Rhythms of the Afro-Atlantic World

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In this essay, I stage a duet between two contemporary choreographers, one Senegalese and one African American, both women of roughly the same age. I try to decipher the distinctive ways in which they vivify their African heritage in order to gain additional perspectives on how the body might participate in creating a sense of agency for a subject under duress. This inquiry grows out of my attempts to theorize tactics of resistance as more complicated and diverse than the terms resistance, opposition, mimicry, or strategic essentialism seem to allow. Although many of these terms implicate physicality in the project of contesting and undermining hegemony, I want to expand and also historicize the repertoire of corporeal techniques that could be implemented when confronting empire.

Pierre Bourdieu and Michel Foucault have shown that what gets stored within physicality as tacit knowledge includes memories from a cherished past about how to do things and also patterns produced by and from within systems of oppression. Theater historian Joseph Roach theorizes this systematic incorporation and reiteration of structurings of domination as a process in which bodies and places together construct vortices of behavior—patterns of action that congeal and become perpetuated over time. Bodies in the present are summoned into these vortical operations through a process of surrogation in which present bodies flesh out the gestures of the past. In what follows, I want to chart possible structurings of noncompliance with these gravitational flows.

Several dance scholars will be dancing along with these two choreographers, helping me to understand and describe their work. Brenda Dixon-
Gottschild, inspired by Robert Farris Thompson, was the first to identify Africanisms such as polycentrism, high-affect juxtaposition, ephebism, and deadpan as central to an Africanist dance aesthetic. Examining the appropriation of these traits by choreographers such as George Balanchine and the post-modern Judson Church group, she showed how an Africanist aesthetic served to vitalize high and white forms and give them their cool. Thomas DeFrantz, building on Dixon-Gottschild’s work, has also complicated the analysis of African American identity with considerations of sexuality and class in his study of Alvin Ailey. Kariamu Welsh Ashanti has illuminated the deeply complex and intertwined relationship between music and dance in African cultures, and Jacqui Malone has demonstrated this relationship in a variety of African American popular dance forms. Veta Goler has provided a powerful feminist analysis of the African American female body. Halifu Osumare, in her studies of hip-hop, has shown how to track the migratory paths of this world dance form. This essay builds from their visionary scholarly initiatives.

Here, I also want to explore possible meanings of a phrase commonly utilized in a variety of dance parlances: muscle memory. Dancers frequently refer to muscle memory as the capacity for memories to be stored in and evoked by movement of the musculature. Sometimes these memories are personal and psychological. At other times, memories insinuated into muscle reference cultural and historical experiences of a people. In this application, the term approximates the concept of embodied memory, also used to signify what Diana Taylor has called a “repertoire” of movements through which history is summoned up and reinvoked. Yet how, exactly, are such memories housed in the muscles? How are they acquired, and how do they endure? What, exactly, do they remember? I will propose that dancing has the capacity not to remember but, rather, to re-member, or to reattach the body to a cultural heritage in various ways. Dancing does not activate some historical past that lies dormant in the body, and the musculature does not function as a storage facility into which the past has been packed. Instead, dancing, as a set of actions, vitalizes a connection to past instances of dancing and other ways of moving. Both the muscles and the nerves that activate them engage in movements that reference, while never being the same as, a past way of moving.

In the same way that there can be no absolutely faithful replication of past movement, so there is no singular way to “put one’s foot down.” This phrase, colloquial for taking a firm stand on an issue, also implies an act of resisting. In what follows, I use the phrase to signify physical actions through which a resistive practice is constructed. Although “putting one’s foot down” could suggest
that one assumes a static and rigid position, choreographers Germaine Acogny and Diane McIntyre have each put their foot down repeatedly over the span of their careers, performing a move that has developed over time in relation to a changing point of contact. Their postures thus remain flexible and responsive to the moment in which there are engaged.

*Before reading further, please focus on your foot for just a moment. What does your foot know at this moment? The texture and warmth of a sock or the contour and limits of a shoe? The sense of a thong between big and second toes or the circulation of air through space? What does your foot sense about its orientation in space at the end of the leg? It knows the angle of its extension from the calf and the degree of tension in all of its parts. Perhaps it registers the results of earlier actions in the form of pains, aches, weariness, or agitation. Perhaps it manifests the effects of routines or training regimens that have cultivated its structure, strength, or flexibility. Reading its physicality, what might we learn about what this foot remembers?*

Germaine Acogny is the daughter of a Senegalese functionary who went to school in France to acquire the skills necessary to administer the colony and who also learned there to abhor dancing. Much to her father’s dismay, Acogny showed exceptional talent at dancing from an early age. Like him, she went to France, where she studied ballet and modern dance in the early 1960s. Returning to Senegal, she began teaching dance classes in the courtyard of her home and also in the lycée where she was hired to be in charge of physical education. In these earliest classes, she began to develop a codification of what she calls “African dance” steps, inspired by the dance techniques she had learned in France. Although she borrowed from ballet its categorization of positions and steps and, I would argue, also a 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. What might it mean to be grounded? Does it refer to a distribution of weight, a quality of attentiveness, a focus on the body’s core, or maybe all of these? Or do concepts such as “weight” and “core,” in their assumption of universal applicability, run counter to the specificity required to relate foot to ground that is necessary for groundedness to emerge? Is groundedness a universal trait, or does it vary from ground to ground?
In his study of the colonization of Australia, Paul Carter has argued that taxonomic projects, such as Linnaeus’s classificatory system for botany, extracted each object of scrutiny from its ecology, “its historical and geographical surroundings. It loses all power to signify beyond itself, to suggest lines of development or the subtler influences of climate, ground and aspect. In short, its ecology, its existence in a given, living space is lost in the moment of scientific discovery.”

Groundedness, then, might require an enduring sensitivity to the relationship between the land and the body, a relationship that is specific to a particular land and a particular body.

Acogny’s adaptation of ballet could seem to jeopardize her dance’s groundedness, especially since ballet’s classification of positions and steps comes out of a taxonomic project similar to that of Linnaeus. Along with all the academies of science, Louis XIV established the Academy of Dance, and sometime in the 1670s, he ordered his principal dancing master Pierre Beauchamps to “discover the means of making the art of dance comprehensible on paper.” According to Beauchamps, he set about “shaping and disposing characters and notes in the form of tablature in order to represent the steps of the dances and ballets” in such a way that they could be learned “without need of personal instruction.”

Three features of this mandate stand out as crucial to the way in which it disciplined the body’s movement. First, it invented a regularized vocabulary of universal actions subtending all steps. Movement’s significance was thereby reduced to a set of possibilities to elevate and lower, to move along a specified path, or to articulate rhythmic patterns with the legs and feet. Using this single classificatory rubric, the notation subjected dancing to laws that all movements appear to share. Cultural and historical specificities of particular dances were smoothed out or erased through the implementation of absolute conceptions of vertical and horizontal space as well as metricized time. Second, this system consolidated a single point of view from which to assess the body’s progress throughout the dance. Rather than recalculate one’s actions in response to the movements of those around one, the dancer was taught to maintain awareness of his or her path in relation to a maplike rendering of the entire space. Third, the notation had as a principle objective the elimination of personal instruction. Body-to-body transmission of information was to be replaced by a textual literacy, one that would enable a much wider circulation of dances and also authorship rights to them. Taken together, these three features of the notation project had the effect of uprooting the body from its specific locality and establishing universal standards for the performance and teaching of dance.

Although the dance notations that resulted from Louis XIV’s mandate did
not circulate widely, the pedagogical assumptions underlying this dance notation continued to inform the development of ballet up through the twentieth century. Acogny borrowed from this ballet pedagogy its identification of positions and steps, using it to establish a basic repertoire of moves for a new pan-African dance form. Yet this borrowing enabled her to defy the colonizing 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. Against the Western assertions about the unknowability of African dance, its “lascivious” tendencies or “chaotic” energy, she proposed a clear curriculum of study and identifiable criteria of competence.

Not only did she refashion ballet’s classificatory framework into an anti-colonial project, but she also infused its pedagogical precepts with new values. Specifically, her insistence on groundedness asks dancers to sense a variegated earth rather than to perform on an unmarked horizontal plane. For example, her current school, Ecole des Sables, boasts an exquisite, open-air dance studio with a sand floor. Students practicing technique experience the uneven terrain, the slight changes in pitch and texture of the ground, with each step they take. Thus, her approach affirms one’s ability to respond to that earth in idiosyncratic or improvised ways rather than to execute a taxonomy of steps deriving from universal principles of movement. In addition, it insists on the need to learn the dance from another body rather than from a set of printed symbols.

Because of interest in codifying a lexicon of steps, Acogny was identified by Leopold Senghor, president of Senegal, and by Belgian-Senegalese choreographer Maurice Béjart, director of Brussels’ prestigious Ballet du Vingtième Siècle, to assist in the establishment of Mudra Afrique, one in a network of schools that Béjart hoped to establish to promote contemporary dance in relation to distinctive dance traditions worldwide. Initially Béjart specified the curriculum: daily classes in ballet, the Graham technique (based on the teaching of U.S. choreographer Martha Graham), Acogny’s African technique, dance composition, and drumming. He also selected a Belgian director, who, in turn, chose the instructors. Of African ancestry, they arrived from Haiti to teach Graham and from the U.S. to teach ballet. Both men claimed to know African dance better than Acogny, and they attempted to take over her portion of her curriculum.

Acogny defiantly opposed this, confronting Béjart and refusing to continue with the project unless she was acknowledged as the sole director and authority of the school. Béjart consented, and Acogny, asserting her own leadership
and reputation, allowed these foreign teachers to continue to teach their specialities. Thus, in her participation with Mudra Afrique, Acogny invited a colonial project into dialogue with her own dance practices, but she never allowed it to dominate. She put her foot down, offering Béjart her own leadership instead of the colonial structure he proposed.

As head of Mudra Afrique, Acogny maneuvered around colonial expectations in yet a third way. Teaching European students alongside those from several African countries, she learned to accept that their sincere efforts simply looked different. Rather than force conformance to a canonical repertoire, she began to integrate their variations into her teaching, thereby developing an ever-changing, constantly renewing practice. Even as the National Ballet of Senegal achieved increasing prominence, touring the world with its showcase of traditional tribal dances, Acogny defied the Western conception of an opposition between tradition and innovation, on which the National Ballet was based. Instead, she constructed an ongoing inquiry into African dance, treating its tradition as perpetually self-renewing. In addition, she began to forge a pan-African aesthetic, the hybrid product of the encounter between European contemporary dance and African forms, which extended beyond region or nation to invite participation from choreographers all over the continent.

Now look at your foot. Note the color of the skin. Survey the calluses, the exact shapes and lines of extension of the toes, the shape of the arch, the dryness or moistness of the skin. Look for scars, bunions, cracks in the skin. Note the length and color of the toenails. Does your foot indicate a class or gender or ethnic affiliation? What does its physicality say about its past? What do its appearance and internal sensations say about what it has been through?

At about the same time that Acogny was teaching in Mudra Afrique, African American Diane McIntyre graduated from Ohio State University, where she had received extensive exposure to modern dance through renowned faculty Vicki Blaine and Helen Alkire and such visiting artists as Anna Sokolow and Valda Setterfield. She moved to New York City in 1970 and founded her own company, Sounds in Motion, in 1972. As the name of the company suggests, McIntyre focused her choreographic inquiry on the collaborative interplay between music and dance, and she conceptualized musicians and dancers, equally, as members of a single company. In this interplay between sound and motion, McIntyre undertook to stage improvised choreography. Affirming improvisation as risky and cutting-edge, she also highlighted its history as an intrinsic feature of African
American performance. Her dances used improvisation as a means to establish a danced dialogue about African American identity—celebrating and criticizing African American culture and, at the same time, casting its strengths and predicaments as issues of enduring human concern.

If Acogny was dancing within and against two hundred years of French colonial domination, McIntyre was dancing across the Middle Passage and all that it represented. Saidiya Hartman has shown that in the case of U.S. slavery, patterns of behavior have continued to mark the body and its cultural production more than a century after its supposed abolition. Hartman analyzes actions such as the slave being forced to dance on the auction block in order to sell himself by looking smart and lively. She demonstrates how these actions recur in minstrel entertainments as a central influence on such characters as the Sambo figure. Continually present even today in advertisements and popular culture images of all sorts, Sambo reiterates the master’s mandate that the slave perform a simplistic enjoyment in dancing, one that proves the indefatigable and carefree disposition of the black body while also demonstrating the lack of intelligence and the subservience expected of subhuman beings.

Hartman also suggests how dancing functioned to redress the pained and abject slave body. It fortified, in the face of “violent domination, dishonor, natal alienation, and chattel status,” the body held in servitude. Through such practices as “stealing away,” in which slaves stole themselves away from the master to spend time in self-designated ways, or holding their own dances, in which they devised parodic versions of the master’s social dances, slaves were able, partially, to stage a sense of their own agency.

McIntyre determined to create anew this sense of agency by drawing on Africanist aesthetic principles such as the integral relation between music and dance. Buoyed by a substantial tradition of African American choreographers working in the modern dance tradition—Katherine Dunham, Pearl Primus, and Talley Beatty, among others—she worked to insinuate these principles into a contemporary moment where their enduring effectiveness could take on new significance. Unlike her predecessors, however, she also gave central place to improvised action. Improvisation functioned as an Africanist remembering, defying the Western opposition between choreography and improvisation, in which choreography is viewed as a fixed strategic plan and improvisation as an unstructured process of discovery. Working in a manner similar to jazz musicians, she asked dancers to improvise the choreography, making decisions in performance about how the dance would proceed. Not only did this use of improvisation confound traditional modern dance assumptions about the planned and
the unanticipated, but it also functioned as a way of staging life on the edge, a highly pertinent focus especially for inner-city black culture resonating with the agendas formulated by the civil rights and Black Power movements.

In order to refine their improvisatory abilities and to forge an intimate relationship between music and dance, McIntyre and her company members spent long hours in the studio improvising with jazz musicians. Here they developed the abilities to trade rhythms; to imitate, embellish, or vary their responses to the calls of others; and to move beyond the familiar toward newly crafted movements and phrases. Prompted by this investigation, McIntyre also began to investigate earlier jazz dance forms and their histories in relation to the African diaspora. Two years after the founding of her company in 1972, she traveled to Haiti, where she witnessed Vodou ceremonies and studied the integral relation between music and dance embodied in Haitian dance forms. Throughout the early 1970s, she also studied Lindy and its many variations, in order to deepen her understanding of possible relations between music and dance.

McIntyre worked with master dancers of the Savoy Ballroom era in order to establish the historical underpinnings of her own practice. From these studies, she expanded her vocabulary to include movement from the snake hips, jitterbug, cakewalk, truckin’, Charleston, mess around, Suzy Q, and camel walk, and she was able to integrate these forms, their steps and their principles, with her modern dance background to achieve a distinctive and powerful signature style of moving. She also tapped the social dance tradition’s mandate for inventive individualism as a way to approach collaborating with her dancers. Rather than develop a single vocabulary and technical standard against which all dancers were measured, McIntyre worked with dancers’ individual strengths, building up a shared language of gestures and phrases that was implemented specifically for each piece.

McIntyre’s interest in the past is particularly striking within the context of the modern dance tradition in which she had been trained. As defined through choreographic initiatives such as those of Isadora Duncan, Martha Graham, and Doris Humphrey, modern dance disdained the past, emphasizing instead the radical innovation in movement vocabulary. The choreographer might look to ancient mythology for the dance’s subject matter, but the movement repertoire used to explore and express that subject necessarily appeared as new and individual. This newness helped to rationalize a new status for the female dancing body as elevated, spiritually motivated, and humanitarian—and hence radically distinct from representations in either ballet or burlesque. By con-
ducting choreographic experimentation that ostensibly shunned both ballet and history, these artists secured an archetypal and universal status for their work.

As much as they claimed individual distinctiveness, the white modern choreographers’ lexicons shared a striking commitment to groundedness, conceptualized and pursued in opposition to the nongrounded colonizing body of ballet. Unlike ballet, the bodies of these white feminist choreographers strongly moved into earth in order to reach toward the sky. Barefoot and unencumbered by corsets, embracing the earth and its gravitational force, they worked the body as dynamic flow between fall and rebound, contraction and release, centripetal and centrifugal momentums. Whereas ballet constructed an unmarked horizontal space into which the body ventures, these modern choreographers constructed an ahistorical interiority, whose universal impulses could be tapped and harnessed as impetus for movement. As in Feuillet’s notation, the ground they embraced was thus rendered as ahistorical and unmarked, yet rather than a pure geometric space, the modern choreographers presumed an absolute gravitational flow that sustained all bodies equally within its dynamic tension.

With the psyche thus identified as purely individual rather than socially marked and with the ground identified as universal earth, these choreographers could place under erasure the inequities on which their success depended. As Susan Manning has shown, they largely ignored the absence of bodies of color on the concert stage, and, simultaneously, they indulged in their entitlement to represent all bodies. African American choreographers, such as Dunham or Primus, who attempted to participate in the modernist paradigm were thereby subjected to a double bind. They were seen either as “natural performers,” when they foregrounded Africanist elements, or as “derivative,” rather than “original,” artists, when they attempted to experiment with more abstract vocabularies. Although black bodies began to populate the stage in larger numbers by the 1950s and 1960s, they continued to be pressured to represent the specifics of their raced and classed backgrounds, while white choreographers could continue to claim the project of radical exploration of the new. For example, Alvin Ailey achieved renown for the depiction of African American life in the South or in Harlem, whereas Merce Cunningham’s success grew from the ability to sequence the motions of unmarked, white bodies using chance procedures.

McIntyre’s synthesis of historical materials and improvised action broke with the dominant white tradition of experimentation in modern dance, and it also radicalized African American modernism. Moving out from the Africanist
connection between music and movement and using as source material events from African American history, literature, and popular culture, she showed work that was both historical and experimental. McIntyre grounded her choreographic project not in a place but in a process, that of continued improvisation with traditional materials. Like Dunham and Ailey, she drew from and valorized the tribulations and struggles that African American identity entails, yet she pushed beyond the depictions of specific communities and their narratives that her predecessors had utilized in their work. Instead, she showed a community of dancers, well-versed in traditional vocabularies yet capable of transforming them through inventive variation and recombination, who created new conversations about their contemporary world onstage. She put her feet down into the histories of white and African American modern dance, establishing a new way to affiliate with a specific identity and a set of universal concerns, both at the same time.

Now stop reading and go find another foot to compare with your own. Look closely at the differences in the size and shape of the toes, the arch, the heel. Note the differences in appearance, but also share the sensations that your foot is feeling with the other person. Together discuss these differences and speculate about their histories.

McIntyre’s company Sounds in Motion operated within Harlem and beyond for over fifteen years, furthering the Black Arts Movement’s rejuvenation of Harlem and also touring nationally. By the late 1980s, McIntyre decided to retire from running the company, because the business overtook the creative practice of making dances. She had to spend way too much time raising money and too little time working with dancers in the studio. Yet she has continued to work with groups of dancers and musicians on special projects, defying the pick-up company model of setting pieces quickly on hired dancers by working with artists for sustained periods of time.

After establishing a successful school of African dance in Toulouse, France, in the 1980s, Acogny began soliciting support for the establishment of a new school in Senegal. In 1998, Acogny celebrated the opening of Ecole des Sables, in Toabab Julau, forty miles south of Dakar. As in Mudra Afrique, Acogny has worked to create a strong sense of community between local inhabitants and the international students who attend the school. By inviting villagers to performances, integrating their labor and resources into the school’s economy, Acogny keeps the village from becoming a museum, while affirming the
lengthy history of its habitus. Acogny has further ensured that rejuvenation by canonizing a vocabulary, one that she continues to teach but that acknowledges the flexible interplay among all bodies that take it on.

McIntyre, in contrast, decenters and destabilizes the very notion of vocabulary by emphasizing improvisation and each dancer’s distinctive skills of inventing and transforming movement. Her sense of community asks dancers to build together what it is that they share. Where Acogny tries to keep tradition alive by emphasizing the new, McIntyre incorporates history in order to keep the present accountable for the moves it makes. In these diverse ways, each choreographer has worked to build a community that is playful, critical, and continually renewing itself.

Both work to “re-member” Africa, yet each has formulated a contrasting set of tactics in response to distinct colonial histories. Acogny traveled to the colonizer, borrowing concepts that helped to elevate her own tradition in the colonizer’s opinion. Accepting the colonial invitation to collaborate, she then used it to create Africa anew. Similarly, McIntyre schooled herself in traditional modernism but then constructed a radically alternative process of dance making, one that avowed her African American heritage while simultaneously constructing a new vision of the social and the ways that bodies can share and exchange movement. She moved out from a white tradition to uncover her own history, insinuating it into the white tradition in a way that both exposes and obviates the tradition’s fundamental investment in whiteness.

Each choreographer’s technique of putting her foot down is unique, responding to political and aesthetic exigencies of her moment. Acogny grounds her practice in a particular physical environs, cultivating an awareness of the specificities of a place called “Africa.” McIntyre grounds her practice by cultivating the historical lineage of which she is a part. Both of these projects demonstrate how muscle memory is cultural memory and how cultural memory is muscular.

Now just give your calf a little massage. There are nine separate muscles in the calf that extend into the foot, enabling its ability to flex, extend, pronate, or supinate and to transfer the body’s weight earthwards. See if you can sense their difference. Try to follow them from their attachment along the tibia or fibula across the ankle joint and down into the foot. Which ones are tense? Which ones are supple or twangy? Can you connect the pattern or muscular development to activities you perform regularly or to actions from your past?
Turning for a moment to the investigations of perceptual theorists, we learn that muscles contain two types of nerve fibers, one that prompts the muscle into motion and a second that continually registers the amount of tension that the muscle is manifesting at any given moment. This second type of nerve fiber, called a “proprioceptor,” delivers to the central nervous system the information concerning the ongoing location, whether flexed or extended, and effort, whether tensed or relaxed, of every part of the body. According to James Gibson, this information is then used as a point of reference in deciphering all forms of sensory input. Thus, our eyeball, for example, can give us relatively little visual information, but the eyeball in combination with the ocular musculature that surrounds it can tell us a great deal about our surroundings. Similarly, we know the location of a sound in relation to the orientation of the head as the sound is heard. We know what our foot is moving toward on the basis of how we are standing. These two kinds of nerves create what Gibson calls a “perceptual system.” The senses do not passively receive stimuli that the brain then processes and determines a course of action, and the will (wherever that is located) does not command the muscles into actions such that they obey in order to produce action. Rather, sensation and action work together to create information.

Not only does action help to produce perception, but scientists are now positing that individuals, based on their heritage of past experiences, literally perceive the world distinctively. Neurophysiologist Alain Berthoz explains that “the oculomotor path followed to explore a face is completely different depending on what the observer is thinking: whether she thinks that the individual is rich, sad, or well-coifed, that his ears are protruding, and so on.” Pleasure or fear or interest all influence the tiny motions of the eye, known as saccades, through which visual perception occurs. One’s history of engagement with the environment profoundly affects how one sees and, consequently, what one sees. Knowledge production thus depends on the detection of a noticeable difference between two or more events, all of which are in motion.

Acogny’s and McIntyre’s careers make apparent this epistemological choreography. Each has persevered in an action of grounding rather than adopting a static posture or stance. They show us, each in a different way, that there is no absolute ground toward which the foot descends. Rather, the act of putting one’s foot down entails a constant revaluing and reassessing of what is necessary to preserve dignity and claim worth. There is also no single action by which the leg moves toward and into the ground. Both bodies remain flexible as the leg descends, drawing sustenance from what is beneath, but not becoming hard as they defy that which is coming at them. However, Acogny has
trained the sole of the foot as sensitized interface between the earthly and the corporeal, whereas McIntyre teaches it to weave between past and present.

Each choreographer thus re-members a past differently. In their teaching, in their work with groups of dancers, in their crafting of dances, each choreographer formulates sets of actions that build up a sense of the past. They actively create memory of a past through their commitment to a shared vocabulary of movements. These motions resemble a past way of performing and carry with them a history of significance, but they are only made meaningful through the consensus about them that is established as dancers and viewers collectively work out what they are doing and watching. Thus, Acogny and McIntyre do not use physicality as a storage unit within which some past set of actions is housed, nor do they bolster a body willing to proclaim a universal position from which to survey and remember the world. Instead, they vivify physicality as coproducer of memory: memory’s pastness is defined by the presentness of the corporeality of the rememberer, and both are in motion.

Now stand up and then put your foot down. What is your foot feeling at this moment?

Notes

1. See Roach, Cities of the Dead.
2. See Taylor, Archive and the Repertoire.
3. Much of the following information about Acogny’s life was acquired through a weeklong series of interviews with her that took place in the Department of World Arts and Cultures at the University of California, Los Angeles, in January 2004.
4. Carter, Road to Botany Bay, 22.
5. Quoted in Harris-Warrick and Marsh, Musical Theatre at the Court of Louis XIV, 84.
6. Literary historian Jean Noel Laurenti explains, “The French dancing masters had to unify a vocabulary of steps with diverse origins, from the provinces or from abroad: to discover what this vast repertoire had in common, it was necessary to first distinguish all the constituent parts. This would permit the use of the same signs (in different sequence of course) to note down a minuet or passepied, originally from the west of France, as well as a gavot or a rigadoon, imported from the southeast, or a “Spanish-style” sarabande or chaconne. The Feuillet system thus reflects an approach which, by passing through the universal laws of movement, finally arrives at a kind of universal language of dance, allowing the different traditions to communicate” (“Feuillet’s Thinking,” 87).
7. See “Feuillet’s Thinking.”
8. Elsewhere I have argued that this project of inventing dance notation buttressed
the colonial project. As Mary Louise Pratt and many others have argued, this disembodied synthesis of pure space and absolute viewpoint worked effectively to rationalize the colonial project. The corporeality that connected space and viewpoint extended itself outward from a central verticality toward a periphery, through an unmarked space. The act of moving through such a pure space was characterized as value-free, and any labor entailed in traversing this space went unregistered. Within such a space, neutral bodily features and motions, such as those specified by the notation, operated to confirm the existence of an absolute set of laws to which all bodies should conform. Implementing this bodily disciplining, the colonial regime could first institute protocols of comportment at home and then proliferate these standards and indexes of behavior to those foreign bodies that it desired to govern abroad. These protocols acquired their persuasive force by standing as the most basic and therefore universal units out of which human behavior is composed.

9. Acogny was brought to Leopold Senghor’s attention when choreographing his famous poem “Femme Noire, Femme Nu,” and he subsequently sent her to Brussels to be evaluated by Béjart. She had pressed on Senghor the need to include dance within his theory of Negritude, but he wanted Béjart’s assessment of her philosophy and competence.


11. Her analysis attempts “to elucidate the means by which the wanton use of and the violence directed toward the black body came to be identified as its pleasures and dangers—that is, the expectations of slave property are ontologized as the innate capacities and inner feelings of the enslaved, and moreover, the ascription of excess and enjoyment to the African effaces the violence perpetrated against the enslaved” (Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 26).

12. Hartman argues, “These displays of excess enjoyment seemed to suggest that the same natural law that established the liberty of all men also authorized slavery since the natural inclination of the enslaved was good cheer and they seemingly endured horrendous circumstances with ease” (*Scenes of Subjection*, 38).

13. Hartman writes, “This indelible image of a prostrate yet perky Sambo conjures up an idealized and fetishized state of servitude, in which the imputed consciousness of the enslaved ensures submission and docility more effectively than either the whip or the chain. In other words, the figure reconciles infantilized willfulness with the abject status of the will-less object” (*Scenes of Subjection*, 52).


15. For an in-depth analysis of several of these defiant bodies, see Brooks, *Bodies in Dissent*.

16. The extent of McIntyre’s research into the history of the Afro-American musical and dance traditions is particularly evident in *Going North, 1881*, a work that includes banjo songs, spirituals, harmonica, and slide guitar, and in the impressive diversity of musical sources used in her entire repertory.

17. McIntyre’s efforts to transplant free jazz sequencing, with its rapid pace, startling disjunctures, and innovative harmonies, eventually consolidated a signature style of moving, described by Cynthia Stembile West as follows: “Her jumps contain a torque, a suspension commonly seen in African dance, that freezes the dancer in midair. This re-
quires rugged physical stamina, skill, nerve, guts, and knowing exactly when to ‘take-off.’ Precision and timing are crucial elements which heighten the drama and rivet attention. McIntyre’s signature is defined by suspended buoyancy, swaggered sliding walks, hands flung out forcefully with each finger carving its own world in the space, and sustained balances that float on stage” (“Dianne McIntyre,” 142).

18. See Manning, Modern Dance, Negro Dance.
19. See Gibson, Senses Considered as Perceptual Systems.
20. Berthoz, Brain’s Sense of Movement, 196.
21. Ibid., 201.
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