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/ DANCE AS MEMORY MACHINE

Contemporary African Dance as a Decolonizing Practice

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This article takes a closer look at the processes of reappropriation of the aesthetic field within which the phenomenon known as ‘contemporary African dance’ was shaped in the second half of the 20th century, mainly for the use of Western audiences. Using the context of the generally outlined political and economic conditions of production, and based on examples of performances that illuminate the basic concepts of postcolonial theories (e.g. H.K. Bhabha, E.W. Said and R. Bharucha), the text outlines the main historical and aesthetic lines of the formation of the term ‘contemporary African dance’ and its possible designations, evoking the artistic attitudes and formal procedures employed by artists of different generations in the process of reclaiming and transforming the aesthetic field that this term defines.

Keywords: Africa; choreography; practices of decolonization; postcolonialism; contemporary African dance

> *Is this Art? Is this Dance? Is this contemporary African Dance? How will I know if this is art? Do you call Art one’s attempt to resist the cycle of destruction by planting seeds of beauty/seeds of dreams in a hopeless context? What then when this resistance is written in*

one's body? The body as the last shield for freedom.
Faustin Linyekula, 2008 (quoted in: Sörgel, 2011, p. 90)

In this article, I analyze the processes of reappropriation of the aesthetic field[1] as part of which, in the successive waves of interest in African culture, a phenomenon dubbed 'contemporary African dance' was formed in the second half of the 20th century, primarily for the use of audiences in the so-called West. In this case, the term 'reappropriation' refers not so much to the reclamation of an appropriated cultural object (dance), but to the process of restoring the agency, self-determination and self-definition of African dance artists.[2]

This text has been written from the perspective of a white person originating from a country with no comparable colonial experience,[3] and therefore it is evident that, in order to bring forward non-Eurocentric optics, the material compiled is based primarily on the statements and activities of African artists. Given the wealth of research material, I will focus on presenting the historical and cultural processes affecting the formation of the concept and identity of contemporary African dance, while also discussing selected examples of performances by artists hailing mainly from West Africa and South Africa.

The broad term 'contemporary African dance' has its grounds for application, even though it encompasses phenomena that are extremely diverse in both cultural and aesthetic terms. These grounds are established, first of all, by the fact that the term has been used (notwithstanding doubts and discussions) by artists themselves, who thus continue – with a sense of distance caused by the awareness of its utopian assumptions – the Pan-African idea of the 1950s and 1960s. Contemporary African dance functions

as a brand, a label used both by artists working in Africa and by those moving between their respective countries of origin and residence.[4] This very notion has also accompanied surveys (triennials, biennials) of contemporary dance held since the 1990s, bringing together the dance community from around the continent.

Accoucheurs and ideologues

The inception of this term is related to an externally imposed perspective, as ‘African dance’ was first defined by and for Western audiences.[5] It should be noted that the very framing of music, dance and drama as separate is Eurocentric and follows from a relatively recent division of genres. In the cultural practice of the African continent, these domains are rarely isolated from one another, despite the fact that performers specialize in, for example, percussion instruments, dance or singing (Kringelbach, 2014).

Based on field research conducted in Bamako (Mali), among others, anthropologist Altaïr Despres identifies the following critical factors linked to the general processes of globalization that led to the emergence of contemporary forms of African dance: the formation of a network of international institutions tightly connected to Europe; the formation of a new perspective on art among African artists; the emergence of ‘aesthetic’ opportunities and interests (related, but not limited to, travels to Europe and cultural funding); and the formation of new subjective identities of the dancer/performer and choreographer, situated between ‘here’ and ‘there’ (Despres, 2016, p. 3). The groundwork for the formation of modern-day post-colonial African art, including dance, was largely shaped by the actions of French cultural agencies and UNESCO in the 1960s, when the dismantling of colonial structures was underway. These activities were supposed to

reinstate subjectivity in ‘traditional’ cultures, but in reality they reasserted the cultural influence of the West. Congolese scholar Henri Kalama refers to the Western organizations and administrators proclaiming such traditionalist approaches and ways of producing ‘authentic’ African art as ‘accoucheurs.’ They then gave way to ‘ideologues,’ i.e. European-educated artists and patrons, including state rulers (e.g. Léopold Sedar Senghor in Senegal or the extreme case of Mobutu Sese Seko’s *authenticité* policy implemented in Zaire at the time). The ‘ideologues’ started out precisely in the 1950s and 1960s, which coincided with the time when African countries were searching for a new, post-colonial identity, which was to both transcend the pre-colonial ‘tradition’ and the colonial, imported modernity (Kalama, 2018). In the realm of dance, this translated into a marked popularity of the so-called ‘great African ballets,’ national ensembles that showcased traditional dance and music in elaborate stage forms and served as an important tool in forging cultural identities.

The most famous among those companies was the Guinean Ballet, founded by Keita Fodeba in Paris in 1947, and subsequently transformed into a national institution under the patronage of President Sékou Touré (Fodeba, 1957). Beginning in the 1970s, these ensembles declined in popularity and importance, and succumbed to folklorization. At the same time, new urban dance forms began to emerge, accompanying the hybrid musical currents that had been evolving since the 1960s.[6]

Pan-Africanism of the pioneers

Since the early 1960s, the countries of the African continent, including Arab countries, have also been incorporated more fully into UNESCO’s agenda, expanding the initially adopted scope of the ‘Orient’ category.[7] Between

1957 and 1966, UNESCO implemented a large-scale interdisciplinary initiative known as the ‘Projet majeur pour l’appréciation mutuelle des valeurs culturelles de l’Orient et de l’Occident’ (Plan for Mutual Recognition of the Cultural Values of the East and West). It sought to improve mutual understanding of the cultures of the countries of the ‘Orient’ (understood mainly as Asian countries) and ‘the West’ (understood as Western Europe and the US). However, with its focus on the past and tradition, it ignored the contemporary, living forms of post-colonial countries’ cultures and their evolution in the field of contemporary art. The activities, reportages and films developed as part of this venture were only executed in Western languages and from an ethnocentric perspective (Maurel, 2005). The plan thus became an almost textbook exemplification of the notion of ‘Orientalism’ as defined by Edward W. Said, according to whom the Orient was cast as a mysterious and distant undifferentiated entity, inaccessible and confined by tradition and the past, in contrast to the modern, rational West.[8]

This also led to the first pan-African festival of black art (Festival Mondial des Arts Nègres) in Dakar in 1966, which aimed to bring together both ‘traditional’ artists and the African diaspora: American jazz artists, representatives of Creole art, writers, painters, etc. Pan-African events of this kind also took hold as dance platforms, thus – according to Western rules of production, promotion and understanding of modernity – laying down the original aesthetic framework of the term ‘contemporary African dance.’[9] Starting in 1974, UNESCO shifted the paradigm somewhat and began to promote contemporary art of post-colonial countries through the FIPC fund[10] (Bax, 2018). It was with the support of this very fund and Senegalese President Leopold Sed that the continent’s first contemporary dance school, École de Sable in Dakar – a branch of Maurice Béjart’s Mudra

School in Brussels – was established in 1977.[11] Its director and icon of contemporary dance in Africa, the European-educated Germaine Acogny proposed the term *New African Dance* (French: *nouvelle danse africaine*) as early as the mid-1970s, using it to describe her own proposal for an aesthetic synthesis of several African traditional dance forms with contemporary principles of choreographic composition. Acogny's goal was to create and develop a unique technique for contemporary African dance that would promote African aesthetics as part of the new global world, while also respecting the hallmarks of each country (Acogny, 1980). A similar stance was later adopted by Alphonse Tiérou, including in his well-known manifesto *Si sa danse bouge, l'Afrique bougera*[12] (If Her Dance Budges, Africa will Budge) (Tiérou, 2001). A foremost scholar of African dance, whose research combined ethnography and contemporary aesthetics, Tiérou was an advocate of pan-African festivals and an ideologue of 'transnational dance politics,' which stipulated that contemporary dance was an 'imagined community' that extended above and beyond (neo)colonial discourse.

Lorsque la danse paraît le masque tombe, dit un proverbe africain (When dance appears, the mask falls off, goes an African proverb), notes Tiérou in a book that represents the first comprehensive attempt to characterize the main traditional dance genres on the continent, in which he also outlines an ambitious policy for the emerging contemporary African dance, one that is, however, founded on its ties to tradition (Tiérou, 1989).

Both Acogny's formal gesture and Tiérou's declarative one can be considered the first attempt to reappropriate the notion of 'African contemporary dance,' i.e., to restore agency to its creators. One should cite here the example of South Africa, where, due to apartheid, the development of black art was particularly impeded, and yet, paradoxically, it was the

contemporary currents, combined with traditional elements and in opposition to the classical ballet imported with white culture, that were recognized here in the 1970s as a space for the social emancipation of the black body. Thus, this first moment of decolonization manifests itself here through the seizure of what – according to Rustom Bharucha's interpretation of colonialism – was originally appropriated, decontextualized and recognized as a representation of the 'other' culture, often involving the complicity of the colonized subjects: the 'accoucheurs' and, to some extent, also the 'ideologues' (Bharucha, 1990, pp. 1-2).

The pitfalls of interculturalism

Another colonial pitfall, the 'dead end' of interculturalism (ibid., p. 2), awaited European choreographers travelling to Africa in the 1990s in search of inspiration, including Mathilde Monnier, whose 1993 performance *Pour Antigone* (For Antigone), transposed the Greek myth onto the bodies of black dancers; Benjamin Lamarche and Claude Brumachon in Nigeria, Alain Platel in Burkina Faso, Susanne Linke in Senegal and Jean-François Duroure in South Africa. Indeed, the 1980s and 1990s saw growing support for the advancement of choreography and enhanced intercontinental exchanges, including internships or co-productions (Despres 2016, p. 56); however, African cultures were still seen primarily as a wellspring of artistic raw material, and not necessarily an end in itself. A telling illustration is *Le Coq est mort*, a 1999 performance choreographed by Linke (The Rooster is Dead – also the title of a French children's song), which met with extreme reactions, including accusations of cultural cannibalism and even racism, especially among American audiences, who picked up on this aspect much more vocally than their European counterparts. Based on the excellent

technical skills and original movement qualities of the eight dancers of the Senegalese company Jant-bi, the performance reflected the rather stereotypical thinking of Europeans about African dance (primitivisms, strong rhythmization, sexualized male bodies, traditional symbols, etc.). On the other hand, one should note that all of the aforementioned projects furthered the international careers of the participating dancers and de facto expanded the contemporary African dance scene beyond the continent's borders.

Perceptions of African dance among Western audiences changed to a greater extent at the time through contemporary works by African choreographers, mainly created for Western audiences, including Guyanese-born Bernardo Montet, who, after his stay in Chad, developed two important pieces focused on Africa, i.e., the 1997 *Issé-Timossé* (The Embodiment of What Is to Come), followed by *O. More* (2002); another project of this kind was *The Rite of Spring* by Algerian-French choreographer Heddy Maalem, featuring dancers from Senegal, Benin, Nigeria, Mozambique, Togo and Martinique (2004),[13] which achieved international success. Highlighted by minimalist costumes, the diverse morphology of bodies (punctuated by the corporeality of the soloists, i.e., a pair of twins) is in its own right a commentary on the stereotypical perception of the continent and the black body. In the first part of the performance, dancing takes place in a white, austere cubicle, and evokes an Africa that is traditional, spiritual, sensual, but also full of tensions. In contrast, the second part features a documentary filmed in Lagos, which moves from depictions of paradisiacal nature to images of a brutal, 'civilized,' post-colonial Dark Continent: poverty, dirt and the body mechanized in line with the rhythm of machines. As a starting point, Maalem highlights the need to work through the trauma of colonialism, drawing on a critique of the Western myth of the victim, with Africa cast as one in the

show.

Thanks to these works, at the turn of the 21st century African dance on European stages no longer appeared as a mere social practice or tradition, but a full-fledged art form, co-created by Africans.

Mimicry and feedback loop

In the 21st century, the next generation (which can already be considered the third generation), often working outside their country of origin, feels trapped neither in a racial 'straitjacket' nor in their African roots. This generation is actively engaged in global artistic circuits, in a different, more ephemeral way than the pioneers of the 1960s and 1970s, but with new aspirations to transform Africa as a social space, among others through global workshop networks, participation in international choreographic projects, and engagement in interdisciplinary practices. The successors to the continent's urbanization and globalization processes proclaim themselves citizens of the world and insist on their universality. 'I am an African, I am an artist, but I am not an African artist,' states Congolese artist Faustin Linyekula. (Mensah, 2021, p. 3). 'Contemporary African dance,' 'modern dance' and *danse d'auteur* (auteur dance) all reflect the same artistic challenge: to express a new stance towards modernity, in all its complexity and with all of its contradictions (ibid.). This challenge also entails the imperative to transcend the general external image of the continent's art, according to which said art operates under three basic paradigms, not so much aesthetical but political-historical ones: that of primitive (traditional) art, that of colonial (modernist, modern) art and that of postcolonial-contemporary art (Kalama, 2018). What contemporary dance artists propose does not fit directly into any of these variants, but rather

constitutes a fluid (transgressive) commentary thereon. Colonial hegemony can be subverted from within its own framework, as illustrated by Homi K. Bhabha's critical concept of colonial mimicry (2010, pp. 79-89). Mimicry can accord one an emancipatory path whereby the appropriation of Western contemporary dance forms by African choreographers should not be seen as a form of neo-colonialism, but rather as decolonization.

This is perfectly illustrated by the work of the aforementioned Linyekula, such as his reckoning with the implicit racism of Ballets Suédois Ballets Suédois (the Swedish Ballet) and Fernand Léger in *La création du monde*,[14] whose reconstructed 2012 version Linyekula annotated with critical commentary. In *Dinozord: The Dialogue* series III (2006), Linyekula explores the possibility of reckoning with Congo's traumatic past following the periods of colonization, dictatorship and the recent civil war, when a sense of nation no longer exists, supplanted by a keen awareness of a state of ruin (Sörgel, 2011, pp. 83-91). Prefacing the performance is an installation consisting of photographs and documentary films, as well as interviews from Kisangani, Linyekula's home village, with the dancer moving among the audience, dressed in black jeans and a white shirt and wearing white makeup (which can be read as a reverse practice of black face, as well as an allusion to the African mask). The choreographer takes the fourteen movements of Mozart's *Requiem* as the starting point for the performance, dramaturgically framing the structure of the work as successive 'stations of suffering,' illustrated by abstract images from Congolese history. Thus, for Faustin Linyekula and his dancers, contemporary African dance becomes an imaginary home at a juncture in Congolese history when all systems of representation and community belonging have failed (Sörgel, 2011, pp. 83-91). Similarly, in *More, More, More… Future* (2009), a *ndombolo* rock opera, Linyekula dissects the social and cultural history of his native Congo.

The piece includes quotes from the poetry of political prisoner Antoine Vumilia Muhindo, accompanied by a hybrid, trance-like *ndombolo* musical form performed by Congolese guitarist Flamme Kapay's band (see Sörgel, 2020, pp. 70-81). Thus, the choreographer uses a Western aesthetic framework to transpose local content, while challenging the simplistic division into traditional and contemporary paradigms. A still more radical formal intervention can be found in *Si c'est un nègre/autoportrait* (2004), Linyekula's autobiographical solo developed for a white dancer. It is still extremely rare, after all, for a black choreographer to produce a piece intended for a white performer; it is usually the other way around (which, by the way, illustrates the imbalance of power in the space of symbolic distribution of power). Linyekula thus undermines another pillar in the notion of 'African dance' as one based on the black body, which stereotypically invites associations with such physical qualities as speed, agility, rhythmicity, eroticism.

A similar approach manifests itself in Boyzi Cekwana's *Ja'nee* (2003), a performance-installation performed in Zulu and Xhosa languages, which confronts South Africa's problems: AIDS, rape, child abuse and poverty in black communities. However, the confrontation of indigenous culture with the capitalist and urbanist culture of the West is not a simple dichotomy, but a tool to expose at least the patriarchal, oppressive nature of 'tradition' and male domination in African societies. Cekwan's *Influx Controls: I Want to Be* (2009), on the other hand, uses the device of double black face: in painting his face black, the black dancer becomes a caricature of mimesis, intercepting a racist practice and embodying its absurdity. This time, the criticism is also partly directed inward: it targets the apartheid policies of South Africa, where the choreographer was born (*Influx Controls* invokes the

name of a governmental programme that sought to restrict the movement of black citizens within certain neighborhoods).

In a similar vein, the *J'accuse*[15] (2008) solo by Senegalese dancer Pape Ibrahim Ndiaye (Kaolack), which deals with his personal experience of violent racially-motivated detention in a North African country, is also a vehicle for criticism turned inward, one that borrows from the 'white' aesthetic.[16]

The adoption of iconic ballet classics or contemporary choreographic repertoire, such as the aforementioned Maalem's *The Rite of Spring*, presents a particularly interesting example of feedback loop.[17] Here the Eurocentric myth becomes a tool for critical commentary on the post-colonial situation of present-day Africa, in a gesture that simultaneously undermines or criticizes the universal potential of said myth. *The Rite of Spring* was also invoked by Dada Masilo, a young generation choreographer from South Africa and graduate of the Brussels-based P.A.R.T.S. Nevertheless, Masilo's *The Sacrifice* (2022) seems to have failed to fully exploit the critical potential of reappropriation, as it draws primarily on the title and general structure of the myth (here, the mother sacrificing her daughter's life), dispensing with Stravinsky's music in favour of a contemporary composition by African artists, which she supplements with a choreography based on traditional *tswana* dance. Consequently, Masilo created an aesthetically refined work with classical dramaturgy and a powerful lyrical charge, but with little dispute with the myth of *The Rite of Spring*.

Conversely, more iconic and loaded with greater critical potential are Masilo's reinterpretations of the classics: *Romeo and Juliet* (2008), *Carmen* (2009), *Swan Lake* (2010) and *Giselle* (2017), featuring black dancers. Each

of these performances is based on the original libretto; however, in *Swan Lake*, for example, Siegfried is gay, Odile is male, the roles of the swans are danced by both women and men, the artists speak, Tchaikovsky's music is cropped and combined with pieces by other composers (including Steve Reich and Arvo Pärt). The choreographer (who dances the role of Odetta) adeptly blends various techniques of Africa's traditional and popular dances, such as twerking, with the classics, a seemingly daunting task, as the principles of moving one's body in these techniques are extremely different. She clads black, physically diverse bodies in tutus, knocking the sole legitimate choreographies off their pedestals, and while she does so without toppling the monuments, she nonetheless strips white culture of its dominance in ballet, if only for a while.

The *D'abord moi* generation

Masilo's case demonstrates that, *en route* to full emancipation, the youngest generation is still threatened by the neo-colonial dichotomy of tradition and modernity, which no longer arises only from the external gaze, but also from the introspection of the dance community. In fact, towards the end of the first decade of the 21st century, a renewed turn to tradition took place, which was a form of reaction of the young generation, raised in times of economic crises, to the uncertainty of the future (Kringelbach, 2014). When a contemporary artist stays too attached to traditional forms, they are often accused of not being innovative, whereas if they turn away from these forms, leaving them too far behind, they may be charged with the practice of 'uprooting' (Kringelbach, 2014). The presupposition that all African dance is founded on so-called traditional dance forms simultaneously implies that, in order to establish themselves as contemporary artists, African artists must transcend this traditional movement vernacular. The aesthetics of

contemporary African dance should therefore be based on an understanding and knowledge of lineage and archives, while at the same time, as Tiérou postulated, the dancer/performer can transcend tradition by engaging with its formal and qualitative aspects (Sörgel, 2020, p. 33); it is not the purpose, function or content that become the subject, but rather, e.g., rhythms and formal structures. This paradoxical alternative that has emerged in the consciousness of artists and resonated in their works since the first pan-African meetings of contemporary dancers, still largely determines the character of African contemporary dance today.

As Bhabha remarks, quoting Jean-François Lyotard,

> Tradition is that which concerns time, not content. Whereas what the West wants from autonomy, invention, novelty, self-determination, is the opposite - to forget time and to preserve, and accumulate contents. To turn them into what we call history and to think that it progresses because it accumulates. On the contrary, in the case of popular traditions ... nothing gets accumulated, that is the narratives must be repeated all the time because they are forgotten all the time. But what does not get forgotten is the temporal beat that does not stop sending the narratives to oblivion (Bhabha, 1994, p. 57).

African dance artists seem to perfectly implement the postulate of tradition-as-time rather than tradition-as-content, which – while remaining an important element of contemporary creation – updates itself under new contexts and meanings, hybrids and fusing genres, no longer just for an external Western audience, but also as part of a process of self-

determination undertaken by professional African artists. For example, in traditional practice, particular dance and music styles are often restricted to specific social groups, while the performance of a particular dance may be an indication of social status. In some communities, such as in Burkina Faso, Senegal and Mali, this is accompanied by a widespread social stigmatization of stage performance (Sieveking, 2004; Desperes, 2016), especially when it comes to women: conventional performance patterns in locally established cultures are gendered, with many songs and dances reserved exclusively for one sex. Even if they are appropriated by the opposite sex (in accordance with a presupposed, dichotomous view), their function remains gendered (Sieveking, 2004). Contemporary dance deliberately deconstructs this semantic framework, transforming elements of local representations into 'raw material' that can be re-composed and repurposed as a fabric transcending the boundary of a particular social and cultural sphere.

A case in point is the work of Fatou Cissé, a Senegalese choreographer of the younger generation who, in her first group performance commissioned by the Avignon Festival, *Le Bal du Cercle* (2015), took inspiration from the popular urban practice of *tanbeer* (Wolof: nocturnal dance), reserved for women. It is a type of celebratory event where women dress up and dance. However, it is also associated with a form of competition between neighbours or family members, who, moving in a circle, as if in a performative fashion show, prove their superiority in terms of attractiveness, sexual power and individuality. According to Nadine Sieveking, however, what the five dancers – two from Burkina Faso and three from Senegal – perform here is neither tradition, nor nation, nor specific ethnicity; instead, they stage their individual identities as professional women artists, (re)producing the difference between amateurs and professionals. Indeed, women in Senegal or Burkina Faso who choose dance as their vocation to

this day have to grapple with the resistance such a decision usually entails in their social environment. In an environment in which ‘we have no individualism,’ as Fatou Cissé noted, the professional practice of contemporary dance provides an opportunity to assert oneself: *C’est d’abord moi!* (Me First!) (Sieveking, 2017).

Local, global, professional

Many choreographers have argued that, in the African context, the generic label ‘contemporary dance’ indicates nothing more than a designation of practices as ‘modern-day,’ relating to current social, political and cultural life. This takes away from the use of the term ‘contemporary dance’ as a genre criterion (Sieveking, 2004; Desperes, 2016). Nevertheless, a new wave of choreographic talent in the early 21st century across the African continent has established aesthetic norms and artistic principles that largely conform to the conventions identified as the realm of ‘high culture.’ Therefore, contemporary dance is often criticized by local audiences as a culturally alienating genre, copying the art of whites and appealing exclusively to educated audiences in the West or to a small group of expatriates and African urban intellectuals who have adopted Western customs (Sieveking, 2004). Even those who have never attended a contemporary dance performance associate it with an *affaire de blancs* (‘a white thing’). Casual audiences often find it too intellectual, abstract, difficult to access or simply meaningless, and even if they admit that contemporary dance is thought-provoking, its message is often deemed difficult to understand (Sieveking, 2004).

Both audiences and artists entering the space of contemporary dance are

hindered by the disconnect in the close rhythmic relationship of music and dance in the new genres; differences in the use of instrumental language; and the relaxed relationship between the kinetic and textual.

Gradually, however, a more familiar audience has developed, one that is particularly appreciative of the way African performers use dance to articulate changing realities and while also emphasizing the value of local culture and tradition or, conversely, deconstructing its violent, patriarchal patterns (e.g. Cekwana, Cissé). The success of local artists and the opportunities for international cooperation have also prompted a noticeable change in attitudes over the past few years. The youngest artists, often coming out of the practice of traditional dance or urban forms, emphasize dance as a tool to build dialogue and bring nationalities together, and to create networks for artistic collaboration and cultural exchange (Sieveking, 2004), which brings us back to the pioneering Pan-African visions of Acogny and Tiérou.

Contemporary choreography as a conscious appropriation, deconstruction or reconstruction of traditional performance genres, and abolishing linear narratives and established symbolism, further emphasizes the proficiency of individual creative subjects and their ability to create and transform symbolic space. However, even as artists demand recognition of their individuality and refuse to unify under the outdated banner of *négritude*,[18] or 'African dance' aesthetics, they employ the latter category as a marketing mechanism.

Ann Cooper-Albright highlights still other interrelated, derivative barriers facing contemporary dance from Africa, as it enters an international market that is predominantly white and 'Western.' The first such barrier is the struggle for secure employment, while the second is related to the

widespread lack of acceptance for the fact that contemporary African dance theater is not necessarily culturally defined and codified (Sörgel, 2020). The conditions for artistic development in the continent's respective countries reflect the intertwined socio-historical contexts within which the practice of contemporary dance as an art and profession emerged in Africa.

These contexts involve institutions for the training and dissemination of the arts, such as schools, companies, competitions or festivals, and are partly shaped by a legacy of national and international cultural policies, and partly by private initiatives. Their particularities and diverse impact on artistic trajectories contradict the reductionist perspective on contemporary dance in Africa as an extension of the (mainly) French choreographic field (Sieveking, 2017). The importance accorded to the process of professional training in dance has a particular stake here. It is also tied to the influences of Western cultural agendas and practices attendant to the construction of post-colonial national identities, as discussed above. In some cases, such as Burkina Faso, modernity and the development of the arts sector was a premise of the revolutionary regime guided by an active 'cultural reconstruction' (Thomas Sankara's rule in the 1980s), which sought to modernize the local cultural practice, perceived as backward. After the regime's violent collapse, Burkina Faso's new government – in keeping with most countries in the region – withdrew from its commitment to cultural policies and left the development of the arts sector mainly to individual actors who actively participate in international and transcultural collaborations.

This relative freedom – which is in fact spurious as it is limited by lack of funding – is accompanied by the still growing involvement of international development agencies in the promotion and professional development of

contemporary dance in Africa. On the one hand, this underscores the ways in which globalized artistic standards and mainstream development discourses exert influence in the field of dance, but on the other, it demonstrates the increasing inclusion of this relatively new artistic movement in the struggle for greater visibility and control of its own position at the international level. In recent years, the European Union has become an important sponsor of cultural cooperation programmes in the West African region, yet contemporary dance is still dominated by French agencies, which continue to invest in the professionalization of the field. This type of contribution by European agencies and cultural institutions remains ambiguous. Although their influence is precious given the endemic lack of other production structures, it undoubtedly translates into the adoption of patterns of dance production and presentation and the hierarchization of the community according to established Western templates. At the same time, it fails to translate into easy access to the international scene for even the most acclaimed African artists.

This dynamic can be illustrated by the example of the Centre de Developpement Chorégraphique (CDC) La Termitière in Ouagadougou. Officially inaugurated in 2006, the CDC was founded by the directors of the acclaimed ensemble Salia n'i Seydou (itself also created with significant support from French structures). The Centre has become the most influential institution to promote contemporary dance in Burkina Faso, also serving as a focal point in the network of the 'new choreographic movement' in West Africa.

The centre conducts residency projects, provides space, technical facilities and organizational infrastructure to artists, enables workshops and lends its professional stage to live performances. La Termitière offers an

institutionalized framework for the transmission of knowledge, often featuring educators from abroad, and contributes to the formation of a cosmopolitan 'choreographic culture.' It is a public institution – a unique phenomenon on the continent – established with government support, while its funding is provided by international sponsors, mainly the French embassy; it also maintains enduring relations with the National Dance Centre of France. Such strong connotations with France have sparked criticism from the community, which considers La Termitière to be just another French choreographic centre, admittedly located in Ouagadougou, but nevertheless embedded in the French cultural establishment (Sieveking, 2004).

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The pieces and activities that are part of the aesthetic field of 'contemporary African dance' thus implement Pierre Bourdieu's idea of cultural objects as dual entities whose reception cannot be separated from the conditions of their production. '(T)he social conditions of the production (or the invention) and of the reproduction (or the inculcation) of dispositions and classificatory schemas which are activated in artistic perception – the social conditions of that kind of historical transcendental which is the condition of the aesthetic experience' (Bourdieu, 2001, p. 288) are not provided *à priori* here, but instead are an element of the reception process.

In light of the above examples, the processes of reappropriation of the notion of 'contemporary African dance' thus involve practices with a decolonizing potential in the sense that they employ the tools and methods of dominant colonizer cultures in order to gradually intercept specific aesthetic fields.

These practices include Tiérou's declarative ideologies and actions, which

today we would label as managerial; Acogny's hybrid technique of contemporary African dance; the mechanisms of mimicry and feedback loop as a dramaturgical backbone of performances; or the revision of the role and function of tradition in contemporary choreographies, as well as the uncompromising artistic stance of artists rejecting aesthetic and generic presuppositions and the use of Western aesthetics and institutional models for critiques addressed 'inward,' i.e. the deconstruction of oppressive cultural and political patterns in African countries, whether or not related to (de)colonization processes.

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Footnotes

1. I refer here to the field of cultural production as understood by Pierre Bourdieu (1995, pp. 214-277).
2. For more on the term ‘appropriation,’ see among others Kupis, 2019.
3. As Jan Sowa argues in *The Phantom Body of the King*, Poland’s history is also marked by the colonial experience associated with, among other things, the domination of the Russian, Prussian, Habsburg and Soviet empires (Sowa, 2011).
4. The main focus of the text will be on the relations between Europe and Africa, and on artists and creators associated with these areas, hence the notion of ‘black dance’ – which refers primarily to the black community in the US, and has somewhat different origins and connotations – will not be addressed here, nor will traditional dance or artists working exclusively in Europe.
5. Quoted in A. Tiérou: *D’ailleurs l’expression « danse africaine » n’a pas été créée par des Africains. Elle est née en Occident* (Besides, the term ‘African dance’ was not created by Africans. It originated in the West), Chalu; Thérésine, 2013, p. 6.
6. For more on these contemporary urban forms of African dance, see e.g., Szymajda, 2022.
7. Within the frame of this project, the notions of ‘Orient’ and ‘West’ posed ongoing categorization problems for UNESCO (and revealing a distinctly Western-centric perspective on this division), not least because of Japan, which demanded to be included among the Western states, and countries and regions situated between these intuitive zones (such as the then USSR, Turkey), let alone the completely overlooked areas such as Central and Eastern Europe, South America or Australia. See Maurel, 2005.
8. See Edward W. Said, ‘Orientalism today,’ [in:] *Orientalism*, 1979.
9. For more on the network of international dance festivals in Africa, see Szymajda, 2022, and Frétard, Sanou, 2008.
10. Fonds internationals pour la promotion de la culture (International Fund for the Promotion of Culture).
11. In 1980, the fund also financed a rehearsal space for the Rwandan ballet company Amasimbi N’Amakombe, which had ambitions to combine traditional and modern forms. However, numerous projects were found to have failed, mainly for organizational reasons.
12. In the context of neo-colonial perspectives, one can recall a review of the 2006 Poznań presentation of this performance. The audience received the artists rather cooly, among others on account of their ‘non-ballet’ technique and ‘technical deficiencies’; the reviewer postulated that the dancers may have been better off sticking with ‘their original movement and music,’ see Obrębowska-Piasecka, 2003.
13. *La création du monde* (The Creation of the World) was a 1923 production by the Swedish Ballet, with costumes and stage design by Fernand Léger and choreography by Jean Börlin; it drew on African myths about the origin of the world, not without avoiding simplifications and stereotypes tied more to the imagined than actual culture of the continent.
14. The performance’s title may be read as an allusion to Emile Zola’s eponymous open letter in the notorious case of Alfred Dreyfus, a French officer of Jewish descent, falsely

accused of espionage.
15. Radical formal interventions based on intercepting the aesthetic frameworks, genres and discourses of white dance, especially classical ballet, are also employed by Robyn Orlin, a pioneer of contemporary African dance. A white choreographer originally from South Africa, Orlin works with black performers and now mainly resides in Europe. In a similar vein, Steven Cohen, another white artist originating from South Africa and currently working in France, undertakes a critique of apartheid, but also the problems of the queer minority in South Africa, see Szymajda, 2013.
16. I propose here a more general treatment of the notion of 'feedback loop' than is the case with Erika Fischer-Lichte's (2008) theory of performativity; I thus put it in a context that goes beyond the individual situation of performance reception as an abstract and general term for feedback within a given system, i.e. a situation in which a system receives feedback on its performance.
17. The term *négritude* (blackness) proclaimed by the poet Aimé Césaire as an identity marker of the new black culture, mainly in relation to literature, became a symbol of African authors' take on the distorted Eurocentric image of said culture (Fanon, 1952). Césaire, Fanon or Achille Mbembe see blackness not only as a skin color, but 'as a kind of human condition (*la condition nègre*), in which one must recognize the legacy of colonial history and slavery, one that is marked by extreme poverty, cultural marginalization and radical social inequality […] the transnationalization of the black condition is a "constitutive moment of modernity" …, with the black slave as one of its most disturbing figures … In Eurocentric colonial discourse, blackness has been defined as an area of the periphery, identified with the inferior, the backward, the marginal' (Sajewska, 2020, p. 143).
18. On this occasion, I rehash a conclusion emerging from the feedback provided by artists and producers who took part in the discussions held during the Triennial and Biennial of African contemporary dance in Burkina Faso (2016) and Morocco (2021), respectively.

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