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Technical Hierarchies: Carving Space For West African Dance In University Curricula

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TECHNICAL HIERARCHIES:
CARVING SPACE FOR WEST AFRICAN DANCE IN UNIVERSITY CURRICULA

by

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ABSTRACT

“When it comes to traditional dance, we don’t learn steps and combinations, we learn language”

-Akosua Akoto

This thesis is an inquiry into the place of West African dance in university curricula in the United States and the technical hierarchies that persist in dance programs. Focusing on ballet, modern dance, and West African dance, I draw on theories of Africanist aesthetics in dominant American dance forms, embodied knowledge, and concepts of technique as a value-based system. Using these frameworks, I highlight disparities in American dance curricula, alongside historical advancements and shortcomings, while offering interventions derived from my embodied practice of all three forms. I offer my lived experiences, both learning and teaching, in suggesting methods that seek to balance the need to preserve cultural material and codify information for transmission. My navigation through the American collegiate system serves to provide methods to create inclusive and representative dance education for all students. By implementing West African movement into University curricula alongside existing dominant forms such as ballet and modern, I argue that the unequal technical value placed on the African dance, and the terms by which West African dance currently exist in the University can be rectified.

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INTRODUCTION

I was born in Togo, West Africa, and spent the early part of my life there. I'd always been a dancer according to my mother. Normally I would categorize this type of statement as a mother supporting her child, even if I had two left feet, but my mom (Judy) had a pretty fierce mambo back in the day, so I think she may have known a thing or two about dance. I did not start taking any formal dance classes until I was nine years old and living in Flint, Michigan. I was enrolled in an after-school dance program, and it was there that I was introduced to ballet. I was immediately drawn to ballet and focused most of my time training in that form until I graduated from college.

I ask myself at times why dance has had such a large influence in my life. Simply put, it has always been a constant for me, year after year. Dance is deeply integrated into daily activities in Togo. Some sort of movement or dance is present when rejoicing, mourning, or just socializing. As a child I attended Vodou ceremonies on a weekly basis. Also known as Vodun, Vodou, or Voodoo, Vodou is a West African religious culture that consists of traditional practices from numerous ethnic groups. It involves ritual dance and drumming practices where the Vodus, or spirits/divinities, manifest in the dancing bodies of worshippers. It entails a number of different groupings or families of Vodus, such as Gorovodu, the Vodou of the kola nut (Rosenthal 1998, 22). My father, a Gorovodu practitioner at the time, had to be present at all functions in the village of Gbetsogbé, and my mother, Judy Rosenthal, had decided to pursue a doctorate in anthropology and was doing her field work in that village. As a family we spent quite a bit of time in Gbetsogbé, so it was only natural for us to practice Vodou as well. Despite my young age, I was encouraged to attend and to participate in ceremonies, which usually resulted in my

spending those nights imitating the movements I saw, whether they were being danced by those I perceived to be in trance, or by attendees like myself. "The Voduns want our arms, and legs to dance. Gods come to possess human beings because they want to dance in pleasure as they did before becoming slaves" (Rosenthal, 196).

I found that dancing could not be separated from one's way of worshipping in Vodun because it was, and is, highly regarded as a necessary aspect in honoring the Vodun (spirits). These ceremonies that I danced in were the beginnings of my embodied education in West African dance. Most dances, having been derived from traditional expression or ritual, use movement as a means to communicate. When dancing these forms, you are using your physical body to speak for you. It is a form of communication that is embodied and includes lived experiences, but it must be learned and cultivated through continued practice. Through dance worship, my embodied knowledge of West African forms began to solidify. I define embodied knowledge, in alignment with Yvonne Daniel's study of ritual dance practices, as knowledge wherein the body, not the mind, is the knowing subject (Daniel 2005).

Everyone who attended a ceremony was encouraged to dance and sing, but, as I got older, the dancing we were doing was unlike that of those who had been possessed (in trance) by a visiting spirit. A person in trance moved about the ceremony as they pleased. Some even left for a period of time to go visit a person in the village who may not have attended the ceremony. They would also conduct the drummers to play what they wanted to hear when they grew bored of the rhythms being played for him/her/them. By contrast, our steps were those that we all knew as a collective, generally danced in pairs or groups of people, traversing the length of the enclosure built for the ceremony. This was similar in structure to West African dance classes I

later took in New York City, where we learned steps by imitating another participant, or were taught by a more experienced dancer, and repeated them while traveling across the marley floor.

This structure offers a frame of “see-do,” which reflects the communal nature of dancing in West Africa in West African dance classrooms in the United States. It echoes a West African worldview, even as it is transplanted in the Americas: “Dance was the most difficult of all art forms to erase from the slave’s memory. In a sense, the body is mind, and is capable of inscribing in space the language of the human spirit” (Stuckey 1995, 55). My “body as mind” described above by Stuckey, was born in Africa and immigrated to the United States at the age of nine. I have had the unique experience of living and dancing in both West African and African American cultures. This singular experience has shaped me as a woman and a dancer. Though I do not have (proven) familial history that ties me to the Atlantic slave trade, I have the embodied knowledge of a West African dancer as well as that of an African American trained in traditionally Western forms like ballet and modern dance. Both of these dimensions required years of embodied study to cultivate. The continuity of dance for people taken from Africa and enslaved, evident in Africanist retentions in American dance practices, relates to my own experience of continuing to dance in America with my West African embodied knowledge. However, I learned early on in my technical training in Michigan that the only viable options for “serious” dance, were ballet and modern.

It was my junior year as an undergraduate. I had specifically chosen Grand Valley State University in Michigan because I knew the director of the dance department, and it was one of the few universities that offered a ballet-based program. I was fully immersed in the ballet program I had chosen for myself, but realized I was very unhappy. I dreaded going to rehearsals for our spring production of *Carmen*. I found myself crying in the dressing room either before or

after every rehearsal. I should have been ecstatic to have the lead role, but I would have preferred to never do another *fouetté* turn, or tape my toes, or pad my pointe shoes to avoid more blisters.

Our program director announced that we had been given the opportunity to go to the Edna Manley School of Performing Arts in Kingston, Jamaica, through a week-long exchange program. When we arrived in Kingston, I felt like I was back home in Togo. As a young black woman, I was once again part of the majority. For the first time, I witnessed traditional forms of dance not only in a studio setting, but in a university context. In Flint, I had been part of a dance community that favored ballet and rarely spoke of, or even included, any other forms of dance in our curriculum. In Kingston, at the Edna Manley school, each dance form (such as Horton, Graham, Ballet, traditional Jamaican and West African dance) was held at the same level of importance. It was refreshing for me to dance, learn, and share stories with dancers and teachers that looked like me. I realized later that this was a turning point in my struggle to become comfortable with my African identity and my journey trying to figure out where I fit in the ballet world, if at all. From that week-long trip to Jamaica, I gained an artistic voice that felt true to me, and I began to open myself to other forms of dance. I created space for myself to grow and expand as a professional dancer in forms that I hadn't previously considered.

My dance experience in Jamaica was emotionally impactful. The rhythms, steps and the exact precision with which they were done, resembled the dances I remembered doing in Africa so much that it left no doubt in my mind that Jamaican forms emerged from the African forms. When I was in Jamaica, I felt as though I had been transported back to Togo. The traditional Jamaican dances, and the percussive music that we were taught in our classes invoked memories of being in Gbetsobgé, dancing and being guided by the drums. My "body as mind" felt at home, comfortable learning this movement that was new and yet simultaneously familiar. This was an

opportunity to explore movement that was culturally relevant to me in a space that welcomed the impressive arch of my lower back and the bend in my knees, rather than trying to “correct” them.

I did not begin formal training in West African dance forms until I was in my post undergraduate dance studies. I attended the Alvin Ailey school in New York City, where African dance was offered as an elective in supplement to my required course of study: ballet and modern dance, focused mainly on Horton and Graham techniques. I was twenty-three at the time, a classically trained ballerina. The years I had put into perfecting my pirouettes were also required for an understanding of rhythms such as the *Doundounba* and the proper execution of the nuanced signature step of its accompanying dance. My years of honing nuanced physical details in ballet meant that I was able to bend my knees and twist my body while opening one arm to create just the right amount of torque so that, when I pushed onto *relevé* and snapped my head around to “spot” in a turn, I would not throw myself off balance. This level of technical specificity was also required for the proper execution of the *Doundouba* signature step—arms moving in a continuous motion with the arms bent and parallel to the floor, both hands, palms facing down (sometimes in held fists) moving towards and away from each other, shifting weight from side to side while the feet tap in a counter rhythm to that of the arms. The arms match the tempo of the accompanying *Sangba* drum (depending on which version of the *Doundounba* rhythm is being played), while the feet maintain the melody generally played by the lead djembe drummer. The attention to detail that I learned in my ballet practice was required equally for proper execution in West African dance. Both forms required technical acuity.

I learned that, despite not having named individual steps, every rhythm, such as *Doundouba*, had a library of movement that was known by all those who were either of the

ethnic group(s) being represented or learned from them by professional dancers. These professional dancers, as members of a local or national dance company (often referred to as the National Ballet of [respective country], i.e. Senegal, Guinea, Ghana, etc.), were responsible for learning all the dances and songs of the ethnic groups represented in the country. I had been taking West African dance (specifically Guinean) for six years before I ever visited the country to study dance. There were a handful of rhythms that I had been studying and could easily identify. One of those rhythms was *Mendjiani*, a rhythm that was, and still is, very popular to teach all levels of students because of its dynamic movement and percussive accompaniment. To my relief, *Mendjiani* was the first dance we were to study during the month-long cultural exchange I participated in when I finally visited Guinea. I thought I would have an easy transition from dancing in a studio format to being immersed in Guinean culture. However, when the moment arrived, the drummers began drumming faster than the tempo to which I'd been accustomed to dancing, while playing a rhythm I had never heard before. I pulled my teacher, Youssouf Koumbassa, to the side and asked what rhythm he was teaching, to which he responded, "*Mendjiani*." He proceeded to explain that a lot of people in the United States teach (at all levels of education) their own interpretations of Guinean dances, while calling those interpretations by a traditional name, such as *Mendjiani*. I had apparently been taught the steps of *Mendjiani* but to the rhythm *Kuku* (another popular Guinean dance). This experience seemed to be common amongst students studying West African dance.

In the U.S. academy, West African dance occupies an ambivalent position. It is frequently present in curricula, but teachers are not held to the same standards as ballet and American modern dance. This is reflected in uneven curricular structures: why is this the case? West African dance is composed of movement vocabularies that have not only influenced how

American dancers move and create dance but have also influenced the current pillars of U.S. dance education (modern and ballet curricula). It should therefore be taught in conjunction with them and given equivalent value.

In modern dance and ballet, teachers study specific techniques, in which proficiency needs to be demonstrated in their movement and teaching, especially in order to teach at the collegiate level. Why then, are West African dances, and those who teach them, not held to the same standard? Ultimately, I suggest that it is perhaps the lack of a written history that is keeping African-based dance out of the realm of “high art,” historically associated with concert dance forms like ballet and modern dance and legitimized through university education as the standard of dance knowledge. I argue that allowing the teaching of a distorted or false version of an embodied history under the rubric of traditional West African dance, especially in a university context, degrades the status of those forms as embodied knowledge in all their complexities, as well as the labor of those who have dedicated their lives to studying and teaching it.

In what follows, I define my key theoretical terms, followed by a historicization of West African dance as a concert form in the U.S. and the entry of West African dance into U.S. universities. I discuss my lived experiences and positionality, which offer key data and insights into my study of the transmission of my embodied experiences to other dancers. This is followed by a discussion of technical hierarchies in university curricula and three case studies of practitioners theorizing productive methods of pedagogy for West African dance forms conceptualized as techniques. Then, I turn to an examination of how West African dance practices demand a consideration of other ways of understanding embodied knowledge and/as technique. I discuss issues with pedagogical practices, lack of structural equity in university

curricula, and, to conclude, I provide recommendations for creating more inclusive collegiate dance departments and programs.

DEFINING THE TERMS: EMBODIED KNOWLEDGE & AFRICAN DANCE

West African dance is a highly personal experience. It asks you to use your entire body and mind while engaging in the movement. Most dances, having been derived from traditional expression or ritual, use movement as a means to communicate. As defined by Yvonne Daniel, embodied knowledge “informs and challenges the notion of hierarchical types of knowledge. Embodied knowledge—that is, knowledge found within the body, within the dancing and drumming body—is rich and viable and should be referenced among other kinds of knowledge” (Daniel 2005, 4). When dancing these forms, my physical body speaks for me, reflecting the embodied knowledge derived from my lived experiences and years of training across diverse forms. I carry this belief with me in my creative process in the studio. Using my embodied experiences and knowledge as a key method in my research, I hope to show, in both my written and performed thesis, the ways in which West African dance techniques permeate what is considered my formal training (ballet and modern dance), as well as how these vocabularies constitute a technical movement practice, one that I was exposed to prior to my study of these historically privileged, Western forms.

“African dance” is a contested term, which is broadly used in reference to the entire continent and its people. When referring to dance from the African continent it is safe to say that nobody is speaking of a form that is inclusive of all ethnic groups in the continent’s fifty-four nations. It is more effective to name the country of focus, later specifying regions and ethnic groups, as each has specific dances with accompanying rhythms. I was introduced to the New York City African dance and drum community in 2006 through a class taught by Maguette

Camara at the Alvin Ailey School of Dance. This class was offered as an elective course, designed to expose the full-time Ailey students to West African, specifically Guinean, dance and drum culture. I expanded my study of African dance forms to include those from Senegal, Ivory Coast, Ghana, Togo, and South Africa, but focused primarily on the dances of Guinea. In what follows, my discussion and examples of West African dance focus primarily on the dances and rhythms from the Republic of Guinea, which are currently the most recognizable forms taught in the United States (Johnson 2012). I also consider the historical role of West African dance on the U.S. concert stage, its impact on dominant U.S. concert dance forms, and its history in American universities.

What then is African, West African, and Guinean dance? Embodied knowledge? Technique? Drawing on interviews with practitioners, informal conversations with dancers, and my own history of training and depth of knowledge in these various forms, I define African/West African/Guinean dance as: any performed movement (ritual or secular) associated with a specific African country and/or ethnic group. I use the term West African to reference the collection of practices I have learned from across the region (as I am not a practitioner of dances from the eastern part of the continent), and I use the term Guinean to specify the cultural and ethnic dances and rhythms from this country, which are my primary focus.

The choreographic component of this thesis that I am working on has become what seems to me like a work that will forever be “unfinished,” due to being forced to reshape it from semester to semester as a result of different constraints. The first iteration was a solo work. I found it easy to allow myself to be in the “space” I had created using ethnographic sonic material gathered from Togo by one of my mother’s students. In this sonic environment, I could either be still or allow my body to react to what it was hearing and feeling. These movements were a

mixture of my pluralistic dance training and the subject matter that drove me to create the piece. My only concern was using that movement, and sound to speak to my audience. This audience's gaze has been on a figure that has "appeared" and "disappeared" in the dim light of the room. Never fully visible, she chooses only portions of herself to show this audience. As she emerges from the darkness for what will be her final reveal, she allows the audience to gaze upon her face. Allowing them to gaze upon her entire body. Holding a *calabash* (gourd) in her hands, she surveys this audience as her chest slowly heaves up and down, and she raises her arms above her head. With a slow blink, she seems to tell this audience that she now gives them permission. Permission to close their eyes with her as she lowered her head. A strange sound suddenly jerks their eyes open to see a trickle of water from the *calabash* down her body and creating a small puddle on the black floor. Together, she (I) and this audience let out a long sigh, letting go.

My lived experience of West African dance at a collegiate level also informs my research. Each class I have taken (or am currently taking), each rehearsal for my piece, interview, and workshop that I attend, all help to paint a broader picture of the current status of West African dance practices in the U.S., and particularly in universities, along with providing answers about to how to move forward in attempting to change the inequalities of its systemic positioning. I believe that West African dance needs to be embodied. It has to be danced, not just theorized or studied from textbooks. My lived experience is an integral dimension of my research project.

By teaching Guinean dance forms concurrently with ballet and modern, and with structural equality in the curriculum, instructors can create syllabi that explore the beginnings of each dance form inclusive of music, and highlight when and how they began to influence one another, and trace their paths to present day dance practices and performance. Providing these

courses with structural parity allows students to learn each movement style in-depth, ultimately producing a more versatile dancer, should one choose to enter the professional field, and a well-rounded dancer with understanding of these distinct dance techniques that are imbricated in U.S. concert dance and its history.

HISTORIES OF WEST AFRICAN DANCE IN U.S. PERFORMANCE

In the 1920s and '30s, Nigerian and Sierra Leonean dance and drum practices were introduced to New York City on the concert stage. Efrom Odok was the first to present West African dance in a concert stage format, while Asadata Dafora established the first African dance company, which remained in existence until the early 1960s (Heard & Mussa 2002). In the 1950s, Guinean dance was introduced in the United States by Les Ballet Africains, the national ballet company of Guinea. As francophone African countries gained their independence (Guinea in 1958 and Senegal in 1960), there were increased efforts to highlight and present African cultural arts, both at home and on international stages. The first elected president of Senegal, Léopold Sédar Senghor, was influenced by the Harlem Renaissance in spearheading (in collaboration with other artists) the political-cultural movement known as Négritude, a protest against French colonial rule and the policy of cultural assimilation. Senegal's independence from France, and the creation of the National Ballet of Senegal, led to cultural exchanges with the U.S. These exchanges were motivated by desires to share African cultural histories during the Black Power and Black Arts Movement in the late 1960s and '70s. Africans and African Americans desired to connect through African dance and music and were vocal about the need for these connections on the continent and in the diaspora.

Dance studies theorist Brenda Dixon-Gottschild has written about the specificities and influences of African-derived, or Africanist, aesthetic influences in American dance music, film, and visual arts, to name a few (Gottschild 1998, xiii). In highlighting the history of the relationship between West African and African American dance in the United States, I seek to begin the conversation of how to hold those involved in sharing these cultures accountable for

the information they are teaching, along with holding academic institutions accountable for valuing the diverse forms that make up American dance practices according to equal standards of rigor. Not only has West African Dance had its own history on the U.S. concert stage, but these forms have contributed movement vocabulary to the two most dominant dance forms in the United States (ballet and modern dance), as well as informed choreographic ideologies of these forms in efforts to create dance practices unique to American dancers and choreographers.

Some examples of Africanist movement contributions to American concert dance can be found in canonical ballet pieces choreographed by George Balanchine, “the father of American ballet,” such as *Apollo* (1928) and later *Symphony in Three Movements* (1972). These include what became known as his signature style of using hip displacement, leg kicks, attacking the beat, angular arms and bent wrists. These innovations in ballet have been established as incorporating Africanist aesthetics to make a uniquely American form of ballet (Gottschild 2001, 336).

In terms of modern dance, Martha Graham choreographed works like *Lamentation* (1930) and *Appalachian Spring* (1944) that earned her the title of the “mother of American modern dance.” Graham is said to have utilized Delsartean contraction and release technique but does not mention her Native and African American influences in terms of groundedness and principles of contraction and release (Gottschild 1998, 49). I argue that these two choreographers were heavily influenced by what Brenda Dixon-Gottschild refers to as Africanist ideologies. This ideological framework is a mixture of African and African American performance that involves polycentrism/polyrhythm, high affect juxtaposition, ephemerism, and an aesthetic of the cool (Gottschild 1998, 332-340). As the aesthetics derived from West African dance have been central to the construction of U.S. concert dance forms, West African dance forms themselves

should therefore be regarded as an equal to American ballet and modern dance in terms of its curricular standing in higher education.

HISTORY OF WEST AFRICAN DANCE IN THE UNIVERSITY

It would be incorrect to say that there are no universities that offer West African dance in their undergraduate and graduate programs. However, their existence in these the academy, I have come to discover, was not due to an attempt to create a more inclusive course of study, but rather arose from a government mandate. In the 1960s, universities rushed to fulfill new requirements implemented by the Johnson administration in response to student protest movements (Green 2011). However, little has been done since their inception to develop these curricula in any depth, beyond a “band aid” that was slapped on, to superficially hold up “diversity” requirements after all these years. Rip it off, and we are still met with recurring structural questions: What is being taught? How is it evaluated and valued? What are the curricular standards? And who is being hired to teach? Doris Green experienced this historical dynamic firsthand. She states:

I was an undergraduate, one of only four Blacks in the Department of Health, Physical Education and Recreation at Brooklyn College. We were questioned by the Chairman to see what courses could be offered by the Department (in efforts to fulfill President Johnson’s Mandate to include courses on Black and Minority Studies). I suggested African Dance. The idea clicked, and in 1969, I became the first person to teach African dance at Brooklyn College. (Green, 17)

In this particular case, it was a coincidence that Green was attending Brooklyn College at that time and had studied African dance before entering the school. Though she was not there as a dance major, her prior experience and focus on musicology provided her with knowledge that had previously not been considered relevant, but now was desperately needed. Though Green taught a movement class, the course was placed in the Department of Health, and Physical education as opposed to the Arts. There weren't many colleges that had black studies

departments at that time (as those were also implemented as a result of the student protest movements), and there were no doctoral degree programs in black studies, if a student wanted to pursue that course of study further. “The first program that led to a doctoral degree in African or Black Studies was at Temple University in 1988” (Green, 18). Until then, it was up to individual departments to create and implement coursework that not only fulfilled the mandate imposed on them but that would interest the student body. Because of their haphazard incorporation into the university curricula through the Johnson administration’s mandate, West African dance forms have continued to occupy a marginalized position in relation to other dance genres in university curricula. This is due to a hierarchy of genres understood and valued as dance techniques.

In her research on the intersection between technique and African diasporic dance forms in university curricula, Raquel L. Monroe reminds us, referencing the work of Nyama McCarthy-Brown, that “Margaret H’Doubler the mother of Modern dance in the academy was a product of the racist ideals of the 1900s, and it influenced her creation of the field of Dance Education as she shunned Jazz dance, excluded black music and dance from her curriculum” (Monroe 2011, 46). This history of racist exclusion requires work to destabilize a system that was built on exclusionary principles. Progress has been made through the development of Black/Africana studies programs and the establishment of dance studies in dance departments. However, “In dance, we have yet to shake the ideology that informs what makes a good dancer. That is, we still adhere to European aesthetics, which value the lines of ballet technique over the rhythmic isolations and contractions of dances influenced by the African Diaspora” (Monroe 2011, 46.)

TECHNICAL HIERARCHIES: TECHNIQUE AS STANDARD OF VALUE

Africans have been characterised by Westerners as 'licentious, savage and heathenistic', an attitude confirmed to the Western observer by the performance of African dance forms. In-depth research can dispel such perceptions while providing at the same time firm evidence that Africans have not been short on the complexity of the creative process and the sustainability of what the human being anywhere can produce from the individual and collective creative imagination and intellect.

-Sir Rex Nettleford

A common misconception about African derived dance forms are that they are easy to do (and therefore do not require intensive study), along with associations derived from primitivism, which assume that those who perform these forms are simply moving in natural, wild, and lewd ways. How can these musically and physically complex polyrhythmic ways of moving be natural or happen all by chance? If West African dance is natural or random, why is it that people struggle to execute the form? At stake are questions of rigor and technique in relation to the value placed on dance forms.

Technique is defined (in a preliminary google search) as "a way of carrying out a particular task, especially the execution or performance of an artistic work or a scientific procedure" (google). To be more specific, I googled "what is technique in dance." This search resulted in: "Technique is the basis of all fundamentals of dance, from holding your body correctly while performing, to executing skills properly in a routine. Strong technique extends across all areas of dance, regardless of the style of your routine" (google). The most recent amendment to this entry was from early 2018. According to both of these definitions African and African Diasporic forms are technical, yet they are often still relegated to the degraded categorization of ethnic forms of expression, which has a problematic relationship to concert dance discourses of primitivism (Kealiinohomoku 1980; Carrico 2016).

Who decides what dance forms are considered technically-based versus culturally inherent? And how is value assigned along this spectrum? African-based movement has long been categorized in concert dance discourses as either being spiritual/ritualistic or lewd and savage (Kealiinohomoku 1980). Neither categorization references the idea of technical proficiency. These discourses provide the basis for sentiments that are still common among many contemporary concert performance viewers. According to Joann Kealiinohomoku, it is the biased historians of Western concert dance who created these discourses that haunt African-based forms in the academy, such as John Martin, Walter Terry, and Lincoln Kirstein (1980). These arbiters of American concert dance elevated ballet and modern as the dominant dance forms (followed by contemporary, lyrical, and with the potential inclusion of hip-hop in more recent years). Their writing constitutes the biased conditions of knowledge production surrounding dance in the U.S. academy. Do African and African American viewers not wish for representation of themselves and recognition for their artistic contributions? Some of us ain't here for it and are tired of being labeled as "basic." Especially when our supposed "natural born ability" to move our hips rhythmically, and the ease with which we seem to do it, eludes some of the most eager and diligent students. Perhaps the issue is that the technique is so nuanced and intricate that it escapes them?

My post undergraduate dance study at the Ailey school was the first time anyone had ever spoken to me about African-based dance forms in a formal setting. Until that point, it had never crossed my mind to consider the dancing and drumming I learned from watching and mimicking my cousins in Togo, West Africa as a technical form. Nor did any of my teachers in studio contexts ever think to position these forms in this way. As discussed previously, rhythms such as *Doundounba*, and the proper execution of the nuanced signature step of its

accompanying dance, require nuanced technical understanding. These forms therefore constitute a complex system of knowledge, which is clearly possible to teach. However, a person should be qualified to share such information with students, just as modern dance and ballet teachers have specific techniques they have studied, knowledge of which must be demonstrated in their movement and teaching, especially in order to teach at the collegiate level.

The work of several theorists and dance studies scholars relevant to my research include Kariamtu Welsh-Asante's work on the embodied contributions of African dance in America (Welsh-Asante 1998). Welsh-Asante developed a contemporary African dance technique named Umfundalai. Pulling from her pan-African and Afro-Diasporic findings, she developed this technique that outlines the pillars of African dance and is currently taught by her protégés in various universities in the United States. Through Welsh-Asante's development of the Umfundalai technique, she has positioned West African dance as a technical form in university curricula. This is an intervention that I am building upon with my research into the status of West African forms in university curricula.

Brenda Dixon Gottschild's investigations into Africanist aesthetic principles as articulations of African diasporic aesthetic ideals are also germane to my research. In Gottschild's formulation, technique is evidenced in ideal execution according to these principles. Her framework includes an examination of: repetition, democratic equality of body parts, polyrhythm and polycentrism, dancing with bent knees, ephibism, high-affect juxtaposition, an aesthetic of the cool, and the relationship between body/mind/spirit, to name a few (Gottschild 2001). She looks at African dance in comparison to ballet, modern, and postmodern dance to highlight the connections between these four genres, connections that have allowed American dance culture to stand apart from Western European forms. Gottschild also speaks about how

African dance and African dance aesthetics have long been categorized as inferior to concert dance and in university programs despite being a powerful influence in American concert dance as a whole (Gottschild 1998, 2).

In most collegiate dance programs, Ballet and Modern are the foundations on which dancers build their technical practice. Accompanying these are generally options of electives including Jazz, Hip Hop, and “African.” Jazz is mostly pursued by those with Broadway or musical theater aspirations, while Hip Hop has gained international recognition through competition-based shows such as “America’s Best Dance Crew,” and has become accepted in the commercial dance field as a technical form requiring study. “African dance,” however, remains primarily an elective course of study with few professional dancers seeking proficiency in the forms included in the umbrella.

It is important to my research and movement practice to be clear about how the concept of technique has presented itself in the forms that I have studied—ballet, modern dance, and West African/diasporic forms—and how the concept of technique has defined my embodiment of these dance forms. In my danced experience, a technically versed dancer in ballet is one who embodies upright and held form and grace, seeming to move effortlessly at all times. In modern dance, one develops technique as the ability to play with “release,” allowing the body to be grounded and revealing the “work” involved in the movement, which is hidden in ballet. In West African dance, I have found that all the dancers whom I admire, Koumbassa for example, embody technique in ways that combine the held nature of ballet, the groundedness of modern dance, and the tradition of non-verbal storytelling from multiple cultural traditions.

PRACTITIONERS AS THEORISTS OF WEST AFRICAN DANCE (AS) TECHNIQUE

The second version of the choreographed thesis piece, following my initial solo, was a duet between my friend Akakpo and me. He has much more knowledge in traditional Togolese dance and song, while I relied mainly on my ballet and modern background during the rehearsal process. It was advantageous for me that we were both from Togo, and I used that as the foundation on which we reworked the solo into a duet. We were “copying” each other’s instinctive and habitual movements. We were both able to employ a method of seeing, then doing, by relying on that foundational pedagogy of “see do,” and I did not feel as though I had to teach or provide much context for him to understand our shared movement vocabulary.

As previously mentioned, West African dance is traditionally transmitted through storytelling and other methods of oral and embodied transmission. The focus lies on learning from a person that is older or more versed in the dance or history one is attempting to learn. Because of the lack of written material or historical documentation of traditional West African forms, practitioners function as historians, teachers, and theorists who are tasked to carry on knowledge and pass it on to future generations.

Lacina Coulibaly (Vernacular Context of Learning)

I had the opportunity to work with Lacina Coulibaly in the fall of 2019 at Sarah Lawrence College, when he set a piece for our performance project graduate coursework. Coulibaly, a professor at Yale University from Burkina Faso, is an internationally acclaimed performer and choreographer. He was eager to discuss my interest in the intersections between West African dance, concepts of technique in these forms, and their presence (or lack thereof) in

American collegiate dance programs. I provided him a simple prompt: “What do you think about West African dance not being considered a technical form of dance?” He responded:

What is fundamental in the study of African dance? How do we perceive the technique in African dance? In theory, people have a lot to say, and they really know how to speak about the dance, but in practice they are incapable of showing or teaching you a *savoir-faire* that fits with their theory(ies). Those who are really good in African dance are not that good in theory. That is the biggest problem in African dance. There is a need and urgency of gathering dancers and thinkers to discuss about Africa dance and start to establish a curriculum for African dance. (Coulibaly 2019)

Coulibaly’s statement highlights my argument that West African dance is a form that has been primarily taught by passing embodied knowledge from person to person. Teaching dance in such a manner is generally practice-based, founded in and transmitted through implicit embodied theories (“*savoir-faire*”) rather than discursive textual theory, but it is no less void of technical knowledge. Coulibaly shares my belief that finding a way to bring the embodied and discursive theoretical knowledges of West African dance into conversation with one another will help to establish the form in university curricula.

In his Yale University faculty bio, where he is a professor of West African dance, Coulibaly is described as being “trained in West African dance and European contemporary dance” (“Lacina Coulibaly”). It must be noted that Coulibaly’s course at Yale is one of very few in the U.S. that requires a technical placement class to enroll in the West African Dance class. In my research, I could not find any other existing programs with this requirement. West African Dance classes are usually placed in curricula as electives and therefore marketed as open level courses. This reinforces the existing notion that technical ability is required to execute ballet and modern, as they are usually listed with levels in which students strive to progress whereas technique is not required for West African dance forms, as there are no levels to progress through.

In an introductory discussion with our graduate class, Coulibaly shared that he never partook in what is considered to be formal training in any of the forms that he teaches or performs. The most time he has spent in a traditional classroom setting was a month or less as a part of a workshop from a visiting artist or while on tour. He further elaborated that he began dancing by watching other people dancing in Burkina Faso and being invited to join in. He would essentially improvise movement based on prompts that he and fellow dancers would provide, or mimic others to improve his skills in traditional dance forms.

His “unconventional” personal history in dance education is evident in his methods of teaching our class. By providing scenarios and emotional prompts, he leads us in movement practices through our own improvised material or movement that he develops while dancing with us. Rehearsals always began with Coulibaly leading a quick warm up for everyone, followed by an anecdote or story. For the purpose of the piece he was creating, we discussed what it would feel like if we were to partake in a protest about something that we were very passionate about. We could not use our voices to express our frustration and had to let the emotions “simmer” within ourselves until we could no longer hold them in, and our bodies found a way to release them. The movements that we “released” were then taught to others and repeated to create phrase work that we combined to create the piece. Though we had time to ourselves to think about our prompts, we were always in motion and Coulibaly remained active with us, often imitating movement that he witnessed, and we had not realized we had done. Coulibaly’s practice of dancing with us, and directing us to create based on our reactions and emotions, is his way of enacting his theories of West African dance as a form that requires a mixture of showing-teaching-doing. He embodies theory in his pedagogy through methods that affirm my argument about West African dance requiring person to person models of transmission.

Dr. Darian Parker (West African Studio/Community Based Context)

Let your foot touching the ground be the reason why the rest of your body moves. Let the energy rise from the ground, into your feet, up your legs, base of your spine, chest, neck and finally up to your head and out the top of your scalp. Let the energy roll through and let your body follow.

--Dr. Darian Parker

We are attempting to learn a short piece of choreography for a family day showing at Sarah Lawrence College. It is a mixture of dances from Guinea and Ghana. As I look around the room, I am amazed by how many ways the professor, Dr. Darian Parker, has come up with to try to explain an undulation of the spine. Given that the class is an elective, it is a mixture of lower and upper level cohorts, ranging from students who have never danced before to those who are in the MFA in Dance program. The range in level proves to be a challenge in itself for a professor attempting to create a course of study that is engaging to all the students in the class while catering to widely varying levels of experience in West African forms. Though there are other students in the class that may have more years of formal dance training than me, I am the only one who can undulate my spine. Is it because I am the only person of African descent in the class besides the professor, who is African American? Or is it because he and I share similar dance backgrounds, having been trained in ballet, modern, and West African/African diasporic styles? The structure of the class provides students with much needed exposure to West African dance forms but does not reflect the same technical value in the curriculum as that of the Contemporary (three levels) and ballet (two levels) in the same department.

Dr. Darian Parker is a choreographer, author, entrepreneur, and West African dance professor at Sarah Lawrence College specializing in Guinean and Malian dance. When asked to discuss issues of terminology, technique, and pedagogy around the ambivalent term “African dance” he responded in this way:

I have a decidedly narrow definition of African dance. If necessary, I can justify my choices. For me, African dance is dance that has a direct genealogical link to traditional African dance forms. As a performance genre, African dance is dance that uses movement to self-consciously reference that genealogy. I'll address my concept of technique for African dance. Technique involves the embodiment of emotions, ideas, and attitudes as movement. Therefore, every movement must be animated by, and has its source, a register of feelings and ideas. For example, it is not enough for someone to simply make the torso fluid; that fluidity must be animated by a feeling. Thus, the proper execution of African dance technique requires a complete commitment to the emotion or idea that inspires it. Teaching and enforcing African dance technique is just as much about offering directives for the body as it is about guiding thought and affect. (Parker 2019)

Dr. Parker employs emotion in his teaching strategies but differs from Coulibaly in the pedagogical structure of his class. Dr. Parker initially studied Malian and Guinean dance in community led classes in the United States and later in Mali. Dr. Parker's class follows a structure of a warmup, a series of movements across the floor to introduce or review the rhythm and dance being studied, and ends with a choreographic sequence. Once the sequence is learned, edits are made, and that is when the prompts of adding ideas, emotions, and attitudes are usually introduced. This approach to teaching traditional forms places the focus on the technical aspect of West African dance before attention is brought to the embodied experience. As I go through my rehearsals, Dr. Parker's approach to West African dance has provided me with tools to enact my argument that the aspects of emotion and technique in West African dance occur concurrently.

Germaine Acogny (Vernacular Context alongside Ballet and Modern Training)

Germaine Acogny, founder of Les Ecoles Des Sables in Senegal and creator of the Acogny technique, is sometimes criticized because of her use of Ballet terminology in her codified African-based dance technique. However, she affirms that, despite the ballet training she received, she will always be African, and her movement would always be derived from

African dance (Acogny interview 2019). In fact, she inverts the paradigm of Western concert dance historiography by positioning ballet as indebted to the technique of West African forms: “I believe African dance is the base of Western dance forms. We take our movement from the earth, from being grounded. Even in Ballet to properly execute a leap or a *pirouette* you have to first *plié* and ground yourself. Where do you think they got that from?” (Acogny interview 2019). Dance scholar Susan Foster supports this claim in her analysis of Acogny’s technique:

Although she borrowed from ballet its categorization of positions and steps, and I would argue spatial stability to each position’s look, she did not incorporate ballet’s insistence on the geometric structure informing the poses. The moves in her vocabulary continue to require a groundedness, a sense of dynamism moving from the ground up through the feet and inhabiting the entire body—that she describes as specifically African. (Foster 2010, 123).

In Acogny’s week-long workshop at Sarah Lawrence College, the influences of her experiences in different dance forms were very distinct to me but worked together in perfect unison to be accessible to all the students in the class. Aspects of ballet, modern, sabar (Senegalese dance), Ghanaian, Beninese, and Ivorian dance were a few of the vocabularies, techniques, and approaches that I was able to identify during the week-long workshop. Classes were led by Acogny and, despite being at times limited in what movements she could do, she danced with us the entire time. Her classes had the same structure as that of Dr. Parker in terms of sequence, while also making use of the metaphorical and emotional prompts employed in Coulibaly’s classes.

From the distinct yet overlapping approaches to pedagogy employed by these three teachers, we can see that, despite being introduced to West African dance in different ways, their methods, learned through embodiment of the forms, allow for the development of culturally accurate transmission of information. Dr. Parker teaches *Liberté* (a collaborative dance of independence from various ethnic groups in Guinea), while providing the historical and cultural

relevance of the rhythm and dance as a symbol of solidarity for the people of Guinea. Coulibaly teaches and leads rehearsals in the same foundations of feel-do, see-do from which he acquired his experience of dance forms. Acogny begins all her classes with a reminder that all her movement, (though she blends aspects found in ballet and modern) is derived from African forms, forms that draw upon elements found in the environment, body, and spirit. Through the use of existing structures, creating personal associations with the movement, and most importantly embodying the movement, they provide models for university pedagogy by gesturing to the theoretical, historical, and technical complexity of the forms, placing West African dance alongside modern and ballet in ways that are suggestive about what demands for proficiency and standards for accountability in teaching might look like in university curricula.

CREATIVE INTERVENTION

As I previously mentioned in discussing my embodied research process, the physical act of dancing is key not only to West African dance but to my attempt to place West African dance in conversation with ballet and modern dance. In my rehearsal process for the performance-based component of this thesis project, I have been using an ethnographic video from my father's village in Togo as a soundscape that invites me to travel back to that time in my life. As I had been working with another dancer, who is also from Togo, we spent a great deal of time in the studio talking about our lived experiences navigating through traditional belief systems and Christianity. In rehearsal I asked: Are our movements based in religion or culture? How have our technical training backgrounds shaped our experiences in the dance field? How can I create a piece that encapsulates who I am as an *AfricanBalletModern* (in that mashed up order of priority) dancer, without resorting to movement that is somehow being expected of me? What is the median movement language for merging sorsonet, grand allegro, and contractions? In this part of the process, we sat on the floor and talked, with me mostly listening, the ethnographic YouTube video continued in the background, with the songs, drums, and an occasional child yelling in the distance.

The third version of my piece relates most closely to my research around pedagogy—how to teach a form that is so nuanced, maintaining the intricacies that are essential to its proper representation. In this iteration, five veiled figures appear as the audience's eyes adjust to the dimness of the lights. The figures sit, and continue to sit, and continue ... They create such a stillness that one begins to feel oneself sink into the seat, staring at them and waiting for

something to happen. Perhaps five minutes pass or five seconds, time begins to bend, and one becomes consumed with the task of trying to make out each and every figure underneath its veil. Suddenly someone moves, followed by the next figure, forming a slow ripple that ends with all the figures moving unison. These figures “flowing” before your eyes convey a slow deep breath, and the audience finally exhales, suddenly aware of the breath held in anticipation of what was to come.

The piece now has five dancers, including myself. We are from various ethnic backgrounds and represent a range in dance training of ballet, jazz, modern, and tango. I am the only dancer of African descent with extensive experience in West African movement. In this version of the work, I have managed to create a scenario where we are all a part of an experiment in teaching. I am the instructor in West African pedagogy, transmitting my embodied knowledge of technique to dancers who have little to no prior experience in the form.

Because of similar cultural experiences that I shared with my cast in the previous iteration of the piece, I am now faced with the challenge of translating our lived experiences to an ensemble that has no context for the movement they are doing, besides the cultural and personal history I share with them in the traditional fashion of oral storytelling. Developing personal association with the movement, a technique employed by Coulibaly, Parker, and Acogny, has allowed me to teach the dancers in my piece what I learned through lived experience as embodied knowledge, but had previously struggled to vocalize. This often took the form of the five of us sitting together and watching ethnographic footage of my life in Togo. I found it easier to show my experience and have them create their own relationship to it rather than to language my experience for them to try and replicate. This communication of my embodied knowledge is present in our ability to move as “one”. Recalling Daniel’s claim that

embodied knowledge cultivated in African Diasporic communities can “reveal what the body knows, what it is capable of”(Daniel 2005, 5), my hope is that, in this work, I will be capable of effectively imparting my lived, embodied knowledge to them and they will in turn cultivate an embodied knowledge of their own.

DANCING ACROSS BORDERS: GUINEAN DANCE ON ITS OWN TERMS

Perhaps the reason why the diverse forms of dance from the African continent are not held to the same standards as Ballet and Modern is due to the nature of their origins. With foundations in practices of oral history and transmission, these forms are primarily shared through spoken or physical, rather than written, language. As has been well established in dance studies, the primacy of the written word is given more weight in academic systems of knowledge production (Daniel 2005, Desmond 1994). Is it possible to codify African dance forms in written form? Is it advantageous to attempt to do so? Even if it were possible to accurately transcribe the dances of an ethnic group, would they retain their traditional cultural influences? Would they even be the same art forms?

I believe the beauty in traditional Guinean dance lies in the way it has been passed down through generations by the performance of these dances through ceremony, in addition to what is known as the “ballet” style. “Ballet” style describes the format in which most West African national dance companies produce shows. These shows or performances replicate the ideologies of a Western proscenium stage classical ballet performance, including: spectacle, the location of the audience, narrative-based dances, condensed timeframes for performance, and large groups of people dancing in unison.

Despite these accommodations to Western formats, the need to label or inscribe movements, or songs does not seem to be a priority in Guinean culture. The practice of dancing, singing, and learning from one’s elders is molded into a daily routine, which is then expanded upon if one chooses to join a professional dance company or troupe. Ballet companies are influenced by the West in terms of production of a concert dance performance, however the traditional integrity of the dances is maintained. The ability to incorporate the structure of

concert dance and the intricacies of West African dance should be the goal of all dance programs in order to create successful and inclusive curricula.

Dance scholar Jasmine E. Johnson's work explores what African dance does for African and African American communities. Specifically, she examines how studying dance on the African continent differs from taking classes in the diaspora and what interventions can be made to positively affect West African dance as it becomes a commodity in the United States (Johnson 2012). Johnson focuses on Guinean dance because it is the most widely taught form of West African dance in the States. She discusses the economics and politics of a "home going" dance and drum trip to Conakry, Guinea, a trip we both participated in. I was introduced to Guinean dance within the industry that Johnson speaks of, and though I believe my training was thorough, Johnson speaks of a connectedness that I never experienced until I travelled to Guinea. In Guinea, I experienced an emphasis on a holistic, full-bodied experience of the dances we were being taught. Ethnic and cultural histories, songs, accompanying music, were a part of our curriculum, along with the expectation to learn and retain the movement of each dance we learned. This is distinct from the classes I have taken in New York City, where the format of warmup, combination, across the floor is the normative sequence for dance classes.

It was day one of Youssouf Koumbassa's month-long cultural exchange program in Conakry, Guinea, and he was determined for us to learn at least ten Guinean rhythms and accompanying dances by the month's end. "*Ein* is no good feeling! You have to make it sweet. You have to take your time and listen to the music. Make it sweet, feeling it. Okay, do it again." Koumbassa was a former principal dancer with Ballet Djoliba, one of Guinea's most important national dance companies. He trained and toured with them for thirteen years before moving to New York City. For the past twenty-six years, he has been hosting international workshops and

conferences, while maintaining his position at the center of his African dance community in New York City (“About Youssouf Koumbassa”). In the informal setting in Conakry, dancing in Koumbassa’s thatched courtyard, there were clear pedagogical methods that governed our daily classes and goals for us to achieve. These are distinct from the system the West African dance class currently taught at Sarah Lawrence College that hold a dance studio or West African dance US community-based context.

Johnson’s research relates to my argument that West African dance when taught must be done accurately. Johnson’s research highlights that the original cultural and “Western” aspects combine to form the root of West African dance in the United States. The need for accuracy lies in the fact that West African dance is more than just movement to percussive drumming or clapping. There is a kinetic/historical/memory dimension: “I will propose that dancing has the capacity to not remember, but rather to re-member, or to reattach the body to a cultural heritage in various ways” (Foster 2010, 122). By removing the oral tradition element in African dance and only ascribing transmission to notating, we would be setting up a similar form of transmission to that of Pierre Beauchamps, the known inventor of Feuillet notation along with Raoul Auger Feuillet. Beauchamps stated that purpose of creating the notation system was for “Shaping and disposing characters and notes in the form of a tablature in order to represent the steps of the dances and ballet in a such a way that they could be learned without the need of personal instruction” (Foster 124).

West African dance is traditionally transmitted orally and through lived cultural experiences, with purposes far greater than movement for entertainment or for creating art. These purposes are steeped in the cultural practices that the dances are derived from, which are passed down generationally. One cannot study, teach, and proclaim a love for African dance forms if

that integral dimension is the first element one wants erased from it. To further this, Foster states that if, “Body-to-body transmission of information was to be replaced by a textual literacy, that would enable a much wider circulation of dances and also authorship rights to them” (Foster 2010, 124).

Doris Green has undertaken such a process. Green suggests that in order to teach African dance, focus must be placed on the music first. As music notation already exists, using African music “the language of African dance” provides a way to represent African dance through writing (Green 2011, 23). If successful, the notation project “had the effect of uprooting the body from specific locality and establishing universal standards for the performance and teaching of dance” (Foster, 124). Perhaps this is the reason why African cultures have not rushed to notate their cultural dances and music. Doing so dilutes the tradition and allows for widespread (mis)interpretations.

Green advocates for notating African dance and music through a method she created and named Greenotation. This system highlights the interdependent nature of African music and dance. Though I agree that notation of African dance helps in making dances more codified, I disagree with her position that African dance should no longer be based on oral tradition. It is that specific thing that separates African Dance from American ballet and modern dance, and it is not a superficial distinction, but reflects aspects of the worldviews of the cultures from which it is derived, making it valuable and fundamental to these forms. Oral transmission is integral to West African dance technique, in that rhythm and movement are interdependent, and pedagogical techniques of teaching movement through rhythmic syllables (geh da geh da ge da da da) is a dimension of the oral/physical transmission that gets lost in translation with notation. Abandoning an oral tradition is a Westernization of traditional practices that is unnecessary, and

I believe it would be a detriment to the art form. Codification through notation is not the answer to equality in the curriculum, nor to standards of accountability for teachers in higher education, though the lack of it may explain some aspects of the degraded status of the form in university knowledge structures.

West African dances are often very complex and can be easily simplified or distorted in teaching practices. I believe that structures must be developed to provide regulations and standards for what and how West African dances are taught in college dance departments. One such dance that has been popular in the United States for many years and usually misinterpreted is *Mendjiani*. This dance is accompanied by a rhythm that shares its name. The dance originates from the Malinké ethnic group in what was originally referred to as the Malian empire. Present day Republic of Guinea, Mali, Senegal, Gambia, Burkina Faso, Ivory Coast, Mauritania, Liberia, and Sierra Leone are all a part of that former empire. Traditionally *Mendjiani* is a dance performed by the eldest girl in the community once she has completed her rites of passage, then passed on to the next girl in line to partake in the tradition. Taken out of its traditional context, fast footwork, high leg kicks, and grace are synonymous with this dance. All of this contextual information is significant in learning this dance and should be considered integral to processes of transmitting it. Combined with the djembe heavy rhythm, it is one of the easier dances and rhythms to teach at a beginner level, so it is widely taught in the U.S.

As I described earlier in this thesis, I spent several months learning what I thought was *Mendjiani* in a workshop for a small presentation at a New York City college (which will remain unnamed), only to find out that I had been learning another Guinean dance called *Kuku*. Rhythmically, both are djembe-based rhythms and sound similar to the untrained ear. One would have to listen to the accompaniment of the bass drum, rather than the lead djembe player to

distinguish between them. This was information I learned from Youssef Koumbassa three years after the performance. Because I was not knowledgeable about the rhythms prior to taking the class, I trusted that the information being given was correct. Many people learn West African dance in this manner and then become teachers themselves, sharing inaccurate information with their students because of a lack of rigor and knowledge in the initial form of pedagogy. My experience supports my previous claim that dance departments have little to no regulations in place as far as who is teaching and what is being taught in West African classes. A comprehensive West African university dance curriculum, such as I am proposing, should include not only movement courses, but also require humanities and music components that expand on African and Afro-Diasporic knowledge in correlation with movement study.

Germaine Acogny, internationally known dancer, choreographer and creator of the Acogny technique is the perfect example of Contemporary African dance in the way I have defined it. Though not of Guinean descent, Acogny created a technique that includes elements of Guinean, Senegalese (amongst others) traditional movement intertwined with ballet and modern.

Acogny went to France in the 1960's where she studied ballet, and modern dance. Returning to Senegal, she began teaching dance classes in the Lycée where she was hired to be in charge of physical education. Although she borrowed from ballet pedagogy, its identification of positions and, using it to establish a basic repertoire of moves for a new pan-African dance form. Yet this borrowing enabled her to defy the colonization project that the taxonomy had originally facilitated. Against the stereotypic Western conceptions of African dance as natural, impulsive, or genetically encoded, she used this codification to demonstrate its discipline, its virtuosity, and its artistry. She proposed a clear curriculum of study and identifiable criteria of competence. (Foster, 2010)

Using existing information to innovate and create a hybrid technique, which celebrates all of its components, Acogny's rigorous approach to her technique provides a template for higher education. Takiyah Nur Amin has argued that this hybridity is in fact integral to American dance forms, although it goes underrecognized in university curriculum: "Higher education fails to

fully represent American Dance as a product of cultural fusion in all facets of a dance student's educational experiences" (Amin 2016, 16).

There is a need for across the board codification. This could include: levels across different technique classes; set curriculum with established technical goals for students; immersive course work that includes learning, playing, and singing music. At the very least equity in the technical, historical, and theoretical treatment of West African forms in university curricula is needed to undo the technical hierarchy that haunts the foundations of concert dance as a performing art. Ballet and modern remain the basis of most degree awarding dance programs in the U.S. with jazz, hip hop, and West African (among other dance forms that are placed under the umbrella of "world dance") being added in more recent years. Universities must realize the ambitions of the implementations of black studies programs in the humanities within the dance field as well, creating culturally relevant courses for the changing population. The emergence of African dance in the collegiate system, faced many obstacles in the efforts to develop culturally relevant curriculum, such as the lack of proficient teachers, which is an ongoing issue.

One issue is that there are currently no systems in place to certify West African dance instructors and what they are teaching in the United States. Such programs of certification exist in other countries such as Senegal where Germaine Acogny's L'Ecole des Sables offers teaching certification programs to dancers. A certification program based on the Acogny technique which combines ballet, modern, and West African dance forms. Codified forms like ballet and modern dance have movements that have not only been named, but that are easily recognized by most concert dance professionals and audiences. West African dance teachers do not have a system that provides these same foundations. This allows them to be more creative in what they choose to teach, but it also leaves a great deal of room for people to teach forms of their own creation

under the rubric of traditional forms, which contain their own specificities in terms of rhythm, vocabulary, and meaning. For example, I recently observed a dance class at the University of Florida where, despite the teacher's enthusiasm and engagement, there was a lack of rigor in terms of definition and pedagogy. I quickly recognized that, though labeled a West African dance class, the students were learning a mixture of South African gumboot dance and what appeared to be Afro Haitian movement. These vocabularies are not grounded in traditional dance from Western Africa, despite the fact that they often fall under the catchall rubric of "African dance" in college dance programs. The course might have been more accurately categorized as "Dance forms of Africa and the Diaspora." Despite its growing popularity as a way for students to broaden their knowledge of non-American based dance forms, there have not been many advancements made in moving African-based dance forms out of the realm of exercise or entertainment, realms which are less valued than "art" in collegiate systems of knowledge production around dance. Universities that have degree awarding dance programs should promote practice based approaches to curriculum that require discipline, and hold teachers accountable for the material they share with their students. Methods of teaching that are present in West African dance, specifically Guinean dance.

HIGHER EDUCATION: PEDAGOGICAL PRACTICES , STRUCTURAL EQUITY & RECOMMENDATIONS

Liberal arts colleges pride themselves on providing their students with comprehensive courses of study, but dance programs in these colleges frequently fail to provide their dance students with comprehensive courses based in West African forms. This, despite continental and diasporic Africans, and African Americans, having played such a large role in influencing what we consider to be American culture (Gottschild 1998). Increasingly, technical proficiency is being demanded in the professional field of traditional and what is sometimes referred to as neo-traditional West African dance. Students of color have been increasingly enrolling in colleges, as shown in a recent report released by the American Council on Education. It states that “students of color made up just 29.6 percent of the undergraduate student population in 1996, increasing to 45.2 percent in 2016. The share of graduate students of color increased from 20.8 to 32.0 percent in the same time period” (Dedman 2019). All minority groups make up nearly half of the U.S. undergraduate population as of February 2019 (Brown 2019). To better represent the growing minority student population and provide dancers with the necessary techniques to meet these demands, I suggest that West African dance forms should be implemented with rigorous standards in collegiate curricula.

Assistant professor in dance Raquel Monroe, at Columbia College, explores the discourses about technical hierarchies among students and faculty in university settings. Monroe writes as a teacher in a dance department that is struggling to figure out how to incorporate the diasporic movement practices with which students enter into school in ways that are advantageous for their training in the academy (Monroe, 2011, 39). Their failures to do so, Monroe shares, results in students struggling to advance in programs and may impact diversity,

due to many students of color not being admitted into other collegiate dance programs (Monroe 2011, 39). The title of Monroe's article—"I don't want to do African, what about my technique?"—is a direct quotation from a frustrated student in the Columbia College dance program. It is not surprising that this student would feel this way, as the department's structure is that of the traditional or typical undergraduate American collegiate dance program. This structure requires that students spend the majority of their time in ballet and modern classes (core curricula which count towards their degree), with options to take West African and diasporic forms as elective or supplementary courses. In the case of Columbia College, the elective courses are not included in the performance review process to advance to higher levels of technical study. Monroe does not suggest a complete dismissal of Western concert dance forms (ballet and modern) but rather suggests that "today's dancers require a fusion of techniques that create fluidity in the body similar to the pluralistic world in which we live and field they will be entering into as artists upon graduating (Monroe, 2011, 39). Creating programs that promote West African dance forms alongside ballet and modern as described by Monroe are necessary for dancers that choose to pursue professional careers, these are still technical requirements for companies that are currently hiring and touring.

Recommendations for Higher Education Practices

I suggest that all U.S. universities with dance departments should create courses that would not only require proficiency in West African dance but a demonstrable understanding of the music as music, and song are intrinsic to West African forms. I specifically mention dance departments, as I do not believe a movement-based course should be placed in Africana Studies, Black Studies, Anthropology, Sociology, Physical Education, Art, or Music departments. All

these departments can and should create interdisciplinary courses that could overlap with dance department requirements and include African dance. However, the responsibility for the necessary shifts and increased specificity in curricular standards should fall on dance departments to decolonize their own historical inheritances by putting West African forms in structural parity to what Amin calls “historically privileged Western techniques,” such as ballet and modern, and providing their students with teachers that are committed to upholding the specificity and history of traditions while leaving room for the development of new generational influences (Amin 2016). Building on Amin’s argument, I propose that a program that implements a practice-based approach to curricula alongside critical pedagogy creates room for improvement in terms of equity in university curricula. Critical pedagogy promotes learning and conversation among teachers and students, using the knowledge students bring in the classroom as a pathway to learning new concepts (Amin 2016, 24). Practice-based teaching invites students and teachers to embody West African dance through sustained engagement with the histories, theories, and aesthetic principles within the form (Amin 2016, 23).

The aesthetic principles derived from West African dance have been central to the construction of U.S. concert dance forms, West African dance forms themselves should therefore be regarded as an equal to American ballet and modern dance in terms of its curricular standing in higher education. I propose that universities offering dance majors and masters level programs in dance should incorporate West African movement along with its dance history, in an equivalent structural paradigm to that established for ballet and modern requirements at the center of most programs. As emerging artists, it is our responsibility to change a system that has allowed for appropriation without citation. This dynamic is seen throughout American concert dance history: with the aforementioned works of Graham who is written into history as being

inspired by white European male theory (Delsartean) with her mentors at the Denishawn School, Ruth St. Denis and Ted Shawn, known for their “borrowing” from various Asian cultures. This paradigm of inequality can be redressed by acknowledging West African forms on equal footing with other concert dance forms in curricular structures of universities that determine what counts as knowledge.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, arts dance departments must provide their students with course material that will prepare them for life post-graduation. As Amin states, a twenty-first-century education is “an approach to learning that empowers individuals and prepares them to deal with the complexity, diversity, and change. It provides students with a broad knowledge of the wider world (Amin 2011, 20). We have been and continue to do a disservice to students by not providing them with a curriculum that accurately reflects American concert dance. That education should include a comprehensive program of West African dance.

My performance and choreographic styles have been influenced by my introduction to dance—initially through social, and religious ceremonies in West Africa, and later through formal ballet and modern dance training. All these scenarios fostered a personal desire to have a dancing experience that was not only structured, required discipline, and had rules (spoken or demonstrated), but that also encouraged full body engagement.

The most recent and possibly final version of my choreographic thesis piece has taken the shape of a video project. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, my cast and I have all returned to our respective homes, and now hold conversations, rehearsals, and an occasional boozy brunch on whichever virtual platform we have access to. Sitting in my Harlem apartment, I direct individual rehearsals , giving notes on how and when to self-record in efforts to capture a similar aesthetic to our past rehearsals. I intended to use a mixture of our past experience (roughly captured in rehearsals to use as reference material) with the reality of where all five of us currently were in the world.

In attempting to hold onto a version of the piece that I had made, I realized that perhaps it never existed. Having had only one rehearsal where all five of us were present, did the piece ever settle into itself and become what “it” was going to be? We may never have the chance to perform “it” together, and I find myself mourning that. What the piece has become is a video presentation of my investigative process into the transmission of embodied knowledge. A work that was based on lived and embodied experiences being transmitted to others will now live on a platform that removes all physical contact between the performer and viewer.

As the entire country reconfigures the way we learn, teach, and interact with one another I have to embrace this new challenge. A work that was based on lived and embodied experience being transmitted to others will now live on a digital platform that removes all physical contact between the performer and viewer. Is it possible to engage an audience through a computer in a meaningful way that will not dilute the sentiment held in the piece? I am left with more questions than answers as I conclude this thesis, but as I experience the transition of movement classes onto virtual platforms and the accessibility to these classes grow by the day, I am convinced more than ever that West African forms when taught must have a system in place that demands consistency and accuracy. In allowing the underrepresentation and misrepresentation of West African dance forms, we never address and resolve questions of rigor and technique in relation to the value placed on dance forms in American dance curricula.

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