



FIGURE 1. Faustin Linyekula, Studios Kabako, and Opéra National de Lorraine's recreation of the 1923 modernist ballet *La création du monde* (2012).

“An Impossible Form”

The Absence That Keeps
on Giving

MLONDOLZI ZONDI

Perhaps absence is a gift.

—mayfield brooks, “The Artist Is Not Present”

God, dance is an impossible form.

—Ralph Lemon, *Geography: Art, Race, Exile*

There is a subject position whose formlessness is irreducible to an aesthetic choice aimed at corporeal dissolution or willful self-abnegation, but is rather a condition of (non)being produced through structural violence. Black aesthetic practices described as formless embrace a deform that already constitutes blackness, and not formlessness as a visual/performance motif, as is often the case in Western aesthetics’ “epistemic turns and revolutions.”¹ The “West,” here, is not a specific geographical location; rather, as Édouard Glissant describes it, “it is a project, not a place.”² The condition of “being without form,”³ as Calvin Warren theorizes, marks historico-political maneuvers of violence that rendered corporeal integrity an impossibility for African-derived people.⁴ Black corporeal/figural *form’s* equivalency to humanity or personhood can neither be presumed nor incontrovertibly substantiated. The figuration of “the black body” does not allow entry into the category of the human, and it is not a “body” in the same way that other bodies are bodies. Its emergence deranges the very meaning of what constitutes a body, since, as Thomas DeFrantz has argued, it comes before the law already

as both its antithesis and condition of possibility.⁵ In his study of Pablo Picasso's relationship to the African figure, Simon Gikandi also notes that "the black body represented the corporeal form out of order, even in nature, and hence already in defiance of the laws of proportion and symmetry."⁶ Both authors describe a negation that grants coherence to the negative/positive polarity and the law. What do we do with this incommensurability between form and meaning? Black political thought and artistic practice have focused on wrestling with this voided subjectivity imposed from *outside*, either by suturing its fragmentation through "imitation of a form of being"⁷ or inventing an African subject position that embraces the rupture of disintegrated form as a point of departure for the dissolution of the anti-black world. What African and African-derived thinkers and makers do with this *de*-form in black aesthetics has political stakes outlined in the following pages.

In this article, I consider African contemporary/experimental dance practices not only as invested in formal aesthetic in(ter)vention but as making those formal choices to draw attention to the scene of violence where blackness meets form. Black dance is pliantly positioned, and this allows it to be moved in a manner that elicits both approval/applause and repulsion. Black dancers spectacularize the figuration that evidences the Negro's "natural" primitive status, the African's banishment from secure categorization within the human, while also remaining a sign of presumed magical creativity, a gift that keeps on giving.

BLACK CORPOREAL/ FIGURAL FORM'S EQUIVALENCY TO HUMANITY OR PERSONHOOD CAN NEITHER BE PRESUMED NOR INCONTROVERTIBLY SUBSTANTIATED

In reaction to the ontological turn in black studies and its abstractionism, a consistent concern becomes how to understand the "actual body" outside of its theorization as absence in abstract discourse. The concern misreads black ontological negation, or what mayfield brooks frames as "absence," to be reducing "the body" to a purely discursive and dematerialized site. Such affirmative empiricism takes biology as a determinant for presence and presumes that same "presence" to indicate "the black body's" endowment with the capacities afforded to universal personhood. I maintain that the "materiality" of "the black body" is less a corroboration of its access to subjectivity than an indication of its vertiginous suspension in dissimulation and exorbitance, a virtual orbit around negation and wealth.⁸ This signals its unremitting

openness to the whims of negrophobic and negrophilic violence regardless of the *form* or affective posture “the black body” takes.

The second part of this article will meditate on the above provocation in a non-comparative way alongside the choreographic interventions of Germaine Acogny (Senegal) and Faustin Linyekula (DRC), whose work not only contributes to formal dance innovation but questions the philosophical foundations of apprehending form. Both choreographers dissect the surfaces and depths of colonial violence, indicting the hands, weapons, pens, and utterances responsible for ongoing anti-black warfare that bleeds over to black intracommunal relationality. Acogny addresses the chasm in the black intracommunal inaugurated by the transatlantic slave trade, and in *Fagaala* (2005), she meditates on the 1990s genocide in Rwanda. Linyekula considers the “Africanist presences”⁹ in European modernism, the sadist atrocities enacted at the command of Belgian King Leopold II in the Democratic Republic of the Congo/Zaire, as well as the long-term postindependence civil war in the country. Not only do they call attention to the formal aspects of this brutality, but they reveal (post)colonial terror’s de-formation of language to explain these horrors. They move toward and against the common sense reductive conceptualization of the “black dancing body” as the quintessence of natural joie de vivre, facilitating an opportunity to more assiduously broach the manifold functions and aims of black dance as a mode of negotiating (epigenetic) memory; conveying or encrypting tactics of struggle through passing on

gesture; inquiring about gravity, the laws of physics, and the mathematical meter; undermining logocentrism through open-ended improvisation; and tending to psychosomatic wounding contra the seriality of catharsis and its “telos of perfect closure.”¹⁰

African enslavement and colonial violence are sites par excellence for modern(ist) experimentation with “the black body.” Such experimentation is irreducible to brutal enmeshment and domestication but extends to coerced jubilation that equally facilitates the annulment of African life. Elsewhere, I have drawn attention to Africa’s position in Western aesthetics as a source of inspiration and extraction, framed as a space where contemporary artistic experimentation and conceptualization can never thrive or even occur.¹¹ In these instances, as Achille Mbembe posits:

Africa exists only as an absent object, an absence that those who try to decipher it [*sic*] only accentuate. . . . Thus, we must speak of Africa only as a chimera on which we all work blindly, a nightmare we produce and from which we make a living—and which we sometimes enjoy, but which somewhere deeply repels us, to the point that we may evince toward it the kind of disgust we feel on seeing a cadaver.¹²

If, from this perspective, Africanity is coterminous with absence, the void, the abyss, African performance—even that which is considered “cutting-edge”—cannot be incorporated with ease into general categories of contemporary experimental dance. My curiosity lies in what contributes to the unfathomableness of an experimental African practice in

CONTEMPORARY AFRICAN AESTHETIC CONTEMPLATION ON FORM AND FORMLESSNESS (CONTENDS) WITH A “FORM OF BEING” WHOSE ABSENCE AND EXORBITANCE EQUALLY *GIFT* WESTERN MODERNITY/MODERNISM ITS FORM

discourses of the avant-garde (broadly construed) as well as why the West needs Africa to signify perpetually for its own psychic and economic stability as a site of simultaneous absence and (resource) extraction, as well as aesthetic innovation. This is not an effort to join the ranks of the Western canon or exalt canonicity but to highlight contemporary African aesthetic contemplation on form and formlessness as contending with a “form of being” whose absence and exorbitance equally *gift* Western modernity/modernism its form.

On Anarrangement

Choreography and colonialism share a defining attribute of order and arrangement. Choreography is more than “the art of making dances”; it is rather devised to instill obedience and domestication.¹³ As an “apparatus of capture,”¹⁴ choreography’s historical development entailed turning dancing into writing/documentation through choreographic scores and treatises that share ontological properties with cartographies of colonial empire. If choreography do-

mesticates movement into order and its objective is to implement and reproduce “whole systems of obedience,”¹⁵ then colonialism, as V. Y. Mudimbe argues, basically means “organization, arrangement.”¹⁶ “Anarrangement,”¹⁷ instead, attends to both blackness’s relationship to form at the level of ontology, as well as at the level of black aesthetic operations that shun the mastery of Western *techné*. “Anarrangement” and “antichoreography”¹⁸ are not about refurbishing mastery but rather the total destruction of mastery and the forms that sustain it. Literary theorist Houston Baker described this as the *deformation of mastery*, which is different from aspiring to mastery of form.¹⁹ Taking this a step further, Rizvana Bradley and Denise Ferreira da Silva consider “both seriality and deformation not as formal deviations from the major paradigms of modernist art, but as aesthetic practices which enact the decomposition of the art historical canon, and of canonicity as such.”²⁰ Calvin Warren proposes anti-formalism since “antiblack violence depends on form to reproduce itself.”²¹ Rather than clinging on to the mastery of form, I am curious about

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an anti-formalism that is not about rearrangement of the terms but about their total decomposition. “Anarrangement” as a black aesthetic operation is neither the arrangement nor rearrangement of the choreographic apparatus. The prefix *ana-* can also translate to “against” the choreographic and its defining aspirational mastery of form. These practices destroy form as a move away from the politics of reform.²²

Dorothee Munyaneza, Faustin Linyekula, Ralph Lemon, Paul Maheke, Kettly Noël, Okwui Okpokwasili, Nadia Beugré, keyon gaskin, Nelisiwe Xaba, Dana Michel, mayfield brooks, Boyzie Cekwana, and Will Rawls are some of the black choreographers whose experiments with form and concept test the potentialities of this formal decomposition. Their approaches to form, which sometimes diverge in content and political orientation, focus attention to the ways that the formlessness of black life is irreducible to an aesthetic motif. This occurs through either indifference to, or the breaking down of, canonical Western dance techniques to foreground black vernacular dance modes that have always been problematically conceived as incapable of perfect form. These are vernacular forms of dance that do not privilege rigid structure and develop in venues outside the theater. These practices of anarrangement move away from the proselytizing apparatuses of dance technique, asserting a black anti-choreographic stance that critiques representationalism and legibility (the tools of ethnographic knowledge-making that reinforce the idea of Africans as knowable and affectable).²³ Here, sampling other styles of black movement is not an elevation of tech-

nique as such since, as Fred Moten and Stefano Harney note, “the black aesthetic is not about technique, is not a technique, though a fundamental element of the terror-driven anaesthetic disavowal of ‘our terrible-ness’ is the eclectic sampling of techniques of black performativity.”²⁴ In that regard, the appeal to technique is the appeal to governance and order, and antithetical to an *itinerant drive* toward the abolishment of bondage. This appeal to order is also a possible trajectory, if not inevitable, for practices of anarrangement, making their radicality transient, specific to the moment, and susceptible to capture.

The Avant-Garde

When Africans engage in nontraditional/nonfolkloric performance forms, those performances are presumed by critics such as Sharon Friedman as unoriginal, and African artists are perceived to be mimicking Euro-American artistic innovations.²⁵ This logic emanates from some of the West’s self-aggrandizing narratives of periodization, which rehearse white artistic innovation as the origin point of modernism and postmodernism. Postmodernist performance is often chronicled as a soliloquy delivered by the West.²⁶ This is attributable to the avant-garde’s “embedded[ness] in a theory of history . . . a particular geographical ideology, a geographical-racial or racist unconscious.”²⁷ This suggests a connection between a Western-centric theory of history and what Moten is calling its racist unconscious. This theory of history and aesthetics cannot fathom modernism as emanating from any source other than itself. I am interested

in thinking against the grain of solipsistic periodization to think (post)modernism and the “avant-garde” away from any geographical-racist originary tale and instead through a consideration of relations of domination emerging in the protracted time of the Middle Passage and colonialism. What is often rehearsed as the history of “postmodern performance” cannot be solely attributed to a Western tale that narrates figures such as Trisha Brown, Yvonne Rainer, Steve Paxton, Lucinda Childs, and other white artists from the Judson Church experiments as sole progenitors, while the rest appear (if at all) to concurrently emblemize belated mimesis and Western innovation’s atavistic anterior or maternal trace.

As a fractal condition instantiated by the trade in Africans as commodities, the black Atlantic is the gateway to modern culture.²⁸ Features and attributes of modern and postmodern culture such as citizenship, freedom, democracy, beauty, aesthetic value, breaks from tradition, and dissent from orthodox intellectual thought were instantiated upon, against, and by African enslaved “bodies”—sometimes as the “limit”²⁹ of those categories. Modern modalities of feeling/sensing/knowing, as well as tools of aesthetic judgment, cannot be separated from colonial exhibitions, human zoos, and the development of medical technologies. Nineteenth-century ethnological attractions in New York, London, Brussels, and other metropolises not only recruited continental Africans and other colonized Indigenous groups to perform but also recruited black Americans and other Diasporic Africans to “masquerade as African

savages or wild men, . . . [and] pseudo-Zulus . . . when demand exceeded supply.”³⁰ (Post)modernist genre categorizations are inextricably linked to modes of knowledge-making emerging from the long Enlightenment, such as natural science, botany, zoology, anthropology, and the philosophy of aesthetics. Our modern and postmodern aesthetic categories, tools of aesthetic judgment, and modalities of curating hierarchies of difference are entangled with taxonomy, anthropometry, craniometry, and other characteristics of eugenics.³¹

Thus, the avant-garde sensibility in postmodern performance is more than merely a form of Western intracommunal heterodoxy, where the “trailblazing young” dissent from the orthodoxies, laws, and conventions of the generations preceding them. When understood as and through historical relations of domination, the concept of the “avant-garde” also emerges as emanating from a deep craving for the different, strange, or deviant. This waywardness is often celebrated in postmodern performance periodization without situating the conditions of emergence for the craving, how and why it came to be, and which “bodies” became conduits for its intelligibility. It remains important to maintain skepticism regarding the West’s self-preoccupied periodizations of the modern and the “avant-garde.” This skepticism, rather than constraining us amid Eurocentric tales of white artistic rebels disgracing the Father/Norm, attunes us instead to modernism’s “black *maternal/material* inheritances.”³² As Richard Iton contends, “We aspire to be modern, as if this were somehow a new posi-

tion and as if blacks and nonwhites were not already clearly and uncomfortably modern, as if modernity were sustainable without the nigger and the fluid in/convenience that is blackness lying, albeit differently, both outside and inside its borders.”³³ Reconfigured this way, the “avant-garde” is indebted to the enduring ruptures of colonialism, imperialism, and transatlantic slavery. The black avant-garde is not merely an add-on to, or mimicry of, already established norms and heresies within Western culture. If blacks are “already clearly and uncomfortably modern,” then modernity/modernism is not a phenomenon that blacks either lack, aspire to, or mimic. Modernism is not a foreign garment that the African puts on in domesticated obedience. The modern and the African are oddly co-constitutive and entangled, meaning, as Steven Nelson and Huey Copeland argue, “any form of the modern is always already *blackened*, even if the fact is limited to the literal footnotes of the discipline.”³⁴ Subversive white performances that have been immortalized as pioneering the “postmodern category” do so through a detachment from and/or appropriation of affects and characteristics of movement associated with blackness and indigeneity. This is a simultaneous embrace and disavowal of the long Enlightenment’s ideas of beauty, (a)symmetry, and the sublime. The avant-garde sensibility is inseparable from a desire for the occlusionary identification constituted by “becoming minor,” which is to say *becoming black*, since African subjectivity (and its aesthetic production) is the quintessence of radical dys-aestheticness and dissymmetry in Western

knowledge-making. The Western avant-garde aesthetic is realized through the simultaneous fetishization of the racialized atavistic, while erasing the historical relations of domination undergirding that same atavistic fetish. This erasure of historical conditions of emergence allows for the sensibility of the “new” and “cutting-edge”—which is a return to previously disavowed “barbaric” thought and action—to be propertyed as white or non-black. What is considered “avant-garde” and categorized as “postmodernist,” especially in dance, moves futuristically toward formerly repudiated content and form associated with “irrational” or chaotic blackness. Black performances concerned with reproducing the (*self as*) strange/deviant, no matter how pleasurable or counterhegemonic, are haunted by lingering anti-black ontologies that produce(d) blackness as deviance par excellence rather than a consequence of deviant performative acts by black(ened) people. The African’s formlessness, then, is construed as a “lack” that is accumulated to materialize white Western aesthetics of self-dissolution. It is the latter that enters discourse while the former is condemned to the space and function of primordial inspiration.

Childless Mother, Motherless Child, Lose Your Mother

Dance scholar Joan Frosch’s film titled *Movement (R) evolution Africa: A Story of an Art Form in Four Acts* (Joan Frosch and Alla Kovgan, 2007) documents a gathering of black choreographers from the African continent and the United States assembled in Florida

to teach workshops, perform, and discuss the political and economic issues concerning contemporary Africanity in dance. The documentary is organized into four acts: “Mother Tongues,” “(Re)invention,” “Moments of Contact,” and “Staging the (Un)imaginable.” One of the central problems explored is the discords and continuities between traditional African dance and what, in the documentary, late Ivorian choreographer Béatrice Komve refers to as “Ç’est la nouvelle expression,” a new expression.³⁵ The documentary presents a collaboration between black American choreographer Jawole Willa-Jo Zollar’s Urban Bush Women, and Senegalese choreographer Germaine Acogny’s now-disbanded Compagnie Jant-Bi. A moment that stands out in footage of this collaboration is when Acogny and Jant-Bi performers sit on a dance studio floor observing a rehearsal by Urban Bush Women and begin tearing up. This tense moment is followed by the Jant-Bi company hugging the Urban Bush dancers. These tears are more than an outpouring of personal emotion or a window to interiority; rather, they augment the unmournable loss resulting from slavery’s rupture of kinship, geography, and temporality. The tears are susceptible to a sentimental reading as signaling closure and redress, as an uncomplicated suture of a global African community. But they are also revealing an unspeakable realization that cannot be fully articulated with language and shows up as affect. By “affect,” I am referring to the capacity to be touched or moved to tears in this case. Whatever potential for redress or reckoning of slavery’s rupture lies in the work is quickly undone by

THE TECHNIQUE ACOGNY TEACHES AT ÉCOLE DES SABLES IN SENEGAL FOREGROUNDS INDIGENOUS AFRICAN SENSIBILITIES AND MODES OF KNOWING AS OPPOSED TO MIMICRY OF WESTERN TECHNIQUE

Acogny's utterance of what she understands as African culpability in the trade, followed by a denial of said culpability. She states, "We are responsible for slavery, but I personally don't feel responsible . . . like the young Germans, like my husband who is German. He is not responsible; it was the others who did that."³⁶ The contradiction is further convoluted by analogizing African enslavement to a white German eschewing personal responsibility from the cruelties of the Holocaust in Europe. Fleshing out the problems of framing slavery in this manner deserves more careful and lengthy engagement than possible in this essay. However, I want to highlight that the scene is instructive on how continental African attempts at reckoning with slavery that go beyond acknowledgment are sometimes limited by the void in language to explain this unsuturable injury. The scene documents a certain engagement with the ruptures of slavery, and the form this takes is a representation of fragmented signs and dense affects watered down by linguistic description and rationalization.

Acogny's momentous contribution to contemporary African dance is well documented and venerated

in both academic scholarship and the professional dance industry.³⁷ As an effort to articulate her formidability and honor her contributions, academics and artists often refer to her as the "Mother of African Contemporary Dance."³⁸ As a choreographer and teacher trained in forms that include classical ballet, her defiance and selective borrowing of Western technique have been described as "enabl[ing] her to defy the colonizing project that the taxonomy had originally facilitated."³⁹ This relationship to Western technique is not an aversion to "technique" as such but a divestment from Western hegemony and domestication perfected through technique. The technique Acogny teaches at École des Sables in Senegal foregrounds indigenous African sensibilities and modes of knowing as opposed to mimicry of Western technique. École des Sables attracts dance students from around the world, many from the Global North. This introduces another set of problems regarding expectations of the technique to endow non-Africans with animism and vitality, as they come to Africa to be in touch with their primal instincts, sidestepping the rigor and invention contained in the Acogny technique (fig. 2).



FIGURE 2. The March 2014 Open International Workshop Technique, Germaine Acogny, École des Sables, Toubab Dialaw, Senegal, 2014. Photograph courtesy of Cristina Sanae Valota. Acogny Technique workshop participants (names not provided in the original caption by Valota) sit around in a circle with arms stretched to the side, fingers almost touching the sand, while Acogny conducts the workshop from the center of the circle. The technique emphasizes awareness of the core, spine, and feet's relationship to the ground, as an effort to perceive rootedness. Acogny codified this technique in the form of a book, *Danse Africaine/ Afrikanischer Tanz/African Dance* (1980), which outlines her approach to dance, supplemented by images of dancers in poses. Artistic director Patrick Acogny has offered more critical elaboration on the technique in his dissertation-turned-book titled *Contemporary African Dance Deconstructed* (2022). Named after the sand (École des Sables translates to "Sand School"), the École emphasizes "the ground" as a material metaphor for its technique, pedagogy, and philosophy. Recently, the École's sands in Toubab Dialaw became the ground for restaging and filming a canonical German modern dance piece, Pina Bausch's *Le sacre du printemps*. The restaging, *Dancing at Dusk*, was a collaboration between the École, Sadler's Wells, and the Pina Bausch Foundation. Rebecca Chaleff writes about the significance of the sand in the restaging, stating that "interaction with the beach unearths histories of transatlantic slavery within the context of a choreography already suffused with violence" (Chaleff, "Economies of Reperformance," 171).

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Dance ethnographer Amy Swanson, who conducted research at the École, noticed that the school's survival rests on a certain strategic acquiescence to colonialist demands and appetites from non-Africans for a primitive Africa. For Swanson, "the Acogny Technique functions both as a saleable and consumable embodied practice that capitalizes on a growing global desire for contact with Africa and its cultural forms, just as it comprises a living, evolving vehicle of African identity affiliation."⁴⁰ The moniker "Mother of African Contemporary Dance" assigned to Acogny is exploited by Global North participants in search of the figure and function of "Mama Af-

rica." While this "capitalizing" might be less a naïve act of self-exoticization than a conscious survival tactic for the École, what gets obscured are the different desires among participants for seeking contact with Africans. White participants attending the school as a way of *playing in the dark*⁴¹ is not conflatable with African American or Diasporic African participation as an attempt to assemble traces and shards of an irrecoverable loss. For dance theorist Jasmine Johnson, "non-black West African dance participants have sometimes treated the dance practice as a spaceship launching toward racial transcendence and sexual freedom."⁴² She distinguishes this from African diasporic participation seeking community building in West African dance as well as its healing properties. Acogny states, "I know what Americans and especially African Americans (want), they want their traditional dances, they want their roots. But we can also invent a new dance."⁴³ Here, the discord lies in the African Diaspora seeking African dances preserved in their traditional form, while continental African dance-makers are stretching those dances beyond the logic of preservation and exposing them to processes of invention. Invention is already a defining feature of those "traditional dancers" as opposed to the preservationist impulse that characterizes Western technique. This is why Johnson calls for an attunement to West African dance that steers away from replicating systems of choreographic order and instead, "train[s] our eyes to look at what falls away, rather than what echoes" in contemporary African dance training.⁴⁴

While Acogny's statement demonstrates the

Global North's appetite for an Africa that signifies as alterity, a fertile ground for eternal extraction, the collaboration with Urban Bush Women moves oppositionally to address what might be felt as the *loss* of native land and ancestral kin. It is a way to understand rather than swiftly mend the rupture. The African Diaspora's desire for "traditional dances" is also partly an attempt at achieving rootedness and groundedness in the wake of slavery's excision of natal ties. Black theorists such as Jared Sexton and Saidiya Hartman complicate this phantasy of groundedness, sparking curiosity about what can be invented and known in the act of losing ground, of losing the *mother/Mama Africa* as (porno)trope. This separation, as they propose in psychoanalytical terms, would not be impetuous abandonment, but "a precondition for any relationship whatsoever."⁴⁵ It is a separation necessary for invention and the forging of politicized global black *relations*.

War can impact or inform both formal and stylistic choices in dance-making. In another dance piece shown in Frosch's documentary, titled *Fagaala* ("Genocide" in the Wolof language), co-choreographed by Acogny and Japanese choreographer Kota Yamazaki for Compagnie Jant-Bi, the cast of seven male dancers directs attention to the international community's silence and indifference to the 1990s genocide in Rwanda. Formally, they foreground movement motifs of fragmentation associated with falling, collision, slipping, and repetition, as well as the intensity of contractions and grotesque poses referencing Butoh (a performance form emerging in

the wake of the United States' atomic bomb dropping in Hiroshima and Nagasaki). Rather than filling the silence with empirical facts, Acogny and Yamazaki gravitate toward the fictional by consulting Boubacar Boris Diop's novel titled *Murambi, the Book of Bones* (2000). They execute this exercise of creating a dance by leaning toward fiction because "through fiction we get to the real truth."⁴⁶ In *Fagaala*, the rendering of the genocide takes the form of "scream[ing] without screaming, speak[ing] without speaking" when language fails.⁴⁷ It is an impossible yet necessary lament for a *loss* that cannot be possessed as one's own. Acogny discusses encouraging the all-male cast to "get in touch with the feminine side . . . to feel what it's like to lose a child, feel the plight of women in war."⁴⁸ The feminine and the "mother" are recuperated here as a way of gendering not only the impulse for participation in war but drawing attention to the gendered erasure of some experiences of war. The "mother," then, in both *Fagaala* and the collaboration with Urban Bush Women, is invoked as a disavowed absence and recuperated presence.

When Congolese choreographer Faustin Linyekula was commissioned by the French Ballet de Lorraine in 2012 to reimagine the 1923 "negro-cubist fantasy" ballet by Darius Milhaud titled *La création du monde*, Linyekula pointed out the African shadows that lurk in European classical and modern dance (fig. 3).⁴⁹ To mark this absence/"shadow," Djodjo Kazadi, the only black dancer in the cast, unleashed a desperate cry at the end of the performance. The ballet is based on Blaise Cendrars's account of an origin



FIGURE 3. Faustin Linyekula, Studios Kabako, and Opéra National de Lorraine's recreation of the 1923 modernist ballet *La création du monde* (2012). As a fantasy creation story set in Africa, *La création* is realized through visual iconographic properties consisting of animal characters (birds, monkeys, insects, reptiles), bright colors, and asymmetrical angular lines. Millicent Hodson (revered for her contribution in Joffrey Ballet's *Rite* [1987], a reconstruction of Ballets Russes' *Le sacre du printemps* [1913], with an avant-jazz score by Igor Stravinsky) oversaw the reconstruction of *La création* alongside Kenneth Archer. The design elements for both iterations of *La création* visualize Africa as the primitive site of origin, confirming Achille Mbembe's opening page of *On the Postcolony* (2001) about invocations of Africa as a "meta-text about the animal" (1). If we consider Zora Neale Hurston's "Characteristics of Negro Expression" (1934) and Léopold Senghor's Négritude-inflected discourses of the image and rhythm, and heed Fred Moten's call to "listen while [we] look," what becomes perceptible in the image is the sound of African material collated to endow this spectacle its modernist formal properties (line, color, rhythm etc.). Cubist artist Fernand Léger (1881–1955) realized the design aspect of the 1923 *La création*. In addition to the angularity of the lines and a collage technique that sometimes appears in jazz painting, the image's "visible music" (Moten, *In the Break*) recalls "Negro dances" such as the Black Bottom and the Charleston appearing in the upbeat finale of *La création*, incorporated into the performance by Darius Milhaud, who traveled to Harlem and Rio de Janeiro (and never Africa) in 1922 where he visited jazz clubs. Would *La création* even qualify as a Primitivist fantasy about Africa without what Millicent Hodson has described as its "glory of color," a mélange of bright colors in scenic and costume design, already pathologized in French late nineteenth-century Darwinist (neuro)scientific aesthetic discourses as the meeting point of pleasure and repulsion, where African cultural attunement to color condemns Africans to the space of the unevolved and a negative foil buttressing the European spectator's human subjectivity and modernist sensibility (see Gordon, *Dances with Darwin*)? Faustin Linyekula's 2012 intervention exposes how playing with color became a way of *playing in the dark*, buttressing the African as the quintessential other.

myth by the Fang people of Gabon. In his *Anthologie nègre* (1921), Cendrars masquerades as an expert on Fang mythology, obscuring that he lifted the published writings of French missionary ethnographer Henri Trilles. Klaus-Peter Köpping aptly refers to this chain of appropriations as “effacements” because they are “veritable forgeries through writing over and covering the sources.”⁵⁰ Milhaud’s *La création* perpetuates this effacement by relying on an appropriation manufactured by Cendrars as an original African myth. This becomes a replacement of the Fang myth with one that fails to acknowledge the names of the myth’s creators. Linyekula reimagines these multiple effacements in *La création* by calling attention to the absented figures in European ballets. He writes, “All the dancers [in European white ballets] are negroes, all writers of the shadows! . . . It’s time that finally I meet all these negroes who have filled the stages and wings down the ages.”⁵¹ He references European modernity to take it apart and reveal its foundational monstrosity, exposing the colonial violence that conditions European modernism/modernity. This illustrates the unavailability of the integrity of the body to the black dancer, and why contemporary experimental black dance practices eschew aesthetics of cultural/national pride.

Like most successful experimental African choreographers, Linyekula resided, trained, and presented work in Europe before returning to a war-torn DRC in 1997 and later forming Studios Kabako in 2001. Like Acogny, he meditates on war’s capacity to not only exert influence on aesthetic deformation but also render the

deformation of the physical form through mutilation. Instead of celebrating cultural heritage, he examines and works from an aspect of his heritage that he describes as an “abyss” and “a pile of ruins.” He posits,

Tell me Cendrars, how do you preserve the integrity of the body when you are just violence and stumps? And you, Senghor, what would have happened if the African national ballets had challenged the national body rather than celebrated it? All of it would have made a negro ballet, I think, a ballet of cruelty, of mutilations, of dishonest compromise, a ballet of shame. . . . And hurray for the losers! A rattling of tambourines with holes in them for the losers!⁵²

Deformation of the body, rather than merely referring to a stylistic device, points to his dance-making approach that emphasizes the “holes,” “stumps,” and “mutilations” in/of the body on multiple scales, from the individual to the national body. In the DRC, any discussion of the deformation of the body cannot circumvent King Leopold of Belgium’s genocidal investment in the country. Leopold is responsible for murdering an estimated ten million Congolese in addition to forced labor and using techniques of bodily mutilation to force productivity in rubber plantations. Leopold’s regime capitalized on the cruel taste-making properties of the aesthetic by simulating the severed hands of Congolese people in the form of chocolate to be sold and consumed by Belgians. Severed African limbs satiated culinary pleasures and invigorated Belgium’s “culture of taste.”⁵³ The “black” and the “aesthetic” are fundamentally antagonistic dance partners.

THE “BLACK” AND THE “AESTHETIC” ARE FUNDAMENTALLY ANTAGONISTIC DANCE PARTNERS

Black dance facilitates attunement to the above, to the forgotten and effaced shadows and ghosts appearing only as unreliable flickers in the moment of performance. Instead of rushing to rationalize them or enforce coherent form and meaning upon them, there exists another itinerary to forgo *remaining* through methods and regimes that seek to arrange that madness into intelligible order, that sanitize the fissures of colonial violence and its afterlives with an uncomplicated fiction of a national body politic. Through the ruminations of Acogny and Linyekula, we glean, at times against their authorial intentions, contemporary black dance’s insistence to *remain* in the entropic field as an impossible form, a rendering of absence while negotiating capture, arrangement, formalization, cooptation, and effacement. Returning to Johnson’s “spaceship” metaphor, these dance-makers’ anarrangement remains susceptible to cooptation and extraction, or get rewarded as an effort to defang their anticolonial impulse, even while turning coloniality on its head. As Athi Joja (pers. comm., July 19, 2023) contends, “black people’s anarrangement

of Western aesthetic form cannot escape blackness,” which has not been extricated from what must be extracted, tamed, and possessed. Any antichoreographic gesture “escaping the colonial script” is also available to be possessed. Black dance, in moments, is a scream without a voice, a disarticulation without language, frustrating routine protocols of signification and interpretation. While it is often understood as the balm soothing the enduring colonial wound, black dance is also the *evidence* and recording of the wound, and it exposes the prematurity, insufficiency, and cruelty of the “balm.” ■

MLONDOLOZI ZONDI is assistant professor of global black studies in the comparative literature department at the University of Southern California. Mlonzi’s work is forthcoming or has been published in *TDR: The Drama Review*, *ASAP Journal*, *Text and Performance Quarterly*, *Mortality*, *Canadian Journal of African Studies*, and *Propter Nos*.

Notes

- 1 For this distinction, see King, “Humans Involved,” 162.
- 2 Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse*, 2.
- 3 Warren, *Ontological Terror*.
- 4 My use of “African derived” as opposed to “African-descended” and correlate terms is consistent with Frank B. Wilderson’s use of the term to draw attention to slavery’s violent capture of Africans. The transatlantic slave trade was not a movement of choice, exile, nor analogous to immigration. Not only does “African-derived” direct attention to this violent capture, but it implicitly critiques those rhetorical strategies which (un)intentionally sanitize slavery through sentimentality, obscuring the unquantifiable brutality of slavery’s deformation of natal commu-

- nity. See Wilderson, "Grammar and Ghosts"; Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death*.
- 5** DeFrantz, "Black Beat Made Visible," 71.
- 6** Gikandi, "Picasso, Africa, and the Schemata of Difference," 40.
- 7** Sexton, "On Black Negativity."
- 8** Bradley, "On Black Aesthetics"; Moten, *Universal Machine*, 182–83.
- 9** Gottschild, *Digging the Africanist Presence*.
- 10** Roach, *Cities of the Dead*, 33.
- 11** Zondi, "Black Performance Theory."
- 12** Mbembe, *On the Postcolony*, 241.
- 13** Foster, *Choreographing Empathy*, 40.
- 14** Lepecki, "Choreography as Apparatus of Capture."
- 15** Lepecki, "Choreopolice and Choreopolitics," 16.
- 16** Mudimbe, *Invention of Africa*, 1.
- 17** Moten, *In the Break*, 1.
- 18** This deformation is what Rizvana Bradley calls the "anti-choreographic" or "anti-style" (Bradley, "Black Cinematic Gesture," 19–21).
- 19** Baker, *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance*, 49.
- 20** Bradley and Ferreira da Silva, "Four Theses on Aesthetics."
- 21** Warren, "Catastrophe," 357.
- 22** Warren, "Catastrophe," 369.
- 23** Ferreira da Silva, *Toward a Global Idea of Race*.
- 24** Harney and Moten, *Undercommons*, 48.
- 25** Friedman, "The Impact of the Tourist Gaze." Friedman argues that African contemporary dancers are mimetic. Joseph Roach critiques this line of argumentation as the "relentless search for the purity of origins . . . a voyage not of discovery but of erasure" (Roach, *Cities of the Dead*, 6).
- 26** Pather, "Response."
- 27** Moten, *In the Break*, 31.
- 28** Thompson, "Sidelong Glance."
- 29** Thompson, "Sidelong Glance," 21.
- 30** Lindfors, *Africans on Stage*, ix.
- 31** See Wynter, "On How We Mistook the Map for the Territory."
- 32** For a detailed reading of this *material trace*, see Moten, *In the Break*.
- 33** Iton, *In Search of the Black Fantastic*, 288.
- 34** Copeland and Nelson, *Black Modernisms in the Transatlantic World*, 3.
- 35** Komve, in *Movement (R)evolution Africa* (Frosch and Kovgan, 2007).
- 36** Acogny, in *Movement (R)evolution Africa* (Frosch and Kovgan, 2007).
- 37** See Griot, "Biennale Di Venezia."
- 38** See Chatterjea, *Heat and Alterity in Contemporary Dance*, 134.
- 39** Foster, "Muscle/Memories," 125.
- 40** Swanson, "Codifying African Dance," 59.
- 41** See Morrison, *Playing in the Dark*.
- 42** Johnson, "Casualties," 170.
- 43** Acogny, in *Movement (R)evolution Africa* (Frosch and Kovgan, 2007). Acogny's shift away from "roots" and "the ground" to foreground invention circles right back to these tropes as she later states, "My technique is rooted in nature. . . . It's important to put your roots in the ground." See Jason, "Germaine Acogny."

- 44 Johnson, "Casualties," 171.
- 45 Sexton, "On Black Negativity"; Hartman, *Lose Your Mother*.
- 46 Acogny, in *Movement (R)evolution Africa* (Frosch and Kovgan, 2007).
- 47 Acogny, in *Movement (R)evolution Africa* (Frosch and Kovgan, 2007). In Mark Franko's inquiry about dance and the notion of the gift, he asks if dance, rather than giving back, can turn toward "rendering, rather than responding to disaster" (Franko, "Given Movement," 114).
- 48 Acogny, in *Movement (R)evolution Africa* (Frosch and Kovgan, 2007).
- 49 Börlin and Linyekula, *La création du monde*.
- 50 Köpping, "Performing 'Africa,'" 56.
- 51 Linyekula and Kunstenfestivaldesarts, "La création du monde."
- 52 Linyekula and Kunstenfestivaldesarts, "La création du monde."
- 53 See Gikandi, *Slavery and the Culture of Taste*.

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