The Racialized Other Moves Still

The (Counter-)Power of Dance, Dance Floors, and Deejays

By Ghaida Moussa

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My entry into the practice of deejaying stems from my deep-rooted relationship with music. I know firsthand the power of good soundtracks to pivotal moments in life. I think about a good drive after a break-up, with a best friend picking the best tunes to sing our hearts out to or the way family members who do not usually dance swarm to the dance floor at weddings when songs that bring them back to their youth fill the speakers and the room. Music has been central to many of the spaces and communities I travel in, as it is a way through which we celebrate, mourn, and heal. Approximately five years ago, I began to reflect on how music empowers me and how it’s been a mode of connection with ancestry, with (heart)beats, and with home. Through this process, I came to realize how, simultaneously, it can be—and has been—intimately mobilized (perhaps in more ways than we know) to exclude, shame, and further processes of racialization and more broadly, colonization and cultural genocide.

I write from the position of a queer diasporic Arab subject who has lost access to a wealth of Arabic cultural knowledge due to the pervasive and continuous processes of colonization and imperialism and who has also noticed first-hand the supremacy of whiteness within ‘queer culture’ due to the monopolization of queer spaces by White queers where I grew up in Ottawa, Canada. The absence of music that speaks to me and other queer people of colour in gay bars in that city, rumors that deejays are asked to speed up music (most importantly ‘black music’) in mainstream gay bars to the point where they are
unrecognizable and won’t attract ‘the wrong crowd’ (which I have noticed repeatedly), and subsequent effects of these mechanisms of bodily control are what initially motivated me to write this article. Through this process, I have come to reflect more deeply on the ways in which the control of dance and music has been a significant mechanism of colonization, disconnection, displacement, and cultural genocide.

I believe that music, dance floors, and deejays can be starting points to understand deeper political and social issues and tensions. To arrive at this, I first reflect on what work dance and music do historically and cross-culturally for the racialized, colonized “Other.” Having set this context, I conversely interrogate what work is forbidden when the racialized body is disconnected from music and dance. In other words, I ask, what are the political and affective consequences of the erasure and/or exclusion of racialized bodies from public spaces centered on music and dance?

It is important during this examination to acknowledge that all racialized people do not necessarily identify with or seek out culturally specific genres of music—and that, say, the experience of Black communities in this regard may differ in significant ways from the experience of Indigenous peoples or my own experience as an Arab, and again are experienced differently within each of these categories. However, I contend that violent processes of cultural genocide cut us off from knowing cultural lineages, that these violent erasures persist to this day, and are upheld without admittance of complicity. Thus, I suggest that deejays have a responsibility to understand music selection as a practice of social justice and to view dance floors as sites of (counter-)power in the same respect as other sites of (counter-)power such as schools, workplaces, dining tables, or street corners. I suggest that dance floors are racialized spaces that can contribute to the disciplining and (neo)colonization of both bodies and minds. In light of my reflections, I close by proposing that the deejay has a social and ethical responsibility of subversion and self-reflection. The deejay lies at the hinges of both power and counter-power, a space in which creative and conscious decisions can shift power in very concrete ways.

**Embodied Knowledge and Subjectivity**

Many authors have explored the ways in which the epistemological primacies of reason, body/mind divide, written communication, and scientific calculations work together to cast modes of knowing such as embodiment, feeling, and movement into the realm of
subjectivity and irrationality. Like others, this paper attempts to conduct an epistemological and methodological shift by showing interest in the way racialized bodies move and dominant forces rely on their stillness to maintain movement. In this way, this paper is an anticolonial effort to question the processes of knowledge production and knowledge destruction. To do so, I recognize the importance of “rethinking the subject in terms of the body” in order to understand it as a system and site “constantly producing modes of subjection and control, as well as of resistance and becomings.” The subject of becoming is important here because I suggest that movement—however it is expressed—is one way in which we come to become. Thus, if identity is “in movement” and movement is integral to the process of identity production, how can restricting movement function to do the opposite?

Colonizing Bodies and Minds

Dance is heavily imbued in the past, as it draws out the journey of becoming by permitting us to obtain cultural and intergenerational connection, while it also traces the history of the disciplining of bodies and minds through cultural colonization. Postcolonial theory is useful for investigating the multiple ways in which colonialism’s legacy still breathes through the social, cultural, economic, and political structures and threads in postcolonial and settler-colonial contexts as well as in the lives of colonized communities. While in a literal sense the prefix ‘post’ in the term ‘postcolonial’ connotes an “aftermath” to colonialism, numerous postcolonial thinkers have demonstrated how colonialism and its effects still appear today through varied manifestations. Indigenous scholars have importantly explained that the most concrete reason why it is inaccurate to speak of a period ‘after colonialism’ is the ongoing settler-colonialism in many countries such as Canada, Australia, and Palestine. In particular, political psychologist Ashis Nandy’s work has been of great influence in acknowledging how colonialism does not end with the physical departure of colonizers and the rise of national flags in the old colonies. That in fact, colonialism “colonized minds in addition to bodies.”

Embodied cultural practices including dance, are a fitting starting point to think through the colonization of minds in addition to bodies. Colonizing missions often involved a dimension of conversion of colonized people to European notions of civilization, which included the imposition of colonial culture. At the same time, this process implied the
suppression of the cultural practices of the colonized including indigenous knowledge, language, ceremonies, rituals, and bodily practices. Many theorists have studied how dance was one of the cultural practices targeted by colonial regimes. Notably, dance was often deemed to be primitive and hence, uncivilized by colonial standards, and its interpretation as a spiritual expression of colonized subjects lead to it being at times associated with the “devil’s work” by Christian colonizers.

Dance was outlawed in colonial times and during slavery. Dances such as the “Ring South” and the Samba of enslaved Africans, Ghost Dance of Indigenous peoples of America, those of Aboriginal peoples in Australia, and many more were forbidden. The reasons for the outlawing of these dances ranged from their ties to ancestry, association with indigenous religions, emergence as a response of colonization, and others, but the common denominator was facilitating control of colonized people through the management of cultural rituals of which a main component was dance. Many of these dances remained despite being targeted, and they were rarely contained by space and/or were carried on through time in various recycled forms. As was the case with ‘Snake Hips,’ an Afro-American dance born prior to 1900 that re-emerged in the 1950s renamed ‘Poppin’ the Hips’, and then again ‘Pop’ in the late 1970s.

These colonial processes have persisted as other modes of social control in contemporary times as well. The racialization of dance has acted as a way to create racial hierarchies and social stratifications. For example, human geographer Tim Cresswell’s study on British ballroom dance floors of the 1920s argues that, “dances such as the shimmy, but also the cakewalk, the turkey trot, the bunny hug, and endless other dance forms were seen as essentially black forms of dance that were variously described as 'simple,' 'primitive,' 'barbaric,' 'eccentric,' and 'hectic' among other descriptors.” Concurrently, Eurocentric dance styles remained unracialized, as pointed out by anthropologist Joann Wheeler Kealiinohomoku’s ground-breaking study on ballet as a form of “ethnic dance” that escaped racialization. The diagnosis of the Other’s dance styles as primitive, barbaric, and racialized justified “attempts… to channel threatening mobilities into acceptable conduits.” This is exemplified by the revision of tango in Britain to make it less “threatening” for society and by the modification of hip hop dance by White suburbanites in the United States. These testimonies allow us to understand the significance of dance in relation to nation building and national exclusion, as certain forms of movement come to “reveal national belonging.”
Thus, the control of the movement of the Other’s body signified and served a direct intervention in to the disciplining of the body and mind, rendering the Other as one who does not belong.

**What Work Does Dance do?**

If dance has been outlawed, policed, colonized, and used against racialized peoples, what impact does this have in contemporary times on racialized peoples? While it is necessary to explore the specifics of these processes in each community in order to access a deeper understanding of their consequences, my goal here is to speak of dance more generally as a noteworthy component of the production of identity. The work of the scholars mentioned throughout this paper who investigate the suppression of dance in colonial and racialized contexts put forward the notion that the control of dancing bodies breaks racialized subjects’ links to their pasts, interrupts the maintenance of cultural beliefs, and facilitates the imposition of Western cultural values and Christian conversion. Much work emerging from dance studies that is concerned with this subject references anthropologist-dancer Katherine Dunham’s seminal research on culture and dance, which revealed that “dance has greater tenacity than any other cultural form and that it is the most permanent cultural link with the past.” The importance of the intersection of dance, culture, and subjectivity is most crucial when discussing diasporic, racialized, and colonized subjects because of the dispossession, cultural genocide, and displacement brought forth by colonization, which often resulted in a loss of community and an alienation from one’s cultural heritage. Dancing, thus, is a performance, or perhaps more literally an ‘articulation’ of memories that extends beyond our present space and time. It shapes the way racialized subjects exist in the world through their movement.

**Make the Circle Bigger: The Production of Space and Race on the Dance Floor**

Space, land, and borders have been themes central to racialized peoples’ struggles. I recognize that my own call for “more space” is in some ways also intertwined with the colonial project still in process in Canada. As an immigrant of colour who was displaced by colonialism elsewhere, the claims I posit in this paper are both points of tension and of connection with Indigenous people of the stolen land I benefit from daily. As a deejay, this calls upon me to also question my practices, reflect on the impacts of my choices, and
continuously attempt to move in ethical and accountable ways. If I am interested in calling for anticolonial practices on the dance floor, I am also faced with the challenge of negotiating what decolonization looks like beyond the reproduction and reaffirmation of colonial dynamics. What does my freedom of movement do for Indigenous peoples? How can I move with and not against or in the expense of?

Having reflected on the importance of dance to racialized peoples, I would like to propose that the dance floor is a site of struggle in “everyday geographies”¹⁷ like public transportation, schools, and street corners. Here, I understand space as produced and racialized. In other words, the productions of space and race are intertwined, so that “control over the production of space—the ability to create space in particular ways—also lends to powerful groups the ability to actively create race.”¹⁸ While the segregation of public spaces is not openly acknowledged in countries such as Canada, even as it is a central mode of control of Indigenous peoples, I propose to view the dance floor as one example of space that is capable of structuring inclusions and exclusions. This does not necessarily happen through the practice of law, (although the imposition of permit purchases for “certain music events” definitely challenges this statement and should be explored further) but through other practices such as the selection of music by deejays and club owners, as an indirect disciplining of racialized bodies. While a space might not be openly advertised as anti-indigenous or anti-people of colour, it can remain a space that produces White superiority and supremacy through the overvaluation of White modes of being and moving in the world. This, I argue, undervalues or actively forbids the ways of being and moving of racialized people. As George Lipsitz¹⁹ writes, “Whiteness never has to speak its name, never has to acknowledge its role as an organizing principle in social and cultural relations”.

Spin a Yarn

“Within the colonial field of racism, the question of movement becomes a question of targeting, of tactical ballistics, of what is made to fall and of what must remain upright. Buildings, bodies, monuments, oil towers, meaning.” — Lepecki (2006: 101).

If the dance floor is a space in which societal and political power and counter-power are reflected and where subjectivities and social order are produced, what is the role of the conductor of movement in this space? In other words, what roles and responsibilities can we impart on the deejay in this context? What are the work and the responsibility of the deejay
in facilitating creative expressions of liberation or extinguishing the potential of their existence?

Exploring the connections between his role as an educator and as a deejay, cultural and political theorist Jeremy Gilbert argues “...that the sense of collective, interactive empowerment which the DJ tries to facilitate and engender in the dancing crowd is interestingly similar to that which characterizes the most successful group-teaching situations, such that reflecting upon these two sets of practices together may offer some illuminating insights into each.” Viewing the deejay as an educator troubles the overvaluation of linguistic and verbal communication as sites of knowledge that I previously discussed. Like the dancer, the deejay is a helpful subject to consider on the subject of affect, power, counter-power, and spatiality. I can personally identify with this role that Gilbert gives the deejay, as I have witnessed the power of teaching through deejaying in my own encounters with students that attended multi-media talks/performances I have presented both at Carleton University and at the University of Toronto. The creation of sequenced beats and words from previously disjointed songs and other forms of recordings is the deejay’s way of transmitting a story or knowledge. The deejay either intentionally provides coherence to an otherwise incoherent musical collection or reveals the incoherence in what is taken for granted as coherent. The deejay, in sum, is at once an “archivist,” producer, and a conveyor of knowledge. To induce dance that works in the way we’ve established, I propose that the deejay’s role is to be attentive to the way affect travels and is interrupted on the dance floor, and to “direct,’ deflect or ‘channel’ those flows without becoming overly directive or didactic.” Imagining the deejay as teacher then involves rethinking deejaying as a pedagogy that aims to free and empower. As we’ve discussed thus far, dance has an important connection to subjectivity, community, heritage, and liberation for racialized people. The deejay, through the music they select, conveys meaning and knowledge that either supports this process or inhibits it. Thus, the deejay has the power to sustain or resist oppressive systems through their role on the dance floor, to follow the current or redirect the flow.

Beat Break

In this paper, I approach dance as a worthy site of knowledge. After thinking through what work dance does for postcolonial and racialized subjects, I proposed that it is a
performative practice that offers creative and meaningful ways to produce subjectivities, link us to a past thought to be lost, and liberate the mind thus being a mode to resist central elements in the project of colonization. I have also considered dance floors as racialized public spaces of power and counter-power and begun a discussion on the role and responsibility of deejays in sustaining and resisting power dynamics in this space. As Ng'wa Thiondo (1985) writes, “first was song and dance.” This in no way is a call for deejays to play music with which they have no connection but perhaps more so a call for self-reflection on the spaces we take up and the lineages and impacts of our practice. In other words, I am proposing a return to dance as a worthy tool for liberation and am calling upon deejays to create spaces where the racialized subjects can move and therefore come to be.

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2 Ibid., 5.
3 To arrive at this, I combine Lepecki’s (2006) work with that of Hall (2003), who teaches us that identity is not fixed or something to which we simply arrive, but rather something dynamic that is produced continuously through representation.
4 A. Loomba, *Colonialism/Postcolonialism.* (Routledge, 1998), 12.
5 A. Nandy, *The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self Under Colonialism* (OUP India, 1989), XI.
6 Banks “Critical postcolonial dance recovery and pedagogy: An international literature review.”
7 Ibid.
8 Ibid.
11 In Banks, “Critical postcolonial dance recovery and pedagogy: an international literature review.”
12 Cresswell, “‘You cannot shake that shimmie here’: producing mobility on the dance floor,” 57.
13 Ibid.
14 Ibid.
17 Ibid., 659
18 Ibid., 659
19 Ibid., 662
21 Ibid., 3.
22 Ibid., 5.
23 In Banks, “Critical postcolonial dance recovery and pedagogy: An international literature review,” 355.
References


