

Cultural Memory in Motion: Pride and Shame in Ballet, Jazz, and Hip-Hop

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Abstract: This study examines the pride–shame complex at work in national cultural memory through the lens of three dance traditions: ballet, jazz, and hip-hop. Ballet embodies nationalistic pride rooted in exclusionary aristocratic histories, whereas jazz and hip-hop provide marginalized communities with ways to negotiate shame and transform it into cultural power and resistance. Drawing on Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital and Halbwachs's theory of collective memory, the paper argues that the coexistence of pride and shame strengthens national identity. As an embodied cultural practice, dance gives shape to the tensions between celebration and exclusion, offering a means for ethical engagement with historical injustices and the promotion of an inclusive cultural memory. This study contributes to interdisciplinary discourses concerning social memory, identity, and cultural politics.

Keywords: pride-shame complex, national cultural memory, ballet, jazz, hip-hop, cultural capital, collective memory, embodied culture, social identity, cultural politics, historical injustice

1. Introduction

Cultural memory presents contemporary societies with a fundamental dilemma: how to maintain pride in cultural traditions while acknowledging their problematic histories. The Opéra de Paris, with its grand gilded halls, was built on the labor of enslaved Africans who served the aristocrats for whom ballet was developed (Foulkes, 2003). The United States presents jazz as its cultural diplomatic symbol but fails to recognize that Black musicians who developed the genre faced criminalization, exclusion, and exploitation (Von Eschen, 2006). This tension between celebration and critique raises a crucial question: should societies feel pride about cultural traditions developed through unjust practices, or should they maintain a sense of shame?

This paper argues that pride and shame are not opposing emotions but interconnected aspects that form a complete understanding of our historical connection to culture. Rather than diminishing our capacity for ethical cultural engagement, this emotional tension enhances it. Dance provides a particularly revealing window into this phenomenon because its embodied nature forces communities to confront their historical background with their bodies, not just their minds.

The central thesis of this study is that the "pride-shame complex" operates as a mechanism for healthy cultural memory formation. Through an analysis of three dance traditions—ballet, jazz, and hip-hop—this paper demonstrates how different communities navigate the tension between cultural celebration and historical critique, and how this navigation shapes collective identity and social reproduction.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1. Cultural Capital and Embodied Memory

Pierre Bourdieu's (1986) concept of cultural capital provides the foundational framework for understanding how dance functions as a system of social reproduction. Bourdieu identified three forms of cultural capital: embodied (skills and dispositions carried in bodies), objectified (cultural objects and institutions), and institutionalized (formal credentials and recognition systems). Dance traditions exemplify all three forms simultaneously—they require embodied skills, exist within institutional frameworks, and create systems of recognition and exclusion.

Bourdieu's analysis reveals that cultural practices like dance are not neutral expressions of beauty but mechanisms that maintain power relationships across generations. The "ideal" ballet body, the improvisation skills valued in jazz, and the authenticity markers in hip-hop all function as forms of cultural capital that determine access to social and economic resources.

2.2. Collective Memory and Social Frameworks

Maurice Halbwachs's (2020) theory of collective memory adds crucial insight into how communities maintain historical consciousness. Halbwachs demonstrated that communities do not simply remember the past—they actively reconstruct it through present social needs. This reconstruction occurs through what he called "social frameworks of memory": the physical spaces (opera houses, jazz clubs, street corners), temporal rhythms (seasonal repertoires, improvisational moments, cyclical battles), and social groups that keep these memories alive. In dance, these frameworks become particularly visible because the practice requires physical presence and repetition. The embodied nature of dance means that historical consciousness is literally carried in bodies, making it harder to ignore or romanticize than purely textual or intellectual forms of memory.

2.3. The Pride-Shame Complex

Building on these theoretical foundations, this paper proposes the "pride-shame complex" as a framework for understanding how societies can engage ethically with problematic histories while preserving cultural continuity. The pride-shame complex operates through three key mechanisms:

- A. Complementarity: Pride and shame function as complementary rather than opposing forces, with shame serving as a corrective to pride's potential for exclusion and denial.
- B. Transformation: For marginalized communities, pride often emerges through the transformation of shame rather than its avoidance, creating cultural power from social pain.
- C. Ethical Engagement: The interaction between pride and shame creates space for what can be termed "ethical cultural engagement"—ways of participating in traditions that honor their beauty while working to address their problems.

3. Case Studies in Dance and Cultural Memory

3.1. Ballet: The Aesthetics of Exclusion

Ballet serves as the first case study because it represents cultural memory organized around aristocratic privilege. The form emerged in Renaissance Italy and flourished under French absolutism, where it literally embodied royal power through controlled movement and aesthetic refinement (Homans, 2010). When Louis XIV established ballet as court entertainment, he created a physical vocabulary for hierarchy, where the ability to move with grace and precision marked one's social position.

Contemporary ballet presents a fascinating example of how the pride-shame complex operates within dominant cultural traditions. Ballet companies serve as symbols of national cultural achievement, and the technical demands of ballet—the years of training, physical discipline, and artistic refinement—represent genuine human achievement worth celebrating. France rightfully takes pride in its ballet tradition as evidence of artistic excellence and cultural sophistication. However, the "ideal" ballet body—slim, pale, elongated—reflects and reinforces particular racial and class hierarchies. As Gottschild (2003) documents, the ongoing whiteness of ballet is not incidental but structural. The Royal Academy of Dance did not just teach technique; it taught a specific vision of human beauty that excluded most human bodies from the start.

This exclusionary history creates what can be observed as the pride-shame complex in action. Ballet communities increasingly recognize that their pride in artistic achievement must

coexist with shame about historical exclusion. Rather than destroying the tradition, this tension has become generative. Companies are diversifying casting not merely for political correctness, but because confronting their exclusionary past has opened up new artistic possibilities.

The case of Misty Copeland becoming the first Black principal dancer at American Ballet Theatre in 2015 exemplifies this transformation. Copeland's success was not just barrier-breaking, it expanded what ballet could be. The shame about historical exclusion prevented pride from becoming complacent or defensive, keeping the tradition alive to its own contradictions and open to transformation.

3.2. Jazz: Innovation Through Marginalization

Jazz demonstrates how the pride-shame complex operates differently within marginalized communities. Where ballet's pride stems from cultural dominance, jazz's pride emerges from creative resistance to marginalization. The genre originated within Black communities in early twentieth-century America, born from the intersection of African musical traditions, American social conditions, and creative responses to racial oppression (Gioia, 2011).

The cruel irony of jazz's origins is that the very conditions that created it—segregation, economic exclusion, social marginalization—also provided the creative constraints that sparked its innovation. Musicians like Louis Armstrong and Duke Ellington were not just making beautiful music; they were transforming the experience of being excluded into a new form of cultural expression. This transformation process reveals how marginalized communities can convert shame into cultural power. The music carries both the pain of its origins and the joy of its creative transcendence. When jazz became America's cultural export during the Cold War, the government was promoting musicians who faced systematic discrimination at home (Von Eschen, 2006). Artists like Nina Simone and James Baldwin used their platforms to expose the gap between America's international image and domestic reality. As jazz gained recognition for its African American origins, the painful aspects of its history were not simply forgotten—they became integrated into a more complex national narrative. The shame of how jazz musicians were treated did not disappear; it became part of jazz's cultural power. The music's ability to transform suffering into beauty became part of its global appeal.

This demonstrates how the pride-shame complex functions differently depending on a community's social position. For marginalized communities, pride often emerges through the transformation of shame rather than its avoidance. The cultural memory preserved in jazz is not just about musical innovation—it is about the human capacity to create beauty under conditions of oppression.

3.3. Hip-Hop: Global Resistance and Commodification

Hip-hop represents the most contemporary example of how the pride-shame complex operates in cultural memory. Emerging in the 1970s Bronx amid urban decay and government disinvestment, hip-hop began as a response to social abandonment (Chang, 2005). The four elements—MCing, DJing, breakdancing, and graffiti—were not just artistic expressions but survival strategies for communities cut off from mainstream economic and cultural opportunities. Hip-hop's unique characteristic is its rapid transformation from local community expression to global cultural phenomenon. Unlike jazz's gradual international expansion, hip-hop achieved worldwide influence within decades. This rapid globalization created new forms of both pride and shame within the culture.

The pride is evident: hip-hop demonstrated that marginalized urban communities could create culture powerful enough to influence the entire world. From the Bronx to Seoul, from Detroit to Lagos, young people adopted hip-hop's language, aesthetics, and attitude. The culture's global reach validated the creativity and resilience of the communities that created it.

When breakdancing became an Olympic sport in 2024, it represented official recognition of something that emerged from the streets. However, this success generated its own problems. As hip-hop entered mainstream cultural spaces, it often underwent sanitization that removed its political edge. Corporate entities embraced hip-hop's aesthetic and sonic elements while ignoring its social commentary (Rose, 2008). This represents what some scholars call "appropriation without reparation"—taking cultural forms while ignoring their historical contexts and originating communities. The shame here concerns not hip-hop's content but what happens when its resistance gets commodified. Many of the communities that created hip-hop culture continue to face the same problems of disinvestment and marginalization that sparked the movement, even as hip-hop generates billions in revenue.

Hip-hop culture has fought back against this appropriation. Artists like Kendrick Lamar, J. Cole, and Beyoncé explicitly connect their personal artistic expression with collective historical memory. They use their platforms to educate as much as entertain, transforming their success into forms of cultural resistance and community uplift. The global reach of hip-hop has also enabled its adaptation as a tool for social justice movements worldwide. From South Africa to Palestine, local communities have used hip-hop methodologies to reclaim dignity and challenge oppression. This demonstrates how cultural memory can travel and transform while maintaining its essential function of converting social pain into creative power.

4. Discussion

4.1. The Complementary Nature of Pride and Shame

The analysis of these three dance forms reveals that pride and shame function not as opposing forces but as complementary elements essential to healthy cultural memory. The key insight is that shame, properly understood, does not require abandoning cultural traditions—it demands engaging with their full complexity. Similarly, pride does not require ignoring painful histories—it involves recognizing the resilience that emerges from adversity. This challenges conventional thinking about cultural emotions. Communities are often told to choose: either be proud of traditions or be ashamed of their problems. However, the evidence suggests that communities with the most resilient cultural identities are those that can hold both feelings simultaneously.

Bourdieu's analysis of cultural capital helps explain this mechanism. Cultural practices like dance serve as systems of social reproduction, but they are also sites of potential transformation. When communities can acknowledge both the beauty and the problems in their traditions, they create space for ethical engagement that neither abandons the past nor repeats its mistakes.

4.2. Differential Operations by Social Position

The pride-shame complex operates differently depending on a community's social position. For dominant groups like those associated with ballet, shame serves as a corrective to pride's potential for exclusion and denial. For marginalized groups like those who created jazz and hip-hop, pride emerges through the transformation of shame into cultural power. These are not the same psychological or social processes, even though they might appear similar on the surface. Understanding these differences is crucial for developing appropriate interventions and support systems for different communities engaged in cultural memory work.

4.3. Implications for Cultural Memory Studies

This analysis suggests several important directions for understanding how cultural memory operates in contemporary societies. First, scholars need to move beyond simple binaries that pit cultural pride against historical critique. The communities with the most resilient cultural identities are those that can navigate complexity rather than demanding purity.

Second, greater attention should be paid to how cultural memory operates through embodied practices. Dance, music, and other physical cultural forms transmit historical consciousness in ways that purely intellectual or textual approaches cannot capture. The body remembers what the mind might prefer to forget.

Third, research must account for how different social positions create different relationships between pride and shame in cultural memory. Dominant groups need shame to prevent pride from becoming oppressive. Marginalized groups need pride to transform shame into cultural power.

5. Conclusion

The choreography of cultural memory requires both the lightness of celebration and the weight of acknowledgment, both the joy of creation and the solemnity of remembrance. National identity, like dance itself, is characterized not by stasis but by movement—through friction, through reckoning, and ultimately toward the possibility of grace. What these three dance forms teach us is that healthy cultural memory is not about choosing between pride and shame but about learning to dance with both. The communities that thrive are those that can hold their contradictions without being paralyzed by them. They can celebrate their achievements while acknowledging their failures. They can honor their ancestors while working to be better than their ancestors. This matters beyond academic analysis. In an era of increasing cultural polarization, societies need frameworks that allow communities to engage with their heritage authentically—neither defensively idealizing it nor destructively abandoning it. The pride shame complex offers one such framework, grounded in the recognition that cultural traditions are neither pure nor irredeemable but complex human creations that reflect both our highest aspirations and our deepest failures.

Future research should focus on ethnographic studies of dance communities that have successfully integrated historical complexity into their practice, develop methodologies for cultural practitioners to authentically engage with their art forms' complex legacies, and explore how educational institutions can move beyond superficial multicultural approaches toward deeper engagement with cultural contradiction. Through continued anthropological work, scholars can contribute to this ongoing dance of cultural complexity, helping communities find ways to honor their full heritage while building more equitable futures. The rhythm of this work is not quick or easy, but it is essential—for in learning to dance with our contradictions, we learn to dance with our humanity.

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