

# The Globalization of Contemporary Dance in Francophone Africa Embodying Cultural Identity While Discovering the New

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## Abstract

In this globalizing world, art and culture are no longer isolated to one geographical location. The cultural exchanges between Francophone Africa and France are particularly promising and problematic. Due to France's colonial history of domination in several African countries like Madagascar and Burkina Faso, there is still a power dynamic visible in the mutual exchanges that currently take place. This paper investigates this relationship by discussing close readings of African contemporary dance performances and the insight of artists engaged in this discussion such as Salia Sanou, Seydou Boro, Faustin Linyekula, Flora Théfaine, and Odile Sankara. Companies such as *Salia ni Seydou* and *Studios Kabako* are developing their own definitions of contemporary dance by incorporating influences from Europe, confronting stereotypes associated with African dance and the black body, and utilizing their own cultural heritage as choreographic material. Contrary to the Eurocentric notion of contemporary dance's birthrights, African contemporary dance is not a sub-genre of contemporary dance, but a product of the contemporary thought process of discovering the new. The global exchange taking place now is resulting in the amassing of multiple identities that are recontextualized to present new meanings, new interpretations, and a new projection of self through the dancing body.

## Preface

I am American, *je suis américaine*. I am white. I am woman, I am agnostic, I have brown hair, blue eyes, I am 5 ft 4 inches, and probably 165 lbs. All of these physical characteristics affect my interaction with the world and the world's perception of me. My personal preoccupation with identity is due to my belief in identity as a constantly evolving state of being that leaves an impression on one's surroundings<sup>1</sup>.

Living in the United States, I am constantly surrounded by dual identities: Afro-American, Chinese-American, Indian-American. While in Europe, I was asked on the street by a passerby, "Where do you come from?" The answer seems simple, America, more specifically the United States. I was quickly corrected by this older gentleman that no, all Americans come from

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<sup>1</sup> In thinking about the actual word "identity," I started dividing the syllables, investigating the individual meanings of the parts of the whole: **I** – myself – **dent** – impression, mark – **ity** state of being, quality. I wanted to clearly appreciate the difference between an "-ity" versus an "-ism," which, in my mind, is the difference between subjectivity and objectivity, respectively. Identity I've come to believe is a lived experience, impacted by the "dents" created by outside influences and a generator of "dents" imprinted onto the environment.

somewhere other than the United States. In his mind, my country's history of immigration has forever frozen the nation into a paradigm of diverse, displaced individuals. This thinking also ignores the indigenous populations that reside in the United States. So sure, I think I have some German, Irish, and British ancestry, your standard American mutt. However, generations after my great-great-great-great grandfather landed on the shores of Eastport, Maine, I would still just settle on calling myself American without the hyphen, because I do not identify with those other labels.

Throughout this past year living outside of my country of origin, national identity has become of particular interest. I have come closer to understanding what it means to be American while living abroad than I have ever during the 20 years prior while growing up in the United States. Four months in Madagascar and then five months in France brought me face to face with intense feelings of displacement and cultural readjustment.

My journey began back in August 2006 as I flew over the great African continent in order to reach the world's fourth largest island located off Africa's Eastern shores. Madagascar is a fascinating melting pot of peculiar island evolution. Not only have its flora and fauna evolved into some unique species, but the human population is an interesting endemic mixture of Polynesian, African, and Arabic descent, influencing the language, cuisine, and customs. For example, this cultural mixture can be heard in the Malagasy language. While the roots of their native tongue are mainly based on Malaysian languages, the standard greeting, *Salama*, is an Arabic expression found in most Northern Islamic African countries. Likewise zebus and rice are two culturally significant symbols that have become integrated into the country's iconography and proverbs but come from different geographical influences. Zebus are sacred livestock symbolizing wealth and good fortune, a close tie to the livestock cultures of Africa. Rice, on the

other hand, was introduced by the Polynesian decedents and has become the staple food in this arid land. Even France's colonial past has made a cultural mark on this precious island: a baguette and coffee for breakfast, *bisous* or greeting kisses, and always either the French salutation *bon appetit* or Malagasy *mazotoa* if someone is eating.

I discovered that no matter how well I was treated by my host family and Malagasy friends, and no matter how long I might live in Madagascar, I would always be seen as the foreigner, the *vazah*, due to the color of my skin and everything that it symbolizes. I was seen as a commodity with monetary and/or sexual value. For closer Malagasy friends, I was seen as their ticket out of their country and out of a life of poverty. Still engrained in many Malagasy minds is that the white man, the colonizer, holds the money, the dreams, and the freedom. Even my 15 year old host sister confided in me that she hopes to marry a *vazah* in the future.

Despite these interactions, I met some of the most resilient and happiest people who were poorer than the homeless I have seen in the United States. Mark Fenn, who worked for the World Wildlife Fund in Tuléar, Madagascar, reminded my group of American students to look through the eyes of a new value system. In the rural countryside, a man may be a king because he owns a hundred zebus, but look as poor as his neighbors who have only one. He told each of us to look into the eyes of the children we would meet, and try to recall the same level of happiness in our American families who can buy it all. I know he was right because it was in Madagascar that I saw the biggest smiles. It was in the distant town of Faux Cap that I danced with all the children of my host village into the late hours. For most nights there were no drums, only voices and no wood-sprung floors, only the sand. Even after working all day tending their land, not one of those children wanted to break the energy and say good night.

After just a few short months adjusting to Malagasy culture, I next found myself transported and transplanted into a small town in Northeastern France, interning at a National Choreographic Center. Instead of dancing by moonlight to the hollow thud of an empty water bucket, I watched dance from the comfort of a plush red velvet chair seated in front of a gigantic, expansive stage. At the Centre Chorégraphique National (CCN) in Belfort, France, I helped with organizing tours for their daughter company, *ContreJour*, as well as hosting visiting companies in the CCN. For its size and location, the CCN was far grander than any dance center that exists in American towns equal in population to Belfort. The building included office space for the staff, a stocked kitchen, a costume workshop, a small studio, and a beautiful black-box theatre fully equipped for lighting and sound.

It was a double culture shock being in a country that valued dance more than my own does and supplied the Arts with more amenities than Madagascar could afford. In addition, I was not only dealing with entering a society with a higher standard of living than I'm use to in the United States, but I was also living in the nation that was a major colonial power in Madagascar's history from 1895 to 1960. Everyday bits of Madagascar would find me. Such as in the market place, I spotted popular Malagasy tourist souvenirs and exchanged a few words in Malagasy with the street vendor. And at a music festival, I came across a traditional Malagasy band who played the rhythms I was so used to hearing. So as an American displaced in a foreign country, encountering Malagasy culture within France's borders, I started to wonder what cultural exchanges do take place between Africa and France.

I believe there is a difference between an American living in France (a foreigner who doesn't attach French to his identity such as myself), the immigrant feeling the pressures of assimilation (who perhaps will embody a dual identity), and the French with African ancestry

(and why they choose to lose the other part of the hyphen). I think there is a conscious choice to continue to carry a country of origin's identity and to pick up a new one. So I initially intended to find where the French-African hyphen exists in France's culture. Instead I discovered Africans fully rooted in their home soil, benefiting from and affected by the current neocolonialist era.

### **Introduction**

This paper investigates the cultural exchanges between Africa and France from a contemporary dance perspective. Since culture and the arts are so intricately tied, it is sometimes difficult to differentiate between the two. At times culture seems to be the main influence shaping the arts. At others, the arts maintain control over culture from which they are produced. Dance can provide a focal tool for looking at France's relationship with her former African colonies in this neocolonialist era and the theory behind what constitutes African contemporary dance. Dance is of particular interest when discussing identity because the body is the artistic medium upon which identity is imprinted and through which identity is formed. By analyzing the French-African cultural exchange, through close readings of African contemporary dance performances and the insight of artists engaged in this discussion, I hope to show applicable examples of the globalization of contemporary dance.

### **France's Historical and Political Background**

In trying to find a hyphenated identity in French culture, I first looked at critical discussions of France's colonial and immigration history. Under the Republican values of liberty, equality, and fraternity, France has championed a universal, national identity which has created a culture that prioritizes assimilation rather than celebrates differences. This process of assimilation requires immigrants to integrate into the French society by taking up French culture and forgetting their place of origin (Spektorowski 287). According to Patrick Lozès, president of

the newly created *Conseil représentatif des associations noires de France* (Representative Council of Black Associations or CRAN), this notion of assimilation, of a constant continuum of integration, will always negate the foreigner as French (Lozès 57). At first glance, Lozès is always considered a foreigner, simultaneously visible and invisible. He is aware of his visibility due to the discrimination he encounters, but he also feels invisible since the government, in not recognizing minorities, has made little effort to eliminate racism (Lozès 13, 43).

Choreographer Flora Théfaine, originally from Togo, has seen France change over the three decades she has lived and maintained her company *Kossiwa* in Nantes, France. Prior to the current increase in racism and discrimination, France offered a welcoming home to immigrants. Now, each day Africans are being sent home. Théfaine is concerned what immigration position the new French President will enforce while in office (Personal Interview). During his campaign, the new French President, Nicholas Sarkozy, called for an immigration test in order to choose qualified immigrants (Danjon). While Interior Minister in 2006, Sarkozy pushed for a French immigration bill that among many things would require immigrants to sign a contract stating they would respect the French way of life (“French-African Ties ‘Must’”).

In addition to these demands for assimilation pushed by Sarkozy, the invisibility described by Patrick Lozès and felt by others who are not white is reinforced by France’s positive interpretation of its colonial past. Seen as civilizing the savage cultures, French colonization is presented as a blessing by popular media, by the National Assembly (the law of February 23<sup>rd</sup> 2005 recognizes the positive role of the French overseas), and even by dictionaries (*le Petit Robert* uses the wording “to place value” for both the verb to colonize and the noun colonization) (Lozès 106, 95, 97). However, this positive spin still does not erase the concept of race created by colonists in order to differentiate themselves from the colonized (Stovall 65). In

the colonies, citizens were mostly white, while subjects, both slaves and the colonized, were black, making French identity primarily a white condition (Stovall 54).

While colonialism has been recognized, France has still turned a blind eye to her history of slavery, which spanned at least three centuries, starting around 1570 and finally ending in 1848. According to Lozès, the history of slavery is rarely taught in schools and the Republic often tries to dissociate itself from slavery by stating that it never actually authorized slavery. Historically, this is true since slavery was first abolished during the first Republic in 1794, only to be reinstated by Napoleon Bonaparte in 1802, and abolished for good on April, 27<sup>th</sup> 1848 after the second Republic came into power (Lozès 80). This distance between France and slavery may have to do with the fact that slavery never existed on French soil. Since racial differences between France and her colonies were reinforced spatially, France never had to confront a racial “other” on her own turf (Stovall 61).

The first time the French had to face the presence of a racial “other” was between 1914 and 1918 when France imported almost half a million foreigners to work during the War (Stovall 55). However, soon after the war France began exporting foreign workers in order to regain racial homogeneity, even though France lost about 1.6 million men in the war who would not be returning to fill the void in the foreign workforce (Stovall 57, 59). As a Labor Ministry article in 1920 states: “[we need] to call upon labor of European origin, in preference to colonial or exotic labor, because of the social and ethnic difficulties which could arise from the presence upon French soil of ethnographic elements too clearly distinct from the rest of the population” (Stovall 59). So France returned to a state of racial homogeneity and the small population of immigrants who continued to live in France in the latter half of the twentieth century remained socially

invisible (Stovall 62). As a result, a hyphenated identity which requires recognition of both minorities and diversity has remained dormant.

France's renowned hip-hop company *Accrorap*, formed in 1989 by Kader Attou, Eric Mezino, Mourad Merzouki, and Chaouki Said, has often focused on the question of identity, a subject of interest for their immigrant and minority communities. Attou, current choreographer and artistic director of *Accrorap*, is a second generation immigrant from Algeria who got involved in performance art as an alternative lifestyle to warfare. The most recent work currently touring promotes harmonious diversity, but not necessarily dual identities within one person. The piece titled, "Les corps étrangers" (2006), translated as the foreign bodies, lists the eclectic cast as:

*Parul Shah, danseuse indienne de kathak*  
*Prashant Shah, danseur indien de kathak*  
*Briahim Bouchelaghem, danseur hip-hop*  
*Fouaz Bounechada, gymnaste et danseur hip-hop algérien*  
*Hichem Serir Abdallah, danseur hip-hop algérien*  
*Clarisse Doukpe Tchellas, danseuse contemporaine africaine*  
*Thô Anothai, danseur hip-hop originaire du Laos*  
*Pierre Bolo, danseur hip-hop français (Attou)*

Not only are nationality and dance style clearly indicated in the program, but the French language also implies gender through the adjective's spelling: danseur (male dancer) versus danseuse (female dancer). Immediately, "Les corps étrangers" signifies to the audience that each dancer's identity is pertinent enough to take notice before we even see them physically.

The performance overlaps the Indian dance form, Kathak, with hip-hop's athleticism and African contemporary dance style to create a diversified whole. Each dancer stays true to his own cultural knowledge, distinct in his esthetic and his performativity. Attou seems to

understand the essence of the movement, its rhythm, momentum, energy trajectory and/or shape, and brilliantly overlaps complementary styles so that they reinforce the parallels between them. For example, the choreography combines the Kathak foot slaps with African torso isolations, the Kathak turns with the hip hop floor spins, and Kathak's quick changes and precision in direction with hip hop's weight changes in the floor work. I think this message of strength through diversity is echoed in one climatic formation where the entire ensemble makes a stairway of bodies leading up to the top of the stage's décor. I interpret this piece as a plea to France to accept diversity as a viable foundation for the French identity<sup>2</sup>.

While "Les corps étrangers" pushes the hot political issue of diversity to the forefront of the contemporary dance realm, I discovered the French-African hyphenated identity was non-existent. In trying to ask French dance journalist Gérard Mayen about a French-African identity by comparing the French-African condition with African Americans, I discovered that America's history of slavery and France's history of colonialism are regarded as separate events with few similarities. I was immediately interrupted by Mayen who corrected my comparison by indicating that slavery is very different from colonialism, leaving me with the impression that France's history of colonialism was regarded positively as opposed to the atrocities committed during America's history of slavery. Consequently, African Americans' and French-Africans' lived experiences would have differed too much to be comparable (Mayen, Personal Interview).

Although I disagree with Gérard Mayen's quick analysis of our two countries' history of domination and oppression, I believe that Mayen's French identity has colored his opinion of the possible existence of a French-African identity. On the other hand, Mayen did introduce me to

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<sup>2</sup> My analysis of Accrorap's piece is based solely on my own interpretation of their movement and staging of "Les corps étrangers." Although Accrorap is a frequent company in residency at the CCN, the timing was not in my favor to interview the artists. Nonetheless, the CCN has various videos of Accrorap's work, which contextualized "Les corps étrangers" as another piece that encourages non-violent integration of cultural differences. More information about the company can be found at their website: < <http://www.accrorap.com/>>.

France's current interest in Africa's booming contemporary dance scene, particularly in her former colonies. His research has focused on the new generation of African dancers who are working in the contemporary idiom in their home countries. Leaving behind my quest for a hyphenated duality, I followed Mayen's lead and found African artists who grew up and developed in Africa, and continue to stay committed to their country of origin after successfully beginning their career in France.

Many of these African artists live their lives on planes, traveling back and forth between Africa and Europe. As a result, I was able to contact several who maintain offices in Paris or who were conducting classes or workshops in France. Although each story differs slightly, these artists, who were initially trained in their African country, started their performance careers abroad and then decided to return to their home country, even when faced with limited resources.

While in Paris, I met with Virginie Dupray, manager of the Congolese artist Faustin Linyekula. Linyekula started his dance career in 1997 when he formed, with mime Opiyo Okach and dancer Afrah Tenambergen, the first contemporary dance company in Kenya called *Company Gàara*. Linyekula returned to the Democratic Republic of Congo in 2001 to create a structure for dance and theatre which would provide a place for training, exchange, research and creation. With his company, *Studios Kabako*, Faustin Linyekula has choreographed six pieces, and he now tours and teaches regularly in Africa, the United States, and in Europe ("Faustin Linyekula"). In 2007, I saw *Studios Kabako's* performance of "Festival of Lies" for the Philadelphia *Live Arts Festival*, but I was unable to meet with either Faustin Linyekula or Virginie Dupray.

I also spoke with Marie de Heaulme, manager of the famous Burkinabé dance company *Salia ni Seydou*. The company *Salia ni Seydou* was formed by Salia Sanou and Seydou Boro in

1995, two years after living in France and working with French choreographer, Mathilde Monnier at the Centre Chorégraphique National in Montpellier. After establishing their company back on their home soil, Salia and Seydou began and now co-direct the Festival *Dialogues de Corps* (the sixth took place in 2006) in the capital of Burkina Faso, Ouagadougou (“Biographies”).

Salia Sanou and Seydou Boro’s time with Mathilde Monnier revealed France’s preoccupation with Africa’s cultural scene. Digging deeper, I found that contemporary dance is frequently considered a European construct by the French. In his book *Danseurs Contemporains du Burkina Faso*, Gérard Mayen considers it redundant to discuss the origin of contemporary dance, but finds it sufficient to call Mathilde Monnier the mother of African contemporary dance. Although only made as a small side comment in his book, it maintains a Eurocentric notion of contemporary dance’s birthright. The general consensus from my research is that African contemporary dance is not a sub-genre of contemporary dance, but a product of the contemporary thought process. Contemporary dance is inspired by lived cultural knowledge which becomes embodied in the dancer’s performed identity, and thus reflects the culture with which the dancer identifies. Mathilde Monnier’s work is an example of contemporary dance in action and she has influenced the Burkina Faso dance scene both financially and artistically, but her contributions by no means make her the sole mother of contemporary dance for all of Africa, let alone in Burkina Faso.

### **Situating Traditional African Dance**

In order to analyze African contemporary dance, one needs to look at Africa’s cultural heritage and the importance of traditional dance in society. As I mentioned earlier regarding the inseparable tie between art and culture, Africa’s traditional art forms are also intertwined with

Africa's cultural patterns. Similar to Western social dances and ballet's original intentions as a court dance that embodies correct etiquette, traditional African dance also teaches appropriate societal comportment. Traditional African dances use gestures and narratives that are steeped in social and religious understandings (Boro, *La Rencontre*)<sup>3</sup>. The transmission of these codified gestures and narratives through the generations teaches moral lessons and general societal conduct.

Dance is an essential element in African social gatherings, such as funerals, weddings, or the typical party where participants form a dancing ring for people to enter. The dance and music are intimately tied, with the lead drummer instructing entrances and exits into the dancing ring and changes in the movement (Mayen 52). This construct of the dancing ring embodies the belief in the inclusion of all members of society by directly involving all participants, whether dancer, musician, or with the viewer who makes the physical structure of the dancing ring. This differs greatly from Europe's use of the proscenium stage providing one perfect viewpoint for the king.

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*People use their bodies as instruments through which every conceivable emotion or event is projected. The result is a hypnotic marriage between life and dance. The two are inseparable. When a child is born, when a person is buried, there is the dance. People dance the sowing of the seed, and the harvest, puberty, rites, hunting, warfare. They dance for rain, sun, strong and numerous children, marriage and play. Love, hatred, fear, joy, sorrow, disgust, amazement, all these and all other emotions are expressed through rhythmic movement (Primus, 6).*

As Pearl Primus so passionately illustrates, African dance encompasses all of life's activities. Dances depict everything from everyday activities to historical events that are chosen to be remembered. For example, many Ghanaian dances such as *Gakpa*, *Agbadza* and *Atsiagbekor* feature bird movement to evoke the image of the legendary bird that guided the Ewe people to their present homeland (Green 14). Labor movements are also visible in dances. The Birnin Kebbi people of Nigeria have many dances depicting farming and fishing, their two main occupations (Green 17). Additionally dance is an important means of communication in African religious practice. Because the body is seen as sacred, dancing promotes this vision of holistic unity between the cosmos, the earth, and the people (Ajayi 184-186). One example is *Gbamu*, a dance of the Yoruba people of Nigeria which portrays the Sango deity of thunder and lightning. In the dance, the diagonal motion of the dance wand, which points from the sky to the earth, symbolizes the unification of the earth and the heavens (Ajayi 191). Although these are only a few examples, they illustrate the importance of African dance as a communication tool and unifier for the community.

From the Western perspective, African societies are frequently interpreted as primitive and sexually promiscuous<sup>4</sup>. Often misinterpreted this way is the extended use of the pelvis in African dance. According to Brenda Dixon Gottschild, the Africanist aesthetic privileges the “democratic autonomy” of body parts where as the Europeanist aesthetic wishes to erase what Gottschild terms the three “b’s,” buttocks, belly, and breasts (*Black Dancing Body* 147). Since Western societies perceive the pelvis as a sexual symbol, movement of that area is considered lewd and vulgar (Welsh Asante, “Zimbabwean” 209). However, unlike Western societies that not only cover up “disgraceful” private parts, but also abstain from moving these areas, African dance does not require the pelvis to be stationary. Ethnomusicologist Doris Green pursued the question as to why pelvic contractions appear in so many different genres of African dance from puberty rituals to war dances. She discovered that often movement is isolated to a particular body part in order to emphasize secondary rattles worn on the body. In other instances, the hip movement of the dancer is used to denote a character such as in the Ghanaian dance *Bamaya* where the men wear frilled skirts and imitate the hip motion of women (Green 16). Consequently, the misinterpretation of African dance as sexually promiscuous is all based on the Western evaluation of the pelvis as sexual. As Dr. Kariamuwelsh Asante states, “one’s perspective governs one’s perception; in other words, what you see is what you think you see!” (“Zimbabwean” 209).

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<sup>4</sup> Joann Kealiinohomoku’s article, “An Anthropologist Looks at Ballet as a Form of Ethnic Dance,” uprooted many of the assumptions in the Western world which considered ballet a high art form that could not be dissected by anthropologic study. Her article gives a short survey of the biased writings of DeMille, Haskell, Holt, the Kinneys, Kirstein, La Meri, Martin, Sachs, Sorell, and Terry, who have written about non-Western dance forms as ethnic dances. Inherent in their definition of ethnic dance, which excludes ballet, is the perception of folk art as primitive, lacking technique and artistry.

The two qualities inherent in many African dance forms are polyrhythm and polycentrism, which are reflected in both the dance and in the culture<sup>5</sup>. Polyrhythm is the presence of multiple rhythms in the body whereas polycentrism is the presence of more than one center from which movement is initiated. For example, the Antanosy ethnic group of Southern Madagascar frequently dances the *Mangaliba* at social gatherings. This dance requires the torso to be slightly bent over towards the ground to allow the feet to shuffle quickly underneath or to do a catch-step. Riding on top of the differing rhythms of the feet, the arms and shoulders remain stationary, sometimes lifting in order to suspend a beat. Unlike ballet in which the torso is erect and the movement is initiated from the core, the torso in *Mangaliba* is closer to the earth and is one of many initiation points. The dance portrays multiple rhythms as well as multiple centers.

And it is not just the dance that employs polyrhythm and polycentrism; I experienced the “poly” structure of life while in Madagascar. At the bank or at the market, there would be no queue or central location, but a group waiting to be served. The American students and I found even our lectures difficult since we were used to the strict outline and direction given by our home universities, which often maintains a central discussion and monotone rhythm. Instead our Malagasy teachers would give information scattered across the board or would go on long tangents that easily had us lost, but they always managed to return to the main point. Gérard Mayen, as well, noted that the street life in Burkina Faso resembled the “poly” structure of the dance, with cars and people zigzagging through the streets (Mayen 160).

The characteristics and values of daily life that are apparent in the dance and music become embodied in the traditions. Since these traditions pass down cultural knowledge and

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<sup>5</sup> In an effort to generate a vocabulary to describe African dance, scholars Odette Blum, Robert Farris Thompson, and Kariamu Welsh Asante have articulated universal qualities that they observed as inherent to African dance. My use of polyrhythm and polycentrism come from Dr. Welsh Asante’s description of the seven aesthetic senses: polyrhythm, polycentrism, curvilinearity, epic memory, texture, repetition, and holism (Welsh Asante, “Commonalties in African Dance”).

social structures, they risk becoming stagnant and unchangeable. All contemporary dancers in Burkina Faso come from a traditional dance background, so many are looking for the connection between modernity and traditionalism (Mayen 86, 80). African artists who wish to evolve their traditional forms face opposition not only from their own countries where the assumption is that traditions should not change, but also from outsiders who pigeon-hole African art as primitive and traditional. Marie de Heaulme, manager of *Salia ni Seydou*, finds that French audiences hold in their minds a cliché or representation of African dance as primitive, full of high energy, and sexually charged. When they see a performance of *Salia ni Seydou*, She confided that many leave feeling either surprised or disappointed (Personal Interview). Thus, African contemporary dance companies face the question of what part of their traditions to hold onto without falling prey to tradition's stereotypes and a refusal to evolve.

### **France's Perception of the African Body**

The Western world has often fantasized black Africa, intrigued by the traditions and practices that it perceived as primitive and uncivilized. France's fantasy of Africa arose in part due to the geographical distance between France and its black colonial subjects. During the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, France was able to admire the black exotic body from afar (Stovall 63). In her book *The Black Dancing Body: A Geography from Coon to Cool*, Brenda Dixon Gottschild deconstructs the black body to reveal the myths and stereotypes the contemporary dance scene has attached to it. A common stereotype and admiration articulated by Gottschild is the vibrant athletic quality. In an interview with Gottschild, Jowole Willa Jo Zollar of *Urban Bush Women* gives a precise example of this athleticism: the perception of the black dancing body's ability to jump high. The stereotype of jumping high is a convolution of many stereotypes attributed to the black body, such as "a larger butt, powerful thighs and Achilles tendon," all of

which allow one to jump higher (Gottschild, *Black Dancing Body* 95). While there are many other perceptions of athleticism in African dance, Zollar's one example demonstrates the complexity of the African existence as defined by the West's oppressive language<sup>6</sup>.

Reflecting that consumption of the athletic body are four quotes from reviews published of *Salia nī Seydou's* piece, "Figninto" which was touring North America in 2001:

- *But it was the physical virtuosity of the dancers that really brought the audience to their feet. Some of the moves went beyond dance to spectacle* (Jackson).
- *their athleticism a sight to behold* (Crabb).
- *You leave the theatre feeling that you witnessed genius in the controlled flexing of muscle* (Kelly).
- *But the major message is to relish the talent before you without searching for a message* (Ashley).

All four of the reviews draw attention to the three male performers' supreme physical prowess rather than the artistic integrity of the performance. Although a small example, the above four critics gloss over the meaning of the movement in *Figninto*, and instead focus on the energy of the performance.

Additionally, it is the opinion of Gérard Mayen that a common attribute of African dance is the valorization of the body, particularly the male body displaying a nude torso (48). The valorization of the body privileged in African dance, however, falls prey to the white gaze which is intrigued with the exotic, sexual vitality of the male black body (Mayen 170). In addition to valorizing the body, Flora Théfaine, states that African dance contains a large source of vitality because dance's position in society encompasses life, love, and death. Because vitality resonates

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<sup>6</sup> bell hooks repeatedly emphasizes "language is also a place of struggle" (154). According to her and theorist Monique Wittig (author of "The Straight Mind"), marginalized groups are often forced to use the language of their oppressor. This language always defines the marginalized group in relation to the dominate group. As a result, the marginalized group's identity and expression is understood through the dominate group's existence rather than on their own terms. The gaps in the oppressor's language continue to keep the marginalized group under control because the marginalized people are unable to fully articulate their experience.

so well with one's sense of kinesthetic empathy, virtuosic movement becomes a feat of the body rather than the intellect. Brenda Dixon Gottschild surmises that whites feared black bodies because "black bodies weren't dumb; they were extensions of black minds—intelligent minds—in a physical landscape where the Cartesian mind/body split refused to take hold" (*Black Dancing Body* 44). However, due to the mind/body division in Western culture, products of the mind are valued more than the labor produced by the body. As a result, choreography that uses vitality is not perceived as being a political critique or symbolically significant, because it requires more physical prowess than minimalist choreography.

While many young African artists play up the stereotype discussed above in order to gain popularity, *Salia nī Seydou* are trying to fight against it (de Heaulme). In his solo "C'est à dire," Seydou kinesthetically comments on Mathilde Monnier's quest for traditional African movement by performing exaggerated stereotypical African movement. His arms circle high overhead as his feet do a catch step, releasing the back at the end of each step. The commentary can be found in the break of the wrist where it appears as if Boro is throwing away the movement. The head also displays sarcastic sentiments as it follows the arm's circle. Although energetic and large, Boro appears to be holding back the real strength of the movement, only marking this phrase. Boro is clearly not in a trance state, in which he would not only be completely engaged mentally and physically, but also his displayed sentiments would be synchronized with his physical expression. Instead, his hands and head reveal his indifference towards the movement (Boro, *C'est à Dire*). Located on the margins of where European contemporary dance and traditional African dance meet, Seydou Boro is strategically creating what bell hooks calls "a space of radical openness" (156). Boro's movement resists performing the "exotic Other" by

transforming the colonizer's perception of African movement into his own critique on the oppression that perception holds (hooks 155).

### The French-African Dance Exchange

There is a universal assumption that the sole lineage of contemporary art is based in the Western world (Mayen 22)<sup>7</sup>. In the West, there is often a value system privileging modernity, as if new equals better which implies superiority (Mayen 66). French choreographer Jérôme Bel defines contemporary art in his piece titled "Pichet Klunchun and Myself," a dialogue between traditional Thai dance and European contemporary dance. According to Bel, French society values discovering the new, so the government funds artists to research new ways of expression despite a popular outcome (Bel). This is a different approach than in the United States where artists funded by the government are no longer free to explore their expression. Limited by the stipulations by the National Endowment of the Arts established to ensure of no obscenities, American art has increasingly since the 1990's been molded to popular tastes. However, in France, the societal importance placed on artistic development outweighs the audience's approval or distain for the product.

This Eurocentric conception of contemporary art is also evident in the French syntax of traditional and contemporary African dance. Gérard Mayen notes that there is a distinct difference between *danse africaine traditionnelle* and *danse contemporaine africaine*. The former designates a location (Africa) and then a dance genre (traditional); the latter implies that contemporary dance had an initial formation location, such as Europe, and Africa is a sub-genre of European contemporary dance (60). In English, the location, if considered necessary would come first and the genre second, as in the syntax I have been using: African contemporary dance.

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<sup>7</sup> This opinion comes from Stéphane Eliard who writes in his book, *L'art contemporain au Burkina Faso*, about some of the obstacles that impede upon African art's development: "soit l'étalonnage sur un supposé universalisme en art qui en fait se trouve n'être que le décalque de la seule histoire de l'art occidental dominant" (Mayen 22).

The statement of an ethnicity becomes important in our globalizing world, a signifier of location that situates contemporary dance (Mayen, 152).

However, the goal of this paper is to reexamine contemporary dance as a process rather than a codified genre, and to use the ethnic identifier to signify and to recognize the cultural heritage which has informed the product. I will present multiple Francophone African artists' viewpoints of and definitions on contemporary dance as well as examples of some of their choreography promoting this definition of process. But, first I want to inform the reader about some selected aspects of Francophone Africa's current contemporary dance scene as well as give a background on French choreographer Mathilde Monnier's initial "discovery" of the continent.

As mentioned earlier, Mathilde Monnier, French choreographer and director of the Choreographic Center in Montpellier, is credited for giving birth to contemporary dance in Burkina Faso. Gérard Mayen describes it as a "coup de baguette magique," or by the wave of a magic wand, contemporary dance in Burkina Faso came to be (Mayen 24). In the early 90s, Monnier was interested in finding a new way of thinking for her new work titled "Pour Antigone." Monnier decided to look to Africa for inspiration, since she was completely unfamiliar with the cultures and wished to valorize African dance during an era when France looked at Blacks as immigrants needing to be sent home (Mayen 70). In a colonialist fashion, Monnier came, saw, and conquered the dance scene in Burkina Faso, introducing her Western perspective in workshops, hiring Africans for her new piece, and incorporating traditional African dance into her choreography (Boro, *La Rencontre*).

After initial preliminary visits, Monnier held auditions in the capital city, Ouagadougou, where she found six dancers who followed her back to France for the creation process and tours; two of whom were Salia Sanou and Seydou Boro (Mayen 69). In Brest, the team of six Africans

and six Europeans worked with Mathilde Monnier in developing the material for “Pour Antigone”. Initially proposed as an exchange between two continents, the rehearsals turned into two distinct camps, the Europeans working with contemporary dance performed to African music and the Africans learning to perform and improvise their traditional dance knowledge in silence. There was little to no mixing or crossing between the two dance genres other than the juxtaposition of the two on stage (Mayen 71).

While creating “Pour Antigone,” Seydou Boro filmed a documentary entitled *La Rencontre*, which illustrated the creation process of “Pour Antigone” and discussed the differences between African traditional dance and European contemporary dance as well as Mathilde Monnier’s contribution to the now growing Contemporary African dance scene in Burkina Faso. Consistently throughout the film, Monnier decontextualizes traditional African dance in order to open Africans up to contemporary dance as a resource and a form of exploration. In one workshop, Monnier criticizes the movement studies of her African students for being too literal in their narration. According to Monnier, contemporary dance can consist of just moving the fingers. Unlike her abstract approach, many of her students are rooted in their African dance traditions which are steeped with religious and secular connotations. During the rehearsals for “Pour Antigone,” the African dancers were asked to improvise in their known domain and vocabulary without learning or incorporating other dance forms (Boro, *La Rencontre*). Seydou even admits that he never took a class at Montpellier in order to preserve his personal movement style (Mayen 180). However, for many of the Africans trained in traditional dance, “Pour Antigone” required them to decontextualize their movement by removing it from its musical and narrative framework (Mayen 72).

In Monnier's mind, "Pour Antigone" presents three distinct characters: contemporary dance, African traditional dance, and Antigone who manifests as two different identities, European and African (Boro, *La Rencontre*; Mayen 70). Although one of her most popular pieces with more than 70 performances, Monnier has removed it from her active repertoire due to its colonialist connotations (Mayen 71). The official video of the piece presents four solos for the characters in the Euripides tragedy: Polynice, Tirésias, Antigone, and Créon. None of these characters is performed by an African. The only black body in the film is one lying dead in an abandoned street, a scene inserted between the solo vignettes (*Pour Antigone*). The visual record of the African esthetic which contributed to the construction of "Pour Antigone" seems to be missing, an erasing or the turning of a blind eye on the unequal artistic exchange that took place almost two decades ago<sup>8</sup>.

In the years after Mathilde Monnier's first voyage to Burkina Faso, Africa has witnessed an explosion of contemporary dance companies. African governments themselves do not have adequate money to support the arts, so it is often the international non-governmental organizations and exterior forces that shape cultural expressions (Gukhière 130). According to Marie de Heaulme, France wants to help her former colonies by offering her idea of civilization in the form of cultural funds. France is not the only foreign agent to hold power over these countries. England and Belgium also finance cultural activities, mostly in their former colonies (Dupray).

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<sup>8</sup> In a similar fashion, Patrick Lozès feels that France has never taken a close look at its colonial history and has collectively chosen to forget the past. Lozès calls this turning a blind eye sweeping the dust under the rug: *Car la France ne s'est jamais penchée sérieusement sur son passé colonial. A un examen honnête de sa conscience collective, elle a préféré l'oubli. Elle a fait ce choix sans débat, sans bruit, comme on glisse une poussière sous le tapis. La poussière malheureusement, c'est nous. Nous, les Noirs de France* (Lozès 24).

Given these external funding sources, there is a chance that African artists will conform to the stereotypes articulated earlier in order to continue to obtain money to create and to perform (Gukhière 130). Marie de Heaulme is concerned that there is little experimental work happening due to the lack of financial security in taking artistic risks. Many young artists are using a cut and paste model, directly imitating Western artists (Mayen 174). Burkina Faso, as well as other African nations, also lacks an independent African perspective and critique of its own dance scene (de Heaulme). Since Africa has yet to develop its own critics, companies are primarily reviewed by Europeans, and the development of their work is affected largely by the external European gaze (Mayen 45).

As President of the Jury at *Rencontres de danse en création d'Afrique et de l'Océan indien*, Flora Théfaine has seen the evolution of contemporary dance in Africa. She sees many young Africans wanting to leave behind their cultures and histories in order to escape their traditions for a contemporary culture. She considers it dangerous that these young choreographers are trying to use concepts and decor too complicated for their productions just in order to reflect the influences of Europe and America. In her mind this is a huge mistake. According to Théfaine, these artists should be using their own history and the resources that are available to them so they can stay true to their lineage (Théfaine).

The impressionable, young choreographers see such artists as Salia Sanou and Seydou Boro as their big brothers who have become successful stars and they want to attain that status immediately. As a result, they just create work to create work. According to de Heaulme, all the performances look the same because everyone is using the clichés of high energy and virtuosic movement (Personal Interview). As African contemporary dance blooms, Mathilde Monnier indicated it would be a waste if the form just reflected American or European contemporary

dance. Monnier hopes that it stays true to itself, rooted in the inspiration of traditional dance forms (Boro, *La Rencontre*).

Because African contemporary dance companies are currently more influenced by the West than by their own environment, they are not very well integrated into their own society where the local and regional development is neglected (Gukhière 133, 130). Ariry Andriamoratsiresy, choreographer of the Malagasy *Compagnie Rary*, admits that he is prepared for his Malagasy audience to be unable to comprehend his work (Gukhière 133). In many African countries, there is a debate regarding valuing community cohesion over personal initiative. There is often distinguished stature for the traditional artist rather than the contemporary artist who forges new expressions outside of the community (Mayen 126).

In addition to feeling distant to their home audiences, African contemporary dance companies also have to fight the colonial connotation of their Western “tainted” art form. In Francophone Africa, the performance spaces which are equipped with state of the art technical lighting, sound, and flooring are often funded by outside countries that primarily were former colonial masters. In the eyes of the local population, these places have maintained an elitist image that deters the home audience from frequenting performances held in these “foreign” centers (Gukhière 133). Although the festival *Dialogues de Corps* in Burkina Faso has been free, not many people attend the performances held in the French Cultural Center because the building is perceived as a place for whites and scorned by the general public (Mayen 122).

According to author Delphine Gukhière, there are multiple untapped economic benefits that might arise from these cultural developmental centers, including increasing employment opportunities. One successful example is the Choreographic Development Center, *La Termitière* in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso started by Salia Sanou and Seydou Boro in 2000 (Gukhière 134,

Mayen 125). Burkina Faso may have one of the most arts-supportive governments in Africa, because Thomas Sankara, President of Burkina Faso in 1983, decided to use culture to unify the country's multiple ethnicities (Mayen 90). Ougadougou has become the place to coordinate a new pan-Africa network. Salia and Seydou have started the Festival *Dialogues de Corps* which provides a venue for emerging artists to show their work. The Festival *Dialogues de Corps* also pushes for training initiatives and tours within Africa, as well as providing a space for artistic exchange (Mayen 143).

### **Francophone African Contemporary Dance in Forward Motion**

Even though exterior forces providing financial support threaten to suppress various authentic African voices, Salia Sanou and Seydou Boro's Festival *Dialogues de Corps* in Burkina Faso is doing well in cultivating an African-initiated awareness for contemporary dance. In addition, the choreography of their company, *Salia ni Seydou*, tries to counter the "cut and paste" trend in order to prove they are capable of evolving beyond their traditions.

Marie de Heaulme finds that the majority of *Salia ni Seydou*'s Western audiences are unaware of the difference between traditional and contemporary African dance. She is tired of the labeling used to catalogue the company. From her perspective, Salia and Seydou just do their work and it is the public who categorizes them. According to her, contemporary dance is simply the dance of today. De Heaulme describes artists as open, accepting people who act like sponges. Artists are constantly moving and evolving, carrying their personal gesture, but always acquiring new influences as they evolve. For instance, Salia Sanou who was instructed in the traditional dances of his ethnic group pushes his roots further in exploring his fundamental training by combining multiple sources in a performance. Within one body may be movement from multiple Burkinabé ethnic groups, displaced and recontextualized (de Heaulme).

In *Salia ni Seydou*'s piece "Weeleni, l'appel," Salia Sanou, Seydou Boro, and Ousséni Sako present three solos that provide an alternative presentation of African dance, often directly contrasting known stereotypes or faux pas. In the first solo, Sanou dances with his back to the audience with the focus on the small dance of the intricate, defined muscles of his shoulder blades (Sanou). Due to traditional African dance's social nature, the dancer almost always faces the community, sometimes playing with the choreography so as to address most of the dancing ring. Both Salia Sanou and Seydou Boro credit Mathilde Monnier for liberating them from their traditional dance education by forcing them to improvise in silence and to explore other facings in which they discovered how expressive their backs could be (Boro, *La Rencontre*). Sanou's choice to face away from the audience in his solo is evidence of *Salia ni Seydou*'s forward motion.

In the second solo performed by Ousséni Sako, I noticed myself wanting to describe his movement as animalistic, which is often used as another connotation for primitive. His arms resembled serpents in their fluidity, and his twisting torso and quick drop to the floor looked more agile than possible for humans (Sanou). The perception of Sako's movement as African is compounded by many factors touched upon by Marie de Heaulme, Dr. Kariamuwelsh Asante, and Patrick Lozès. Firstly as Lozès stated, my perception of Sako's skin color situates him as African, and then secondly, Sako's movements embody many of the attributes of traditional African dance defined by Dr. Welsh Asante such as repetition and polyrhythmic structures. However, these qualities are not restricted to the African continent. For instance, ballet choreographer Michel Fokine's "The Dying Swan," which is a modern interpretation of the death of Princess Odette, distinctly highlights the animal characteristics of the swan. The ballerina can be seen fluttering across the stage on pointe with lithe arms twisting with fluidity equal to that

seen in Sako (Folkine). The juxtaposition of Sako against Nina Ananiashvili's performance of "The Dying Swan" helps to tease apart associations we have never previously questioned. While Sako's movements are animalistic, they are not primitive. His movements more than likely portray an animal of significance to his cultural context just like Ananiashvili's swan is an esteemed fauna in ballet iconography<sup>9</sup>.

The company further combats traditional African dance stereotypes in the third solo danced by Seydou Boro. Holding the bottom of his shirt in his mouth throughout his solo, Seydou performs the smallest of movements: delicate gestures of the hands and quiet undulations of the visible abdomen (Sanou). Gérard Mayen applauds Seydou Boro for his gender critique, since the Western perception of African dance is highly masculinized (Mayen 168). However, Marie de Heaulme pointedly questions: is Seydou commenting on femininity or is it the viewer who attaches feminine to the small, sensual movement? (de Heaulme). It is this tactic that the company *Salia ni Seydou* uses to construct an artistic evolution into the realm of contemporary dance. In "Weeleni, l'appel," each solo recalls preconceived connotations and associations of African dance and the male African body, and then turns this on its head by disrupting the stereotype slightly, forcing the audience to question their assumptions of African dance.

Flora Théfaine also feels her identity is questioned in performance. Théfaine who originally came from Togo has lived in France for over 30 years. The choreography of her contemporary dance company, *Kossiwa*, is inspired by her cultural heritage. Although questioned as to whether her dance is truly African, her company being composed entirely of white dancers,

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*The ethnicity of ballet is revealed also in the kinds of flora and fauna which appear regularly. Horses and swans are esteemed fauna. In contrast we have no tradition of esteeming for theatrical purposes pigs, sharks, eagles, buffalo, or crocodiles even though these are indeed highly esteemed animals used in dance themes elsewhere in the world (Kealiinohomoku 40).*

This quote from Joann Kealiinohomoku emphasizes that iconography is inherently steeped in the cultural context from which the dance is produced. Thus, animalistic movement reflects the values of the culture rather than fitting a primitive-civilized hierarchal schema.

Théfaine never tries to prove her ethnicity in her choreography. Instead she follows her own path. She has invented a warm-up routine which allows all to participate. This has provided her a way to transmit a technique but never a whole culture (Théfaine)<sup>10</sup>.

According to Virginie Dupray, manager of Congolese artist Faustin Linyekula, Linyekula does not like the stereotyping and pigeonholing of African artists. Faustin says: “I am a dancer. I am an African. Yet I am not an African dancer” (van Reybrouck). He tries to avoid festivals which specifically showcase African contemporary dance (Dupray). Linyekula finds the idea of comparing African artists who come from different countries with different economic cultural, political, and religious backgrounds absurd. However, Linyekula is interested in the personal territory of an artist and how he constructs a universe based on personal history (Voisin 12). Faustin Linyekula often refers to his own body as his only true country (“Corks and Memories”). For Linyekula, the goal is to tell a story and to use whatever resources are available to him to tell this story. His work incorporates dance, text, film, and images which he has collected from various sources in order to share a particular history (Dupray).

A larger question for Linyekula is the perception and presentation of the black body. During his residency at the Centre National de la Danse outside of Paris, Linyekula performed an installation piece titled “Le Cargo” (2005). In this piece Faustin Linyekula presented images of and text about the black body. Along the walls of the studio were photos of Black individuals. Various books of differing sizes sat on a tarp parallel to the wall. Their titles professed to catalogue all of African art, a continent’s worth of diversity within the binding of a one inch-thick book. Linyekula alternated between projecting images of Blacks throughout theatre history on a chalkboard wall and presenting his own body on a pedestal against the same wall. While

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<sup>10</sup> I came across Flora Théfaine’s presence near the end of my stay in France. We were able to coordinate a phone interview, but I did not have time to see any of her work on video.

plastered against the wall in various balances and shape configurations, Linyekula spoke about the war in Congo, family ties, AIDS/HIV, and being an African dancer; his own body displaying the stereotype of being muscular (Linyekula, *Le Cargo*). The collage effect of the installation juxtaposes centuries of similar histories of the treatment of Blacks. When Linyekula goes beyond writing on the blackboard with white chalk to drawing lines on his own skin, the dimensionality of the human body becomes evident when the lines run over his defined, muscular legs. History becomes reality in this brief gesture as history comes off the page and onto Linyekula's black skin. The installation gives no answers or action steps against the degradation of the Black race, but Linyekula points out the repetition of history, perhaps an attempt to sway viewers to change the next chapter.

As evident in the above description, Faustin Linyekula's work is very portable: flexible enough to be performed in any space and adaptable based on the technology resources available to him. His company, *Studios Kabako*, acts like a state of mind, harboring values of creativity and choreographic research, rather than an actual location (Dupray). Author David van Reybrouck describes the ride to Linyekula's rehearsal space:

*It was quite a ride in a jeep through the dusty neighborhoods of Kinshasa where chickens fluttered away as we passed by...In front of a concrete wall, and an iron gate, the vehicle halted. 'Here we are,' he [Linyekula] said as we entered. Two young men stood on a lawn without grass. A sandpit without kids, eight meters by eight. They switched off the cassette player. There was no light, no stage, no mirror, no bar, nothing. Not even a strip of shade. Only dust. And yet, here it is, I realized, that a passionate choreographer traces his artistic urge by developing shows that are going to be performed in the lofty theatre halls of the European capitals (2006).*

In 2007, Faustin Linyekula and *Studios Kabako* performed “Festival of Lies” in the Philadelphia Live Arts Festival<sup>11</sup>. “Festival of Lies” is a poignant exposé of Congo’s troubled past of colonization and revolutions that has confounded Linyekula’s national identity. Linyekula voices this confusion when he asks what national anthem the cast should sing in order to close the show. Since the birth of the Congo under Belgium imperial rule, there have been multiple free states, so which anthem is the true one? Linyekula further insinuates that the Congo was never a Congolese concept, but created by Belgium who called those living under their rule as Congolese. Thus, none of the national anthems are appropriate with that mindset. So Linyekula turns to his ancestors, asking them which anthem they would sing. A table is pulled out to the middle of the stage with hundreds of plastic doll parts strewn across the table to represent the individuals who have died during Congo’s political unrest. The cryptic message is unsettling; political unrest has touched much of the population in Congo over the past century, making the choice of a national anthem problematic and impossible. The one glimpse of hope Linyekula leaves the audience with is a call to the losers, “Live the Losers,” who like Linyekula will survive after each political upheaval and who will prevail after every revolution.

“Festival of Lies” not only tackles critiquing Congo’s political history, but also attempts to correct many of the problems associated with African contemporary dance such as dispelling some of the stereotypes and creating a form accessible to the local population. Linyekula attempts the latter by seating the audience around small café tables that line the stage, eliminating the typical division between the audience and the performer as on a proscenium stage. The set up is more inclusive so that the audience is at eye level with the performer and is not confined to their chair. To begin the night, Linyekula picks up the mike to introduce his

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<sup>11</sup> This analysis of “Festival of Lies” is based upon my interpretation of the performance at the Painted Bride Art Center. Due to Faustin Linyekula’s tight tour schedule, we were unable to meet during his stay in Philadelphia.

performers and to encourage the audience to support the arts by helping themselves to the cuisine provided at the bar. He insists that everyone get up at any time during the performance to make sure they are fed. Like all good Western audience goers, no one leaves their seat once the performance begins. Everyone is focused on the work unfolding, not wishing to interrupt the atmosphere by filling their plate. However, this construct is ideal within the cultural context of Linyekula's Congo. The proscenium stage often alienates the African audience who is accustomed to the social agency of the dancing ring. In the space Linyekula has created, the public can remain engaged, conversing with fellow guests or partaking in the feast.

Additionally, Linyekula creatively avoids two Western stereotypes: the highly sexualized, muscular African male body and high energy, virtuosic African dance. Sometimes these stereotypes are hard to avoid, especially if the underlying characteristics are features of the vocabulary and medium. In particular, dance calls for a certain level of athleticism and control of the body in order to express oneself. Thus, the highly sexualized, muscular body is hard to escape when Linyekula and his dancers are well trained with toned bodies that define beauty. About halfway through the piece, the dancers begin to tear off each others clothes in a violent, sexual manner. The carved muscles become visible as the three are stripped bare except for tight black biker shorts. At that point, however, Linyekula interrupts the possibility to consume the bodies by calling for a short break since none of the audience has gotten any food to eat. A short intermission follows where the attention is refocused on filling one's plate or conversing rather than on the bodies of the performers.

The other stereotype is vitality, which is an inherent quality in African dance due to its social forum and connection with life cycles, but Western audiences have misconstrued this one facet of African dance to be the sole expectation of an African performance. As mentioned

before, vitality in movement is often considered to be unequal to intellectual physical investigation, because the movement resonates so well with one's sense of kinesthetic empathy. Linyekula avoids the second stereotype by not employing highly virtuosic, intensely energized movement in the actual piece. Instead, he uses movement pertinent to telling the story about the political and social confusion in Congo. As the dancers run around the space shouting, "Live the losers," "*Vive les perdants*," the band starts up and the dancers begin to pull people on stage, encouraging everyone to participate in a large dancing ring. The dancers then begin to take turns embodying the high energetic music: reverberations of the spin, isolations of the hips, and fast footwork of the feet enliven the space. This choreographic design avoids the consumerist aspect of the stereotype by involving the audience. Those people in the ring are participating and dancing and are no longer voyeurs. Those who choose to remain a voyeur due to their lack of comfort in participating in the performance are isolated, singled out by not being within the dancing ring. Thus, the vibrant, high energy movement performed is not a consumed, expected aspect of the performance, but embodied by everyone.

Faustin Linyekula's work presents an opportunity for African art to escape from its primitive paradigm established by Western audiences. His work has been performed in many art capitals of the world, such as Philadelphia and Paris, while still using limited resources. Burkinabé actress Odile Sankara champions for this switch in African artists' mentality. Rather than imitating Western art forms which reflect and work within a Western cultural context, she asks artists to continue to maintain high performance and creative standards, while using their own cultural context, allowing their home countries to feel included (Personal Interview).

Odile Sankara was nearing the end of her four-year residency at the National Theatre of Belfort (France), Le Granit, when we talked. She described to me two styles of theatre happening

in Burkina Faso: the popular form and the classic form. The classic form was introduced by the French and consists of studying the classic playwrights like Molière and Shakespeare. The popular form which is indigenous to the Burkinabé culture is part of the oral tradition that involves dance and gestures and is usually performed as a ritual or part of a ceremony. The popular theatre form performs in public places such as the market square. The actors interact with the public, sometimes interrogating onlookers or even inviting the public to replace the actors on stage. Since this form of interaction between performers and the Burkinabé audience is intrinsic to the culture, Sankara feels it is necessary to integrate the popular form with the classic form. The proscenium stage is impossible in her mind. Only large companies can afford to present work in such a setting. According to Sankara, the art form needs artists to use the minimum resources available to them while maintaining a high level of performance and technique. Artists should be working at the same high European standards but within Burkinabé cultural contexts, like such examples as *Salia ni Seydou* and Faustin Linyekula (Personal Interview).

### **Conclusion**

The individual definitions of African contemporary dance that have been presented in this paper by *Salia ni Seydou*, Faustin Linyekula, Flora Théfaine, and Odile Sankara, have provided me with a sense of resolution after living through two drastically different cultural experiences. Through my research, I have discovered that my two lived experiences in France and Madagascar have not only informed one another, but have also become intrinsically interwoven. Like all of the artists discussed in this paper, I have become a sponge incorporating new cultural understandings into my identity. What comes next is a life-long process of seeing my embodied identity emerging through my choreography and my performances as I pick up new influences

and deepen old ones. The beauty of being a contemporary dancer is that I have the freedom and the responsibility to evolve constantly as my life changes, a universal reality inherent to any culture.

Thus, I hope to have proven that contemporary dance is not a European phenomenon or of European origin. Contemporary is a mode of thinking, a way of practice that values innovation that spans across cultures. It involves reconstructing and reinventing tradition. This recontextualization of preexisting elements creates a new understanding of the world (Mayen 187, 178). Contemporary dance has become a process of globalization where by saving the essentials of tradition, these artists have done more than just cut and paste their past influences into a precarious discord, but have filtered their past through their lived cultural experiences, creating a cohesive work. In Seydou Boro's film, *La Danseuse d'Ebène*, Burkinabé choreographer Irène Tassebédou gives a passionate definition of African contemporary dance as the dance of tomorrow. She strongly believes that each individual evolves in his own direction, carries his own history, and has her own reflections which inform her own dance (2002).

Contemporary dance is happening all over the world. It is not just the result of Merce Cunningham's rupture from the Graham technique as Gérard Mayen believes; there have been many examples of artists who break away from the traditions of their predecessors<sup>12</sup>. Societies who have not even heard or seen Cunningham's post-contemporary work are breaking from their traditional dance forms. For example, Classical Thai dancer Pichet Klunchun relates to Jérôme Bel the changing culture in Thailand. Klunchun says he is forced to transform his cultural knowledge into a contemporary form in order to keep the new generation engaged in its

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<sup>12</sup> Before France's own contemporary dance boom in the 1980s, France was preoccupied with America's modern choreographers, such as Alvin Ailey, Martha Graham, Paul Taylor, Merce Cunningham, and Alwin Nikolais (Gore 32, 33). This French "infatuation for Cunningham" is conveyed by Gérard Mayen who writes: "dans le champ de la chorégraphie occidentale, ma conception de la danse contemporaine s'initie essentiellement autour de la 'rupture' *cunninghamienne*" (Gore 33, Mayen 31).

traditional art form (Bel). Classical Thai dance in its isolated, “pure” form has become archaic for the younger Thai generation who are influenced by outside cultures and artistic styles. By allowing his form to incorporate some of these external influences, Klunchun can continue the heritage of his traditional dance while still giving it space to evolve.

One of Cunningham’s most famous quotes states that there are no fixed points. In his choreographic mind, the spatial design is constantly changing so that there is no point around which one can orient. Likewise, the multitude geneses of contemporary dance cannot be attributed to one point of origin. Instead, the shifting, interacting nature of culture allows for no art form to remain fixed. Consequently, contemporary dance cannot be labeled as a product from any particular country or culture. Although I have used “African contemporary dance” in this paper, I strongly suggest replacing this terminology with “contemporary dance in Africa,” because the place locator identifies the roots from which contemporary dance draws, while allowing contemporary dance to be recognized as having multiple birthrights.

Francophone Africa is still caught within the web of neocolonialism which hangs onto the image of a colonial Africa, is attracted to Africa’s “primitive” traditions, and claims ownership of Africa’s contemporary developments. In order for contemporary dance to be sustainable in these poorer nations, African contemporary dance companies have to find a way to include their home audiences and develop infrastructures pertinent to their current and past African cultures rather than mirroring their former colonial masters’ preconceived concepts. By embracing their own cultural heritage, African contemporary dancers can continue to evolve along their own paths in this greater global civilization. Salia Sanou would like to see the new generation of African choreographers escape the stereotypes of traditionalism in order to prove that African culture is rich and under perpetual evolution (“Biographies”). Similarly, Faustin

Linyekula describes his own evolution to dance scholar Brenda Dixon Gottschild: “my Africa is always in the becoming. It’s not a fixed point, and no identity is fixed” (“My Africa Is Always in the Becoming”).

I think the importance of contemporary dance is its ability to embody cultural identity while continuing to discover the new. My own identity is always “in the becoming.” It’s not a fixed point. The mixture of Malagasy, French, and American influences I embody today will shift as I incorporate new experiences. The collage effect of juxtaposing my accrual of dance and cultural knowledge will generate new meanings, new interpretations, and a new projection of self through my dance.

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## Biography

Kathryn Speer graduated in 2008 from Swarthmore College with a Bachelor's of Arts degree in Dance and Biology. Her work has ranged from performance, choreography, archival processing, and research scholarship. For the past eight years, she has attended the Bates Dance Festival in Lewiston, ME where she has worked with such artists as Chris Aiken, Robert Een, David Dorfman, Michael Foley, Jane Weiner, and Jennifer Nugent. At Swarthmore College, Speer has studied *Umfundalia* contemporary African dance technique created by Dr. Kariamu Welsh Asante. In 2006, she developed the archival database for the International Center for African Music and Dance Video Collection currently housed at Swarthmore College and Temple University. As an intern with Centre Chorégraphique National (CCN) in Belfort, France, she became familiar with the choreographic style of French choreographer Odile Duboc, director of the CCN. Presently, Speer resides in Philadelphia, beginning her career in all aspects related to dance.

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