

# Coloniality in dance and the africanized forms of self-inscription: South-South perspectives through Germaine Acogny's technique

Colonialidade na dança e as formas africanizadas de escrita de si: perspectivas sul-sul através da técnica Germaine Acogny

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## Abstract

Placed at the crossroads of education, dance and anthropology, addressing body and culture, the article presents key concerns in the field of social theory investigating coloniality as a driving force to broaden epistemological perspectives in the dance field. In the investigative course we present Acogny technique as an epistemology of the south and a possible atlantic connection.

Keywords: Coloniality. Dance. Germaine Acogny.

## RESUMO

Situado no campo transversal entre educação, dança e antropologia, na esteira da reflexão sobre corpo e cultura, nosso texto busca apresentar as preocupações principais do campo da teoria social que investiga a colonialidade que ora utilizamos como mola propulsora para ampliar as perspectivas epistemológicas no campo de conhecimento da dança. No percurso investigativo apresentamos a técnica Acogny enquanto epistemologia do sul e possível conexão atlântica.

Palavras-chave: Colonialidade. Dança. Germaine Acogny.

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As the body is fluidity of memories, surface and continent of cultural and political inscriptions, living entity capable of asking and responding in different ways to training, languages and aesthetics, it's imperative the challenge of expanding the epistemological landscapes that suggest senses for the dance's bodies.

We elaborate this text on the transversal field of dance, education and anthropology as areas of knowledge that produce reflections on the multiplicity of Brazilian society in its complex transits between hegemonic and subalternized aesthetics.

Noting that the reality of knowledge production in Brazil is deeply marked by coloniality - understood here as the permanence of states of presence founded in the colonial order in the fourteenth and nineteenth centuries in the Americas during the processes of territorial, economic and political exploitation - we seek to penetrate the broad and contrasting field of social theory that is dedicated to discuss the unilateral imposition of Eurocentric epistemologies. We intend to offer a reflexive proposal to the field of knowledge of dance, still little porous to the multiplicity that can inhabit the education of the body and obtuse in relation to the aesthetic and poetic power present in the Africanized forms of self-writing<sup>3</sup>, commonly subsumed by the perspective of the folkloric and the eccentric accessory.

Touching on the theme of coloniality requires us to reflect on how diversity of thought has been accommodated in the spheres of dance education, specifically in undergraduate and postgraduate courses, and limited by forms of knowledge originated from dominant modes that obstruct. The assumption of the Brazilian multidimension, guided by the black and Indian cultural substratum, brings forth elaborate proposals beyond and in the gaps of the canons that monopolized for centuries the epistemological notions in the various areas of knowledge, imposing homogeneous recipes validated as the only forms of knowledge.

Indorsing the need for alternative pedagogies, we do not refer to the selection of special subjects or "thematic events", which often sound as palliatives in the face of the urgency of more horizontal relations between the proposals of formation from the northern hegemonic contexts and those originating from the subalternized spaces. We propose that the various traditions and contemporaries thoughts based on the africanized forms of self-writing should be considered within the broader territory of concepts and methods legitimized by the field of research and training in dance.

3. The idea of "Africanized forms of self-writing" arises from the reading of the work "African Forms of Self-Inscription" by the camaronese philosopher Achille Mbembe, in which oeuvre he critically analyzes the various essentialisms constructed around African experience and also the danger of the unreflective search for an African alterity without due recognition of the cultural, political and geographical specificities of the continent. We criticize the essentialisms that are built around African experience and we consider the possibility of using the idea of "Africanization" assuming the African substrata that make up the Brazilian experience.

### *Theoretical Foundations*

By valuing interdisciplinarity as fertile territory for the analysis of dancing bodies and its relations with social life, as well as the opportunity to draw up critical dialogues where body and culture are viewed with relevance, we will present some proposals that serve to evaluate the eurocentrism that affects the field of thought in dance. We approach some guiding assumptions focused on the idea of coloniality, presenting the general lines of thought that seem useful to us to re-locate the afro-oriented knowledge with the proper agency and to reflect critically on what we call coloniality of the gesture - the presence of forms, perceptions and conceptions about body, movement and their contexts influenced by colonial logics - which in turn is linked to the fact that the languages, techniques, methods and training chosen by the spaces of university training in dance are predominantly based on knowledge produced in the northern hegemonic.

To discuss the foundations of coloniality, we briefly return to the critique of colonialism built by a series of intellectuals who in their specific contexts and times discussed the impacts of European interference on the existences of subalternized people. Frantz Fanon (1925-1961), essayist, psychiatrist, and activist involved in the processes of African decolonization devoted much of his intellectual life to the field of anticolonial thought, presenting theoretical perspectives that served as basis for many of the elaborations that later discussed the impacts of colonialism. The works “The wretched of the Earth” (1979) and “Black skin, white masks” (1963) were important in the elaborations of the so-called postcolonial criticism. The first one, giving the fundamental bases for the understanding of the relations between colonizer / and its implications and the latter historicizing and analyzing the colonial experience in the psychology of the black person. Fanon’s legacy is related among other things to the bleeding caused by the colonialist apparel that fissured not only the social sphere but the human senses and identities. His ideas influenced many intellectuals in the field of postcolonial thought, including Homi Babha (1949-), Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1942-), Edward Said (1932-2014), Stuart Hall (1932- 2014), and Paul Gilroy (1956 -).

In post-colonial studies a wide range of subjects that are commonly ignored have become focus through proposals announced by intellectuals from colonized spaces. Representation, difference, race, migration and gender began to be approached from the perspective of the various subaltern communities and theories that emerged from these spaces concerned with analyzing the fact of

colonialism and its permanent consequences in social relations. It is not a field with a homogeneous theoretical matrix, but it brings common concerns for the deconstruction of the essentialisms built by modernity and a theoretical political program that envisions social transformation and the confrontation of oppression. What these authors have developed from their places of theoretical enunciation (they are intellectuals originated mainly from the black or migratory diaspora), is the criticism to the matrix of knowledge that by legitimizing themselves in European contexts reproduces the logics and colonial relations. There is great diversity in the generations that produced postcolonial theories from the 1970s to the present days as well as a number of criticisms of their ability to extrapolate theory and announce praxis. Thus the postcolonial does not necessarily denote the of an overcoming of colonialism, but the critical discussion to understand its bases and continuities.

### *Coloniality and Latin American thought*

In the early 2000's a group of intellectuals from various Latin American countries proposed readings about colonialism looking at the critique of the colonial system as a present entity, bringing in a more punctual and conceptual way to discuss the idea of coloniality as opposed to colonialism. It is a heterogeneous group which does not present itself as a "school of thought", but shares the critique of Eurocentric epistemologies and their hierarchies of power. The Peruvian sociologist Aníbal Quijano, the Argentine semiotic Walter Mignolo, the Puerto Rican sociologists Ramón Grosfoguel and Nelson Maldonado-Torres and the Ecuadorian pedagogue Catherine Walsh are some of these authors.

The debate they are building seeks to announce categories of analysis that critically address specific Latin American realities in the complex modernity / coloniality, pointing as a proposal to decoloniality, understood as the active critique of colonial legacies draw from the wisdoms of Latin American cultures.

The Bolivian sociologist, historian and activist Silvia Cusicanqui Rivera is contemporary to this group, but thinking in another terms. While not in line with the concept of coloniality she fosters theories developed from the perspectives of the Aymara culture, proposing epistemological constructions based on gestures, languages, symbologies and signs of this culture. For the author it is necessary to rescue the sense of totality that modernity and capitalism dismantled through the Cartesian division between body/

mind, soul/thought that solidified dichotomies absorbed by the collective imaginary.

Reading these theoretical projects we raise the question: how to incorporate these questions into projects that go beyond the merely analytical and discursive? The Portuguese sociologist Boaventura de Sousa Santos highlights the idea of *epistemologies of the South* - procedures of creation and validation of knowledge from the perspective of those who have systematically suffered the destructions and exclusions caused by colonialism, capitalism and sexism. For the author it is necessary to undertake what he calls the *sociology of absences*: to make visible what was produced as invisible or as non-existent. His proposal, entitled *ecology of knowledge*, is based on an organic relationship between the knowledge of the south and becomes another possibility of critical reading that brings paradigms for social emancipation.

This perspective of symbolic enlargement of the thoughts that emerge from the south is a crucial principle for the positive deconstruction of the spaces of production of knowledge that we propose. Thus we reflect on how the theories proposed by the Northern contexts, which are based on the official structures of production of knowledge in the so-called global South, can be rethought in the light of our own contexts and realities. Pondering on coloniality provokes us to announce intellectuals, histories, languages and knowledge held in the peripheries of the knowledge's production.

Referring to Brazilian thought, we bring up intellectuals from the field of culture and education such as Santos (1996), Sodr  (2005), N brega (1991), Martins (1997), Moura (1988) and Nascimento (1989) whose work approach afro-orientated contexts to draw pedagogical concepts and practices. Such references strengthen our intellectual position and allow us to understand that the critical effort to coloniality is vivid in Brazilian contexts of non-hegemonic knowledge production.

We consider that decolonization is not a naive claim to abandoning canonical epistemologies, but rather a gradual exercise of reinvention and critical revision, breaking the insularities of knowledge-producing spaces. What are the theoretical bases of our production of knowledge? Where do our theories circulate, what are our references? What dialogues do we have with the African continent beyond the stereotype of humanitarian aid? It seems important to re-evaluate the field of dance studies and to introduce in-depth reflections on the contexts that underlie our bodily knowledges. And it is not a question of claiming a certain "right to speak" but rather to widen with due tone the perspectives

regarding what epistemologies in the field of dance come to be and to approach their pluralities, looking with the whole body at the various proposals and contexts that have not yet been visited.

### *Watching the Atlantic – crossroads with Germaine Acogny*

Understanding the relationship with the African memory as a possibility to update the strands that unite Brazil and Africa as well as establishing viable south-south connections for the 21st century, we share some of the thoughts from the encounter with the Germaine Acogny technique.

Choreographer educator and dancer, Acogny was born in Porto Novo, Benin in 1944 and as a child she moved to Senegal, a country in West Africa. Her trajectory in the confluence of Africanities with classical and modern dance languages in the construction of a technical proposal systematized in the 1980s resulted in an intercultural proposal in the field of dance pedagogy.

After graduating in physical education and rhythmic gymnastics in France, Germaine worked as head of department of the National Institute of Arts in Dakar, where she introduces what she called Black African dance in the training program of the institution. After a long journey in the field of education, as well as acting as an interpreter, the artist was invited to take the position of artistic director of the African Center for Research and Improvement of the Interpreter, *Mudra Afrique*, a project promoted by the President Leopold Sedar Senghor, who invited the Belgian choreographer Maurice Béjart to the general direction of this pioneering enterprise.

Those were times of transformation in various contexts of the African continent and in many of them a new thought about the meaning and breadth of African cultures was born. What was then the first president elected after the overthrow of French colonialism proposed an ensemble of state policy that privileged art as a fundamental instance of national development. This thought has similarly crossed many governors of other African nations seeking the creation of national troupes and ballets in an evident assumption of a national patrimony.

The creation of *Mudra* consolidated itself as another action of the Senghorian policy of insertion of the arts as a privileged part of the plans of cultural policy and in the undertaking of an idea of political unity linked to the consciousness of the cultural identities of the black civilizations, making art and national culture priorities. In a broader perspective related to the processes of

African independence it was about the participation of dance in the processes of modernization of the young African states.

### *Mudra Afrique – gesture’s contours*

Dancers from various countries of the African continent were recruited for Mudra Afrique in a three-year formation that provided a learning in African traditions in relation to the languages of modern European aesthetics. West African dances, classical, modern dance (Graham technique), rhythm, singing and theater were taught in a perspective in which the dancer was encouraged to be deeply situated in the performing arts.

The aim for the construction of a “new African black ballet” that “participated in the universal” was the great motto of this enterprise, starting from an idea of assimilation conceptually delineated by Senghor and practiced by Béjart in the articulation of the classic ballet with the African languages. The idea of “being rooted in the values of blackness in order to open itself to the values of other cultures”, as Béjart stated, was carried out through the work of Germaine Acogny, who had among other missions the task of inventorying traditional dances and communicate them with European dances.

The communication between the European and African aesthetics proposed in the Mudra guidelines under Béjart was driven by many ambiguities especially from the hierarchical proposal that guided the relationship between African and European dances, reproducing between the lines an ambivalent discourse that although affirmed the foundational character of dance in the expressions of African peoples, slipped into the worn out perception of the innate body, where physical differences would be inherited genetically reinforcing the idea that these people danced “naturally.” In recognizing the lively expressiveness of Africans, the superiority of European rationality was also supposed to be capable of “ordering” the African powers.

The presence of Germaine Acogny as a Senegalese woman aware of local issues as well as her insight and wit would counter-balance Béjar’s Eurocentrism without distancing herself from the key ideals that propelled Senghor’s development. In the process of artistic direction of the school, the choreographer elaborated her book *Danse Africaine* which sought to systematize the contents of the black dances worked in the school and which deconstructed the common imaginary that African dances would be supported by simplistic and limited perspectives, colonial society that cre-

ated polarities such as wild/civilized, societies/tribes, rational/emotional.

In her book, published in English, French and German currently having achieved three editions, Acogny formalizes a repertoire of base movements and of the building of organized system.

The life of the *Mudra Afrique* extends from 1977 to 1982 and was weakened by the lack of resources. Acogny expatriated herself in Europe where she stayed for about twenty years. Her return to her native country took place in the 1990s when she organized workshops for foreigners in Casamance, southern Senegal, and later in Toubab Djalaw, when she founded with her husband Helmut Vogt The Ecole des Sables - International Center of Traditional and Contemporary African Dances - created in 1998 . The aim of the school was to provide the development of the dance field on the African continent with a bias of training and professionalization. Its pedagogical project, architectural structure and program of courses places it as an important reference for the training and improvement of dance artists from different continents.

### *The technique - gesture and sensitivity*

The Acogny technique is a philosophy,  
a way of living and seeing life.  
(Germaine Acogny)

Germaine Acogny produces a consolidated dance think based on the synthesis of dances from West Africa, especially from the regions of Senegal and Benin, associated with classical dance and modern dance. The driving element of this relationship between cultures is the express connection with the forces of nature and with a perception of the universe as energy integrated into the body. This notion of a body considered in its entirety and whose energy circulates in itself and in the universe is the premise present in many African cultures. It is the fundamental perception of the body as cosmos and as the mobilizer of vital energies in a very concrete way.

This dialogue according to Germaine is a philosophy of life and of the body, and also a perception of the spirituality, something distinct from any religious affiliation, as is often referred to when dealing with african arts. It is a connection of the person who dances with the surrounding contexts in a somatic perspective - opposed to the understanding in the “Orientalist European” register, where the bodily practices of Asia and Africa are considered esoteric. Thus the concept of body-cosmos goes far beyond

holistic knowing, as it is the basis for the person who dances to be empowered and autonomous to manage his body and the choices which it will make to nourish itself technically.

Acogny's technique is deeply related to the imaginary and the ability to give concreteness to the symbols. Specific names are given to the spaces of the body, among which we mention: the area of the external bone in the front of the thorax is called *le soleil* (the sun), not by chance there is the solar plexus, space of flows between the lower and upper parts of the body; the region around the pubis in the lower belly is called *les étoiles* (stars); the seventh vertebra in the dorsal region is called the pleasure vertebra; the motor center in the belly region is called *jumba*, literally "navel" in Wolof language.

In the systematization of technique the choreographer does not use the term "step" but rather "movement", which corresponds to a series of motor, sensory and symbolic information. We learn the movement of the baobab, the palm tree, the starfish, the from-ager, the ashanti doll, the driver, the angry tiger, among others. Such mobilization proposes a relation and understanding of the movement that: extrapolates the research of movement dedicated only to the kinetic articulation; offering the understanding of movement from the imaginary, supplanting the perspective of mere reproduction, since the dancer is oriented to visualize and to feel the symbol in itself.

What guarantees a firm body for the proposal of Acogny's technique is a wide perception of the relationship between the Afro-oriented and Euro-oriented languages, coupled with the awareness of the creative force present in the traditional expressions. In it, dance harbors qualities and landscapes, rather than the form itself, emphasizing the place of esthesis. The technique is concerned with the efficiency of the gesture, but above all with the feeling of dance from the subjective perspective, valuing the layers of history of the person who dances and the community experience that shapes and dignifies the being, opposed to the individualism and abstraction that characterizes Western Eurocentric thought, prioritizing the well-being satisfaction and the balance with the world.

The proposal that privileges the sensation and the imaginary leads the person to access states that dance, if understood only as a form, is not able to offer. For example, imagining itself as a from-ager tree in its greatness, implies keeping the feet deeply rooted, relating to the center of gravity and at the same time feeling as if the body's extremities had branches, relating to the broad exteriority of the world and seeking the expansion of the gesture. There

is an engagement of the spine and the rotators of the hip area in a continuous and minimalist undulation, in an inner work of perception of movement, just like an ancient tree moving with a notion of time that is not necessarily synonymous of old age but of experience. Maintaining this balanced relationship, expanding the inner spaces and growing to the infinite is a great challenge, not only for the maintenance of the physical balance but also in our daily dilemma in dealing with the issues that affect us as people in the world.

In the content of the technique the work focused on the spine, which Acogny calls the serpent of life, has great importance. The units of the members, interpreting the parts of the body as elements of the cosmos, the postural order developed in the stage of the class called *la marche*, where it works with elements linked to motor coordination, articulated spine, feet deeply anchored on the ground and concern with the flow of energy add to the technique components of harmony that Acogny sums up in the notion of *elegant body* - great and provocative synthesis, as the common sense, colonized and racist, rarely offers this type of adjectives to the black wisdoms.

The strong power of Acogny's technique is its express direction for pluralistic universality. Taking classic and contemporary Western perspectives in relation to the classicisms, traditions and African contemporaries, a dialogue is created that places any body in a state of presence. And it's not magic. It is a modern technique in contemporary dialogue with contemporaneity, a proposal that is structured in values and perceptions of tradition in a multidimensional way. Who between the 70's and 80's would propose an idea of an intercultural relationship in a field still as restricted as that of technical systematization in dance on the African continent? Given the aims of colonialism, it is relevant that this proposal has played itself in the subalternized South and that is a knowledge produced by an African woman. In this respect, it seems fair to call Acogny "mother of modern African dance", beyond the jargons.

When we situate and reinforce time, space and historical context, we insist that the choreographer inserts African knowledge into modernity – the same modernity that has excluded and alienated black protagonism. This pioneerism is noteworthy for the worldwide history of dance convened as comprehensive and multiple. Perhaps her biography soon may be in the curricular components of our undergraduate dance courses as a reference of the multiplicity that constitutes the productions of knowledge about dance in the world. Also, after we know more of these *other*

*south*, we can attend and dialogue with it, redesigning the canons and giving other tones to the history.

It is time to reinvent the models that historically have educated our bodies, based on different theoretical and practical assumptions, critically enlarging the references and the ways in which we perceive ourselves from within generating bodies aware of themselves and the surrounding contexts.

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