and the US, but also from Japan, South Korea, South Africa, Cuba, Colombia, Argentina, and Brazil, among other locations. Yet, even as the British ballet subscribed to this global cosmopolitanism Acosta remained a rare figure—one of the few black ballet dancers in the UK (Bourne 2011; Goldhill and Marsh 2012).

There is no question that Acosta's celebrity corresponded with his status as one of the most phenomenal ballet dancers of his generation. However, as indicated earlier, it was the BBC1 documentary of his life that catapulted him to national fame, to an important extent by stressing the exceptionality of his blackness in the British ballet. The media's overexposure of Acosta effectively transformed him into a token. Tokens of diversity are paradoxical. In Acosta's case, the token's *raison d'être* was the extraordinariness of his race in ballet and, yet, through its ubiquity in the media the token suggested a prominence of the black dancing body in ballet that surpassed reality. In 2011, for instance, Acosta was one of only two black artists in the roster of ninety-five dancers of the Royal Ballet. In the other three leading ensembles of the UK—the English National Ballet, the Birmingham Royal Ballet, and the Northern Ballet—black dancers occupied just five out of 154 positions (Bourne 2011). Acosta's

tokenization instantiated what Ahmed would call a mechanism for “changing perceptions of whiteness rather than changing the whiteness of organizations” (2012, 34). It is in this sense that institutional diversity can be cosmetic and amount to a technology for reproducing whiteness. As Ahmed aptly observes, “adding color to the white face of the organization” only “confirms the whiteness of that face” (151).

Conclusion: Can the Subaltern Not Speak as Other?

The demand for the subaltern in the economy of diversity empowers these dancers to reappropriate their otherness and capitalize on it. Like Khan, who strategically staged his ethnicity to access institutional structures of funding (Mitra 2015, 19–22), Acosta understood his status as a commodity and cashed in on the appeal of his otherness to British audiences. He utilized his celebrity to denounce the prejudices he experienced as a black dancer from Cuba and to advocate for the elimination of racism in ballet.⁴ At the same time, he pursued the benefits of self-positioning as a marketable *product*: a desirable other in what Gilroy describes as a “neoliberal consumer culture that can glamorize racial difference” (2004, 137). Acosta reasoned, “My difference [is] not a problem for me ... I can use it to my advantage big time because I’m a new product” (quoted in Craine 2006, 17).

How Acosta mined the fetishized story of his life in the lucrative dance production *Tocororo* (2003) and the bestselling autobiography *No Way Home: A Dancer’s Journey from the Streets of Havana to the Stages of the World* (2007) could be the subject of another study. Here I underscore that his financial success with these ventures is reminiscent of that of black luminaries from previous eras, such as Josephine Baker and Bill Robinson, who performed their otherness to great economic gain. Self-exoticism and self-stereotyping are strategies that

foreground the agency of the subaltern to work subversively within the strictures of coloniality. But the fact that contemporary artists still resort to these strategies indicates that, despite the ascendancy of discourses of multiculturalism and diversity, in the twenty-first century's art market—as in the early twentieth-century context of Baker and Robinson—subaltern dancers, and black dancing bodies in particular, continue to be obliged to “prove themselves as ‘Other’” (DeFrantz 2001, 343). Given this injunction to perform otherness, the postcolonial question that Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak posed three decades ago in the title of her classic essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?” (1988) could now be asked differently: Can the subaltern *not speak as other*? For ballet's new cosmopolitanism to realize its transformative promise, its subaltern actors must cease to be fascinating rarities, objects of colonialist hedonism, and tokenized ornaments of institutionalized diversity.

Endnotes

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² In 1992, the Royal Ballet began scouting for dancers of color through a program that provided free ballet lessons to children from diverse backgrounds in schools across four boroughs of London (Bourne 2018, 60).

³ The details of Acosta's life are retold in numerous articles that I consulted but do not cite here for reasons of space. Access World News records over 3,000 entries that mention Acosta in British newspapers since 1998 to date.

⁴ In a forthcoming article, Zoa Alonso contends that Acosta embodied decolonialist principles through his politically symbolic performances, as a black man, of the eponymous leader of the slave uprising in Yuri Grigorovich's *Spartacus* in 2007.

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