

Centering Germaine Acogny's Contemporary African Dance as a Decolonial Tool in Post-Colonial Africa

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Abstract

The matriarch of contemporary African dance – Germaine Acogny – is renowned for centering African aesthetics, stories, and philosophies in her works. In this paper, I read her performance *Somewhere at the Beginning* and her “Technique” as decolonial tools that decentralize Western domination within African narratives. To answer the following questions: how can Acogny’s Technique serve as a tool to decolonize African bodies? And in what ways does Acogny’s performance challenge colonial ideologies? I draw on my personal experience and analyze program notes, *Ecoles des Sables* handbook, articles, books, videos, and publicity website. More importantly, I employ Kariamou Welsh Asante’s seven Africanist aesthetic senses as a lens to view Acogny’s performance. I conclude that Acogny’s performance techniques can serve as a formidable tool in disrupting hegemonic norms while centering African aesthetics. Although Acogny’s technique centers on Africa, it gives room for interaction with other dance forms from the rest of the world. Thereby creating a space for synthesis and global dialogues.

Keywords




Technique, Acogny, Contemporary African Dance, Decolonization, and African Aesthetics.

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Introduction

Decolonization is a word that seems to have been coined in 1932 by the German scholar Moritz Julius Bonn, but it came into general use in the 1950s and 1960s to describe “the process through which the people of the Third World gained their independence from their colonial rulers” (Chamberlain, 1999, p. 2). Over time, “decolonization” got applied to various contexts and countries to evoke different meanings. To Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2013), “Decolonization is better understood as a terrain of illusions of liberation and myths of freedom” (p. 66). The idea that colonialism ended when several countries of the world got their independence is merely an illusion. Until today, several institutions from previously colonized countries still place Western ideals at the center of their discourses. This is why Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2018) in his later book *Epistemic Freedom in Africa* mentions “how colonialism lingered on the minds of the colonized like a nightmare long after its administrative/judicial presence has been dismantled” (p. 43). With reference to Ngugi wa Thiong’o, he defines decolonization “as the search for a liberating perspective, a quest for relevance and a secure base from which ‘to see ourselves clearly in relationship to ourselves and to other selves in the universe’” (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018, p. 115). It is this search for a liberating perspective, and the need to carve a unique space for African epistemologies and identities that drew me to Germaine Acogny’s Contemporary African Dance and Kariamuwelsh Asante’s African Aesthetic theory.

On the one hand, Acogny – the mother of contemporary African dance – is renowned for centering traditional African movements, stories, histories, realities, and knowledge systems in her performances and training. On the other hand, Asante (2001) describes African dance aesthetics as a complex art that is recognizable and distinct. By engaging Acogny’s performance through the African aesthetic elements Asante states are common across several ethnic groups in Africa, I argue that the study of Acogny’s works can serve as a formidable decolonial tool in present Africa. Decolonial tool in the sense that it can be used for undoing epistemicides which Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2018) describes as the “killing of indigenous people’s knowledge” (p. 3), centering African epistemologies while being aware of the other existing ones, and giving agency to the “African” in contemporary African dance.

Sorgel (2020) asserts that “artists from the African continent and across the diaspora who take on the global stage must negotiate the complexity of their subjectivity in an upfront encounter that attacks the power of white aesthetics in dance” (p. 153). It is crucial to discuss African dance aesthetics not just as innate to the continent but as effective decolonial tools. I ask, how can Acogny’s Technique serve as a tool to decolonize African bodies? And in what ways does Acogny’s performance challenge colonial ideologies? I answer the preceding questions by mainly analyzing Acogny’s Technique and reviewing her performance titled *Somewhere at the Beginning*.

Furthermore, I explore the implications of contemporary African dance. I call our attention to some definitions and interpretations of the genre to highlight how it intrinsically possesses decolonial strategies. Although there is a scanty number of materials on contemporary African dance and Germaine Acogny, I have gathered

data from dance books, articles, websites, École des Sables¹ handbook, and YouTube. My analysis of Acogny's work is also supported by my years of experience as a contemporary African dancer who has taught, performed, and taken dance workshops across Africa, Europe, and America. Additionally, I participated in Acogny's workshop at the University of Ibadan, Nigeria, during Adedayo Liadi's Trufesta International Dance Festival around 2013. I also witnessed her live performance during this period, and I have continued to follow her events since then. Recently, I saw and wrote a review (unpublished) of her duet piece titled *Common Grounds* as performed on the 22nd of October 2022 at Ann Arbor, United States. By focusing on Acogny's solo piece titled *Somewhere at the Beginning* and her teaching "Technique," I put all the aforementioned data and my dance experiences in conversation with one another. I search for the commonalities and differences between what Acogny says and does to make sense of the decolonial strategies in her work.

A Connection between Contemporary African Dance, Decolonization, and Acogny

The development of contemporary dance in Africa can be traced back to the French-sponsored dance festival and competition called Choreographic Encounters of Africa and the Indian Ocean (Adewole, 2018, p. 3). It was during this period (1995) that Alphonse Tierou (A choreographer from Côte d'Ivoire) protested the imposition of French artistic criteria on African dance. The organizers set a rule that participants should present a new form of dance "which should not be associated with ideas of African tradition, but which still retains motifs or signifiers which Western audience would perceive as being African" (Adewole, 2018, p. 4). This rule seemed like another form of cultural neocolonialism, and it sparked the interest of African artists and scholars alike. Also, Adedayo Liadi – one of the seven selected dancers out of three hundred to participate in the "artist-in-resident program at the Centre Choreographique National de Nantes in France 1995" speaks of his post-performance talk in London (Kansese, 2013, p. 287). During this talk, Liadi was asked why he did not perform in an African costume, and he responded that "his dance was not 'African dance' but 'contemporary dance'" (Okoye, 2017, para. 1). This whole idea of maintaining superiority over African aesthetics and retaining it as exotic or the 'other' seems important to Westerners. Hence, I contend that if Westerners keep making the rules of international dance performances or dare to demand why an African performed without an African costume, the whole point of contemporary African dance and decoloniality may fail.

Scholars like Jane Desmond (2001) and Funmi Adewole (2018) have argued that contemporary African dance should be defined by its practitioners or those invested in it. Kansese (2013) posits that contemporary dance "cannot be identified as a particular form; since it fluctuates with every choreographer and with every dance created" (p. 284). Then Okoye furthers this definition when he asserts that "contemporary dance opens itself most conveniently to appropriation and re-

1 École des Sables (school of sand) is a dance school created by Acogny in her home country, Senegal. It is situated on the hill of Toubab Dialaw, a fishing village. It has two huge open dance spaces; the one with a sandy floor is called Kër Aloopho while the other with a professional wooden dance floor covering is called Henriette room. The use of a sandy floor can be read as a conscious strategy to center African narratives and culture since we traditionally dance barefoot on sandy floors. In fact, the naming of this space Kër Aloopho which is often associated to Acogny's grandmother, a Yoruba priestess helps reify this idea of Afrocentrism. On the other hand, the Henriette room is used for dance rehearsals, conferences, and seminars (Acogny's training handbook, 2022, 19).

configuration. As such, it has proliferated into many stylistic categories under the superintendence of many local and traditional dance cultures” (Okoye, 2017, para. 7). Contemporary dance can take multiple forms and structures depending on its choreographer. This malleability of the genre is the reason its practitioners from Africa have been able to adapt it to their taste. On Liadi’s return to performing in Nigeria after being trained in Europe, he realized that Nigerians could not really appreciate his dance pieces, they were considered alien. Hence, he began experimenting with new forms by blending “Yoruba symbolism with everyday pedestrian gestures and movements that are juxtaposed to aspects of indigenous dances to create a cosmopolitan multi-ethnic landscape” (Adewole, 2018, p. 9). Although Liadi’s intention may have been to reach out to the Nigerian audience, his performances can be considered a form of decolonization. He managed to carve a niche for himself by decentralizing the Western ideals in his dance. But Liadi is not the first nor the only one, many contemporary African choreographers have succeeded in centralizing African narratives in their works, and they include but are not limited to Christopher Emmanuel, Qudus Onikeku, Segun Adefila, and Germaine Acogny being one of the earliest and iconic.

Acogny’s career reflects multiple layers of African reality. Her grandmother was a voodoo priestess in Benin and Acogny “has always felt her grandmother’s presence, especially through her dance” (Sorgel, 2020, p. 39). It is probably due to this presence that Acogny learned several traditional African dances and made it a must to always carry this part of her identity wherever she goes. The Africanness Acogny exhibits in her performances across international spaces makes her a formidable figure in discussing the decolonization of dance in post-colonial Africa.

Acogny’s first dance studio was founded in Dakar in 1968 and “Between 1977 and 1982, she directed Mudra Afrique, created in Dakar by Maurice Béjart and Léopold Sédar Senghor. In 1980, she wrote her book *Danse Africaine*, published in three languages” (École des Sables Handbook, 2022, p. 7). At the end of Mudra Afrique, she relocated to Brussels and started working with Maurice Béjart’s company. There, she created courses that centered African movements which later became popular among the European public. People across Africa and the rest of the world began to appreciate her work more. As a result, she went back to Senegal and opened a school in Fanghoumé village with participants from all over the world. Acogny currently teaches, performs, and choreographs internationally.

Acogny’s dance class has been given several names by the media. In the YouTube video² whose link I have attached, we would hear different descriptions being used to define her dance class: “...rooted in African aesthetics... Germaine contemporary incorporates modern dance... Contemporary African dance...” (CGTN Africa, 2014). The questions that come to mind at this point include, do these descriptions manifest themselves in her dance? If yes, is there a way we could come up with one acceptable umbrella term to describe Acogny’s technique and other contemporary African forms that align with it? African scholars are not generally quick to define contemporary African dance, maybe because they feel the need to keep the genre free of rigidity and codification or because there are too many practitioners with their unique approach to the dance. Regardless, Okoye acknowledges that contemporary African dance relates to Africa and that it is both African and contemporary. Following this acknowledgment, he provides a

2 Link to a YouTube video of Acogny teaching a dance class:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9FcpRqozZqw&ab_channel=CGTNAfrica

detailed definition of contemporary Nigerian dance as a “spatially and rhythmically embodied creative and dynamic category that challenge received orthodoxies – in both the indigenous Nigerian and Western aesthetics configurations – and critiques the complex peculiarities and vicissitudes of daily living in contemporary Nigeria” (Okoye, 2017, para. 3). While Okoye’s definition leans towards a dance form that critiques both the local and the Western, Kansese’s definition suggests a form of hybridity. Kansese (2013) even switches the arrangement of the genre’s name, according to him “Nigerian contemporary dance is sometimes seen as a mixture of different ideas, both indigenous and exotic” (p. 285). Other African countries also have their approaches to contemporary dance. For example, Nadine Sieveking “describes contemporary dance in Burkina Faso as a cosmopolitan cultural practice that has emerged at the interface between local and global art worlds and sphere of development politics” (Sieveking, quoted in Adewole, 2018, p. 4). This definition is at the intersection of indigenous forms, international forms, and political affairs. Therefore, one could argue that it is peculiar to Burkina Faso. Although there seems to be no singular detailed definition that encapsulates what contemporary African dance is, I would reiterate that there should always be something “African” in every contemporary African dance. And I believe that an exploration/development of the “African” part of the genre will further aid decolonization.

For Acogny, she started dancing around the 1960s, the decade most African countries gained their independence from the colonizers. She spent some time in France, learning ballet but due to the body-shaming she often received, she developed her technique as a critical reaction (Swanson, 2019, p. 3). The statement she was probably trying to make was that all bodies should be appreciated for their uniqueness. In her classes, one would see the five ballet feet positions, grand plie, and ballet hand positions, but all integrated with African dance movements (Swanson, 3). What she does is quite like what Katherine Dunham³ does – breaking the rules of ballet and infusing African elements with it. Nevertheless, the African elements in Acogny’s technique seem more prominent.

If “true decolonization begins with a critical engagement with one’s world,” I would argue that contemporary African dance is inherently a decolonial tool (Eze, 2015, p. 411). Its practitioners and scholars often have to critically engage the local and global to birth a unique work that speaks to both worlds. It is important to note that even if contemporary African dance seems disruptive to traditional rules and Western ideals, it is not an absolute rejection of both. In the next section of this paper, I review Acogny’s solo piece *Somewhere at the beginning* with the intention of understanding how it serves as a decolonial tool.

African Aesthetics and Decolonial Tools in *Somewhere at the Beginning*

*Somewhere at the Beginning*⁴ is an hour-long dance piece choreographed and performed by Acogny. It toured a few theatre spaces including La Biennale di Venezia, Italy in 2016; and Curve Theatre, United Kingdom in 2018. However,

3 Katherine Dunham (1909-2006) was one of the formidable dance artists of the twentieth century. Her works broke the barriers of race and gender, and she is sometimes referred to as the “matriarch and queen mother of Black dance.” See Joanna Dee Das’ *Katherine Dunham: Dance and the African Diaspora* for more information.

4 A YouTube link to see *Somewhere at the Beginning*: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MpTpH3DyMzg&ab_channel=LaureMalecot

my analysis is based on the recorded version on YouTube as uploaded by Laure Malecot in 2020. *Somewhere at the Beginning* explores African conceptions of reincarnation, birth, death, ritual, belief, gender, and aesthetics. Acogny interprets the world through the eyes of her grandmother Aloopho, a Yoruba priestess who practiced voodoo. She confronts the bruises of coloniality including the one that led her father to believe that the gods of his ancestors were demons. She ends her performance in a bird mask ritual, refers to herself as her father's mother, baptizes her father, and forgives him for following the white man blindly. Then she forges her way through a new beginning that centers African narratives within global discourses.



Figure 1: A photo of Acogny during her performance of *Somewhere at the Beginning* (Sorgel, 2020, p. 42).

Before I begin my analysis, it is important to define decolonization and also understand how colonial mentality works across Africa. Anurima Banerji and Royona Mitra (2020) contend:

We are conjuring the term ‘decolonizing’ in our title in all its complexities and iridescence, recognizing that this political act refers to the disruption of a range of normative social hierarchies. We are conscious here to differentiate between ‘decolonizing’ as a material act, and ‘decolonial’ as an undoing of imperialist epistemes. (p. 22)

Decolonization has to do with the undoing of the damage caused by colonial structures and disrupting normative social hierarchies. For many Africans, not just African dancers, decolonization is needed because some still walk around with the mindset that “the white man” is superior to them. Many African dancers,

including myself, grew up believing that the practice of something Western is a must for our success in life. In fact, there are existing structures in place that help reify this idea – private primary schools in urban areas that teach ballet as their only dance extracurricular activity, parents who want their children to speak no native language but English, universities that only allow suit and tie in formal ceremonies, History departments that focus on teaching Western histories, and so on. Until today, many Africans hold Western practices at a height much higher than theirs. Hence, a need to disrupt such normative hierarchy.

Despite being performed in the land of Europeans, *Somewhere at the Beginning* centers on African aesthetics and even “head on confront the bruises of colonialism, both physical and psychological” (Sorgel, 2021, p. 42). By confronting colonialism and centering African narratives, Acogny disrupts the idea that “white” is superior and pure. She exposes the ruins colonialism has left through her stories and dance and encourages other Africans to embrace their roots.

To review the contents of *Somewhere at the Beginning*. I engage Asante’s (2001) seven African aesthetic senses which include – “polyrhythm, polycentrism, curvilinear, dimensional, epic memory, holism, and repetition” (p. 146). I find these aesthetics apt for my discussion because they broadly capture the commonalities in African dances. Similarly, Acogny advocates for her technique to be used as a tool by all contemporary African dancers and beyond. These seven aesthetics help me reinstate the idea that Acogny’s performance stands very much apart from the Modern/Contemporary dances of the West. It is uncommon to find a balletic movement, song, costume, theme, story, or posture in Acogny’s works. Her major source of movement lies within African rituals, ceremonies, and traditional dances, among others. By placing more focus, trust, and power on African movement vocabularies, Acogny’s *Somewhere at the Beginning* disrupts the colonial mentality that African dances are unrefined, and maybe not worthy of being on the big stage. With multiple awards from across the globe, she serves as living proof to up-and-coming African artists who are unsure of the power their indigenous aesthetic carries when placed on an international scale.

The first aesthetic sense to be analyzed in *Somewhere at the Beginning* is Polyrrhythm. At multiple intervals in the video, we hear several percussion instruments (membranophones, chordophones, idiophones, aerophones, electrophones, and voices) in conjunction with multiple movements. According to Asante (2001), “Polyrrhythm goes beyond having multiple instruments harmonize. The human body must complement such rhythm” (p. 146). Some African dances evoke vocal sounds from their performers. In *Somewhere at the beginning*, we occasionally hear Acogny make sounds despite having a piece of music playing in the background. Such shouts of happiness, sadness, and confusion, among others, aid the originality of this piece. Furthermore, as the composed sound reverberates, we see Acogny vibrate almost as if the sound and her movements are one. This idea of having a dancer complement a beat is common in Africa. With the aid of the talking drum, some dancers go as far as having conversations with drummers through dance. Polyrrhythm is an aesthetic that can be taught in schools as an alternative to Western Aesthetics, thereby serving as a decolonial tool.

The second aesthetic tool is Polycentrism. The middle section of the video exemplifies polycentrism which is the idea of “extra” – The ability to be mentally conscious of the multiple musical instruments playing at the same time and to allow various muscles of your body to react differently to these rhythms. While Acogny’s

limbs are vibrating at a very fast pace, more like a staccato, her hands move in a fluid and sustained motion, and at the same time, her head moves very slightly, all serving as complementary instrumentation to the playing sound. Acogny is quite famous for her ability to move multiple parts of her body simultaneously to multiple musical instruments. This ability is not necessarily unique to her, there are many African dances like *Bata* (a Yoruba dance) that require such a skill. If properly codified, this multiple isolation movement can become a trend for young African dancers to tap from when learning the art of dancing. Thereby, serving as a decolonial tool.

The third aesthetic sense to be discussed is Curvilinear. For Asante (2001), “curvilinear [is] seen in form, shape, and structure” (p. 146). Many Africans believe in the power of circular lines and this idea is tied to the religions and cultures of African people. Although this piece was performed on a proscenium stage, we see Acogny moving across several lines as if the audience surrounds her, she exhibits circular hand gestures, in-place turns, dancing with her direction upstage, moves in circles as if she is walking in a ritual-like procession; all of which exemplify the curvilinear nature of her performance. Again, this taps from the ontology and epistemology of African religion and culture.

The fourth sense to be discussed is Dimensionality. “One aspect of depth in African dance is texture. Music is textured; the dance is textured, the art is textured” (Asante, 2001, p. 147). In African dances, there is usually a need to find a texture to movement, a movement should have multiple interesting interpretations that show mastery. In ballet for example, there is a certain way one must execute a pirouette, the head must move last but arrive first. But in many African dances, your ability to add an extra texture or change a certain movement shows mastery. A pirouette that requires the head to move first will be considered wrong in ballet but might be considered creative if the pirouette is an African technique. One’s ability to enact an extra contraction or shape during the performance of a movement shows mastery. In *Somewhere at the Beginning*, we see Acogny execute a textured movement as she waves her skirt, touches the ground, and makes her hand tremble, there is a virtuosity to the pace and precision of these movements. Dimensionality as exhibited by Acogny is quite hard to achieve as a dancer. Hence, I consider it a challenging technique that young African dancers can spend ample time mastering and appreciating in place of dances that do not necessarily fit their reality.

Asante’s (2001) African fifth aesthetic sense is Epic Memory. She refers to it as:

...a memory retrieved that delivers to the viewer the pathos, feeling, and experience without telling the literal story...there is a spiritual dimension to this conception of experience... It is not religious by definition but can involve ritual; it is the conscious and subconscious calling upon the ancestors, gods, mind, to permit the flow of energy so that the artist can create. It is more than submission to authority, present or ancestral; it is an innate recognition that the creative force is indeed a force and not the person performing the act of creation. The artist can reject it, kill it, or accept it, but the creative energies come from within in response to a spiritual initiator. (p. 149)

As this performance opens, we see a book, a calabash, and the image of an old woman on the screen. Acogny during her performance interview with Curve

states how she always connects with her ancestors during her performances. The calabash⁵ may symbolize a native African custom while the book symbolizes the written tradition from the West. The presence of these items marks the inception of spirituality in this dance. In the program note, Serre (2015) posits, “Germaine often spoke of her grandmother Aloopho, who was a priestess from Dahomey, mother of the sacred and of strength” (p. 3). Acogny often referred to herself as a reincarnation of her grandmother. According to the brief description on Curve’s (2018) website, “*Somewhere at the Beginning* is a personal exploration of both Germaine’s history as she looks back at her own family and takes its source in the past, its roots in the present, and crosses space and time to approach the future with a spirit of forgiveness” (para. 2). So, even though we see just Acogny on stage, she represents and is in harmony with those who have come before her. She represents their struggle, their religion, and their story. She is the result of their existence and through this performance, she remembers them. Oral tradition is arguably richer in Africa than written tradition because people mostly remember, learn, and appreciate by doing. The act of remembering through performance by Acogny is another formidable decolonial tool. The act of remembering and researching the past helps us gain more connection to it. It helps us deepen our roots so that we are not easily blown away by Western aesthetics.

Asante (2001) refers to the sixth sense as Holistic, “in this sense, the parts of a creation are not emphasized or accentuated beyond the whole” (p. 150). Throughout this performance, we notice that Acogny does not just pay attention to sounds and movements. Silence and stillness are equally important. We see her seated still in one position as she slowly pushes the book away in total silence, immediately after, she is seen standing still with her back to the audience. Throughout this piece, we occasionally see stillness carefully layered with movements and silence layered with sounds. The idea of the holistic is not one that I consider inherently unique to Acogny or Africa, but when properly manipulated, it can serve as a decolonial tool. Africans have unique ways of combining sound/silence and stillness/movement that reflect their culture. By exploring this idea further, African dancers can continue to create interesting sounds and movement that is unique to their worldview.

The final aesthetic sense provided by Asante (2001) is Repetition, to her, “it is not the refrain or chorus of a movement, but it is the intensifying of one movement, one sequence, or [an] entire dance.” In this performance, we witness Acogny pull her gown occasionally, but each pull is slightly different from the other in terms of position and intensity. We also see her walk in different directions, but the motif and intensity of each walk is different. Since African dance is very much tied to the religion and culture of its people, there is often a use of cultural movement as a tool to reach a trance-like state. Performing a movement just once is considered ineffective, it does not give enough room for appreciation. However, repeating this movement allows for intensity, it gives room for transcendence. The constant marriage between music, dance, and religion is very common in Africa. It is another tool that can serve decolonization when explored. In the next heading, I analyze Acogny’s Technique as taught and practiced in her school. During my analysis, I draw our attention to “Technique’s” potency as a decolonial tool for Africans within Africa or the diaspora.

5 A traditional African bowl that is made from wood.

The Three Pillars of Acogny's Technique: Ripple, Contraction, and Tremulation

Swanson (2019) narrates how Acogny studied physical education and dance at Simon Siegel School in Paris around the 1960s. She states:

As the only African student at the school, Acogny learned first-hand of professional institutions' recognition of certain dance forms and their strict demands for a specific body type to the exclusion of others. She describes the impetus of her technique as [a confrontation with classical ballet] when her ballet teacher told her that her bottom was large and her feet flat, Acogny was inspired to create her technique in which her anatomy would not be considered flawed... "[I] began doing grand pliés with undulations in my spine. It was from there that my dance technique emerged. p. (3)

Ever since the inception of Acogny's Technique in the 1960s, it has continued to grow into its own genre. In the training handbook 2022 | 2023 on Acogny's Technique, it is written that the technique hinges on three elements, "ripple, contraction, and vibration/tremulations" all of which are motivated by African culture (3). Ripple, in this case, has to do with movements flowing like the wave of the sea. Dancers are taught to understand where a movement begins and ends, the organs involved in safely and properly executing these movements, and the ways they increase and decrease pace without losing the flow. A good mastery of ripple helps enhance dancers' body coordination as they experiment with various movement idioms.

The second element here is contraction which is very much similar to Martha Graham's contraction and release technique. Of course, contraction is an element very present within the African culture; however, Western dance scholars often tie it to Martha Graham. Contraction is the concept of using different body parts in opposition to one another. For instance, pulling one's sternum downwards while bending the knees. This technique helps dancers learn to create tensions in different body parts and to also release these tensions. A dancer who has mastered this technique can create the illusion of moving against a heavy wind. Furthermore, being able to physicalize this element helps give texture and emotion to the movement of the dancer, and ordinary everyday movement/activity can be turned into extraordinary dance moves.

Drawing from my experience in Acogny's workshop, vibration/tremulation is a relatively hard technique that many dancers find hard to execute at first. Regardless, it is the ability to create a very strong tension in several parts of the body, a tension so strong that it makes the body vibrate. One who has not mastered this technique can only vibrate the body across multiple positions.

It is important to note how instead of rejecting Western techniques, Acogny found value in many of them. She took time to learn them before developing her Technique filled with African elements. According to Acogny's Technique handbook (2021), her "Technique" is linked to:

Nature – plants or animals – also daily life in Africa. It uses symbolic images from nature, such as the Fromager tree, the eagle, the rain, the water lily, the guinea hen... The movements are precise, clearly defined and are deeply linked to breathing. The result is a very pure, powerful, and elegant expression. (p. 3)

When the body is completely still and relaxed, one major factor that separates the dead from the living is the fact that one breathes or has a heartbeat and the other does not. This breath and heartbeat stimulate a rhythm (music) and movement (dance) in the body. Therefore, a dancer needs to master his breathing, a necessary exercise not just for dancers, but for every human alive. If a dancer does not properly master their breathing, we might notice their movements are not often as precise and controlled as possible, they might struggle through learning any movement, and of course, might find out they quickly get tired. Acogny's technique "offers finding the *body lost* by feeling earth, rhythm, heartbeat, and discovering a new flow of physical energy" (Acogny Technique Handbook, 2021, p. 3). She takes her dance students to natural sites (ocean, forest, rocky areas, sandy areas, open spaces) all to help them tune in with nature, be aware of their environment, and be aware of the air they breathe.

Acogny also centers on improvisation in her works. Swanson (2019) hints at this when she posits, "...while similarly comprehensive elements may also be found in [Acogny's] dance practices including contact improvisation and Butoh, for instance, the Acogny Technique introduces these elements as integral to an African-centred practice, one that the African students take ownership of" (p. 11). To further clarify this statement, Acogny's training handbook (2022) states, "through the use of choreographic tools for composition and improvisation, the dancer is invited to deconstruct the movement in order to make new ones and use these new forms for composition purposes" (p. 16). This concept of improvisation is what her son Patrick Acogny, a teacher in her school, also delves deep into. Improvisation and contact improvisation are whole dance genres on their own. They require a different kind of skill, and they are important in creating something new from the old. To improvise, one needs to have movement awareness, but the interesting thing about improvisation is that a dancer begins to weave movements together in ways they have never done before and through this, can create variants of already existing vocabularies. According to Acogny's technique handbook (2021):

[Her] training encourages African dancers to discover their path by transforming their traditional dances into a modern expression and form. The work of Germaine Acogny helps dancers to see their own gestures from a different angle, to analyze and use them with a new creativity. Her technique is strongly linked to Africa while at the same time belonging to the universal. In the world of Western dance, she suggests practicing African dance for its richness, power and strength, and experiencing it as a new source of inspiration. (p. 3)

One thing I occasionally consider the failure of some educational institutions is their inability to dig into the strengths and weaknesses of individual students. There is usually no time to work with students on a case-by-case basis, and some students can barely afford the fee of a personal dance trainer. In my opinion, all dance bodies are unique and must be treated as such. Some people have hyperextended joints, others do not, some have strong limbs, others have a sense of rhythm, and so on. Therefore, every dancer is worthy of individual attention that goes beyond general technique classes. This is one of the strong points of the *École des Sables*, it allows for personal growth as well as communal – helping dancers carve their niche within the dance world. As a dancer in the school's program, your experiences are important, did you grow up learning how to paint, draw, sing, or farm? Whatever experience you have, how can that be integrated

into your dance training? Being able to tap into your uniqueness is what easily makes you stand out amongst many, and this is one of the missions of École des Sables: “The training offers... inquiry into an in-depth knowledge of oneself, of one’s body, of one’s dance” (École des Sables handbook, 2022, p. 3).

Furthermore, this idea of individual growth can serve as a way of maintaining connections to one’s roots. I am privileged to know enough about my ancestors: how they lived, the religion they practiced, where they were buried, the trade they engaged in, and so on. I will say that my access to their stories is why I am where I am today. Knowing that my big uncle was a masquerade performer, knowing that my father and his father loved dancing, and knowing that my grandfather was a village lawyer are some of the reasons I dared to pursue a master’s degree in Europe and a Ph.D. in America, knowing my roots motivates me to keep pushing when the going gets tough. This is not even the most interesting thing, being knowledgeable in my native dance, and having something to call my own is just priceless. It has made me a stronger performer filled with so many creative ideas. Even this paper has taken this shape because of my wealth of knowledge in African dances. A person with knowledge of their roots will not be easily dislodged when living within a foreign space nor will they quickly consider a foreign culture to be superior. Knowing one’s roots is a fundamental step toward the decolonization that Acogny advocates.

Acogny’s technique does not require one to be stuck in one’s own experiences and exploration. Her process is like what Okeke-Agulu (2015) defines as “the selective use of artistic resources and forms from Africa and European traditions” – a natural synthesis, instead of uncritical nativism and undue Western artistic influence (p. 265). On the one end of the spectrum is uncritical nativism, this idea of rejecting everything outside of one’s culture. For example, an African man rejecting the use of social media, phones, and airplanes, among others, mainly because they are Western inventions. On the other end of this spectrum is an undue Western artistic influence which is connected to artists who consider Western artists, dance forms, and technique superior to the point of disproportionately forcing them on native culture. “Natural synthesis” recalls the idea of a flowing river – indigenous and Western movements being put in a dialogue where both voices are heard and appreciated; the Western is not superior (Swanson, 2019, p. 4). This concept of natural synthesis does not only apply to Africans but the rest of the world. I would recommend the Acogny Technique to even dancers from the West who have mastered ballet or other dance forms. Learning something new that requires a reconfiguration of one’s thoughts about spinal movements, tremulations, ripples, and improvisation among other things might be beneficial to one’s dance body. Even if dancers from the West do not learn this technique, watching it being taught on the sand, in the ocean, and forest might serve as an eye-opener, the beginning of a new conversation.

Conclusion

In this paper, I broadly defined contemporary African dance by drawing on the words and works of certain African scholars and Practitioners. I argue that contemporary African dance is intrinsically a decolonial tool. Then, I delved into the artistic journey of Germaine Acogny who is often referred to as the mother of contemporary African dance. She discovered contemporary African dance as a

critical reaction to her ballet teacher who considered her not fit as a result of her protruded buttocks and flat feet. I interpreted the three different elements (Ripple, contraction, and tremulation) she developed based on traditional African dance as a tool for decoloniality. During my discussions, I also analyzed her “Technique” as a viable tool to strengthen the dance skills of African dancers and non-African dancers. I provided a brief biography of Acogny, and then I analyzed certain elements in her dance performance titled *Somewhere in Between* to illuminate how it serves as a decolonial strategy.

What I discovered sets Acogny apart is her centralization of African aesthetics and personal stories in her performances. She places her ballet and modern dance training at the periphery of her performance while she centers African aesthetic elements. I believe this to be a very effective decolonizing strategy that can be embraced by not just Africans but also people from other parts of the world who have been subjected to colonization. However, my recommendation here is not that artists should focus so much on their indigenous aesthetic elements that they fail to understand other dances from the rest of the world. “Natural synthesis” which calls for an ability to tap into dances from the rest of the world – in a non-exploitative, but dialogic way – to strengthen one’s own is still a viable way to approach contemporary African dance and decolonization. In fact, virtually all artists from previously colonized countries who practice natural synthesis should not just consider themselves artists, but also potential advocates for decolonization.

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