

Modern-day Griots: Imagining Africa, Choreographing Experience,
in a West African Performance in New York

by

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the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New
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Abstract

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This dissertation examines the production and practice of African dance performances in New York based on the music and dances from West Africa. The performances that I examine are not staged performances, rather they take place in a dance studio setting. New York has been central to the historical development of African dance outside of the continent due to trans-Atlantic ties that were established between Black American artists and political activists in America and West Africa. Since the period of intense interaction in the 1960's, African dance has become commercialized via World Music and is practiced by an eclectic population. Presently the performers who participate in these dance and musical practices include West Africans, a mix of African and Euro-Americans, and several other international groups.

African dance performances serve as a mask for individuals to explore marginal forms of experience that do not conform to mainstream values surrounding aesthetics or subjectivity. West Africans take part in performances mainly for professional or

economic goals but also to gain new forms of experience by re-thinking Africa in a new social context. While African dance performances have enriched the collective and individual experience of participants, the creative exchanges among them traverse diverse social movements, ideologies and artistic practices and involve a cultural protectionism of both space and experience. African dance has been produced within a dialogue and through a plurality of competing discourses that both fix and destabilize identities based on claims to authenticity. These claims have been inspired by a universal paradigm that associates both the performers and African dance with authentic or rooted cultures. The competing discourses are informed by a Black Diaspora aesthetics, a commodified version of exoticism and a quest for authenticity. Authenticity is an ambiguous term that describes both the source and a quality of personal experience that is derived by taking part in African dance performances. Performance participants describe their experiences as being pleasurable or symbolically meaningful and associate their practice with an authentic West African tradition. By highlighting the power dynamics involved in struggles over defining the aesthetic standards of African dance, the results of this research address the relations between aesthetics, cultural production and personhood in American life.

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Dedication

In memory of Mildred Decena

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

The expression modern-day Griots refers to the making of a “pan-West African” identity in New York based on the performances of the music and dances from West Africa. This project examines African dance performances within the tensions and contradictions of a living tradition and cultural memory of Africa on the one hand, and an exoticized version of Africa on the other. As a “wandering aesthetic” (Gabriel 1990), the popularized African “style” has been abstracted from social experience by operating within a commodified field where it has been prefigured by way of exoticism. African dance has been informed by a universal paradigm of authentic or rooted cultures, and is produced by, and must respond to, a plurality of competing discourses. As the “choreographers of experience,” West African performers take part in the production and practice of African dance and music for professional or economic goals. Their participation in performances serves as a commentary on their lives, and relations with the broader community of American and international performers in New York.

Griot loosely describes a concept of 17th Century Europeans regarding the role of men and women who come from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds in West Africa, and who are the keepers of cultural traditions, oral historians and artistic creators. While the term Griot applies to peoples in West Africa such as the Manding (or Mande) population in particular, the term has been broadly applied to represent a variety of people who engage in similar practices

throughout the region (Charry 2000). In New York's African dance and drum scene, coming from a Griot or hereditary musical lineage is esteemed, as it represents the authenticity of both performers and the genre. Other important signifiers include being trained in one of West Africa's numerous national dance and performance companies. These markers serve as ways of making distinctions amongst performers based on verifiable sources such as professional training or ancestral lineage, which enhances the credibility of West African performers.

The aim of this project is to show how cosmopolitanism and tradition are conceptualized and practiced in multiple and oftentimes contradictory ways by addressing the dialogical relationship between identity, authenticity and self-making in popular dance performances (Bakhtin 1981). By collectively imagining the "idea of Africa," and by embodying an "aesthetic sensibility" (Chernoff 1979), African dance serves as an arena for individuals who come from diverse social backgrounds to derive new symbolic meanings. By associating aesthetics and subjectivity, individuals rely on performances as a "mask" for exploring marginal forms of experience that are associated with the exotic or notions of cultural difference.

In addition to embodying a "performance identity," African dance performances serve as a context for self-making through a play with subject positions that have been informed by modernist conceptions of personhood, based on categories

such as gender, sexuality, race or ethnicity. By performance identity I refer to the roles that individuals embody as dancer, drummer, or instructor. This involves developing and acquiring various bodily or musical practices and techniques that are unique to the “performance of Africa.” Through a symbolic play, and by claiming or re-claiming subject positions that have been informed by identity, individuals rely on African dance performances as a resource for self-making. This practice of self-making involves an interaction between “performance” and “social” identities. As a dialogue, the social dynamics and struggles for symbolic resources among performance participants has been structured internally in terms of power relationships where issues of ownership, the cultural protection of space and experience, and the narratives that concern authenticity are shaped through competing discourses surrounding authenticity and subjectivity. These competing discourses have been inspired by a Black diaspora aesthetics, exoticism and a quest for authenticity.

Authenticity is an ambiguous term that refers both to the origins of West African performers and their cultural productions as uncontaminated or rooted cultures, and defines a quality of personal experience. By associating a particular place, people and cultural practice with a quality of experience, performance participants make links between their experience and authenticity, and describe their experiences gained from taking part in African dance performances as pleasurable or symbolically meaningful. As both the *source* and *quality* of personal experience, authenticity acquires a symbolic significance in relation to

the modern, and is derived by associating a place with various forms of practice that are gained through “self-constructed” means.

The quest for authenticity by way of the “performance of Africa” points to a paradox. Modernization, urban migration, tourism and the commodification of global cultures have displaced social life in West Africa, influencing the growth of diverse forms of individualized artistry, as well as local genres of popular cultures. The artists that are represented in this project come from both Griot and non-Griot backgrounds. But they serve a similar role in the West by transmitting and keeping their histories alive for themselves and their audiences through memory, poetry, songs and dancing. While modern-day Griots share a traditional African heritage with Western audiences, their identity and artistry are also shaped by working as individual artists, international travel, and a new life in America. Given this reality what kinds of songs do modern-day Griots sing? What kinds of stories do they tell? How do they transmit their knowledge about Africa to Western audiences?

The formation of African dance and its practice in New York takes place via a collectively imagined exotic idea of Africa and a “nomadic aesthetics” (Gabriel 1990) that is aimed towards constructing a new kind of subjective and aesthetic experience. Both the quest for authenticity and a Black diaspora imagination have helped to shape the defining features and collective experience of African dance in New York. Consequently, authenticity can be used to make claims

about the cultural origins of West Africans and their performance styles, and for claiming a unique quality of personal experience, oftentimes expressed as desirable or pleasurable (Trilling 1980). The desire to have an authentic experience, is gained through the imagining and construction of new kinds of subjective experience based on ideas of Africa. The fashioning of identity by taking part in performance is an ongoing process. However, because the agents of an artistic practice are valorized with the same degree of symbolic significance as the “aesthetic,” this signals an ambiguity in the relations between authenticity and experience. African dance (as an art form) and its creators (i.e. West African performers) must be reduced/organized to an essence. These desired ideals or aspirations by participants, which are shaped or constrained within actual performance contexts, will be displayed in the form of a dramatization (Turner 1986, 1982). As a “mode of inquiry,” the concept of a performance encompasses the ways that an artistic production or cultural practice is presented for an audience or experienced by participants, and the behind – the – scenes organization of a cultural practice (Ebron 2002, Schechner 1985). This includes the kinds of social, political, and economic forces that enabled a particular genre to emerge and serve as a source of aesthetic and personal experience in American life.

New York has been in the vanguard of the historical development of African dance since the 1930’s due to the trans-Atlantic ties that were established between Black artists and political activists in America and West Africa. Since

that time, various cultural centers and schools specializing in African dance have been founded in New York, allowing performers moving to and from West Africa to network with international and American groups. This study took place primarily at a dance studio located in downtown Manhattan that specializes in dances from Africa and the Diaspora, but also includes other areas in New York such as Brooklyn and Queens, where African dance or drumming is practiced. Although some attention is given to staged performances, the main focus of this study is on dance performances that take place in social gatherings that are not for the purpose of presentation on the theater stage and mostly occur in dance studio settings.

The performers who participate in these dance and musical practices are made up of a mix of African and Euro-Americans, together with early and recent migrants from West Africa, the Caribbean, Europe, Japan, and several other international groups, although the extent of mixing varies. Internationally, West African performances have become popularized in various regions including Europe, Japan, Australia, Canada, Mexico and the Caribbean. This has led to ongoing debates concerning the criteria to be used for evaluating the aesthetic standards and authenticity of performances.

Recent studies like Jacqueline Copeland-Carson's (2004) investigation of a Wellness Center in Minneapolis, shows how black American identity developed through an "intermingling" with the traditions of other peoples, including

continental Africans and Diaspora Blacks. Carson's study (2004) also highlights the process of contemporary immigrant incorporation into urban centers that have historically been inhabited by working class African American communities. The persistence of institutionalized forms of segregation and "racialization projects" in America affect immigrants, in terms of their access to work, housing, schools and their use of public space (Brodkin 2005). Because the organization of work and social space have been erected or reconfigured by the state, in ways that promote ethnic segregation, as "racialized Others" (2005), African immigrants must learn to negotiate their conceptions of personhood with rigidly defined notions of American identity.

Studies like Paula Ebron's *Performing Africa* (2002), which is a multi-sited ethnography, explore the ways that *Griot* music makers among Gambian musicians, having entered into a transnational circuit, must negotiate different kinds of histories, traditional values, and story telling to shape their identity. This shift in dynamics between the interpersonal and institutional, interspersed with travel and tourism, has led to the emergence of new forms of cultural production and politics amongst *Griot* musicians in Gambian society. In *Mapping Yoruba Networks*, Kamari Maxine Clarke (2004) foregrounds a multi-sited ethnographic perspective to examine the complexities of contemporary self-making within an African American community in South Carolina, whose members draw on the Yoruba tradition of Orisha worship from Nigeria. This study illustrates how Africa serves as a "physical" and "conceptual" space for "making history" and new

forms of cultural practices, as a response to the legacies of the trans-Atlantic slave trade and racialization of American identity politics. Clarke also points to the ways that Yoruba cultural and religious practice in the diaspora has been influenced by travel and tourism. This has not only led to the transformation of Yoruba practice in the African diaspora; Yoruba practitioners in the diaspora now question the authenticity of Yoruba tradition in Nigeria due to the influences of colonialism, Christianity and Islam. Both Ebron (2002) and Clarke (2004) discuss the ways that issues of authenticity, cultural commodification, and tensions concerning cultural protectionism play a significant part in the construction of narratives surrounding contemporary identity and self-making. Both these studies highlight the complexity of modern Diaspora identity formation and the shaping of subjectivity, due to the complicated interpretations of identity between Diaspora Blacks and continental Africans.

By tracing the historical circuits of the Black Diaspora, Brent Edwards Hayes (2003) suggests that Black expressive culture needs to be conceptualized within an “internationalized transnational” context that is marked by difference, where divergent modes of understanding identity are expressed in the form of a dialogue. As a way of rethinking the debates concerning cultural authenticity in Black Diaspora identity formation, David Scott (1999) argues against the reliance on a “verificationist epistemology” which tries to trace identifiable historical links between Africa and Black Diaspora cultures. Instead he proposes that an emphasis be placed on the ways that Diaspora Blacks have “put Africa and

slavery to use,” and the “kinds of identities” that Africa serves within local “knowledge and power relations” (125).

In New York’s African dance scene, some of the group dynamics and institutional practices that influence or constrain the formation and collective imagining of new subjectivities (which can be transient) include the kinds of experience or expectations that individuals bring into the performance setting namely: American race relations, the commodification of cultures by way of exoticizing cultural difference, and the sexualizing of the space in which performances are carried out. At times these factors make the dance practice and inter-personal relations emotionally charged and constrain the autonomy of individuals desiring to create new forms of social exchange or experience through the “performance of Africa.”

Other factors also frustrate the social dynamics among performance participants as a consequence of the influence of modernist ideals in self-making and romantic sensibilities surrounding art. These include: highlighting art as a universal category and a pleasurable endeavor, presenting the “artist” as an autonomous entity possessing unlimited access to creative options in self-fashioning, and pretending that creative decisions are unaffected by the marketplace. The inability to attain these humanist ideals due to structural constraints, which affect groups or individuals differently, creates tensions that occur in the pursuit of an authentic quest and leads to contested representations of the aesthetic standards of African dance. Moreover, the representation of

performances as pleasurable or in moral terms fails to address how the power dynamics and conditions that influence the decision making process in the shaping of a genre or aesthetic experience have been comprised in ways that both enable and constrain individual goals in the pursuit of authentic experience. African dance has been constructed as a genre that traverses diversely comprised aesthetic and experiential ideals by encompassing a utopian or universalist ideal of art and experience, a Black Diaspora imagination that relies on Africa as an imaginative space for shaping a collective aesthetic identity, and a commodified idea of exoticism. Given these divergent symbolic ideals, the imagining of Africa and objectives of performance participants can at times be diametrically opposed, by expressing directly competing points of view, rather than containing a common approach towards the quest for authenticity.

In addition to the desire for having an authentic experience, the tensions and solidarities that occur amongst groups concern issues of maintaining social boundaries, and the preservation of a shared cultural memory. The emergent group identification or conflicts, which are enacted within performance spaces, reflect the complex nature of contemporary cultural politics. These concerns, which are expressed either in the form of in-group alliances or contestation, cannot be explained by way of a single theoretical trajectory. Instead they call on multi-faceted perspectives that consider the emotional, aesthetic, and cultural factors that inform subjectivity and the shaping of a genre.

Examining the diversification process of African dance in terms of how it is defined and experienced by its association with verifiable sources, such as particular peoples or regions in West Africa, illustrates the ways that the notion of authenticity has been made to interact with the creative process and artistry.

This approach provides a glimpse into the kinds of experiences and social dynamics that are produced as outcomes of engaging in the imaginative pursuit of Africa by different groups. Additionally, the social enactment of dance performances will address the limits and possibilities that are available for aesthetic and subjective transgression, and illustrate how authenticity serves as a critique or medium for expressing the broader social concerns that surround the complexities of personhood and cultural identity in American life.

Personhood refers to the ways that discourses of identity frame social relations in American society by becoming “the primary medium for understanding and engaging the relationship between the political and the cultural, the subjective and the social” -- as “processes through which people are made collective” and the “ways in which they develop as distinctive individuals” (Rouse 1995:351).

The West African performances that have become popularized internationally have been traced to the Mande, the homeland of the Maninka/Susu population in Mali (Charry 2000). Presently the Mande and their performance styles span across regions in West African and are found in Mali, Guinea, Burkina Faso, Guinea Bissau, Senegal and Gambia. The influences of other groups such as the Wolof, Susu, Peul, and Baga people of the region have also been

incorporated into contemporary West African musical styles and dances.

Although to a much lesser degree, musical styles and dances from The Congo, Ivory Coast, Sierra Leone, Ghana and Nigeria have become popularized in some New York dance spaces.

Dance Styles

Overall the various styles of dances that are accompanied by a musical ensemble (mostly live drumming) are social dances usually performed in West Africa during life cycle celebrations such as harvest, initiation, birth, or marriage. With the growing number of national dance companies across the region, choreographed dance styles have diverged from the social context out of which they emerged and are becoming much more intricate.

Similar to the diversity of languages that are spoken in different parts of West Africa, the interpretations of dance and musical styles as they move across the region takes on numerous and even more varied forms, and the social contexts in which they are performed need not correspond with specific rituals. Some of the popularized social dances in New York include styles such as: *Mandiani*, a dance of initiation or celebration; *Kuku*; a dance of harvest (or of fishermen); *Lamba* a dance of spirit (healing) and ancestral appreciation, and numerous others. *Sabar* rhythms from the Wolof peoples of Senegal, another popularized dance in New York as in Senegal, are performed during celebrations of weddings, birth, or as a part of social gatherings. Dance styles that are

performed to *Sabar* rhythms are called the *Thiebu djen*, which literally means rice and fish, named after a popular Senegalese dish, *Kaolak*, *Mbabass*, and *Niarry Gorong*. *Sabar* dances have also crossed borders into Mali, Guinea and other regions.

These social dances are not rigidly prescribed. They vary by social context and in the ways that they are performed across different regions in West Africa. The styles also change generationally. Some dance styles need not be related to a specific ritual and can be performed as choreographed, as staged performances, or as accompaniments to different rhythms. Moreover the performers themselves need not be associated with the dances and musical styles that come from a specific region. Generally social dances in West African performances can take place in formal or informal settings and are held either in or outdoors. People usually gather to form a circle around a drum ensemble situated near the outer rim leaving enough space for dancers to enter and perform either solo or in unison with other dancers while spectators surround the dancer and drummers. Since the spectators are already familiar with the rhythms, dances are usually spontaneous and improvised. Someone may appear from out of nowhere and enter the middle of the circle, perform a few movements and then leave the circle for others to follow. Oftentimes there is a continuous movement of dancers entering and leaving the circle. Or two people may playfully perform several dance movements, challenging drummers or the audience.

Overall the atmosphere is upbeat and it is up to different dancers or drummers to evoke certain kinds of moods that are provocative. There is always a dialogue between drummer and dancers, which for the most part is nonverbal and is expressed in ways that can be humorous or, through nuances, can accentuate certain kinds of bodily movement. Overt sexual gestures within performances are also permissible whereas the same kind of movement may not be considered acceptable outside of a performance context. Some exceptional dancers or drummers are also given money; oftentimes someone from the audience will run towards the performer and place a bill (or several) on their forehead as spectators cheer or praise the performer's talent.

Musical Instruments

One of the most popularized musical instruments played in most Manding (or Mande) dances in West Africa is the *Djembe* (also referred to as *Jembe*) drum, which is a cone shaped drum carved from a piece of solid wood and covered in shaved goat (or cow) skin that has been dried and stretched to fit the surface of the head. The skin is then tightened with a cord, using a lacing technique all around the surface of the drum. The drum must then be tuned from time to time by pulling on the strings that are attached to the head of the drum. The *Djembe* is played with both hands and has a very versatile sound. Usually, a lead *Djembe* player is accompanied by several other *Djembe* players, who play different accompanying patterns.

The lead player is free to play more complex patterns while communicating with the dancers and also gives signals such as the commencement or end of a dance movement. Three other drums that usually accompany a *Djembe* ensemble are the *Doundoun*, *Sangba* and *Kenkeni*. The *Doundoun* is a two-headed drum that is carved out of wood or made of a round metal container. The two heads of the drum are covered in skin tightened with a cord. The *Doundoun* usually has a large frame and gives a pulsating bass tone. The *Sangba* and *Kenkeni*, also two headed drums, give off a higher bass tone. They are smaller in size with both sides of the heads covered in skin and have metal bells attached to their sides for accenting different sounds.

All three bass drums when played separately carry different mono-rhythms, each drum keeping its distinct beat. When they are played collectively within the ensemble, the rhythms interpenetrate. This rhythmic style, known as polyrhythm, has become a defining feature of African music (Agawu 2003, Chernoff 1979). Other instruments such as the *Balafon*, a type of xylophone, and *Shekere*, a rattle made of gourd and covered in a net-like beaded surface, are sometimes played along with a *Djembe* ensemble. *Sabar* drums from the Senegal and Gambia region are made of a wooden shell usually carved out of a Baobab tree and covered with shaved goatskin that is attached to wooden pegs around the head of the drum. The drum is tuned by tightening the pegs that are attached to its sides. *Sabar* drums are played with a stick and one bare hand. There are usually three drums that give off specific sounds in a *Sabar* ensemble,

one that resonates, one that is sharp pitched, and a lower pitched sound. When played together, they form melodic rhythms.

Despite the internationalization of the musical and performance styles that come from these diverse regions in West Africa, many groups in the West continue to give a symbolic weight to dance performances evoking an authentic Griot tradition or Mande roots. Through a process of verifiable association of the dance and musical styles with specific regions or peoples these performances are considered to be the source of a highly important dance tradition. Moreover, commercial companies and sponsoring institutions, both of which pay performers, valorize authenticity by evoking “ideas of Africa,” or an imagined indigenous tradition. With rapid modernization, the burden of representing the authenticity of West African performances and the cultural authenticity of performers has heightened significantly.

African dance as performance

As a way of describing the choreographing of experience, I approach African dance as: (a) a “performance text” by attempting to examine the totality of performances. This includes the behind – the – scene events and practices that occur both “onstage” (i.e. actual performance context) and “off” (the organizing of experience) and (b) the process involved in the transmission of a “performance knowledge” which involves an exploration into the constructions of cross-cultural genres through which performances shape new possibilities for experience

(Schechner 1985: 23). I hope to illustrate the experiential dimensions of performances and their interaction with representational practices as they construct the social body (Foucault 1979). I will also call attention to the everyday forms of symbolic and social expressions or relations (Goffman 1959) through which group conflicts, originating from the contested representation of identities, are expressed as social drama within performance contexts (Turner 1986, 1982).

The “framing” of performances involve a symbolic play between both “aesthetic phenomena” and social process (Koepping 1997). Performances are both “ambiguous” and “ambivalent.” Through a “suspension” of every day reality, performances subvert or “rupture” the taken-for-granted categories of every day experience. As aspects of the aesthetic process, the structuring of an “imaginative reality” and total engagement in a specific practice allow for experiential shifts that promote a transition into non-ordinary reality, or shifts in perception of time, emotional release, or heightened states of awareness such as the notion of “flow” (Csikszentmihalyi 1991). It is essential to note, however, that within the frame of performances, rituals do not merely “follow experience” but also “formulate” or “modify” experience by “permitting knowledge of what would otherwise not be known at all” (Douglas 1966: 64). Subsequently the status and interpersonal relations of participants within performances may be altered in the context of a “play,” fantasy or through displays of power (Koepping 1997). The interactive nature of performances makes the practice “inherently *risky*,” and for

performances to “work” the burden of responsibility falls on participants (Schieffelin 1985: 60). Some forms of “play” can also become serious by arousing caution, the threat of withdrawal or non-participation by performance members.

Although the “frame” in performances signals changes in perceptions of every day reality, it is the contents within a “frame” and the awareness that participants develop between “playing with reality and the imaginary plane” that determine the efficacy of performances, ultimately pointing to the “fragile” nature of the “frame” itself (Koepping 1997: 19). The contents of the “frame” are “volatile” due to the “paradox between playing with reality on the imaginary plane and invasion of reality by the imaginary plane” which are unpredictable and involve unintentional acts or consequences. Individual goals and intentions within performances are multiple and uncertain, or experienced ambivalently in the form of a “search for that which simultaneously induces fear and excitement” or as “joy and anxiety” (Koepping 1997: 23). Acts within performances such as animating or being concealed by the masks that animate, are like a “seductive play” with the “other-world,” evoking feelings like “curiosity, risk, and hope.” Within the suspension of ordinary reality and subversion of rules, nonetheless, there also lies the danger of discovering what was not sought after (Koepping 1997).

Performances possess an “ephemeral” and “elusive” nature (Schiefflin 1996), and the relations between embodied experience and the transformative power of

performances via shifts in perception, social dynamics or therapeutic “efficacy” (Csordas 1996) are never the same. This suggests that performances are “mutli-temporal” and dynamic rather than following a linear process or progressive notion of time (Racy 2003). As a kind of social process the relations between performance, transformation and efficacy are inconclusive. In other words one cannot explain how a performance efficacy occurs, however, it is possible to highlight the ways that performances contain numerous experiential possibilities and shifts in social dynamics that may be conducive to promoting an efficacy.

Performances – whether ritual or dramatic – create and make present realities vivid enough to beguile, amuse or terrify. They alter moods, attitudes, social states and states of mind. Unlike texts, however, they are ephemeral; they create their effects and then are gone, leaving their reverberations (fresh insights, reconstituted selves, new statuses, altered realities) behind them (Schiefflin 1996: 60).

Since the “creation of presence” within performances is subject to ongoing changes depending on the context, memory acts as a “mode of orientation” and mechanism through which individual and collective forms of “efficacy” are realized. An “imaginative reality” serves as the reference point through which “self-processes” are experienced and expressed (Csordas: 101). By both framing and focusing the attention, rituals “enliven” memory and perception by linking the present with the “relevant past” (Douglas 1966: 64).

Ritual transformation within this context is a process that occurs within spaces of “disjunctions” rather than serving as a means or ends. The tensions in interactions between the familiar and “other-world” suggest that every day experiences, individual “biographies” and “personal histories” are constituted

within numerous “ruptures” and “breaks.” And as such, they are filled with “contingencies, particularities and deviations.” Moreover “imagined” and “real” worlds need not occur as distinct “sociological” and “psychological” categories but are interactive and culturally informed practices (Crapanzano 1992: 263, 264). That is “self processes” are constituted through “ruptures,” breaks or a suspension of self that is ongoing.

Engaging in an “imaginative reality” and alterations in perception between the familiar and “other world” involve an interplay between the imagined and real rather than a severing of the two worlds. This “paradoxical perception and reaction ... permits both identifying and distancing with and from play *and* reality” (Koepping 1997: 20) and makes up a part of the tension and transformative potential that sustain performances. Thus, rather than conveying a sense of linearity, performance as a kind of social process involves a “profound anarchy” that attempts to “break through language” in order to create a “language for the senses” (Artaud 1958), the effects of which manifest within undefined spaces. These moments need not be solely comprised of pleasurable feelings, sublime imaginative qualities, or “progressive,” “redemptive” attributes ascribed to romantic notions of Western art (1997).

Using the concepts of a dialogue (Bakhtin 1981) and “complex space/heterogeneous time” (Asad 2003), this project explores the spatialization of identities, by looking at the ways that travel and globalization allow performers

to construct and appropriate the notion of authenticity. The diverse forms of representations that surround authenticity within cultural performances, as well as in the ways that new identities are fashioned, serve as a commentary on the relations between space, the displacement of peoples, and the formation of new forms of experience via expressive cultures.

As a way of introducing my research, chapter 2 describes my ethnographic approach, encounter with African dance, and the various New York dance settings in which I participated. I also provide my impressions of West Africa in terms of representations of dance and exoticism from traveling to different countries in the region. This chapter describes the conditions that led to the migration of West Africans to New York, the differences in social organization and backgrounds among African immigrants and how they have been incorporated into American society. I also discuss the complexities of representing contemporary African cultural formations through ethnographic analysis. In order to contextualize the ways that a fascination with the exotic continues to inform representations of difference while simultaneously blurring social boundaries, chapter 3 provides a theoretical overview of the ways that transnationalism reconfigures spatialized identities by discussing the connections between globalization, exoticism, a quest for authenticity and the performance of contemporary identities via popular culture. The aim of this chapter is to explore different theoretical approaches that analyze the processes of contemporary

social transformation as a way of examining the relations between aesthetics, cultural production and identity formation in America.

Chapter 4 illustrates some of the phenomenological aspects of African dance performances and how the experience of African dance contributes to the articulation of authenticity. The purpose of this chapter is to describe the unique experiential possibilities that African dance performances afford and to explore the ways that in-group tensions at times frustrate the attainment of a performance “efficacy” and pursuit of authenticity. I discuss how the self-making process is enacted within African dance performances through a symbolic play with subject positions in order to show the complicated relations between aesthetics and subjectivity. Chapter 5 situates the transnationalization of African dance within the shaping of exoticism, a Black diaspora identity and world music. By giving a historical overview of the development of African dance in West Africa and events that culminated in trans-Atlantic aesthetic “cross-fertilizations,” this chapter addresses the ways that a contemporary African diaspora diverges in its constitution from the way it was conceived previously. I also try to show how African dance has been constituted through interactions between local West African and international subjects at different historical moments traversing diverse social movements, ideologies and artistic practices. This approach addresses the ways that African dance has been shaped through competing discourses and claims to authenticity.

In attempts to explain what it means to embody an indigenous identity, or *become* cosmopolitan chapter 6 explores the imaginative pursuit of Africa as it moves through time and space from West Africa into a transnational “circuit,” and into New York in particular. This section presents the shaping of African dance as a “nomadic aesthetics” (Gabriel 1990) and illustrates the contradictory ways in which the aesthetic standard of a genre is constituted and reflected within different notions of identities. By alternating between the ways that African dance is produced in West Africa and New York, I discuss the ways that identities are both fixed and destabilized by being associated with authentic and rooted cultures.

Chapter 7 examines the ways that flexible subjectivities are informed by a commodity culture and notions of difference, and how performers must negotiate their concerns for a livelihood with their individual artistry. This section highlights the significance of gaining access to cultural capital in order to authorize a genre, and the ways that local cultural productions are “globalized.” I show the ways that West African performers are asymmetrically positioned in relation to cultural capital and how this limits their ability to participate in determining the aesthetic standards of African dance. Chapter 8 describes the performance of Africa via a dramatization of imagined identities and the personal or artistic possibilities that ideas of Africa afford in the shaping of subjective experience, as well as its limits. By addressing the ways that subjects positioned within a multi-vocal field, interpret a “nomadic aesthetics,” I show how different groups express their

concerns for a cultural protection of space and experience. By presenting the ongoing nature of self-fashioning and contestation of identities through the lens of aesthetics, chapter 8 attempts to situate African dance in the present. In conclusion I assess where it stands as a genre, in the shaping of identities and experience in general.

CHAPTER 2

On Ethnographic Writing

Because I participated in dance performances for several years prior to conceiving this project, it is difficult to describe my writing process without considering the act of “centering” and how it underlies a narrative’s meaning by ordering events that were once arbitrary into a historical time that occurs within a “peculiar” ethnographic context (Crapanzano 1992, Fabian 1983). Being both insider/outsider confuses the sense of time/space orientation that an ethnographic account must assume in order to have a degree of consistency. Writing this project while living in New York, traveling abroad to visit relatives and friends, and continuing to participate in dance performances, has involved various interruptions in my orientation towards a sense of “ethnographic” time and place.

Maintaining a degree of textual consistency seemed at times rather alien in comparison to the immediacy of my experience of performance contexts and their going nature. Therefore, I consider this account as a work-in-progress which includes eclectic experiences from disparate time frames and geographic places in order to position myself, as well as others, within this ethnographic moment. Because I am also a participant in dance performances, and because this project is not simply a “research” endeavor, the encounters, events, experiences and interactions that I have had influence the shaping of this project and choices of subject matter.

Examining my positioning has allowed me to explore further the ways that I have negotiated different meanings in order to give an account, and to explore the contradictions along the way. Nonetheless, I am quite skeptical of self-reflection as it obscures an equal examination of the “frame” in which it occurs (Crapanzano 1992). In other words my self-reflection cannot explain my ethnographic ambitions. Namely, why it was necessary to write this account in the first place? Contextualizing my positioning and self-reflexivity serves perhaps as a way of revealing my “centering” process by providing a closer view of aspects of my own experience, and interactions with others that helped to make this ethnography happen.

Writing about ethnographic subjects who are not simply “informants” but also include friends, teachers and acquaintances has at times been complicated. There is also a sense of entitlement that an ethnographic practice produces and through which one is situated amongst “objects” of study, which unlike other kinds of social interactions can be ethically problematic. Firstly, the awkward transition from being a dance participant to a “researcher” has been met with resistance not only by some of the people whom I approached, but also by me. I felt that for some, my mundane questions in contrast to the complexity of people’s lives came across as being quite trivial, although most people have been more than generous with their time and information. My transition from dancing to dance and research has also altered the way I see the performance

space and the people involved, as well as the way I am seen by those who know about this project. The distance or separation process that writing requires of experience has been a difficult transition, particularly in terms of the inconsistencies of trying to establish a dialogue from a place of rupture and experiencing the moments of rupture.

Conducting research in a literate society where “information” and representation have certain kinds of currency has led to many kinds of responses by individuals. Some of my impressions and experiences were pleasant, others were not. To the dance community being neither American nor West African but from Ethiopia places me in a “peculiar” (as one dancer notes) position, perhaps because of the assumption that I should be taking interest in my own cultural background rather than another African tradition. Nonetheless since the spaces in which African dances take place are *potentially* experimental spaces for self-making, even to the West African performers, my identity was ambiguous. I find that my involvement in African dance (i.e. as one who came from Ethiopia and learnt African dance in Harlem -- New York), and approach towards writing about the subject matter and people involved, reflect some of the contemporary concerns surrounding the complicated nature of displacement, and overly simplistic reliance on geographically fixed peoples and places as a way of describing social processes or identities. I am also interested in using the context of a performance to highlight some of the ways that space, and “urban” space in particular, are imagined, constituted and embodied through various forms of

social practice, aesthetic sensibility and representations of identity, at once reinforcing and destabilizing assumptions about place and belonging.

Working on this project during the aftermath of September 11, and in the general “post 9 – 11” political climate in America, has affected the experience of dance performances. Working with West African performers who are mostly men has at times involved a certain kind of gender dynamics that has constrained or influenced the kinds of information I was able to gather. Because of the sensitivity that surrounds some of the issues that I examine, I have taken precautionary measures by concealing pertinent information about some individuals. People have also asked that I not disclose certain information, which they felt was personal. In order to protect the privacy of my informants, and research participants in general, I have changed all of their names. To avoid the repetitive use of the word African, I use the term Black American as a way of making distinctions between continental Africans and African Americans.

Trying to understand and write about the complexities of contemporary migrant experience and displacement, which constitutes a large part of my account, has been filled with mixed emotions and is undoubtedly cathartic. Witnessing and enduring some of the conditions and experiences of contemporary displacement of peoples involves undergoing, or allowing one’s senses to undergo, agonizing moments. This, however, does not constitute the totality of what migrants experience nor how they conduct their daily lives. Like the lives of other groups

their lives contain bittersweet moments. Having a glimpse into different versions of reality and worlds has curtailed my urge to infantilize or depict individuals as victims or heroes. In parts of this account I express a heartfelt gratitude to the people whom I write about for allowing me access to spaces such as New York's African dance subculture, creating opportunities for me as well as numerous other people to participate in an "abstract purpose," one that has engaged me in endless and unexpected ways.

I do not claim to know all the West African performers in New York, and they come from very different walks of life. Most of the time a friend named Assan helped me with answering a lot of my questions. He is one of the more recent performers from Dakar and has lived in Mauritania, The Gambia, and Mali and can speak Arabic, Bambara, Fulani, Wolof, French and English. He knows many kinds of dances and does well teaching African dance and drumming at after-school programs for children. He has an upbeat personality and works well with children. I know his home in New York and have met some of his roommates and friends. Sometimes we have Senegalese tea and talk at his apartment, or go to African restaurants. One time I introduced him to Ethiopian food. We also keep in touch by phone. Oftentimes we talk about many things besides African dance, like his responsibilities for sending remittances, his love relationships, and his impression of life in America. Listening to his experience and the many stories about his life alone makes me think that a project such as this one is not only overly ambitious but also partial.

Ethnographic Overview

Prior to its commercialization in the late 1970's African dance was an integral aspect of the Black Power movement in New York's Black American communities. Although some of the dance participants from the Black Power movement continue to take part in commercialized performances, they have a very different perspective on the role that dance has played in their lives. For many, African dance was a "cultural connection" and an aspect of a Black Nationalist identity rather than simply a recreational pursuit. With the 1980's and 90's commercialization and incorporation of a diverse array of performance participants, the shaping of identity through African dance has now taken on eclectic perspectives. Presently African dance is affiliated with New Age movements, Afrocentrism, the World Music scene, or it can be fused with other genres of performance styles such as Modern Dance.

The venues where African dance performances take place are also no longer concentrated within Black American communities, and can be found in different dance studios (as a form of ethnic dance), colleges, music conservatories or elementary and high schools. At the same time, the migration of large numbers of West Africans to New York has led to the replacement of Black American teachers by West Africans. In some contexts, West African performers collaborate with both Black and White American performers. Some performance spaces in the surrounding boroughs of New York such as Queens, Brooklyn, and

parts of Harlem that have been predominantly Black American communities, however, have remained homogeneous. West African performers teach at these venues in addition to the more commercialized dance studios, which are located mostly in mid-town and lower Manhattan. In addition to studio performances, ongoing workshops are conducted in different states, and some New York performers take part in these events. In some cities like Washington D.C. and Oakland where there are high concentrations of Black Americans, African dance participants are for the most part homogeneous, unlike New York's downtown dance spaces.

In Harlem, Brooklyn and Queens, African dance performers are primarily Black American women and children with a few male dancers. Most of the participants are working class and live within the community, although there are several participants who are professionals from middle class backgrounds or who commute from neighboring boroughs. The drummers within these communities are primarily men. Both the dancers and drummers vary in age ranging from children and young adults, to middle aged and some senior citizens. Some of the performance spaces in which African dance events take place are sponsored by different community programs, which might require some form of membership fee from participants, or they may be free of charge.

Within Black communities, the *Charles Moore Studio* in Brooklyn was founded by the dancer/choreographer Charles Moore, a Black American who studied with

choreographers Asadata Dafora, Pearl Primus and Katherine Dunham. The *Maimouna Kieta School of Dance* also located in Brooklyn was founded by Marie Basse Wiles, a Senegalese dancer and her husband Olokuse Wiles, who was a Black American drummer. In Queens, New York an African dance center, which housed the Dinizulu Dancers, Drummers and Singers ensemble, sponsors numerous West African based dance and drum workshops. Most of these dance communities have been influenced by Black Nationalist ideals and continue to be homogeneous in their membership although to varying degrees. Factors like the gentrification of New York neighborhoods, and the movement of West African performers within both the homogeneous and commercialized dance centers has led to the incorporation of some White and international dance participants into these spaces, which have historically been frequented by Blacks.

Since the late 1970's African dance has become more mainstream in New York and been incorporated into a few dance studios in downtown Manhattan. According to some performers from the Black Power era, this turn in the demographics of African dance performances occurred partly because of insufficient funds for securing rental spaces within Black communities, and the dwindling of members due to the changes that were taking place within Black Nationalism. With its commercialization African dance began to attract a diverse group of participants, and was no longer solely an aspect of Black American expressive culture. The diversification of African dance, while enriching the individual and collective experience of participants, has also led to a cultural

protectionism of both space and experience. As a way of illustrating the complexity of contemporary cultural politics, the following chapters will explore how different groups negotiate space, and experience, and the power dynamics involved in the articulation of African dance as a genre.

A Walk Through Central Park

This section outlines my research approach and the conditions that led to the writing of this ethnography, highlighting personal experiences of my encounter with African dance. In this narrative I place myself as both an insider and outsider to show how my positioning has given shape to this account and how the writing of this project has taken me in numerous directions beyond “fieldwork,” which constitutes only an aspect of this research.

Around ten years ago while walking through Central Park one summer afternoon, some friends and I stumbled upon a group of Black Americans, several women accompanied the drummers and were dancing to a captivating rhythm being played by four male drummers. At the time one of my friends, Maria, who is Puerto Rican, had discovered a Puerto Rican Theater Company near Times Square where we were taking Jazz and Afro-Caribbean dance lessons. We were both new to the world of dance and also interested in theater; occasionally we performed in different plays. Through my introduction into the theater company, I got to know a little about New York’s Latin clubs. I was the only African in the theater company. Our dance teacher was a heavy-set woman in her fifties who

danced with great feeling but also had an intimidating demeanor and yelled a lot when students did not follow her instructions. But when a student executed a movement that she liked, she beamed with enthusiasm and had the dancer perform for the whole class. I was fascinated by dance.

New York's urban life and the creative opportunities that it affords came as a relief from my previous experience of suburban life, which supposedly symbolized the American dream but which I discovered was my biggest nightmare. While adjusting to New York City was initially overwhelming, it is where I have spent a major part of my life as a migrant. I have always been amazed at how people from different walks of life, myself included, traverse the landscape of New York and make sense out of its complexity. A walk through different neighborhoods in the city is a reminder of the creative impulses that abound, as well as the sometimes-alienating feeling of urban life.

Watching the group of dancers and drummers perform in Central Park with my friends that Sunday afternoon became my passageway into New York's African dance sub-culture. Eager to learn this new dance form, Maria and I introduced ourselves to the performers. We received flyers with information on the times and places where African dance classes are offered in Harlem. Generally classes take place in various community and cultural centers, or in high school gymnasiums that are funded by different arts and cultural organizations. I could not take a class during the same week that Maria took hers, but a message on

my answering machine regarding her first experience on the dance floor was, “I felt like going through the roof!” After hearing her message I was eager with excitement to take a class, and remember getting off the A train for my first class, walking out of the subway and seeing numerous Black people but with a Caribbean accent, and the smell of fried food in the air. The condition of the buildings and overall neighborhood in comparison to parts of mid or lower Manhattan was quite run down. Years later I got to know other parts of New York that had similar neighborhoods with very distinct Caribbean, Black American, and other immigrant communities.

One of the classes that I began to take regularly with different friends happened to be in a High School gymnasium, and as we walked towards it we often passed by a couple of Jamaican restaurants where people in the area greeted one another. Usually they said hello. After dance classes these spots also became places to get to know some Rastafarians who were the shop owners and to try different Jamaican drinks, snacks and foods. My favorites were veggie patties, a thin crust filled with cabbages and spices; Irish moss, a jelly like sea weed blended with different juices or milk and sweetened or spiced; Sorrel a drink brewed from hibiscus flowers and sweetened; and a drink called Roots Man made of different roots that reminded me of a home-made Ethiopian beer.

A train-ride away from downtown Manhattan, and before it was closed down, the 125th street market, was an exciting discovery that burst with life and energy

especially during the spring and summer months. Strolling through stalls of African fabrics, or masks and crafts, skimming through books about Africa and Black consciousness, listening to music, taking in the smell of incense and different foods in the air, were newfound pastimes with friends. Talking with vendors or people in the area, being invited by some to eat together or bartering over prices was enough to temporarily transport anyone to a different time and place. The marketplace was a networking center and it was sad news to hear of its ending. The newly relocated African market further up in a reconstructed parking lot had lost much of the magic that could be felt on 125th street. I learned about various spots around New York that became alternatives to mainstream culture, and where sensibilities around art, style or fashion thrived, although eventually variations of these alternatives inevitably became commercialized.

My first African dance teacher, Shelly, was a Black American woman in her late thirties, and a former member of a well-known African dance company in New York. She had trained with several West Africans as well, and is originally from South America. I was surprised to hear Shelly mention one time that when she first started dancing she was told that she could not dance. As a dancer I found her to be very talented; she was also a very patient teacher. Shelly reassured frustrated beginners that anyone can learn to dance and often talked about interpreting rhythms or connecting with rhythm and movement. I could not understand Shelly's point at the time, until several years later when I had begun

to develop ideas about the connections between rhythm and movement.

Conceptually it is still difficult to describe the workings.

Dancing to live drumming was intoxicating and made my body feel like a sponge that soaked up the rhythms. It took some time to learn to coordinate rhythm and motion however. The dancers who participated in these gatherings were mostly women and from different generations. Body size did not matter, many were superb dancers, and with costuming and choreography could give an exceptional performance (which some did). But most dancers preferred to participate in social dances. Since dancing in Harlem's African dance circle (as it is called), I have come to know numerous other centers that offer African dance in New York and elsewhere.

Dancers as well as teachers in Harlem have different attitudes towards African dance. Some are interested in the folkloric aspects of dances and songs, the different origins and histories of specific dances, while for others the dance space is a way of affirming cultural pride and identity or simply an opportunity to socialize and for physical exercise. Shelly feels that artists who claim the "license" to add or omit movement and styles have made the dances lose their authenticity. She instead is more interested in the collective experience and keeping things "close to home." Overall, African dance in Harlem serves as a way of bringing people together to share a common space, and many of the

dancers and drummers have been participants for several years. I have felt both a welcomed guest and out of place dancing in Harlem.

In New York, if one has the time and money, it is possible to attend African dance or various other forms of dances every day of the week. Meeting and getting to know people across generations and cultures living ordinary lives, but creatively, has been especially inspirational. Some were musicians, singers, painters, designers, writers or poets. In addition there were people working in all sorts of professions from business, law, or medicine, to different forms of survival jobs. Dancing downtown turned out to be a very different experience from Harlem. My initial reaction was a curious astonishment regarding the degree to which Africa is imaginatively expressed, in body language, styles of dressing, aesthetics, and sexuality, by a very eclectic population in terms of social and cultural backgrounds. Various kinds of affiliations surrounded the popularization of Africa from activism and new age spirituality to entertainment, travel, World Music, film, and the arts.

In addition to American dance participants in the downtown venue, there were numerous international groups whose members shared these spaces along with a few Africans. Racial tensions in downtown studios were more pronounced than in Harlem since very few Whites and international groups attended the community centers there. There has been a growing participation of West African performers in Harlem's dance communities, however. During the spring and

summer months, different cultural centers and parks have dancing and drumming circles, festivals for the general public, and recreational performances.

Drumming classes are usually attended by men, whereas women predominate in the dance scene, although there are women drummers and male dancers as well. I took up drumming lessons with a White American drum teacher who studied martial arts and incorporated African dance and drumming. He also directs a performance company. Steven studied *Djembe* with a Guinean drummer and choreographer and has a large following of drum students. Usually in his classes he throws in a story or two about some of his experiences in West Africa, and about the sources of different rhythms.

Unlike the previous role of African dance as a part of New York's Black-nationalist movements, since the early 1980's Manhattan's dance centers have featured commercialized dances from Africa. Of the three that emerged in that decade, only one of them presently remains. The high cost of rent in Manhattan has forced numerous dance studios to lose their lease and close down or relocate to neighboring boroughs. Over the years the availability of studio spaces for African dance has declined. Many West Africans have relocated to other states or left the dance world for other professions, although there is an ongoing movement of newly arriving performers from West Africa as well. In buildings where office spaces are shared with dance studios that have live drumming, complaints over the noise level and disruption of a work environment are continual. This, too, makes it difficult for African dance teachers to secure

dance studio spaces. In the early 1990's, a dance center, which was managed by Japanese and a West African, located in the basement of a downtown building, was a vibrant setting for social and artistic exchanges. Listening to people's experiences, recounted with nostalgia, gave me the impression that the space was a unique context for cross cultural exchanges and creativity. Even though it was short lived, the center served as a regeneration period for West African dance in New York. The closing of the center led to the dispersal of many performers.

Membership in different dance companies, and travel to West Africa by dance and drum tour groups, also popularized in New York, have grown and continue to attract numerous American and international men and women to participate in the African dance and music scene. West Africans who have been migrating to or from New York in greater numbers over the years have enriched the dance world by introducing new styles and sounds. A few of the well established performers and teachers have succeeded at redefining the meaning of earning a livelihood, by working from their passions. Due to the growing demand for learning *Djembe* in particular, some teachers are on the road to or from different international and national destinations, and hard to keep up with. Outside of New York, I have had a chance to experience African dancing in Los Angeles at a dance studio in a Black American community, and at the World Arts and Cultures center at UCLA. I also joined a dance group and performed at different venues

in Los Angeles. Except for my brief experience of dancing in Los Angeles, my impression of African dance is based on experiences in New York.

With the spread of West Africans to different parts of the country, several dance centers have now mushroomed throughout the United States in both Black American working class communities such as Washington D.C., Florida, Oakland, and North Carolina, as well as white American towns and suburbs in such arts and crafts – oriented places as Marin County, and Vermont.

Conferences, books, journals, and trips to West Africa that are organized by different groups, as well as debates surrounding the meaning of African dance, have grown over the years.

Presently a former dancer runs the only center that remains and is fully thriving in downtown Manhattan. He is from Martinique. Maurice was sponsored by Amie Cesaire, a well-known leader of the Negritude movement, to study dance and music in Senegal where he converted to Islam and learned to speak fluent Wolof. He also studied African dance and music in Mali and Guinea, where he became acquainted with president Ahmed Sekou Toure. Being neither American nor West African and specializing in West African dance, his center is surrounded by controversy. In addition to African dance, the center also offers wide-ranging dance forms like: Middle-Eastern, and from the African diaspora, as well as Dunham (named after dancer/choreographer and anthropologist, Katherine Dunham), hip-hop, Martial arts, Mambo/Salsa, yoga and different styles of

drumming lessons. Other forms of ethnic dance, or music classes that are available in New York, include Orisha ritual dance from the Yoruba of Nigeria (with Brazilian or Cuban versions), dances from Ghana, Congo, and Nigeria, Egyptian drumming (Tabla and finger cymbals), Odissi, Kathak and other south Indian dance styles, Flamenco, and Korean dance. Most New York dancers take part diverse dance styles. I have explored other dance forms like, Afro-Caribbean/Brazilian dance, Belly dance, Tap, Yoga and Dunham dance. Moving from one class to the next and learning different kinds of dance styles was both socially and creatively enjoyable.

I learnt about the use of different bodily techniques -- bent knee postures, and loose hip movements in African Dance, the erect spine and pulling up of the torso in dances like Ballet, Dunham technique, or belly dancing -- although all of these techniques may be interchangeable. In Manhattan's east village I also learned of a Yoga center that offers an interesting version called Ashtanga. Unlike other centers that have verbally guided practices, which can be distracting, students are given a series of postures individually and practice silently as a group. The simultaneous group work in silence was a unique experience. Although the creative possibilities in many of these performance contexts are numerous, issues of appropriation, protectionism and the compulsion to become an "other" also abound. Through a territorialization of space these sentiments are often expressed as notions of entitlement where *having* cultural "information" or "capital" translates into being or becoming something. Issues of ownership at

times take on hostile forms or get played out within performance contexts, and have become an ongoing aspect of the creative process.

Some Travel Stories

New York's African dance scene became a stimulus to travel to different parts of Africa. For the purpose of this project, reflecting on my travels has helped me contrast the ways that signs and symbols that are locally imagined are practiced with how they are transformed as they circulate within global spaces. I was intrigued by historical accounts about the early empires of West Africa, the trans-Atlantic slave trade and ancient Egypt from reading Black consciousness books about Africa. In Cairo's airport I met several Southern Sudanese refugees who lived in marginal communities and were eagerly trying to go someplace else, preferably to Europe or America as asylum seekers. In the meantime they eked out a living by buying and selling various duty free goods, coaxing arriving passengers at the airport to purchase items that they could then sell in the city. Local tour guides in Cairo, hip to the New Age movement, hassled tourists by offering to take them to the pyramids for meditation.

I left my belongings with an old friend from high school who now lives in Cairo, and traveled to Aswan where the Nubians that I had read about live. Along the way I witnessed the grand historic sites and monumental architecture in the Nile Valley. Contemporary Nubian culture is promoted by mostly male tour guides who have adopted a popularized version of Rastafarianism, sporting dread locks

and reggae music. For those who desired, overnight stays and a meal in a Nubian village were also a part of the exotic experience, a boat ride away on the Nile, and tucked away from the main tourist centers of Aswan.

My visit to West Africa was initiated by conversations that I had with a Senegalese friend Issa who lives in New York, and who made arrangements for me to stay with his family in Dakar. I also contacted some other acquaintances living in different parts of West Africa. On my way to and from my visits with them, I traveled through Togo, Ghana, Ivory Coast, Burkina Faso, Mali and Senegal. Being invited to eat on buses and at rest stops or while waiting sometimes for several hours for malfunctioning buses to be repaired was common. Rest stops bustled with activity and were like mini-markets where little girls sold water in pails almost their size balanced neatly on their heads.

In Dakar, I found out that my friend Issa's family, the Diop family, have received many of his friends during their visits to West Africa mostly from New York's African dance scene. Amongst several other destinations, Malaika is a village about 45 minutes from Dakar where every summer dancers from New York attend a workshop and also tour Senegal. By Senegalese standards, Issa's family are middle class and devout Muslims. Every morning Issa's father would rouse each person by name for morning prayers. I was received with the kind of hospitality and warmth that is memorable. The household dynamics at the Diop's reflected their constant hosting of visitors and a large extended family living

together. Meals, prepared daily and in large quantities, were opportunities for a gathering. I learned about different kinds of Senegalese dishes often accompanied with rice. Thiebu Djen, the fish and vegetable dish was my favorite especially with the fiery hot pepper that comes on the side. Whenever I go to visit Issa's oldest sister Aisha who now lives in New York, she always has some Thiebu Djen prepared, as she cannot bear to go for a day without eating a home cooked meal. I tell Aisha that she has "good hands" since her cooking is always delicious.

At the Diop's residence sitting out on the veranda after mealtimes drinking heavily sweetened green tea and chewing Kola nuts, which I grew to like, was an occasional pastime. I also visited the holy city of Touba. A neighbor of the Diop's was taking an Imam there and invited me along, being very eager for me to convert to Islam. Although there are numerous Mosques in Addis Abeba, my home city, it was my first time to enter the interior of one. To the Senegalese that I meet in New York, being an Ethiopian who took a trip to Senegal and especially to Touba always brings a smile to their faces since it is a holy site for pilgrimage.

I spent most of my time while in Dakar with Issa's two sisters Daro and Maimouna with whom I was close in age. Aisha is much older and has four children. She and her husband used to own a garment factory in Gambia, which they had to sell since much of the garment industry in West Africa has been over taken by international manufacturers. Having lost their livelihood, Aisha had to

migrate to America in order to work and send money for her children's schooling in Dakar. Her husband joined her several years ago. They have not seen their children for almost eight years, but they talk by phone several times during the week. Aisha and her husband rent a kiosk in Harlem and sell various accessories, scented oils and incense. The rent for kiosks or a storefront space in New York runs between, \$1000 to \$2000 per month. Before opening their business Aisha used to work as a cashier at a grocery store and was injured while on the job. Having no insurance coverage and because her employer did not cover her medical expenses she chose to become self-employed. Over the years, Issa's other sisters have migrated and now reside in different parts of America. Both of Issa's parents have also been to America to visit their children but were very eager to return back to Dakar.

Local West Africans' initial impressions about an outsider's fascination with African dance vary. Although I am from Africa, my preoccupation with West African dance amused Daro and Maimouna. They told me of dances with names like the *bicyclette* (bicycle), *ventilateur* (fan), which emphasize various hip movements, and rhythms like the *Thiebu djien*, and *Mballax* a percussion music style popularized by the Senegalese singer Youssou N'Dour. Overall though we did not talk much about African dance and spent more time pursuing other activities. After she came to America, I once took Daro to observe an African dance class. She watched but with little interest to participate, noting that the context differed considerably from both the occasional gathering in which such

dances took place back home, and the style of dancing commonly practiced in Dakar nightclubs. The dances that are popularized in New York emphasize stylized traditional movements that are also performed by national Ballet companies in West Africa. Dancing in the nightclubs in Dakar included a fusion of popular styles, while neighborhood *Tanaberes* were sexualized and very playful social dances. Towards the end of the performances some women who felt uninhibited displayed very erotic movements that sent the spectators in an uproar. Daro was unimpressed by the New York African dance class that I took her to. Overall though, some newcomers like Daro showed no interest, others wanted to dance. When I asked Daro about her impression about the international enthusiasm for West African music and dancing, she simply replied, "We're poor and we sing and dance and we live in the jungle on trees." Whenever Americans ask her outlandish questions about Africa, this is the storyline that she gives them. Daro's comment reveals a view held by many Africans concerning the aestheticizing of Africa by Westerners.

Issa used to tell me that with his social status and coming from a conservative Muslim background, it would be unthinkable for him to become a dancer or musician, although he used to play the guitar in a local band during his high school and college years. Yet even though Issa's father was against it, his mother encouraged him to learn traditional drumming, at least as long as he remained in school and worked towards some other profession. Music and

dancing are for the most part still considered marginal professions in West Africa, even though the boundaries are more flexible with internationalization.

Amidst Westerners' quest for West African village style music and dancing numerous other forms of popular culture are thriving in West Africa. Events like FESPACO (Pan African film and television festival of Ouagadougou) attract huge international audiences as well as locals. Afro-Beat musicians like Fela from Nigeria have transformed popular cultures both local and international. Malian Blues guitarist Ali Farka Toure, who was inspired to play the guitar after watching Keita Fodeba's guitar performance during a performance given by Guinea's national Ballet, has adoring fans from all over the world. His musical style has received international fame through a film produced by Martin Scorsese entitled "*Feels Like Going Home*," which traces the links between music from the river Niger to the Mississippi Delta and shows Farka Toure's fusion of the Dogon and Peul mythology with Tuareg rhythms, Songai Melodies and the inspiration of American Blues artist John Lee Hooker. Hip-hop and Reggae festivals are other forms of popular culture that have mushroomed throughout West Africa. People also take interest in non-West African music. I met a Malian in Mopti who was a tour guide in the Dogon communities and sold masks and crafts. He used to live in Paris where listening to African music was vital, whereas in Mopti he hardly ever listens to any African music. In his small art studio surrounded by posters of different Western musicians and Dogon art, we listened to some rock music.

Amidst the constant flux of people to and from different regions within West Africa, and the vibrant flow of different genres of music and dance, as in other parts of the world the desire by locals to migrate abroad, mainly to the United States or Europe, is enormous. Those who return to visit their relatives bring material goods and come with stories that have led to new tastes and desires. Many have built new homes for their families. Most West Africans who migrate to different parts of Europe or America eventually sponsor their siblings or relatives to join them abroad, leading to a chain migration and displacement of whole households in West Africa. Many also send remittances to their families in West Africa. A Black American dancer who traveled to West Africa with one of her teachers several times noticed how over the years the home of her teacher's family was transformed. During her initial visit she gathered that her teacher lived in what Americans would consider a ghetto. What struck her the most in subsequent trips was a brand new but unused refrigerator with a single shriveled up pepper on one of the shelves, since fresh food was brought from the market daily.

Not all the stories of migration to Europe or America end up being pleasant or opportunities for displaying material success, and many talk of their disappointments once they arrive in the West. In spite of these accounts, however, people to continue to migrate even under the harshest of conditions, like crossing the Sahara dessert, or as stowaways. Others borrow money from relatives to cover their travel expenses and cannot return without repaying their

debts. Although women are mostly left behind to take care of children while their husbands send remittances from abroad, eventually some of them migrate as well.

I read on BBC news on the Internet about two teenage boys from Ghana who were found in the gap underneath the wings of a Ghana Airways plane, their bodies discovered at Heathrow airport along with two greeting cards they had brought along. I wonder what futures they imagined that warranted such an adventure. In a similar case in 1998, the bodies of two Guinean boys were found in the landing gear of a plane that arrived in Brussels. In a letter that was found in the pocket of one of the boys, addressed to European officials, they pleaded for European governments to aid Africa in its struggle against poverty (Ferguson 2002). And more recently the uncontrollable flow of African migrants across the borders of Spain has led to anxieties in Europe. This “invasion” according to Spanish officials has even justified the killing of numerous Africans in their attempts to climb over a protective fence surrounding Spanish territory. In other parts of Europe racism, xenophobia and Islamophobia are now on the rise (Bunzl 2005).

In parts of Southern Europe, numerous West Africans find work in the informal economy much as they do in New York and have become more visible over the years. The men work as traders and women as, among other things, seasonal hair braiders active in the summer. (European women frequently have to apply

pomade to thicken their hair for braiding). The summers are the most lucrative season for traders as well; one sees them loading and unloading their heavy bags full of merchandise on and off trains and busses, during this season. Similar to the ways that immigrants in New York utilize public spaces as a means for earning a livelihood by commodifying their ethnic heritage, other migrants like South Americans, perform native songs and sell CD's.

My experiences seem like a mosaic. My encounters in West Africa remind me of the several contradictions between the real life events that I encountered while I was there, and the distinctive ways that ideas about Africa are either inserted into or omitted from people's imaginations and discourses in the West. In contrast to the ways that Africa is aestheticized in the West, being a tourist during the economic crisis and amidst the hard times that had hit West Africa in the 1990's, gave me a different perspective of life in West Africa. Crossing numerous borders to or from different regions was especially instructive. The different countries that I visited seemed enormous and porous, replete with many languages and a bewildering variety of people moving constantly from place to place.

Transactions related to visiting relatives, business dealings, labor migration, and the exchange of goods were common practice on both sides of every border, as well as between West Africa and other parts of the world. In spite of all the motion, however, some people remained quite stuck, or rather stuck while in motion, like Assan's roommates in New York who drive cabs several months out

of the year then leave for Dakar to be with their wives and children for a few months. They are neither in Senegal nor New York. Assan complains that their constant talk about Senegal disrupts the flow of his life in New York.

As with other racialized groups in New York, ethnic distinctions based on race define the lives and identities of African immigrants. Most view themselves as “African blacks” or by stressing their accent “assert” their difference as “foreign born” Blacks (Arthur 2000). To the broader community however, Africans are considered Black and identified with Black Americans (Foner 2005). The racial divide and persistence of stereotypes in American life obscure the growing diversity that exists within the Black population in the United States. Rather than making distinctions between people from Ghana, Nigeria, Senegal, the Caribbean, or Black Americans, tourists on a sightseeing bus ride through Harlem for example, would simply notice Black people (Baker 2001). Over the years in neighborhoods like Harlem or the Bronx, communities who come from different parts of Africa and the Caribbean have formed their own ethnic enclaves. Like the children of other Black communities, the children of Africans attend inner city schools and have adopted Black urban identities. Assan who teaches at various after-school programs in New York refers to them as “Africans who have lost their culture.”

The massive migration of West Africans to the United States has been partly influenced by the economic crisis in West Africa during the 1980's – 1990's

resulting in a devaluation of the CFA (the currency used in thirteen former French colonies) and a loss of jobs. For example, in Senegal the rural “component” of structural adjustment policies imposed by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) led to an agricultural decline, forcing farmers to compete with cheaper imported products from Europe and America and led to the migration of rural dwellers into urban centers in search of wage labor. Many college-educated youth were also without jobs, which led to the “decay” in the quality of urban life (Sommerfield 1997). In addition to trading goods across West African countries and between international destinations, and due to the limited job opportunities and anti-immigrant sentiments in France, migration to America became a “coping mechanism” for confronting the economic crisis in Senegal. Women were no longer homemakers and contributed to their household income by participating in long distance trade. Most families derived their income solely from monthly remittances of \$100 or more sent by relatives living abroad. In a country with a GNP per capita income of \$780 this sum could sustain a household’s basic necessities (Sommerville 1997:36).

By 2000 over one quarter of New York City’s non-Hispanic Black population were foreign born, and nearly 70,000 are sub-Saharan Africans (Foner 2005). Some cases like Somali refugees who were re-settled in Maine (by way of Kenya since the 1990’s), have led to racist campaigns against them by white supremacist organizations in neighboring towns. Due to the segregation of New York neighborhoods, racial attacks, and police harassment, most African immigrants

prefer to live in Black neighborhoods. Many have opened specialty stores that sell various imported foods items from Africa used for cooking different national dishes. Some have opened barbershops, clothing, garment or tailor shops, restaurants, import/export and money wiring services, or support groups in these neighborhoods. In Harlem there are five African mosques. In Harlem's little Africa, the nightlife, usually active on the weekends, takes place in restaurants. Sometimes, different African communities rent halls in the area and sponsor various music groups from West Africa. Griots sing praise songs to their patrons and are showered with money in return, as is done customarily in West Africa. Most of the performers return back to West Africa with thousands of dollars.

A growing number of female West African migrants now occupy New York's informal economy, most of them working in hair braiding salons, the restaurant business or as traders. West African women hair braiders often congregate around different spots in Harlem and the Bronx, coaxing customers, or handing out business cards that advertise their services. Their clients are for the most part Black women. In Senegal one of Maimouna's hobbies happened to be hairstyling. She would offer her services free of charge to her friends and relatives, and when she came to America it paid off. Maimouna learned that there was a demand for hair braiders in different Black neighborhoods, and got a job in a salon that was owned by a Senegalese woman.

The owner of the hair braiding shop apparently drives a SUV from amassing a fortune in the business and has also built a mansion in Senegal. Maimouna felt that she was being exploited by paying over fifty percent of her wages to the owner and decided to start her own business, by working from her home. She would amusedly declare that she is now “a professional hairstylist.” Eventually Maimouna returned to Senegal because she could not cope with the American lifestyle and because she wanted to get married and raise her children in Senegal. Currently, she has a two-year old son and her husband, who works in Germany, commutes to Dakar several months out of the year to be with his family.

West Africans also circulate to and from New York on an ongoing basis for business transactions or to visit relatives. The class composition of African migrants into urban centers like New York varies. Some may be professionals, or have attended high school or trade school, while others have minimal literacy skills, and may not have even lived in the metropolis in West Africa but instead come from surrounding towns or villages. Mamdou Diouf (2000) describes the trade diaspora created by the Senegalese Murid traders who form a transnational circuit; in his words they “reconcile native temporalities and forms of spirituality with the temporality of the world at large” by merging mercantile, cultural and religious values with capitalism (679). The Murid are a Muslim brotherhood founded in the 19th century by a Marabout named Amadou Bamba Mbacke. They have adopted a “universalist” version of Islam, by fusing traditional values

with “key aspects of the colonial project,” and define themselves as followers of “a black Islam” (685).

The “diasporic culture” of Murids excludes outsiders and by emphasizing Murid rituals that are carried out on a daily basis they aim to intensify a sense of “solidarity,” and “mutual support” amongst one another (Diouf 2000: 695).

Presently, Murids are visible throughout urban centers in Europe, America and more recently Asia and Australia. Dressed in their “traditional robes” and “tassled hats,” Murid merchants speak numerous languages and have created vast enclaves and networks that span several international trade routes, all of which are connected directly with “Touba their spiritual home,” and “Sandaga their economic center” in Senegal. Using their connections Murids are able to obtain products from Chinese traders in New York, and sell them at competitive prices to businesses in Strasbourg, Germany or by collaborating with Korean manufacturers some have managed to open factories in Senegal (2000). In New York there are several Murid enclaves in neighborhoods like Harlem.

The differences in social organization and backgrounds among African immigrants are crucial for explaining their cultural patterns and the ways that they adapt or adjust to their new lives in America (Arthur 2000). Although ethnic groups like the Murids have established new enclaves abroad, most Africans may not always be in contact with people from their own social background. For example Daro notes that most of her peers are scattered throughout different

countries while some remain in Dakar, and although she socializes in Senegalese circles in America, much of the social network that she had developed in Dakar was based on neighborhood, school, kinship or various associations, whereas in America being Senegalese is what counts the most.

The circulation of money, goods, and information within various locales in New York has led to the formation of new kinds of social spaces and lifestyles that transcend the boundaries of nation-states. In addition to shaping their ethnic or racialized identities, these transactions inform the ways that most immigrants organize their lives and conceptions of personhood in America. The interpretation of identity in American life as a kind of “property” or through the notion of a “commodity logic” (Strathern 1988) where identities occur as “things” that individuals “have, possess, claim, acquire, lose or search for” suggest that a “continuity of self” must depend on a “sustained possession of particular properties that mark people as individuals and those that mark them as members of collectivities” (Rouse 1995:357). The processes through which individuals and collectivities sustain these properties, however, can be rather complex.

According to this view, the “ideal” personhood is informed by a “lasting form of self possession or proprietorship in self” (Rouse1995: 357), and is difficult to attain, since identity is also “irreducible to rational choice” (Scott 1999:20). This points to the ways that identity is “inscribed” within relations of power and is constructed across difference and disjuncture (1995). The multiple connections that immigrants have forged with their homelands have eroded the assumptions

of a pure national identity on the one hand, while leading to the imposition of such rigid classifications of identity as “raced difference” on the other (1999).

For example being Wolof in Senegal has a different meaning in terms of informing the idea of personhood, or organizing social life and action, and is different from being a Wolof, or Senegalese in France or America. Race is a “primary factor” that determines immigrant experience in American life. Factors like real estate value, which are determined by the racial composition of neighborhoods, constrain Black immigrants from securing homes in areas of their choice (Foner 2005). Africans who occupy the informal economy, may not be legalized which makes it difficult for them to secure an apartment since they have to provide references, bank account information, or have “respectable” jobs in order to pass the screening by landlords. Instead of moving into white neighborhoods where these issues are more pronounced, many newly arriving Africans opt to rent rooms in apartments with other Africans in Black neighborhoods. However they are also very visible in white neighborhoods as service providers. Like most Caribbeans, they work as caretakers for the elderly or as nannies (mostly the women), and others work in grocery stores, or gourmet food markets as cashiers, or delivery people.

In New York outside of the dance scene, I have known West Africans from different contexts such as business people, professionals and while working at an after school program at a Bronx middle school. I have met numerous youth

who are recent migrants trying to adjust to inner city life and a different kind of school system. The stories about their ruptured lives are too numerous to recount, but one that stands out concerns Ousmanne, a fifteen year-old from Guinea who came to New York to join his uncle. After a few months Ousmanne's uncle returned to Guinea. Ousmanne remained by himself in his uncle's apartment and started selling bootleg CD's in Manhattan. He was arrested by the police and because of being underage, was sent to a foster home. Ousmanne now lives with a Latino family in the Bronx and has learned to speak Spanish. Since we talked about Islam often, he gave me some prayers from the Koran, which he had translated into English.

Assan tells me that he choreographed a performance with homeless children in New Jersey. They are mostly Black Americans, but two of them are Senegalese living with their mother. Little Africa on 116th street is now a bustling neighborhood especially on Fridays; it has even been written up in the New York Times. After attending the mosques in the neighborhood many West Africans gather around the streets to socialize, eat at restaurants, go to the barbershops; buy calling cards to Africa or the latest CD's, movies and music videos from West African stores in the area. I asked Assan's friend about a homeless West African man that I had seen on 116th street. He replied that everyone knows him and that "he was not like that when he got here." Several West Africans had offered to contribute funds for airfare to send the homeless man back, but he refused.

Aisha's niece Fatou, now in middle school, was born in America and has never been to Senegal. She understands but cannot speak Wolof and is surrounded by many aunts and uncles who are now living in America. Fatou asks them many questions about Senegal, some of which they find amusing and others annoying. With her youthful innocence and sense of humor she provokes them, her ideas introduce something different into their space. Their world at times intrigues her and at other times is just confusing or unusual. One time Aisha was getting dressed in an African Boubou and Fatou came into her room and exclaimed, "what are you doing, people will stare at you when we walk on the street" and Aisha replied "well I will look back at them." They went out together and many people stopped Aisha to compliment her on the outfit she was wearing. Except in the wintertime, Aisha always wears West African clothes. Some Black Americans around where she works call her "African queen." Aisha does not understand why in America women have to wear tight fitting clothes to feel sexy, or feminine. Her daughter in Dakar hand-picks all of the fabrics which she then has tailored and sends to her mother through the numerous Senegalese who travel back and forth. Long distance relationships like the ones between Aisha and her children oftentimes require daily phone conversations, or ritual transactions that involve money and goods to help sustain family ties. Because Aisha is familiar with numerous wholesale stores in Manhattan (oftentimes owned by Koreans), she would purchase items like clothing, accessories, or school supplies at discount prices, and sends it through Senegalese shippers located in midtown Manhattan or Harlem, who send containers to Senegal on a

weekly basis. In Senegal she is able to get clearance without the wait or having to pay an exorbitant fee through contacts who, work in the customs office.

While I was having lunch at Aisha's house one day, Fatou was visiting with her father. During her usual string of endless questions about Senegal, her father got flustered and retorted that she and her American friends did not even know where Senegal was on the map. Jokingly Fatou whispered, "we don't really have any time for geography, we're too busy planning slumber parties and talking about pizza," her favorite food. Fatou's father talked about some of his frustrations at his job, especially the infantilizing ways that Americans at times deploy in talking to foreigners when they detect an accent. (He works in customer relations and deals with many people on the phone). Perplexedly he remarks "but the mind has no accent." I had not imagined that a casual meeting with some African dancers in Central Park and a subsequent interest in African dance would lead through such haphazard terrains, experiences and eventually a writing of this account. It also seems that we occupy a multiplicity of worlds simultaneously. Through traveling I learned that there are many ways of seeing and not seeing, all of which shape experience, but quite differently.

My impression of what it means to be an African from traveling to various regions on the continent, contrasts with the predicament of being an African in Europe and America and the disposition of Westerners towards Africans. Alternating between these various ways of seeing, and "systems of knowledge," entails

looking at the complex relations between language, “truth” and representation (Mbembe 2003). As a particular cultural “mode of understanding,” disciplinary constructions like ethnographies are the analytical products of anthropologists and serve as the “explanatory device” through which anthropology creates itself. The peoples under scrutiny are another story (Strathern 1988). The process through which analytical language is constructed by distancing itself from the realities and descriptions of ethnographic subjects points to the limits of the “kinds of claims” that anthropological analysis can and cannot make. Moreover, Western metaphysical concerns surrounding the underlying assumptions about the nature of society or collectivity and its relation to the individual as a cultural construct or “social being,” achieved through a system of “ordering” and classification, has been critiqued for its unproblematic application onto non-Western societies (1988).

Consequently, Africa as a “geographic accident” or “sphere of representation” has been invested with “a multitude of significations” aimed to represent its cultural and symbolic attributes. Through a “grammar of difference,” Africa represents a “sign,” and what Africa signifies has set the conditions for its inclusion into modernist projects on the one hand (Mbembe 2003 632). On the other hand,

Contemporary African cultural formations have not emerged out of people’s experiencing the past as a fate set in stone: rather, they often derive from an ability to treat both as open-ended and as an interlude – a negotiation of those aspects or fragments of the past necessary for life to

go on in the present... however, whatever the degree of estrangement and mobility, the bonds of remembrance are always linking the migrant to a place of origin. Hence, identity is formed at the interface between the rituals of putting down roots and the rhythms of estrangements, in the constant passage from the spatial to the temporal, from geography to memory (Mbembe 2003: 636, 637, 638).

Unlike multicultural discourses that celebrate cultural diversity, or liberal assumptions, that propose the limitless opportunities that are available to individuals for fashioning their lives, much of contemporary encounters and the crossing of social boundaries while promising new possibilities, are oftentimes also marked by a necessity. The “heretical spirit” which defines the encounter between “Africa and the world today,” is an example of how individuals inhabit several worlds or situate themselves, “on two sides of the image simultaneously” (Mbembe 2003:639). Although the attempt to articulate the “heretical spirit” of Africa must necessarily escape “the prison of our discourse,” one can inquire into some of the ways that it might inform every day life (2003).

CHAPTER 3

Migration and “New ethnicities”

Since the 1970's a series of “neo-liberal” processes and projects have transformed capitalism, in particular the deregulation of financial markets, the acceleration of capital flight and off-shore investment, the weakening of labor unions and the retrenchment of social welfare. These and related changes have generated enormous instability and precariousness for millions of people world-wide, leading to the expression “disorganized capitalism” (Winnant 1994). The consequent flow of ideas, peoples, products, and images across “deterritorialized” spaces has transformed social and economic networks as well as relations in cultural productions that are locally and globally imagined (Appadurai 1990, Kearny 1995). Previously studies of “world systems” had pointed out the prevalence of similar large-scale socio-economic networks (Braudel 1995, Wallerstein 1976, Wolf 1982, Abu-Lughod 1989). However the level of “intensity” particularly in terms of a “compression” of time and space (Harvey 1989, Giddens 1990) and the merging of technology with information (Castells 1996) are the significant features of present-day re-makings of the local and global.

Rather than representing a transition from the “modern to post-modern, from industry to information, or from national to global” forms of orientation, globalization involves shifts in production from multinational capital accumulation to the increasing dominance of “processes organized along transnational lines”

(Rouse 1993: 357). Although globalization suggests the “rootlessness” and homogeneity of cultures, its uneven process and ongoing “de-territorialization” and “re-territorialization” of space have led to a proliferation of new forms of ethnicities and cultural practices within transnational spaces (Basch et. al. 1994).

In addition to the production of cultural homogeneity, the marketing of local ethnicities via a fascination with the exotic as “markers of distinction” continues to persist, taking on new forms. New possibilities for “self-transformation” are also displayed in the form of “unpredictable” modes of representation. For example by presenting difference in ways that both blur and redefine social boundaries, commodified notions of identity can be expressed as a “pastiche” of “flexible” and “disjointed” subjectivities (Rouse 1993:390, Hall1996). Alongside “flexible” subjectivities however, identities based on “imagined communities” and a diaspora are also framed by way of ethnic, racial and cultural boundaries that are articulated either in the embrace of, or against, notions of citizenship and belonging, dictated by nation-states (Gupta and Ferguson 1992, Basch et. al. 1994, Clifford 1997).

Despite their “multi-local” or transnational affiliations, which connect villages, towns, or countries with various “outposts” in the United States, immigrants must learn to organize their lives and actions through ethnic or racial identities (Rouse 1995). This process of constructing localized identities links the personal experience of migrants with collective forms of action, due to class-based

prejudice or discrimination that they face in their new locales, based factors like access to jobs or housing. However, the possession of an identity or the process of identity formation is not a universal aspect of human experience. The assumption that migrants either retain their association with their places of origin or abandon their “old” identity does not address how they organize their lives and actions through “multi-local” affiliations. In addition, having multiple affiliations should not be considered as either a marker of a “transition” or a sign of “pathology.” Instead they are forms of practice that are both “lasting and intelligible responses to the varied pressures people face” in their new locales (Rouse 1995: 354). By focusing on a collective identity, studies on the relation between immigration and identity obscure the ways that individuals are constructed as collective subjects and, the “processes through which they are prompted to construe themselves as distinct individuals” (356).

Cities are a significant feature of a “globalized world.” Serving as strategic sites of global capital and finance, they challenge the “unitary” role played by national economies (Sassen 1996). As contradictory spaces, urban centers are made up of multiple forms of economies and “work cultures” such as low wage and “malleable” forms of informal labor (e.g. factory work) and high profile jobs (e.g. Wall-Street). The coexistence and fashioning of diverse forms of “work cultures” involves a fluidity and merging between disparate “modes of experience” and “arenas of activity,” leading to new contexts through which “flexible” subjectivities or “self-transformations” are shaped (Rouse 1993: 389). The growing

dependence on Third World migrant labor in urban service industries, while giving a greater visibility to individuals with diverse national and racial identifications and class positions, masks the uneven ways that urban landscapes are occupied, and the limited forms of access to local resources that most third world migrants share with the broader society.

How different groups make use of “global cities” depends upon the nature of their incorporation within them. While serving as major international centers of finance and business, such cities also house a multiplicity of “cultural environments” and identities, as well as “localized processes” that frame concerns of belonging along the lines of national, multicultural or transnational practices. In the United States, debates over the newness of transnationalism as a process by which immigrants forge, maintain, and sustain “bilocal” social and economic ties with their societies of origin has been ongoing (Foner 1997). As early as the 1900’s similar inquiries related to the concerns of assimilating America’s “alien” population; and immigrants, persistent attachments to their homelands through “diverse nationalist feelings” have been extensively explored for that period (Bourne 1916). Additionally, notions of the local and global fail to adequately capture or explain contemporary migrant experiences and how different forms of mobility provide individuals with access to different kinds of local and global transnational practices. The response of local cultures to the transformation of their familiar social boundaries due to the incorporation of migrant communities in their midst, also signals new shifts in local cultural practices. In spite of the

opportunities that mobility affords, some migrants' every-day actions are constrained. Others confront social invisibility due to the impositions of pre-existing institutions that determine the terms by which they are inserted within local economic, political or ideological spaces (Rouse 1995).

In addition to its "depth and density" (Jones 1992), Nancy Foner (1997) suggests that the newness of contemporary transnationalism is reflected in the "dynamics" and types of immigrants rather than the transnational process itself. In particular, transformations in transportation and in communications technology have accelerated the transnational process by making it easier for people to occupy and participate in multiple worlds. In the United States earlier studies on migration, although they acknowledged immigrants' potential nationalisms, emphasized issues concerning assimilation into the broader society while overlooking the transnational aspects of their social networks. The current focus on the transnational or fragmented nature of immigrant life, and "multiculturalisms" which emphasize cultural pride and appreciation rather than issues of membership, discourage dialogues concerning the different forms of migrant incorporation into pre-existing institutions and their inclusion or exclusion from participation within the broader society (Rouse 1995).

What present forms of global and transnational networks suggest is not the homogenizing of the local, but rather the re-constitution of "new" versions of local and global forms of identification (Hall 1996). An unevenly distributed

globalization is represented by the differences “between regions and between different strata of the population *within* regions” (Hall 1996: 625) through which various forms of social relations and practices are forged. Rather than former versions of identities which are forged within “well-bounded” localities, the present making of selves via commodified (or exotified) forms of popular culture occurs within the logic of a global, “disorganized capitalism” (Winnant 1994). Nonetheless the necessity of having an identity (national, racial, ethnic) continues to sustain or inform new versions of “re-fashioned” selves, due to the asymmetrical access to resources and social structures that are afforded to different groups based on identity (Hall 1996). Drawing on the concerns of globalization’s unevenness Doreen Massey puts it this way.

... different social groups, and different individuals, are placed in very distinct ways in relation to these flows and interconnections. This point concerns not merely the issue of who moves and who doesn’t, although that is an important element of it; it is also about power in relation *to* the flows and the movement. Different social groups have distinct relationships to this anyway differentiated mobility: some people are more in charge of it than others; some initiate flows and movement, others don’t; some are more on the receiving-end of it than others; some are effectively imprisoned by it (Massey 1991: 25-26 see also Hall 1996; Robbins 1991).

As Massey (1991) points out, the experience of mobility without being “in charge” is unlike the kind of experience that mobility affords to those “who are both doing the moving and the communicating and who are in some way in a position of control in relation to it.” As an example she highlights the people of the *favelas* in Rio,

... who know soccer like the back of their hand, and have produced some of its players; who have contributed massively to global music, who gave us the samba and produced the lambada that everyone was dancing to last year in the clubs of Paris and London and who have never, or hardly

ever, been to downtown Rio. At one level they have been tremendous contributors to what we call time-space compression; and at another level they are imprisoned in it (25-26).

More importantly the uneven direction of globalization's "flow" between the "West" and "the Rest" gives the impression that, although it is affecting the whole world, globalization is essentially "a Western phenomenon" (Hall 1996). However rather than "naturalizing" the relations between center/periphery, it is likely that the process of an "unequal cultural encounter" -- through "images," "artifacts," and the construction of modern identities (Hall 1996) through a dissolution of "barriers," "distance" and a "face-to-face" encounter with the exotic other -- makes contacts between center/periphery seem more "immediate and intense" (Robins 1991: 25). Given the disparate forces that have shaped the notion and appropriation of "world cultures," or the exotic other, it is essential to distinguish between how the local and global are signified, versus made use of, by social actors, and why only certain aspects of cultural productions or practices are "globalizing" and not others (Abu-Lughod 1990).

Cosmopolitan "world cultures"

As a "battleground of the twenty-first century," cosmopolitan "tolerance" is marked by the embrace of "cultural complexity." In contrast, fundamentalism, as a site where "renewed" or "purified" versions of cultural practices persist, is thought to serve as a "refuge" to those for whom cosmopolitanism is "disturbing and dangerous." According to Giddens (2003) it is hoped that a cosmopolitan attitude "wins out" (23).

As a “mode of intercultural mediation” what role does anthropology play in a multicultural world where marginality is “universalized” and where cultural “outsiders” are represented as both enriching and refusing a national culture (Shannon 1995)? Proponents of multicultural discourses have argued that cultural diversity not only serves as a resource for individual and collective agency, but also affords subjects autonomous spaces to govern their world. Yet “tolerating” cultural diversity implies that non-western peoples will eventually make a transition from “tradition to modernity.” Put somewhat differently, permanent difference may become a condition of exclusion by denying groups full participation within the broader society (1995).

Because “world cultures” gain entry into the modern through a process of “ambivalence” and “ambiguity,” they require not only a successful “enculturation” but also a translation. The transition of non-western cultural productions into modern “world cultures” by way of a translation, involves potentially new possibilities for constituting difference, as well as an act of “subversion.” Moreover the inventiveness of “world cultures” must be in accordance with the ways that modern cultures place a “value” on inventiveness as a universal category (Asad 1995). This suggests the contingency of incorporation and its implication as an exercise in power (Mamdani 1996). More importantly, do traditional cultures “spontaneously” *become* modern, already containing seeds of modernity, or are people “pushed, seduced, coerced or persuaded into trying to

change themselves into something else, something that allows them to be redeemed?” In addition, why do people continue to give significance to their historical experiences, and how has enlightenment’s claim to “universality” made it possible to argue that people’s historical experiences are “inessential” and can be simply discarded “at will” (Asad 2003: 154, 162)?

Representing “world cultures” homogeneously, given the disjunctures in cultural production versus the ways cultures are practiced, and positing cosmopolitanism as the antithesis of tradition, obscure the likelihood that cosmopolitanism itself may be a *kind* of tradition (Asad 1995). Describing cultural production in terms of virtue or vice (Giddens 2003) tends to mask the ways that language constructs the world as a “safe” place for managing differences. Instead of viewing people’s cultural productions as outcomes of a virtuous “agent” (i.e. cosmopolitanism) in which tradition (a vice) has been discarded, it is essential to inquire into the paradoxical ways that a cosmopolitan subject emerges via “world cultures” and represents “one condition among others for responding to a new order of virtue and vice” (Asad 2003: 342).

Moreover the distinctiveness of modernity does not rest on its capacity for expanding the options in “individual freedoms,” but rather in its “point of application” (Scott 1999). Instead of directly implicating the “body” of the “sovereign subject” in its projects, modernity has been inserted into the lives of non-western peoples through various “practices,” “modalities,” and “projects” and

via a “systematic uprooting” of alternate forms of cultural practice through which individuals lived and defined their lives. Those have instead been replaced by new “conditions” that are based on “clear, sound and rational principles,” that have consequently altered the terrains through which non-western peoples produce their cultures (Nandy 1998, Scott 1999: 32).

Cultural practices, then, should also be viewed as “unequally displaced,” conceived not only as “visual,” “bounded,” and hybrid forms or as perceptions between self/other, but also in terms of “temporalities of power,” which act as “enabling” or “constraining” forces that determine people’s capacity for action (Asad 1993, Foucault 1979, Scott 1999). Here, power does not imply the “antithesis of freedom and reason (in which freedom emerges as a product of the progressive rationalization of power).” Rather, power can also be productive (Hall 1997) and is defined as “the general name of a relation in which differential effects of one action upon another are produced” (Scott 1999: 36). Talal Asad (1993, 2003) to whom I refer at length, suggests that the mediation of these “temporalities of power” by various agents enables the constitution of certain forms of social practices over others. Thus “particular forms of life are displaced, outlawed and penalized ... and conditions are created for the cultivation of different kinds of human” (Asad 1993: 154).

Power is productive by working “*through*” constructions of the “*normative*.” That is, by acting as an enabling or constraining force within spaces of “free social

exchange,” power affects individuals with diverse motives and provides access to, or constrains them from, new possibilities for shaping their lives. Here subjectivity is deemed as being the *source* of “free will and agency” (Scott 1999: 36). Therefore to speak of cultural variety, innovation or creativity as universal or as outcomes of modernity, ignores not only the ways that new possibilities in cultural production are constrained, but how cultural productions are “managed,” and must also “respond to” modern classificatory forces.

If as some anthropologists now put it, culture is always invented ... if invention opens up the possibilities for difference, then it should also be clear that the conditions of invention are no longer what they once were ... even if it is true that new cultural forms are being continuously invented in different societies, these societies now live in a single, shared world. A world brought into being by European conquest (Asad 1992: 334)

The language through which modernizing projects valorize cultural variety, hybridity and the transformative possibilities of cultures in contrast to the “inventedness” of traditions (oftentimes read as resistance to change), fails to address (a) the “complexity of embodied experience” and the process by which some desires are “eliminated,” or must be “regulated” and (b) that belonging to a “tradition” does not imply that traditions are “static,” and “unchanging,” or that traditions lack an “internal critique” or dynamic (Asad 2003: 80).

Moreover privileging the varieties of “free will” and “agency” residing within “normative social exchanges” (via language) undermines the ways that the “gaps” between individual desires and outcomes are exacerbated by modernist projects. That is, “gaps ...between the realities that most people experience and the promises they are offered” (Rouse 1995: 376). Experienced as “lived time,”

such gaps occur as a “rupture” and in this “rupture ... old memories may be recalled in unexpected ways because the future looked forward to is not experienced as such when it arrived” (Asad 2003: 222).

Anthropological attempts to explain “cultural complexity” by relying on a “dual temporality” (i.e. modern/traditional) and via notions of a “progressive time” undermine the process by which cultural differences and connections are *historically* constituted (Asad 1993, Fabian 1983). A “dual temporality” places Otherness in both a contemporary and non-contemporary context while a progressive notion of time gives anthropology not only its “conceptual site” of modernity, but also allows it to analyze other groups using a “contrastive” model so as to define both the modern and non-modern (i.e. tradition) on its own terms.

Subsequent forms of representing otherness through relying on a “dual temporality” have been inserted into various “ethnophilosophical” disciplines or projects (Mudimbe 1994) and have played a crucial role in defining the “essence” of the modern. In order to serve particular arguments, or representational ends, these forms of cultural interpretation of difference place disparate temporalities, events or social practices along a single “continuum.” In the end, the effort to understand cultural difference by means of such concepts turns anthropological explanations about otherness into a definition of the West, while Western “projects” engage in the transformation of the societies that anthropologists “claim” to represent (Asad 1993, 2003).

More recently, self-reflexive anthropology and its turn to the “local” as a more authentic or privileged source of information gained through “fieldwork,” has not resolved the privileged space from which anthropology constructs its subjects. At various moments and depending on the context, all people are local (Asad 1993). However, there still lacks an equal examination of the analytical frame through which the certainty of authentic knowledge is envisaged, such as the instances when and by whom local knowledge is valorized, when the value of local knowledge becomes less significant, and whether knowledge *about* local peoples is in fact local knowledge. In some contexts the local now serves as a replacement for the primitive or tribal. This assumption of “culture as an *a priori* totality of authentic meanings to which action and discourse must be related, if they are to be properly understood and their integrity explained,” constrains the production of a “viable theory of social change” in anthropological writings (Asad 1993: 608).

The shaping of difference within “temporalities of power” implies that cultural reproductions as displaced or reconstituted practices are not only “embodied” but also occur within a “complex space” and “heterogeneous” conception of time. Interpretations of cultural reproduction then must “systematically” examine the ways that local subjects encounter a dual orientation towards the production of difference, and time/space orientation. In his writings concerning the process of cultural transformation, Walter Benjamin’s (1955) defense of reproduction and

loss of authenticity was an ambivalently positioned one due to the likelihood that a loss of “aura” might also imply the loss of human experience and sense of historicity (Asad 1995). This suggests that modernity’s creative hence transformative force, and the circumstances through which non-Western peoples both define and contest their cultural productions, concern not only issues of innovation but also historicity and embodied experience. Therefore examining how historically *specific* conditions set the context for constructing specific *kinds* of choices, and how “distinctive choices constitute historically specific subjectivities,” will serve as a vantage point for examining the process of cultural transformation, negotiation, and their articulation (Asad 1987: 607, 1995, 2003).

Exoticism, authenticity, art

As a “mode of representation” exoticism tentatively describes the relations between a Western “self” and exotic Other (Celestin 1996). Exoticism also serves as a vantage point for examining whether the presence of (individual) identities, and a reliance on the “certainty” of the difference of the exotic, is sustainable. The decline in “unknown” territories and the “fragmented” or displaced nature of the “uttering” Other (as an exotic “self”), suggests a “breakdown of a unit essential to exoticism (Celestin 1996: 27)” If so what role does the exotic play in its continued significance as a category of experience?

The concept of authenticity describes the “origin” of objects, places or peoples. In social life and as a “quality” of experience, authenticity is vital for constructing

a sense of identity and uniqueness (Trilling 1980). In the West authenticity has served as a source for constituting an ideal world, or to fulfill a personal experience by looking to the past or other societies in the form of a quest. However, how has the quest for authenticity become an *essential* need and a means for the “fulfillment” of a desire? What are the mechanisms by which the temporality of self-making (via authenticity) is sustained as a unified experience?

As a form of experience the quest for authenticity is a voluntary means for having an existential encounter with Otherness, albeit through “liminal” or transient and self-reflexive spaces, which provides individuals a “release” from their familiar world. However, this release from the familiar is also temporary, and individuals are still bound by different forms of social constraints or obligations that dictate their familiar worlds (Turner 1978, Urry 1990). The framing or limiting of experience also implies that certain forms of experience, selected through a system of classification, are “shut in” while “intruding ones” must be “shut out” (Douglas 1966:63). Through encounters with otherness, the “certainties” of an individual’s familiar world may become destabilized, or ambiguous (Celestin 1996).

For example, studies on the “consumption of leisure” suggest that tourism serves as a symbol of social status (MacCannell 1976), or indicates, “...the individual’s perception of what society requires of him or her” rather than reflecting a personal need (Rojek 1995:5). As “estranged laborers” the contemporary middle

class opt to “forage the earth for the ultimate authentic experience,” due to their alienation by the workplace, leading to the quest for “a not so alienating, more authentic reality” that has been denied to them in their day to day lives (Nash 1995, Hillman 2001:2). Hillman (2001) shows how backpackers establish a connection between experience and authenticity by constructing their own “positive experience” from their travels, which they describe as encounters that are “worthwhile” and “memorable” in spite of their arduous journey. By not conforming to the norm and traveling to places where few tourists go, or by experiencing diverse forms of cultures in order to construct their own version of the authentic, backpackers view themselves as “travelers” and value their experience more highly than “tourists.”

Some enjoy “being able to undergo the same experience in different countries; for example being able to scuba-dive in every country they visited” (Hillman 2001:2). Others construct “their own meaningful existence” by traveling as a “way of life” or as a form of experiencing “the world.” More importantly, tourists consider other people and places as being their sources of authenticity (Hillman 2001, Pearce and Moscardo 1986). Backpackers experience the world through “self constructed authentic means” where authenticity is produced by associating places with various forms of action (Hillman 2001:2). In addition to desiring authentic experience, backpackers must also have familiar things around them, “it can be anything but something familiar is key” (4). This shows how the temporality of authentic experience is sustained through a self-reflexivity, and

through brief encounters with the “other world.” Leaving “home” is necessary in order to return as authentic reconstituted selves, or to gain a “positive experience” (6). Consequently, both “touristic sites and individuals” must engage in the constitution of “places and actions concerned with the production of the authentic” (1).

The ways that varied experiences and circumstances shape authenticity, and the kinds of subjects who desire authenticity and their motivations for doing so, are very complex. Moreover whether the manifestations of personal transformation that occur are due to authenticity or other factors, and how “enduring” the transformations that are ascribed to authenticity are, cannot be approached in a systematic fashion (Nash 1996). What can be examined are the “filtering mechanisms” (Douglas 1966) or techniques through which a quest for authenticity is organized and constitutes an experience.

Because the exotic is now also situated within the familiar, encountering the exotic Other no longer involves a physical break with the familiar and can occur without travel or a “geographical distance” (Celestin 1996). Given that how the exotic participates as an object (and not a subject) in the practice of exoticism influences the direction of the authentic quest, can authentic experience be derived by way of the ordinary or “commonplace”? How or why is the experience of authenticity given greater significance as being more “true” or “real” over other forms of experience? Besides providing the means for authenticity what is the

consequence of constituting the exotic as a category of experience? For example Euro-American ideals regarding art and bohemianism presume to explain how categories or experiential “realms” are conceived. Celebrating “nature, creativity, pleasure, rebellion, novelty, self-expression,” or the “elevation of sex to art” serve as responses to the “stultifying constraints” of a bourgeois middle-class “realm” dictated by the marketplace. Nonetheless bohemianism shares in the bourgeois “realm” of materialism while relying on a separate mental category, and as a practice continues to inform contemporary notions of art and ideas of self-expression (Lipsitz 1998, Brooks 2001:96).

Locating authenticity as a “criterion of art, and as a quality of the personal life which may be enhanced or diminished by art” (Trilling 1980:124) raises several questions concerning the roles of art and the exotic as essential components of a “self constituting” experience. The recognition of authenticity as an “identifiable” category implies that the imaginative pursuit of authenticity involves an ordering of reality -- a desire for personal gain through a selection of experiences that conform to a particular mode of perception. As an overarching principle, specific “aesthetic preferences” (Trilling 1980) and the “extraordinary” (Agamben 1993) serve as the essential components for structuring authentic experience. The shift from the exotic as a generalized aspect of everyday life, which coexists alongside the banal, to exoticism as “practiced or felt by a self” (Celestin 1996: 24) reflects the ways that the exotic and extraordinary have been constituted by a conscious “desiring” subject (Agamben 1993).

As an object of desire or “insatiable phantasm of experience” the exotic implicitly suggests “that there is a road to experience.” And this road must be defined by rules, “... by way of the extraordinary and exotic (in opposition to the familiar and commonplace)” (Agamben 1993: 23). Therefore the structuring of authenticity and the “techniques” by which it is attained call on the authorization of certain forms of narratives, which may be altered but require an authorization. For the exotic to make up the “raw material” of the every-day and familiar, and to become a kind of experience, the “extraordinary” and “unusual” must be translated through the language of the “familiar” (Celestin 1996). The rules for translating the exotic must also define how the extraordinary becomes an essential criterion for constructing experience (Agamben 1993: 15).

Considering art’s role as a site that may “enhance or diminish” the “quality of the personal life” (Trilling 1980) is a useful point of entry for examining the values ascribed to creativity and experience as spaces that afford individuals with autonomy.

...Say, if you like, that art conducts to the individual certain of the more rarefied cultural energies, moves him in hitherto untaken directions, offers him such confirmation of the sense of individuality as may be found in social enclaves organized around aesthetic preferences. But this is not autonomy: the rule, the law, derives from others” (Trilling 1980: 64).

Trilling (1980) points out that the autonomous rules governing authenticity may be constrained due to the imposition of external values concerning what constitutes art. Therefore given the banality and commodification of the exotic or

extraordinary in everyday life how are the rules governing authentic experience derived through art? Also, in the case of exoticism, valorizing the *agents* of an artistic practice with the same degree of symbolic significance as the “aesthetic,” necessitates that both art and its creators must be reduced/organized to an essence. Given that in a commodified field, art operates in a “cyclical” fashion as both “universal” and through “exclusion and mastery” (Root 1998: 18) and given the ambiguous relations between art and aesthetics, does the assignment of symbolic/economic values to art alter the possibilities that art provides as a source of creative autonomy, hence authentic experience?

Although everyday life is replete with meaningful events, the production of experience as a “measurable” and “certain” category suggests that experience is also “displaced outside of the individual” and that its production involves the yielding of personal “authority.” Additionally, the relations between art and subjective experience are inconclusive. Neither do the arts carry “their end – or – their reality within themselves.” That is, subjective experience informs an artistic endeavor and an artistic endeavor informs subjective experience. However the effects of an artistic endeavor in social relations, and the symbolic/imaginative possibilities that art affords, can be illuminated by taking a glimpse at how art and subjectivity inform one another and lead to shifts in social values, personality or identity. Nonetheless, this depends on the forms of incorporation of otherness into a symbolic system either as a “new ingredient” or as an object of fascination through a play of imagery and stereotypes. In addition, rather than occurring as

a taken-for-granted category, as a dialectical process, the temporality of authenticity must be historically constituted and is reflected in the interactions between an experiencing self and his/her external world (Artaud 1958, Adorno 1973, Trilling 1980, Kristeva 1986, Agamben 1993).

Moreover, because social bodies derive their rules for action or (subversion) not only as autonomous agents, but also within “rhetorics of power,” the terms of encounter between a desiring subject and the exotic Other occur within a paradox. Authentic experience derives its meaning through individual actions, yet experience is also structured through varied forms of social and institutional practices that are produced outside of the individual. Therefore, the narratives that construct and enable an exotic encounter may not be autonomous, and individual motivations towards encountering the exotic need not be solely driven by a desire for gaining authentic experience.

Additionally, because aspects of subjectivity such as “instinctive reason,” the “docile body,” and the “unconscious” also play a significant part in the shaping of experience, the temporal relations through which authenticity and subjectivity are structured and through which a “self-affirming” (experiencing) subject emerges are indeterminate (Asad 1993). As Asad (1993) points out because the “negotiated reality” through which subjects act can be “more (or less)” than the “consciousness” of actors, and because an agent’s act is also “subsumed within the project of other actors,” thus no longer the “exclusive” property of the

“initiator” (15), individual choices need not translate into authorized action. And creativity need not occur within autonomous spaces but can also exist within spaces of constraint or limited choices of action.

This is not to imply that individuals are precluded from engaging in the imaginative pursuit of authentic experience. Instead, it is to point out that the context (or narratives) through which authentic experience is constituted need not be derived from self-authorized/autonomous spaces, or produce self-authorized autonomous actions, and to therefore question the *inherent* privilege of art and authentic experience as autonomous categories of individualized “self-making.” (Here it is important to note the significance of self-making in Western conceptions of art, creativity, and notions of the artist, and of art as a self-authorized practice). It is also essential to consider how the possibilities for subversion by subjects within the frame of exoticism are unlike the subversive possibility (i.e. translation), which enables the constitution of the exotic as a category of experience. In other words does the organizing of the exotic as a category of experience prevent other possibilities in the “quality” of personal experience from taking shape? That is, naming the exotic as a “certain” category limits other possibilities by creating a symbolic boundary, which must be differentiated in relation to other forms of symbolic meanings and therefore modifies experience (Douglas 1966).

The concept of personhood which serves as the basis for structuring authentic experience and a self-affirming subject relies upon several assumptions about self-making. Namely that (a) by *having, becoming or being* a “self,” a subject is inherently endowed with “free-will” and the “right” to autonomous action, and (b) that a subject engages a world that is filled with expansive possibilities in choices for action. However, this very Western conception of personhood and self-making which is a “humanist” ideal does not translate into a “historiographical option” (Asad 1993). And because self-affirming subjects must enact their identities socially, the contradictions in the availability of options for self-making, versus the ways that experiencing selves are enacted, inevitably become spaces of contested representations between and among group and individual identities.

Therefore, it is essential to distinguish between the “logical” “structures that afford individuals with the options for effective action” and the “consciousness of actors.” This is because the “systematic knowledge” that subjects rely upon in order to act autonomously is not subjectively derived. People’s capacity to act is determined not by their lack of or access to imaginative capacities, but rather by the “structuration of possibilities” that either enables or constrains their choices in action (Asad 1993: 15, 16).

That is, the ability of self-affirming subjects to engage in a series of actions that lead to the structuring of experience must be enabled by sustaining certain forms of “probable practices” which will result in “probable social and moral” outcomes.

Certain forms of the “structuration of possibilities” may also “oblige” individuals to act in specific ways and not others. The ensuing struggles that occur between and among groups or individuals within an unevenly structured social terrain, rather than being struggles over individual perceptions of reality, involve struggles over peoples’ ability to gain access to spaces that authorize actions. Moreover the ability of individuals to understand the constraints that they face due to the “structuration of possibilities” does not alter the terrain that they must continue to engage in (Asad 1987). This suggests that certain forms of narratives about Otherness will govern the rules through which exoticism will be enacted (or contested) and exclude other forms of narratives and practices.

An important aspect of the structure that sets a context for authorizing what constitutes difference and how individuals may act involves the ways that the interpretation of “selves” by a Western “self” and exotic Other have both come to rely upon the assumptions of modern self-making. That is, “self-consciousness” also implies “maintaining sameness through alterity” (Taussig 1993). Due to the symbolic significance of otherness, differentiating between “essence” and “appearance” then, also implies that “appearance is power.” As Michael Taussig suggests, this places alterity within a “hierarchical,” “interdependent and mutually exclusive” relationship. And in the “awakening” of “mythic pasts for modern projects” the self that is “inscribed in the alter is a self that needs to define itself against,”

... Other worlds now, mirror, interlock and rupture each other’s alterity to such a degree that all that is left is the excess, the self-consciousness as

to the need for an identity, sexual, racial, ethnic, national and the roller coasting violence and enjoyment of this state of affairs (Taussig 1993: 237).

In this “unsettling interpretation” of self-making which Taussig (1993) refers to as “mimetic excess,” where terror/fascination, fear/pleasure become entangled, and the symbolic codes that govern the rules through which the “original” is to be reproduced must be upheld with utmost rigor, “mimesis becomes an end in itself.” Rather than its symbolic capacity, the “magical power of the signifier to act as if it were indeed real” describes the ways that constructing Otherness as an identifiable category of experience can induce “manipulated but also manipulatable” forms of realities (Taussig 1993: 253). This emphasis on self-consciousness as an identifiable category of self-making, imposes a constraint on the imaginative possibilities that Otherness affords, as a context through which both an ironic-distance and spontaneity play a part of the self-making process.

However, the potentially transformative possibilities that lie in exoticism as a “mode of representation” and cultural critique rely on the practice of individual identities. Because the practice of exoticism demands a “subjective distantiating” in the form of a “break” or a “voyage out” from the familiar world of a desiring subject, followed by a return to the familiar, the “multi-vocality” between the desiring subject, a dominant center (as site of translation and authority) and the exotic Other, and the ongoing negotiations between them, constitute its limits and possibilities. The “public” character of exoticism may be rigidly defined and resist

alteration; individual practices and interpretations however, can pose a challenge to the commonly held views or practices towards Otherness by the dominant Center. Subsequently exoticism describes the ways that the Center maintains a hierarchy by rearranging, recombining or absorbing “identities and discourses in an ever expanding taxonomy,” and how a “negotiated reality” destabilizes the certainty of difference (or the familiar) without an attempt to reconcile either forms or practices (Celestin 1996: 222).

“Which idea of Africa?”

How can one be African? Is not ours.

- *Achille Mbembe*

The debates that emerged during the aftermath of Steven Spielberg’s film *Amistad* raise some important questions surrounding the ways that contemporary concerns over the representation of Africa are articulated. *Amistad* portrays a true story about the 1839 slave rebellion by Africans on board a Spanish ship en route to the Americas. In a *Newsweek* article (1997) Spielberg responds to the question why Black Americans were not given a “first chance” to direct the film, by arguing that the film represented American and not just African history. Nonetheless, Debbie Allen (a Black American choreographer) was appointed as the producer. Allen also saw to it that the “scenes with the Africans were restored when the movie was becoming too much about the white people who fought for their freedom in court,” and ensured that the “tribal dialects, and traditions were true to history.” The author of *Newsweek* commends Spielberg for allowing the Africans to speak “in their native tongues without substitutes”

(65). The film is about a “first encounter” and an African view of white society. A learning-kit about Amistad has also been incorporated into school curricula. In his defense of the film’s main plot, Spielberg states that men like Cinque (the main character who plays a West African slave revolt leader) “... are always greater than we are and they are in some ways perpetually unknowable.” In response to Spielberg’s justification for making the movie, an article entitled “Spielberg film warps history, deceives students,” by a *U.S.A. Today* critic asks, how it is that Spielberg and Allen can argue that in 1839, African culture was more advanced than American civilization, and by “what standards?” The critic comments further that “these pre-literate peoples depended on slavery even more than their European counterparts did, while commonly practicing gruesome genital mutilation of little girls,” and questions why classrooms should pursue an “in-depth” discussion of such cultural “advancements?” (Medved 1997:15A).

As Mbembe (1992) notes, Africa plays an “allegorical” role in Western discourses by operating as a kind of “mobile negativity” that allows definitions of what the West is or is not to rest on what is perceived to be Africa’s “power of Strangeness.” Mbembe critiques the “modality” through which Africa, a vast continent in all its linguistic and cultural diversity, has entered into the “field” of Western knowledge, by being reduced to the scale of a single country and in the form of a “pariah.” The above debate serves as an example of the multiple ways that definitions of Africa (or Africans) enter into popular discourses. These varied representations such as the noble savage, the barbaric or enigmatic, serve

specific ends, and as ideas have been based on different levels of perception and interpretations of Africa (Mudimbe 1988). Representations of Africa depicted either in terms of “abstract universalisms” or as “intimate particularisms,” as banal or exotic, constitute extremes, which “paralyze” and lack a historical specificity (Mamdani 1996: 10). Yet because the West also defines itself through a definition of “others,” “the latter must enter into the definition of the former (even though the former continually denies it)” (Mbembe 1992: 140). Thus the complexity and heterogeneity attributed to studies about the West are lacking in studies about Africa, which instead has become a “methodological dungeon” and an “epistemological closure” from which we *begin* to describe or argue about our interpretations or representations concerning Africa and Africans (Mudimbe 1992).

It is also likely that Africa may be an “accidental” recipient or destination of our knowledge productions, and that interrogating the “idea of Africa” might reveal the role that Africa serves, in the form of a “pretext” to the “text” (Mbembe 1992). For example in *Representations of African Music* the ethnomusicologist Kofi Agawu (2003), makes an important but ignored point about an issue that concerns the material and power disparities between individual music scholars in Africa and the United States, and their impact on the shaping of knowledge about African music. He describes the lack of access to archives (including musical recordings, or videographies), which are predominantly located in the “metropolis,” a “meager” government salary which oftentimes can barely

accommodate an African scholar's living expenses, let alone cover funds for airfare to participate in conferences, subscriptions to journals or membership in associations. These factors necessarily exclude African scholars from the debates and production of knowledge about African music. This "skewed" representation of knowledge production should raise significant ethical questions about the idea of an "Africanist scholarship" and illustrates how ideas about Africa enter a "global competition" of knowledge production either under categories such as, AIDS, famine and genocide, or as cultural and aesthetic resources. Here it is also noteworthy that Africa gains entry into the field of knowledge as a recipient rather than contributor, despite the kaleidoscopic play of imagery that it affords as both a resource and object of analysis.

Mudimbe (1988) suggests that given this "intellectual tragedy" it is essential to recognize the distinction between the transmission of history by way of everyday practices which are internalized as an identity or tradition, and the intellectual, institutional or "ethnophilosophical enterprises" (such as history or anthropology) which negate a living tradition by privileging "objectivist" discourses that rely on a Western epistemological order. He inquires further what this implies for African studies by emphasizing how the idea of Africa has become confused by "its history and levels of interpretation," and confusing due to "the levels of its perception." Most importantly Mudimbe (1988) points to a paradox; within Western "theatricals" and "fantasies" about Africa and Africans there also lies a "reality of Africa as a continent and its civilizations" (xv).

By highlighting the paradoxical condition of Africa's living tradition I ask how does life go on? In order to explore the persistence of a living tradition I have juxtaposed the "theatricals" and "fantasies" about Africa, which have taken on a life of their own by serving different Western practices and discourses, alongside the living tradition which informs, and is informed by, these practices. My analysis concerns the *making* of West African identities in various social contexts; it is not about West Africans per se. My interest in people's constructions of Africa will serve the purpose of investigating the significance and degrees to which individuals are embedded within their constructions; the "constructed" nature of their practices is assumed. Because of the attachment and significance that people give to their realities, power struggles and conflicts inevitably emerge in the articulation of meanings, defining of boundaries and shaping of individual experience or identities.

Ethnic dance, modern dance.

*We do modern dance.
Modern dance is the dance
Of today. Because we are people
Of today. And it is a pure traditional
Dance of our ancestors which we
Give another color. But it does not mean
that we forget our roots.*

- *Beatrice Kombe (choreographer).*

In a video, which highlights the choreographies of several contemporary West African dancers, Beatrice Kombe's commentary (2003) describes one of the

many ways that African dance is interpreted by various choreographers. Using different approaches choreographers attempt to explain ways of representing African dance as modern/traditional, or Africans themselves as modern/traditional people *who* dance.

The video also includes some collaborative works with French choreographers. With much ambiguity and at times in diametrically opposed ways, the question of what constitutes the modern/traditional traverses ideas of geographic space, a historical moment, the cultures of a people, their essence or natural predispositions. In their choreographies and discussions, some artists draw on a hybridity of styles (or people) and others on the traditional aspects of African dance and its people. In the defining of the boundaries of genres in the West, dance Journals, for example, categorize styles such as Ballet, Modern and Ethnic/Folkloric to imply that clear distinctions exist amongst the genres. Viewed in this light, dances can be either reflections of the cultural traditions from which they emerged, or constituted via “proofs, techniques and categories” that can be either static or changing (Kealiinohomoku 1983: 535).

Kealinohomoku (1983) raises some interesting questions that pertain to issues of choreography and the representations of the choreographies of “folk” dances. For example, how is it that “traditional peoples” are oriented towards ritual and collective decisions rather than staging choreographies, whilst “modern people” choreograph as individuals rather than sharing in collective rituals? Also if

dances and choreographies represent the works of individual artists while folk cultures yield “mass” or communal art forms, does this suggest that the works of folk artists are a spontaneous creation of a people as a whole, hence belonging to a community of artists? And does a community of artists imply that their creations are the aesthetic expression of a group rather than the collaboration of individual imaginations? Furthermore how are aesthetic systems derived cross-culturally and then practiced as the artistic creation of a group (537)?

Definitions of what constitute dance or not in popular narratives about “folk” arts tend to also be ambiguously framed in terms of how dance is collectively understood, and how the term dance is then applied to various performance contexts. Performances that derive their meanings from a wide array of cross-cultural practices are on the one hand given a universal meaning as resources for creativity; and aesthetics. Hence as art they are read as forms of spectacle and communication. On the other hand, there lacks an examination into the kinds of experiences that various forms of performance practices enable (Schechner 1985) and particularly how aesthetic systems govern symbolic meanings (Kealinohomoku 1983).

For example, in Hopi “rain dances,” the movements are “rigidly prescribed” and performers do not “lapse into an orgy” or “hurl themselves on the ground and roll in the mud after the rains begin.”

Hopis would be offended if you told them that they could not distinguish between the concrete and the symbolic. They are not children after all.

They certainly understand the natural causes. But does it make them primitive, by definition, if they ask their gods to help their crops grow by bringing rain? Don't farmers within the mainstream of America and Europe frequently pray to a Judeo-Christian God for the same thing? Are the Hopis more illogical than we are when they dance their prayers instead of attending religious services with responsive readings, and a variety of motor activities such as rising, sitting, folding hands and the like? (Kealinohomoku 1983: 539).

It is also noteworthy that "no living primitive group" is considered capable of interpreting European folkways in a manner similar to the popular narratives surrounding the folklores of primitive peoples that have been construed by Europeans (1983: 540). Given these inconsistencies, diverse forms of performance are collapsed under the rubric of dance, alongside distinctions like ethnic/folklore, modern, and ballet. It is unclear whether it is the "styles" in movement that set the standards of distinction or the cultures that brought about the "styles." Moreover if there are distinctions in different notions of dance, why are diverse forms of cross-cultural performance given representational meanings or mediation by referring to them *as* dance? This ambiguity in the representation of "folk" dance gives the folkloric and ethnic styles attributes that can be both dance-like and non-dance like. Yet in the West sport, for example, as a kind of performance, is "nonverbal," "kinesthetic," and "dramatic" but is neither dance nor theater (Schechner 1985). Why are "folk" and "tribal" performances given both dance and non-dance like qualities?

Some of the non-dance qualities of folk performances and their "origins" can be traced to categories like forms of play, magical and religious practices, natural, purposeful, communicative, social, and expressive, as well as having none of

these traits. Overall, the diverse or monolithic meanings that are attributed to African dance forms encompass similar characteristics such as rhythmic motion, shared, communal/functional acts, expressions of spirituality, sexuality, a lack of technique/presence of technique, codifications, disorganized/free form, which can either be abstracted to complement or diverge from the “modern.”

Other approaches by choreographers like Alphonse Tierou (2003), a dance historian from the Ivory Coast, describe African dance as being a “major component of African culture... to understand dance is to understand Africa in a profound way because Africans have been dancing for ages.” In his book *Doople, the eternal law of African dance* (1992), which is based on the Mask dance tradition of the Ivory Coast, Tierou incorporates African cosmology with dance techniques that involve “precise rules and codified movements.” He points out that traditional African dance is “the result of centuries of perfecting and cannot be understood or danced without training.” Tierou makes distinctions between Western style theatrical dance versus traditional African dance, which involves initiation and training. African culture, he argues, “exists, it lives. But it is impossible to graft arbitrarily onto it a conception of art which does not conform to its own values ... African dance is the repetition of gesture learned according to tradition” (17).

Yacouba Konate (2003), a dance critic, notes that traditional African dances “interpenetrate” and that Africa has been “hybridized by the dances of the African

diasporas,” such as Black American music as well as Rhythm and Blues, pop music and Afro-Cuban/Brazilian styles. “All these dances and rhythms were re-appropriated by the new African generation” as a result of colonization. Like the artistic director Germaine Acogny, Konate agrees that traditional dances became devalued with modernization and urban culture, and that young people now have to relearn traditional styles. Acogny (2003) also suggests that “all traditional dance needs a new spirit of the nowadays ... this is the connection with Europe, with America, with modernism.”

The documentary explores questions of relying on Africa as a category for defining dances from the continent, which is questioned by some choreographers. Beatrice Kombe (2003) points out that:

In Africa there are about 50 countries, and every country has more than 2000 – 3000 dances. That means when you are from the Ivory Coast there are dances of the Ivory Coast. When you are from Congo there are dances of Congo. But a single African dance does not exist.

Sidiki Outtara (2003) describes the dance of Ivory Coast as being derived from a country that houses about sixty languages and ethnicities with four “large groups.”

Every ethnicity has about ten dances, so it is impossible to say that there is a single dance appropriate to the Ivory Coast apart from the street dances of the young. You can say that these dances are dances of the Ivory Coast because these are created by the young ones and everybody dances them.

Some French choreographers who collaborated with West Africans and staged various performances described the differences between Western and African performances mainly in terms of emotional and natural differences.

We Westerners don't have enough expressive emotional means ... even for the dancers it is very difficult ... while in Africa there is an enormous palette for expression, the palette of gestures, the palette of songs, a palette of dances to express sorrow. Our incapacity to express our emotions with gestures ... Africans do not possess it ... they are really free and expressive in their movement in their release of the emotions and that is very important, (Mathilde Monnier 2003).

... For me I think the most important thing has to do with people in Africa. A certain kind of innocence that they have, innocent but not naïve ... intelligent naturally, cleverness, enormous sense of humor, enormous sense for rhythm, percussion is a base for them, it's a rhythm of life. How they move that is amazing ... they can bring us such a precision of the rhythm... movement in the traditional dance, (Suzanne Link 2003).

The likelihood that, “ ... there is no reason to assume any primacy for the individual's attitude to his own bodily and emotional experience any more than for his cultural and social experience” should provide a “clue” to the uneven ways that different aspects of bodily practices are given a significance cross-culturally (Douglas 1966: 121). This perspective is insightful for explaining how translations of African dance by emphasizing certain bodily, emotional or cultural features and not others, is made to correspond with local and global narratives surrounding exoticism, as well as the ways that African dance is contrasted with modern dance. Yet, like the objectivist discourses surrounding the “confusing” and “confused” representations of the “idea of Africa,” the representation and practice of African dance have been informed via narratives of travel and movement as well as a living tradition. The above discussion presents some of the challenges that unraveling the living tradition from objectivist discourses

poses. These assorted perspectives on the meanings and ways of presenting a genre will serve as a context for describing the dynamic ways that African dance has developed both on the continent and abroad. Additionally, the ways that a particular version of traditional dance has flourished outside of Africa and its influence on local cultural production are of particular interest to my project.

By examining different theoretical approaches to the ideas of exoticism and authenticity, this section has highlighted the complex ways that African dance performances contextualize cultural production and identity formation. The rubric of a “complex space” and “heterogeneous time” challenges the assumptions behind aesthetics and subjectivity and how they have been merged to fashion new forms of social experience. Within the imagining of Africa by way of global or cosmopolitan notions of a “flexible” subjectivity, there also lies the representation of identities as fixed and bounded. Given the centrality of identity to modernist self-making, it is essential to re-examine the narratives that constitute ethnic signifiers, and their appropriation in ways that both promote and constrain aesthetic and subjective transgression. Furthermore, how do individuals negotiate narratives that have been constructed within “temporalities of power” and through which the “structuration of possibilities” both facilitates and hinders the quest for authenticity? How does the quest for authenticity coexist within a commodified field where the shaping of experience requires individual autonomy, but where individuals must also respond to externally informed narratives, which dictate that the exotic is vital to the fulfillment of desire?

CHAPTER 4

Magical moments

This chapter provides an overview of the phenomenological aspects of African dance performances as a practice containing both culturally informed and experiential qualities involving shifts in awareness (or altered states), and which constitutes the self-making process and authentic experience. Although a performance is comprised of diverse experiential moments that are transient, authentic experience as a *particular* kind of state is described by performance participants as pleasurable, desirable, or symbolically meaningful. The views that I provide of African dance performances are based primarily on my own experiences, although some of my interpretation is derived from the views given by other participants. My interpretation of performances are therefore partial due to the complex nature of trying to convey phenomenological understandings – one’s own and that of others.

Authentic experience as an aspired state has been informed by the “idea of Africa,” and is gained by employing practical methods, such as embodying a performance/social identity and an “aesthetic sensibility” (Chernoff 1979). A performance identity refers to the various roles or subject positions that individuals embody, such as being or becoming a dancer, drummer, or instructor, and involves developing bodily or musical practices and techniques that are unique to the “performance of Africa.” Individuals can also use performance spaces to affirm or reclaim their ethnic, racial, gender or sexual identities.

African dance serves as an arena for enacting the self-making process, through a play with different subject positions. As an essential ingredient for gaining an experience through “self constructed authentic means” (Hillman 2001), West African dance and musical styles, are symbolically associated with authentic/rooted cultures or “indigenous identities,” which serve as a signifying practice (Hall 1997) and source of an “aesthetic sensibility.” Moreover authentic experience is derived by engaging in a specific practice or by associating experience with prescribed actions. Through self-reflexivity reconstituted selves or positive experiences gained by authentic means are also contrasted with the familiar world. This process of self-making will highlight the relations between aesthetics and personhood in American life.

Africa as a conceptual category or a “sign” (Mbembe 2003) stands for a people, sensibility and geographic location and has been translated into a resource for experience by way of exoticism. As a representational strategy exoticism derives its meaning in relation to other forms of representation rather than occurring as a static category. This implies that within a dialogical field the “idea of Africa” serves as a “floating signifier” which can be creatively re-appropriated, to redefine an endless array of “selves.” Difference is vital to this process because in order for new “selves” to be reconstituted, individuals must first construct rules and symbolically produce or organize meanings that dictate how difference mediates subjectivity.

West African performers may not directly associate their experience of performances with authenticity, because as choreographers of experience, they participate in performances for financial/professional reasons. Nonetheless most are aware that dance and drum students participate in performances in order to have an experience, and as one dance teacher notes, the goal of West African teachers is to “make everybody happy.” However, rather than being the authors of exoticism, their participation in various discourses concerning cultural authenticity occurs within a prefigured “aesthetics of exoticism.” They also gain new insights and shifts in awareness by engaging in the performance process as this entails re-thinking Africa in a new social context. While performances serve as an arena for self-making which involves a play with subject positions, the new meanings that are ascribed to reconstituted “selves” depend not so much on essentialized notions of difference, as on the shifting relations between reconstituted selves and difference. Here the absence of Africa as a sign can also serve as a signifying practice by indicating a shift or a contrast in the rules between what one would expect to find and the new forms of representation that are being made.

This manipulation of a shared “conceptual map” or system of identification (Hall 1997) vis-à-vis difference by performance participants, serves as the basis for contesting or making claims to authenticity. The claiming of a performance identity can also be informed by way of sexual, gender, cultural or racial

identities. This implies that there is always a subject position, which serves as a coherent platform and basis for constructing other forms of identification, and which can also limit individuals from action, because subjects are located within a dialogical field. This process of self-making constrains some individuals while enabling others because individuals must define their relation to others at an intersection where competing claims to authenticity are being made.

A performance context provides the means for individuals to autonomously identify or distance themselves “with and from play and reality” (Koepping 1997:20). However, because the idea of individual autonomy and its virtues as put forth by modernist conceptions of the self and its ability to “*thrive*” due to its capacity for ongoing “unmaking and remaking” is a problematic notion, it would be more useful to consider autonomy as an aspect rather than the sole constituent of subjectivity (Scott 1999). This suggests that performances convey “societal patterns” (Racy 2003), and shows the ways that limitations are posed to self-processes as they are informed through the interplay between imagined and real worlds.

The performances that I examine are not staged performances, and take place in a dance studio setting. The unique quality of experience that African dance affords has been attributed to a kind of “esthetic sensibility” (Chernoff 1979) that fosters improvisation and spontaneity. The imaginative context of exoticism serves as a “mask” for individuals to explore marginal forms of experience that

do not conform to mainstream values surrounding aesthetics or subjectivity. Nonetheless, because of the eclectic composition of participants in terms of personal, racial, cultural, or class backgrounds, and because imagined worlds are culturally conceived, the group dynamics of performances can become tense. Differing views and desires inevitably emerge in the construction of narratives concerning how aesthetics and identity shape personal experience. Because performances require that a “certain definite threshold is crossed, in order to achieve an efficacy,” the inability of performance participants to achieve that state results in the “failure” of a performance (Schechner 1985:10). In such instances the inability to attain experiential shifts, which is also expressed within the performance context, adds to the destabilizing of authentic experience. Highlighting the experiential possibilities that African dance performances afford will serve as a context for examining the narratives that inform modernist self-making and aesthetics.

The West African dances that have become popularized in New York dance studios, are based on eclectic rhythmic styles and choreographies by National West African Ballet companies such as *Sabar* (from Senegal), *Lamba*, *Kuku*, and *Manjani* (based on Mande styles) and include different forms of street dance. Some of the dances may also be associated with ritual dances such as healing or rites of passage, although these dance forms have also been integrated into the choreographies of National Ballet’s as a dramatization of village ritual. The instructors of dance performances in the downtown studio are primarily men with

a few female West African instructors. The dance participants who are mostly female vary in age and include, college students, artists and professionals. In addition to Caribbean, white and black American participants some come from different parts of Africa, Europe, South America, India, the Middle East and Japan. While some of the dance participants may be recent or irregular members, others have been taking part in dance performances for several years.

Around 6p.m on a given weekday evening the downtown dance center bustles with energy as people crowd around the first floor waiting for the elevator to arrive. Several, having made their way from work or home on one of New York's many overcrowded rush hour subways or streets, wait outside the building for the buzzer, or someone from inside to let them in. A West African street vendor around the corner packs his belongings after a long day's work of selling incense, oils, soaps and creams. Sometimes he may light up a bunch of incense sticks, pull out a prayer rug from under his table, lay it out on the pavement and pray, unaffected by the chaotic movement of people who get a waft of the smell from the incense as they rush past him.

Inside the studio building while waiting for the elevator, people are more relaxed and exchange quick glances, some looking away nervously, but others responding with smiles, and nods, or engaging in conversations. The majority are female dancers from diverse age groups, and cultural and racial backgrounds. The musicians are mostly men (although there are some females

who are drummers, and some men who dance). Saturday mornings are oftentimes reserved for children's dance classes. As people start to accumulate, the elevator (which is rather old) slowly makes its way to the first floor, while groups of those who work on the different floors of the building exit. The waiting crowd then crams into the empty elevator until it is full to capacity. As the doors shut, all eyes are fixed on the door, or the numbered buttons, which light up on each floor. Very slowly the elevator creeps its way up to the seventh floor.

Prior to being remodeled to house one large and two medium-sized dance rooms (re-built by the owner), the building used to be an old printing factory. On a wall inside the dance studio there is a proudly displayed collection of photographs by the studio owner, which illustrates the building's history. The partially exposed high ceilings and old-fashioned elevator with caged doors that is occasionally operated by a conductor are also reminders of the building's past. Having taught African dance at various New York studios, Maurice "a poor farm boy" from the West Indies became a New York City entrepreneur and decided to build his own dance studio. Presently out of forty instructors, around fifteen teach West African dance or drumming.

On a wall inside the dance studio is a quote by Maurice, "you don't have to be born in France to dance ballet, and you don't have to be born in Africa to dance African dance." There are also numerous write-ups celebrating the dance center as one of the "best ethnic dance schools in New York" by popular magazines like

Elle and *Mademoiselle*, and local newspapers like the *The Village Voice*, *The New York Times* and *The New York Post*. Growing up in a rural town in Martinique and moving later on to the city life of Fort-de-France, Maurice has had a variety of international experiences, which include Paris, New York, Senegal and Guinea. In addition to his cosmopolitan experience, Maurice notes that his vision to build an African dance school in New York comes from being influenced by figures like Malcolm X, Bob Marley, Aimee Cesaire and the Black is beautiful movement. His personal mentors include Aimee Cesaire, Arthur Mitchell and Geoffrey Holder (two Black American choreographers), and South African singer Mariam Makeba.

Once on the seventh floor, the doors open and as some people rush in to sign up for classes and head straight to the changing rooms, others with more time to spare exchange salutations with familiar faces who are waiting around the lobby. There is sense of urgency in the air as people anticipate entering the dance studio, eager to rid themselves of their mundane day-to-day affairs and be swept away by rhythm and motion. The mood resembles that of a woman *Zar* participant (a therapeutic dance performance, which usually takes place throughout the Middle East and East Africa), who rushes to a gathering, pays a fee to be “incensed” and asks the drummers for the occasion, “hurry up and play my beat” so she may appease her patron spirit and proceed with her daily affairs (Eisler 1985).

Behind the counter the staff are no longer relaxed and chatty, as they had been in the early hours of the afternoon when the studio was empty and quiet. Instead, they have strained looks on their faces as they try to calmly keep up with the long cue of dancers waiting to sign up, or pay for their classes. Those who have already completed taking a class also wait in line to buy bottled water to quench their thirst after spending a long sweaty hour and a half on the dance floor with other tired and sweaty bodies. The changing rooms and hallways are littered with clothes, as people get dressed into their dance attire, while others who have completed taking a class change back into their street wear. Some engage in conversations, the latest gossip, or exchange a few laughs while others quietly get changed, gather their belongings and proceed to their classes without even looking up. Most of the African dancers wear tights, a tank or loose fitting top, and wrap a *lappa* (a sarong made of batik) around their waist, or African style Boubou's. Others dress in various styles of dance outfits, but overall, a sexualized femininity is accentuated, by adorning bodies in ways that are either discreet or more forward. Once the dancers enter the studio as they continue to interact or wait around, a teacher arrives to start the class with some background music, stretches and warm-ups. Sometimes a dancer who attends regularly gives the warm-up instructions and others follow along. Implicitly these moments become opportunities for a display of skill and for "sizing up" others.

Some dancers slowly gather their energies to engage the various mechanical movements, which regulars may know by heart and unabashedly display, while

others practice in a more reserved manner. In the meantime, latecomers gradually filter in and fill empty spots on the dance floor, adjusting themselves to a new surrounding and other bodies. As the warm-ups take place, a group of musicians exit the elevator with their drums, exchanging handshakes, greetings or conversations with each other or with people in the waiting area. Some watch the dancers through a wall-to-wall window while seated on bleachers in the viewing area. Drummers (who are mostly male) are also eclectic in their clothing and appearance, accenting ultra-urban styles with African fabric, amulets, or silver bracelets and replicas of the Koran on their rings or around their necks. Some dress in leather pants or army fatigues and have their hairstyle in dreadlocks.

Authenticity as an affect that has been inspired by exoticism is signified within performances in various ways and plays a vital role to self-making. In addition to the clothing and accessories that evoke an African style which can be fused with the “modern” as stated earlier, musical instruments, dance movements and styles are also associated with various regions in West Africa and represent “timelessness,” or rites such as celebration, birth, masculinity, or femininity. These authentic styles are in turn interspersed with African “street” style dances or rhythms. In some classes an instructor might start a class with songs or by stating the names, places, and meanings of dances. In classes that students attend regularly most may already know the names of dance styles, their various ethnic associations, and even the signals that mark a transition from one style to

another. As the embodiment of an authentic African or Griot tradition, the identities of West African performers are also valorized. Dance instructors or musicians may evoke Africa within performances through spontaneous singing or dancing and those who are familiar with a song or dance might join in. However, instructors and a drum ensemble may not always be comprised of individuals who come from the same region or country. Nonetheless these moments within performances aid the cultivation of experience.

Even in their absence the broader performance community reproduces the authenticity of West African performers. For example a student who studied with a Senegalese instructor and who now teaches African dance begins a class by “giving thanks for the trees that became our instruments...for the animals that gave its life...and for our traditional teachers.” In order to give meaning to the dances and rhythms the instructor describes the background of dance styles and encourages students to “listen to and play with ...to hear the real thing.” “I offer to help them (students) get in touch with our teacher if they want to become a student of the music. I also urge them to come see “the real thing” at one of our weekly dance classes where Africans lead the drumming and teach the dance”¹.

Other examples that help to show the ways distinctions are made between “the real thing” and the copy include, the ways that dance participants might evaluate the affect of a drum ensemble of West Africans in contrast to an all white ensemble who may perform with their teacher on some occasions. A white

¹ [Http://www.drums.org/djembefaq/m5.htm](http://www.drums.org/djembefaq/m5.htm)

female African dancer's style would not be considered the "real thing" in relation to Black dancers, who in turn would valorize a West African female dancer. The gender dynamics between a female West African dance teacher and female students differs from the dynamics and erotic appeal of male West African instructors. Dancers may try to imitate an idealized African style based on demonstrating gestures or techniques, while others emphasize their individualized expressions. Even in New York, dance troupes that are coordinated by West Africans are often racially homogeneous. Recently a flyer that was posted for an audition at the downtown studio required dancers to be "at least fifty percent African," and "African Americans need not apply."

West Africans also evaluate non-West Africans based on their interpretations of authenticity. Assan for example considers Maurice's style to be inauthentic and "not African." On the other hand, some West African performers who construct themselves through ultra-urban identities consider African dance to be a form of Black dance. A young Senegalese hip-hop teacher claims Senegal as the source of rap music. Souleymane migrated to New York in his teens, and like most young Africans he is drawn to urban culture and considers rap a Griot tradition. Although he is proficient in *Sabar* dance, he taught hip-hop classes at the downtown dance center for several years and was a drummer for *Sabar* instructors. He relocated to another state and no longer teaches downtown. According to a Senegalese rap group, in Senegal *Tasso* is thought to be "an offshoot of griot music... it's been around since before slavery traveled to

America ... rappers of today are modern griots.²” The lead drummer of a Griot drum ensemble from Senegal, who gave their group an ancestral name notes, “every generation must bring something new into the community.” Although these interpretations portray how a play with signs and symbols inspired by the “idea of Africa” informs African dance as a genre that is both fixed and fluid, they all rely on various forms of signifying practices that derive their meanings through authentic or rooted cultures as their source.

The choreography of dance styles, also evaluated in terms of authenticity, represents bodily gestures like a bent knee gait or pelvic thrust as forms of African style. Nonetheless dances like *Sabar* usually require an erect posture and contain movements like spins and turns that could easily be incorporated into “modern” styles. The style of some instructors who incorporate African based movements into their choreography may be critiqued for being “too modern.” Some West African performers who have experience in other dance styles omit them in their choreography. Sisse a *Sabar* teacher notes,

I went to a dance school ... and I learned ballet, jazz, modern, African – that’s the national conservatory of Senegal. When I came here, I stopped doing those things, because I was busy teaching African dance but I was a very good performer in modern dance and afro-jazz.

These forms of signifying practices, which constitute the self-making process and choreography of experience, make up the genre and aspects of dance performances through enabling/disabling, or empowering/disempowering

² <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/3622406.stm>

mechanisms. As an aspect of the creative process, in some instances where the capacity for empowerment or ability to attain authentic experience are limited, individuals may experience the disabling or disempowering effects of self-making in the form of a “symbolic violence,” or as a painful awareness.

A performance moment

A performance generally begins with some basic movements directed by a dance instructor who leads the class and students try to follow along. During a dance session once a choreography begins, drummers enter the dance floor to set up their instruments and seating arrangements. Gradually more intricate steps are added depending on the ability of dancers to keep up with the changes in movement. If movements become too difficult for the majority of dancers to follow, the instructor alters them to suit the proficiency of dance members. There may also be instances where an instructor will execute a movement and decide to change it altogether. Because most of the popular instructors have taught dance extensively they are able to determine the proficiency of dancers after watching them execute a few movements, and can tailor a class to suit the level of performance participants. This is important since the goal of teachers is to help dancers to gradually develop a momentum. In a class that is attended by dancers on an ongoing basis, some movements can be challenging and difficult for beginners to follow.

Generally the beginning stages of learning choreography are times when movements are revised or additions made without the accompaniment of music. The instructor performs a movement repetitively and dancers follow along. The pacing of movements during this phase can be abrupt or discontinuous; however, most regular performers are aware that eventually a momentum will start to develop. The anticipation of the dancers becomes gradually more heightened and there is very little conversation or exchange between dancers as there was during the warm-up session. Everyone's attention focuses on the movement and rhythm, which are verbalized either by counting or in the form of sounds. After going over several movements without music, the drumming begins and the choreography is repeated to the accompaniment of live music. The dances are choreographed and structured with a degree of emphasis on style and form, but spontaneous expressivity is accentuated.

Rather than having several pauses in between movements, as in most modern dance classes, with live music there is an ongoing repetition of movements, and minimal verbal exchanges between teacher and performers. Because most classes are mixed in level, the proficiency of dancers can range from very advanced to basic. Some performers have been attending the same classes on a weekly basis for several years. At a certain point during the class, musicians and dancers take a pause, and then the dancers, forming rows of two or three, repeat the movements given by the instructor as they move in a progression across the floor towards the drum ensemble who are seated facing them.

Generally performers select their partners and dance together in rows, or a teacher selects dancers by placing the more advanced dancers at the beginning of a row so that they can lead the rest of the class. At this point bodies are fluid, some sweating profusely, as the movements can at times be highly rigorous and aerobic. As the room heats up, everyone's attention becomes more focused due to the structural demands of the performance, such as attentiveness to proper timing, or aligning with partners on the same row.

Due to the body heat that is generated in the room the mirrors become foggy, and the ceiling fans blowing above make the air in the room feel damp and seem misty. Although dancing barefoot and feeling the support of the floors beneath is helpful, until the hardening of soft soles, the dancers must endure quite painful blisters. Dancing towards the drum ensemble can feel overwhelming due to the force of live drumming, which for a novice adds to the tension of performances. But there are also moments when drummers and dancers (or partners) make a connection, and the rhythm becomes soothing or eases feelings of tension. Without following the prescribed codes, however, a dancer or drummer cannot take part in the movement or follow the rhythms. While learning these initial stages, which is an ongoing part of the dance experience, embarrassing moments are likely, as there are numerous occasions when a rhythm or movement is difficult to follow.

One's attention can stray or become unfocused leading, to poor coordination and a lack of uniformity with dance partners or drummers. Others may respond to this effect with ridicule or support. And for the individual concerned, an avid desire to "go after the movement," as a teacher used to say, being "thick skinned," or simply forgetting, eventually becomes the antidote. Imitating others who move in ways that are appealing oftentimes leads towards absorbing the movement into one's very own. The intent of teachers is also vital in this process, since they control and are responsible for transmitting a movement as well as gathering people's energies. Like a conduit, their ability to transport each individual on a collective journey culminating in moments of ecstasy is magical, and makes the experience, which in "ordinary" time lasts for a breath, feel like an eternity.

Watching the ease with which skilled dancers move in and out of different rhythmic patterns, their emphasis on self expression, rather than being fixated on the technique (as in the case of beginners), gives the impression that they are simply taking a stroll down a lane without paying much attention to which foot to pick up or which arm to rest. For a beginner, due to the difficulty of trying to follow rhythms and movement simultaneously, dancing in a disharmonious state is a common sight. Dancers are diverse ages and body types, and size is not a precondition for being able to connect with movement. Drummers, teachers and dancers also span generations, some in their fifties, sixties or even older. Although the moments of challenge in learning can be endless, the thrill and

sense of accomplishment that comes when a movement “makes itself known” -- that is becomes familiar enough that one can slip into it or allow it to linger on the periphery -- gives one hope of eventually being able to display the ease and grace of the skilled.

The moments of challenge in attempts to connect with rhythm and movement can be stressful however, due to psycho-physiological changes, such as the self-consciousness that arises in the process. Breathing literally feels as though it has come to a stop, the sense of fluidity in the body starts to contract, and instead a feeling of anxiety emerges, making the body feel rather awkward and damp, as though it is shifting gears. One’s sense of time and space starts to alter and an ambivalent emotional feeling emerges, making the dance seem like a wrestle. Despite the emphasis on the pleasurable aspects of dance performances, certain movements during a dance can feel awkward or physically uncomfortable. The acoustics of rhythms can be too high or unpleasing to the senses. Some classes that have a large drum ensemble or attract a multitude of dancers can induce trance-like sensations, or a heightened sensitivity due to the emphasis on the drums, which can become overbearing or distract dancers from focusing on movement. Individuals may also experience moments of alienation during a performance depending on their state of mind, or interaction with other dancers or drummers.

The entry point or whereabouts of a rhythm is rather subtle and for a beginner takes what feels like an excruciating amount of focus and concentration to follow through, at times leading to mental exhaustion. But gradually one discovers that focus and attention need to be guided to spaces that loosely approximate (or perhaps align) bodily and mental capacities, which are aided by memory, or by recalling sensations, and through repetition. Eventually this kind of attention requires less mental exertion, and the development of other physical and psychosocial sensibilities enable one to slip in and out of an experience. It then feels as though one is “being forced into wakefulness” against one’s will; a sense of expansion descends, like being “filled with another sense of space” (Webster 2002: 200).

The connection between rhythmic motion and the exhilarating feeling of expansion and temporary sense of elation can be contagious, and extends out towards other dancers and drummers as well as being felt by onlookers who, having been transformed, take part through claps and cheers or dancing. A theater director from Eastern Europe who watched a performance for the first time observed that he was so “opened up” and captivated just from watching, that he was overcome by a spontaneous urge to shake hands with a stranger who was standing beside him. He likened the emotional state to “duende,” a psychosocial experience evoked through Flamenco performances. This contagious effect of a performance on spectators is common in settings like live

concerts where there are moments when spectators are “opened up” and stand spontaneously to move or dance without inhibition.

Watching drummers generate a feeling of being enlivened by the flow of the rhythm, and the dancers’ ability to connect with and express movement is also hypnotic. The visual effect of watching a synchronized row upon row of dancers moving down the line in a harmonious flow is like the waves of the ocean. Even drummers can become captivated and spontaneously jump up from playing their drums to dance a few steps, or throw down their sticks, dance, and then resume their playing. However, these experiential moments by players are interspersed in various moments of a performance and must be developed while focusing on the process of interweaving various rhythmic patterns and harmonizing rhythms between drummers and dancers. The various phases of a performance, such as moments when dancers are not facing drummers but simply rehearsing movements, give drummers ample time to improvise and “tighten” their musicality without focusing too much on coordinating with the dance movement.

Ultimately, dancers must be able to work through the constraints of technique and form to explore their own expressivity. Although movement and the body have become privileged as sites in anthropological studies of dance (Reed 1998) the phenomenon of psycho-social transformation practices like yoga (which incorporates movement and stillness), spoken words, or visual imagery can also induce “altered-states,” although with different degrees and types of emotional

manifestation. The following description by a White female drummer provides a glimpse of some of the processes involved in transformation that are not restricted specifically to movement,

“ ... sometimes ... and it’s not all the time because the drums are fickle and the rhythm spirit does not come out to play ... but often enough we have strong drummers and dancers and BANG it explodes! We lift off and it’s tight and so good that the drummers break out into their beautiful smiles and it feels like we are working as a team on an old schooner. Each one doing their job, making expert adjustments to get it just right and then we catch the wind, it fills the sails and we fly over the water. Sometimes it’s like the drums literally play themselves. You have to be really strong to keep it tight and hold it. You become a conduit for the magic. It’s a high.”

The visual stimulus of eroticized bodies expressed as movement can serve as a catalyst in heightening experiential shifts. The ecstatic nature of the erotic and its suggestive qualities contain an allegorical dimension (Dunham 1969, Racy 2003). In *Island Possessed*, Katherine Dunham (1969) describes both the highly erotic “uninterrupted,” “pelvis-grinding” dances of carnival, as well as the “undulating” ecstatic Vodoun dances in Haiti, as forms of “collective,” “concerted,” and “uninterrupted” movements aided by “drums” and “sounds” to generate body heat. Although these “mass dances” are “sexual in the highest degree,” or are aimed at an object of desire, the intention of close physical contact between partners need not be taken as a direct advance but rather an “oblique,” or a metaphorical gesture. And dancers being “too far gone” in a state of “sexual ecstasy” are unaware of the “sex or age of a partner “(222).

As a social process and aesthetic practice, the moments of experiential alterations within performances, rather than suggesting a linear or hierarchical progression, encompass complex and “multidimensional” fields. Thus performances contain various “sub-categories” and “expressive spheres” that weave broader societal “patterns and worldviews” (Racy 2003:11). As a unique form of “aesthetic sensibility,” the flexibility or improvisatory character and group dynamics that West African performances afford both contain experiential possibilities, and reflect the broader “societal patterns” of expressivity, due to the re-contextualized nature of the performance practice. African dance as a performance is also structured differently from staged performances, and from the social West African social gatherings in which dancing takes place.

Unlike traditional performances that occur within social gatherings, New York style African dance is structured through the dance studio and shares in similar rules of other dance practices. The setting is more a learning environment, with a teacher who gives instructions and students who follow, although there may also be improvised moments. In contrast, a gathering of West Africans might be taking part in a performance to accompany a celebratory occasion, in which case people are dressed formally and there is food, drinks and conversation with a mixed population including men, women and children along with the dancing. In such settings people are also not paying in order to have an experience but are instead sharing in a familiar social practice. Similarly, at a neighborhood street

dance in West Africa the atmosphere would be casual, unlike the dances that take place in a New York dance studio.

The time of day for public performances would also be varied and not confined to the strict regiment of studio dances. This process of constituting a genre within a social, physical and temporal space, along with the emotional sensations and effects that performances elicit, serves as a way of examining the social and expressive dynamics of performances “in context and as context” (Racy 2003). In his description of *Tarab* as an expression of musical and emotional transformation in the Arab world, Jihad Racy (2003) suggests that the ability to undergo altered states in musical performances depends on what a performance genre allows. By considering “cultural expression” as a “distinct aesthetic system,” and music as an “autonomous expressive domain” he compares *Tarab* music as a unique emotional experience with music’s inherent ecstatic qualities. By traversing a cultural – aesthetic system Racy (2003) suggests that a “musical idiom” must be flexible enough to follow various “implicit” and “explicit” rules. This includes factors like: cultural, physical, emotional, musical and individual talent, and artistry which can be used to partially explain the “organic process through which ecstatic sensations are musically conceived, codified and transmitted.” He suggests that these factors can be applied to various other performance genres (221).

Racy (2003) notes, however, that the “modality” through which transitional or altered states are created is unpredictable, and can occur independent of various “conventional inducers.” Moreover, depending on the context, a performance environment may or may not be conducive to promoting experiential shifts. Explanatory devices that purport to explain how ecstatic states are fashioned within performance contexts by relying on such categories as “the mental and the physical, the emotional and the aesthetic,” are themselves “elusive” (200).

Some relevant points in terms of the aesthetic, emotional, physical and psychological factors in *Tarab* (Racy 2003) that are related to West African performance and which become conducive to fostering transitional experiential states include both the psychosocial and musical context of performances. As a ritual process, the efficacy of performances or cathartic effects may be caused by factors such as the physical containment or proximity of performers, and the collective “aesthetic experience” that a performance space allows through shifts in sense of time. Nonetheless the binding together of groups in an “experiential moment,” as in the notion of “*communitas*” (Turner 1986, 1982) whereby liminal experiential states are gained in the “spirit of a community,” is “impossible” to attain within performances due to conflicting representations, competing discourses and multiple meanings that constitutes a performance moment. Instead, a “*communitas*” conveys an aspired or desirable state that performance members might pursue, “as far as the exigencies of life permit” (Eade and Sallnow 1991: 15).

As an aesthetic sensibility or mental stimulus, the imagined ideas of exoticism can aid in the shifting of attention away from ordinary time. In addition, the ability to viscerally “feel” the music through a “creative” rather than passive hearing, and the kinesthetic effect of being in a state of “flow” which is achieved through repetitive rhythmic motion (Csikszentmihalyi 1991, Dunham 1969) and active participation, are other added factors leading to changes in awareness. Unlike the notion of an “altered state,” however, which emphasizes a state of inwardness -- a psychological or behavioral condition -- a more holistic approach would include the “sensory” and “aesthetic” dimensions that influence shifts in awareness within a performance setting (Racy 2003).

Other factors that influence the experience of performances include amplification of sound, visual stimuli, and changes in physiology such as shifts in breathing, physical over exertion, heat and “stiffness,” leading to a decrease in oxygen supply to the brain (which can induce trance-like states). In addition the overall ambiance of a performance in terms of a “heightened expectation,” overcrowding, or “theatricality,” a “permissive atmosphere” and the “presence of strong models” also aid in promoting experiential shifts. Experienced musicians or the leaders of performances may also be able to detect these emotional shifts in individuals and aid in heightening the ecstatic process (Crapanzano 1973).

Moreover, as Racy notes, altered states, such as the one's described in the works of Gilbert Rouget (1985), which examines the relation between music and "possession," tend to emphasize the nature of "trance-like" conditions or loss of consciousness rather than transient "ecstatic" states or sensations that are "remembered" or "cherished," and where subjects are aware of the stimuli which caused their ecstasy. Depending on the context of performances, altered states can vary in their degree and intensity by containing both mild and heightened states of awareness and individuals can respond to these states in specific ways. Overall, the causes of trance-like states have been associated with the notion of over-stimulation or a "sensory overload" whereas ecstatic states are thought to be a byproduct of under stimulation or a "sensory deprivation" (Tart 1969). Focusing on behavioral factors, physical environment, social structure or stimulus and response to describe altered-states, however, tends to become mechanical and minimizes other processes such as the multi-temporal and dynamic nature of the performance context.

As Racy notes, some behavioral factors like a preoccupation or absorption with "internal sensations or mental processes," aided by external "over" or "under" stimulation (Ludwig 1969, Deikman 1969, Csikszentmihalyi 1991), can generate effects such as contemplation, or excitation. These sensations when coupled with movement and the magical or transformative qualities of sound and music as forms of stimulus (Tame 1984), do aid shifts in awareness. The shift in perception of time that occurs due to the contained nature of performances within

a physical space can also heighten mental and creative capabilities by leading to sensations such as “time splitting from time,” “losing oneself” or being “engulfed” in a performance process which suggests that an alternating sense of “temporal awareness” takes place between “ecstatic” and “ordinary” time (Racy 2003).

Within this “modality” of creating altered states there is a “creative feedback” and variations occur in experience between audience and performers, as well as among performers themselves. For example, within *Tarab* artistry, the notion of *Saltanah* describes the ways that performers can become absorbed, or experience a heightened state of expression or improvisational “affective” moments, in which feeling and “creative ecstasy” become both “overpowering” and “empowering,” performers “being dominated” or becoming “dominant.” And through this “overpowering – empowering complex,” both the physical and perceptual faculties of the performer are affected through a “creative feedback.” How this inspirational or creative process develops -- whether it is voluntary or involuntary; what are the causes, circumstances or persons who acquire it; and whether “the primary source lies in the artist or outside the artist” – is however, unclear. It would also be rather “absurd” to presume that a subject, through the application of various forms of bodily techniques or rituals, would induce an inspirational state upon him or herself (126).

In addition to the cultural, physical, personal, emotional, issues at stake, and the understanding of local musical idioms, the ability to “feel music” and performing

with feeling are considered to be conducive towards promoting a “creative ecstasy.” A creative dynamic can be negatively affected by “standardization” or the imposition of strict techniques, like fully rehearsed works for staged performances that do not permit improvisation. Other factors that might inhibit the fostering of a “creative ecstasy” include lack of physical rest, or health related issues such as physical exhaustion and over or under eating (Racy 2003).

Some of the commonly held views concerning the emotional and physiological sensations attributed to “creative ecstasy” suggest that it is a “desirable” or a “pleasurable” state containing both psychological and physiological mechanisms that promote one’s mental and creative faculties. However, in addition to the cathartic benefits captured, if inadequately, by such words as pleasurable feelings, or joy, ecstatic experience also encompasses the ambivalent emotions of sadness, yearning, “obsessive longing,” nostalgia, a sense of grief or a combination of “opposite” yet “interconnected poles” of emotion that may fluctuate in intensity or expand between the different poles (Racy 2003). These experiential states are adaptable to individuals or the performance context, and do not occur as neatly ordered stages. Unlike mystical experiences, the ecstatic state derived from contexts like *Tarab*, which occurs in a “secular” performance setting, can be “hypersuggestive” by producing feelings of rejuvenation, a catharsis from the stress of daily affairs, or the release of personal emotions. By being “efficacious” yet “neutral,” the experience “eludes emotional specificity” and

lends itself to various interpretations that can be “political,” “amorous” or “religious” (203).

The attainment of ecstatic states within African dance is contingent on several factors. Among them the group dynamics of performances in terms of racial (or cultural) constitution, which is not always conducive to fostering altered states. The willingness of a collectivity to provide the context for intensifying performances and enable performers to cross a “threshold” is also vital to the attainment of ecstatic experience (Schechner 1985). Interpersonal, racial or cultural tensions can at times become incompatible with this requirement due to the discrepancies between what people bring into the performance space, their expectations, and what they leave with. Some contexts simply become outlets for kinesthetic release, displays of power or emotional tensions, because the in-group dynamics and feedback between performers lack the necessary exchange that can sustain a sense of play or creativity amongst participants.

In a learning environment the mixed level of the performers often offsets the collective flow of rhythmic motion, or synchronicity between dancers and drummers, which arrests improvisation and the intensification of performances. However these moments can become opportunities for individual performers to be more focused and nurture a sense of creative autonomy or inwardness that then sustains the feedback among performers by enabling those who are “offset” to align themselves with the others again. Because some of the challenges

between performers (i.e. drummers and dancers) via various symbolic gestures or acts are mediated through the dance, and knowledge of various rhythms, learning the dance and music become a necessary means of engaging in a playful (or flirtatious) exchange with other performers. The dance also serves as a means of displaying status or gaining entry into “cliques.” As a dancer notes, “if you can dance you’re in.” Yet this gaining of entry is conditional since other challenges emerge, for example, overall conduct in artistry, personality or in-group issues such as showing off, or trying to outdo others, which in turn can lead to different forms of discipline, and non-participation depending on the nature of the group dynamics.

Interpersonal relations between drummers, dancers and dance instructors during a performance can be emotionally charged, by containing moments of tension, misunderstandings or displays of status and power. For example a dance instructor and drum ensemble can encounter communication difficulties while coordinating the tempo, or changes in the rhythmic patterns of dances. A lead drummer who directs other drummers during a performance could end up having conflicts with individual drummers depending on his attitude, personality, or the ability of drummers to follow his directions to alter rhythmic patterns. Dancers and drummers can have playful or flirtatious exchanges with one another, or some drummers may deliberately play “stronger” for their favorite dancers and not others. This gesture might in turn offend dancers or cause them to envy the attention that drummers give to the “favorite” dancers.

Dancers can also display their power and status by selecting their dance partners and excluding others. Body types or expressivity can become objects of desire. When some dancers move in rows towards a drum ensemble, others may stand around the periphery and practice movements, support other dancers or watch the drummers. These moments are occasions for observing others and for being observed. A Japanese dancer noted how she feels like a “minority” on the dance floor, and is often self-conscious of her body. She explained how this limitation constrains her capacity for self-expression because she finds that a well-rounded body type is aesthetically more pleasing and better suited for African dance styles. The end of performances when dancers form a circle to perform their solo performances are opportunities to play, make symbolic gestures or to challenge other dancers through movement. By executing movements that are difficult to follow, dance instructors can assert their status or make a statement to dancers, drummers or onlookers.

These kinds of tensions within performances vary and are interspersed with other kinds of playful interactions. However, overt physical or aggressive behavior is not permitted within performances. On some rare occasions, there have been instances of physical confrontation between individuals after a dance class.

Although there are several unpredictable moments within performances, depending on their mood or temperament, individuals can determine how they intend to participate by choosing to linger along the sidelines as solitary dancers

and limiting their social interactions, or by immersing themselves fully in the experience. Other dancers may develop an emotional affinity or distance themselves from performers depending on their desire to identify with either the margins or the center of action. Despite this rigid description, which suggests that clear distinctions exist between the kinds of experiences that inform dances, performances contain numerous moments of interplay and crossing of emotional and social boundaries.

Since the livelihood of dance teachers depends on their overall reputation within the community they must keep their overall conduct in check. Some dance participants develop emotional bonds with their instructors, which mystifies their role as teachers and limits their ability to act autonomously. Because performance participants desire to have a subjective experience, and because dance instructors have professional concerns as this influences their ability to earn a livelihood, interpersonal tensions and conflicts must be contained in tactful ways. Although most instructors are aware of various kinds of tensions that inform performances, the burden of controlling the conduct of participants falls upon them. Instructors can also be affected emotionally by performances depending on their personality, sensitivity to interpersonal relations, their private lives and overall teaching and performing experience.

Factors concerning tensions within performances become issues of concern depending on whether a sense of artistry, distinct from personality conflicts, is

displayed either in the spirit of a play or more seriously in the form of a combat, in which case the dance itself or rhythms become a weapon. In such instances, performances turn into a state of frenzy. This give and take within performances is highly fragile and yet essential. It depends on the intent as well as the consent of participants, which can be easily disrupted due to individual temperaments or the nature of the social dynamics. However, when a creative exchange occurs, it heightens the experience, and becomes key to sustaining the overall momentum. The “overpowering – empowering” complex and its interpretation via rhythm and movement can, in other words, serve as a tool for externalizing strong emotions, and become a shield against aggression.

Although intense sentiments are, for the most part, symbolic, their effects may be sensed as people become more fluid and open their sensory/emotional faculties and because the timing of these events is unpredictable. The externalizing of inter-personal gender/sexual or racial tensions amongst performers and the symbolic staging of these expressions, along with a heightened competitive drive, triggers a sense of vulnerability by making individuals feel as though they are under assault. Most participants who sense this group dynamic stated that these moments of externalized emotions might induce various responses such as feeling vulnerable, ambivalent toward participation, or like limiting their emotional investment.

The use of performances as a context for expressing social conflicts is not a phenomenon unique to African dance (Blacking 1977). And although these moments are constitutive of performances, they do not make up its totality. Moreover, in contrast to this elaborate depiction, these expressions manifest in ways that are non-systematic. However, they are moments that can disrupt the group dynamics of performance spaces by leading to frustrated desires, by arresting the sense of expansiveness that accompanies the ecstatic possibilities that the performance context affords. These forms of expression may also either resonate or culminate at the end of a performance.

The end of a performance is usually a time when dancers form a circle around the drum ensemble, and those who choose to do so perform individual solos as others watch. Drummers usually try to support individual dancers by playing intensely and displaying their talents. Due to its improvised nature, and because it signals that a performance is coming to a close, these moments can be exciting and affect both participants and spectators. They can also be the best part of a performance with moments of free play, but due to time constraints must be kept short. And while people gather around to cheer or support performers, some collect their belongings and exit the dance floor. After several solo performances a lead drummer gives a signal to end the session and the dance comes to a close.

In the hallways and changing rooms people gather once again and pieces of damp clothing litter the floors as they change back into their street wear and gradually acclimate themselves to ordinary time. Some become more extroverted or talkative, and while gathered around the elevators people exchange hugs, greetings or farewells and leave the studio together with friends or acquaintances. Others who desire a solitary moment after the dance quietly slip out of the studio; not even waiting for the elevators, they may head for the long flight of stairs down and out into the streets. Inside the studio, teachers and drummers linger around the waiting area talking to passers by as they wait to collect their payments for the day. After a second or third shift of performances the space gradually slows down. As people filter out, only the staff remains to clean or straighten up rooms, rearrange furniture and count the day's money. Finally the lights go down. While walking towards the subway or on the streets dancers recall sensations, events, rhythms or movements, the skin feels damp, the body light and fluid. Such memories and sensations are repeated again and again on numerous other occasions.

On Performance Efficacy

During a recent lecture, Ms. Katherine Dunham, 94 years old and still touring with lectures and workshops on dance, made an insightful observation on the emergence of the “overpowering – empowering” complex within the transient emotional spaces of performances. Dunham described some forms of externalization as a “striking out” and a “deflowering of the virginal aspects of

socialization” where the expression of a release stems from an agonized setting, one that differs in its manifestation and expression from the kind of release that comes from “being so full of something that it overflows.” She notes,

...I’m beginning to see release as striking out ... you open up, take center stage, you see a partner, you use your partner (2004).

This perspective on the kinds of emotions that a performance space elicits, as Racy (2003) notes, suggests that a performance experience conveys not only the intersubjective dynamics of its members (Blacking 1977), but that it is also “multi-temporal,” containing “sub-categories” that span diverse emotional states beyond the pleasurable. In some instances, African dance performances are contexts that serve as a vehicle for staging unresolved social concerns such as the racialized nature of self-making, or association of an “aestheticized moral identity” with subjectivity. At times the competing discourses informing social interactions can compel individuals or groups to refuse to share in a collective consciousness or to transgress inter-racial or cultural boundaries. How this affects both subjectivity and interpersonal processes within a performance points to the “permeability between the borders of moral imagination, bodily affect and social processes,” where some “modes of experiencing” which include social pain can occur simultaneously as individual and collective (Kleinman, et. Al. 1997: xi).

A performance moment may also lack specificity in the kinds of emotions that it stirs up. To performance participants, it is likely that emphasizing the

pleasurable qualities of a performance by romanticizing or trivializing the human condition or “incommunicability of pain” (1997) constrains the efficacy of performances. The externalization of agonized emotions can be partly attributed to the ruptures in a performance where the inability to feel pleasure (as a desired emotional state), in-group tensions or the unfeasibility of a “communitas” might lead to other forms of emotional responses or reactions.

Emotional frustrations experienced within performances can become heightened due to self-reflexivity and the assumptions of modernist personhood, which dictates that pain as a human condition must be overcome by a quest for the pleasurable, or that pain must be eliminated universally by “secular agency” (Asad 2003). This implies that for a subject to choose pleasure or be liberated from pain or external constraints he/she must also be “subjected to the control of a liberating self already and always free, aware and in control of its own desires” (68). The sense of urgency or inability to communicate pain might heighten sensations of vulnerability that individuals feel due to the realization that pain cannot be shared. Given the precarious nature of human agency, it would be more useful to consider pain as an indication of the “limits of the human body as a site of agency” (73). Moreover, like pleasure, a sensitivity to pain “reproduces and sustains human relationships” and “how pain is felt is in some measure dependent on how it is expressed and how it is expressed is dependent on social relationships” (88).

In *The Sorrow of the Lonely and the Burning of the Dancers*, Edward Schieffelin (1976) describes the *Gisaro* ceremony of Papua New Guinea as a ceremonial dance with a “highly dramatic quality.” The goal of *Gisaro* performances is to induce the grief of guests who attend these ceremonies by provoking them through songs and dancing to the point that they are “deeply moved, in their grief and violence, and for that moment one glimpses something fundamentally important about their lives” (25). The ceremony, which takes place in the evenings, lasts throughout the night and performers sing songs that recall the names of places or the close relatives of hosts who have died. Suddenly a host whose relatives are recalled gets “enraged” and is “overcome” with such grief that he grabs a torch from a bystander and,

... jams the burning end forcefully into the dancer’s bare shoulder. With a tremendous noise, all the youths and young men of the host community jumped into the dancing space, stamping and yelling and brandishing axes. The dancer was momentarily lost in a frightening pandemonium of shadowy figures, torches, and showers of sparks. Showing no sign of pain, he moved slowly across the dancing space; the chorus burst into song. The senior man broke away from the crowd and ran out the back door of the house to wail on the veranda. This scene was repeated over and over from dancer to dancer during the course of the night. Finally, at dawn, when the first birds began to sing, the dancers, the chorus, and the rest of the visitors suddenly rose to their feet with a shout ... breaking the spell of their performance and bringing it abruptly to an end. The dancers, whose shoulders were quite badly burned, then paid compensation to those they had made weep, and all the visitors trooped out of the house to go home. Since many people wept, the ceremony was felt to have been a good one (24).

After *Gisaro* performances individuals would evaluate how well they danced, or cried, and approve of or complained over the amount of compensation they received. The ceremonies are regarded with “enthusiasm and affection” and the

experience is described as being “exciting, beautiful and deeply moving.” A *Gisaro* dancer represents both “splendor and pathos” not due to the burns that he must endure during a performance but due to the “very beauty and sadness that he projects that causes people to burn him” (Schieffelin 1976:24).

African dance performances span complex emotional states beyond the pleasurable. Moreover because dance performances have been constituted through diverse narratives spanning American race relations, a commodified notion of cultural difference, and exoticism, these overarching representations can at times override individual choices in self-fashioning or the attainment of pleasure. Therefore the ways in which authenticity is desired, and the ways that psychological dislocation, as a manifestation of aesthetic or subjective transgression, occurs is inconclusive, or difficult to articulate in moral terms, due to the emotional ambivalence or instability that accompanies transgression. Although the efficacy of performances is articulated in terms of pleasure, the competing discourses and subject positions that inform a performance moment might also leave individual desires unfulfilled.

The pursuit of pleasure coupled with modernist notions of a progressive self that perfects itself through a perpetual making or unmaking, leaves little room for a self in pain and desiring a cultural mediation. Because the social context of performances, constrain individuals from expressing emotional outbursts or conflicts, repressed emotions can promote feelings of alienation. Docile bodies

can also learn “techniques” of pain through nonparticipation or by muting or aestheticizing the emotion. Nevertheless, rather than being a passive state or an emotion that secular agency must restore with pleasure, pain can be conceived as kind of action. “What a subject experiences as painful, and how are not simply mediated culturally and physically, they are themselves modes of living a relationship” (Asad 2003: 84).

Questions such as how authenticity has become a means for fulfilling a desire wherein the exotic serves as a necessary ingredient in the shaping of experience, and the centrality of the exotic to erotic experience point to the problematic ways that difference has been aestheticized and reinforced. Moreover the idea that subjectivity can be “consumed,” the ways that consumption then becomes a kind of relationship through the “convergence” between pleasure and otherness, and the compulsion to *become* an other (rather than a symbolic play), all signal the loss of autonomy and mutual choice that inform the pursuit of authenticity (Hooks 1992). Exoticism as practiced in African dance performances then becomes the basis for conveying diverse ideologies, or subjective desires, and where a mutual choice is lacking, may result in tensions or frustrated emotions.

A white drummer who reflects on African dance/music performances and the ways that the social dynamics among participants can at times pose a conflict

between individual desires and the pursuit of authentic experience puts it this way,

... the context in which drumming occurs is just as important as the drumming itself. When drumming comes out of elitism or willful ignorance, it produces discord, unhappiness and dissipation... when I drum, I want to feel good. At events sponsored by ... I come away feeling abused and scorned at some level. Although my technical facility does improve by being exposed to them, I have to wonder if it's worth it...you can't play with a resentful attitude and expect to get joy or peace as a result. You can't play with an elitist attitude and expect to build community or appreciation for the music. You can't pretend that racism doesn't exist or doesn't matter and play in your own authentic style---because you'd be lying to yourself about the very nature of your drumming... even the best of playing can be spoiled by an unkind spirit or willful ignorance about our impact on others. And if it's going to be like that, who needs it? ³

This comment from an internet chat room which served as a forum for discussing African dance and drum related issues like cultural appropriation and race had to be terminated because according to one correspondent, these topics are a “perpetual emotional machine ... polluting news groups all over the Net.” ⁴ The new list serve, which is moderated, now serves the function of “sealing the energy and closing the circle”⁵.

In the dance world, a Black dancer made similar observations to the above comment, by describing the tensions that surround some performance contexts as an “assault” on experience. Another dancer from Eastern Europe, who no longer participates in dance performances, compared the downtown dance experience with a gathering of people during “happy hour” at a bar located in a

³ <http://www.drums.org/djembefaq/m5.htm>

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ <http://home.acceleration.net/clark/djembeLring/djembeL.html>

building adjacent to the dance studio. She gave her reason for quitting the dance world by stating that both practices (the dance world and happy hour rituals) were forms of escape from “ordinary reality.” Her comment suggests that to some dance participants, the desire to seek transitory changes in awareness might also involve a desire to enter ordinary reality as changed individuals. This desire may also trigger anxiety over the possible failure to achieve an altered experience. It is likely that in some settings the decontextualized nature of performances and their re-contextualization through competing discourses may heighten interpersonal tensions or personal disappointments, and thereby increase anxiety rather than release it through catharsis. Nonetheless depending on individual or group expectations, other styles can promote an efficacy or introduce new forms of inter-subjective awareness among performance participants.

The transformative possibilities in the “performance of Africa,” must be explored within these breaks and ruptures. Because a performance efficacy is influenced by the group dynamics and compatibility in a collective consciousness, it becomes essential to examine why performances “fail” and the ways that participants respond to this failure. Although the performance context of African dance promotes experimentation, this does not imply the absence of rules dictating how individuals are to conduct themselves, and the ways that an “aesthetic sensibility” is conceived. Rather than containing progressive or redemptive attributes, ecstatic states denote shifts in awareness, and can be

experienced in the form of “fresh insights, reconstituted selves, altered moods, attitudes, new statuses, or states of mind” (Scheiflin 1976), or foster regressive states.

By traversing divergent subject positions and aesthetic demands, the following chapters examine the kinds of identities that the “idea of Africa” serves, and how notions of identity are situated within an imagined “aesthetic sensibility.” In particular, I aim to show how self-making as a “right” and “entitlement” according to modernist narratives is vital to the shaping of experience but must be negotiated, and how identity is at once a process, contingent and uncertain, and a necessity. Within this contradictory practice, I illustrate the conditions through which individual attempts to gain new forms of experience are “enhanced” or “diminished.” The narratives and “structuration of possibilities” surrounding this enabling/disabling mechanism of self-making, and the pursuit of authenticity, together convey the relations between contemporary cultural politics and aesthetics. I will examine these processes in the chapters to follow.

Chapter 5

The Transnationalization of African dance

By illustrating the multiple roles that tradition and primitivism play in West Africa and abroad, this chapter examines the historical conditions under which specific performance genres emerge and get played out cross-culturally (Beeman 1993). Moreover, illustrating tradition's complexity serves as a commentary on how subject positions and social practices that reproduce indigenous or authentic identities are reconfigured, contested and performed transnationally. The cultural exchanges between Africa and the West and the architects who enabled the constitution and popularization of African dance, in particular *Djembe*, outside of West Africa, are multifaceted. These exchanges between local and international subjects who entered the scene at particular historical moments traverse diverse social movements, ideologies, and artistic practices.

Several transformations have occurred in both the constituting forces and the agents who popularized West African dance, yet the aesthetic appeal, and centrality of difference for constructing experience, remain a given. African imagery and the "idea of Africa" (Mudimbe 1994) have been incorporated into various transnational contexts as a resource for aesthetic inspiration, and as an imaginative space for constructing identities. Well-known examples include minstrel and vaudeville shows, the Harlem Renaissance, and the incorporation of primitivism into Avant-garde Parisian society and pan-Africanist independence movements in Africa. Contemporaneously as an aspect of a "global

imagination” (Veit 1996) African-inspired imagery and aesthetics play a significant role in the popularization of the World Music scene.

In Africa nationalist movements incorporated tradition as a source of cultural pride in their efforts at nation building during Africa’s post-independence period. Of the numerous African leaders, Ahmed Sekou Toure was the most visionary in his commitment to culture as a means for developing an independent Guinea and Africa as a whole (Diallo 1990). An important aspect of Sekou Toure’s philosophy, which he coined the “African personality,” was a return to Africa’s cultural heritage as a means of redressing the effects of the slave trade and colonial legacy. Sekou Toure regarded the “African personality,” enhanced by “embracing” African culture, to be an essential ingredient in the development of Africa’s political and economic structure. He notes,

The African personality, is the whole of the material, moral and intellectual realities which distinguish African people from other people. The characteristics of the African personality have resulted from the diverse history, and economic conditions, which have created in Africa, the particular sociological conditions which give to the man of Africa his own personality, whether in its positive or negative aspects. But in the human plan, in the universal plan of the nature of the social relationships tying people together, the African personality appears as one quality (Toure 1965:100).

Between 1958 and 1971, and in response to Western capitalism and Soviet Marxism, Sekou Toure envisioned an alternative “socialist cultural revolution” which incorporated his idea of the “African personality” so as to unify Guinea’s diverse ethnic groups, youth, women and workers, and for restructuring Guinea’s economic resources. Toure wanted Guinea and his philosophy of an “African

personality” to serve as a model for other independent African nations as well. During the cold war, Guinea assumed a neutral position in its foreign policy relations on the world stage, making it a “small nation power player” particularly in its relations with France, the United States and the Soviet Union. Sekou Toure played a significant role in the conception of the O. A. U. (Organization for African Unity). He also had strong relations with other post-independence African leaders such as Patrice Lumumba, Kwame Nkrumah, Gamal Abdel Nasser, and Amilcar Cabral (Diallo 1990).

In 1958, Guinea was the first French colony in West Africa to radically sever its ties with France in “an act of heroic defiance” against French colonial rule (Adamolekun 1976, Adebayo 2000). Sekou Toure refused to join the French commonwealth. Instead he proclaimed, “we would rather be poor and free than rich and enslaved” (Diawara 2003). This act of defiance led to the destruction of Guinea’s infrastructures and main communication systems like railroads, telephone services, and harbors by the French. In order to rebuild Guinea’s infrastructure Sekou Toure invited engineers, teachers and medical practitioners from the United States and different countries in Asia, and Europe. School curricula were restructured to incorporate and emphasize Guinea’s history and culture and in collaboration with the Polish government, Guinean officials reconstructed the original site of the ancient Mali Empire, the center of Guinea’s pre-colonial history (Niane 1994). Dancers and musicians were sent abroad to study choreography and script techniques in order to maintain the authenticity of

tribal dances. At the same time, in his effort to inculcate an “Africanized socialism,” Sekou Toure banned institutions such as “idol” worship, rituals of masked dances, and Guinea’s overall clan structure (Adebayo 2000). Folklore was revived through a national ballet and cultural ministries as happened throughout post-independence West Africa. During the 1960’s, neighboring countries like Ghana and Senegal also developed national ballets as a way of promoting their nation’s cultural heritage. Senegal’s president Leopold Sedar Senghor promoted African pride through writings on Negritude and encouraged a revival of native dance and rhythms throughout the country.

Black activists and performers such as Fannie Lou Hamer, and Harry Belafonte were invited to take part in Guinea’s cultural revolution. In Conakry, Guinea’s capital, the Palace of the People is a theater that was built by the Chinese to stage performances by different national companies. Sekou Toure commissioned Harry Belafonte to found the Ballet Djoliba (named after the River Djoliba which, as the source of the Niger River, symbolized a return to the source of Africa’s history). Guinea’s national ballet was founded by Keita Fodiba, a Guinean living in Paris in the 1940’s. Fodiba had attended the William Ponti institute in Dakar and earned a teaching degree in 1944. After teaching high school in Senegal for several years, he moved to Paris where he became involved in theater and dance research. In 1949 Fodiba formed a dance company and introduced African drama and dances to the West. Originally, Fodiba’s company was based in France; it was called “Les ballets Africains de

Keita Fodeba.” His company consisted of multi-cultural members from Martinique, Haiti and France and performed internationally. On one occasion in 1955, Fodiba’s company also toured West Africa.

After Guinea won its independence in 1958, Keita Fodiba was invited to serve as Minister of Interior and later as the head of Defense and Security. His ballet company transferred its base to Guinea and changed its name to Les ballet Africains de Guinea. Guinea’s ballet members were selected from various regions of the country and consisted of diverse ethnic groups, all of them contributing to the development of an eclectic musical and dance repertoire. Some members of the dance company studied acrobatics in Asia, which was suffused with regional styles; they also trained in stage design and choreography. (Eventually like numerous Guinean officials under Sekou Toure’s regime who were imprisoned or killed, Keita Fodiba was assassinated on March 21, 1965 for political reasons)⁶.

Although drumming is central to the popularized forms of Mande and Griot tradition that have spread outside of West Africa, other instruments such as the Kora (a string instrument), harps, and lutes are also integral to Mande music and contributed to these developments (Charry 2000). Meanwhile in Guinea, local musicians playing diverse instruments such as Bembaya Jazz and Guinea’s first female band called the Amazons of Guinea were sponsored by Sekou Toure and received a government salary. These bands further diversified their sounds by

⁶ <http://www.lesballetsafricains.com/founder.html>

using electrical instruments and also composed lyrics that dealt with social concerns. The music known as Manding Swing, broadcast through Radio Conakry to different parts of the country, played a key role in popularizing local musical styles in Guinea⁷.

During the cold war, Guinea's non-aligned position with the super powers yet strong diplomatic ties with the United States enabled the formation of United States Guinean communities. Because of Sekou Toure's commitment to global struggles, in the 1960's during his visit to the United Nations, he was invited by African Americans and Guinean officials to visit Harlem (Diallo 1990). Conakry, the capital city of Guinea, became the "adopted" hometown of African-American civil rights activist Stokely Carmichael and formerly exiled South African singer Mariam Makeba (Makeba 1987). At the same time, West African leaders such as Kwame Nkrumah, who was educated at a Black University in America, established ties with Pan-Africanists from the Diaspora while Ghana became a refuge for American Blacks like W. E. Dubois who renounced his American citizenship, became a Ghanaian citizen, and eventually died in Ghana in 1963.

In 1966 the ongoing trans-Atlantic exchanges between Diaspora Blacks and West Africa culminated in the organization of the First World Festival of Negro Arts organized in Dakar by Leopold Senghor who also promoted a cultural renaissance through his writings on Negritude and revival of Senegal's native culture. The event, attended by around 2000 artists and several dignitaries from

⁷ http://www.c4africa.com/bembeya_jazz.htm

around the world, had as its aim to promote an awareness of African culture through the arts. Sekou Toure, however, refused to participate in the First World Festival because of his differences with Senghor on the idea of representing African people as “Black” via Negritude’s embrace of race as a political strategy.

Seoku Toure argued that race was not a “viable philosophy” for Africa. He proposed that Negritude was an “irrational response” to an “equally irrational racial discrimination” and was based on the experience of Diaspora blacks from Africa and the Antilles living in France (Diallo 1990: 29). Instead, by embracing the “African personality” as one that grew out of an “African experience” and “struggle for self-determination,” and as a post-Negritude movement, Toure promoted the revolutionary value of culture as a unique heritage of Africans. In opposition to Senghor who organized the First World Festival in Dakar, Guinea instead took part in the Pan-African cultural festival in Algiers in 1969 (1990).

Primitivism and modern dance

The pioneers of modern dance such as Ruth St. Dennis and Isadora Duncan turned away from classical dance to what they defined as “primitive” based materials in search of self-expression, which was thought to be the “basis of human spirit” (Harris 1991, Franco 1998). It is said that the dancer St. Denis was captivated by the image of the Goddess Isis of Ancient Egypt, which she saw in a poster that advertised “Egyptian Dieties Cigarettes.” This sparked her interest to explore female deities of the ancient world through dance and theater.

In Europe and the United States, African imagery was incorporated into performances as early as the 1800's, as a source of artistic inspiration, an aspect of exoticism, and for spectacle. In the United States, live minstrel shows featuring African village scenes, and dances representing primitivism and "native" life such as the Dahomey dancers, were performed at the Chicago's World Fair in 1839 (Baker1998, Sunkett 1995). Minstrel and vaudeville shows featuring Black experiences of plantation life served as a new context for American Blacks to perform on the concert stage (Harris 1991). In addition to minstrel performances, the Harlem renaissance in the 1920's was inspired by Africa, which symbolized an "ancestral key" for "unlocking" the imagination and "cultural potential" of the modern Negro (Locke 1968).

The turn towards Africa as a source of artistic inspiration coincided with the incorporation of non-Western aesthetic resources and primitivism in the development of modern dance. In Paris, West Africans were brought from the colonies for entertainment in tribal dance performances and appeared at the "Exposition Universalle" in post war II Paris (Gates & Dalton 2002). African imagery from the colonies was used in advertisements for products like tobacco, rum and coffee. "Scientific" studies such as South African Sara Bartman's study of "deviant" sexuality, as well as the surrealist "bent" in ethnography, were also informed by ideas of primitive expression (Straw 2000). The image of the "noble savage" was central to enlightenment philosophers and their inquiry into the

consequences of industrialization, which they argue placed modern peoples into an “iron cage” (Ove 2000).

In Parisian society primitivism was inserted into the arts as a source of creative inspiration, and for the enrichment of modern art both during the colonial and post World War I periods (Harvey 2003, Straw 2000). In the 1920’s during the Harlem Renaissance, Black American writers and artists including well-known figures like Alain Locke and Langston Hughes made connections with avant-garde artists in Paris as a way of establishing a dialogue with pan-Africanists and to build their careers outside of the United States. Intellectuals like W. E. Dubois organized the first Pan-African Conference in Paris in 1919 (Fabre 1991).

Caribbean and African students like Leopold Senghor, and Amie Cesaire, studying at French universities at the time, were also engaged in discussions about French colonialism through literature and poetry. Like the pan-Africanists, they explored ideas about a Black diaspora identity based on race through their writings on Negritude, and were in dialogue with avant-garde Parisians and pan-Africanists (Fabre 1991).

Black American soldiers, many of whom chose to remain in Europe after the war, mingled with Parisian society introducing Jazz, and alongside performers like Josephine Baker transformed the appeal of “primitivism” from “jungle tam-tam” to “le hot Jazz” (Straw 2000). The transformation of Paris in the 1920’s through primitivism, Jazz and a “face to face” encounter with Black Americans continued

to alter aesthetic sensibilities in diverse artistic genres, including classical music and ballet as well as the works of artists like Matisse and Picasso (Gates & Dalton 1998, 2000). In the United States the rise in modern dance via primitive art and rituals inspired the works of anthropologists and performers like Pearl Primus, Zora Neal Hurston, and Katherine Dunham. Zora Neal Hurston and Katherine Dunham, besides being dancers, also explored African based dance rituals from the Caribbean in their writings (Dunham 1983, Hurston 1981). Pearl Primus, born in Trinidad and raised in New York, was also inspired by African dance and music. She choreographed, taught and popularized African based performances as well as travelled to numerous countries in Africa (Heard & Musa 1999).

In the 1930's dancers like Martha Graham, Jane Dudley and Asadata Dafora Horton, a native from Sierra Leon who studied music in Europe, relied on primitivism for their choreography and representations of identity. During its height in "Depression era America," modern dance was based on the premise that the body and emotion served as universal media for self-expression and differed from other styles of theatrical dance by virtue of its "affective" and "psychological content" which emphasized emotional expression (Franco 1998).

Martha Graham's dance technique emphasized the development of emotion through an exploration of "primitive sources" and by making a connection with rhythm. However, emotional states were not only expressed stylistically, but also

conveyed the “cultural politics of subjectivity” that were evident in the class and racial conflicts of the Depression era. Mark Franco (1998) notes how it was “through theatrical manifestations of feeling in modern dance that concepts as different as psychological depth and ethnic identity became symbolically wedded to movement.” By integrating psychology with ethnicity, modern movement served as a vehicle for identity politics, conveying national, class and ethnic sentiments. “Expressive bodies ... were themselves ideological constructs” (475).

In New York in the 1930's, Martha' Graham's “primitive mysteries” and “Frontier” conveyed ideas about American “nativist modernism” whereas Jane Dudley's choreography “Time is Money” depicted images of class relations and the construction of a proletariat identity in American society. Asadata Dafora Horton's Black American dance company presented *Kykunkor* or *Witch Woman*, a West African dance drama. *Kykunkor* promoted pride in Black cultural heritage and a pan-African identity. All three choreographers used primitivism not only as a vehicle to convey their artistic expression, but in order to *appeal* ideologically to the subjectivity of their audience based on ideas like nativism, class identity or Black pride (Franco 1998). The construction of modern dance as a distinctive form in contrast to “primitive” style is contradictory, however, as it draws on eclectic sources including the “primitive” for its inspiration. As Mark Franco notes, representations of the “modern” and “primitive” in dance styles occur interdependently and are “mutually restrictive” (467). Moreover, in addition to

undermining the significance of aesthetic innovations, for modernism, distinctions between the “modern” and “primitive” downplay the contradictory ways that representations of authentic subjects are constituted, masking the centrality of identity politics to modernist self-expression.

African dance in New York

In the late 1950's, *Djembe* was introduced into New York through a performance given by Guinea's national ballet. Ladji Camara, a member of the ballet since the age of 16, remained in New York and has toured and performed with numerous American artists such as Chief Bey, Charles Moore, Katherine Dunham, Alvin Ailey, Chuck Davis and Olatunji from Nigeria. Choreographers Alvin Ailey and Katherine Dunham had formed integrated dance companies that were comprised of modern and African based styles. Ladji Camara also taught *DJembe* to a generation of Black American artists and eventually to Euro-American performers. Olatunji came to the United States as a student to attend Moorehouse College and later on studied with Asadata Dafora. He opened a cultural center in New York in the 1960's called the Olatunji Center of African Culture. Located in Harlem, it became a headquarters for American and West African performers. Ladgi Camara also had a dance center in the Bronx where he popularized Mande music and dance while his wife introduced African food and hair dressing styles to the community. Although several other West African musicians from places like Ghana, Nigeria and Liberia have introduced African music in the United States since the 1940's, the works of Asadata Dafora, Ladgi

Camara, and Olatunji in collaboration with Black American artists, were decisive in popularizing African music and dance, particularly in New York (Heard & Musa 2002).

Prior to *Djembe's* entry into New York, The Abyssinian Baptist Church's leader Adam Clayton Powell had paved the way for the introduction of African dance by encouraging the turn towards African folk expression as an aspect of nationality and expression of Black pride in New York's Black communities (Harris 1991, Heard & Musa 2002). Performers such as Chief Bay learned African drumming from Ismay Andrews in the 1930's. Andrews had studied with Asadata Dafora and was also a self-taught dancer and drummer. She "re-created" dance styles out of picture books and from research materials. Teaching at the Harlem Mother African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, which was New York's main center for African religion and culture, Andrews' students included Jazz singers Esther Rolle, and Ertha Kitt (Harris 1991).

At the New York's World Fair in the 1960's, the African Pavilion provided Chuck Davis, a Black American choreographer who also had a dance degree, with an influential platform for promoting African dance, not just in New York but throughout the United States. Through his troop "Dance Africa," which showcases the works of various West African and Black American performers, and his dance company, which was formed in 1968, Chuck Davis also reached a wide audience. Ladji Camara became a major attraction as he toured with

Chuck Davis and other Black American artists. Of the major cities in America, New York continued to be the focal point for West African musical development and exchange, due to the ongoing traffic of performers to and from the continent, and an already established local art community. This influenced not only innovations in African dance styles in New York but also influenced the works of African artists in the continent due to an ongoing exchange amongst artists in West Africa and abroad.

Prior to the introduction of the *Djembe* orchestra in New York, the most popular African based music came from the Yoruba, Afro-Cuban, Ghanaian, Lucumi, and Congo styles, which were generally performed as “sacred” or religious dances. In 1948 Dinizulu, a Black American living in New York, studied and taught the religion, dance and music of the Akan people from Ghana through his dance center in Queens (Heard & Musa 2002). Before the entry of *Djembe* drums in New York the Conga drum used in Afro-Cuban styles was the most widely utilized percussion instrument. Yet although in the 1940’s and 1950’s, *Djembe* drums were expensive and rarely available in America, the *Djembe* orchestra and dances, first performed by the National Ballet of Guinea were becoming a major turning point for musicians in New York. The electrifying rhythms and movements of dancers led to an overwhelming demand for *Djembes* by local musicians and audiences alike. New York musicians would pack into hotel rooms where Guinea’s ballet members stayed to learn Guinean rhythms and dance movements. They traveled on trains for hours to the limited sources that

were available for learning *Djembe*, which they played on Conga drums until *Djembe's* were more widely available. The Black power movement of the sixties further fueled the embrace of African music and dance as a source of self discovery, Black pride and a symbol of political solidarity with national struggles in the Diaspora and Africa. In New York's mostly Black American neighborhoods, African dance continues to serve as a vehicle for self-discovery and identity construction.

Since the introduction of African dance into New York, numerous dance companies have been formed. Public school programs and colleges have also incorporated West African dance as a part of the curricula in multi-cultural education. The collaborations between American and West African performers have continued to grow. African dance and drumming have now mushroomed in many American states with the spread of West Africans to different parts of the country. American performers have also established themselves both musically and in dance by forming their own companies and cultural centers based on West African styles.

The formation of large Senegalese communities since the 1970's in New York has led to the popularization of *Sabar* dancing. With the introduction of the National Ballet of Senegal in 1971, *Sabar* dance was received with the same degree of enthusiasm as *Djembe*. Doudou N'Diaye Rose, a Griot choreographer and drummer who also trained an all female troupe of *Sabar* dancers and

drummers, *Les Rosettes*, was instrumental in popularizing *Sabar* both abroad and in Senegal. Since the 1970's, the opening of dance centers in New York specializing in West African and Afro-Caribbean dance forms, and the rise in tourism to West Africa, have revived African dance by making it more accessible to a wider audience. Although the majority of African dance teachers are men, in the early 1980's Marie Basse Wiles, a former member of Senegal's National Ballet, arrived in New York and eventually married Olokuse Wiles, an African American drummer. Together they co-directed a dance company and formed a cultural center.

Currently there are two newsletter publications called *Traditions* and *Attitude* which highlight some of New York's African dance related events and performances (Heard & Musa 2002). West African dance and drumming have become further popularized through new age gatherings, parks and recreation centers, colleges, gyms, museums, and music conservatories. The Internet is also an important source for establishing networks between regional and international communities, and where ongoing dance and drumming workshops, conferences and study groups to West Africa, are coordinated by West African and American artists living in New York or other parts of the United States. The demand for *Djembe* drums and other accompanying percussion instruments has risen over the years and is now being met by both local West African artisans and by various international manufacturers of musical instruments (using synthetic materials). Meanwhile West African fabric, and dress styles, arts and

crafts, hair-braiding, and food as additional features of the West African experience have become widespread in different New York neighborhoods and other regions in the United States.

Modernization and popular culture in West Africa

Sekou Toure's legacy of instilling tradition and cultural pride into African social life remains both in Guinea and its neighboring countries in West Africa.

However *Djembe* is not central to the popular culture promoted locally; compared to the international arena there is less demand for ethnic and authentic cultures, and more for African popular music (Agawu 2003). As Kofi Agawu notes (2003), the most widely heard music and performance styles on the African continent have roots in the urban regions and are not as valued in the West as the "traditional" styles. In West Africa there is now a distinction between drumming and dance genres from the villages and nationally oriented ballet styles. Village styles, represented as "functional," correspond to social ceremonies like weddings, circumcision, and naming ceremonies, while ballet draws on various regional styles and has a more elaborate choreography that is specifically designed for spectacle. With the emergence of styles that are influenced by modernism, categories such as traditional versus popular music have emerged, and imply that tradition lacks innovation (Barber 1987, Agawu 2003).

Historically, specific groups like *Jelis* (or Griots), and artisans such as Blacksmiths and leatherworkers, were assigned the role of musician. However

the emergence of numerous regional and popular styles in conjunction with internationalization has led to the growth of local music industries and widespread individual artistry in West Africa. While national ballets and music schools, often run by governments and paying, at best, minimal wages, offer a limited range of possibilities for developing new styles, the growth of music industries and travel opportunities have allowed musicians both Griot and non-Griot to work independently and to be more eclectic in their styles (Charry 2000, Eyre 2000). In the United States, Alex Haley's *Roots* (1976) depicts the mythic journey through which he reestablished his ties with Africa popularizing the idea of Griots for Americans (Ebron 2003).

While village or regional styles are associated with authenticity, experimentation and the exploration of new frontiers is not a modern occurrence. In Mande cosmology, *ngana* symbolizes the "hero of social action." *Ngana* is depicted as having one foot in the village, symbolic of tradition, and the other in the bush to represent the unfamiliar. In his fascination with play and adventure, *ngana* is said to stimulate "individual artistry and creative impulses" by moving out towards unexplored territories. By doing so, Mande aesthetics is said to "proselytize" while reforming its own tradition at the same time (Charry 2000). It is said that, "Mande has no end."

The entry of African dance into formalized Western dance studios and its specialization calls for a development of specific dance techniques for instruction.

Techniques that comprise “traditional” styles are thought to differ significantly from modern or contemporary African-based dances. For example, an emphasis on expressivity and various bodily positions such as pelvic thrusts or hip motions is associated with primitive or folkloric techniques. Certain aesthetic practices and musical instruments are also associated with particular regions and populations. Based on the premise of “embodying an indigenous identity” (Mendoza 1999) and privileging authenticity, people distinguish between modern bodily gestures and stylistic elements versus the non-modern.

As Kofi Agawu (2003) notes in discussing the problems of representing African musical genres, the “implicit” context through which African music is produced, popularized and consumed by international groups rests on a “disjunctive” field of conceptual schemes about Africa. Namely, a disjunction exists between the practice of African music and its various forms of representation, both scholarly and popular. Agawu (2003) argues that the boundaries between folk and popular are arbitrarily constructed, either by insisting on a radical difference or emphasizing the modernization of African musical genres. In fact, he notes, the authenticity of most African musical forms lies, “deep in urban Africa.”

And yet the dichotomy between village and urban continues to conjure a radical opposition in the Western imaginary and hence an insistence in a distinction between folkloric, read as authentic tradition, versus popular urban styles, read as a dilution of tradition. Agawu (2003) suggests that a more useful reading of

African musical idioms would treat the various repertoires as a traditional-popular-art matrix rather than as rigid categories. He suggests that these categories, rather than being fixed, feed back into each other and that “each type is in turn constituted by a wide range of expression, depending on contexts and purposes of music-making, performers’ skills, and degree of integration with ritual” (p.xv). Likewise West African dance as a genre, and the individual artists who have popularized it internationally, are best represented via a traditional-popular-art matrix.

Focusing on the regional specificity of African performance styles underplays the complexity in interactions between international, rural and urban populations within Africa and transnationally. Musical and dance styles in African societies extend not only beyond regional boundaries but have also been influenced by the impact of Arabic culture, Christianity and colonialism (Agawu 2003, Ranger 1975). Artistic innovation in urban centers and the movement between urban and rural populations reflect the vibrancy of social networks that are stimulated by conditions like labor migration and displaced rural communities (Veit 1990, Ranger 1975). Often these networks articulate relations between local and international groups.

With the introduction of Islam and Christianity into West African societies, the role of music was extended towards new aspects of social life. European musical influences and instruments brought about an internationalization of music and the

formation of new sub-cultures beyond ethnically arranged groups (Barber 1987). Moreover, while African drumming is highly popular internationally, it represents only a single dimension of the complex and diverse range of musical styles in Africa. Language is an essential component of African music-making and is vital to understanding the context of different African musical and performance genres (Agawu 2003). *Djembe* however, continues to be associated with a unique aesthetic sensibility, a sensationalized radical difference, stoking demands for authenticity. And the seekers of authenticity relegate individualized forms of expression, eclecticism and originality to Western genres insisting that non-Western styles ascribe to functional purposes and “tribal” protocols, purified of Western elements.

Global Rhythm, World beat

Outside of West Africa and in the World Music scene, the modernized African dance performances have not been relieved of the burden of representing cultural authenticity. Issues abound regarding authenticity which some performers claim is little more than a recent, opportunistic “invention of tradition.” Other debates amongst performers and participants include the need to maintain the purity of musical rhythms and choreographies as well as concerns surrounding the dilution of tradition or “selling out” by some performers. Nonetheless musicians, dancers and choreographers alike also experiment with boundary crossing and a re-thinking of tradition.

World Music's simultaneous demand for a regional specificity of cultures while making claims of artistic universality is paradoxical. On the one hand World Music as an emerging aesthetics and "global imagination" (Veit 1996) offers possibilities for local groups to construct their identities based on experimentation or identity politics. On the other hand, when mapping out the choices that are available to subjects in the World Music "system," various historical trajectories and imaginings have been reduced to a single classification or cultural space (i.e. World Music). One of the essential features of the World Music "system" lies in its representation of diverse local experiences via a universal paradigm of authentic or rooted cultures (Veit 1996). Within the global imagination of World Music, the behind-the-scenes strategies for marketing and aestheticizing non-Western cultures by way of authenticity calls for the construction of a vocabulary for describing the role that difference will play in structuring particular identities and experiences. Local groups as participants must then reconstruct their traditions by identifying with symbolic "ethnic signifiers" or aesthetic values as markers of their ethnic heritage (Mercer 1990). The embrace of authenticity by local groups can also serve as a strategy rather than a goal (Keith 1990) or be the consequence of a lack of available options in artistic innovation.

Additionally images of cultural heterogeneity and cosmopolitanism, while having led to the blurring of genres, call on cultural "intermediaries" to maintain the consistency of difference (Jameson 1998, Featherstone 1990). The "commodification, distribution, and consumption" of aesthetic styles that are

produced locally must be reconstituted by “culture brokers” as they enter into a transnational circuit where “style” is a prerequisite. How do mediators popularize local cultures? What role do they play in promoting “ethnic signifiers” or a “global imagination” while also defining the limits to cultural transgression? How does experience influence the constitution of a global imagination and how does a globally imagined space construct experience?

Globally imagined spaces are governed by standards and rules which entail designing ethnic classifications that appeal to a broader audience outside of locally produced sites (Shannon 2003). Simultaneously the merging of diverse genres and styles into a single category called World Music illustrates how local subjects “indigenize” or experiment with their identities as well. As representations are subverted or reconfigured, local subjects are obliged to alter their cultural productions, meeting the contradictory goals and expectations of a global market whose consumers imagine the meanings of local aesthetics. In the end, the rules and standards that govern a global imagination must then take into consideration the question of translation and the subject positions from which local actors imagine, practice and interpret a “global” aesthetics.

Tracing the journeys of African dance performances within an international “circuit” entails taking into account the imaginative possibilities as well as “real” constraints that locally produced aesthetic practices traverse within globally imagined spaces. This includes the social, aesthetic, political and economic

factors that have enabled African dance performances to *become* an experience within both locally and globally imagined spaces. Examining these spaces of contestation, and the power dynamics involved in the appropriation of performances, involves inquiring into the aesthetics of a Black diaspora imagination, and how the practice of exoticism constitutes the shaping of personal and collective experience in African dance performances.

“Nomadic aesthetics,” a Black Diaspora Imagination.

In response to the “canonizing” of aesthetic theory, which “fixes” rather than liberates its objects, Teshome Gabriel (1990) proposes a “nomadic aesthetics” which destabilizes and “creates havoc” for stable aesthetic categories due to ongoing shifts in “... form and content and the relationship among them and their audience” (398). Like the nomads who “synthesize” their surrounding cultures by “refusing official history,” a Black diaspora aesthetics draws on an imaginative field and collective memory of Africa and slavery as its “moral,” “political” and “historical ... horizon of hope” (Scott 1999) through “symbolism, metaphor, music and performance” (Gabriel 1990).

The idea of a “nomadic aesthetics” governed by a “mythical and spiritual home,” and the positing of Africa and slavery as a “horizon of hope” (Scott 1990), together situate the debates of cultural authenticity in Black diasporic imaginations, in a realm beyond a mere strategy for addressing the predicament of “existence” and “being-in-the-world” (Gordon 1997). Lewis Gordon (1997)

notes that the attempt to understand the situated nature of Black existence must address the question of whether the concept of identity embodies a “value laden perspective in the world” (4). Similarly Scott (1999) suggests “... to be produced as ‘black’ in and through raced social relations, ideological apparatuses and political regimes” carries within it a “potentially” critical standpoint (125). Based on the premise that identities are not simply “*made*” but also “*found*,” an aspect of this “value-laden perspective” in the shaping of a Black diasporic subjectivity has involved imagining Africa and slavery as the organizing features of a collective identity (Scott 1999).

The embrace of Africa in the shaping of a trans-Atlantic diaspora illustrates how, through a “spatialization” of identity, the notion of modern Blackness interrogates the “rootedness” of identity (Gilroy 1993). This approach presents tradition as a “discursive practice” that is embedded not only in a past but also in the present (Scott 1999), and as one that has been achieved through a critique of the “normalizing” of place, community and belonging as practiced by nation-states. As David Scott (1999) argues, rather than privileging the hybridity of Black diaspora subjects by focusing on the similarities and differences in Black cultural practices, using an “ethnographic” approach based on a “verificationist epistemology,” a Black diaspora needs to be approached in terms of the “... *ideological* convergences and divergences in the way cultural practices across the Black Atlantic *put* ‘Africa’ and ‘slavery’ to use” (125).

Scott (1999) critiques the scientific claims and ontological assumptions concerning history and culture that an anthropological “truth apparatus” suggests and through which a Black diaspora criticism has been approached. The problem of relying on a “verificationist epistemology” using anthropological means implies that representational sources must be authorized by drawing on “identifiable” social and cultural features based on an “authentic” African past so as to validate the continuity or discontinuity of the present. Even within anthropological contexts, this “verificationist” approach has been critiqued. Indeed the model of a “truth apparatus” was aimed at instituting anthropology as a scientific discipline rather than for the purpose of investigating the nature of social process (Scott 1999). In contrast a Black diaspora criticism that relies on tradition as a “discursive practice” and as one that is “socially embedded and historically extended” need not rely on a “verificationist epistemology” for constructing narratives nor on the construction of “imagined communities” that are premised on a relation to the past.

Moreover, rather than being static, a discursive tradition holds within it both a “style of reasoning” and spaces of contestation. By arguing for a discursive practice that considers how Africa and slavery construct narratives in the present, Scott attempts to “dislodge” the debates of an essentialist versus anti-essentialist perspective that a Black diaspora subjectivity evokes. Instead he examines the insertion of discourses on Africa and slavery in Black diaspora identities by

placing the focus on the *kinds* of identities that it “serves” within “local networks of power and knowledge relations” (Scott 1999: 124, 280).

It is through the ambivalent positioning of subjectivity at a “junction ... outside of but inspired by Africa” (Jones 1999) that a kind of discursive practice and cultural critique gave birth to nomadic expressions such as Jazz and the blues. Black aesthetic practices however are also altered within a commodified field where Black idioms are given an “associative” value fostering images of sophistication, and the “hip.” Or through “aestheticized,” “mythologized” or “ultra-urban” notions of identity (Morrison 1993). Within versions of corporate multiculturalism, or global cultures that both aestheticize and mythologize versions of Blackness, an emphasis has been placed on “hyper-visual” and “de-politicized” forms of expression (Marable 1995, Tate 2003, Collins 2004). Through these symbolic reconstitutions, usually informed by romantic sensibilities of art, it has become possible to redefine Black aesthetic practices. In such instances, art is made to occur outside of politics and culture; in the pursuit of pleasure, social pain becomes aestheticized (Gilroy 2000, Lipsitz 1998).

Despite the potentially critical space of expression that a “nomadic aesthetics” offers, as Ellis Cashmore notes in the new *Black Culture Industry*, the counter-cultural elements that give Black popular cultures their impetus can occur “instead of” rather than “as an agent” of change (1997). Likewise drawing on the carnivalesque as a site where everyday practices of the popular are dialogically

expressed, Stuart Hall (1993) illustrates the ways that cultural hegemony can be waged within the popular by giving the socially marginal a symbolic centrality. By dissipating the subversive potentials that lie within the popular, “cutting edge difference” is “blunted to spectacularization” (Hall 1993:112) and resistance and servitude share in the same “episteme” (M’bembe 1992). Although a Black diaspora aesthetics is a “contested” aesthetic category situated within “indeterminate” spaces (Hall 1993), it nonetheless continues to play a role as a social critique and response to the inclusive/exclusive practices of articulating place and belonging, along the lines of homogeneous national, racial and cultural categories.

Contemporary African Diaspora

Unlike the African migrants who came to the United States during the 1960’s and 70’s and returned to their homelands after acquiring an education in order to take part in the nation building of their countries, contemporary African migration to America is made up of persons from diverse cultural, religious and economic backgrounds. The majority who have come as a result of the Immigration Reform Act of 1986 or by way of the Diversity Visa Lottery, have chosen to establish their permanent residence in America and are considered economic migrants (although some are political refugees). Some consider themselves “sojourners” and intend to return back to Africa (Arthur 2000). Many are considered “upwardly-mobile,” finding work in the professional, business, or informal economic sectors and generating a large proportion of the remittances

sent to Africa annually. Those with minimal credentials work in low paying or menial jobs and eventually work their way up into the more desirable jobs.

Most African migrants are concentrated in urban regions such as New York City and Washington D.C., but some are dispersed throughout various American states. According to the 2000 Census, out of the 70,000 sub-Saharan Africans living in New York City, the majority came from West Africa, and 90,000 African immigrants living in Washington D.C. include nationals who come from Somalia, Ethiopia, as well as Nigeria, Ghana, Sierra Leone (Foner 2005). Overall the northeastern regions of America have the highest concentration of African immigrants followed by the Southern, and Western regions, with the lowest African population in the Midwest (Arthur 2000). Several Africans who have worked in the informal sectors in their homelands or because they hold foreign degrees, or have encountered language barriers have taken advantage of small business opportunities in America serving Africans and Black Americans, for example by establishing services such as hair-braiding salons, restaurants, corner stores, or nightclubs. Communities with large populations of Africans have established cultural associations, religious institutions and, like other immigrant groups, have developed mechanisms for pooling economic resources. The growing number of second generation Africans has further extended the connections of these migrant communities as they take part in the broader social contexts in which they now reside⁸. African immigrants assist individuals in times

⁸ http://www.africanmigration.com/archive_02/j_takouganghtm

of personal crisis related to illness death or legal issues through mutual aid associations that transcend ethnic or national identity. Because of American race relations, and since most African immigrants may have very little in common besides their “geographic affiliation,” some have opted to pursue a pan-African identity that transcends their ethnic and national background (Arthur 2000).

These factors, coupled with the continued influx of African migrants to The United States, and their ruptured or transnational ties with their homelands, have complicated the ways that diaspora Blacks and African migrants have come to “put Africa to use.” Shifts in social dynamics have called for a re-thinking of the ways that self and identity are negotiated between and among African and diaspora Blacks who “were transported centuries ago” (Ebron 2003). Despite the persistence of symbolic and imaginative links between Africa and the diaspora, subjectively cultural, sexual, and class disparities between African and diaspora identities further influence both the articulation and experience of diasporic imaginings.

Nonetheless within these complicated assumptions that underlie the shaping of a diaspora identity, and although cultural differences between African migrants and diaspora Blacks have been highlighted (Stoller 1996), a racialized difference continues to inform the shaping of contemporary migrant identities. In New York City incidents such as the fatal shootings of two West Africans, Amadou Diallo (2000) and Ousmane Zongo (2003) by New York City policemen have sensitized

African migrant populations to the ways that racial and ethnic differences structure America's social fabric, and to the necessity of having an identity.

Nevertheless, in the negotiations of self and identity, the ways in which diaspora Blacks draw on Africa may or may not converge with the ways that continental Africans do. By questioning the assumptions that a Black diaspora evokes, Handel Wright (2003) suggests that as a discursive practice the notion of a diaspora must take into account the "troubling ... and taken – for – granted" premise through which continental and diaspora identities are forged (6). That is, while Africa serves as a "spiritual" or "mythical" homeland for diaspora Africans, the "diaspora itself is not considered a potential home place for continental Africans." Wright notes (2003) that this one-dimensional view of a Black diaspora imagination fails to address the ways that the possibilities and "necessity" of living oblige continental Africans to also engage in the creation of a new cultural identity.

Chapter 6

Places: Imagining Africa

A Wandering life produces a wandering aesthetics.
- Teshome Gabriel

This chapter sets the scene for the dramatization of West African dance and musical practice and raises the question how is space imagined as a context for shaping identities and experience? In what follows, I explore the kinds of cultural forces that have enabled a particular genre of West African performance to emerge and serve as the source of aesthetic and personal experience in American life. I examine the sites where African dance is produced, commercialized and performed in Africa.

In the performances of the “modern” and “traditional,” conceived within a “complex space” and “heterogeneous” notion of time, (Asad 2003) how has African dance gained such a wide-ranging international appeal that seems to overlook the mushrooming of numerous other genres of popular culture within West Africa? How do local performers respond to the growing international popularity and demand for their styles? Most importantly, how does space set the stage for the construction of a multiplicity of contested experiences? In addition to the physical context where African dance takes place, this chapter examines the kinds of social, conceptual and emergent spaces that allow for imagining an “idea of Africa.” This includes an examination of the ways that African dance and music traverses a “global” imaginary field from Africa to New York, is “re-

represented,” and made accessible to wide-ranging audiences by way of “virtual” spaces such as the Internet.

Abstracting aspects of a cultural or aesthetic tradition by emphasizing certain features while ignoring others, requires decisions in *translation*, and a subversion of meanings, which is informed by the conceptual categories of a dominant discourse (Asad 1995, Celestin 1995). These decisions are often made in arbitrary ways that may or may not be tied to the internal coherence of the cultural and aesthetic practices of a given tradition. Instead, what is called for is the ability to construct new meanings by managing the abstracted fragments of a culture via familiar conceptual categories. This involves situating the exotic,

... within a familiar context in which it can then acquire *presence*. This operation could be called re-representing: the removal from a former, “authentic” context (but foreign to me) to a context foreign to it (but familiar to me) (Celestin 1995:13).

The multiple discourses, practices, and negotiations of power, and the emergent conflicts that arise in the process of defining or re-defining the aesthetic criteria of African dance (including the artists) occurs within a contradictory time/space orientation. The discourses that contest, challenge or redefine what is being affirmed about “tradition,” and ideas of authenticity, illustrate how otherness is conceptualized through the lens of exoticism and leads to new social spaces for imagining Africa.

In the West the absence of a local context to inform the practice of African dance situates performances *potentially* within an “experimental frame” by allowing new

identities, subjectivities and stylistic forms to be fashioned. Yet the representation of African dance as having origins associated with ethnic groups constrains experimental possibilities and instead performances (and subjectivities) become *constitutive* of authenticity through the imposition of new rules for shaping experience. This occurs due to the necessity of reproducing preconceived notions of a timeless “tradition” and the persistence of discourses that are based on uncontaminated cultures.

As already noted, depending on the context and actors involved, both in West Africa and America, the vocabulary of authenticity for defining what constitutes African dance can also serve as a strategy rather than a goal. In the selection of aesthetic criteria, I examine the practice of privileging authenticity over experimentation, and the idea of a “globally imagined” or universal space as an idealized site of innovation and artistic expression. By looking at how a consensus on aesthetic decisions is made (or contested), I examine the process through which a “system of placement” (Burke 1969) has defined African dance as a genre.

Within the emergent spaces of ambiguity and as outcomes of experimentation, (hence the formation of a new aesthetic practice), I also explore the limits and possibilities that are available for individual and stylistic transgressions. The negotiation of meaning in contemporary performances of African dance illustrates the power-dynamics involved in defining a genre, and comments on the ways

that artistic innovation, via popular cultures, organizes discourses and practices that both destabilize and affirm identities.

Guinea, West Africa: “In Search of Promising Dancers.”

A “Dances of Guinea” video entitled “In Search of Promising Dancers” (1991) features a performance by villagers (men and women) who reenact village life through a dance drama as a way of auditioning for recruiters from Guinea’s national dance company, Les Ballet Africains. The scenes portray rituals of courtship, harvest, various masked dances, drumming, and stilt walkers. Some performers are dressed in grass skirts and their chests are bare, others are in various ritual costumes. As one of the recruiters walks around appraising the performers, taking notes and tape recording songs and rhythms, onlookers circle the performance and observe. Some clap and sing along; others talk amongst themselves, giggle or watch the performers, the camera or the recruiters. Some children are playing while occasionally watching the dancers from the periphery. The dances are repetitive and not very elaborate; some acting is included as though it was staged for the audition. Some of the actors are shy or self-conscious of both the recruiters and the camera whereas others are more theatrical and uninhibited. In another scene, the camera switches from the village to an indoor theatre stage, perhaps suggesting that the dancers have now been selected and are in the city. They are onstage learning choreography and various rhythms. The presentation switches back again to the village scene and

dancers as a way of showing the transition of performers from the village to the national ballet and city life.

Where does the notion of authenticity begin? The transition of villagers to the city and as dancers in Guinea's National Ballet illustrates how performances initiated by local artists are popularized through more flexible forms of interpretation of authenticity in West Africa. This contrasts with Westerners' representation of African dance and music as a homogeneous category. As I have argued, however, in spite of the rich array of popular cultural forms that occur in various West African contexts, a rupture exists between the practice and representation of African expressive cultures (Agawu 2003). In addition to traditional performances, in West Africa local artistic innovations, the emergence of the national ballets, sponsorship of performers by international groups, transnational links with West African performers now living abroad, and tourism have contributed to the popularization of performances. Alongside the commercialization of African dance and music for both national and international audiences, popular cultures like *Doundounba* (in Guinea), or *Tanabere* (in Senegal), which are forms of "street" or social dances, thrive within local mostly lower class communities. They serve as sources for improvised recreational dance and music, and for displaying individual artistry.

Moussa, a Guinean journalist in New York, who observed the growing international popularizing of African dance and drumming pointed to some of the

ambiguities in performance, noting that the drum has become symbolic of a “global” aesthetic phenomenon. However, he asks, “why is there a simultaneous demand for the authenticity of the artists and their artistic creations?” Similarly in “A Conversation in Conakry,” Bruce Flemming (1993) narrates his discussions with some Western expatriates, and with Guinean promoters, concerning Guinea’s most “celebrated cultural export,” its National Ballet. In addition to the numerous international tours undertaken since the dance company was first conceived, Guinea’s National Ballet has toured the United States alone on numerous occasions. Flemming describes the performances of Les Ballet Africains as a “polyglot” and “broadwayized” transformation of Guinea’s cultural heritage. To Western audiences, however, although the “glitzy” performances resemble the choreography of Vegas shows or Academy Awards ceremonies, they do not measure up to a Western notion of “art,” or qualify as the creative expression of an “agonizing” individual artist.

As Flemming (1993) notes, this break in representation occurs due to the distinctions in aesthetic appraisal between individualized “post-romantic” forms of expression read as *original*, versus “tribal” forms of expression which are read as *authentic*. Distinctions in the West between “high” or “low” art are also associated with the venues and types of audiences who attend modern versus folkloric performances. These classifications in turn make “slick” productions such as Les Ballet Africains less appealing to “serious” dance enthusiasts, including critics, who approach, say, an opening performance given by a

prominent Western choreographer with much “artistic” enthusiasm, but relegate shows such as *Les Ballet Africains* to be critiqued and evaluated by folklorists. In most of their performances the Guinea ballet's costuming and stage design display a radical alterity through symbolic references to authentic village life by way of palm trees, the hut, and dramatizations of courtship, spirituality, or harvest rituals in which men and women appear in exotic tribal wear or grass skirts, bare muscular chests or exposed breasts. Flemming (1993) notes that, as a “plyglot” choreography, African dance incorporates, for example, a dance movement from the *Baga* peoples with some *Malinka* steps accompanied by *Soussou* rhythms, the ensemble reflecting and representing a people's national cultural heritage. Yet the reliance on national styles as a source for artistic inspiration takes on a different turn in the West where artistic expression is marked by privileging individuality.

The criteria of “high” and “low” as standards for evaluating artistry, and as markers of distinction between the modern and traditional, relegate West African performers and their cultural production to the folkloric. Moreover the influences of national or cultural heritage are given a greater symbolic weight than the individualized artistic expressions of the performers themselves. Nonetheless with the growing professionalization of African dance in West Africa, individual performers are now recognized for their skills and artistry as specialists in traditional dance and music. Having received training as an apprentice of a village based master drummer, or being a member of a national ballet, they are

regarded as the authors of highly significant artistic accomplishments and credentials. The specialization and learning of musical traditions includes a teacher-apprentice relationship passed down through family connections (or among Griots) and can lead to entry into national ballets, international travel, individual artistry via popular culture in urban contexts, or a combination of the above. Ballet dances that draw their inspiration from ceremonies like marriage, birth, naming rituals or harvests, and that are associated with a living tradition, continue to require Griot performers or traditional musicians. Such performances presently appear in both commercial and ceremonial settings where they serve as important conduits of urban and village customs. Although village ritual dances continue to serve as inspirational elements for representing African dance styles, as we have seen, the institutionalization of national dance troupes has led to a sharp distinction between village and ballet style dances. In the West, however, choreographers are able to “adopt” and “mix” genres or representations. In fact, it is required of them (Flemming 1993). Flemming cites a criticism made by a Guinean about this contradiction. In the choreography of Western performances like *Oklahoma* the Guinean notes, the inauthenticity of cowboy dances is not of any concern to Western audiences. Why then is there a demand for the authenticity of non-western performances when Western audiences have long ago given up on the idea of authenticity for themselves?

The ongoing influx of tourism in West Africa and a growing escalation in the international demand for traditional music and dances associated with particular

regions or populations, have added further to the growing distinction between village and urban music on the part of local and international groups alike. However the two spheres have become more proximal in artistic production. Every villager has access to the city and vice versa. With commercialization, the criteria for defining individual artistry and musical genres have grown flexible in most areas while becoming more rigid in other areas. The identification and origin of musical instruments, rhythms, and dances and issues of ownership based on social status (in particular being Griot or a traditionally trained master drummer/dancer via national companies), continue to be topics of concern.

Some performers, both local and international, argue heatedly over the sources of dances, rhythms, musical instruments and their association with particular peoples and regions. At the same time rhythms, dances and musical instruments have been introduced or have crossed boundaries to other regions through migration, inspiring new versions of dances and rhythms (both internationally and locally). In other words, the blurring of genres is a constant process producing ongoing transgressions in style and subjectivity. For example in Mali, *Sabar* dance has become popularized by women who perform these dances discreetly and enter trance states. However *Sabar* is banned by Mali officials due to its explicit sexualized style, which is seen as being indecent according to Malian social standards.

For the most part the blurring of genres in Africa and abroad introduces a conflict of interest amongst artists, especially in the commercial sphere, as the representation of genres and their marketability, as well as professionalism, continue to be framed by the authenticity versus inauthenticity debates. But controversies created by the validity or invalidity of genres based on assumptions of tradition and modernity can also lead to the popularization of performance styles. Dance companies such as the one formed by Senegalese choreographer Doudou N'Diaye Rose and his all female *Sabar* drum ensemble gained local and international acclaim through reviving *Sabar* as a cultural heritage, even though it would later on be banned for its sexual overtones. Versions of *Sabar* are also practiced in Guinea, while *Djembe* is performed throughout several countries in West Africa. The popularizing of dances like *Sabar* in neighboring countries besides Senegal, show the transgressive possibilities of popular cultures in West Africa. Other dance forms like the *Mapouka*, (a highly sexualized dance which was banned in some countries) gained popularity in the nightclubs of several West African countries and internationally after the production of numerous videos by different West African artists.

Nonetheless distinctions between village and ballet style dances continue to persist where village dances are considered traditional and functional, while ballet styles are considered to be innovative and eclectic (yet inspired by traditional styles). Ironically, the villages that serve as sources of aesthetic inspiration are undergoing a rapid transformation through vast networks of

technology, communication and tourism. Although this does not imply the “disappearance” of village culture, a question which begs to be asked is why a particular version of the village is so central to the inspiration of African dance and for whom? It is this context of imagined ideas about Africa that sets the stage for contemporary debates surrounding the authenticity or inauthenticity of African dance internationally.

Vignettes of Performers

The following quotes from biographies used in promotional materials (mostly available on Internet) and personal interviews display the various representations of African dance put forth by some of New York’s more established performers. They serve as examples of the diverse and ambiguous ways that the genre is constituted and described. These representations are usually collaboratively created with American participants who are familiar with the local cultural capital and have the appropriate competence and knowledge of the aesthetic standards of sponsoring institutions, conventional artistic practices, and demands of audiences. They act as mediators between these oftentimes inconsistent terrains. The representations include preparing promotional materials like flyers, personal biographies, business cards, photographs, and a website that explains the credentials, level of professionalism, and other relevant background information of performers.

Sekou, a former artist from Guinea's national ballet is described as the "pre-eminent" teacher of dance from Guinea and is a "dancer, musician and choreographer." In addition to touring West Africa with the national ballet of Guinea, Sekou has performed in places like Japan, Bangladesh, India, Holland, Hungary, Russia, Korea, Libya, Saudi Arabia and the United States. He has lived in the United States for over thirteen years, has a dance company and is a "much sought after master teacher at dance conferences, workshops, camps and schools." When he is not away on tours, his classes in New York are "attended by a large and loyal following who are appreciative of his mercurial energy and grace." The performances by his company,

... are a spectacular *mélanges* of traditional culture and dance-theatre and are well supported ... in his attempts to bring the energy, excitement and history of African dance to a wide audience, Sekou is meticulous in acknowledging the source of this material and insists on a high level of understanding and respect for the form among his students. He travels to Guinea regularly and returns to the United States with the latest developments in contemporary dance so that his teaching is always a mixture of traditional work and the dances that infuse popular culture.

Sekou has also created several instructional videos and collaborated in the making of a documentary on the role of dance in Guinea and the United States. Although Sekou demonstrates a wide array of experience in choreography and dance training, has performed at numerous international venues, and is familiar with a "*mélange*" of traditional styles, his authority in African dance rests on his ability to "acknowledge" the sources of the materials he uses by making distinctions between the traditional and popular forms. In addition to updating his dance repertoire by traveling to Guinea on a regular basis, the individual inspirations that inform Sekou's choreography and pedagogy must be

distinguished from traditional sources. This representation illustrates the arbitrary ways in which ideas about Africa are constructed by emphasizing a particular association with uncontaminated cultural sources using ethnic signifiers to build authentic identities. As a cultural ambassador, Sekou must represent both his cultural heritage and artistry. His expertise involves knowledge of the historical background of dance and musical traditions, regions, and the peoples involved, as well as functions of different dances and rhythms, for example social dances, dances of healing etc. As such he is expected to demonstrate an expertise in individual and cultural authority. In a social context where art is commodified and where individualism is a vital component of artistry, the association of performers and their students in terms of a master/apprentice relationship, mystifies and confuses the roles that West African performers are expected to play as teachers, dancers and musicians.

The biography of Assan shows how representations of tradition can even be inspired by cosmopolitan life.

Assan was born in Senegal West Africa. He is master dancer, choreographer and drummer. He has been choreographing since 1996. In Senegal especially Dakar he is known as a popular dancer since 1980. Assan has starred in television and music videos with featured artists like *Kine Lam* and the band *Super Diamono*, and is also featured in numerous other performances. He has performed for the Miss Europe contest in 1992 and a Nelson Mandela concert and is well known for performing dance in all of the popular nightclubs in Dakar, such as *Sahel*, *Thiossance* and *Kilimanjaro*. Assan was a dancer in the prestigious company *Ballet D'Afrique Noir* in Senegal. He performed as a dancer for five years on the *History of Mandinka* program (as Sundiata Keita, the king of Mandinka), and the ballet named *Epoc Manding*. Assan has been training numerous European artists in the Gambia in West African dance and drumming and

has been working as a teacher for children in various New York programs. He has choreographed several children's performances.

Assan is experienced as a dancer in music videos and popular nightclubs in Dakar, as well as in training tourists in traditional drumming and performing Mande's epic history as King Sundiata Keita. Not from the Mande society, Assan is a mix of Senegalese, Malian, and Mauritanian. As a recent migrant and participant in New York's dance scene he voiced his frustration at seeing the obsession with traditional dance which he finds constraining, being far more interested in what he describes as "funk" styles, a mix of *Sabar*, Afro-pop, and modern. He notes, "once you know the *Sabar* rhythms you improvise," instead of being too concerned with the techniques of the dance style and origins. When I asked Assan why he only teaches *Djembe* style and does not teach *Sabar*, he replied, "ah! ... the Griots will kill me." Dancers also valorize the ethnic background of teachers and learning from a Griot is given a greater symbolic significance.

Before introducing another instructor Amadou, it is necessary to consider New Yorkers' exposure to ongoing trips and workshops to West Africa, which are advertised in ways that highlight authenticity.

... In addition to workshops, you will observe various traditional ceremonies, visit markets, explore beautiful beaches, and attend rehearsals of some of Guinea's ballet troupes. We will also visit the village of Kindia ... well known for its beautiful scenery, indigo (tie-dyed) fabrics and large markets. Because this is a special year we will also be going to the beautiful village of Boke for two days to see traditional mask dances of that region! Students will live in a large villa in Nogo, a village about 15 miles from downtown Conakry. Accommodations are comfortable with bedrooms and bathrooms shared by workshop

participants. The delicious local cuisine is based on rice, fish, vegetables, meat and a variety of sauces. Fresh bread, salad and bottled water will be served with meals.

These representations of events and places in authentic terms highlight uncontaminated village life, and appeal to the senses of American audiences.

The images are symbolically mediated in ways that provide distinctions between the modern and traditional. There are also instances where it is possible to highlight unique aspects of authentic village life such as an invitation to Mali, which reads: "Bamako is not a city like Dakar and Abijan. It is an agglomerate of numerous villages and ethnic groups." Students are invited to explore other aspects of village life besides drum and dancing as an opportunity for going to the "next level" from learning *Djembe* to exploring the cultures of places like the mysterious Dogon country. Students can find accommodations either at a "luxurious" hotel in Bamako or by staying with Malian families.

Other invitations even take into consideration the significance of documenting and researching African tradition and recommend a trip to the "motherland" as an opportunity not only to experience "pure pleasure," but to also "discover the traditions and culture of a historically rich kingdom" especially "instrumental for all individuals interested in fulfilling research particularly in anthropology and dance history. "... Whether you are a student, a scholar, a dancer, an executive, or a homemaker, this is the trip of a lifetime. For all those who have never touched the African soil, experience the quintessential."

Even regional African dance camps in the United States such as one which takes place in Maine highlight authenticity by imitating “African village life” and listening to “authentic West African rhythms and dance from masters around the world.” “Enjoy African cuisine and bathe in the sun by a fresh water lake. In the evenings, you can relax around a cozy camp fire by the lake accompanied by drums, songs and story telling.”

In his attempt to represent an authentic village tradition, an African dance instructor named Amadou, who was initiated into the masked dance tradition in Ivory Coast and performed with the National Ballet of Cote d’Ivoire, has had an impressive array of experiences both as an international performer and as a teacher. Amadou disapproves of the idea that African dance is a tradition-popular-art mixture. In response to the question “are you a Griot?” Amadou retorted, “Africa is a continent not a country” and explained that Griots come from particular regions in West Africa and that not all performers come from a Griot background. Based on his own experience Amadou then made distinctions between Griot tradition, which he associates with particular regions of West Africa (that do not encompass his background), and dances that are social rather than ritual in form. For Amadou, ritual dances, like folklore, are based on daily life and are spiritual rather than religious. Moreover dances that come from folklore are not meant for staged performances. Amadou points out that in the commercialization of African dance, the ritual context has been undermined and his goal is to teach students the different meanings of dances partly as an

ancestral calling. He resents the idea that anyone can simply “pick up a drum” and become a musician without a proper training. As stated previously, the process of blurring the boundaries of a genre by constructing a “third space,” where authentic cultures are popularized, leads to a contestation of the rules and standards of correct instruction. In folklore Amadou notes,

... You dance to the village community. Even if you make money it goes back to the village, not you ... you have a master and anything you make is for your master ... except for what your master gives to you. We look for the blessing of masters. It is the blessing which makes us who we are in the United States. We learnt the hard way not the easy way ... to give back to the master you work in his farm ... there is no phone. Your master sends you on a message so you have to walk ... no bus ... for your master ... but not all learned like this ... you live with family friends ... you learn for love. You believe in what you are doing.

Based on his learning and teaching experience Amadou criticized some West African and American artists who have entered the commercial scene as musicians without having what he sees as being the essential training, experience and attitude, especially learning humility “the hard way.” In his words, “when we’re learning in Africa, only god knows where we’re going; many performers play “with an ego not love.”

An introduction to Amadou’s biography reads as follows:

Amadou was born into a family of dancers and craft people – indeed, his family ... are responsible for perpetuating the masked dance tradition. In addition to being a highly skilled concert artist ... Amadou is spiritually enfranchised through the family heritage.

His website displays a picture of Amadou dressed impeccably in a dark business suit and tie giving the impression that he might be the CEO of a company. In contrast, most other performers are photographed in ritual clothes having donned

various ethnic markers. One time, during the staging of a protest by dancers and musicians after the closing of a dance center because of noise complaints from loud drumming, Amadou appeared on television dressed in a suit. “This is our culture,” he argued in response to a question by the newscaster about his opinion on the disruption caused by the drummers.

Amadou insists on the representation of a specific kind of authenticity and also feels responsible to teach his students the cultural origins of dances and peoples. In the staging and choreography of various dance styles, Amadou suggests that improvisation is permissible as long as the traditional forms are not drastically changed. Commenting on his frustration with the general public’s perception of Africa, which comes from museums, movies, books and cultural centers and which he finds to be “the wrong places for learning about Africa,” Amadou asks, “what is a date? A date is not a culture, what happened at that moment is important about that culture ... I don’t need books I need life, I may not be able to give you a date but I can tell you what happened.”

As an example of displaying his disappointment with representations of Africa in museums, Amadou critiques the displays of masks which come from his region, “you see the head of a *Dan* or *Gouro* mask that’s it. What kind of information is that? What does it mean? It’s not the human way, the spirit behind the mask makes the mask ... a mask is spiritual but what is behind it? How was that mask made that way? I am not a mask but the mask belongs to me ... represents the

spirit of the ancestors.” Amadou describes himself as a “living interpreter of the mask.” Amadou’s narrative emphasizes how oral traditions, which sustained the shaping of more flexible and context specific forms of meaning, have become codified. Performers must learn a process of “curation” to suit their particular contexts, consequently they become “specialists” of their cultural heritage.

My discussions with different performers also invited a degree of masking or mystification of certain aspects of our self-representations. As a researcher I was taking notes whilst asking a series of questions and being concerned over the accuracy of my “data.” The performers were obliged to present themselves to me in a coherent fashion by demonstrating the accuracy of the sources of their knowledge, their expertise about African dance and their legitimacy. In a sense we were both “specialists” but within our respective institutions. Although Amadou, for example, is one of my teachers whom I have known for several years, this was the first time that we encountered one another in a researcher/interviewee context.

Sitting in Amadou’s car while he was smoking a cigarette and preparing to teach an evening dance class (which was the only way I could pin him down for an interview), I could not claim that my reading about West Africans and knowledge of African dance would help him and his peers “understand” themselves better. There was also a sense of anxiety surrounding the information we exchanged and Amadou was particularly concerned about how I was going to make use of

the information that I got from him. He asked that I contact him before publicizing any part of it. We were both concerned with the authority of our information, which incidentally enabled us to represent and legitimize our positions. Our sense of entitlement (however ethical or self-reflexive) depended on (or was derived from) the representational contexts that we found (or situated) ourselves in. But more importantly, it was I rather than Amadou who would be writing the narratives gathered for this project, despite my reliance on his account and concerns over its accuracy.

The level of expertise of a future apprentice of Amadou's would be appraised by other West African dance and drum participants depending on Amadou's "accreditation" in the broader performer and dance community. The adequacy of my knowledge of African dance also depended on the validity of information that I gathered concerning individual performers, and my overall "understanding" of the subject matter reflected in different theoretical contexts. With the right combination of symbolic and cultural capital it is also possible to transform one's information into something new. Those with a greater influence and access to symbolic capital are then able to authorize the legitimacy of some performers over others.

Being affiliated with a former national ballet company member, or a Griot, receiving grants and awards, collaborating with well-known artists and scholars, performing at prestigious venues, all serve as forms of symbolic capital that

boost people's biographies and credibility in the world of African dance. The construction of symbolically mediated categories which provide viewers with "information" about otherness by making distinctions between the modern and traditional, such as in Amadou's case, illustrates how appearances promote a certain kind of aesthetics and idea about difference. Through a reordering of signs and symbols, "information," "facts" and imagery that are based on "credibility" need not be "true" or "false." Instead through a consensus they act as codes that enable an affect and serve the purpose of crafting an experience (Lasch 1991).

Globalizing the local

Inhabiting a "third space" through the process of "re-representing" and hybridizing authentic cultures and construction of "indegenized" cosmopolitan identities requires a context. In order for their creativity to thrive, individuals must "find" or "seek out" a context (Mosley 2006). In "Life Out of Context," the writer Walter Mosley describes how individual artists must learn to situate themselves within a "lineage" and "history" for their "style" to acquire a presence. "Self-perceptions" that are gained through being affiliated with a lineage and history can then "broaden" or "deepen" a genre. If one questions an author's claim, one would also have to confront the "great historical masters of the art" (6). He notes,

I didn't really care about the circumstances that these artists make use of to promote and justify their work. I was interested in the reasoning behind their fabricated affiliations, which I readily admit I only supposed. One value in belonging to a group is professional. You have friends who hire you, write you letters of recommendation, excuse your shortcomings, and profess love for the work you commit. These artists affiliate themselves

with institutions whose boards create endowments which help to foster the work of these writers. These professional friends influence awards, stipends, and subtler decisions that bring, at least for a moment, these works and their creators into the public eye (7).

This protection of “intellectual preserves” even within the arts serves multiple functions. Not only does the artist benefit from placing him or herself within a context, so does the audience. Because one is compared to certain other writers and artists, “... all of them benefit from an intellectual and artistic structure that lends an authority and a breadth to their work that few lone artists could accomplish. Their readers and students also gain because of a group of dynamic ideas that blossom *within a context* of art and artists.” Individuals can then rely on the context of a genre or “style” to “bolster” their “... solitary agenda of creativity with a large system of thinkers and thought – even if the claims of the system in question are dubious, it gives meaning to their relationships” (Mosley 2006:8). This process of acquiring a substantial amount of capital through a combination of individual and institutional means then provides people with the ability, as “specialists,” to bestow prestige and honor upon others, or to shape the decision making of the genre by influencing the acceptable aesthetic choices and limits to the definition of boundaries.

For example, “A guide to *Jembe*” elaborates on the contrast between appropriate village and ballet styles juxtaposing the popularization of recorded percussion musical ensembles in the international arena with live drumming in local contexts in West Africa. These forms of representation are accessible to African dance participants in New York and elsewhere:

The new ensembles further remove *Jembe* drumming from its village roots by almost entirely dispensing with dancers. Focus is shifted to the ensemble arrangements and the charisma and virtuosity of the soloist. This use of the *Jembe* is bound to stir mixed emotions among Africans in general, and even among the drummers themselves. The thought of an African drum taking the modern industrialized world by storm must have some appeal to Africans seeking recognition of their deep cultural legacy. On the other hand, the possible bastardization of a sacred tradition may be too high a price to pay for a fleeting commercial success with a typically fickle American public. The frustrations of some African teachers when they hear their village rhythms being played wrong are becoming more visible in workshops” (Charry 1996:3).

The guide also provides other sources for learning about *Djembe* in addition to going to Africa and learning with masters, for example, spending the summer in *Djembe* camps in America staffed by West African teachers. Distinctions are also made between books that need to be given a “critical eye” by identifying between those that address “core” traditions (i.e. authentic Manding societies) “from Mali and Guinea as sources of *Djembe* tradition,” and books covering peripheral traditions which include “other regions of West Africa.” In this category, a book written by a Malian is recommended with reservations because it was co-authored by a writer “with little musicological experience.” Here, the problem need not concern the “right” or “wrong” way of playing rhythms. Rather, a “verificationist epistemology” is externally applied to West African musicians, based on “musicological” expertise, which diminishes their “authority” although they are simultaneously referred to as masters. (Most West African musicians do not have a formalized musical training in the Western sense). “A guide to *Jembe*” was fashioned to suit the demands of international students of African music rather than West African musicians. This shows how locals are globalized, and the limits to a “global imagination” and experimentation.

A “global imagination” serves as a context for some narratives and not others. The institution of rules serves as the basis for appropriating and representing African dance and music. Some New York performers attempt to make distinctions of performers based on verifiable sources. In order for West African musicians to take part in discourses such as “A guide to *Jembe*,” they would have to learn and abide by the rules of musicology. The guide provides reasons for making distinctions between *core* and *peripheral* musical styles and recordings of *Djembe*. A musical style is to be evaluated in relation to the “country it is from, the ethnic and regional affiliation of the leader, and the recording context, be it a traditional event in Africa or a studio recording” (1996:4). The authorizing of a genre or definition of its boundaries nonetheless can change as Mande music also contains within it an aesthetic sensibility that is “proselytizing,” with the ability to “reform itself” (Charry 2000).

The reliance on the accuracy of information to “understand” otherness can have multiple implications. As Chinua Achebe (1988) notes for example, the colonists’ “understanding” of the natives served as a “precondition” for control, and control implied having an adequate “proof” of understanding. These contradictory ways of hybridizing local cultural practice can then interfere with the goals of institutionalizing a genre, leading to confusions and debates concerning how to address professional standards, accurate techniques, discerning the living tradition from “origin stories” and a Griot non-Griot hierarchy. Moreover, despite

the mystification of their role as “masters,” performers are expected to conduct themselves as professionals. According to a drum student, some performers are critiqued for being disorganized, unable to come together collectively and represent themselves. They are also expected to “be punctual for jobs, or workshops, learn the language and acquire correct teaching techniques, run a class like a business, deal with money issues, understand planning and publicity... and give customers (students) what they want and need.” Not being able to ascribe to these rules of conduct results in the loss of jobs and students. Therefore the performance space is not merely experimental or an occasion for a social gathering but is also dictated by rules and standards like any other commercial dance or performing arts institution, and performers must try to work within these regulations and standards.

As members of “world cultures” West African performers’ concerns over translation and enculturation involve not only issues of negotiating symbolic meanings but also gaining access to “social practices of power” through which symbolic meanings and the “licensing of the gaze” (Hall 1993) are shaped. In the translation of texts into world cultures, for example, the “colonized accuses the colonizer of injustice in the name of modern world culture “precisely because he conceded that he is not yet accorded full membership” (Asad 1995: 330). “The colonizer invites the colonized into modern world culture, but insists as its authentic originator on being the judge of successful enculturation ... and the

kinds of questions that the colonizer confronts (which are institutional and not textual)” include,

... Why are they not translating my work? ... Am I not inventive in the way modernity values inventiveness? Do I not demonstrate the sensibilities that modern culture requires? Can I not criticize everything even as moderns do? (The non-colonized asks no such questions)” (Asad 1995:330).

Traversing the aesthetics of a “global” imagination and the fashioning of new styles within a commodified field, point to the persistence of rules and standards of incorporation rather than their absence. As Edward Said has noted, Orientalist discourse is sustained through the ongoing reproduction of conceptual categories that are negotiated between the West and the other. These categories occur as forms of shifting discourses within power structures that are made to accommodate a system of validation (or re-validation). Although lacking consensus, this involves a perpetuation of tradition through classifications and “ethnic signifiers” by institutions and individual authorities that endorse the “credibility” of information concerning otherness, which is mediated through language. Information then takes on a primacy and those caught up in debates of authenticity or inauthenticity must “seek out a *context*” and strive to attain the highest degree of accuracy in their validations or cross-validations. This system of cross-validation, which serves as a prerequisite for the other’s incorporation into Western discourses, can also oblige individuals to make choices in representation.

In the “battle of minds” of post-colonial India, Ashis Nandy notes, the “folk” and “hybrid” can be used impartially, to constitute a larger repertoire of experience (1988). Most importantly, what people are able to do in terms of their choices in cultural productions, self-representation and economic goals depends on the kinds of options that are at their disposal. And choices have to be made. They are made either because of the presence, or due to the lack of, options and in response to the immediacy of the circumstances at hand. Subsequently, the other’s reliance on authenticity may serve as a strategy, or a response to the demands of an “aesthetics of exoticism” which condemns otherness to an identity. It is likely that the emergence of “self-conscious” acts in representation may be neither “true” nor “false” but a “credible” vantage point for constituting a new kind of reality, and critique of the dominant narrative’s concern about otherness. It is also necessary to inquire how the translation of the exotic into a “certain” category acts as a subversive force by obliging or constraining individuals in their attempts to take part in the shaping of a genre.

Chapter 7

Style: Scenes From Around New York

*“A strange man, in a strange land,
must sing a strange song”*

- *Babatunde Olatunji (1927 – 2003)*

Olatunji's death was announced on *Afropop*, a popular website for World Music enthusiasts. Several other sources also broadcasted the news of his death. On April 28th 2003, a ceremony in Olatunji's honor was held at the Riverside Church in Manhattan with the Reverend Dr. James A. Forbes presiding. Following the service, New York's drummers organized a drumming ceremony at Grant's Tomb in Riverside Park. As a Nigerian Master drummer and “ambassador” of traditional African dance and music in America and internationally since the late 1950's, Olatunji received a long obituary listing his many achievements since coming to America, to his “... immortality.” Among the highlights, in 1958 Olatunji performed at the Radio City Music Hall as a guest soloist. He attended several colleges in America, receiving an Honorary Doctorate in Fine Arts from Medgar Evers College, CUNY and created the Olatunji Center for African Culture. In Nigeria while working at the Nigeria Labor Department, Olatunji had formed a cultural group and learnt to play several traditional musical instruments and performed throughout the country.

Olatunji attended the Baptist Academy in Lagos, Nigeria and came to the United States through a scholarship to attend Moorehouse College in Atlanta in the 1950's. As a student Olatunji earned some extra money by working in jobs such

as tobacco picking, construction, railroad construction and at a Ford factory. Prior to developing an interest in music, he had intended to work towards his Ph.D in Public Administration and return to Nigeria to serve in politics. While at Moorehouse College, Olatunji performed at different functions. Eventually he married a Black American woman and began performing professionally at different venues in New York. Through his performances he became acquainted with the choral director of the Radio City Music Hall. His music was transcribed and made into an album. Olatunji also appeared on CBS television and his growing popularity led to nationwide lectures and appearances at various institutions like Carnegie Hall, The Apollo Theater in Harlem, and schools, and museums (Olatunji 2005, Warren 1962).

In addition to releasing numerous albums, and performing with various artists, Olatunji received a Grammy award in 1958. Inside the leaflet, which lists the order of service, is a photograph of Olatunji when he was much younger. He is dressed in a white robe with a thick chain that displays a cross around his neck. Kneeling in front of three short cone shaped drums covered with Zebra skin, his arms are outstretched. Underneath the photograph is a quote by Olatunji which reads, “rhythm is the soul of life. The whole universe revolves in rhythm. Everything and every human action revolves around rhythm.”

The service, an all-day affair, was attended by a massive and diverse population which included Olatunji’s extended Nigerian and “international extended” family.

The church was full to capacity, and the entrance and corridors bustled with activity. During the ceremony, as different tributes or performances were being presented in the main sanctuary, people entered and exited. Outside the church building, cars and limousines were parked in a long line and several people carrying *Djembe* drums and dressed in various styles of clothing made of African batik were also entering or leaving the church. Amongst those who came to pay their respects were members of a large Nigerian and West African community dressed in colorful and elaborate robes. Greetings, nods and looks of acknowledgement were exchanged amongst passers by. Inside the church corridors several Black American women dressed in white costumes were rehearsing some dance steps; a few were familiar faces from New York's African dance scene.

In between the tributes that people paid in honor of Olatunji and for the space which African tradition and arts has afforded to individuals, different versions of African tradition were performed. Some of the speakers and performers at the ceremony included Chuck Davis, a Black American choreographer, Randy Weston and Max Roach two Black American musicians, and Olatunji's *Drums of Passion* band. A Nigerian band performed some funeral music and Nigerians in the audience participated in a call and response. Some stood up spontaneously and moved to the rhythms being played. Chuck Davis also gave a eulogy and invited the audience to stand and take part in a celebratory response. During the

intermission between speakers and performances, a *Djembe* orchestra played different rhythms.

Throughout the service there were moments of outburst, which the audience collectively shared or expressed by clapping and laughter. It seemed as though the level of emotional outpouring in Olatunji's memory became an opportunity to affirm or reclaim an African tradition, which has been reproduced by countless other individuals as well. Olatunji's lifetime achievement was honored by many. Although he symbolized the hero of an African tradition, he was not a drummer by birth and was therefore unrestricted by the rules of any particular tradition. This allowed Olatunji to hybridize out of African and American styles (Olatunji 2005) a "nomadic aesthetic" (Gabriel 1990). In spite of his revitalization of African music, however, and the honor which was bestowed on him as an "elder tradition bearer," controversies surround his musical styles and "in-authenticity."

Besides Olatunji, Chief Bey (1913 – 2004), a Black American drummer, and Ladji Camara (1923 – 2004), a Guinean drummer, are two figures from New York's African dance and drum scene who have died and who were paid similar tributes. Alongside the symbolic breakdown of cultural barriers and embrace of African music and dance by an eclectic group, as reflected in the diverse population of participants at these memorials, issues of ownership (i.e. the claiming of a genre and authenticity of individuals), or concerns of cultural appropriation and boundaries are played out persistently within different groups.

For example, in some circles the popularizing of Olatunji's African style as an "authentic" West African tradition has been controversial due to his artistic association with Black American Artists such as Chief Bey who, according to some sources, coached Olatunji in different versions of West African music. The popularity of Olatunji's style in the 1960's and his authority with regard to traditional African music was critiqued by Guy Warren who referred to Olatunji as a "leader of a cultural sect" (1962). Warren is a Ghanaian Jazz musician who during the same era was frustrated by the American mainstream's attraction to a *kind* of traditional African style which undermined his interest in popularizing Afro-jazz. Warren, also known as Kofi Ghanaba, was born in 1923 in Accra and was a drummer in the Afro-Rhythmic Orchestra. He lived briefly in London after World War II, and then Chicago. Eventually he returned to Ghana to work as a musician and Disc jockey. Warren experimented with various musical genres and practiced Buddhism while living in Ghana.

In the 1950's Warren moved to the United States to work as a Jazz musician, and was interested in introducing African drums into Jazz by developing a technique of his own, which he refused to compromise, and which American Jazz musicians found complex to interpret. Warren experimented with American Jazz artists like Thelonius Monk, Charlie Parker, Max Roach, and several Afro-Cuban musicians (Kelley 2005). A photograph of Warren with Charlie Parker displays him dressed in an overcoat while Parker was wearing a robe made from

Ghanaian Kente cloth. Warren's interpretation of the standards and attempt to popularize African tradition by associating it with subjectivity diverged from Olatunji's "idea of Africa." While both Olatunji and Warren hybridized American and African styles to form a new genre that was informed by an "aesthetics of exoticism," their interpretations of the idea of Africa and the ways that they appealed emotionally to their audiences varied significantly.

Flexible Subjectivities

By drawing on various representational practices, this chapter explores the process of hybridizing and commercializing popular cultures in New York. I examine the intersections between local cultural productions and "virtual" identities that are gained through exemplary means. How African music and dance are constructed as a genre through various institutions, and the ways that individuals shape their artistry, serve as vantage points for examining the modes through which locally produced cultural practices that enter into a global field are "indegenized" as cosmopolitan identities. Alongside flexible subjectivities and new opportunities for constructing identities, the "structuration of possibilities" and criteria of an "aesthetics of exoticism" obliges West African artists to represent themselves through notions of difference. The burden of earning a livelihood through artistic means further underscores the ways that art operates within a commodified field and the complex terrains that West African performers must navigate within a "disorganized capitalism" (Winnant 1997).

Howard Winnant (1997) notes that even in the Center, a globally imagined world is sustained by an uneven process of structuration. He depicts the ways that students at an urban college campus in California hybridize and cross cultural boundaries through “imagined worlds” that have been produced by peoples from various social backgrounds. On their way to their segregated homes, they are able to “indigenize” (via information and technology), cultural productions that a “disorganized capitalism” provides, such as hip-hop music, automobiles, and stereo-systems. The point here is not whether exoticism is imagined or real but that the absence of a temporality through which difference is globally imagined, commodified and popularized; exoticism is prefigured and removed from everyday occurrences. Nevertheless, these detemporalized representations, and the aesthetic sensibilities they evoke, must then be associated with actual peoples, times and places. Similarly, the hybridizing and representation of African dance and drumming has been constituted in diverse and uneven ways. The following descriptions present the ways that a “disorganized capitalism” shapes cosmopolitan identities in the world of New York City African dance.

On a summer day in Battery Park in lower Manhattan, a *Djembe* ensemble made up of five White American drummers performed to an audience who are mostly Wall Street workers on their lunch break. In the periphery, several West African traders carrying briefcases filled with watches and sunglasses were engaged in a heated conversation, paying little attention to the performance. This image portrays the “indigenizing” of identity and how the representation of African dance

and music by way of an “aesthetics of exoticism” exists within a “third space” (Brooks 2001). In his humorously written self-reflexive account, “Bobos (bourgeois Bohemians) in Paradise,” David Brooks (2001) examines how mainstream values have become hybridized to form a “third culture.” Brooks describes this emerging “third space” as a site that intersects “creativity and commerce” by illustrating how the “anti-establishment” counter cultural radicalism of the bohemian sixties has now been fused with the “realm of ambition and worldly success.” He suggests that in a “hybridized world,” the “culture-wars” can be reconciled by merging “consciousness raising” and consumerism into forms of experience. By translating “intellectual capital” via ideas and emotions into products, the “culture industry” has made it possible to reconcile “aristocratic thrill-seeking with social concern” through a symbolic reordering of reality.

Hence, new versions of “natural lifestyles,” aesthetics, and bodily rituals or experiences such as: “bohemian/primitive chic,” “ready-to-wear religions,” and “eco-adventures,” or the fusion of “consciousness raising with cost control” have led to marketing innovations such as Benneton or Body Shop. Brooks cautions however, that “new codes are in place that are different from the old codes but serve many of the old functions of giving order and coherence to life.” The blurring of boundaries may signal a “shift in boundary markers” and new versions of a “moral etiquette,” while American social life remains as hierarchical as it has been in the past (58, 67). Thus the juxtapositions of entertainers, Wall Street workers and watch traders noted above.

As Brooks points out, the diverse ways that local authentic cultures are popularized through the blurring of boundaries have resulted in unusual forms of fusions in styles. In the African music scene in New York, styles such as “Afro-Celtic” bands, or Jewish Klezmer music with West African drumming illustrate some of the novel ways that African music and artists are now becoming hybridized. American performers such as the ones described in the Battery Park scene are taking part in West African performances through different teaching and learning environments and the availability of a variety of musical instruments. During an interview session with a West African drummer on his break from teaching at a Manhattan studio, a white male entered the studio and mentioned that he was attending a drum party and needed to purchase a drum. After looking over an assortment of drums, he selected a “talking drum” and received a short instruction on how to play it, paid \$80 and left with his newly acquired musical instrument. These forms of transactions, now readily available by way of the marketplace, downplay how learning rhythms and dances, like other art forms, requires skill. The arbitrary blurring of boundaries also can lead to concerns of cultural protectionism.

In some instances such as the above example, the decontextualization and reincorporation of African dance and music as an art form/cultural practice into diverse spaces in American life frame the genre ambiguously. For example, at a New York Aveda store, (a hair care and beauty shop with a vision that connects

“beauty with environment”), a large poster reads “save our power plants.” Below the poster there is a *Djembe* drum beside a *Shekere* (a percussion instrument made out of a gourd) placed on top of the drum. To the left is another poster with an advertisement that offers yoga and stress management lessons. The business card of a *Djembe* instructor placed beside the drum invites students to a “drum circle” and displays his credentials as a certified yoga instructor, ceremonial drummer and Kirtanist (an ancient Sanskrit chanting practice from India). By combining an “ancient practice with today’s cultural need for creative expression and human connection” the flyer describes a drum circle as varied, although most follow “similar principles.” There is no audience, “... everyone is part of the musical experience, and “there are no rehearsals ... the music does not come from reading notes on a sheet of music written in the past, it is improvised in the moment.” “There is no right or wrong ... the drum circle is a safe, permissive explorational environment.” There is no teacher, “... instead the drum circle is led by a facilitator who has a dual focus; to build the musicality of the group while also building the sense of community and connection.” By emphasizing that the drum circle is “much more than drumming,” the flyer concludes “... it is inclusive ... everyone is welcome; all levels of ability.”

In West Africa, although music plays a significant role in social life, not everyone dances and drums. And of those who do take part in dancing or drumming there are distinctions between social performers or highly skilled (or talented) individuals who received their training in a formalized setting and learnt from

teachers. The improvisational character of polyrhythms, or their unwritten and unrehearsed form, does not imply that they lack a structure. Representing a drum circle as being free for all requires abstracting some aspects of this cultural practice and not others, introducing new standards in order to give it meaning suitable to a new social context. In the process the doors are open for untutored performers to enter the arena, urging in audiences and followers across the city.

Put somewhat differently, re-constructing African dance as genre in arbitrary ways (i.e. as an art form/cultural practice) diminishes the level of skill that one must acquire to become a professional. In other forms of dancing such as modern dance, this is less so. Because most students are not professional dancers, (although some perform in dance companies), the performance space is both a social setting and a learning environment. Cathy, a white American dancer who traveled to Senegal and is familiar with *Sabar* dance, explains that her reason for changing to Dunham dance was because of *Sabar's* ambiguous representation and its lack of "formalized" training. She asks "it's not a *Tanabere* and its not modern dance, what is it that we are doing?" Most performers nonetheless argue that the ways that they learned dance and music involved some kind of cultural context and specialized or institutionalized forms of training. Their concern, however, involves understanding the ways that cultural practices are framed as authentic or hybrid.

Given the socio-economic disparities among individual performers, their reliance on the dance community implies that they must also appeal to various demands, along with managing the processes through which rhythms and dances are commercialized. However, a level of professionalism and adherence to institutional standards is also in place. In other words, people are learning artistry as much as they are engaging in a “global imagination.” Yet as an aspect of the “global,” rhythms, dances or even subjectivities can be improvised or re-fashioned to suit various styles with or without the need for identifiable sources. Depending on the immediacy of their goals, performers must then try to untangle social and institutional demands by either exemplifying or minimizing issues of authenticity amongst themselves.

The ambiguous framing of performances that draw their representation from authentic cultures, and their incorporation into mainstream American popular culture is not unique to African dance and drumming. For example, a new CD by an “all-electric band,” available at mostly new age centers, is based on “sacred sounds” that weave the “tonal vibrations” of India’s Great Indus Valley into the “ethereal yet earthy” rhythms and grooves of Harlem. Another CD by the same group fuses music of the “Mississippi Delta region, the Black gospel church, the blues, jazz, funk, folk, soul, rhythm and blues,” and the “wisdom of Ancient Africa with the tonal energies of Sanskrit and Vedic chants.”

Some forms of commodified cultures are re-fashioned in ways that appeal to wide ranging audiences. At a dance center in lower Manhattan (a different venue from my research site), a studio is filled to capacity with Japanese hip-hop students who are standing around waiting for instructions from their teacher. A few minutes later a rap song comes on and a voice from the group calls out “five, six, seven, eight.” The teacher appears to demonstrate some movements. She is Japanese, dressed in baggy pants, t-shirt and sneakers and conducts the class for the most part in Japanese. Over the years the demand for hip-hop and other forms of Black American vernacular culture by Japanese communities in New York has grown. In the East Village several Japanese stores now display advertisements for hair braiding services. In other nationwide venues such as gyms a new version of the “Indian Jane Fonda” based on Bhangara, a rural folk dance from Northern Punjab, has become the “trendiest” fitness workout with DVD’s and instructional videos that are readily available. American hop-hop and Rhythm and Blues artists have popularized Punjabi music, prompting some Indian artists to demand compensation for the unlawful use of their music.

These perspectives on the ambiguous ways that an “aesthetics of exoticism” travels in space and time and operates within a commodified field illustrate the centrality of difference as a conceptual category and how it must be prefigured to operate as a “set of signs.” Fragmented images that are then associated with a place, peoples or aesthetic sensibility are meant to elicit certain kinds of emotional responses. In the commercial sphere, concerns over individual artistry

and representational practices involve disputes over understanding and gaining access to the structures through which signs, symbols and language define or blur boundaries. In his attempt to decipher this ambiguity, a young Malian drummer notes, “there are rules to get to Broadway and we don’t know what they are.” According to a Malian filmmaker, the reasons why performers “give all of themselves and get nothing back in return” is because of the highly specialized nature of American life, where everything has to be recorded, studied or “patented.” Marketing and patenting authentic African dance involves learning how to juxtapose contradictory discourses and practices; it also demands that the performers take an authoritative stance in their self-representation. Once the process of translation has occurred, these representations become open for re-imagining and re-constitution.

The ability of West African performers to navigate the complexities of life in New York (or other parts of America) is affected by their level of literacy. Overall many artists work in the informal sector, which makes them partly dependent on mediators or “culture brokers.” They also understand the significance of public relations in marketing themselves. This requires being competent in the local cultural capital, which involves learning English, and understanding marketing strategies like developing promotional materials. They also need to develop interpersonal skills with wide ranging audiences. As teachers of music and dance they must establish a pedagogy, and because they do not own dance

studios or production companies they must acquire a business rapport with various kinds of institutions.

Recent migrants and women performers face particular difficulties in learning to “hustle,” which constrains their ability to find work and promote themselves in an over saturated market. Women’s lack of training with musical instruments is a particular drawback since they have to depend on drummers to teach their classes. Usually they end up leaving the business. If women performers have children, their time and energy for networking are further impaired. Some choose to work in hair braiding salons in Black American communities, in African restaurants or in trading or other kinds of survival jobs as alternatives.

For example a Guinean drum and dance instructor who travels both regionally and internationally, suggested that the underlying problems concerning the political disputes in dance classes had especially to do with the segregated nature of social life in America and the limited contact between peoples across racial lines. He observed that these disparities were mostly visible in terms of neighborhood, school, and the work place. However, because his professional goal does not permit him to take part in political disputes, his main focus is to provide a service to any group that is interested in learning African dance and drumming. In general though, a particular concern and confusion to West African performers involves the ways that they are objectified or misrepresented, more importantly, how the experimental nature of the genre can either be fixed or

transformed because exoticism occurs outside of historical time. At times this mechanism renders them, as well as the genre, invisible.

For example, a female semi-literate West African teacher and single mother living in Harlem, who braids hair part time to supplement her income from teaching dance at a downtown studio, contrasts with the mostly middle or lower-middle class educated, American or international dancers who are in her class. As a dancer pointed out, after a dance class, some go to their downtown lofts, or gated communities and others to their inner city homes. Due to her inability to coordinate a performance group as a part of an annual presentation for the dance school, Fatou no longer teaches at the dance studio. However, the performance experience continues without her.

Of the few female dance instructors in New York, Fatou was a member of a Guinean dance company and started to teach at the downtown center as a substitute teacher. Eventually she was able to secure her own classes and occasionally participates in regional or national workshops when her schedule permits. As a single mother, she must juggle her professional life with child rearing. Because of scheduling problems and her inability to teach according to the policies of the downtown center Fatou had to quit. Since there are limited spaces in New York that afford similar opportunities for earning a livelihood by teaching ethnic dance as the downtown center does, Fatou was unable to secure an ongoing dance class at a different venue. Conversely, performers with

access to cultural capital and an adequate knowledge of African dance and music are able to teach classes, make videos, write books, produce shows and CD's, receive funding or grants from various cultural centers or foundations, or develop websites featuring their African music and dance-related works.

In New York, in addition to being spaces for earning a livelihood, the spaces where African dances take place are also networking centers for many West Africans, both local and new arrivals. For example Mady stays connected with Africa by meeting new people and sharing the downtown dance space with West African and international dancers.

Being here without a family is hard. That's why we can't live without going to the dance classes. That's where we get together, all of us, because we don't live together. We also bring people together.

Harlem's little Africa is also a haven for meeting other Africans in the restaurants and streets, which Mady calls an "African town." There "you hear no more English, you hear Wolof, Bambara, or a little French."

Mady is a *Sabar* dance performer in New York. He notes that *Sabar* dance can be both social and transgressive – "in Senegal people use *Sabar* for different things: for a wedding, a baby ceremony ... sometimes ladies want to have a party so they just throw a *Sabar* party, we call it *Tanaber*. But the *Sabar* can be sexy and sometimes older people don't want to see it." Mady also described the gender transformations of West African dancers who are for the most part women in Senegal, whereas abroad most of the dance teachers are male. This

is partly because men are able to also play the musical instruments, which makes it easier for them to learn choreography alongside their musical knowledge. “Usually in Senegal you don’t see a lot of guys doing the *Sabar*. Mostly you see women doing the *Sabar*. Believe me, if you go to Senegal you not gonna see a lot of men dancing.”

Newly arriving videos in New York are also ways of expanding the repertoire of choreographies by mixing the latest styles in West Africa with various rhythms. Styles evolve to accommodate performances in nightclubs and concerts. Mady makes a distinction between being a *Sabar* teacher as a profession and his ordinary life. “When I go to clubs, I don’t dance. If I go out after teaching a dance class, I have had enough dancing already. So I’m just chilling.” And if he does dance it is just for fun. “It is not like we are dancing *Sabar* – we are dancing the music: you have the guitar, the keyboard, and the *Sabar*.” In response to the question, “is there a dance that you can’t dance?” Mady replies, “not a dance that’s with music.”

Through establishing contacts and by networking, some performers use their knowledge of dance and drumming as a way of getting established in New York and move on to other professions. This was a much more lucrative option several years ago, however; recently it has become more challenging for newly arriving West Africans to secure teaching (dance or drumming) spaces because of the growing competition and limited studio spaces, and the rising cost of real

estate overall. In the 1980's, which was a flourishing period for African dance, a Senegalese named Jean came to New York because his French visa had expired during his stay in Paris. He arrived in New York with \$50. Jean met some cab drivers from West Africa at Kennedy airport who helped him find a place to stay in a popular Manhattan hotel where numerous other West Africans rented rooms that they shared with several roommates. It was winter and Jean's first job was working as a bus boy at a downtown café. He recalled crying bitterly one evening while taking out the garbage, since he had not expected life in America to be so harsh.

Jean learned of the African dance scene at a downtown center and befriended a Senegalese teacher who invited him occasionally to teach in his classes. After some time Jean began teaching his own classes which became quite popular and the added income allowed him to save enough money to rent an apartment. In Senegal Jean had never trained as a dancer and was not interested in becoming an artist. He improvised most of his style from his dance experience at nightclubs in Dakar and knowledge of traditional styles. From a middle class background and wanting to attend college, Jean did not see teaching African dance as an end but as a way out of his predicament. Eventually he became a sales person and worked with several companies in management positions and as a sales representative. Jean now owns a condominium, has sponsored several of his siblings to America and has no interest in New York's African dance scene.

Although in his reflections he shared some fond memories, Jean emphasized the hardship of being an artist in New York, especially the uncertainties of trying to earn a living in an unstable “ethnic” market, and the lack of education, which he found as being a constraint for performers who sought alternate means to a livelihood. In addition to earning a living as an artist, which can have different meanings in terms of lifestyle, attitude, and income in New York as distinct from West Africa, first generation immigrants have the weighty obligation of sending remittances to their families back home, not to mention language barriers. While some performers have intermarried or have managed (to some degree) to incorporate themselves into the broader society, others occupy two worlds by living at the margins of American society. Most are very devoted to their families and the lives that they left behind in West Africa. Through telephone conversations, and by connecting with West Africans who travel frequently to and from New York, they learn about the marriages, births and deaths of relatives and acquaintances that they left behind. They also send money and receive goods on a regular basis. Based on their previous lives and relation to work, most performers’ attitude towards earning a livelihood differs from the meaning of working for a living in America, where oftentimes work defines one’s identity. Assan notes how in Senegal work was more social, and did not have the same kind of alienating effect on his personal life as it does in America, because he was able to spend time with family and friends. He especially made note of the amount of energy required to take work so “seriously,” even as a performing

artist. Eventually though most adjust to the rigors of a professional life in America.

Adapting to a new social environment, and learning new forms of artistry that have been influenced by demands for the authenticity of both the artists and their aesthetic representations is a further challenge for many performers. Moreover even though performers may construct their identity as individual artists in the American sense, they tend to be viewed by the broader community (and are expected to present themselves) as “cultural ambassadors” as well. Sisse, who also worked as a performer in Dakar, describes the difference between being a New York artist and his previous experience as an artist in Senegal.

There are more opportunities here, it is easier to make money, but it is way easier in Senegal in terms of dance. There you don't mind if you have money or not ... you just go do your rehearsal; when you go home – you find food. It's different here, it doesn't matter how talented you are or who you are, you're gonna hustle. In Senegal you hustle but you hustle with your family and you don't feel it.

In the West despite the emphasis on issues such as the correct representations of songs and dances, most artists, like former national ballet members, do not necessarily come from the regions that they represent but have learned a variety of styles from different sources. In addition to being talented, their commercial success depends on their ability to negotiate various meanings and practices.

In addition to national ballets, which serve as places for training professional dancers and musicians, numerous dance schools and cultural centers in West

Africa specialize in both modern and traditional dance styles. Most New York dancers and drummers from West Africa come from a traditional-popular art background, although some disagree with this representation and emphasize the significance of dances or rhythms by ethnicity or region, and the need for maintaining the integrity of traditional/folkloric styles. Veteran New York artists are quite familiar with the kinds of aesthetic demands made by international audiences; this however does not necessarily include their individualized forms of representations or practices in actual dance performance settings. Dances that are practiced in many of New York's studios serve as examples of "street" dance, in contrast to the staged performances that are often dramatized in terms of authenticity.

For example Sisse, a Senegalese dance teacher, describes his eclectic training: "you have to be creative, even if you do traditional style. Sometimes you mix a little street in it but still the traditional is there...I teach a lot of different dances: West African, including *Sabar*, *Djembe*, Malian dance, Guinean dance, and dances from Ivory Coast." Since the 1980's Sisse has worked in many contexts in New York from choreography, to performing with different modern dance groups. "The first work I did here in New York," he reports, "was dancing modern dance." In Senegal Sisse's repertoire of experience includes a "mix of everything...Afro-Jazz, not totally modern or Jazz strict, not totally African." Over time, Sisse has grown accustomed to the demand for traditional African styles and omits much of his eclecticism when teaching and often in his choreography.

As an “open-artist” and when situations permit, however, he continues to be drawn to aesthetic eclecticism. He has co-produced performances with several other choreographers. One was called “From Senegal to Soho,” and others include numerous African based dances, Yoga, Capoeira, and poetry.

Another performer named Alpha spends a lot of his spare time going to see different performances, and Broadway shows. He finds that exploring other dance forms, in addition to being inspiring, is also a way of expanding his technique and repertoire of styles. When I called him to make an appointment for an interview he had just finished watching the Broadway musical *Aida*, and mentioned that there was some African music in the choreography. Alpha taught at numerous colleges and dance schools in New York such as Alvin Ailey. At the African Museum in New York he presented a performance and lecture on African dance and during the question and answer session, Alpha emphasized the more hybrid, trans-regional aspects of African dance, rather than its authenticity. One woman from the audience asked him about the symbolic significance of his *Djembe* drum, which -- was colorful and adorned with various pieces of cloth and beads. He replied, “oh, I just did that this morning,” (which does not mean that the color of the cloth and the beads lack cultural resonance or symbolism). Alpha mentioned how West Africans outside New York’s dance scene who come to see New Yorkers dance to West African styles find it “bizarre” that they can dance “so well.” Yet based on their preconceived ideas of tradition or folklore,

most New York dancers find West African performers to be lacking in aesthetic diversity in their styles.

Since the popularizing of African dance, newly arriving artists from West Africa are aware of the growing demand for an ambiguously framed notion of authenticity and find innovative ways of popularizing their styles. Most have already had prior contacts with tourists or with performers who live internationally and have visited West Africa. For example, a home video recording of a *Doundounba* dance in Conakry (made by a drum instructor) performed for international dance and music students who were traveling with their teacher to Guinea, shows a local dancer who is now in New York. I recognized him from the video and learned that he also happens to be the relative of the teacher who organized the tour. He is now a drummer in New York and has a business card that displays his picture in a grass skirt. Some artist's constructions of themselves as "living museums" based on ideas of authenticity serve as "masks," or possibly a salve for their vulnerabilities and as vehicles for navigating their way in unfamiliar territories, which they often shed or modify as time goes by. Some also fashion themselves via different forms of "Afro-urban" identities and imagery, including Rastafarianism, which are extremely popular in West Africa.

Since the transnationalization of African dance, numerous American and international participants travel on an ongoing basis to West Africa, and tour both the villages and urban centers. Various individuals and institutions that

specialize in marketing the culture or “folklore” of far away places demonstrate their expertise by constructing a specialized vocabulary, and through classifications that translate difference into a Western imaginary. Experiencing authentic Africa and its natural resources nonetheless also involves maneuvering through such modern trappings as airports, roads, nightclubs and villas, although the latter are quite modest by American standards.

Steven, a white American drummer, who is now a frequent traveler to Guinea, recounts his first travel experience with his teacher. As they drove from the airport to his teacher’s home, he was impressed that Conakry had streets and an airport. When they approached a small shack that served as a kiosk, he mistook it for his teacher’s home. Steven was surprised to find that his teacher’s relatives lived in a large villa, part of a huge compound where international students of dance and drumming study with West African performers. For the New Year’s Festival, which he spent in Conakry, Steven was further surprised that instead of the drumming and dance he took for granted as integral to the ceremony, participants spent the evening dancing to Rumba and “eating shrimp cocktails.”

On a different note, a white American female drummer named Linda traveled with a group of Americans to take part in the funeral of a West African drummer and friend. They collected funds to transport his body from New York. Although the drummer’s family are Catholic, Linda and her entourage insisted that their deceased friend would have wanted a traditional funeral ceremony. She

explained the lack of interest in tradition by Africans as being a reminder of their “badge of shame.” They called in some traditional drummers, and as the family sat and watched they performed together with some local traditional musicians. Linda was very emotional and crying at times as she recounted her experience.

The act of self-representation that West African performers have to fashion in the process of translation entails that they take on the role of a “trickster” (Ebron 2003), negotiating diverse symbolic meanings between West African and international spaces. As organizers of village life for international communities they coordinate a particular kind of experience by collaborating with local performers. Thus, performers have to juggle a multiplicity of worlds and in the process, engage in destabilizing a range of meanings. Local performers are eagerly striving to become “tricksters” in order to embark on international careers, while international audiences are eagerly aspiring to “go native.” Being able to traverse this dichotomy requires acquiring certain kinds of knowledge, skill, and an understanding of the grammar of placement by which various practices facilitate different modes of perception.

The way a locally produced aesthetic traverses a globally imagined space to shape personal and collective experience suggests that diverse groups represented by way of a universal paradigm of authentic or rooted cultures must continue to be qualified by “ethnic signifiers.” These classifications must also appeal to a broader audience beyond the local, although locals are able to alter

their cultural practices to meet the demands of a “global aesthetics.” Locals themselves however are de-territorialized and re-territorialized forming new versions of ethnicities and cultural practices within transnational spaces. This dynamic has important consequences for African dance performers in New York.

Sisse is one of the “veteran” dance teachers and is well respected as a dancer and performer. He has been teaching for over ten years and relies solely on his income from teaching and performing at various venues. And yet he notes, “I go through bad times and good times ... sometimes I make it good, sometimes I hustle up and down like everybody.” Being a professional dancer in Senegal, Sisse remarks, also had its up’s and down’s (but in a different way),

In Senegal I was doing a lot of professional work in big productions or with people who came to create work in Senegal. That was good. It paid well. Dancers are always broke but in Senegal we were having a lot of work in the hotels. I was doing a lot of work, teaching, learning ... it is different here (New York) because this is an advanced country, over there we have a lot of schools but they are in art centers. Some people have big yards, cover them, and have a very talented dance company. There, you love the art more because people don’t care about the money but the knowledge. Here, you can get to a point where you can say, I’m not gonna do this because I’m not getting paid, cause here you have to have money, that’s what the difference is. But what’s interesting about being an African dancer here is that people wanna discover about Africa, about the culture, the arts. That’s the difference. When you are in Africa they have the art there already and they don’t give it a lot of importance; it is too close to them to realize how important it is. And wherever I have traveled in the world, people adore African dancing and drumming. They get crazy about it. And that’s good ... you have something that people want ... so you have to give it in the right way, teach people, tour around the world, bring Senegalese troupes to New York.

Sisse longer lives in New York. After several years of attempting to create a livelihood through dance, and due to complications in his personal life, he eventually moved to another country.

Trying to juggle a personal life in a new environment with the demands of sustaining a livelihood as an artist and learning to “hustle” manifests itself in different ways depending on individuals. Understanding how to commercialize African dance for international audiences through the “right” use of marketing techniques is a skill that performers develop over time, and which some find frustrating, while others have had a remarkable success. Some performers like Alpha, despite his success in the business, complain that West African artists are not very appreciated by the overall dance community.

Once a degree of competence is achieved through the acquisition of local cultural capital though, performers may emphasize either the authenticity or hybridity of their performance style depending on the kinds of spaces they are attempting to carve out for themselves. For example Maurice, the owner of the downtown studio, created a “workout and fitness program with the dances and drums of Africa” by publishing a book, CD, and instructional video. Maurice considers himself to be both a “shrewd businessman” and an artist: two important assets which he finds to be lacking in many performers.

Being equipped with a “split personality,” he notes, has been a key to the success of his dance studio and career as an artist and entrepreneur. Maurice prefers to represent himself as an “innovator in teaching African-based movement” and has provoked controversies over the authenticity of his approach; both American and West African performers have criticized him. His exercise video, both “a workout” and “a cultural journey,” is targeted to a wider audience beyond New York’s African dance subculture. His book, which is available in most commercial bookstores and can be purchased online, incorporates the recommendations of a “certified kinesiologist, nutritionist and exercise physiologist.” The book also provides a workout and, in addition, covers the history and origin of different styles of African dance and rhythm, and incorporates various teaching and learning principles based on a Master/apprentice relationship.

Although Maurice makes distinctions between his style of African dance and “traditional” styles, he ambivalently relies on a radical alterity in his representations. In his book a photograph depicts Maurice, dressed in a loincloth that is decorated with Cowrie shells. His well-sculpted and muscular body is accented with armbands that look like amulets, which are also decorated with Cowrie shells. Nonetheless, Maurice recommends that the appropriate style of clothing for his class does not require imitating “National Geographic magazines” or images from “anthropology books” that portray Africans in “rustic” settings, and

describes the appropriate “gear” which is a *Lapa* (preferably African) for women, and a *Chaya* (loose fitting pants made from African batik) for men.

Having studied African dance and drumming in Senegal, Guinea and Mali with numerous well-known choreographers, and performing with West African dance troupes, Maurice founded his own dance troupe in New York. His performance training includes ballet and modern dance at the Dance Theatre of Harlem. His dance company has toured internationally and in the United States, making appearances at prestigious venues such as Walt Disney World, Busch Gardens, the Guggenheim Museum, and the Museum of Natural History. Having combined a business persona with artistry, Maurice is able to claim, “I love what I do, I love African Diaspora art, and I know the arts as a performer, teacher, drummer and choreographer and that makes a big difference.” I know what it takes to be successful despite the controversy of what I teach.”

The ability to succeed in African dance entails performing and representing dances and music in ways that appeal to participants who, taking part in performance events, expect to have an experience. Not surprisingly, making experiences happen in a commodified field comes with a price tag; combining assets as Maurice does can be a challenge. Producing shows and publicizing productions in order to promote oneself are experienced as setbacks. For example, most production companies book shows sometimes up to a year in advance. For performers who conduct their daily lives in an unstructured fashion,

such forward planning is usually unfeasible. Most performers move around due to changes in their living accommodations, job instability or other personal constraints. Organizing a dance troupe with ongoing rehearsals entails having the financial resources to pay for studios, costumes and other resources. Because of these limitations the shows that are eventually produced end up being “pick-up” types, coordinated at the last minute and lacking the more refined staging and choreography that are characteristic of many American companies. This inconsistency then leads to the inability of performers to secure bookings for future shows. Most performers prefer to conduct dance or drum workshops (in between other forms of survival jobs), or collaborate with different art or cultural centers, these being less demanding financially and logistically, while being creatively more feasible and lucrative.

For dance teachers, for example, constructing a popular class involves not only being talented, but organizing drummers, as live drumming is vital to the experience of performances. Teachers have to secure a studio space, and pay a percentage of their profits from teaching a class to the studio; in the long run the venture may or may not be profitable as it depends on the consistency of participants. Because most drummers have a minimum requirement for playing in a class (most drummers play long hours during the week and refuse to participate in classes where they are not compensated, although some are recreational drummers), they are high in demand. The scarcity of drummers implies that classes may not become popular. Dancers often complain when

there are not enough drummers. Although some dancers remain, most eventually move on to other more popular classes if there are no changes. The busiest times, (generally from 5:30 pm. until 7:30 pm. and on Saturday afternoons) are reserved for veteran teachers who bring the most students into a dance studio. The remaining times and days are less rewarding monetarily.

Similarly, trips to Africa, which are organized by various teachers and musicians, involve pooling financial resources by performers and networking by drummers and teachers who coordinate these events. Dance classes usually range in price from \$14 to \$18, and drum lessons run anywhere from \$18 to \$20 per session. Most participants attend these sessions regularly at least twice weekly. The cost of most international workshops ranges from \$2000 – \$3000 for a two or three week stay with meals, music and dance instructions, transportation and accommodations included. Domestic summer camps and workshops are also available and vary in price from \$ 500 – \$1200 for a week or ten days. Hand made drums imported from West Africa, range in price from \$300 – \$800. Participants can also purchase various accessories. It is through these kinds of expenditures, which can easily be disrupted and are highly contingent, that a “global imagination” is sustained. But this is also an aspect of the behind – the – scenes organization of performances which, although vital to the performance context, is given minimal attention by participants.

Translation

During a lecture on “The Commodification of World Music,” Steven Feld (2004) described the process through which the exotic undergoes a translation in which “whatever is possible becomes permissible.” The exotic is made “familiar” for a Western audience by way of a “curation” process where it is “de-contextualized” and incorporated through a juxtapositioning with the modern. Subsequently, conflicts concerning the politics of ownership and issues of appropriation are elided by a rhetoric of the universality of art and knowledge said to demand an “autonomous aesthetics.” Tracing the journey of African dance and performers from the villages and urban centers of West Africa to New York and into a transnational “circuit,” and their incorporation into a *singular* “globally imagined,” conceptual space – “World Music” -- illustrates the workings and rules of translation.

For example, the promotional materials displayed at a performance venue in New York which specializes in world music events, represents an assortment of ethnic performances (dance or music); the visual imagery depicts performers in various ethnic regalia that are fused with contemporary styles. Beneath the image of each performer or group is a description of the region and background of performers. West African performers are only one possibility among many. An “explosive” drum ensemble accompanies an Afro-Brazilian dance troupe from Bahia in northern Brazil whose movement is described as “frenzied.” These “folkloric” dances, which are of African origin, are also characterized as “uniquely

Brazilian.” A Lakota Sioux Indian dance theatre which was founded on the Rosebud Reservation in South Dakota communicates the “powerful resonance of dance in the Plains Indian society,” through such dances as the “Buffalo and Eagle” and through songs and oral history. A sacred Kurdish Tanbur musician performs the music of the Yasan people in Kurdistan. The Tanbur is an ancient lute that is traditionally performed in religious ceremonies, and the Yasan people are followers of “a mystical faith associated with Sufism.” Some hybrid styles such as an “innovative interpretation” of Jewish music on a Clarinet combines an improvisation of Kletzmer music of the Chasidic masters and American roots (bluegrass and roots) and “original” works that include Jazz and “other traditions.” Other styles include Afro-Peruvian, Flamenco, Byzantine and Sufi music, music from the “Judeo-Spanish world,” “African-Indian” Sufi music and dance.

Although these performances span diverse genres, historical moments, societies, and geographic regions, they are re-represented through signifying practices and narratives that shift between timelessness and the present. Instead of being represented as individuals, performers themselves are made to promote an effect by way of a geographic association, or an aesthetic sensibility. Rather than the concept of a narrative, the mechanism through which the exotic has been constructed by the West is best described in the form of a “trope” (Root 1998). While narratives combine different events, tropes serve as a link by forging various concepts symbols and associations to constitute a coherent conceptual category. Tropes also differ from stereotypes and are more difficult to

“challenge,” because they are multidimensional in their sources and ambivalently situated in relation to difference. The tropes and ontological processes through which exoticism operates involve both an abstraction and reconstitution. Objects stand for images that stand for a culture or a sensibility as a whole (Root 1998:40).

Djembe fans who discuss their concerns of cultural appropriation, aesthetic autonomy and issues of universality, highlight how *Djembe* has evolved in diverse ways “as all good music does.” *Djembe*,

... has evolved into the context of the western world – for better or worse – in much the same way as cultures have blended and borrowed from each other since time began, only in the 20th century it happens faster and over much greater distances than before... And isn't there a theory that the shape and design features (of Djembe) evolved from interaction with Arabic traders? (Consider the similarity in design and acoustic function with the smaller darabouka, tablah, dumbek, etc. of the middle eastern regions) now, the repertoire and application of the instrument – that's where the issues start to cloud ... I personally don't see a need to stand in awe of a music-producing object just because it has specific attributes in one culture. I treat the Djembe with the same respect as I treat an Indonesian button gong, Tibetan prayer bowls, the Violin, Saxophone, etc. They all have the same level of admiration for me as they are all products of the unifying humanity of their creators ... somebody (or a bunch of somebodies over time) DID initiate this music. Even at the beginning, somebody had the temerity to assume that they could create. And through time, others had the gall to adjust, refine, and develop what had come before. I am human, and this is a human craft, if I learn and respect, I can alter and create⁹.

Although *Djembe* is “unifying,”

...music stripped of its cultural baggage is nothing more than meaningless noise ... until it has been attributed a purpose, significance, what-have-you it is nothing...It would take an astounding mind, given a bunch of Djembes, a couple of dunduns and some bells, to even approach the

⁹ <http://www.drums.org/djembefac/m5.htm>

complex rhythmic interweaving that gives life to an African drumming ensemble, if they had no experience in the tradition ... there is a good likelihood that over the X amount of years the particular cultural group has been using an instrument, they have found methods of using its individual characteristics and combining them with those of other instruments so that the entire thing really, really works, even on a purely musical level.¹⁰

Given the persistence of a dual orientation towards time and space through which the modern and traditional are reproduced, the above examples suggest that otherness can operate within a “continuum” to accommodate contemporary/non-contemporary conceptual spaces notwithstanding ruptures in cultural production and practice. Translation is a useful conceptual site for explaining how new forms of identity and aesthetics emerge, and the ways that “temporalities of power” mediated by various agents (institutional and social) construct social spaces and narratives that continue to call on the exotic as an essential category of experience.

¹⁰ Ibid.

CHAPTER 8

Choreographing Experience

In the previous chapter, I highlighted the lives of Olatunji and Guy Warren, as a way of showing how individuals interpret a “nomadic aesthetics” and make sense of destabilized identities. This chapter examines the lack of consensus in the ways that aesthetics shapes subjectivity. The ways that individuals and groups who participate in African dance and music voice their concerns of historicity and appropriation of art is conveyed as a dialogue, through discourses that are multi-vocal and aimed at promoting a cultural protection of space and experience.

Warren’s introduction of Afro-Jazz into American society complicates the representation of African tradition, and the kinds of subjectivity and aesthetics that are associated with an African tradition. In the United States, the racial and cultural disparities amongst African dance and drumming participants creates a complex dynamics in the ways that a genre serves various experiential demands. The incorporation of drumming and dance into mainstream commercialized social spaces and the commodification of subjectivity itself heightens these differences further. Adding economic factors to a prefigured “aesthetics of exoticism,” along with racial and cultural differences, inevitably leads to diverse interpretations in the role that African performance is expected to play within various social circles. By being associated with an “aestheticized moral identity” and universal or particular ideologies, the “performance of Africa” in some cases assumes a redemptive quality.

In mostly Euro-American (or international) spaces African dance and drumming for the most part serves as a context for individuals to recreate an idealized world by imagining a mythical land, exotic culture, or superior civilization. Or for others African dance and drumming serves as a vehicle for experiencing transitory ecstatic or experiential states, spirituality, or a fashioning of alternate lifestyles and communities, via notions of an aesthetics of “universal rhythms” and a “global utopia,” which need not be tied to racial or cultural origins. Olatunji’s influence spread amongst mostly white drummers through his affiliation with the drummer Mickey Hart from the Grateful Dead music band. Through these artistic exchanges Olatunji became a “spiritual guru” amongst white drumming movements in the United States and internationally leading to events such as the 1992 “California drum circle,” “one of the largest ever” organized by Mickey Hart in which two thousand drummers took part in Marin County. Olatunji led numerous similar workshops at different holistic centers and retreats in America such as the Omega Institute, Esalen, and various world peace events (Charry 2005: 3).

Olatunji also played a role in the formative years of the Black Power movement where African dance and drum circles served as a means for sharing in a collective idea of Africa, alongside writers, poets, and jazz musicians. Most recently he made artistic contributions to a CD which commemorates the life and poetry of the Rapper Tupak Shakur (Charry 2005). The multiple roles played by

Olatunji and several West African performers (to varying degrees) illustrate how the idea of Africa has been fashioned to accommodate diverse social movements or experiential realms in American life.

In most Black American circles, where Africa is mythologized or considered spiritually superior, African dance and drumming connect Black consciousness or a nationalist identity with an ancestral heritage, or existential encounter with an African past and slavery. Subsequently, the space of African dance serves as a context for exploring an identity. However, Black views are not homogeneous and may also be influenced by generation, social class and cultural backgrounds (this includes the Caribbean, people of mixed race backgrounds, and continental Africans). Of the Black performers who choose to take part in inter-racial and inter-cultural spaces (as distinct from those who chose to stay within Black communities), some are critical of the universal/utopian versions of drum movements.

This lack of a consensus in the approach towards self-making suggests that the contemporary appropriation of otherness, and the sustaining of desires or subject positions, involves not only concerns of historicity but also forms of “intra-and inter-subjective” violation and pain (Flax 2000, Lipsitz 1998: 62). Yet, within the overarching context of racial and cultural oppression, both white and Black views of appropriating performance spaces or artistry can contain both assimilationist and non-assimilationist, eclectic and abstract perspectives. Moreover, examples

from contemporary writings on the role that Africa plays within the Black experience such as *Native Stranger* (1992) and *Out of America* (1998), suggest that not all Blacks share in the desire to imagine Africa as a symbol for having an existential encounter. For example, Michelle, a Black American dancer who was born and raised in New York and traveled to different regions of West Africa after graduating from college notes,

... There's a tendency we have as people to take just one brush and (sweeping motion) ... what I learned from my trip to Africa is not just traditional history but also colonial, so once you understand colonial history, not all of Africa is Africa ... I don't think of it as romanticized, it's diverse. I think the past is important but I'm not locked into it. The notion that what Africa is from a broader perspective ... the folklore is very important but that's not all it's about.

These concerns surrounding the interpretation rather than appropriation of group values within inter-cultural contexts reflect the "spirit" of modern self-making and the predicament of American romantic individualism, which relies on notions of personal autonomy, rights and entitlement in self-fashioning, as well as demanding a "correspondence between the inner self and community" (Rosenblum 1998:601). Treating the relations between art and social life as "immune to commercial considerations," and attempting to reconcile "antagonistic social realities" by conflating people of diverse circumstances and insisting on universal aesthetic and emotional "affinities," together pose serious problems in the shaping and enactment of experience (Lipsitz 1998). Significantly, valorizing individuals who "lose their identities through art" or the pursuit of pleasure by admiring artists who provoke intense emotions or who develop "a highly individualized and original means of expression" yet who live marginal lives are

common features of American popular culture (Lipsitz 1998:123). These values highlight some of the ways that cross-cultural aesthetic and subjective transgressions are informed by way of “moral etiquettes.” Representing art as universal, as a source of pleasure (or entertainment), developing emotional affinities with performers by mystifying or aestheticizing their roles as artists or by presenting them as heroes, all serve as examples of the ways that expressive culture and creativity are framed in terms of morality.

However, it is essential to question the way that an “aestheticized moral identity” becomes a desirable trait, and how social circumstances influence the artistic and cultural production of individuals (Lipsitz 1998). Given the complex relations between art and modernist self-expression within cross-cultural identifications, the question emerges how to form a community from “a company of strangers whose backgrounds and values diverge” and how to make use of and form links between the individual and community, self and other” (Rosenblum 1998:601). Moreover, in a dialogical world of self-making where the word “always half-belongs to someone else” (Lipsitz 1998:129), group or inter-personal conflicts are inevitable. Here, even within revisionist or self-reflexive narratives (which dictate that cross-cultural and interracial encounters must be carried out good-naturedly), self-making may be repositioned but does not cease to rely on otherness for its sustenance.

In addition to racial or intercultural differences, conflicts between personalities leading to every day forms of sadism and competition in artistry further add to the tensions that inform popular “performances of Africa.” The attempt to create a “ritual” out of unrelated “sub-worlds” (Douglas 1966), and the symbolic inconsistency which mediates or tries to give coherence to experiences shaped by language, trigger several kinds of responses. While negotiations are ongoing and always contingent on participants’ consent, other alternatives include the severing of ties, re-creation of alternate social spaces, or a moral sanctioning of individuals and groups in the name of rights, entitlement or aesthetic autonomy. Group or individual boundaries often expressed in implicit or explicit ways include forms of expression such as non-participation, boycotts of certain dance or drumming spaces, or teachers. Symbolically they also surface unpredictably within performance spaces.

Exoticism at “Home”

The diverse forms of sentiments expressed within African dance performances convey both the rhythms of contemporary urban life, and the shaping of social fields by nation-states via practices of citizenship, work, consumption and leisure, where cultural politics and discourses of identity are informed by racial and class relations in ways that organize individual and collective action (Rouse 1995). Within this social field, classificatory “realms” influenced by the culture industry, serve as modes of experiencing disparate worlds through identity which is fundamental to contemporary cultural politics, and mediates subjective forms of

action. By fusing “divergent modes of being” with references to “universal access,” and by representing a “pastiche” of mass-mediated imagery, discourses of corporate multiculturalisms dictate the ways that the landscape of American class relations is to be traversed by encouraging workers to take on more “flexible” forms of subjectivities. Despite the “breakdown of a unit essential to exoticism,” and the displacement of the exotic (Celestin 1996), industries like tourism continue to search for peoples and places that can be re-presented “as sufficiently exotic and authentic” in order to “feed the escalating need for markers of distinction” (Rouse 1995: 372). In the “cultural marketplace,” otherness is “coded” as having a capacity to induce more happiness or serve as a source of spiritual and sensual resource (Hooks 1992). Consequently, cross-cultural encounters continue to be framed through notions of racial and ethnic difference although “unknown territories” have declined, and exotics are now more visible “at home.” Nevertheless “color” and national origin continue to serve as “markers of an already known identity” (Rouse 1995:371).

As stated in chapter 3, contemporary cities house a multiplicity of cultural and work environments (Sassen 1996), and are marked by “topographies of difference” via populations like third-world migrant laborers who work in urban service industries, and who were previously kept apart but are now an integral component of urban life. While New York’s public space continues to be organized along racial and ethnic lines in terms of work, school and housing, the rapid gentrification of different parts of the city has brought disparate worlds into

a closer contact. For example, rising real estate costs in neighborhoods like Harlem has transformed the social composition of its residents, and in other parts of New York, a growing number of luxury high-rise apartments, or “gated communities,” are erected near low-income housing projects, at once reinforcing and blurring the boundaries between the inhabitants of these dissimilar worlds.

In the workplace, individuals with different racial and national identifications and who, occupy different class positions are interspersed with “token forms of upward mobility.” Nonetheless, large populations who have been “abandoned” by “modern” projects and a “latent reserve army” have increasingly come into focus, and the gaps between those who are “... capable of redemption through education and those who are not” are articulated in moral terms (Rouse 1995: 391). Subsequently, the “convergence” between disparate work cultures, “arenas of activity,” and “modes of experience” and the interactions between individuals on a much closer level than during the post-war boom, while promising new experiential possibilities, also exacerbate the sense of alienation, and forms of “symbolic violence,” or distress that are experienced by different groups (Bourdieu 1999).

Within this setting cosmopolitanism as a “kind” of tradition (Asad 1995), informs subjectivity in ways that are deemed appropriate to the prevailing economic and political organization of urban life (Rouse 1995). Despite the discrepant worlds and commodified, symbolic resources that inform contemporary modes of self-

making, the temporality of a modernist self is sustained through narratives that have been informed by a triumphant “secular agency” (Asad 2003), which aims to contain the wounds that have been “opened up” by modernist projects (Rouse 1995). Inhabiting and experiencing such a world nonetheless involves merging antagonistic social realities. In a multi-vocal and commodified field, where individual desires to have an experience calls for transgressing social boundaries that have been structured within asymmetrical power relations, and are expressed in terms of notions of rights and entitlement, where a mutual choice is lacking, insisting on a universal paradigm to frame social experience might intensify rather than ease interpersonal tensions.

Hence, positing art in pleasurable terms, mediating cultural difference through the sensual realm (Hooks 1992), or presenting the aesthetic productions of cultural others through mystification or in terms of moral etiquettes that demand an emotional “affinity” between divergent worlds (Lipsitz 1998), limit the experiential scope of expressive culture and what it enables. Moreover, pleasuring oneself might involve an allegorical play with reality rather than romantic fantasies, which construct primitivism by inscribing pleasure onto a geography or a “body” (Hooks 1992).

The reliance of mass culture on difference by fixing identity, leads to a game of “provocation” which unlike the ambiguity of seduction, acts as a kind of “blackmail” by “condemning” individuals to difference (Baudrillard 1990).

Furthermore, the “primitive” is co-opted by discourses of multiculturalism and diversity in “productive ways” by being presented as a “life-sustaining” alternative to mainstream values, and by appealing to otherwise marginalized groups whose only chance for gaining a visibility occur through these discourses. Nonetheless the “acknowledged other” must also assume “recognizable forms.” Rather than promoting a sense of social concern, and stripped away from its counter-cultural, “cutting edge” elements, the cultural productions of marginalized groups get re-presented for consumption in ways that “appease” the contradictions in contemporary crises of identity in the West (Hooks 1992:25). These forms of artificially coded cross-cultural representations by the culture industry confound the meaning of creativity, which in art involves expressing a social experience through forms such as dance or music, and which rarely emerges out of the hedonistic pleasures of a collectivity. Moreover, compartmentalizing expressive culture limits the role of art in social life by restricting the diverse levels of experience that can be derived from artistic exploration. For instance rituals do not merely “follow experience” but also “formulate or modify experience” by permitting “... knowledge of what would otherwise not be known” (Douglas 1966:64). As Adorno has pointed out, music conveys not only a nation’s character but also its “antinomies” (1982 See also Gilroy 1994).

While self-making implies having a sense of place, a personal history, friends, or family, unlike the “imperial self” of “yesteryear,” the need to maintain an “emotional equilibrium” in the contemporary world places selfhood under a siege

leading to its contraction into a “defensive core,” reducing it to a “minimal self” (Lasch 1984). Rather than the “mournful imperialist nostalgia” which depicted primitivism in terms of the destruction of a “lost paradise,” contemporary mass-produced notions of primitivism project a sense of abundance onto cultural difference by promoting a celebratory “continuum of primitivism.” By deflecting issues of social suffering the emphasis on a yearning for otherness reflects not a desire “to make the other over in one’s image but to become the other” (Hooks 1992:25).

In a world that is dominated by mass-produced cultures, the creative possibilities of urban experience, while providing individuals from diverse social backgrounds the ability to traverse wide-ranging social spaces in order to have an encounter with new “modes of being,” also contains a paradoxical quality by limiting or disempowering individuals due to the lack of a consensus between how signs and symbols mediate subjectivity. Moreover, positing transgression as an act of defiance, as a “norm” in the self-making process, or in terms of a “universal access,” does not address the ways that transgression is enabled within a dialogical field through a power dynamics.

Re-inventing Selves

As a component of urban experience, the “performance of Africa” at the downtown dance center frames disparate worlds, and individuals who enter the space come with varying needs. Through their interaction with other performers,

some develop new relationships that may extend beyond the dance space, or may be limited to the dance setting. On some occasions, downtown participants form a collectivity by taking part in performances or concerts that are given by their instructors. Some also coordinate fundraising events for different instructors to assist them in times of emergency, or illness. To some, dancing downtown may be a solitary and transient experience that compliments other kinds of activities which make up urban life. In other parts of New York dance centers like Harlem, Queens or Brooklyn, extended social relationships may be easier to forge due to the relative homogeneity of dance participants in terms of racial, class and cultural backgrounds. New York's West African gatherings also constitute performances differently from the downtown scene, and downtown's dance participants rarely venture into these spaces. Although they take part in extended social relations, dancers who participate in downtown spaces but who were a part of the Black power movement, have their own cluster of relationships as they have been dancing for several years, and come into the dance setting with different sensibilities surrounding expressive culture. The kinds of experiential possibilities and forms of "symbolic violence" that constitute transgression, and the reasons why some individuals are unable or unwilling to transgress their social boundaries while others are empowered, shows the paradoxical ways that symbolic resources mediate cosmopolitan subjectivities.

For example amongst several online discussion forums, a popular *Djembe* website with the logo "drums not guns" displays a compilation on "race, culture

and drum culture” featuring debates between drummers (and dancers) on issues related to cultural appropriation versus the universality of art. Unlike face-to face encounters, the anonymity of the Internet allows individual sentiments to be expressed through frank, hostile, and often witty discourse. In attempts to develop an understanding of the “evolving Western Drum Culture,” the introductory homepage explains that a new list-serve had to be created as a result of ongoing conflicts, which became disruptive to an amicable artistic exchange between performers. The response to these antagonistic sentiments is conveyed this way,

Some folks with dull axes to grind of a political nature found that they were unable to correspond without venom laced with racial and gender bashing vitriol aimed at the mostly male and white folks that were affluent enough to own computers, into drumming and corresponding about the same. Stereotypically, musicians and other artists are very sensitive and a volatile bunch, so things got pretty messy. This lengthy harangue had folks bailing out en masse as it wasn't much fun or educational, anymore ... personalities continued to be disruptive to a smooth flow of information even in this new setting ¹¹

The website's chat room displays an assortment of concerns that performers share over the appropriate ways of taking part in an African based “Western Drum culture” which, according to one Black correspondent, “evolved out of African culture both continental and Diaspora.” Although this project examines the tensions in performances with an emphasis on mostly female dancers rather than drummers, who are mostly male, below is a selection of a very lengthy exchange on the etiquette and concerns of cultural borrowings that reflects similar issues within drumming circles.

¹¹ <http://home.acceleration.net/clark/djembeLring/djembeLhtml>.

Sam: My tendency is to take bits of other cultures that I like, respect, or admire and assemble them into “my culture.” I am relatively comfortable with this process but am quite envious of those who clearly identify with their specific cultural lineage. This process, for me, is always in the context of showing utmost respect to those cultures; however, I don’t try to make myself into something I’m not (re. I love Cuban music but I do not practice Santeria). I hope that this does not offend those whose cultures from which I borrow. I don’t know how else to re-invent myself. I think this is what has attracted me to drumming, and I am definitely including the drum in my “new” culture.

Paul: “In response to racism ... not racism ... your culture, my culture ... Africans, non-Africans and so on.” I didn’t start playing the Djembe or join this list “because” of the African culture, or any other culture, that happened to be the ancestry of Djembe music and rhythms. These rhythms could have originated as Eskimo fish-slapping dances, as far as I’m concerned. Having taken up the Djembe, my interest is based on playing, playing and more playing of Djembe related music. If I close my eyes, listen and feel what’s happening in the music, it doesn’t matter what “race: or other discriminating factor is present in those playing the rhythms. In music, that kind of thing just doesn’t play a factor ... here’s an example: if I learn about an instrument called the Gungaloon, and like what it sounds like, and start learning to play, and then find out it’s a traditional instrument of the Turo people of North Heptobia, that cultural fact had no influence on my decision to play the Gungaloon. It just happens to be part of the culture, but I didn’t choose it BECAUSE of the culture ... I think I’ll go back and practice some more of my twanging technique on the Gungaloon ¹².

These exchanges display some of the ways that the fashioning of personal experience through appropriation and cultural borrowings operates within a commodified field. These decisions concerning subjectivity are informed by the ways that an aesthetic sensibility is packaged and sold. At times this involves the erasure of origins while at other times the critical process is domestication (Root 1998). Individual disputes reflect the concerns over who has the right to reproduce a cultural sensibility through a process of erasure or domestication of the sources, and the implications involved.

¹² <http://www.drums.org/djembefaq/m5.htm>

Within dance circles that are inter-racial, issues of appropriation are at times reflected in the tensions amongst Euro-American dancers and Black women. These concerns involve issues of space or subject positions and can influence the overall experience of performances for participants. While a collective exoticism of Africa sets the context for performances by all groups, White and Black views on exoticism can at times involve racial and territorial misunderstandings. This however does not imply that relationships do not emerge from interactions that occur between them and the views of Black and Euro-American dancers on these issues are not homogeneous. Several women do find that if it were not for the opportunity that the dance space affords, they would not have had a chance to come into contact with people whose life experiences differ from their own. Moreover, the highly sexualized nature of the dance scene due to the associations of eroticism with cultural difference may be a playful, or novel experience but can lead to tensions and misunderstandings. In such instances women themselves take part in reinforcing a gendered and sexual identity. Subsequently, the dance space serves as a context for participants to confront unresolved social issues such as gender, racial, sexual and cultural misunderstandings -- oftentimes glossed over under the guise of morality or political correctness, which as a dancer notes can be "debilitating."

The level of involvement in performances by participants varies. Some are not only involved in dance performances but have extended their relationships with

West Africans by taking part in trips to Africa and to regional dance workshops. Perhaps they become socially or romantically involved with performers. Some individuals, who feel estranged from the broader society, also seek out African dance spaces as a refuge. Others take part in dances specifically for pleasure, networking or catharsis with very little interest in extended social engagement.

The notion of cultural protectionism of space and experience is not unique to the African dance scene. For example belly-dancing happens to be a predominantly White female practice in New York. Women construct themselves to embody the middle-Eastern feminine “archetype” and acquire “ethnic markers” such as Middle-Eastern names or physical transformations. The Yoga scene in New York is also a protected space, in this case one that is both male and female but predominantly white. Some Blacks who have taken interest in yoga have formed an association of Black yoga teachers. In Capoeira, a martial arts/dance from Brazil (via Angola), there also exist tensions between intercultural participants over questions of authenticity and appropriation. Black women who travel with their teachers to attend regional African dance workshops that are in predominately white communities also made note of the protection of space and experience expressed by members of these communities. All of these spaces display a similar sense of compulsion to become an “other” through a territorialization of space, or “exotic/erotic” fascination with otherness.

The ways that African dance spaces are utilized affirm group boundaries based on identity politics or promote aesthetic and subjective transgression. A Black dancer notes, “Blacks mythologize, and whites exoticize Africa.” Of the Black women participants, some who are known as “divas” due to their electrifying dance skills and rhythmic abilities bring a different kind of cultural experience based on their idea of Black aesthetics and identity, in addition to their ideas of Africa. Some are engaged in performances not so much due to the desire to cross boundaries, but for engaging in inter-subjective relations. Most have been attending performances for several years. White women (who also take part in performances on an ongoing basis), dispute this territorial assumption by arguing for the universality of art, and the cultural differences between Blacks and continental Africans. They argue, “they (the Black women) are not African, they are American.”

In *Dangerous Crossroads*, George Lipsitz (1998) points to the ways that marginalized or “disaffected” groups contest the appropriation of their cultural production by mainstream society due to the lack of a “reciprocal subjectivity,” (since marginal groups do not choose to take part in mainstream values). Similarly, in some African dance circles, where Black Americans rely on dance performances as a context for having an existential encounter with Africa, some are critical of utopian ideals surrounding art and popular culture and feel constrained or unable to cultivate moral or cultural alternatives to these values. Some Black women view African dance spaces as a context for reclaiming a

notion of Black womanhood, which they feel, is often misrepresented in mainstream society. They made note of the lack of spaces and resources within the broader society that could enable a similar sense of entitlement in self-making.

Within a collectively imagined Africa, and re-invention of selves (through notions of entitlement), the kinds of demands and expectations that set the context of performances can be oppositional rather than constituting a collective desire. At times this limits the levels of experimentation and degree of emotional or personal commitment that individuals are able or willing to express. In actual performances the claiming of space and identity are then displayed through mastery of rhythms and dances, in the form of a game of conquest and domination.

Within this setting, West African performers are caught in the crosshairs. Not only are they also engaged in a re-thinking of Africa in a new context, some are either presumed to be socially lacking in a “race-consciousness” (by Blacks), or considered to be culturally different hence politically neutral (by whites). While they are vital to the performance context (as an exotic/erotic other), their individual goals and expectations in terms of artistry, personal experience (or gain) must be negotiated with the diverse demands that the performance space must serve. Here the problem does not necessarily concern issues of political neutrality or the lack of a race consciousness since West African performers

traverse various social contexts and as “tricksters,” understand and have learnt to accommodate the competing discourses that a quest for authenticity demands. Instead their concern may have more to do with their professional goals.

Moreover, the diverse background of participants and interactions between them are likely to be radically removed from their everyday experience; intense and immediate, they leave behind “reverberations” rather than a more tangible sense of knowing another reality. On the one hand, this encounter with a radical “alterity” might serve as a source of heightened experience via the imagined “flow” of diverse ideas and peoples sharing in a collective moment; on the other hand it contributes to the invisibility of the performers.

On a different note, as an aspect of a “global city,” New York is well suited for fashioning “flexible subjectivities” via primitive or cosmopolitan styles. However the disparities in subject positionings are also far and wide-ranging, therefore in the shaping of experience, the ways in which space sets the context for constructing hybridized forms of selves may not be reciprocal. According to the tenets of modern self-making, the signs and symbols that people freely appropriate to fashion themselves must also be displayed socially, and be affirmed, or recognized by others. How this is received need not be as intended by the practitioners.

For example Mansour, a rather flamboyant dance teacher and musician who considers himself to be an artist and works in different kinds of survival jobs to sustain his artistry, enjoys exploring the primitive and cosmopolitan. As a performer he represents a Griot tradition, and at a recent performance, dressed scantily in animal skin, he enjoyed displaying himself as the exotic/erotic other. He had applied some oil onto his jet-black skin, which gave off a shine, and someone in the audience even asked, "Is that his skin?" In his "ordinary" life though, Mansour is a trendy New Yorker who likes to dress in the latest styles.

At an African concert one evening Mansour was dressed in leather pants and a leather jacket with a shirt that was buttoned down to expose his chest. He wore a silver chain and a studded earring in one lobe and he has his hair in dreadlocks. Mansour has traveled internationally, and having developed a taste for things exotic, finds that he often raises the attention of shopkeepers, and is even followed "by other ethnics." In his Harlem neighborhood, he is "hassled by cops." More recently Mansour no longer sports dread locks, and has left the African dance scene altogether. He has started his own business and is married to a Senegalese woman. How Mansour traverses a global city illustrates not just the condition of individual mobility in time and space and the opportunities that are available for re-inventing selves, but also that outside of certain contexts, some forms of re-invented selves have little significance. They must be "licensed" with all that that implies.

Take for instance the following segments from an article written in *Black Renaissance Noire*, entitled “Rhythms of Changes: from the Sabar to the Mbalax” (1998), on the revival of *Sabar* dance in Dakar by the “common people” of Senegal. By sprouting up on the street corners of Dakar, where “businessmen in their impeccable Paris-tailored suits in the early morning hours rush to work (not necessarily in the same neighborhoods though),” *Sabar* has now “reclaimed a nearly lost cultural space” (Erni 1998:42). Although the narrative privileges the innovation and modernizing of African tradition, it does so with a caveat.

“Sabar is, in each form, a distinct Senegalese creation – unlike Djembe rhythms, drums and dances, which can be found all over West Africa ... Sabar is an intricate means of communication which today reaches beyond class, creed, and age. In fact Sabar is a conversation; its rhythms are attuned to the cadence of Wolof. Wolof features mainly monosyllabic words and requires painstakingly clear and exact articulation; even in everyday life, it is spoken with a rhythmic edge and a theatrical intonation. Like the sacred rhythms reserved for a few only, today’s popular Sabar has a similar function: to “enter” a society’s collective “body” and “inject” its message ... The musicians, dancers, and drummers are not trying to analyze or solve Senegal’s problems in a rational and abstract way, but they illustrate and comment on them in the language of the common people, comprehensible to all. Sabar was revived not by the authorities but the common people; not the Francophone (only 12 percent of Senegalese people speak French) but the Wolof (spoken by 75 percent); not the isolated but the communal; not the elitist but the democratic; not high art but vernacular genius (Erni 1998: 39, 40, 44, 43).”

There is also a “cooler wind blowing from Senegal’s latest music scene” as *Sabar* is now being “abandoned” with the “beating” of a “harsher rhythm” and a “blunter language” that “imitates” American rap by “disenchanted youth” who have now opted to take on “crude American homeboy” styles (50). According to the article, the Senegalese singer Youssou N’Dour’s concert at New York’s Roxy club

illustrates a more modernized mix. “Adoring” Senegalese fans emerged from New York’s “every corner,” from “cab drivers in beat-up wool caps to businessmen flashing their Rolex watches” and from “poised matrons in their sumptuous Boubous to excited girlfriends in miniskirts and platform shoes.” All in their “Senegaleseness as they emerged from their American dreams and aspirations” (Erni 1998: 36).

And yet at another New York venue, a *Sabar* party of “stunning women” in their “lavish Boubous and the latest slippers from Paris” hosted by the Senegalese community, there also appear the same “disenchanted” Senegalese homeboys who stand around absorbed in their “universal cynicism,” not participating in this traditional gathering,

“It is interesting that the United States, the very country in which Afrocentrics don’t like to see the *Sabar* develop into modernity, has also created a music style that has lured Senegalese youth away from attempting to create their own original musical style (50).”

It is evident in this description that *Sabar* must be defended from Afrocentrics and non-Afrocentrics alike. In this view the “challenge” that “disenchanted youth” in their “universal cynicism” pose to the survival of *Sabar* is comparable to the challenge (or familiarity) posed by the “Francophone businessman” in Dakar in his “Paris tailored suit.”

It is possible that the Francophone businessman of Dakar could be a non-participant elite. On the other hand he may also be a “polyglot,” rather than a

mere imitation of Europe. A Griot may have presided at the naming ceremony of his children or officiated at his wedding. On a Friday he may don one of his numerous colorful robes for prayers, and resume his day-to-day affairs in his European clothes. He may spend his Saturday evening dancing in one of Dakar's many nightspots to the fusion of *Sabar* rhythms. As a privileged member of society, his villa tucked away from the "common people" may also be a stopover for distant relatives to or from the village. Rather than illustrating the values of the "common people" and the threats that they face, this depiction of *Sabar* as a unique Senegalese tradition and the ability to describe "Senegaleseness" itself presumes that Senegaleseness must now contend with modernity as if it had not done so in the past. It also comments on how the authorizing of representations is not simply made up of imagined worlds, but also occurs through a "filtering mechanism" which requires a consensus in the "licensing of the gaze" (Hall 1993).

The critique of Afrocentrics for not desiring to see *Sabar* "develop" into modernity is no different from the critique of the Senegalese homeboys succumbing to rap and their lack of a desire to take part in traditional dance. We are reminded of the challenge posed by the mere presence the Francophone businessman of Dakar in his Paris-tailored suit to the development of *Sabar*. Moreover, if the Senegalese homeboys must be charged with a "universal cynicism" for embracing rap and abandoning *Sabar*, then how is one to place the non-Senegalese dancers and drummers of New York who have shunned their

specific traditions by embracing “African” tradition? Would the common people be of any interest to international followers of African dance were it not for their aesthetic appeal? Like “... the wailing of an outsider whose wailing drowned the grief of the owners of the corpse” (Achebe 1983: 61), this lament in defense of the “survival” of a “nearly lost cultural space” demonstrates the “filtering mechanism” of desire.

Coincidentally this illustration also provides a depiction of the various kinds of sub-worlds that operate around African tradition and its transition from the continent to New York. Numerous African communities in New York are oblivious to the downtown dance and drum scene, and hold their own traditional gatherings. And West African rap, now popular amongst lower class youth, of whom New York’s traditional drummers and dancers are oblivious, has expanded throughout the region via hip-hop concerts like the annual Ouaga-hip-hop festival, and is now as popular as the pan-African film festival. In addition to the imposition of American mass culture onto local popular art forms, rap is now also embraced by West African youth who share in similar experiences of inner city life with other youth. Akon, a Senegalese rapper who came to America as a young teenager (and who incidentally happens to be the son of a Senegalese drummer who toured with Katherine Dunham in the 1960’s) is now a popular singer. In one of his album’s he chronicles his experience as an inmate and participant in inner city life, as well as paying tribute to his African heritage.

These arbitrary ways of valorizing the “vernacular genius” and popular cultures of “common people” through “associative” values that are ascribed to marginality relates to Norman Mailer’s (1957) writing on the hipster, and Negro music’s appeal to mainstream American society.

... The Negro (all exceptions admitted) could rarely afford the sophisticated inhibitions of civilization, and so he kept for his survival the art of the primitive, he lived in the enormous present, he subsisted for his Saturday night kicks, relinquishing the pleasures of the mind for the more obligatory pleasures of the body, and in his music he gave voice to the character and quality of his existence, to his rage and the infinite variations of joy, lust, languor, growl, cramp, pinch, scream and despair of his orgasm (279).

In the United States this version of difference of a mythologized, eroticized, notion of Black aesthetics has become commonsense for both Black and non-Black audiences alike. How can one discern the terrains through which ideas of Black aesthetics are constructed? Maureen Mahon (2004) notes that the images of Black expressivity that rely on a working class identity, spirituality, and style, alongside images of poverty, criminality, and various pathologies, sustain American popular culture by producing both Black and non-Black assumptions about Black authenticity. However, for most “ordinary” Blacks these exemplary forms of Blackness tend to be altogether “foreign” to their everyday lives (Gwaltney 1980). Mahon (2004) describes how assumptions about Blackness have been confronted by a generation of Black “middle-class,” “post-civil rights” Rock musicians who formed the Black Rock Coalition (BRC) to challenge the “ironic” accusation of white record executives that their music is “inauthentic” or “not Black enough.”

The imaginative appeal of marginality and its generational “re-emergence” in America can be partly attributed to individual desires for “non-conformity to dominant values,” or the desire to “flaunt” social norms, by seeking alternate forms of masking subjectivity through a play with subject positions. However due to the limitations in human agency and autonomy, the assumption that individuals can freely engage in an ongoing re-invention of selves may lead to the danger of controlling and “containing” narratives about otherness (Lipsitz 1998). People’s capacity to engage in multiple forms of “self-transformations” through a reliance on “detectable signs of character” within “divergent ways of being” can also produce “anxiety” when it comes to defining boundaries (Rouse 1997:391). Additionally the nature of embodied experience, the moral commitments such as belonging to a living tradition, and threats posed to group integrity, may lead to the formation of protective values around boundaries.

The concern over disappearing cultures and the threat that “common people” face, as Lipsitz (1998) notes, may or may not have to do with issues of originality but highlights the “filtering mechanism” of desire by romanticizing the life circumstances that shape subjectivity within marginal communities. Additionally within the desire to be free of the confines of bourgeois life there also exists the likelihood that common people too desire some form of escape from the confines of their banality, or perhaps may even envy the ability of outsiders to turn their “banality into a source of pleasure” (Kincaid 2000); their self-representations may or may not be literal.

Like the opposing views and circumstances that inform concerns of constituting subjectivity and its appropriation, the understanding of African dance as a genre is informed ambivalently. For example despite the controversies that surround his approach to the “standardization” of African dance, Maurice has been able to successfully create a certified teacher-training workout based on standardized African-based dance techniques, such as the Dunham technique (which was instituted by choreographer/anthropologist Katherine Dunham).

Steven a white drummer discussed his concerns surrounding the idea of standardization based on information that he heard which was initiated by, a group of “elders” consisting of Black Americans and some West Africans, who had considered developing ways of accrediting master teachers. While understanding the cross-cultural dynamics and problems of commercialization he argued, that standardizing African dance would violate the principles of aesthetic autonomy and conduct of artistry, he notes “this is America you can’t do that.” For example as a way of developing standards and the correct etiquette for instruction and standardization instructors of Yoga, Capoeira, and the Martial arts receive their teacher-training credentials through affiliation with masters or well recognized teachers. Presently there are several regional, national and international associations and boards that certify individuals who participate in Yoga, Capoeira and Marital arts.

Yet even well established performers like Maurice are also concerned with appropriation, such as the lack of acknowledgement towards teachers or the “fast paced, go-getter mentality” and individualized nature of artistry. He notes this “deplorable” attitude is unsuited to the ideals of a community or a teacher-apprentice style of learning and performance, which sets the context for the “correct” instruction of African dance. However, these concerns over appropriation cannot be approached systematically and are situated ambivalently in individual narratives. Maurice for example, notes,

Once you teach someone something, it belongs to them. After that you don't own it anymore. If you go to school and your philosophy teacher teaches you philosophy, you are a philosopher. If you learn math you are a mathematician ... you learn to use what you learn.

Amadou, who went to great lengths to explain the hardships that he went through as an apprentice in West Africa, explains that he eventually chose to restrict his teaching to select spaces in New York due to the lack of appreciation that he found;

I went through all that hardship, and now you can come to my drum class pay \$15 and tell me I paid him ... and because I don't speak the language you get the job? That hurts. Can you show your gratitude and take me with you?

Other performers such as Alpha are more resigned, displaying their disenchantment and confusion regarding the issue of appropriation this way: “they took away the drum to keep us from finding our way back home.” For the “polyglot,” the moments of confusion and inability to articulate the experience of living between the languages of two worlds is also experienced as a “realm of silence,”

... Or perhaps even a rejection of speech altogether ... where by dint of saying things in various ways, one just as trite as the other, just as approximate, one ends up no longer saying them (Kristeva 1997:15).

A Black American choreographer who traveled to West Africa and also performed with numerous artists in New York conveys some of the challenges faced by most performers.

I think that coming to a new land to make a life for yourself takes a definite determination and is a reality that I don't really know. I struggle in my own life, and I felt like I had to leave my Brooklyn 'hood' to do it ... and my family felt further away than I wanted them to be but for the most part I was with my family, felt their support and I was in my country of birth. Some continental Africans living here are famous at home and come to the U.S. to make money ... this is my assumption. I see folks working hard. I think the hardest thing about being here in America is trying to make your life work as an artist. I see folks trying to make their way, they want to create choreography but the opportunities and the funding support is scarce. Or folks want to teach but folks get locked into favorite teachers and resources are limited. Some don't really care about traditional cultures so this is surely a complicated game to come here and play. How do I create a popular class? Or find ways to showcase my choreography? There also needs to be a mending inside the communities where people do traditional dance. There are African American artists that have been teaching traditional dance for years, here in the states, who don't understand the unconditional support given to some continental Africans that have been teaching. There's a divide between uptown Harlem and Brooklyn on some levels too ... that's separate from the downtown traditional community. Of course folks cross borders but the issues are still there (Davis 2003).

Some Black performers to whom African dance served as an imaginative context during the Black power movement display a disappointment at the dissolution of an era. The influx of continental West Africans and shift in the social dynamics of the genre has led to a more diversified interpretation of performances beyond Black Nationalism. To Jerome, a drummer from the 1960's for whom drumming was a "culture connection," and who "rehearsed or practiced for hours on trains to the only source that there was, the impetus was very, very different." (Due to

their long distance travels to *Djembe* classes, Jerome and his friends would occupy a car in a train and rehearse as a group). When Shelley discovered African dance through Ladji Camara (her teacher) during the height of Jazz and Modern dance,

... It was always a problem with oh your legs are too big, you're not thin enough, you're not long enough. It was always something ... your hair doesn't go in a bun, all kinds of things. I was usually one of three blacks in the whole class. I didn't want to go back to into that scene ... I never learned how to dance just relaxed because I'd been taught to pull up ... I stayed with it (African dance) and for the first time in my life I felt connected to movement, and then when I started learning the history of the movement, it just intrigued me more (2002).

But like most dancers who chose not to venture to downtown spaces, Shelly gives her reasons,

... History has told us over and over again that we kinda lose things that we have created or found or developed, we lose that to other people that are able to patent it and get money to document it and put it out and so that's why I don't support going downtown. The folklore keeps it close to home ... if we don't take the responsibility to do it somebody else is going to document it change it and it won't be our story anymore, in terms of studying it this gives us the opportunity to know things about ourselves on whatever level it is, if it is our music or whatever it just gives us that opportunity (2002).

As for the aesthetics, Shelly is more drawn to the imaginative context that African dance affords as a teacher rather than being concerned with the authenticity of dances and as an artist she notes,

... It's an evolving art form, but it lasted because it's based on life. I don't believe it's traditional but it's an evolving art form. I think it does change, it changes according to climate, it changes according to the limitations you have to express yourself, things change! Just like we African peoples we move around we don't stay put and so we travel and learn different languages and cultures. Also being a performing artist, a lot of times we take license to create something to tell a story in which case movement is added or taken away (2002).

In his journeys across Mali, guitarist Banning Eyre (2000) relates his experience of learning Griot music and his concerns as an outsider appropriating a musical style. Drawing on his experience Eyre depicts the relations that he forged with Malian star performers and the conditions that allowed him to travel and situate himself as an apprentice amongst them. Eyre contrasts his own preference of learning the music “stripped of its context” with John Miller Chernoff’s (1979) *African Rhythm and African Sensibility*, a popular writing that guides readers to learn African music through being “immersed” in the cultural context. Eyre notes,

... My core interest as a musician was the sound of the music, and, more often than not, the context rather than enhancing and deepening my appreciation, obscured it with sideshows (Eyre 2000:48).

For a “wandering aesthetic,” African dance and music contains both versions of an aesthetic sensibility, one stripped away from its context and the other immersed in a tradition. This perspective on the ambiguous/ambivalent nature of constituting aesthetics and subjectivity makes performance contexts both unique and agonistic due to the intertwining of varied forms of play and new forms of imaginings as well as resistance and discipline.

In other words, within individualized forms of artistry and popularizing of Africa, a camaraderie such as the one that pervaded amongst Griots (as valued representatives of authenticity) has been elusive. Proverbs like “no matter how long a piece of wood floats in the river, it will never become a Crocodile” tell the story (Eyre 2000:99). At times the clashes over origins and authenticity amongst performers leads to a hierarchy, and like “delegates of superseded civilizations”

they must contend with one another for being the originators of a valued tradition. By doing so they display “... the irreversible triumph of the language that has usurped all others in which people once discussed their differences ... as it now belonged to a dismantled rung on the ascending ladder of Development” (Gosh 1993:236, 237). By reforming subjectivities and reorganizing the “social spaces in which people act and are acted upon,” one of the conditions that enables individuals to choose or expand their range of creative options entails being able to make a “modern choice” (Asad 1992:337).

Although the idea that social relations contain limits as much as they contain possibilities is often an issue that is elided in American life, limits are nonetheless imposed upon individuals through various mechanisms. Or individuals impose limits upon themselves and others in both intentional and unintentional ways. Engaging in self-reflexive, politically correct, or revisionist forms of narratives concerning representation are some of the ways that order and coherence can be imposed upon individuals to constrain the spontaneity that experimentation demands of performance participants. In addition, because the named always carries with it a symbolic significance by fixing meaning, revising narratives may be ineffective due to the immediacy of social interactions. While signs and “knowledges” may attempt to give order and coherence to social life, within a multi-vocal field of disparately positioned subjects, their interpretations oftentimes take on diverse meanings that are as inconsistent as the various narratives that are aimed at suiting specific ends. And in a dialogical field where

social interactions amongst groups or individuals are not always consciously enacted (Asad 2003), this implies that there are discrepancies between:

... What one says (*le dire*), and does not do; what one does (*le faire*), and does not say; what one does not say, but does; what one does not do, but says (Mbembe 1999:132).

And within a “precariously” constituted institution these inconsistencies concern distinguishing between:

... What is prescribed and codified by the law, but not applied (or applied in a discontinuous fashion, according to times and places); what is continuously applied, but nowhere prescribed (Mbembe 1999: 132).

Subsequently, due to the practical nature of events, people’s motivations for participating in boundary crossings can either be heightened or minimized. As “aesthetic morals” and subjectivity are complexly interwoven, it is essential to ascribe a degree of consistency to the kinds of subjectivity that difference “invites and avows” and simultaneously “disavows.” It is also necessary to examine the ways that “invisibility” is regulated through “segregated” and commodified forms of visibility (Hall 1993: 106).

Moreover, in the shaping of subjectivity, insisting on universalisms or the permeability of boundaries where “everything is up for grabs” poses the question of how selves can be both re-invented while also serving as *coherent* platforms for engaging in a cultural critique (Asad 1993:264). How can tradition be identified, critiqued, or serve “an aspiration to integrity” if it is also unidentifiable? Moreover, is it possible to engage in a “*regular life*,” or the translation or articulation of new social identities if they are subjected to “... ongoing doubt,

questioning and confusion?” As the above discussions illustrate, the insistence on the permeability of boundaries and their contingency or indeterminacy does not necessitate “pure” or “settled” pasts but rather “manipulable, and recreatable presents” (Asad 1993:265).

The symbolic representation of authentic desire as “truth,” which in turn constitutes its own “internal logic” (Root 1998:43) as experience, then becomes volatile when an illusion becomes challenged, is “shattered,” or when an object of desire diverges from its intended goals, and ambivalently situates him/her self as a subject. The “self-referentiality” of exoticism can thus be gleaned within these spaces of a dialogue. And individual concerns convey not the ways that boundaries have been dissolved but rather the ways that boundaries are either systematically or arbitrarily drawn or re-drawn and why they are initiated or deemed unnecessary. What the various narratives surrounding the re-invention of selves suggest is not the identifiable nature of homogeneity or difference but rather the “authority to define crucial homogeneities and differences” where language serves as an “indispensable” means for facilitating this process since, “speech is the first and continuous condition of political dispute” (Asad 1993: 267). Tracing the journeys of a “wandering aesthetic” and its expression through ruptured identities, shaped within divergent imaginative worlds, suggests that the popular contains neither a utopian drive, nor cheerful optimism.

Modern – day Griots

In the preceding chapters, I explored the conditions that enabled a particular genre of West African dance and music to become the source of aesthetic and personal experience in American life. The production and practice of African dance in New York which takes place by way of a collectively imagined “idea of Africa,” has been inspired by, a Black diaspora aesthetics, exoticism and quest for authenticity. Authenticity is associated with original and rooted cultures and defines both the source and quality of personal experience. Authentic experience is derived through “self-constructed” means, by associating African dance with a cultural practice, particular place, and peoples. By juxtaposing the “idea of Africa” with the familiar, participants describe the experiences that they gain from taking part in African dance performances as being pleasurable or symbolically meaningful. Through various forms of commodification, and by reducing both the artists and the artistic productions of cultural others to an essence, the framing of narratives surrounding expressive culture in American life in terms of moral etiquettes or as virtues and vices, limits the experiential scope of art and what it enables.

Within an asymmetrical and inconsistent system of signs and knowledges, and given the real challenges that modern-day Griots face in terms of trying to earn a livelihood as artists, their limited social status and minimal access to the structures that define the aesthetic standards of their genre, and given the

necessity of having to appeal to the desires or (demands) of an audience, by what mechanisms do they destabilize the centrality of difference?

As “tricksters” and choreographers of experience, West African performers participate in the “performance of Africa,” by re-thinking Africa in a new social context that has been shaped by way of a commodified and prefigured “aesthetics of exoticism.” They inhabit an imaginary field that has been shaped by a set of prescribed conceptual categories that signify Africa as a source of authentic and rooted cultures, where the exotic is vital to authentic experience. This process limits the experimental potential of performances by pointing to the problematic ways that authentic experience is derived, and the ways that the exotic participates as a subject.

While they did not author the narratives that surround authenticity and exoticism, as the bearers of a valued and “authentic” cultural tradition, West African performers are vital to the construction of experience. They must also learn to negotiate the various demands made by performance participants, through a play with subject positions, a perpetuation of tradition, and by relying on ethnic signifiers that both destabilize and fix identities. The insistence on difference as a necessary ingredient to authentic experience obstructs the questioning of the frame and rules that govern the ways that difference has been constructed as a category of experience in the first place. The “grammar of difference,” which occurs as a “floating signifier” and which is essential to the shaping of a genre

and experience, involves constituting Africa as a “sign” that contains cultural and symbolic attributes that are contrasted with the modern. Although their goals for participating in performances are primarily financial or professional, West African performers inform the development of African dance and also gain new forms of subjective experience.

The process of translation, which categorizes West Africans and their artistic productions into an essence, suggests that the creative process and construction of a genre does not always follow the tenets of “aesthetic autonomy.” Moreover, examining the centrality of the exotic to the shaping of a genre and personal experience leads to the question, how have discourses concerning creativity and the quest for authenticity, gained through artistic means, become privileged as autonomous spaces for self-making? In addition, how does the compulsion to become an “other,” and consumption as a kind of relationship inform the creative process?

Illustrating the “performance of Africa” and shaping of experience within a dialogical field, suggests that performances serve as an arena for self-making through divergent imaginative worlds and competing discourses, where the pursuit of authentic experience and desire for resources (both symbolic and economic), have been structured within a power dynamics. Accordingly, individual autonomy constitutes an aspect rather than the totality of the creative process and subjectivity. In the enactment of a cultural practice this implies that

cultures --- as “unequally displaced forms of practice” are shaped within “temporalities of power,” and that distinctions be made between the “logical structures” which enable individuals to act, and subjectivity (Asad 2003). In other words it is the ability of individuals to gain access to the structures that authorize action, rather than subjectivity, which informs the rules for constituting African dance as a genre and for choreographing an experience. Therefore, how West African performers have been incorporated into a “global” imaginary field, and their vital role as choreographers of experience, must also take into account the kinds of options that are available to them for determining the rules or narratives concerned with shaping African dance as a genre.

Because the ability to fashion new experiences or identities through mobility does not provide an adequate explanation, however, I have also queried how it is possible to move, communicate and be in a position of control within contemporary social and aesthetic transformations (Massey 1991). Moreover this approach addresses the ways that physical and moral mobility results in social invisibility (Asad 2003). Rather than privileging subjectivity, or experiences gained through the enactment of exoticism, and in addition to examining the rules that govern the constitution of difference to explain these factors, it is essential to examine the kinds of aesthetic, social or political values that difference fulfills in its abstracted and reconfigured context (Root 1998).

Looking at the contributions made by modern-day Griots, which are evident in the new aesthetic sensibilities that have transformed various New York communities, obscures the question of whether they might also be “imprisoned” by their cultural productions due to their subject positioning. In a commodified field, cultural productions are no longer the exclusive property of the originator; instead they are subject to ongoing reproduction and reconfiguration. Highlighting “aesthetic autonomy” as a means for subverting commonly held views surrounding exoticism overlooks an important factor – the difference between subversion within the frame of exoticism and the subversive role of translation through which African dance has been constructed. Within a system governed by tropes and “temporalities of power,” and given the immediacy of individual lives it is also essential to consider how people are not only imaginative but must be pragmatic. Naturalizing subjectivity and the various ways that it can be reconfigured via language, masks the rules that govern the means through which subjectivity is enacted, displayed or experienced. And paradoxically, subjectivity as an ongoing process is contingent on the structures that either afford possibilities or constrain their fruition.

While the availability of opportunities to engage in a negotiation or a dialogue are ongoing, their very subject positioning and the realization of what they are capable of accomplishing within these set boundaries can also limit individuals from action. For example based on their interpretations of “the idea of Africa,” Amadou’s insistence on tradition by emphasizing folklore, Maurice’s controversial

yet successful commercial venture in hybridizing African dance, Sisse's juggling of eclectic styles, or the choices by some performers to limit their participation to specific spaces are examples of the various positions that subjects take within the overarching sphere of African tradition. However, these were not arbitrary decisions instead, they were informed by the location of individuals within a multi-vocal field, and due to "temporalities of power" that influenced their decisions. Moreover, despite the expansion in the range of possibilities for defining their "styles," individuals must still rely on Africa as a "sign" that operates in shifting relations with the "modern," and by emphasizing cultural and symbolic attributes that indicate difference or a radical "alterity."

In the "performance of Africa," the attempt to construct a "ritual" out of unrelated "sub-worlds," while ongoing and promising new possibilities, comments on the relations between aesthetics and personhood in American life. Because identity plays a vital role to modernist self-making, self-consciousness is the norm and medium through which subjects must negate, authorize or articulate their identities. Within the reorganizing of social space and re-constitution of subjective experience where identities continue to be framed by way of ethnic, racial and cultural difference, does the decline in "unknown territories" or the "fragmented" nature of the "uttering other" (Celestin 1996) guarantee that the other's narratives will be heard? Are the relations between the dominant center and exotic other simply relations based on a desire for or absence of power? How are concerns for historicity, embodied experience and the desire to cultivate

moral alternatives situated within discourses of social and aesthetic transformation?

As a kind of “modern choice” (Asad 1992), self-making is a process that has been informed by modernist assumptions of personhood -- as a “property” gained by way of a “commodity logic,” where “selves” are enabled and disabled, or made and unmade through acquiring symbolic resources that are derived within a dialogical field. Where a mutual choice is lacking, this practice contradicts American romantic individualism, which relies on individual autonomy while also demanding a “totalizing” relationship between the individual and society, or insisting on universal aesthetic and emotional “affinities” between groups whose life experiences are antagonistic (Strathern 1988, Lipsitz 1998, Rosenblum 1998). This contradictory mechanism of self-making, highlights the ambiguous process through which the temporality of authentic experience is sustained. Because a mutual choice is lacking in the articulation of meanings that define personhood, aesthetics, or social boundaries, which are defined in terms of racial, ethnic, or cultural difference, in some contexts individuals may experience self-making as a constraint. The desire for constructing moral or social alternatives within a multi-vocal field, and concerns surrounding historicity or embodied experience may also lead to the formation of protective group boundaries. In addition, the compulsion to become an “other,” and a territorialization of space and experience can disrupt the symbolic play or ironic distance, which is vital to the transformative potential of performances.

Rather than suggesting a linear progression, transformation gained within performances are “multi-temporal,” and as transient forms of experience they lack an experiential specificity (Racy 2003). This suggests that experiences gained within performances occur as disjunctions or may contain numerous “ruptures,” and “breaks.” Due to the “hypersuggestive” nature of performances the idea of engaging in a “self-constructed” authentic practice, or the desire to attain pleasurable states, does not guarantee that one will find what was sought after. In other words one does not strive towards attaining a transformative state, and intense or ecstatic forms of experience gained through performances constitute an aspect rather than the totality of a performance moment. Therefore in the construction of narratives surrounding the “performance of Africa,” pleasurable, extraordinary, intense or ecstatic forms of experience gained through performances need not be given a primacy over the cultural and social contexts through which these experiences were derived. This complicates the relations between authenticity, aesthetics and cultural production by pointing to the contingent nature of transgression, and the ways that a lack of personal autonomy or mutual choice in the enactment of self-making, affects the cultivation of experience.

By romanticizing transgression and creative autonomy, or by associating a performance efficacy with pleasurable states, interpersonal conflicts and frustrated emotions, which also inform performances, must be regulated leaving

individual desires unfulfilled. While the pursuit of pleasure takes precedence over other forms of experience, social pain (although less valued), also constitutes a performance moment, and is a kind of action that serves as “a mode of living a relationship” (Asad 2003:84). Nonetheless because modernist conceptions of personhood present the self in contradictory ways, as one that is autonomous, progressive, or perfecting itself, and “perpetually unfinished” (Strathern 1988), and because “secular agency” must eliminate pain (2003), cultural and aesthetic transformation must be articulated in moral terms. Nevertheless, as a quality of experience, and because of the complexity that surrounds transgression, the process of attaining authentic experience cannot be articulated systematically or in terms of morality.

The merging of cultures at a crossroads and its symbolism as a “dangerous potency” elicits the image of a space where one may be fortunate enough to seize upon new possibilities, but that one might also perish there while battling with “multiple-headed spirits” (Achebe 1973:191). If a marriage between worlds is possible, the image that the “performance of Africa” evokes is that of a “hyperreal utopia” depicted in Jean Baudrillard’s *America* (1989), in which he describes a utopia as being neither a “dream nor a reality,” as it behaves from the “very beginning as though it were achieved” (28). In such a world, experience takes on a new meaning as it has already been “expropriated” (via language) to occur outside of the individual making one “undergo” an experience. Once experience is “measurable,” and “certain” it becomes a different kind of

“experience” (Agamben 1993:24). The other world is somewhat like the theater of the absurd displayed as a “corruption” of the “facts of life” (Artaud 1958:48).

While these two worlds are irreconcilable, both reflect the social dynamics of African dance performances and the ongoing tensions that occur within and through them as new experiential possibilities emerge. As an ongoing process that reflects the broader “societal patterns” concerning aesthetics and personhood, this social dynamics displayed as a creative order and disorder informs the kinds of values that are ascribed to African dance performances and will influence the direction of its future course. Accordingly, and based on their capacities to negotiate a “nomadic aesthetics” and new forms of identities, modern-day Griots will fashion themselves to suit new versions of moral etiquettes or virtues and vices that may or may not coincide with an “ever-expanding taxonomy.”

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