PERFORMANCE, POLITICS, AND IDENTITY IN AFRICAN DANCE COMMUNITIES IN THE UNITED STATES

by
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THESIS ABSTRACT

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This thesis investigates the representation of African dance in the United States, particularly through African dance classes and public performances. It chronicles the motivations that catalyze participation for students and instructors and studies the effects of practice on Americans' understanding of Africa as an imagined place. My findings are based on ethnographic field research in community dance classes and dance troupes in Eugene, Oregon and southern New Hampshire and Vermont from 2009-2012. The project details dance practices produced for the stage in West Africa that are reinterpreted and re-produced in American dance class settings and then subsequently retranslated for the stage by Americans. It illustrates how West African griot culture, economic realities, and audience demand influence transnational dance instruction and suggests alternative ways of understanding concepts of representation, agency, and authorship. Further, it explores how American dance students apply narratives about African dance they learn in class to forge new communities that provide fulfillment absent in their daily lives. Ultimately, the thesis demonstrates how intersections between personal and social histories and performance and performativity in African dance communities in the United States can both reaffirm and disrupt official discourses about race, ethnicity, and artistic expression.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Setting the Stage

As I drive down Grove Street into downtown Brattleboro, Vermont, windows rolled down to combat the swollen August humidity, I can already hear the drums. They punctuate the air, eclipsing the mild laughter of passing barefoot, dreadlocked hula hoopers and ice cream-smeared families, the low hum of passing New York-plated visitors fruitlessly seeking a reprieve from the heat, even the lone sandwich-boarded Post Office Protestor, whose steadfast stream of excoriations usually owns the block. I'm late again. I lock the car door, rush down the hill and push through the heavy back door of the Stone Church. The muted light inside the old building filters through stately stained-glass panels of saints onto the African and American drummers occupying the church's chancel. Six men's and one woman's djembes and dunduns create a wall of sound to support Kabisko Kaba, a Guinean-American dancer who leads thirty odd dancers through Yankadi, a social dance from Guinea.

Save David, a wiry, intense-jawed 60-year-old man in a sweatband and a ratty red t-shirt with the sleeves shorn off, all the students are women, ranging from college-age to mid-60s, most garbed in tank tops and lapas, ankle-length wrap-around skirts generally made of one large rectangular piece of patterned fabric, with dark Spandex bike shorts underneath. There is one African American woman in the class, while the rest of the students appear to be of Euro-American descent. They line up behind Kaba in rows of four and advance across the worn wooden planks, attempting to emulate his demonstration of each phrase in time with the loop of the Yankadi rhythm on the drums.

Kaba doesn't offer much in the way of verbal instruction, instead allowing his students the time and space to simultaneously observe and practice with little initial critique as they travel toward the drummers. Experienced dancers occupy the first and second rows, while newer students hang back in order to be able to observe various people demonstrating the movements before it is their turn to try (see figure 1). As each row of dancers approaches the drummers, the musicians and students make eye contact, and the dancing becomes more deliberate, polished, and vibrant; students' initial inward concentration becomes consciously performative and interactive. The lines revolve; after their turn in front, dancers bead sweat, grimace with frustration, laugh with each other, and yell things to their neighbors over the drums. After a 15 minute warm-up and a 45 minute session crossing the floor learning the steps, students begin to perform in earnest, spending the last 20- 40 minutes of class enjoying dancing for the drummers, Kaba, and each other. Just when their limbs start to droop and their energy lags, Kaba signals the students to form a circle, and each student is encouraged to perform an improvisational solo to end the class.

There are dance classes featuring social dances from Senegal, Ghana, and Guinea in almost all major metropolitan areas in the United States, and increasingly, in many rural regions as well. Instructors advertise classes under the umbrella term West African dance, although instructors and dance forms hail from specific locations in the region. Although people in all West African countries participate in social dance practices, the majority of the instructors who teach in the U.S. are Senegalese, Guinean, Nigerian and Ghanaian.

Figure 1: Dancers in a community African dance class at the Stone Church, Brattleboro, Vermont

For the purpose of brevity, when I am referring to instructors from any of these countries, I will adopt their terminology--West African instructors-- to mean the primarily Senegalese, Guineans, and Ghanaians who teach dance in the United States. Instructors offer classes at many major universities, local cultural centers, YMCAs, or other community spaces. West African men who have settled semi-permanently in the U.S. teach most of the classes. West African women occasionally teach, and there is a burgeoning population of American dance instructors who also instruct this style of dance, who have studied either via travel to West Africa or with instructors domestically. There are more female American instructors than male American instructors, and male American instructors seem more common than female West African instructors. Enthusiastic students help organize West African dance festivals and conferences,

featuring respected dance instructors from West Africa, and attend instructor-organized intensive week-long dance camps in West Africa.

Rationale and Points of Analysis

Slave trade, colonial occupation and anticolonial struggles across Africa have nurtured exogenous and endogenous constructed and/or imagined notions of Africa and African identity. Despite gulfs between the various ideologies that have buoyed these imaginaries, most ideological stances position dance as central to African identity. Whether scorned as primitive, unrefined expression, employed as medium of covert resistance or hailed as the highest tangible manifestation of indigenous cultural beliefs, dance has been, and remains, a powerful focal point in conversations about African culture (Castaldi 1). All of these historical imaginaries influence the ways in which Americans currently interface with African dance. This project aims to investigate the representation of African dance in the United States, particularly through African dance classes and public performances. My investigation reflects a desire to more critically examine questions sparked by my personal involvement in African dance communities over the past ten years. My inquiry will follow two central research questions:

1) How is African dance represented by African and American instructors in the United States and why do instructors choose to present it in these ways? What sorts of artistic, political and practical concerns inform these decisions? What do they include/exclude in their narratives? What stories do they tell?

2) How do instructors' narratives about African dance influence students' understanding of Africa as a place and its relationship to dance? Do students' conceptions of Africa and its relationship to dance reify/complicate/refute Western ideas about Africa and African people?

I focus primarily, although not exclusively, on West African dance instruction and performance because the vast majority of African people who teach African social dance in the United States hail from West Africa, as do the majority of internationally-touring performance troupes presenting traditional African dance (see Chapter 3). Traditional dance, in this context, generally refers to social dances which draw mostly on indigenous artistic expression, serve specific purposes within the community, and function as entertainment. In West Africa, these dances are generally regarded as distinct from both contemporary art dance-,which is largely aimed at staged performances and draws inspiration from indigenous and international dance techniques, and popular dance, which draws from varied sources both local and international and serves primarily as social entertainment, although it often addresses issues that matter deeply to the people who produce and consume them (Barber 2).

The international conception of and discourse surrounding 'African dance' is heavily influenced by certain West African styles of movement and accompanying instrumentation. The project will attempt to illuminate the multitude of diverse and often disparate interests, assumptions, and narratives that populate dance classes in studios and community halls. It chronicles the motivations that catalyze participation for students and instructors, and studies the effects of practice on Americans' understanding of Africa as

an imagined place and the understanding (and lack thereof) of the current realities of the continent and its peoples. I am particularly interested in how discourses surrounding tradition map onto African dance practices and how syncretic reinterpretation of movement practices termed traditional serve the interests of instructors, performers and dance students within a specific globalized, transnational milieu while the same reinventions oversimplify and reify limited discursive constructions of African identity.

My methodological practices are informed by ethnographic research methods and performance, feminist and anticolonial theories. I investigate how the intersections between personal and social histories and performance and performativity in African dance communities in the United States can "disrupt and disturb discourse by exposing the complexities and contradictions that exist under official history" (Mutua and Swadener 16). My aim is not to find out any one 'truth', but rather to examine and make visible the complexities of cross-cultural and inter-cultural performance in current North American sociopolitical conditions. In light of these theoretical goals, I seek to avoid exclusionary discourse that "authorizes certain people to speak and correspondingly silences others, or at least makes their voice less authoritative" (Usher and Edwards 90). Rather, I aspire to provide a forum through which historically marginalized voices and ways of knowing can converse with, and contextualize, hegemonic narratives. The people involved in this project are not passively swept along with the tides of cultural ideology, but rather are all active agents who engage with, critique, and participate in discursive constructions of Africa, and tailor kinesthetic practices to suit their individual needs and interests.

These theoretical foci allow me to foreground the multidirectional complexity of power relations and dynamics, authorship and performance within the dance communities. As Kagendo Mutua and Beth Swadener note, in an era of growing neo-conservatism in the U.S., "particularly evidenced in the current forced adherence to neopositivism in educational research and increased demand in education for standardization", space for more complex interpretive methodologies are often diminished (31). It is then, all the more vital to pursue research whose multivocal, performative, and ambiguous core offers counter-hegemonic accounts of the experiences of Americans who were born in the U.S. and recent immigrants. The strength of such research stems in part from its heterogeneity, diversity and inconclusiveness. This study aims to resist positivist paradigms and generate continued dialogue concerning internal colonialism, global and local power relations, expressive culture and authorship, and constructions of identity and performance, contributing to an anticolonial, egalitarian vein of social science research. In Mr. Kaba's class alone, the instructor, drummers and students have a multitude of interests and opinions about African dance. Students' attitudes and behaviors regarding this practice and their instructors' pedagogical narratives are often reverent, ignorant, and self-centered, while at the same time, the same students comment on social realities and power relations with insightful depth and self-awareness. Female Euro-American drummers seek empowerment, emotional release and connection by playing 'traditional' West African rhythms that women would be prohibited from playing in West Africa. Mr. Kaba wears both indigenous and Western clothing styles, in and out of the classroom respectively, and teaches social 'village' dances that he learned as a professional from trained experts in Conakry, the capital city

of Guinea. The realities of these communities are far more contradictory, multilayered, and varied than my initial assumptions suggested, and they provide fertile territory for more nuanced conversations about the practice of transnational dance instruction and American student reception of African dances.

Basing my research on questions and avoiding finite conclusions does not hobble my ability to make critical arguments. Yet, my hope is that this inquiry will present my arguments that express my own subject position with its attendant biases and relationships to axes of power, along with the arguments and opinions of my informants in conversation with relevant scholarship. As Yvonna Lincoln and Gaile Cannella reflect,

> An ethical, egalitarian social science would not accept the assumptions that human beings have the ability or right to define, know, or judge the minds or ways of being of Others (even those identified as children, or poor, or uneducated, or underdeveloped).The purposes of research would no longer be to represent or know Others, but rather to examine and change the systems and discourses within which we function (279).

By relying on many different voices and their arguments to illuminate systems of discourse and power, this study endeavors to evade theoretical calcification and positivism, retaining multivocalic potential to promote further dialogue.

Literature Review

West African dance and other styles of performance arts in a transnational milieu have only recently become a subject of major scholarly studies in the United States. Francesca Castaldi's *Choreographies of African Identity: Négritude, Dance, and the National Ballet of Senegal* connects West African independence-era political ideologies to the nationalization and professionalization of dance in Senegal and explores the ways in which Senegal's national ballet's performances are received by both local and international audiences. Paulla Ebron's *Performing Africa* examines how African music

is conceived in the American and European popular imagination, and how these conceptions, context and audience composition all influence how West Africa musicians craft their international performances. Lena Sawyer conducts a useful examination of racialization, gender, and negotiation of power in community African dance courses in Stockholm, Sweden. All three of these studies investigate issues that inform my own work and mark the initiation of an important scholarly dialogue to which this project will also contribute. By focusing on transnational performance and reception, I hope to further address how aspects of representation, marketing, and individual agency affect how certain West African dance practices influence a wider American conception of African dance.

Although scholarship on West African dance in international settings is still relatively scarce, there is quite a bit of scholarship that addresses issues vital to the development of this research: performance studies- particularly as it relates to West African expressive arts, cultural histories of West African griot culture, and work on the exotification and commodification of foreign styles of social folk dance in the United States. Richard Schechner's and Victor Turner's early work in performance studies laid the groundwork for research that acknowledges that performances are deeply contextual, site-specific, and embedded in cultural and social practices. The relationship between text and context, particularly in arenas in which there may not be a bounded stage, is constantly shifting, negotiated anew, and often improvised. Margaret Drewel's *Yoruba Ritual* engages with performance theory to highlight the dynamism, flexibility, improvisation and context-based fluidity inherent to many Yoruba ritual performances.

Research that involves West African musicians, many who hail from griot castes, necessitates adequate background knowledge of this topic. The word griot signifies a caste of people who serve as historians, musicians, genealogists, advisers, spokespeople, diplomats, interpreters and translators. The word griot is a French word used to identify this social category across various ethnic groups in West Africa. Eric Charry's *Mande Music* focuses on griot music by describing the music culture of the Malinké and Mandinka peoples living today primarily in Mali, Guinea, Senegal, The Gambia, and Guinea-Bissau, tracing these cultures from their origins in the 13th century. Thomas Hale's *Griots and Griottes* provides important background information on etymological and cultural history concerning griots across the region, and explores the complex social roles and status that griots play, in addition to investigating the role that gender plays in griot culture. In *Masters of Sabar*, Patricia Tang examines current griots' music repertories, performance contexts and creative processes to illustrate the ways in which griot performers have retained musical traditions while adapting to the demands of current social realities.

In *Choreographing Identities: Folk Dance, Ethnicity and Festival in the United States and Canada* and *Dancing across Borders: America's Fascination with Exotic Dance Forms,* Anthony Shay provides helpful background on the history of the last hundred years of American interest in learning foreign dances, from Middle Eastern to Balkan to Indonesian 'traditional' dances and asserts that for many students, temporarily trying on a persona based on an imagined foreign cultural identity can elicit cathartic release and joy. Marta Savigliano's *Tango and the Political Economy of Passion* chronicles how the tango's allure in Paris transformed its local status from a lurid novelty

associated with brothels to the Argentinian national dance, and explores the implicit power dynamics concerning the colonial gaze, the body, and exoticism. Jean and John Comoroff's *Ethnicity, Inc.* explores how global capitalism and tourist imperial nostalgia intersect and influence the ways in which ethnic populations market themselves and trade on the symbolic power of 'authenticity'. Veit Erlmann's work on early 20th century South African musicians and Robert Rydell's *All the World's a Fair: Visions of Empire at American International Exhibitions, 1876-1916* illustrate that conscious performance of ethnicity is not a new phenomenon.

Research Methods

My own investigation is based on a year and a half of ethnographic field research in Eugene, Oregon and southern New Hampshire and Vermont. Eugene, Oregon has a population of approximately 146,000 people, of whom approximately 88% are of European descent, 5% are Hispanic and less than 2% are Black (State and County Quick Facts). Alstead, New Hampshire has a population of 1,944 and is approximately 98% of European descent and .2% Black. Brattleboro, Vermont has a population of 8, 289 and is approximately 93% of European descent, with Black people accounting for the largest minority ethnicity at 1.3% (Brattleboro Population and Demographics). These research locations do not constitute representative groups or provide evidence for broader conclusions, but rather present specific information about particular people in specific locations. In order to understand more fully the constant interaction between performance, individual beliefs and experiences, and discourse, it is imperative that I explore individuals' experiences with African dance in a way that acknowledges the context-bound, site-specific nature of those relationships.

For these reasons, I act as a participant observer, using informal dialogue and formal interviews to inform my research questions, to begin to investigate *how* instructors choose to frame dances in classes and performances, *what* instructors and dance students say about their experiences, and *how* these experiences inform their views on Africa *and* their own lives. I found that formal, audio-recorded interviews were a fruitful structure for some dancers and instructors, while they completely alienated others. For some, the interview format provoked a palpable disinclination to open dialogue. These same dancers and drummers were however, very accommodating and far more comfortable within the structure of informal conversation. Thus, much of my information from community participants was recorded in field notes after these discussions. Despite my initial anxiety about losing sight of the interviewee-driven nature of my interviews, the formal interviews in which I was an active participant, offering more than brief questions, were markedly more vibrant and drew more enthusiasm from my interviewees. Active participation in the interviews proved as important as it was in classes themselves to signal my position as a collaborative learner and peer. Thomas DeFrantz notes that criticism operating 'outside' dance accesses only a portion of its visual effects; he suggests that African diasporic dance practices "resist inscription and interpretation from an exterior, immobile, microanalytic perspective" (67). By fully participating in these dance practices and the discussions that surrounded them, I gained a different, more comprehensive perspective on the community.

I grew up in Dublin, a village of 1,300 people set amidst the bracing spring-fed lakes, granite-strewn hills, and sugar maples stands of rural southern New Hampshire. This region is a largely racially homogenous area; over 96% of the population is of Euro-

American descent. After studying different social dances from West Africa and the African diaspora at Smith College in Northampton, Massachusetts, I began to notice that southern New Hampshire towns boasted many community West African dance classes. I was curious about the widespread volume of African dance classes in these areas and the relationships people cultivated with this practice. I also had direct access, established trust, and rapport with these communities, resources that I most likely would not have enjoyed as an unknown 'outside researcher' initiating research in another geographic area. African, African American, Euro-American and dancers of other ethnicities often have very different, sometimes contradictory ideas about traditional African practices, all of which deserve further attention and study. However for the purposes of this initial inquiry, I chose to work with communities with whom I already had danced (in the case of the New Hampshire and Vermont communities for many years) and with people with whom I had established relationships via dance. I felt the depth and quality of the information I could garner under these circumstances would substantially exceed what I might have gained attempting to make inroads as a complete newcomer in a different community.

During most of my research, I was dancing, engaged in active participant observation. Therefore, I was constantly juggling mastering new steps and techniques while attempting to carefully observe the interactions, practices and conversations in which I and those around me take part. I was a performer in this fieldwork, undertaking subjective, dialogical, and continuing interactions with other students and teachers. My hope is that by focusing on individuals, this research exposes the complex, contradictory nature of communities made up of multilayered testimonies, practices, performances and

discourse with differing tensions and diverse histories.

From November 2009- August 2011, I attended various West African dance classes taught by Senegalese, Guinean, and American instructors, and a summer dance festival featuring several Senegalese dance instructors. In addition, I am a member of the University of Oregon group Dance Africa, a performance troupe dedicated to learning about dance traditions from a variety of African cultural groups and creating educational and entertaining performances for children (via school visits and performances) and adults (via performances in the community and at the university). This troupe practices twice a week for two hours. They host a guest artist in residence who helps produce a series of performances every January at the University of Oregon. The company performs at local schools most Friday mornings from February to May. Through Dance Africa, I have worked with American, Ghanaian, Malawian and Senegalese dance instructors and drummers and conducted formal interviews with American, Ghanaian, Malawian and Senegalese dance instructors and American dance students and performers. Senegalese and Guinean instructors taught almost all of the community classes I attended. I have also spoken to other Americans, formally and informally, noting people's diverse opinions about Americans studying and performing African dance.

Thesis Overview

This thesis is organized into six chapters, beginning with this introductory chapter. The second chapter, *Caught in the Framework,* introduces the complex discourses about African dance that emerge from both colonial and postcolonial literature and culture, and discusses how various political and economic motivations imbue African dance with specific rhetorical cultural significances. The third chapter, *From the Stage to*

the Classroom and Back Again, explores the ways in which dance practices that have been produced for the stage in West Africa are reinterpreted and re-produced in American class settings, and then subsequently retranslated for the stage by Americans. It interrogates notions of tradition and investigates ways in which the pragmatics of performance settings influences performance styles and narratives. The fourth chapter, *Griot Culture Abroad: Shifting Patronage, Agency and the Business of Representation***,** explores how West African griot culture influences transnational dance instruction, and suggests alternative ways of understanding representation, agency and authorship. While earlier sections explore how instructors modify dances to suit contextual interests, the fifth chapter, *Cultivating Community: American Student Reception, Syncretic Philosophies, and Healing*, investigates how students interpret, appropriate and apply these dance practices and the attendant philosophies they have learned from their instructors. It positions American students' consumption and embodiment of African dance and clothing styles within the historical and social context of artistic expression and race in this country. It explores how American dance students apply their conceptions of African dance's connection to community interaction, egalitarianism, and embodiment to forge new communities that provide kinds of fulfillment that they cite as absent in their daily lives. The sixth chapter, *Shifting Tides*, discusses the observations made in this project and suggests possible directions for further inquiry.

My hope is that this examination will express the complicated power, cultural and gender relations, multilayered pedagogical presentations, troubled concerns about their role in the community and genuine appreciation for the practice that my informants express. This inquiry emphasizes that all current cultural practices, be they American or

African, even those termed ‘traditional’, are constantly informed by specific cultural, economic and political histories and contemporary realities.

CHAPTER II

CAUGHT IN THE FRAMEWORK

As the National Ballet of Senegal took the stage at Chicago's Symphony Center one Sunday in October, 1998, performing a two hour program based on traditional dances, *Chicago Sun Times* reporter Kevin Williams declared "Only those who have witnessed previous visits by the National Ballet of Senegal knew what to expect" (1). Yet ironically, Williams' characterization of Senegalese dance in his review of the performance seemed to provide American readers with exactly what they had come to expect in a description of African dance. Williams pronounces the troupe "hyperactive" and "indefatigable", "a barefoot extravaganza, a celebratory maelstrom of stomping feet and percussive brilliance" (2). Williams notes this maelstrom is achieved through "powerful spins" and "outthrust pelvic movements" (2). His description echoes how African dance has been described in Western discourse for hundreds of years, with the added reverence typical of Negritude rhetoric on the subject. When the company visited Orange County, California, *Orange Coast Magazine* trumpeted the return of the Ballet's "exotic flair" to the Irvine Barclay Theatre (19). Both of these publications demonstrate how historical narratives about African dance continue to define the way current artistic practices are framed. In this chapter, I will provide a brief review of Euro-American and West African historical narratives about African dance and assess their impact on current discourse on the subject. This treatment provides necessary background to explore the discursive narratives and particular social histories that impact African dance instruction and performance in the United States.

Dance and Society

As Mark Franko contends, Euro-American dance criticism and expressive theory can encourage a vision of the dancing person as both "private and depersonalized, expressive of subjective interiority and universal" (8). Dance criticism often describes dance in terms of the body and instinct, divorced from cerebral engagement and its trappings, as "a respectable form of anti-intellectualism" (Copeland, Sussman). Euro-American criticism can position language, history and discourse as externalities to dance. By describing the dancing self as at once ephemeral and universal, such criticism positions dance as eluding interaction with specific social circumstances and history.

However in West Africa, language and history are understood as deeply connected to dance practices. Traditionally, dances do not occur in isolation, but rather play a specific role in an event or a series of events organized for specific social occasions (Kwakwa 285). They are valued as entertainment; however their primary purposes are more directly linked to historical, political, sociocultural or religious purposes (Kwakwa 285). Historically in this region, dance offered an esteemed method to stretch time and space, a practice through which people could communicate with ancestors and spirits, and through which histories were written and rewritten though griot performances. Pearl Primus argues that orality is a defining feature of African dance performance (387). West African political leaders and cultural tourism industries have used narrative to situate dance as integral to the social fabric of the region and the identity of its people.

In this thesis, I will argue that language, narrative and the particulars of social history, as well as context and audience, play central roles in the construction,

performance and reception of almost all dance practices, including traditional West African dance in transnational settings. Through vocalized language, production or pedagogical choices, and movements, traditional African dances are both kinetic and cerebral, containing "meaning beyond the formal, aesthetic shapes and sequences of movement detailed by the body in motion…[and] perform[ing] the actions they name" (Defrantz 66). Chapters III and IV will explore how these elements influence movement and meaning. Yet to synthesize their influence, we must first become familiar with the ways in which discourse is formulated and how particular social histories shape discourse and narrative about African dance.

Discourse

In 1971, French poststructuralist theorist Louis Althusser's *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays* asserted that although ideologies can perpetuate systems of domination, they work through, not only upon subjects. Intrigued by the ways in which individuals adopt dominant ideology as their own views, Althusser contended that individuals were shaped, or interpellated, by external ideology which they then in turn codified and perpetuated via 'spontaneous' language and action (218-19). For Althusser and his student Michel Foucault, individuals adopt and propagate systems of repression by cleaving to certain ideas of what is normal and what is deviant. Thus, Ania Loomba explains, power spreads democratically throughout societies like capillaries, rather than emerging only from one central location (38). For Foucault, power manifests itself though discourse,

> a category of human identity [which] is produced and reproduced by various rules, systems and procedures which create and separate it from normalcy … Discourse exists in human practices, institutions and actions. Discursive practices make it difficult for people to think outside of them—

> hence they also exercise power and control. This element of control should not mean that discourse is static or cannot admit contradictions- discourse includes the entire range of utterances and writings on the subject…the world we live in is only comprehensible to us via its discursive representations (Loomba 38).

Edward Said suggests that in many contexts, texts, documents and observations published by academic or governmental bodies are accorded uncritical support by the general public, so that they not only create knowledge, but also the very reality they wish to describe (94). Richard Bauman asserts that language is a means through which social realities are intersubjectively constituted and communicated (304), thus language describing dance deeply influences people's perspective of dance and the social reality of the practice. Similarly, Richard Bauman and Charles Briggs contend that when discourse is linked to a particular genre, like African dance, "the process by which it is produced and received is mediated by its relationship with prior discourse" (148). Hence, if we acknowledge that dance practices indeed do not operate in a social vacuum and *are* influenced by context and history, we must examine the existing discourse surrounding African dance.

Discourse and African Dance

In *Performing Africa*, Paulla Ebron suggests that Africa enters the United States' ideascape through one of two means: either as a tragic narrative about eternally impending social collapse or an uplifting message about the unification of expressive arts. While news stories about the continent are generally framed in a feedback loop of devastating famines, epidemics, and tribal rivalries, American popular media presents African dance and music as a homogeneous narrative about the universal power of the continent's arts to liberate the spirit and body. Necessarily local and rural in nature,

African music, dance and celebration are framed in terms of community interaction, egalitarianism, unity and spiritual transcendence. Ideas or systems of ideas about African dance do not, as Eric Wolf notes, "float about in incorporeal space, they acquire substance through communication in discourse and performance" (6). Conceptions of African dance and music are informed not only by popular media, but also by the continued influence of colonial discourse and scholarship, and nationalist and pan-Africanist cultural renewal movements.

Early American notions of Africa as a continental space were informed by colonial narratives of a landscape peopled with uncivilized natives who were "addicted to dancing" in a primal, wild, instinctual fashion (Agawu 56). Such characterizations were shaped by a history of European thought about outsiders from Greek antiquity through the European Enlightenment. Esteemed thinkers from both periods organized theories of civilization based on a binary of civilization and barbarism in which there existed only two kinds of people: cultured people who were capable of living based on reason and savage primitives who lacked reason, a life of the mind, and the attendant potential for civilized social organization. In *Race and the Enlightenment*, Emmanuel Chukwudi Eze suggests that Enlightenment discourse was predicated on the assumption that reason could only reach maturity in Europe, "while people who lived outside of Europe, or were considered to have non-European cultural or racial origins, were consistently described and theorized as racially inferior and savage" (4). Enlightenment thinkers associated reason with the mind and savagery with the body in literal and symbolic ways in order to construct and police hierarchical differences between European and non-European people. According to these Cartesian divisions, European, white men represented the

mind and reason divorced from the body, while African people (along with all females, Jews, the poor, and any other allegedly inferior social group) remained identified primarily by their bodies, highlighting their supposedly inherent cultural and mental inferiority.

Thus when Enlightenment-era European travelers and explorers described African people's relationship to music and dance, the descriptions were predicated on the assumption that as non-Europeans, African people were governed by their bodies, and their bodies' visceral, irrational, responses to external stimuli. Europeans often situated this relationship in terms of rhythm, percussion, and spontaneity. In 1670, Scottish cartographer and explorer (and incidentally, former dance instructor[i]) John Ogilby wrote that Gold Coast[ii] Africans had "great inclinations to Dancing", so much so that if they heard a drum, they were powerless to stand quiet. 250 years later, Ogilby's observations still rang true for William E. F. Ward, who in 1927 remarked,

> If European music is specially marked by the rich variety of its forms and the splendor of its harmonies, African music is similarly marked by the fascination of its rhythms…Africans have not merely cultivated their sense of rhythm far beyond ours, but must have started with a superior sense of rhythm (qtd in Agawu 56-57).

Most colonial accounts situate the prominence of African rhythm and spontaneity as points of alterity from Western musical practices, which were characterized as more rehearsed, cerebral, cultivated, and refined. Attributing genetic origins to Africans' complex sense of rhythm implies that these practices require no thought, learned skill, or musical theory, only thoughtless physical responses. As late as 1949, ethnomusicologist A.M. Jones writes, "the African is utterly unconscious of any organized theory behind his music. He makes his music quite spontaneously" (11). In *The Invention of Africa* and *The*

Idea of Africa, V.Y. Mudimbe alludes to the influence of Enlightenment goals in descriptions of Africans. He identifies the core of European representations of the African as Other as a means to achieve psychological, practical and ideological ends. He writes, "The discovery of primitiveness was an ambiguous invention of a history incapable of facings its own double" (190). The early association of African artistic practices with cultural backwardness and lack of civilization not only girded Enlightenment ambitions to establish a singular claim on civilization, but also provided justification for Europe's continued colonial presence on the continent. As Megan Vaughan suggests, "Unable to contain a notion of difference that was not directly tied to the question of inferiority and the necessity of subordination", European colonialists capitalized on perceived difference to justify colonial occupation and to institute economic, administrative, judicial and bio-medical control (115, 51).

The monolithic Enlightenment-era trope of Africa as a timeless place filled with primitive, dancing bodies provided a useful, racially-based narrative for Euro-Americans profiting from chattel slavery. During the Middle Passage, Africans were forced to dance to preserve their physical strength and for the entertainment of the crew, and upon arrival in the U.S. were made to dance in the slave-pens for prospective buyers. An African captive who was a good dancer often fetched a higher price at slave auctions because dancing vigor demonstrated the physical strength and health that plantation owners hoped would translate into consistent and reliable labor (Emery 12). In her history of Black dance in America, Lynn Fauley Emery reflects:

> The African was forced to dance in bondage and under the lash. He danced because his white ruler wanted his stock in good condition. He danced not for love, for joy, nor religious celebration, not even to pass the time, he danced in answer to the whip. He danced for survival (12).

Despite the coercive tactics that provoked this dancing, early Euro-Americans' observations of Africans dancing in these settings combined with their exposure to colonial narratives contributed to a Euro-American conception of African dance as hysterical and devoid of refined skill. Such conceptions are evident in records of Euro-Americans observing slaves gathering to dance at Congo Square in New Orleans on Sundays. Following the New Orleans City Council's 1817 legislation forbidding slaves from dancing on any other day, the mayor designated Congo Square as an approved location that could be kept under careful surveillance for any signs of potential uprising (Emery 156). Sundays at Congo Square became a popular outlet for socialization for slaves and drew many white spectators who liked to watch the dancing. Lyle Saxon, an early onlooker described the dancing in his diary on April 11, 1817:

> I witnessed a Negro dance. Their postures and movements somewhat resembled that of monkeys. One might, with a little imagination, take them for a group of baboons. Yet as these little wretches are entirely ignorant of anything like civilization…one must not be surprised at their actions (Saxon 233-34).

Casting African dance as homogenously primitive, instinctual and animalistic helped white American society reinforce presiding cultural narratives about the inherently civilized, refined nature of white culture and artistic expression and girded the rhetoric of racial difference upon which racism, slavery and its attendant exploitation relied. In the early twentieth-century American dance world, in response to the mechanization and uniformity of Busby Berkeley, John Tiller and Florenz Ziegfeld productions, white performers mined African-informed Black dance forms, which Euro-Americans understood as spontaneous, 'natural', and thrillingly base, for their own performances. During the same period, Ruth St. Denis and Maude Allen, white women often lauded as

the founders of classic modern dance, stained their skin brown and performed popular pieces based on racial mimicry. For some white female dancers during this period, reinterpreting 'African' dance provided a way to reinscribe their bodies' own sensual potential "through and against their own abject projections of racialized femininity" (Brown 171). In the 1940s, African American dancers and anthropologists Katherine Dunham and Pearl Primus set out to study Afro-Caribbean and African dance respectively, committed to proving that dance forms of African origin were just as worthy of the concert hall as were Russian ballets. Dunham sought to distance Afro-Caribbean dance from the spectacle it was characterized as by Euro-American presentations, "to take *our* art out of the burlesque—to make it a more dignified art" (qtd in Orme 46). Primus and Dunham presented dances of African origin as distinguished and deserving of serious artistic attention, and helped to begin to displace many Euro-Americans' minstrel-show vaudevillian conceptions of African dance (Emery 268). Seventy years later, Euro-Americans' general contemporary conception of Africa may have abandoned overtly racist discourse, yet notions of the traditional, timeless nature and the 'sensuous potential' of African artistic expression still dominate popular culture and color the way some Americans perceive African dance.

This fact is evidenced even in a basic Google search. If one enters 'African dance' in the image search box, the majority of the images feature contemporary dancers dancing traditional dances in traditional costumes. Here again, traditional refers to styles of social dance that are classified as separate from art dance and popular dance. The current Wikipedia.com entry for "African dance" includes many paragraphs describing the characteristics, cultural functions and examples of traditional African dance from

across the continent. For the common audience contributing to and managing the Wikipedia page, African dance is almost entirely defined by traditional dances that occur in rural village settings. In the 48 paragraph entry, there is but one suggestion that there may be other forms of dancing practiced on the continent, and the language of this section hints at the damaging and dangerous results of African dance straying beyond its supposed traditional norms. The paragraph details that when townships were created, people and their dances "were removed from the traditional environment", and dances took on a sexual emphasis "almost violent in its urgency" ("African Dance"). The article makes no specific note of where on the continent nor when these townships were created. Happily, the article notes, the situation was remedied by creating traditional dance clubs to protect the supposed purity of these dances and to regulate the behavior of dancers and musicians.

West African nationalist discourse, on the other hand, dismisses colonial tropes painting Africa as an uncivilized, undifferentiated, wild space, yet dance is still central to the rhetoric of independence movements. In the wake of generations of colonial dismissal of an African past, nationalist politicians in Senegal and Guinea drew on Negritude philosophy to champion African artistic expression as a product of their own great civilization and concrete evidence of vibrant cultural traditions. First published in Aimé Césaire's 1939 *Cahier d'un Retour au Pays Natal* and expanded into a full ideology by scholar, poet, and eventual first president of Senegal Léopold-Sédar Senghor, Negritude was a literary and ideological movement that rejected colonial racism and ideas of European cultural superiority. At the same time, the movement embraced the notion of a shared black identity and foregrounded African cultural and artistic practices as evidence

of sophisticated African civilization. Paulin Joachim, a Beninese poet, journalist and editor and one of the early leaders in the Negritude movement in Paris, explains to Benneta Jules-Rosette,

> Our vocation was essentially to insert African culture into the civilization of the white man. It was to affirm our presence, pure African presence, because the colonizers had always negated our culture, as if there could be a people without a culture (35).

Even non-Negritude based independence movements in Africa during this period highlighted the cultural import of traditional African dance, positioning traditional dance as a marker of the uniqueness of African civilization and national pride and overtly rejected European appraisals of Africans' cultural inferiority.

Directly following independence in 1959 and 1960 respectively, Guinea and Senegal both established national dance troupes aimed for domestic and international performances. Senegalese leader Léopold Senghor situated dance as central to a continentally and diasporically shared "Negro-African" philosophy and way of being and knowing (Castaldi 52). Senghor declares, "'I think, therefore, I am,' Descartes writes…The Negro-African could say, 'I feel, I dance the other, I am'. To dance is to discover and recreate….In any event, it is the best way to know" (73). Senghor collapsed the implicit Manichean binary between mind and body and elevates the function of dance to epistemological and spiritual concerns, while simultaneously presenting dance as foundational to a continentally shared African social space. Rhetoric that emphasized the shared cultural links between all African peoples functioned as a political tool. Before colonization, government and social structure were organized based on ethnic group and caste rather than national boundaries. Successfully establishing independence and political clout in the international sphere meant adopting a Western model of nationhood.

Negritude ideas about shared Pan-African identity helped leaders foster cultural and national ties between disparate ethnic groups, yet simultaneously reified colonial notions that all Africans belonged to one hazily defined tribe. Thus Euro-American colonial narratives conceived of Africa as a place in which dance was timeless, innate to Africans, and central to ethnic identity, while West African nationalist rhetoric also focused on all African people's inherent connection with dance as proof of their shared ethnic identity and the integrity of their cultural heritage.

***Différance* and Performance**

These historical discursive constructions clearly affect current American depictions and understandings of African dance. Yet, as Gananath Obeyesekere indicates, "Discourse is not just speech; it is…expressed in the frame of a scenario or cultural performance. It is about practice…insofar as the discourse evolves it begins to affect the practice" (650). In this sense, discourse frames practice—it can position, defend, and/or extend its range of application (Edwards 38). Discourse contributes to cultural performance, yet it does not dictate its bounds. The practice itself articulates itself in relation to discursive fields, "to a variety of derived or opposed signifiers, fleshing out its history of use, and imagining its scope of implication, its use, its future" (Edwards 38). Dominant ideas are never monolithic, and performance's inherent ambiguity provides performers opportunities to reinforce, negotiate, capitalize on and contest dominant ideas. Challenging Saussure's closed loop between one sign and one signifier, Algerian French theorist Jacques Derrida asserts that no sign is identical to what it signifies, that there is always slippage between the two (347-358). Meaning, which Derrida argues is inherently multiple, is not a feature of the sign itself, but rather of this gap or *différance*, this

potential for numerous signifiers that each sign contains. For African dance instructors, the performance of identity, dance performance and pedagogy are all marked by *différance.* These types of social performances are constituted by and contribute to a constantly shifting discourse. As Margaret Drewel contends,

> Transformational, or generative processes are embedded in African performance practices through acts of re-presentation, or repetition with critical difference. Thus… performance necessarily involves relations between the past and individual agents' interpretations, inscriptions, and revisions of that past in present theory and practice (xiii).

Performers negotiate discourse, audience, and individual experience to create multilayered performances containing palimpsests of signifiers. Despite limiting discourse surrounding their practice, African dance instructors draw on the cultural resources available to them to expand professional opportunities and incrementally amend mainstream cultural narratives. As Judith Walkowitz usefully notes,

> Foucault's insight that no one is outside power has important implications for expressions from the margins …That individuals are basically bounded by certain cultural parameters does not falsify Marx's insight that men make their own history, albeit under circumstances that they do not fully control or produce. They are makers as well as users of culture, subjected to the same social and ideological constraints, yet forcefully resisting those same constraints (30).

I preface this investigation with a discussion of dominant discourses not to suggest that they dictate performance and reception, but rather to make explicit the existence of discourse as collections of representations rather than collections of facts. I want to emphasize that dance, including African dance, is a social practice that is indeed influenced by and a producer of discourse, politics and history. At the same time, I frame this project with an actor-centered performance studies approach that acknowledges

‘traditional’ dance practices as constantly renegotiated and re-presented, affected by context, audience and individual intentionality.

Notes

[i] Ogilby apprenticed with a dance master and subsequently performed in court masque events, however his career was cut short after a bad landing injured him and left him with a permanent limp.

[ii] Phrase used by Europeans from the 15th century onward to describe coastal regions in West Africa rich in gold.

CHAPTER III

FROM THE STAGE TO THE CLASSROOM AND BACK AGAIN

"This next dance is from Senegal. It's called Toucouleur. It's danced by pregnant women, who are proud they can still kick high and dance well even though they are pregnant." The 100 odd Edison Elementary students, seated cross-legged on the gymnasium floor in Eugene, Oregon, crane their necks upward to follow Dance Africa artistic director Rita Honka's presentation. Ms. Honka's six foot frame, swathed in a vibrant purple and blue boubou, a long pullover tunic worn by women in the Gambia, Guinea, Ghana, Mali and Senegal, cuts an imposing and captivating figure on the make-shift stage. "This is the last dance Dance Africa will perform today, so please, let's welcome the dancers one more time!" The five Euro-American drummers occupying the rear of the middle of the performance space initiate a steady, energized Toucouleur rhythm, and nine women dressed in long cotton brocade lapas and ruffled indigo bubas, fitted blouses that accent the shoulder and hips, burst into the gym, each bearing a woven basket, and form a long V of bodies moving forward and back in unison. The children gasp, giggle and exchange nervous glances with their neighbors. One of the dancers is Saudi Arabian and Euro-American, while the eight remaining dancers are Euro-American, as is Ms. Honka, Brian West, the musical director and head drummer, and the rest of the drummers. The women put down their baskets in order to execute whirling turns in which they raise one knee, fake a turn in one direction and spin around, arms windmilling the opposite way. They form long lines on either side of the drummers and when signaled by a drum break[i], jump while kicking their right leg high to the front followed by a low left kick behind, all in the span of a second. The jump is repeated mercilessly until the dancers shoot meaningful looks to West, who relieves them with

another break. The women wheel forward, grinning broadly at their young audience members who pull their feet back, delighted, as the dancers turn and jump seemingly right above them, just beyond their toes. With another break, the dancers are on their knees, baskets raised in offering to the audience, and the dance is finished. During the enthusiastic applause, the dancers hold their positions and smiles as sweat courses down their necks. They rise, bow and Ms. Honka rejoins the group on stage. The dancers all introduce themselves and Ms. Honka asks the audience whether they have any questions.

About a third of the audience members' arms shoot up, followed by another group of more tentative hands. The children squirm and attempt to push their palms higher than their friends, as if this extra half inch of visibility will grant them the momentary fame and personal attention they seek from the dancers. Ms. Honka calls on one student and another, answering each question quickly and good-humoredly.

> Student: How did you learn all those dances?
>
> Honka: We learn from dancers from Africa and we practice for many hours every week.
>
> Student: Was it hard to learn the dances?
>
> Honka: Sometimes it is hard, but we all work together and have a good time. We enjoy dancing and practicing together. You could learn too. It just takes practice.
>
> Student: Have you ever been to Africa?
>
> Honka: I have not- I have learned from many master dancers from Africa who have traveled to this country. [In the rare case that one of the company members has been to Africa, they explain in greater detail (country, region, etc.) where they went and why].
>
> Student: Are you all from Africa?
>
> Honka: No, we're from the University of Oregon in Eugene.

Honka's last response elicits knowing chuckles from some teachers and chaperones, but the impact of the question is not lost on Honka and the troupe. Maybe the adults mistakenly presume that the student would know that most Africans have dark skin. Dance Africa drummer (and public elementary school teacher) Rhian Pyke often laments that Oregon public schools' social studies programs only devote one week to the entirety of Africa. Dancer Julie Polhemus notes that this Dance Africa performance might be the students' only exposure to African artistic practice in their whole tenure at school, and as severe state budget cuts affect school's arts programming, it may be some of their only arts education (Polhemus). Established in 1993 by Ms. Honka, a University of Oregon dance instructor, and Kouessan Abaglo, a University of Oregon MBA student at the time from Togo, Dance Africa is a performance troupe dedicated to spreading knowledge about the dance traditions of Africa. Composed of current undergraduate, graduate students, and alumni of the University of Oregon, the troupe hosts artists in residence, produces annual shows at the university, and has toured area schools free of charge for the last 17 years, performing and providing brief lessons in African geography, rhythm and instrumentation, storytelling and dance.

Although Dance Africa provides far more access to African expressive arts than general public school curriculum funding would allow, the exposure that school audiences receive through Dance Africa presents a particular vision of African dance, primarily informed by a specific group of drum-accompanied dances and songs that emerge from specific regions in Africa, performed primarily by Euro-Americans. Furthermore, although the troupe has had African American members in the past, the current members are mostly Euro-American. Troupe members acknowledge that this is

problematic, and contend that they wish there were more African American people in Eugene that would like to participate in Dance Africa. Such sentiments allude to the complicated history and present condition of race relations in this country in which Euro-American performers consistently appropriated African American artistic expression for their own gain. Troupe members clearly wanted to dispel the idea that they were engaged in such practices. Their comments also imply that they believe that African American people have more of a legitimate claim on these African dances than they do. Furthermore, the desire for darker skinned people performing, even if they are not African, speaks to the significance of racialized bodies as indicators of cultural authority for Euro-Americans in African dance classes.

Nonetheless, troupe members also feel that the exposure to African dance and culture that students gain through Dance Africa's performances are more beneficial than the alternative of not having any exposure. Because of the local public schools' abysmal budget situations, booking and paying for a troupe from elsewhere with more African members is simply not an option. For most of these schools, it is a free visit from Dance Africa, or nothing. Dance Africa troupe members hope that the visibility the art form receives via their school visits is just the first exposure, and that interested students will seek out more information about the topic after the visit. This chapter aims to examine the complexity present within dance practices performed for various audiences and explore how politics, language, and environmental context influence performer intentionality and audience reception.

Restored Behavior and Signifyin(g)

In *The Theatre and Its Double,* Antonin Artaud suggests that "an expression does not have the same value twice, does not live two lives…a gesture, once made, can never be made the same way again" (75). Dances, even traditional dances, do not remain the same, but shift content, intentionality, and reception based on context, past performances, history and surrounding social dynamics. Performance studies theorist Richard Schechner argues that in this way, performances by definition are intertextual because actors are constantly and self-consciously alluding to previous performances and modifying them based on the current context. Schechner's "restored behavior" may repeat elements of previous performances, but the current iteration is a repetition with critical differences (Schechner 40). In his analysis of African American literary traditions, Henry Louis Gates argues that repetition with critical difference, what he terms "signifyin(g)", disrupts the supposedly closed circuit between sign and signifier articulated by Ferdinand de Saussure in his influential *Course in General Linguistics* by using performative utterances to indirectly comment on, allude to, satirize, criticize, or celebrate previous performances (50). Gates uses Mikhail Bakhtin's notion of a 'double-voiced utterance' to describe signifyin(g) because in a signifyin(g) performance, there are always multiple signifiers, or utterances. A signifyin(g) performance's allusions mean different things to different audience members and performers, depending on whether or not they share knowledge of each indirect reference. Thus, like Derrida's notion of *différance*, for Gates and Bakhtin, one denoted sign does not match with only one corresponding connotation. Rather, the sign becomes a "special sort of palimpsest" which retains the initial signified connotations, yet also houses many more based on the perspective of each choreographer,

performer and audience member (Morson 108). In "Genre, Intertextuality and Social Power", Richard Bauman and Charles Briggs argue

> intertextual relationships between a particular text and prior discourse (real or imagined) play a crucial role in shaping form, function, discourse structure, and meaning; in permitting speakers (and authors) to create multiple modes of inserting themselves into the discourse; and in building competing perspectives on what is taking place (147).

Thus, as musicologist James Snead reflects, "Whenever we encounter repetition in cultural forms, we are not indeed viewing 'the same thing', but its transformation" (151). Performances of traditional African dances by Americans for American audiences are informed by and speak to multiple past iterations of those dances in multiple contexts, and audience members interpret them in varied ways depending on what kinds of cultural knowledge they do or not share with the performers.

Performance artist and theorist Coco Fusco suggests that although Western audiences are more than capable of recognizing metaphorical meaning and intertextual nuance within domestic productions, many approach non-Western cultural performances, particularly performances of traditional arts practices, as if everything they saw was a realistic portrayal of the culture featured. She argues that the literalism with which many people interpret transnational or cross-cultural performance feeds cultural misunderstanding, generalization and racism (Fusco 143).[ii] Specifically, this chapter will challenge the notions that West African dance performances present a facsimile of African people's relationship to dance in everyday life and that such dance practices exist outside the influence of politics, history, and constant evolution. I argue that traditional African dance performance and instruction is restored behavior that nods to previous performances, yet constantly evolves—it is repeated with critical differences. It is

ordered and bounded it certain ways, at the same time as specific performances are "open-ended, heterogeneous, and fragmented (Bauman and Briggs 147).

Because the majority of instructors with whom I worked were Guinean and Senegalese (and because of the large numbers of Senegalese and Guinean instructors in the U.S.), I will focus primarily on Senegalese and Guinean instructors and dance performances. Nonetheless, I will also draw on comments and interviews with dance instructors and educators from Ghana and Malawi whose experience with professional companies in their home countries and understanding of the ways in which African dance is marketed and taught in the U.S. offer valuable insight and perspective, and speak to pedagogical experiences in the U.S. shared by African instructors from different countries.

By examining traditional African dances' roles and meanings in a number of settings, I will demonstrate the dynamic nature of traditional arts practices and illustrate how African dance performance and instruction functions as a potent context-specific sign with multiple, continually-shifting signifiers addressing political, economic and cultural interests. In doing so, I wish to dismiss ideas about African dance as inherent cultural knowledge and static tradition and emphasize the ways in African dance practices can be multiple, contradictory, and intertwined with the politics of performance, economics, and ethnic identity.

Appropriateness and Visibility

It is not just Dance Africa's repertoire, but the majority of African music and dance to which Americans are exposed that emerge from a select group of West African dances. The reasons for this are connected to the social functions of dance, changes in

political economy, the post- independence history of nationalization and professionalization of dance in this region.

Many dance instructors from Senegal and Guinea who teach African dance to American students often refer to the dances they teach as traditional, or village dances. These words have different connotations for their Senegalese and Guinean presenters and their American audiences.

Historically, Western scholarship about African arts organizes artistic pursuits on a binary. Traditional arts occupy one end of this binary. Non-African scholars have used the word traditional to describe African artistic practices which are expressed using indigenous images and practices and are assumed to have a connection to the area's pre-colonial past (Barber 1). On the other end of the binary are modern, Westernized, elite practices. These practices are defined by mastery of European expressive conventions, proximity to metropolitan centers, higher formal education, and a smaller, often international audience (Barber 1). Some scholarship frames traditional art practices and elite art practices on a chronological scale, as if elite dance practices have evolved and grown out of static traditional practices. According to this rhetoric, Karin Barber reflects, "the traditional is frozen in place as the origin or influence, which is co-opted to authenticate the modern by providing it with roots" (2). This trope is evident in contemporary discussions about dance in Africa. Bode Lawal is a contemporary choreographer from Nigeria who describes his work as "radical, post-modern, syncretic expressions" that employ many dance styles while also paying homage to African cultural traditions (qtd in Barnes). In a profile of Lawal, former director of the Phoenix Dance Theater Thea Nerissa Barnes writes, "One wonders though when African dance

was ever a 'modern' dance form to warrant Lawal's 'post modern' stance?" (Barnes). In Barnes' estimation, all African dance is traditional, which in this framework, is the opposite of contemporary or modern. Although most contemporary scholars now reject this simplistic binary, Mary Arnoldi argues that many scholars' work still seems to assume that all traditional arts practices in Africa operate on a similar trajectory and rate of change, thus tacitly lumping all these practices together in one group instead of acknowledging the highly differentiated and diverse practices that occur even within one distinct community (80).

Although some African scholars have also adopted this linguistic binary, most organize African artistic practices in a different fashion. In the case of dance, people generally refer to different styles of dance as either traditional, art, or popular dances, although none of the boundaries of these categories are impermeable- and each influences the other two. Many professional dance instructors from Senegal and Guinea who teach in the U.S. trained in companies who pride themselves on their innovative performance of traditional dance. When these instructors use the term traditional, they refer to a specific group of traditional dances.

In *Dooplé: The Eternal Law of African Dance,* Côte d'Ivorian dance scholar Alphonse Tiérou uses a model of concentric circles to illustrate the different uses of traditional dance in Côte d'Ivoire and neighboring regions of West Africa where many related ethnic groups reside (see figure 2).

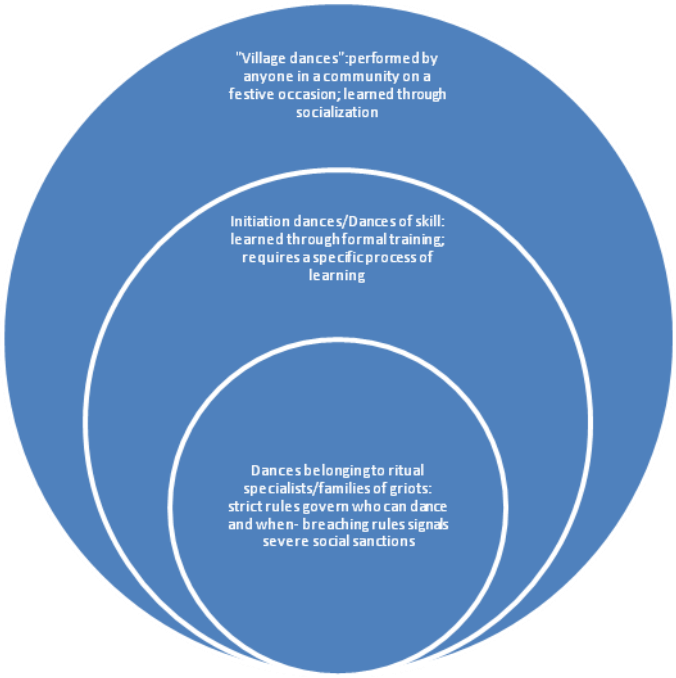

Figure 2: A visual representation of Tierou's concentric model of dance classification (Adapted from Tiérou 57-62).

The largest circle of dances, what Tiérou calls village dances, generally do not carry many social sanctions. Most people can participate in these dances, and the movements are learned through socialization from childhood onward. In both rural and urban areas, these dances are part of a community's social life, and each ethnic group has its own particular dances. These 'village' dancing styles generally encourage improvisation and choreographic variety (Castaldi 146). Thus many traditional dances evolve often, and their dynamic evolution defines, rather than undermines their traditionality.

The dances that occupy Tiérou's second circle are performed publically, but by a socially restricted group of people on specific occasions. Similarly, Francesca Castaldi explains that in Senegal, the *cin* (for men) and *nāka* (for women) Manding initiation dances are performed only during a coming-out ceremony when the initiates return to their community to perform in the town center (147). Dances in the second circle do not

encourage the same kind of improvisation as do village dances from the first circle. Correct performance of dance steps signifies obedience to and respect for elders, and failure to follow exact choreography can result in beatings for participants (Castaldi 147). Dances in this circle cannot be danced by just anyone, and participation is sanctioned based on formal training and clear distinctions between master dancers and amateurs.

Tiérou's innermost circle describes dances that are the exclusive property of families of griots, a caste whose social functions include praise-singing, organizing and narrating histories and genealogies, interpretation and translation, and serving as spokespersons for chiefs and rulers. Social and professional codes guard the sanctity of these dances; their instruction and performances are policed by strict rules, and violations of the latter can merit social and spiritual upheaval (Castaldi 147). While all of these dances continue to be practiced in many West African countries, the social functions of Tiérou's first, or outermost circle of public, 'village' dances' expanded dramatically in many West African nations post-independence.

Negritude, Nationalism, and Dance

Negritude was a political and cultural movement that embraced shared black identity throughout the African diaspora and many parts of the continent and a renewed appreciation of the cultural treasures of a uniquely African civilization. Asserting racial difference and consciousness were part of the human experience, Senghor, Césaire and other Negritude philosophers and political leaders embraced and repositioned several of the characteristics of African life denigrated in colonial literature (rhythm, earthiness, sensuality, strong connections with the past) as proof that Africans belong to a "mystical civilization of the senses" (Loomba 177). Although Senghor's characterization of African

people was very different than that of colonial discourse, it still relied on sweeping generalizations about large groups of people. In this sense, Senghor's ideologies did not challenge the racial categories on which colonialism thrived, but provided a reactive message that asserted that indeed all Africans and people of African descent shared this collection of traits, and moreover, that they were positive characteristics of which Africans should be proud.

Drawing on Senghor's assertion that dance was intrinsic to African people's sense of being in the world, newly independent West African countries established national dance troupes, or Ballets, aimed for domestic and international performances. Senegal's Senghor and Guinea's first president Sekou Touré, as well as many other African leaders, positioned traditional dance as a marker of authentic African civilization and national pride. By calling the groups 'Ballets', Senghor and Touré challenged the singular European claim on the word to signify a certain style of dance, linguistically asserting that staged productions of African dance were just as refined and technique-driven as were European ballets. Negritude ideology and the ways in which Senghor and Touré employed African dance to signify Africa's cultural treasures for Western audiences continues to influence the way traditional African dance is currently taught and performed in the U.S.

Guinean president Sékou Touré asserted that the goal of the National Ballet was not to educate foreign spectators about African daily life or community dance practices, but rather to acquaint them with Guinea's cultural values and artistic riches, such "to make her known and esteemed" throughout the world (261). He emphasized that National Ballet performances would not reflect literal presentations of different ethnic groups'

dances, but rather an artistic representation of Africa and the life of African people. National Ballet performances in Guinea often drew primarily from dances Alphonse Tiérou classifies as village dances, the outermost circle, dances which everyone is free to perform and during which choreographic improvisation is encouraged. Because Ballets employ dancers from various ethnic groups, dancers may be familiar with some dances the Ballet performs, and may know one or two dances intimately. However the majority of the dances (from other ethnic groups) are new for the dancers, and they learn them in the formal, rehearsal setting of the Ballet under the direction of the artistic director and master teachers. Dancers often concentrate on learning a single dance for over a year before the artistic director approves them to perform the piece. Occasionally Ballets also perform certain dances from Tiérou's second circle, because they rely on a set process of formal instruction. Creating stage presentations of village dances that combine different public dance styles from different areas in order to tell a story, is a strategy, as Eric Charry reflects, "intended in part to promote a national identity based on the contributions of all members of society", to downplay cultural differences between ethnic groups and castes while elevating the virtues of national unification in a plural society (211).

In this way, Senghor, Touré and other West African leaders employed Ballets as self-consciously corrective presentations of the prized value of African artistic practice for both foreign and domestic audiences. Despite the popularity of Western funk and rock'n roll in Guinea and the proliferation of performance groups who combined local musics with these styles, Touré felt these foreign genres signified hegemonic colonial influence on Guinean culture. In 1958, the new Mandé president launched his

Authenticité campaign, prohibiting the presence of Western styles in creative expression. The campaign required all dance and musical performances to merge traditional dances with new material in order to create new, 'authentically African' art. For Touré, this meant the art could not reflect influences that were not indigenous to Africa. Thus despite the literal ways in which Ballet performances may have signified (and continue to signify) to Western audiences, for Guineans, the nature of the dances performed by Ballets did not reflect the ways in which Guineans actually were currently dancing, as much as it did carefully-crafted politically motivated messages about the value of Guinea's artistic heritage expressed through a European performance frame via staged, choreographed performances.

Furthermore, the Guinean Ballet's performances of all Guineans, no matter the ethnic group, dancing together, created a public message meant to overshadow the continued political tension between ethnic groups that challenged the new government's ideal of a unified national spirit trumping ethnic or caste ties. Many Fulani people resented the manner in which they had been unceremoniously ousted from their positions in French colonial government during Touré's attempt to unite the country against France. Viewing Touré's decision as an assault against their ethnic group, many left Guinea for neighboring Senegal. Despite his unification rhetoric, many Guineans interpreted Touré's presidency as a strategic return of Mandinka power in Guinea.

Despite Léopold-Sédar Senghor's rhetorical embrace of indigenous African culture, the essentialized nature of his own dialectic justified the continued inclusion of European cultural infrastructure in Senegal. By juxtaposing African identity with modernness and associating Africanity with 'a turn inward', Senghor's notion of

Negritude ironically demanded that Senegal embrace French language and education systems in order to produce 'proper citizens' capable of building a meaningful future for Senegal (Castaldi 199). Only those fluent in French were permitted to participate in political debate, and all educational curricula, from elementary school to university was (and still is) conducted in French. Despite the 37 languages spoken in Senegal, Senghor singularly championed French. Eventually in 1971, after intense public pressure, he recognized six indigenous languages- Wolof, Pular, Sérér, Joola, Manding, and Sarakholé-Soninké--as official national languages. Senegalese national Ballets performed a representation of the nation characterized by diverse, cooperative ethnicities. Through performance, they projected an image of one unified nation to foreign audiences and members of the emerging nation. In reality however, national politics often marginalized local ethnicities, cultural values and languages in favor of institutionalized French language and culture (Castaldi 203). In this way, we can see how national Ballets function as public relations mouthpieces for governments, presenting a self-consciously unified and cooperative vision of African cultural life via dance that often masked social dynamics based on ethnicity.

Influence of Ethnic Groups

Even as performances were billed as expressing diverse styles of Guinean or Senegalese dance, depending on the artistic director and current interests of the government, Ballet performances often favored village dances from certain ethnic groups. These artistic choices reflect broader social and political dynamics between ethnic groups in the region. Senegal is home to approximately twenty different ethnic groups, the largest percentages being Wolof, Fula, Séréer and Joola respectively. However, the

majority of the population has adopted the Wolof language as the primary language of communication[iii]; up to 90% of Senegalese people have at least a passive understanding of the language (Swigart 80; Diouf 62). In their work on Senegal's 'Woloficization'[iv], both Leigh Swigert and Makhtar Diouf identify an assimilation to Wolof culture as a by-product of this linguistic phenomenon and suggest certain urban styles of Wolof language[v] and culture are becoming markers of transethnic identity for many non-Wolof people in Senegal. For example, sabar is a dance traditionally performed by Wolof and Séréer people, yet sabar events are now danced by people of any ethnic group in Dakar. Castaldi explains that sabars are "the most pervasive and popular dance events in the capital, held to celebrate births, marriages, political and sporting events, and gatherings of close friends (76).

Because of the popularity of the sabar events, many Wolof griots have gained access to a new opportunites for income playing *mbalax*[vi] music in Dakar clubs and in the world music scene internationally. Unlike the Wolof ethnic group, Mandinka and Soninke people belong to a wide swath of ethnic groups in the region that all exist under a shared Mande heritage. Mandinka and Soninke griots have found sustaining work as choreographers and artistic directors of national Ballets. Mande dances demand graceful articulation of the arms and wrists and the ability to perform steps with a sense of "grounded elasticity" (Castaldi 156). In addition to the abundance and choreographic influence of Mande artistic directors, many Ballets also reflect a privileging of Mande dances from various groups as a response to the diffusion of Wolof-centric styles dominating popular cultural expression. Thus although Wolof dance styles play a central role in Senegalese popular expression, professional companies primarily perform Soninké

and Mandinka dances for international audiences, presented using the general term West African dance, or often the even more generic African dance, reflecting Negritude ideas about continental unity.

Privatization

Throughout the 1980s, as international development agencies cut funding for economic development and international policy shifted its focus to privatization in an effort to discourage state corruption, Guinea and Senegal cut funding for state-sponsored national Ballets significantly (Ebron 22). At the same time, tourism was deemed the industry of the future and the marketing of traditional culture to a growing leisure class of foreign visitors provided new jobs and potential income for many people (Ebron 22). In this context, because the audience for tourist enterprise is largely Western, the term traditional culture relied on Western conceptions that divide African artistic practice into two categories: traditional or modern (or Westernized). Hundreds of private dance troupes formed, marketing traditional dance performances to foreign visitors who wished to learn about local culture. Considering the prestige and international mobility the national Ballets enjoyed, most companies modeled their own dances on the national companies' successful repertoires.

Habib Idrissu, a Portland, Oregon based performance studies scholar who is Dagbamba and grew up in a performing family in northeastern Ghana and trained as a dancer and drummer in that tradition, explains that a similar phenomenon occurred in Ghana. Because people looked up to the Ghana Dance Ensemble (national company) as the best dancers, private companies emulated the GDE's choreography to prove their own skill and professionalism (Idrissu). Thus a limited repertoire of dances selected by

cultural ministry officials and national Ballets' artistic directors proliferated throughout the area was performed for foreign audiences and presented as traditional African dance. As Idrissu explains, in the 1980s and 1990s, the abundance of private companies meant that competition was fierce to secure limited domestic performance opportunities for foreign audiences. Private dance troupes capitalized on foreign ignorance of local dance styles and the potential for choreographic improvisation that some traditional dance genres allowed by adding eye-catching stunts and acrobatics to increase their appeal to foreign audiences.

> We have a lot of cultural groups in Ghana and each group wants to look unique. So, when they learn something from the Ghana Dance Ensemble, which has *already* experimented with traditional dances, they want to do it in a way that they will get the tourist venues, so they add things, even if they have to add Tae Kwon Do movements or acrobatics into African dance[vii], to make it different than the other groups…There is a slow push to the brink…pushed so much that you can't even see the technique (Idrissu).

As a trained dancer, Idrissu's comments indicate that as private dance companies became mainstays in the cultural tourism industry, audience demand exerted far more influence over choreography than did ideas about authenticity or traditional movements (for more discussion of this phenomenon, see Chapter IV). Idrissu contends that similar practices occurred in other African countries based on his observations at various conferences, workshops and community classes he has attended with Senegalese and Guinean instructors in the U.S.

Dance Instruction in the U.S.

In the last 60 years in the United States, there has been dramatic rise in Americans' interest in social dances classes from foreign cultures outside the U.S. and Western Europe. In *Dancing Across Borders,* Anthony Shay documents how the 1950s

saw a American fascination with learning various forms of Balkan dance, Latin American dances, and dances from India, Japan and Indonesia. Shay posits that Euro-Americans were interested in trying on more exciting and romantic identities by temporarily playing the part of the exotic Other in a safe, familiar setting. In Mirjana Lausevic's ethnographic work with Euro-American female students enrolled in Balkan dance classes, dancers explained that in class, they felt more "earthy, real and true" (466). Many of this 1950s European American generation's parents had been immigrants themselves and sought to be regarded as Americans, Anglicizing their names and downplaying specific ethnic or cultural traditions. Shay suggests the 1950s generation, their children, may have felt more secure in their role as Americans and thus comfortable exhibiting curiosity about foreign ethnic identity, or may have simply been rebelling against their parents' ardent assimilation. Americans' fascination with foreign dance forms has only increased, leaving Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson wondering whether the idea of foreign artistic practices as earthier, more connected and real than our own provides some sort of psychological balm for an American postmodern anxiety about fragmentation of self, and a loss of sense of place and community (13). Alternatively, many people may experience foreign social dance practices as more real or immediate because instructors explain that foreign dances are often integrated into everyday life in a way that social dance is not for most Americans. Thus American students may interpret foreign dances as possessing more direct links to community, personal identity and real experience.

In the 1980s, as funding for national Ballets diminished, many West African dancers sought to perform and/or teach abroad as a means to support themselves and their families. These dance instructors joined a small group of Americans who were already

teaching African dance forms, many of whom had been trained by anthropologist and dancer Pearl Primus and her husband, noted dancer and choreographer Percival Borde after Primus' own fieldwork in African dance communities in Ghana, Liberia, Cameroon, Senegal, Nigeria, Angola and Congo (Honka). Caro Diallo, a Peul dance instructor from Senegal who teaches seasonally in Switzerland, the United States and Senegal thinks that Americans enjoy taking African dance classes for two reasons: for exercise and for community (See Chapter V for a further discussion of the role of community in African dance classes).

> They like to come to class after work and forget about the desk, papers etc. and just be in their bodies and move…They like to be with other people, not at the gym on a machine- just back and forth with no contact with other people- here there is a connection with other people, you smile, laugh, make eye contact; it is fun (Diallo).

African dance instructors in the United States who emigrate from Africa are predominantly West African men who are veterans of either national troupes or private dance companies[viii] who have come to the U.S. through sponsorship or by abandoning an international tour in search of greater economic opportunity. Almost all forms of African dance classes taught in the United States in collegiate and community settings are conducted under that title: African Dance. There is no boundary between ethnic group, country, dance and continent. Although this may not seem so strange, it seems improbable that one would call a tango class simply a South American dance class. I have seen instructors refer to sabar dance classes as 'Sabar classes', but most of the time, instructors identify dance classes as if they span the whole continent, as if the continent's dances were homogenous, or were similar enough that they could all be covered in one

class. Further, there is no distinction between professional and social dance, or traditional, popular and contemporary art dance forms.

Yet for West African instructors who have come to the States to make money to send home, cleaving to an already established class title with which potential students will identify is important. The vast majority of Americans will not know what a Dundunba class is, and this lack of recognition could lower the numbers of potential students. Despite the generic title, Guinean and Senegalese instructors teach traditional African dance that draws from a small group of public, village dances and drum rhythms, mostly from Mandinka and Soninke (and to a lesser extent Wolof) traditions which have been adapted, combined and choreographed for the stage by professionals. Although Senegalese and Guinean instructors call them village dances, for instructors, as I have discussed, this refers their social category, potential for choreographic modification and suitability for varied audiences, instead of the way they were learned or the environment in which they are performed in Senegal and Guinea. The dances have been shaped by self-aware selection by artistic directors, professional choreography, and proscenium staging techniques. However, for American audiences, the simplified, general terms in which many African dance instructors often frame dances do not acknowledge these aspects of the dances' social history.

When African educators use simplified, general language about African dance to connect to American audiences, their symbolic position as cultural authorities reinforces these narratives as truth. "In Africa, there is a dance for everything," Malawian Masankho Banda remarks in a guest lecture for the University of Oregon dance

department. Mr. Banda is a dance instructor and Interplay leader[ix] who has lived in the United States for twenty years. Banda describes Interplay:

> It's an active, creative practice for unlocking the wisdom of the body, using dance, music and storytelling for individual and creative transformation. It's an improvisational art form that allows individuals and communities to access information that they have in their bodies and that they are not always consciously aware is there" (Banda).

Through his work with Interplay, Mr. Banda leads workshops across the U.S. and internationally, using a framework of African dance to encourage people to develop a more integrated relationship between mind, body, and community. He suggests that in Africa, people express themselves through movement, that most social situations have a corresponding dance, and that "we in Africa cannot function without art" (Banda). I have heard similar statements repeatedly in dance classes taught by Senegalese and Guinean people. Most African instructors of traditional African dance describe arts practices in broad terms to their students. The chief narrative characterizes arts as integrated to daily life in Africa, and describe arts (in this instance dance) as an activity in which anyone and everyone is encouraged to participate. Pape Ba is a Senegalese dance instructor who lives in Burlington, Vermont and teaches classes in Burlington and workshops around New England at festivals and dance conferences. Mr. Ba came to the United States with the hopes of pursuing higher education, and teaching dance helps fund his college classes. Mr. Ba, declares, "This dance [referring to Senegalese dance in general] is meant for everyone! There are no boundaries for dance. If it brings people joy, they should do it!"(Ba). Both Ba's and Banda's general pedagogical language supports the notion of dance as a central feature of life for all Africans. These instructors emphasize the significant role dance and music plays in day-to-day life, historical preservation and ritual

ceremonies[x], and stress that everyone should feel free to participate. A term like village dance in the context of continentally broad African dance classes in which dances are defined as experiences in which everyone lives in villages and is encouraged to participate shapes the way that American audiences conceive of African people's relationship to dance. Dance Africa member Ida Danks guesses that the reason why African guest artists may teach differently than Honka does is because the guest artists did not formally learn the dances, but absorbed them all growing up.

> Ida: I think when things are so natural and when things are so in your body and you've grown up with it for so long because…
>
> Sarah: Because you've been studying it for a long time?
>
> Ida: Rather because it's a part of your culture. Abdoulaye as opposed to Rita had a completely different style of communicating what he wanted out of us because even though he has worked with a bunch of dancers, the movement and the rhythm and the dance and the drums are all so a part of his life and have been because he was raised with them that he just has a different way of communicating it….Not only do they just know it, they've grown up in the culture so it's part of their lives, so they don't need to learn it, because it's inherent knowledge (Danks).

Ms. Danks' appraisal of Mr. Thioub's "inherent" knowledge reflects the continued influence of colonial discourse about Africans and dance and privileges discourse about dance as natural over skills established through years of training and practice. It also speaks to the ways in which Mr. Thioub and other Senegalese and Guinean instructors present their own histories and relationship to dance. While most of the dances that African dance instructors teach are village dances because they mostly emerge from national Ballet repertoires, without further explanation of this phrase, most students assume it means dances primarily practiced in a village. If all the dances students are exposed to in African dance classes are village dances that, in students' eyes, match the

prevailing discourse surrounding African dance, it follows that they may assume that most or all African dance practices happen in villages, accompanied by drums, and that people grow up dancing in environments in which everyone is encouraged to participate. Thus by simplifying narratives surrounding dance, instructors can reinforce both colonial and Negritude ideology about Africa and dance.

Once in a great while, instructors will allude to times they participated in dances in a professional, staged setting. During a workshop at the University of Oregon in Eugene, a Guinean instructor who teaches weekly classes in Portland, Oregon, exhorts his students to smile broadly for their (imagined) audience. "Our teachers whipped us if we didn't smile," he explains, adding wryly, "but I will refrain from that here." The instructor's comments indirectly allude to the fact that most instructors are professional experts who were trained in a structured, pedagogical setting, not people who have acquired this level of skill through community dancing or cultural osmosis. The students in the class, comprised of University of Oregon students and local community members, laughed and then promptly attempted to adopt professional, stage-ready grins. They appreciated his dry humor and also seemed to respect his professional experience. His comments disrupt the gloss that these dances are executed only socially and for fun, community-building or ritual purposes in which everyone was welcome, however such asides are rare. In this situation though, the instructor's humor and transparency seemed to increase the students' respect for his cultural and professional authority.

The reasons behind these generalized terms sometimes have to do with a lack of adequate shared language. The large majority of Guinean and Senegalese dance instructors who have come to the States are multi-lingual, often speaking four to six

languages, including French, Arabic, their ethnic group's language, and the languages of other ethnic groups[xi]; however they are often relatively new English speakers. For example, Alseny Yansane, a Susu dance instructor from Guinea, teaches Guinean social dances on Saturdays at the WOW Hall in Eugene, Oregon to a group of about ten students. Andrea DiPalma, Mr. Yansane's wife, attends the class as well. Ms. DiPalma, a white American woman who grew up in Eugene, spent seven years in Guinea and is fluent in Susu; Mr. Yansane speaks some English. Mr. Yansane sometimes explains to his students from which ethnic group the dance originates, and what its original purpose was. Most of the dances Yansane teaches are danced in Guinea, however many practices span national boundaries via both ethnic groups and transregional cultural trends. This type of contextual knowledge of the dances however, comes from my own research, not from Mr. Yansane's instruction. Because Ms. DiPalma is fluent in Susu, she sometimes translates complicated questions into Susu, or translates a word Mr. Yansane can't remember, but she does not act as a general mediator. It seems important to the pair that Mr. Yansane does not speak through her, but directly to the class in the words he chooses to use. This seems to signify respect for his agency and authority.

Lack of shared language accounts for some of the generalized presentation of African dance presented by West African instructors, however perceived audience demands and interest exert even greater influence on what instructors choose to say about dance practices. As Mr. Diallo suggested, many West African teachers correctly note that many students who attend classes desire exercise, dance and community more than they want detailed information about the dance's history. Tracy Smith, a 32-year-old farmer from Alstead, New Hampshire admits she really has very little interest in the latter.

> For me, it's not about Africa or anything, it's just about dancing--it's about feeling it. Maybe the styles are based on [African movements] but [her instructor] doesn't really go into it so I'm just assuming that it is. I mean, I don't even really care, I guess. It's just a venue. For me, it's just an opportunity to feel that….that high, what dance does for me, so I guess it doesn't matter (Smith).

Although scholars would certainly contest Smith's assertion that cultural discourse about Africa does not really inform her dance practice, it is important to note that many students do believe that the wider discourse has little to do with them or their personal dance practice. While some students do desire more detailed information about dance practices, other cultural differences can also signify lack of interest to instructors. Mr. Diallo explains that in West Africa, an aspiring professional dancer will study one dance for an extended period of time, sometimes over a year, developing a masterful and refined understanding of the movements and rhythms before moving on to another dance. In classes in the United States and Europe however, "people often would like some variety, would like to learn a different dance maybe every week or every couple of weeks; they never learn the dance with the same depth that they would if they were learning it in Africa" (Diallo). Jessica Sprick, an American dancer, observes that to West African instructors, American students often appear impatient. She reflects, "There's a rush to learn something fast and move onto something else rather than actually learning the technique" (Sprick). Mr. Iddrisu concurs, adding that although student comments on his instructor evaluations at Reed College and Northwestern University are generally positive, many students express a desire to learn dances faster and to vary the dances almost every class. He observes:

> Many Americans think that African dance should be learned in a matter of days and it should be like fast food fashion- everything should be like, "Oh, I'm on the run so I have to get this quickly and move on", and yet

> my argument is that even fast food takes a lengthy process before it becomes that quick[ly digestible] (Idrissu).

Iddrisu contends that some instructors interpret these attitudes on the part of students as a lack of commitment or respect for the practice. Instructors often respond to these attitudes and demands by teaching highly simplified versions of dances without providing any contextual information. In these instances, Iddrisu explains, "Some teachers don't care because they feel their students don't care so much" (Idrissu).

An instructor's social and economic position also influences how much he/she may share with the audience. If an instructor has pressing economic need to retain students, he/she may be less willing to be fully transparent with students, and more apt to cleave to the narrative they believe students want to hear about African dance. In the course of my fieldwork, only very established, financially secure instructors were willing to speak candidly about professional Ballets' influence on the style of dances instructors in the U.S. teach. The only instructor I have ever heard overtly tell American students that the style of dance they are learning is directly influenced by Ballets is Youssef Kombassa. A former member of the National Ballet of Guinea, Mr. Kombassa spent years touring internationally before coming to the U.S. to teach. He has taught in the U.S. for over 22 years, and is widely acknowledged as one of the most respected and established West African dance instructors in the country (Honka). He is the founder of several large African dance companies. In a recent class I attended with Mr. Kombassa in Oregon, he prefaced the instruction by explaining that the dances that we were about to learn were *not* the same types of social dances that people do informally, but rather were based on professional choreography from the National Ballet. The respect, financial stability and prestige that Mr. Kombassa commands seems to alter the narrative he

presents to students, which is far more detailed, less utopian, and more accurate than the narratives other instructors present. Similarly, as a professor, Mr. Idrissu does not have to rely on dance classes for income, so his comments will not negatively affect his financial situation. Both men's professional security seem to allow them to speak more candidly about the role professionalization plays in the repertoire instructors use for U.S. –based classes.

African instructors may also choose to let students believe that village dances represent all dances because the dances classified in Tiérou's inner two circles, and particularly in the innermost circle, are generally not dances aimed for public consumption and discussion. In a 1994 interview with Bouly Sonko, one of the artistic directors of the National Ballet of Senegal, American Francesca Castaldi asked whether some of these dances were forbidden from stage presentation. Sonko chose his words with care, replying that any dance that belongs to the people can be performed (Castaldi 144). Again, his response could indicate to a beginning dance student that any dance can be performed, but if one knows that only certain dance forms "belong to the people", Sonko's response effectively answers Castaldi's query while refusing to even discuss certain forms of dances with a cultural outsider (see Chapter IV for further discussion).

Almost all African dance classes I have attended in this country conclude by having the dancers gather in a large circle. Each dancer is encouraged to take a turn entering the center of the circle to improvise in rhythm with the drums. This classroom convention mimics the practice of spontaneous improvisation and friendly competition common in many public social dance milieus in West Africa. In a U.S. pedagogical setting, the timing of the improvisational period is far more structured and always occurs

after the more formal technique instruction. Margaret Drewel characterizes improvisation as "moment-to-moment maneuvering based on acquired in-body techniques to achieve a particular effect and/or style of performance" (7). She emphasizes that improvisation does not express random, spontaneously invented movements, but learned in-body formulas or collections of movements, which in this instance; a dancer could combine in different patterns in sync with the percussive rhythm provided by the accompanying drums. Musicologist and jazz scholar Paul Berliner notes,

> Popular definitions of improvisation that emphasize only its spontaneous, intuitive nature—characterizing it as the 'making of something out of nothing'–are astonishingly incomplete. This simplistic understanding of improvisation belies the discipline and experience in which improvisers depend, and it obscures the actual practices and processes that engage them. Improvisation depends, in fact, on thinkers having absorbed a broad base of musical knowledge, including myriad conventions that contribute to formulating the ideas logically, cogently, and expressively (492).

The improvisation circle in African dance classes is no different: it encourages students to draw from the specific movements they have learned in class to demonstrate choreographic celerity, mastery of form, and performative playfulness and flexibility. These purposes are rarely explicitly stated, but rather learned through observation of the instructor and more experienced dancers. Each experienced dancer generally performs 3-5 different movements from the dance that was learned that class and then exits the ring, making sure to leave enough time for all the other students. Dance Africa member Ida Danks cites this part of class as her favorite: she enjoys "the freedom to take the movement and make it your own" (Danks). Some students choose to grande-jeté across the performance space. While this doesn't demonstrate anything they learned in class, these dancers' solos do reflect improvisation as an opportunity to apply previously acquired dance techniques in creative ways. However many Euro-American dancers

interpret improvisation to mean completely free form dancing. Some of these dancers begin to dance using shuddering, undisciplined, and sudden motions unlike those they have learned in class. They twirl wildly in a circle, shake their heads, roll on the ground, and often behave as if they are in a trance or have been possessed by an alien spirit. One dancer who often attends a weekly dance class that I frequent floats about during her solo, skipping across the floor space and executing repeated barrel turns[xii] until she becomes so dizzy she loses her balance. Her barrel turns are high and strong, but her loosely-knotted white peasant skirt reveals her underwear and crotch to fellow dancers and the drummers with each turn. Such exposure, if embarrassing in our culture, would be considered the epitome of immodesty and rudeness in most West African milieus. As a fellow dancer, observer and researcher, I can't help but wonder what ideas about African dance these students carry with them to class. Their movements often mirror colonial discourse about the uncontrolled, hysterical, trance-inducing and promiscuous nature of African dance.[xiii] Instructors often appear noticeably uncomfortable during these solos, yet they rarely correct or address the issue at that time. Even when their instructors have just explained the technical nature of the dance they learn, correcting form and execution, some dancers follow this lesson with improvisational choices that directly allude to colonial discourse. Such displays demonstrate how preconceptions informed by colonial discourse often prove more powerful even than the directions of a cultural authority.

Instructors' silence reflects many tensions that operate within the classroom. Some beginning students do not always realize they should learn by watching more experienced dancers, and without the explicit verbal instructions to which they are

accustomed, they presume that the circle dance is free-form. Language barriers sometimes prevent an explanation of improvisation with enough subtlety to encourage play *within* the technique students learn in class. Instructors do want to encourage students to be comfortable improvising, and thus often refrain from direct critique which might discourage future attempts at soloing. Furthermore, for instructors who doubt their students' respect for the dance or who have noted their students' desire for unfettered communal movement trumps their demand for refined technique instruction, they may simply let the students use the circle as they wish. There is a concerted desire to make sure that students get what they want to get out of class because the more satisfied students are with their experience; the more they will continue to attend class, providing a livelihood for foreign instructors (See Chapter IV for further discussion). Additionally, the more professional and financial stability an instructor enjoys, the more willing they may be to correct students' assumptions and push for cultural respect and technical proficiency.

As I have noted, because of multiple linguistic signifiers, language barriers, and perceived lack of audience interest, compounded with Negritude-related cultural narratives about dance, the predominant narrative in African dance classes presents a simplified, often inaccurate narrative about dancing in Africa: different ethnic groups have their own dances, but moreover, continentally 1) dances are an inherent part of the culture that are performed for various social and ritual purposes, 2) dances are accompanied by drums, 3) dances are learned in a village, 4) everyone participates in these dances and is encouraged to participate in all dances, 5) personal expression and shared community spirit are very important and 6) improvisation is encouraged. This

narrative has become so widespread and normalized that when a West African teacher is in fact transparent about the staged nature of dancing, insists that refining technique is more important than fun or pleasure, and corrects solos, he/she is often met with resistance from students.

Caro Diallo teaches dance every year at an August dance conference in Brattleboro, Vermont. I have attended this conference four different times. Mr. Diallo's classes are physically grueling 2.5 + hour sessions. He usually focuses on one dance for the week-long workshop, two at most. He insists that we smile broadly while we perform, and berates students quite sternly when they do not. It is quite clear that the dance we learn is intended to be performed. Mr. Diallo asks dancers to run through the dance again and again, and when we are exhausted, we run it some more. He watches dancers intently, picks up on minute mistakes, and consistently provides at least one major correction every time we finish the piece. Every time I think I might be mastering the movement, he offers a gentle reproach to not surrender, to always be scanning my body--what can I improve upon? He always finds something. Dancers who solo off-beat, never mind outside the specific rhythm, receive glances of surprise, disappointment and sometimes disgust. Mr. Diallo explains why he teaches in this fashion:

> Some [African] people say that if you're teaching Europeans and Americans you do not need to really teach them much, you can be lazy and they won't even ever know the difference. This might be true, but I don't feel comfortable with this. I feel I have a responsibility to give all, and if I don't, I feel badly. If I go a day and I don't give students everything I have to give, I don't feel good. My body doesn't feel good. It feels like something is wrong. I don't think this is a good way to live. This is my reward, it's not about the money--people who think this way are mistaken-- it is about the connection. It makes me feel good to see people learn (Diallo).

Although Mr. Diallo's commitment to what he considers responsible and thorough pedagogy is clear, students are often intimidated by his gruff manner and exacting corrections. A fellow dancer who devotedly attends weekly community classes in New Hampshire expressed anxiety about making mistakes and disappointing Mr. Diallo at the annual conference, but mused that at least he seemed friendly this year.

Dancers' responses to instructors' pedagogical style will vary widely depending on their previous experiences learning West African social dances. If a dancer has studied with many established instructors in a professional environment, Mr. Diallo's instruction would not appear marked. If a student has studied in West Africa, he/she *may* be more familiar with this style of instruction, but more likely not, because dance camps and intensives in West Africa aimed at Westerners tailor the instruction style to meet the demands of the client base. Because most West African dance instructors in the U.S. do vary dances often, and do not devote as much time to technical details and performance standards, American students can have taken years of classes and feel like experienced dancers and still be jarred by this pedagogical comportment. Even having spoken to Mr. Diallo at length and having considerable background knowledge about the professional pedagogical techniques he employs, I still find myself getting frustrated to the point of anger when he barks at me sullenly for the 10^{th} time to smile. "This is NOT fun!" I seethe internally. I smile toothily, but my eyes glare stubbornly forward, refusing to meet his reproachful gaze. "This is MY time. I should be enjoying myself. This is just abuse!" My reactions illustrate entrenched narratives about African dance that I have heard in American classes for the past ten years. Although Mr. Diallo's pedagogy may seem severe, to him, it expresses respect for his students and is far closer to what professional

dancers would encounter in Senegal. His teaching style disrupts the singular, utopic narrative about African dance that many classes in the U.S. promote and highlights the refined technique and professionalism he feels the practice deserves.

Abdoulaye Thioub, a griot from Senegal, has taught dance in Corvallis and Eugene, Oregon for two years. Abdoulaye's father, Meissa Thioub, also a griot, was the long-time director of Ballets Africains Sanagomar in Senegal. As a Dance Africa artist-in-residence in January 2011, Mr. Thioub taught the company a dance he referred to as Toucouleur. Toucouleur people are a subset of the Fulani ethnic group who live primarily in northern Senegal and southern Mauritania, although there are smaller Toucouleur populations in other areas of West Africa. Large populations of Fulani people live in many areas of West Africa from Senegal to Nigeria. Mr. Thioub labeled the dance Toucouleur for this specific American audience, probably because that rhythm is one specific to Toucouleur musical traditions. Mr. Thioub explaining that the physically demanding high kicks in the dance signified young people in the community taunting pregnant women because they could not dance well and could no longer impress with high kicks because of their imposing bellies. Ms. Honka uses the dynamic Toucouleur piece as the finale for Dance Africa's 2011 school tour repertoire. Changing with her dancers backstage before the first performance, Ms. Honka discusses the piece with the performers. "What am I going to say? I can't tell these kids that the song makes fun of pregnant women!" Honka decides to alter the explanation of the dance a bit, so it will be more empowering to pregnant women. Her decision clearly illustrates how anticipated audience reception can in fact shift purported meanings behind a dance. The white, middle-class cultural values reflected in Eugene dictate that pregnant women should be

regarded with care, adoration, and the singular respect devoted to someone carrying precious new life. Adult audience members would not appreciate a dance featuring taunting pregnant women, and would most likely frown upon teaching children that to do so was funny. By changing the frame so it is the pregnant women who kick triumphantly in spite of their pregnant bellies, Toucouleur becomes a dance that highlights women's can-do, enterprising spirit and signifies American feminist values. In this way, American, white middle-class values and audience composition govern the narrative which frames Dance Africa's performance of Toucouleur.

In *Between Theater and Anthropology*, Richard Schechner asserts,

> The performance process is a continual rejecting and replacing. Long-running shows…are not dead repetitions but continuous erasings and superimposings. The overall shape of the show stays the same, but pieces of business are always coming and going. This process of collecting and discarding, of selecting, organizing, and showing, is what rehearsals are all about (120).

African dance performance and instruction in West Africa and in the United States, follows Schechner's model of performance processes. The overall impression of the practice of traditional dance remains relatively similar, however the narratives that describe dances, the specific dances performed, and the motivations and intentions of performers, sponsors and creative directors all shift based on context- the political environment, personal interests, and audience and/or patrons' values. In this sense, as Henry Glassie suggests, the defining feature of tradition is not stasis, but dynamic continuity (396). Rita Honka reflects,

> Most traditions change with the times. There's a reason this song is being sung now because this is what we're experiencing politically and therefore there's a reason this dance can go with that. I think it's more pliable than people realize-there's variation in how we live it, but we're still *in it* (Honka).

Thus, rather than operating outside of time and cultural context, performance of traditional African dance is a *contemporary* practice that continuously changes and evolves based on politics, performer intentionality and audience reception.

Notes

[i] A specific transition in the drum rhythm initiated by the lead drummer signifying a change in the accompanying dance steps or choreography.

[ii] See Fusco's article describing she and Guillermo Gomez-Peña's performance art installation for striking evidence of this pattern.

[iii] French remains the official language of government and education in Senegal.

[iv] There are many reasons for the spread of Wolof language and culture, most of which are tied to Senegal's colonial history. Wolof people were the first to have contact with Europeans and acted as interpreters, facilitating rubber trade. Under French rule, inhabitants of four *communes* (Saint-Louis, Dakar, Rufisque, and Gorée- all Wolof regions) were recognized as French citizens and granted political privileges denied to the rest of the population (Diouf and Diop 1992: 47; Crowder 1962). Wolof regions produced the majority of Senegal's peanuts, and at the end of the 19th century, as peanut production became Senegal's primary export crop, Wolof slowly became the language of commerce. Diouf and Diop (1990) also connect the spread of Wolof with the rise of Islamicization in Senegal, since Islamic Brotherhoods, particularly Wolof Mourides, controlled peanut production. Furthermore, Saint-Louis and Dakar were also Wolof provinces, and as people migrated toward urban areas and intermarried, Wolof influence expanded even further (Castaldi 2004:77).

[v] Leigh Swigert (1992) distinguishes Urban Wolof, characterized by frequent linguistic borrowing from French, a more basic grammatical structure, and a smaller vocabulary, from deep Wolof (*Wolof bu xoot*), spoken in more rural areas (102).

[vi] Developed in the 1970s, *mbalax* is a fusion of popular Western music with *sabar*, whose name derives from the heavy use of accompanying rhythms called *mbalax* which are also used in *sabar* dance events.

[vii] Many of the dances Puel men from southern Senegal perform do involve physically demanding acrobatics, but this is not the norm everywhere. Senegal's national Ballet performances often prominently features Puel men's dances- audience response to these dances and the national Ballet's repertoire's prestige may account for some of the proliferation of acrobatics in performances of traditional African dance throughout the region and in transnational performances.

[viii] Although some dance instructors have little to no training, this phenomenon is generally frowned upon by West African dance instructors and dance students alike.

[ix] Developed by Cynthia Winton-Henry and Phil Porter in Oakland, California, Banda describes Interplay as "an active, creative practice for unlocking the wisdom of the body, using dance, music and storytelling for individual and creative transformation. It's an improvisational art form that allows individuals and communities to access information that they have in their bodies and that they are not always consciously aware is there" (10 Feb. 2010, personal communication)

[x] I have only once heard a dance instructor cite national Ballets as the source of the choreography they teach.

[xi] For example, in light of the earlier discussion of Woloficization, all instructors I have met from Senegal, be they Wolof or not, speak Wolof.

[xii] A leap in which the dancer arches their entire body into an inverted C and leaps behind oneself to land in the same spot from which one took flight.

[xiii] Interestingly, I have only ever observed Euro-American students dancing in this fashion.

CHAPTER IV

GRIOT CULTURE ABROAD: SHIFTING PATRONAGE, AGENCY, AND THE BUSINESS OF REPRESENTATION

In *Domination and the Art of Resistance*, James C. Scott asserts that public performances are intrinsically related to politics and power relations. He suggests power relations specific to the context of the performance require performers to shape performances "to appeal to the expectations of the powerful" (2). These performances signify what Scott calls a public transcript, in which even subordinate members of a society (here, the performers) appear to champion the dominant prevailing discourse, while another private, more nuanced discourse informs performers' own beliefs. Scott explains:

> The theatrical imperatives that normally prevail in situations of domination produce a public transcript in close conformity with how the dominant group would wish to have things appear. The dominant never control the stage absolutely, but their wishes normally prevail. …The result is that the public transcript is…systematical skewed in the direction of…the discourse, represented by the dominant. In ideological terms, the public transcript will typically, by its accomodations, its tone, provide convincing evidence for the hegemony of dominant values, for the hegemony of dominant discourse (4).

Thomas Defrantz has suggested that Scott's theories relate directly to black American expressive culture. DeFrantz notes that most black social dances contain "dual transcripts of public and private meaning" playing on exoticism for outside audiences while also entertaining a shared communal rhetoric (64). Historian Robert Hinton traces the origins of this performative double-consciousness to the structure of slave society in America:

> Early in the slave experience, Afro-American dance split into two basic streams. The first stream was the dance that black folks created for themselves during those few precious hours of sacred and secular celebration. The first stream was the more 'African', in part because of the

> movement quality and vocabulary, but also, because the movement was created for the benefit of the dancers. The experience of any observes (the audience) was secondary. The second stream was the dance that black people created for white people. The second stream was more 'European', both because of the technique and because the dance was created under differing degrees of duress for the pleasure of the audience. The experience of the performer was secondary (4).

Although Scott's and Hinton's interpretations are illuminating, both reflect Western epistemological modes of thinking which position non-Western performers as subordinate and trace such practices to contact with white slave owners. I will argue that 1) conscious public/private transcripts informed West African modes of expression long before contact with colonizers or slave traders, and 2) categorizing social positions as 'dominant' and 'subordinate' does not accurately reflect the complicated and nuanced social relationships between performers and audience members.

In this chapter, I will explore the impact of griot identity and culture on the representation of African dance in the United States. By exploring West African understandings of griot identity and performance, I hope to provide an alternative lens through which to interpret performance and pedagogical narratives about African dance. In doing so, I suggest that the ways in which West African dance instructors choose to represent African dance are heavily influenced by griot cultural practices. Griot culture dominates many aspects of public performance and influences non-griot public performance in West Africa. Therefore, almost all West African dance instructors, whether they are a griot or not, are familiar with the typical relationship between a griot performer and a patron. This relationship influences the public transcript instructors present in classes and performances in the U.S.

A Brief Note on Etymology

The term griot is not one that is indigenous to West Africa, nor is it used by any one ethnic group. Many linguists believe that the word 'griot' derives from the French term '*guiriot'*, first recorded textually by the Capucin missionary monk Alexis de St. Lô during his travels down the Senegambian coast in 1634-35 (Hale 251). The spelling of the French term evolved; by 1778, records detailing correspondences between French colonial administrators in West Africa noted: "[a] grillot is a species of negro actor whose theatrical costume resembles that of Harlequin" (qtd in Hale 252). Other scholars trace the word to the Spanish term '*guirigay'* (gibberish) or the Portuguese word '*grito'* (to shout) (Hale 8). Still others maintain that the term 'griot' is an adaptation of the Wolof term *guewel*, the Fulbe *gawl*, or the Arabic *qawal* (Hale 8). For Africans who believe the term griot derives from colonial interaction and does not reflect origins in any African language, the word 'griot' can be insulting. Yet due in part to Alex Haley's use of the word griot in his 1976 bestseller *Roots*, the term has also gained widespread cultural currency and symbolic value for African Americans and Africans in the diaspora as well as on the African continent. I acknowledge that the term is problematic, however because each ethnic group has a different term for griots, I will use the word griot here to refer to the general caste identity.

Griot Professional and Social Identity

More than fourteen different ethnic groups and languages in West Africa have specific words for the social category that I refer to generally as griots. Griots[i] occupy many roles: they are genealogists, historians, praise singers, translators, musicians, entertainers, advisers, spokespeople, composers, mediators, and ceremony participants.

Although many griots trace their professional heritage back to Bala FasƐkƐ, the griot for the thirteenth-century Malinké hero and king Sundiata Keita, some argue that there is convincing archaeological evidence of active griot practices long before tenth century written historical records first documented their existence (Hale 9).

Griots, like blacksmiths, potters, weavers and many other artisans, belong to certain castes in the social system of their ethnic groups in the sense that they are born into their occupation. Historically, it has been considered socially taboo for non-griot people to perform the role of a griot.[ii] It should be noted however, that although griot identity is historically endogamous, this should not necessarily connote low social status. Bonnie Wright asserts that the West African caste system, "rather than being composed of hierarchically ranked groups, is really best understood as a set of groups differentiated by innate capacity—or power—sources" (2). Griots occupy a complicated social position: they often live at some remove from the rest of the community, yet as Diango Cissé explains, this isolation reflects the fact that they are respected and feared because of the social power and influence their words wield (211). The 'otherness' of griot identity in the context of broader West African society is rooted in "the power of their words to praise, to differentiate, to preserve, and to destroy" (Hale 216).

Griots and Praisesinging

Griots are musicians, dancers, entertainers and storytellers, and historians. However to understand the influence of griot identity on griot and non-griot West African dance instructors in the U.S., the griot's role as praisesinger is arguably even more central than their abilities as dancers. Griots sing praisesongs that highlight and laud the roles of different members of society, in exchange for gifts. The singing often occurs in

conjunction with movement or dancing. The songs usually describe in words what an individual has done and the qualities that he or she demonstrated while performing these deeds (Hale 116).The manner in which one is characterized in a griot's praisesong can confer respect upon one's character or publically mar one's reputation. As skilled historians and genealogists, griots have the ability to publically control the individual and collective histories of people, granting them either a central or negligible role in their community's history based on not only quality of the patron's gifts, but also their social comportment. Furthermore, griots often publically praise patrons for things they have not yet done. By complimenting their generosity, griots can effectively pressure the patron to follow through on the actions mentioned in song, catalyzing changes that either the griot, or the community would like to see. Thus although griots are characterized as a lower social class than nobles, they exert considerable social control, linking past, present, and future through genealogies and praisesongs, managing the fate of a patron's reputation and steering patrons' future actions by mentioning them in song form. As Bala FasƐkƐ of the Sundiata epic explains, "I am the word and you are the deed; now your history begins" (Niane 58).

Griot praise singing plays a major role in reputation building in many contemporary West African cultures. Guinean-American scholar Manthia Diawara explains that every person wants to have his/her praises sung by a griot because this will immortalize his/her deeds through art (88). Lack of recognition by griots translates to a serious form of social failure. "It is in this sense that rich and poor, modern intellectuals and peasants, men and women alike seek the favors of griots. No one is important or respectable enough until he or she attracts the attention of griots" (Diawara 88). Yet

despite their significant social influence and the public respect they often receive, griots' identities remain contradictory and ambiguous. Dominique Zahan reports that Banmana speakers[iii] generally concur that Mandé griots, or *jeliw*, are necessarily "liars" because their occupation requires the generation of hyberbolized accounts of courage and valor (141). During Yusuke Nakamura's fieldwork in Mali, Markajalan people [iv] often described *jeliw* as "rapacious people" who would say anything to receive gifts (331-2, 343). Such sycophantic tendencies on the part of griots is disparagingly termed 'griotisme' or 'griotage' (de Moraes Farias 226). This negative perspective is partially due to a recent proliferation of what some call 'fake griots', people who were not born into the griot tradition yet attempt to flatter for monetary compensation, although West African historian Paulo Fernando de Moraes Farias, citing the stories of Sumanguru and Sunjata, argues that this tension between empty flattery and meaningful praise has probably existed as long as the occupation has.

In this chapter, I will explore how griot and non-griot instructors translate and adapt praisesinging traditions in a transnational milieu and how the function is particularly important in dance classes and performances. First, I will explain griots' changing roles in West Africa and illustrate why they and other performers influenced by griot culture pursue work internationally.

Griots in Contemporary West Africa

In contemporary West African societies, master griots are often respected public figures who have attained the status of cultural heroes, commemorated on stamps in their own countries and internationally[v] (Hale 210). Nevertheless, griots' position in society remains fraught with social tensions. Some griots enjoy opportunity to make a sizeable

income by praisesinging, participating in and officiating initiation, marriage, circumcision and other ceremonies, and performing in entertainment groups and Ballets. However, as some people distance themselves from griots, and as the number of non-griot people seeking employment as griots proliferate, competition for adequate work has increased. Furthermore, funding for state-sponsored entertainment in the form of staged events and broadcasting has significantly decreased in the last twenty years across West Africa. Government-employed artists like Gambian griot Papa Sousso receive low salaries in national Ballets. Yet as Sousso notes, "The troupe assures me of a certain fixed income at the end of every month, however small that income. One cannot go to beg one's patrons every month!" (qtd in Jatta 23). Celebrated Malian griot Mariam Kouyaté remembers that in the days of early independence, griots were often well-paid by state-owned radio and television producers but notes that today, no money is available for these performances (Hale 298).

Some griots choose to sidestep the increasingly fierce competition for their artistic skills by pursuing other jobs. Yet when griots seek work outside their caste-bound profession, they often encounter discrimination, particularly in rural regions. Schoolteachers of griot heritage reported trouble disciplining students who are of noble classes, highlighting sentiments discouraging mixing between noble and 'caste' people (Hale 203). Although some people of griot heritage occupy political offices, in Senegal, presidential speeches urging people to "challenge caste prejudices" and newspaper headlines inquiring "Could a caste person become president?" illustrate continued tension in popular opinion on the issue as recently as the 1990s (Senghor qtd in Villalón 58; Coulibaly March 1).

New Patronage Opportunities

As opportunities for local employment diminish in Senegal and Guinea, many griots began to seek more permanent opportunities abroad. In 1987, Lucy Durán asserted that "the future of Jaliya [griots] no doubt lies in the concert hall and recording studio" (236). Twenty years later, as these markets grow increasingly competitive, populations of griots and non-griot performers who have learned griot skills both explore opportunities in transnational community performances and community-based music and dance instruction for Americans and Europeans based in West Africa, Europe, and the United States. For both of these populations, expanded audiences and patronage provide new opportunities. Nonetheless, aspects of griot cultural identity and its attendant social history in West Africa significantly shape how these performers choose to represent artistic practices to foreigners. Performers and teachers shape instruction and advertisement to reflect the patrons' context and understanding of dance traditions while simultaneously obscuring many aspects of dance and wider cultural practices. These professional choices collide in interesting ways with the established Western discourse about Africa and dance, providing professional, social and cultural agency for West African performers while they also reify many Americans' ideas about African dance.

As discussed in Chapter III, both griot and non-griot dance instructors often initially reach the U.S. through various means related to touring- either by invitation to perform at a university or cultural center, or by choosing to leave an international tour and remain in the United States. Ballet Monsour is a private Senegalese dance company with a highly successful internationally touring troupe. Many of its members are also griots. When seventeen Ballet Mansour dancers defected en masse during a U.S. concert

tour, U.S. newspaper reports speculated that the dancers were dissatisfied with their contract (Castaldi 195). The contract, which paid each dancer $140 a week, more than twice what they could earn in a month in Senegal as a member of a well-positioned company, may have induced the defection, but not because it paid too little. Rather, the tour had given the performers an entrée into an environment filled with wealthy potential patrons, while the contract confirmed evidence of the earning potential possible in the U.S. (Castaldi 195).

In addition to increased earning potential, performers who choose to teach African dance in the United States also enjoy far more choreographic agency and control of the narrative surrounding the dances than they would working with a state-sponsored or private dance troupe in West Africa[vi]. Amadu Bansang Jobarteh, a griot and former performer in a state-sponsored troupe, notes,

> The best analogy to a musical troupe is a troop of soldiers under the control of a commander. Troupes such as the Gambian National Troupe are managed and controlled by Western-educated persons and the *jalis* are given no say. Whenever they give a concert, the money they received belongs to the government… I was a member of the national troupe for a very short period. [After one performance] I gave them back their uniform and withdrew from the troupe. I told them that the whole thing was alien to me and that I was not a soldier to be regimented in that fashion (qtd in Jatta 22-23).

In a national Ballet or private dance company, performers are subject to the decisions of a creative director who shapes the representation of ethnic and national identity performed by the entire troupe. In the United States, for the most part, where students have little previous knowledge of African dance and are happy to learn whichever dances and songs their instructor cares to teach, instructors can choose to shape their ethnic identity in different ways. If they choose, they can teach dances from their own ethnic group, or

dances from ethnic groups that are not generally encountered outside West Africa. Teaching in the United States can also provide a respite from the consistent physical fatigue of demanding daily rehearsals. Because novice students often take a long time to learn basic movements, a class proceeds at an exponentially slower pace than touring rehearsals would, and the physical toll on instructors is comparatively minimal. Guinean dance instructor Mory Traore reflects, "With teaching…many people have never danced before. You have to be patient and teach them slowly" (13). Instructors no longer face grueling rehearsal schedules, can work at a much slower pace, and can decide what they would like to teach instead of submitting to the whims of a company's creative director.

Teaching abroad also affords greater professional mobility for those performers who do not enjoy the prestige conferred upon certain families of griots or the experience of a long career behind them. One griot reflected that at home, it was nearly impossible to get guitar-playing gigs if one's surname was not Kouyaté, Diabeté, or Cissokho[vii], whereas in the U.S., the general public's ignorance about hierarchy within griot culture means more professional opportunity for griots from less storied lineages (Charry 4-5).[viii] American students are generally appreciative of the dances the instructor presents, and do not demand that their instructors have a certain number of years of experience, or a renowned family reputation.

Furthermore, in this transnational setting, non-griots also have more professional mobility and can pursue career options that would be frowned upon at home. Bouly Sonko, one of the artistic directors of the National Ballet of Senegal, explains that male members of non-griot castes are generally discouraged from dancing. "My parents did not want me to dance because…in the ethnic groups there are what are called warriors. I

am from a family of warriors, of nobles, so people had to dance for us, and not us for them. That is really the tradition" (qtd in Castaldi 158). Historically, for many noble classes in Senegal and Guinea, direct communication by way of physical expression is prohibited; physical distancing and remove connotes power, thus public dancing is often viewed as shameful and ill-advised for those that belong to these castes (Heath 90). Other non-griot instructors share Sonko's experience. Most concur that their parents did not approve of their desire to dance and were afraid their sons' propensity for dancing might signal homosexuality. Such fears illustrate indigenous cultural values about trespassing caste boundaries, yet they also reflect the influence of European standards concerning gendering of the body and physical practices. Additionally, although participating in village dances in specific public contexts are social practices that are open to most people, it is true that public dancing is discouraged for men of certain caste backgrounds. The reasons are complicated—they reflect indigenous beliefs, colonial and European standards as well as social values inspired in part by fundamentalist strains of Islam that dominated many areas in West Africa throughout the 18th and 19th centuries.

Because these social codes are based in part on caste identity and corresponding suitability for certain behaviors, the same social prohibitions that could cause shame for non-griot performers can confer prestige for griots. Wolof griot Azis Faye explains:

> A long time ago, we did everything. We drummed and we danced, and people just sat there and watched us. They were not supposed to dance. But now everybody dances, because it is power. Because they can make money from it, and take it far away [to other countries] (qtd in Castaldi 160).

Faye's remarks express frustration with non-griots performing and instructing because they trespass distinct cultural codes. Yet faced with a severely depressed economy and

social change, transnational dance instruction can hold the potential for economic opportunities and artistic expression outside the bounds of these cultural standards.

I attended a sabar class from 2007-2008 at a local community center in Putney, Vermont. In Senegal, Sabar drum ensembles typically contain six to twelve Wolof griots who play drums of various sizes in complex polyrhythms.[ix] Male griots play Sabar rhythms on the drums, but do not dance this rhythm at these events. Sabar ensembles are integral parts of life cycle celebrations, Muslim holiday celebrations, political meetings, wrestling matches, and neighborhood dance events (Tang 10). Similar to a block party, Sabar neighborhood dance events are parties organized for and by women. Apart from a few pre-teen boys and griot musicians, no men are generally present at Sabar dance parties. Sabar events have exploded in popularity, and what was once a Wolof dance has become a popular dance style for urban women across ethnic lines. Sabar is not caste-restricted for women, but because it is a dance traditionally performed by women and for women, with the only exception being male griot musicians, it *is* caste-regulated for men. The male Wolof instructor who taught my class in Putney was a member of a Senegalese hip hop music group and had come to the U.S. primarily to perform with this group yet taught dance classes on the side to make extra money. Although he presented dynamic choreography the first few months of class, his movements soon grew repetitive and stale. It became clear that he had exhausted his limited repertoire of movements. He is not a griot, yet had learned some Sabar dance during *soirs sénégalaises,* Senegalese nightclub evenings featuring full Sabar musical ensembles, where it has become more acceptable for women to perform this dance socially in the presence of non-griot men. Observing women dancing at these clubs gave him access to some Sabar choreography[x].

He used this small collection of movements to secure a community class upon his move to New England. Because none of his students were aware of the local social taboos against men dancing sabar, he was free to present this repertoire as if he danced it at home as well. Foreign audiences' lack of knowledge about caste social codes and broader cultural gender codes allowed this performer to gain employment as a dance instructor, if only temporarily.

Whether a dance instructor is a griot or not, if they hail from this region of West Africa, most are very familiar with the typical relationship between a griot performer and a patron. Many griots who teach dance articulate the shift to teaching dance transnationally as a shift in patronage. As I have noted, the skills required for males to teach traditional dances classes are socially coded as griot skills, so it follows that even non-griots who teach dance in the U.S. might also view their classes in a similar manner, conceiving of their students in terms of patronage. A keen awareness of patrons' politics, background and views is a skill central to griots' praisesinging, narrating histories, and acting as an appropriate spokesperson for the context. West African dance instructors' awareness of the ways patrons may view African dance often influences how they choose to present the material.

Advertisement and Visual Signification

Chapter II discusses the ways in which discourse about African dance in the United States is informed by colonial narratives which characterized African dance as wild, passionate, and instinctual, as well as anti-colonial Negritude ideology that posits African dance as a gateway to higher knowing, as a unifying, liberating force which emphasizes Africans' cultural alterity from Western arts practices. African dance, in the

popular American imagination, generally remains a continentally undifferentiated, timeless, traditional practice, accompanied by drums in a village, closely related to spiritual release and animal nature- a practice whose authenticity derives from its supposed stasis, its opposition to modernity, and its supposed indifference to cultural change. Quite conscious of this inaccurate trope, dance instructors may interpret the dances they teach and construct their classroom persona in ways that they believe will appeal to their patrons. They appeal to local values in much the same way as did Ms. Honka when she modified Toucouleur's message in order to appeal to a specific audience.

This practice is evident in the manner that instructors advertise their classes, the way they dress, and the way they conduct class. Many dance instructors use their websites to construct business personas that play on stereotypical Western ideas about African dance in order to attract Western students to classes and dance-based cultural tourism in their home countries. Caro Diallo, a dance instructor and performer from the Casamance region of Senegal, teaches in Switzerland for the majority of the year, returns to Casamance to teach an immersive dance camp for European (primarily Swiss) and American students in January, and teaches at dance workshops and festivals in the United States in the summer. The front page of Mr. Diallo's website features a schedule of classes in Bern, Switzerland and photographs of Mr. Diallo sporting long dreadlocks, vibrantly-colored loose fitting clothing, a cowrie shell necklace, and a broad, welcoming smile. Bright yellow leopard-print wallpaper canvases the background of the website. Below the class information, Mr. Diallo has posted a poem written by an American

student who studied with him at a workshop at Landmark College in Putney, Vermont in 2008:

Something is awakened.
My breathing becomes that of an animal
I am slipping between the borders of civilization and something
primal. As hard as the sweat tries to cool my face, I feel a burning energy
as the drums beckon the spirits to appear.
It's as though my inner animals are trying to shatter the castle
walls I have built
upon the foundations of manners, modesty, sobriety, and
withdrawal from socialization.
They had never fought so desperately as when I was trying to
mimic his movements ("Home Page").

The student's experience with and relationship to African dance and Mr. Diallo directly reflects narratives about African dance promoted through colonial discourse and Negritude ideology. The student situates the dance practice outside of time and civilization, and directly juxtaposes images of two fantasy worlds, a jungle world with a civilized one populated by buildings, in a stance of combative alterity. The primal "inner animals" who are summoned are ferocious and wild; they fight "desperately" to destroy the "civilized" architecture that the student feels he/she has brought to class. The student's reaction expresses the perceived spiritual vacuity of his/her 'civilized' existence, while celebrating "the ancient, the sacred, the primitive and the exotic in an all-encompassing natural world" (Radano 511).[xi] The ability of the drums to beckon spirits alludes to Senghorian mysticism and colonial narratives about percussively-based ritual events.

Interestingly, the student has chosen to portray his/her own Western society in contrast, as a place of manners, modesty, sobriety, and withdrawal from socialization. For this person, African dance practices signify a desperate fight against these values,

implying that the culture from which it emerges, in this case Senegalese culture, would discourage modesty, sobriety, manners, etc. Mr. Diallo is Peul, but teaches primarily Wolof and Mande dances. As noted in Chapter III, for many Senegalese people, Wolof language and values signify a transethnic urban identity, and have become assimilated into many non-Wolof urban people's sense of identity and values. Mr. Diallo is no exception. Raised in a cosmopolitan environment, Wolof values are a part of Mr. Diallo's cultural identity. Within this identity, social conduct is governed by a code of honor (*kersa*) which links high status with social restraint (Heath 90). As I have noted earlier in this chapter, such beliefs are common among noble classes across ethnic groups in this region. Furthermore, because he is devoutly Muslim, Islamic values which equate modesty and subtlety with superior status also influence Mr. Diallo's comportment and decisions. The same codes emphasize the importance of literal sobriety- Muslims are not supposed to drink alcohol-and a sobriety of demeanor. Paulla Ebron attended a jeli concert in the Gambia with a mixed audience of Gambians of various ethnic groups, international Peace Corps volunteers and tourists. Many of the tourists mimicked their imagined ideas of Africa through dancing. "Meanwhile, Gambian audience members... look on with expressions of bewilderment or disgust at the revealing clothing and wild dancing of many tourists" (Ebron 67). Ironically, just as Western audiences often conceive of African dance as convulsive, physically liberating, sexual, and passionate, for many West Africans, the West and especially Western women are associated with a "homogenous, eroticized mass of wild dancers"(Ebron 67).

These social and religious codes are quite important to Mr. Diallo. He has discussed his allegiance to the value of restraint with me on numerous occasions. Outside

the professional context of a dance class, he has exhibited disapproval more than once when I have danced around or practiced dance steps at a friend's home. He admonished me, "You should not always be dancing. A real dancer does not always have to dance. You should be honorable" (Diallo). However, Mr. Diallo expressed these things to me as a friend, *outside* of the classroom, at a private home. He would not respond this way in the classroom. Mr. Diallo is not concerned that his students know him personally in any sort of intimate fashion. He conducts himself as a professional, and maintains clear boundaries between his private self and the one he presents in class. For a West African transnational performing artist like Mr. Diallo, whether he is a griot or not, his occupation reflects the business relationship between a griot and an economically powerful patron. Despite his personal beliefs, Mr. Diallo's business acumen, sense of privacy and knowledge of griot culture all contribute to a professional face and website-- a public transcript-- that appeal to his patrons' values, in this case, authenticity, egalitarianism, bodily release, and an unadulterated connection to nature. Instructors can capitalize on Western audiences' ignorance by presenting audiences with accounts of African dance that suit their patrons' desires and secures demand for their professional services.

Other pages on Mr. Diallo's website also exhibit his deliberate construction of identity to appeal to idealized Western ideas of African dance. Mr. Diallo hails from Ziguinchor, a city of 230,000 people and the capital of the Casamance region, and spends most his time in Bern, Switzerland, population 125, 000. Despite his continued connection with and dance contacts in Ziguinchor, the webpage on which Mr. Diallo advertises his January dance camp in Casamance conflates his dancing image with the natural beauty and undeveloped rusticity of village life in Abene, a tiny fishing village

on the coast. The page presents Mr. Diallo, again with a broad, welcoming grin, at the entrance of a thatched roof village hut and silhouetted mid-leap at the Atlantic's edge in the golden glow of the sunset (see figure 3).

Figure 3: Mr. Diallo dancing on the beach in Abene.

The construction of a provincial identity is common on such Western-aimed websites. Most do not explicitly deny urban living, yet suggest village-based identity through pastoral imagery and photographs featuring Africans wearing singularly traditional dress.

In the context of the classroom, instructors use visual signs to simultaneously cater to and deconstruct students' ideas of Africanness and African identity. Enter most African dance classes taught by West African men, and you will be greeted by an instructor wearing a brightly colored, intricately patterned boubou and pants of matching material with voluminous amounts of material at the top of the inseam and tapered legs. If your instructor is female, she will probably wear a lapa and buba made of similar materials. From a performance studies perspective, all aspects of an individual's comportment can be interpreted as performance. Thus the clothing that instructors choose

to wear cultivates aspects of a specific, creative identity. Here, instructors' clothing in class matches the image they advertise of traditional African identity. However, if students arrive early to Kabisko Kaba's Brattleboro, Vermont class at the Stone Church, they might see Mr. Kaba arriving wearing a black button down shirt and dark denim jeans. When Mr. Thioub, a Senegalese-American instructor and griot who teaches community African dance classes in Eugene and Corvallis, changes after class, he abandons his boubou in favor of a button down shirt and designer jeans. When Mr. Thioub was the guest artist for Dance Africa at the University of Oregon in January, 2011, his post-class clothing reflected the prestige of the appointment: he left class every day in a beautifully tailored suit (often white) with crisply ironed pleats running down the front of each leg, a button down shirt in a smartly contrasting color, a matching fedora, and expensive dress shoes. Mr. Thioub prides himself on his sense of fashion, explaining that ever since his father entered the textile industry when he was twelve, he was known for his "killer style" (Thioub). The contrast between the traditional boubous worn for class and the Western clothing instructors wear in their personal lives breaches the audience's definitional identity of African identity based on Western discourse and in-class narratives. By using clothing to highlight a certain identity and tradition in class and then claiming other styles of clothing as a part of their personal identity that students might not have otherwise associated with Africanness, instructors visually deconstruct static narratives of African identity. Their sartorial choices signify performatively as "collective self-definitions specifically intended to proclaim an interpretation to an audience not otherwise available" (Myerhoff 234-235).

Narrative and Evasion

As I have outlined in Chapter III, there are many reasons why West African instructors choose to present information about dances in very general terms. The narratives that accompany dances are usually simple, brief, and generalized, lacking any type of temporal specificity or contextual information. When instructors teach students songs, they often do not provide translations unless the students request them. When they do provide translations, the translations are often in very general terms. Although these descriptions may contribute to students' ideas of African dance as timeless and static, instructors' reticence may be indicative of a desire to safeguard certain cultural information unsuitable for outsiders. Some African dance instructors, like Malawian dance educator Masankho Banda, regard it as part of their mission to provide a more nuanced, realistic portrayal of Africa for students. He wonders, "What kind of a program can I present that gives a real accurate picture of who we are as a people?" (Banda). However for griots and other instructors whose professional dance experiences are related to griot culture who teach in the United States, full disclosure about dance traditions would not signify responsible pedagogy, but rather a form of cultural heresy. As noted in chapter III, many dances (with the exception of those classified as village dances) are part of rituals or secret societies and their practice is contingent on group membership, gender, age, caste, etc. Dances reserved for griots belong to Tiérou's innermost, and thus most private, concentric circle of dances.

When Thomas Hale asked griot Papa Sousso to explain in advance what he was going to sing during a 1994 residency at Penn State, Sousso obliged, however his descriptions remained "general and elusive. It was almost as if to translate and dissect

would be to destroy" (269). Griot knowledge is viewed as information belonging to a select group of professionals (Hale 190). During his Dance Africa guest artist residency, Mr. Thioub taught the company's nine dancers many songs. The dancers were eager to know the meanings of each song, broken down by lyrics and asked many questions about wording. Mr. Thioub explained the meanings much as Sousso did to Hale. One of his drummers, Amara Ndaiye, who has been in the U.S. for far longer, seemed to interpret Mr. Thioub's general, perhaps inaccurate description of the lyrics as a mistake due to a linguistic barrier. "No, no, no," Mr. Ndaiye corrected, stepping forward. "It's like this." As he began to provide a more detailed explanation, Mr Thioub stepped back in. "No," he insisted, with a meaningful glance. "I mean what I said."

These cultural barriers exist not only with foreigners, but also between griot performers and non-griot audiences in West Africa. When Guinean historian Djibril Tamsir Niane interviewed Mamadou Kouyaté during his research in preparation for collecting and publishing the Sundiata epic, Kouyaté cautions Niane, a non-griot,

> Do not ever go into the cities of the dead to question the past, for the spirits will never forgive. Do not seek to know what is not to be known…I took an oath to teach only what is to be taught and to conceal what is to be kept concealed (Niane 84).

Just as performing dances reserved for griots for mixed audiences can elicit severe social sanctions, revealing too much knowledge can have dire consequences for griots, at home or abroad. As Hale notes, "the consequences of overstepping the sometimes unstated limits of access to esoteric knowledge can be fatal- or at least perceived as fatal" (191). In 1975 and 1976, famous Malian griot Wâ Kamissoko served as an informant at SCOA-sponsored seminars in Bamako for scholars studying West African history (Belcher 108; Moraes Farias 14). His death in 1976, soon after the conference, was widely viewed in

Mali as retribution by his professional colleagues for having revealed too much to outsiders (Hale 191). Thus griots performing in domestic, regional *and* transnational contexts may only offer seemingly simplistic or evasive descriptions of dances; however this behavior reflects occupationally enforced codes of conduct and professional responsibility.

Dance instructors, both griot and non-griot, have other reasons for neglecting to provide more specific information to students. In addition to the language barriers and perceived lack of student interest outlined in Chapter 3, some dance instructors may not know a great deal about each dance they teach. They may have learned the piece in a private dance company or national Ballet, in which case, their interpretation would most likely reflect the views of the artistic director. In other cases in which non-griot dancers have picked up the movements through observation or other means, they may not know much at all beyond the basic narrative. By pointing to these details, I do not mean to call instructors' skills into question. Rather, I wish to highlight the diversity of experiences, cultural perspectives and means by which people learn dance in West Africa and the United States.

By providing only generalized information about dances and songs, and advertising images of African dance they think their students will recognize from popular, albeit limiting discourse, griots may anneal students' generalized perspectives about Africa and African dance, however, this practice allows them to expand their professional opportunities and secure new types of patrons while safeguarding more private knowledge and consequently, their reputations at home. Hale reflects that,

> It is easy for a griot to generalize by saying, "in Africa we do it this way"… The griot suddenly becomes the spokesperson for all of a very

> vast and diverse continent. But in fact, the problem of interpreting Africa is multilayered, beginning with the regional bias presented by griots and extending to more specific issues of just which griots and which cultures will be represented (333).

Yet it is vital to recognize that both griot and non-griot instructors in the United States may be spokespeople, but there is no reason why they must be saddled with the enormous, frankly impossible responsibility of providing completely accurate cultural correctives about an entire continent, most of which they may have never been to. I wish to emphasize that each instructor presents a different narrative reflective of their individual experience, business interests, and specific cultural values.

My aim in this chapter is to highlight the complex web of interests and obligations that West African dance instructors in the United States face. Instructors' creative decisions are informed in part by the demands of their patrons and their own ethnic, national and caste culture. How much each instructor adheres to or challenges students' presumed narratives about Africa and how much he/she chooses to reveal depends on his/her personality, level of economic and professional stability, the personalities of the students, the depth of the student/instructor relationship, and many other factors. When an instructor says that he/she is performing a dance in the traditional manner, the ways his/her ancestors did, he/she is probably referring less to the actual movements, which may have changed dramatically over time, but to the style with which the dance is presented. The values that govern the art form, which include presentation of only certain suitable dances, tailoring performances to align with audiences' interests, and safeguarding sacred knowledge, are what make these practices traditional, and remain central to the instruction of traditional African dance in the United States. Instructors do

not seem very interested in personally shouldering the burden of re-educating the West about their misrepresented continent or the idea of authenticity. Rather, performances of African artistry and cultural identity demonstrate savvy traditional and capitalist business tactics. Thus while West African instructors do indeed employ a dual transcript of public and private meanings in their pedagogy, advertisement, and performances, "the dominant" should not be singularly understood as the classes' primarily Euro-American clientele and their assumptions about African dance. Instead, "the dominant" is constituted by an overlapping web of forces—the consumer base, pressure to protect esoteric caste knowledge, traditional griot praisesinging practices, and personal and financial security. Furthermore, although such performances do not overturn stereotypical Western ideas about African dance, their artistic license and practices and conform to griot artistic practices of framing a narrative, or "curating a tradition" according to a patron's worldview and expand performers' entrepreneurial entranceways to professionally mobile, transnational settings (Ebron 25).

Notes

[i]For an in-depth discussion of the diverse theories about the origins of the term 'griot', see Thomas Hale's detailed treatment in *Griots and Griottes*, pgs. 7-17.

[ii] Although this is still largely the case, noble-born people like the immensely popular musician Selif Keita have broken this social boundary by studying griot music and song and publically performing praisesongs. Keita's practices in particular had a profound effect on the way some people viewed this taboo because his contemporary reinterpretations of praisesongs have garnered international visibility, respect and popularity for artistic traditions previously primarily appreciated in West Africa.

[iii] Language of the Banmana (Bambara, Bamana) ethnic group, a Mandé people. The Banmana are the largest ethnic group in Mali, and also live in Burkino Faso, Senegal and Guinea. Approximately 80% of Malians, regardless of their ethnicity, speak Banmana.

[iv] An ethnic group in Mali, near San.

[v] Both Ban Zoumana Cissoko of Mali and Boubacar Tinguizi of Niger were posthumously commemorated on stamps (Hale 1998: 210).

[vi] Unless they occupy the powerful role of artistic director, for which competition is fierce and positions few.

[vii] Three of the most revered and oldest families of griots, who are all known as guitar masters.

[viii] It also means that it is quite rare to meet a Diabeté, Cissokho, or Kouyaté teaching in the U.S., especially at the level of a community class. I had the distinct pleasure of working with Karamo Cissokho of the Cissokho clan for two years in Putney, Vermont, where Cissokho was the lead drummer for a Guinean dance class and a sabar class. Mr. Cissokho was relatively young (32) at the time, and did not get on well with his father, a master drummer and griot whose training methods Mr.Cissokho described as tyrannical and unforgiving. In 2006, Mr. Cissokho moved to Oakland, California where he now lives and works, although he returns to Gorée Island, Senegal, every winter.

[ix] Sabar drums vary in size, but they are all single-headed drums carved from the trunk of a mahogany tree. The drum's goatskin head is held in place by seven pegs, and it is played with one hand and one stick. Wolof griots or *géwël* are an endogamous caste of oral historians, geneologists, praisesingers and storytellers who have played a significant role in West African history over the past seven centuries. Sabar drumming is a closely guarded musical tradition handed down through generations of *géwël* percussionists (Tang, 2007, 10).

[x]Non-griot males are not permitted at most other sabar events.

[xi] Radano notes that this type of generalized, timeless, romantic language was central to the way in which liberal American abolitionists' described slave spirituals.

CHAPTER V

CULTIVATING COMMUNITY: AMERICAN STUDENT RECEPTION, SYNCRETIC PHILOSOPHIES, AND HEALING

During the winter of my sophomore year at Smith College, I piled layers of sweats and heavy Sorel boots over my dance clothes and skidded my way down the hill along the frozen pond to the boathouse's upstairs studio, where evening dance classes were held overlooking the expanse of ice and the birch skeletons that populated its banks. Augusto Soledade, a visiting dance performer and scholar from Bahia, Brazil, was teaching a wildly popular Afro-Brazilian dance class, and it had taken me a year and a half to be able to secure a spot. I had spent my high school evenings in the local dance studio studying ballet, jazz and modern dance, and as a young college student, was eager to explore new styles of expression. Mr. Soledade's instruction encouraged fluidity of the spine and hips that contrasted sharply with the angularity of ballet. For the first time in my dance career, I did not leave the studio secretly berating the heft of my hips, rear end and thighs, but rather began to consider them assets whose strength and flexibility allowed me to more easily execute movements. The choreography I had memorized for high school dance productions often felt awkward and trying to recall the combinations made my brain hurt sometimes. In Mr. Soledade's class, this was never the case. My body and the movement seemed to make sense together. I stopped worrying so much about forgetting what came next and spend more time enjoying dancing.

Mr. Soledade had been initiated as a Candomblé priest and had experienced spirit possession via dance, yet he had also studied modern dance with Garth Fagan and Clyde Morgan, and began his training at Federal University in Bahia. He taught us about

Candomblé, its origins, and its relation to dance in Brazil. I relished learning about dance's role outside the studio, and I physically enjoyed this form of dance more than I had any other to which I had been exposed. I resolved to continue learning about different styles of dance related to the forms I had studied with Mr. Soledade.

Over the next ten years, I took Afro-Caribbean and West African dance classes at Smith College and in community classes, conferences and workshops all over New England. The year after college, while I was teaching English as a Second Language in Athens, Greece, I found a West African dance class at an upscale spa/gym located two bus rides from my campus, which I attended every Wednesday night. As I continued to attend classes and workshops throughout my twenties, in Athens and then in New England, I started to develop friendships and relationships with fellow students and drummers. I noticed that although there were many classes occurring in the two -hour radius around my house, they were often populated by the same people, and if you mentioned someone's name (instructor or student), usually other people in the class knew that person as well. Most of the students were women, and there was a clear social hierarchy among dancers, based on who one knew, and also, for Euro-American women, how much African style one externally adopted. Although these same social regulations did not seem to apply to women of color, white women who had been to Africa to study dance, who braided their hair in corn rows with beads or covered dreadlocks with fabric head wraps, or wore lapas and bubas carried themselves imperiously and talked and laughed almost exclusively with each other, like they had culturally converted and belonged in some way that Euro-American women sporting tank tops and pony tails did not.

I loved the dancing at these classes and workshops, but the behavior of these women made me slightly uncomfortable, although I could never exactly pinpoint why. What did these Euro-American women gain by adopting this style? Was it appropriate (and to whom)? What did it mean that African American women seemed to command cultural authority in the eyes of Euro-American women, but Euro-American women could seemingly match this authority via sartorial choices or brief visits to Africa? What did the dances and narrative the instructors presented mean to these women? Why was it that the alpha dancers, as I secretly called these Euro-American women, who clearly enjoyed such strong community connections through the class, made me uncomfortable? What did it mean that I seemed to connect to these styles of dance more than those from my own culture? After years in these communities, although I did not affect West African sartorial or hair styles, I did know people well and felt confident and relaxed on the dance floor. Sometimes I noticed less experienced dancers glance anxiously at me, and realized that I might have become an 'alpha'. I wondered, when I said that these dances felt more natural in my body, that I gained more emotional release and pleasure by practicing them, was I being honest, was I appropriating, was I exoticizing? Was it all three? Despite these reservations, I liked that I had learned something about West African culture through my dance instructors, and looked forward to being able to visit the region and study dance there. Through my fieldwork, I found that many other students shared my overlapping, contradictory emotions surrounding my dance classes and my relationship to West African dance.

This chapter aims to explore how American instructors and students interpret the dances and narratives surrounding the dances presented by West African dance

instructors. I will position Euro-American students' consumption and embodiment of Senegalese and Guinean dance and sartorial styles within the context of appropriation of African American expressive forms in this culture. Furthermore, I will document how American instructors present the narratives they learn from their West African instructors to American audiences, how American students interpret their instructor's presentation of dance practices, and how they apply these narratives to their own lives and dance practices. Finally, I will address the issue of community for West African dance instructors teaching in the United States.

As I have noted, approximately 95% of the students who attended the classes and workshops in which I conducted my fieldwork were female. Through participant observation in dance classes and personal interviews with American female dancers, I found that despite the prevailing discourse about African dance in this country, none of the women to whom I spoke consider African dance timeless or continentally uniform, and many dancers express hunger for more specific information about dance practices. Based on the narratives their instructors provide, many students understand community interaction and egalitarianism to be central features of most African dance. Many American dancers apply the narratives their African and American instructors have used to frame traditional African dance in syncretic ways, adapting the philosophies their instructors espouse to create their own local communities centered on interactive embodiment. By applying these narratives in a local setting, dancers forge communities that work to counteract the isolating individualism, competition and lack of joyful interaction they cite in their daily lives. Thus their interaction with African dance is not necessarily based on a desire to accurately distill West African culture via dance.

Instead, African dance classes provide narratives and community that many Euro-American women report ease feelings of spiritual and emotional deficiency within their own American identities.

Dance and Race in the U.S.

The persistent, low-grade anxiety I experienced watching Euro-American women gain cultural capital by adopting Guinean and Senegalese clothing and hair styles is surely informed by the relationship between cultural expression, race and exploitation in this country. To understand the complicated nature of dance students' engagement with these styles, it is helpful to address the history of this relationship.

The term race generally denotes a categorization based on skin color, body type and other biological traits, "suggesting difference that is immutable and grounded in nature" (Kajikawa 7). Most researchers have abandoned any scientific projects aimed at distilling any biological basis for racial difference. Rather, the concept of race is recognized as a socially constructed category. Historically, this narrative of fundamental human difference based on physical appearance enabled Europeans and Americans to justify the expropriation of property, chattel slavery, and the denial of political rights (Omi & Winant 10). Specifically, its profligate use in the United States to validate slavery, social and structural inequality and Jim Crow legislation and the subsequent Civil Rights movements protesting these oppressive systems cemented notions of racial difference and ensured race's place as an important social category in the United States. People adopt racialized identities as points of cultural pride and respect at the same time as the concept continues to feed narratives that enforce systems of unequal power and access.

For white slave owners, Africans' music and dance were aural and visual manifestations of supposed racial difference. Post-Jim crow era efforts to enforce segregation of Euro-Americans and African-Americans continued to frame African American artistic practices in terms of race and racial difference. In the mid-19th century, the immense popularity of Blackface minstrelsy with white audiences reflected many Euro-Americans' ambivalent attraction to Black musical practices. In the 20th century, when Euro-American musicians began adopting blues, swing, jazz and rock and roll, all styles of music with roots in African American culture, white performers' wide access to American audiences through radio spots, concert gigs and plum recording deals meant that they gained celebrity status as giants of each respective genre while African American artists from whom they learned received comparatively little credit. Throughout the 20th century, Americans anointed Paul Whiteman the King of Swing, Benny Goodman the King of Jazz, Elvis Presley the King of Rock and Roll. Recording companies sold these styles of music as uniquely American art forms performed by celebrated Euro-American performers, rarely acknowledging that they were in fact all African American in origin and inspiration (Tate 3).

Similar practices permeated dance entertainment in the United States. After seeing African American dancer Ethel Williams perform in the Harlem production *Darktown Follies*, white stage producer Florenz Ziegfeld contracted Williams to train his own Euro-American dancers in her technique. Despite Ziegfeld's obvious admiration of Williams' style, he relegated her role to backstage, while white dancers performed the movements she taught them on stage. "None of us [*Darktown Follies* dancers] were hired for the show….and at that time I was supposed to be the best woman dancer in the whole

country," Williams reflects (qtd in Brown 164). Ethel Williams also trained the famed dance duo Irene and Vernon Castle, although the Castles did not credit Williams for her choreography. Ned Wayburn, a director for Ziegfeld from 1916-1919, also secured African American dancers to train Euro-American dancers, and offered versions of their routines in his book *The Art of Stage Dancing*. Wayburn did not credit his artistic sources (Brown 167). Producers consistently used African American dancers' choreography without credit to benefit Euro-Americans' stage performances, regarding African Americans' repertoires as raw material that they would translate, sanitize and civilize for Euro-American audiences. By framing African American dances as "semi-barbaric dances….that had to be contained and controlled" by a Euro-American arbiter, white producers justified the mining of African American artistic expression for their own profit (Brown 170). In this way, African American expressive traditions became lionized as general *American* cultural treasures, while the African American people behind these achievements received little or no credit for their creative work.

Although their primary purpose may have been to shirk obligations concerning artistic and choreographic credit, producers' descriptions of African American movement as natural urges of the body that were both rejuvenating and potentially out of control mirrored colonial rhetoric about dances originating in Africa. In this milieu, descriptions of artistic practices specifically reinforced notions of racial difference. Euro-Americans often regarded these black dances as both dangerous and rife with potential as a thrilling outlet for their own social repression. The dance styles' supposed sensuality and proximity to natural urges appealed to women raised on images of Ziegfeld's regimented, mechanized dancers.

Euro-Americans' fascination with African American forms of expression certainly continues, yet developments in critical scholarship, civil rights activism and music production (the rise of the African American music mogul, etc.) all contribute to a markedly different environment concerning appropriation of cultural expressions tied to race. It still occurs, yet when the 21-year-old Euro-American hip hop artist Krayshawn plays her own version of the dozens, affecting the swagger typical of some male African American rappers, spitting racially charged language denigrating African American women, the blogosphere erupts with debate concerning the dubious nature of her performance. The exploitation of African American art forms for Euro-American gain is a visible, tense issue that merits active public debate.

African dance classes truck in the same narratives of bodily joy, sensuality and liberation that appealed to Euro-American women in the 1920s. When the subject of Euro-American women practicing Senegalese dance, dressed in Senegalese clothing, comes up over drinks with some Euro-American acquaintances, many express their discomfort with the idea. They shift in their chairs and avoid eye contact. "Isn't that sort of wrong?" they venture, expressing their awareness of the problematic dynamic. The dancers who choose to adopt Senegalese and Guinean sartorial styles generally do not feel this way because they feel they are motivated by respect and veneration for cultural traditions rather than self-interest. Furthermore, I suggest that Euro-American women's adoption of Senegalese and Guinean styles feels less troublesome to some because the movement and clothing styles are framed in terms of culture rather than race. Because these sartorial and dance styles are framed by instructors in terms cultural expression, Euro-American students feel more comfortable adopting these styles. A narrative frame

that stresses mutable expressions of culture allows Euro-American students to dabble in a foreign style that feels liberating to them without invoking the tension implicit in cultural appropriations that are framed in terms of race.

While American students may feel more free to use African dance narratives and styles of expression to fill voids their own perceived cultural inadequacies, these opportunities would not exist to the same degree were it not for a dearth of economic opportunity for West Africans at home. Students and instructors occupy markedly different positions in a global power structure, and this influences their interaction with the practice. In *Colonialism/Postcolonialism*, Ania Loomba notes,

> The inequities of colonial rule still structure wages and opportunities for migrants from once-colonized countries or communities, the racial stereotypes that we identified earlier still circulate, and contemporary global imbalances are built upon those inequities that were consolidated during the colonial era. A complex amalgam of economic and racial factors operates in anchoring the present to the colonial past (111).

As I have previously noted, although instructor's narratives are not based on colonial or Negritude discourse about Africa and dance, all of these narratives circulate together and all inform students' conceptions of the latter. Contemporary global economic imbalances whose origins are linked to colonial and racially-related inequities supply Euro-American women with steady stream of West African cultural authorities whose narratives about Africa help women confront dissatisfaction with their own Euro-American artistic opportunities.

American Instructors, Dance Narratives, and Student Reception

Although the last two chapters have focused on the representations of traditional African dance cultivated by African transnational artists, performers, and entrepreneurs who apply business practices to dance instruction, these are not the only narratives that

appear in African dance classes in the United States. Most Americans who teach African dance have studied the material they teach with African instructors, yet American instructors also teach West African dance. These instructors occupy a very different cultural and economic position in relation to their students. Because dance instruction pays relatively poorly compared to most U.S. vocations, most American instructors do not primarily regard teaching African dance as a way to make money. Generally, instructors also have other forms of income, to which their dance instruction is a supplement. If they have chosen to pursue dance instruction as full-time work, their motivation is not generally money. Most American instructors say they teach African dance because they have a passion for the practice and are attempting to raise the visibility of and knowledge about the art form in the United States. Therefore, they generally try to present detailed, specific information concerning African dance and regions in Africa while at the same time paying deference to their African instructors and the (usually more general) narratives they espouse. The American instructors involved in this project reflect these interests, presenting layered and occasionally contradictory narratives about traditional dance in Africa.

Chelsea Agee, 32, an instructor in Alstead, New Hampshire, teaches an African dance class to community members in a small schoolhouse on a local, family farm. Chelsea is a stay-at-home mom to her two children and she teaches to make extra money. Her husband is a carpenter and a drummer for her class. Chelsea explains to students that she is passing on the knowledge of the dances that she learned from her teacher in Guinea, where she studied for one year. She states that there are probably many different versions of the dances she teaches of which she is ignorant. She explains that the dances

may have different steps or upper body movements depending on where they were taught or performed. In her African dance classes at University of Oregon in Eugene, dance professor Rita Honka emphasizes the cultural importance of dance in everyday life in Africa in broad terms, yet discourages continental cultural conflation, introducing each dance by explaining who taught her the dance, detailing from which ethnic group, African country, and region the dance comes, and describing the original purpose of the dance. Honka notes that her own African instructors do not always readily provide this information. "You have to ask pointed questions. What's the name [of the dance]? Where did you learn it? How has it evolved?" (Honka). Although it is not a primary focus of the class, if a student asks about current dance practices, Honka stresses that all of these dances grow and "change with the times" (Honka). In class, she readily concedes that she does not always know the current context in which these dances are performed, that she is only relaying the information her instructor gave her, and that the movements may differ depending on who is dancing them. By explaining that each dance they teach is simply what they learned from one teacher, and noting that the dance varies quite a bit depending on location, time period, social situation, etc., Agee and Honka attempt to undo representations of an undifferentiated, timeless Africa. When asked about Guinean dance, Rebekah Steihl, a four year student of Honka's, reflects:

> You certainly can't generalize about all dances from Guinea because there are so many different teachers from Guinea who could teach us so many different things. It all comes from an individual I think, and it would be difficult to say, you know, "This is from Guinea, period" (Honka).

Steihl's articulation of Guinea as a multidimensional, differentiated, dynamic space that produces individual dancers who all have their own history, influences and various styles of interpreting multiple dances demonstrates the influence of Honka's pedagogical

presentation. Ida Danks concurs, noting that just because instructors teach traditional dance forms doesn't mean American students conceive of Africa as homogenous or timeless.

> Cultures change and evolve, like Rita will say, this dance *was* done for this purpose, but now they do it socially. Or like, Gahu [a social dance from Ghana], who knows what Gahu was originally planned for, but now they do it in flip-flops and sunglasses! (Honka).

All the same, the American instructors involved in this project often do not contextualize dances in a contemporary milieu or mention how dances change unless directly asked. I suspect the reasons for this practice are twofold: 1) instructors may be attempting to respectfully present the material with which their African instructors provided them which often notes the original purpose of the dance but omits specific historical context; and, 2) they may not necessarily know how the dance has evolved, and don't seek to highlight what might appear as ignorance to beginning students. Students who study with both African and American instructors note the difference in narrative styles, and articulate the tension they feel between the two. Steihl remarks that American instructors and students (she includes herself in this group) often feel the need to 'overintellectualize' the dances, by demanding further detail and cultural/historical information. "They want to know exact information. Where does it come from, how is it danced – so that can inform their practice, but… it doesn't always have an easy answer" (Stiehl). Julie Polhemus, an eleven year member of Dance Africa, agrees:

> I have a problem with that… I do that; I know I do that and I feel like I'm-- as you're saying-- overintellectualizing, but I want to know. Is this a harvest dance? Why am I doing this movement? Because, it's going to look different and it's going to have different intentions if it's a harvest dance instead of a dance looking for my home, so those are the types of questions I ask and sometimes you get a little of it, but I always want a lot (Polhemus).

Polhemus and Steihl characterize a desire to learn specific details about dances as "overintellectualization", a desire that Polhemus describes as "a problem" at the same time as she defends it. The dancers' language exhibits conflicting desires-- to respect the style in which 'native' experts present the dances and to learn more about the complex stories behind the dances. Furthermore, by articulating the type of information for which she is hungry as the difference between a "harvest dance" and "a dance looking for home", relatively basic and general information, Polhemus' comments imply that she receives quite little specific historical/cultural information about the dances she studies from either African or American instructors.

Students' understanding of dance practices in West Africa depends on their personal experience with the art form. Those who have travelled to and studied in West Africa often engage more critically with the practices presented in classes because they have observed dance instruction in various contexts. Although dance camps in Senegal and Guinea are still environments tailored to fit the expectations of foreign visitors, they still can provide a broader context for understanding than never having been there would. 60-year-old Brattleboro, Vermont resident Ricia Gordon has been studying West African dance in the U.S. for approximately ten years. When she traveled to a January dance camp in Senegal to study a few years ago, she noted how differently the instructor treated the female Senegalese dancers than he did his American students. As members of the instructor's private dance company, Senegalese women were required to work at the camp, dancing in front of the American and European students to provide physical modeling of correct form. Ms. Gordon recalls that when one female dancer attempted to leave class early one day, the director slapped her across the face, admonishing her to

return to her position. He returned to Ms. Gordon's group and proceeded with the lesson, cordially remarking that he was "sorry they had to see that" (Gordon). In Gordon's appraisal, the Senegalese woman's experience participating in the instructor's troupe was clearly different than the narratives that advertised dance as a way to build community spirit and express one's sense of joyfulness. I must note that every instructor, every individual is very different, and I do not recount this story to imply this behavior is common. I include this anecdote because Gordon cited this experience as a moment where she realized that dance practices were clearly impacted by professional pressure and local gender dynamics in ways that were not apparent in her U.S. classes.

The extent to which dance students (who have not traveled to Africa) engage critically with the narratives presented in dance classes seems to correlate with how critically their instructor engages with the information. For example, Steihl and Danks both conceive of Africa as a multidimensional place harboring abundantly diverse identities and experiences, which is how Honka presents the continent. Both dancers also articulate African dance as a practice defined by community, egalitarianism, and artistic sharing, reflecting narratives presented by Honka, and many Dance Africa guest instructors, including Malawian instructor Masankho Banda and Senegalese instructor Abdoulaye Thioub. During a interview, Danks explains, "I like how closely related [African dance] is to culture, and to real life, to everyday life. I wish that the arts played an active role in community life [in the U.S.]" (Danks). Describing Gahu, a social dance from Ghana, Danks notes that although the dance changes and evolves,

> they're still doing it as a community and coming together and dancing and they all know it, where …you go dancing in the States and everybody is doing their own thing. It's not like everybody in the club knows similar

> dances, unless it's the Electric Slide. But even if you break out into the Electric Slide, not everybody is going do it with you! (Danks).

I do not dispute the fact that people do indeed dance Gahu in this manner; however I do suggest that the way that Danks chooses to describe the dance and use it to synechdochally represent qualities inherent to 'African dance' demonstrates the influence of instructor narratives and pedagogical decisions. Steihl concurs, adding,

> Some of our culture's dance traditions have their roots in upper class divisions: only rich people can dance, or it's a high society prestige thing… then there's all these aspects of you can do it right, or you can do it wrong. And only those that 'do it right' get to do it at all. With African, it's more like "Everyone dances- it's a community". So, I think it comes down to who gets to do it and why do we do it. 'But what if I do it wrong? Am I allowed?' My [American] fears our totally irrelevant to an African person- to them, this is life" (Stiehl).

Steihl's comments illustrate her association of American dance instruction with class divisions, competition, and pressure to perform 'correctly'. They also demonstrate that her African dance instruction has not provided any information about the influence of caste divisions, gender, suitability/appropriateness of a dance, competition, or 'correct' comportment on dancers in Africa. Her narrative illustrates a significant conflation between the dance practices that prevail in traditional African dance classes in the U.S., and what happens in Africa, reflecting what she has learned from her instructors. The narratives about African dance her instructors champion in class may not provide specific information about the realities of dance in Guinea or Senegal; however for Steihl, they provide an alternative way to conceive of the relationship between her own moving body and her dance community. In this way, conceptions about the value of African expressive culture presented in class resonate with Stiehl and Danks, who articulate dissatisfaction with certain dance institutions in the States and the social values they associate with these institutions. In this sense, community African dance classes and the narratives instructors

present become a function of the white self, a means for Euro-American patrons to learn about their own bodies and their immediate community (Dyer 13).

American Social Values and African Dance

In *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*, Robert Bellah, Richard Madsen, William Sullivan, Ann Swidler, and Steven Tipton investigate the influence of individualism on every day American life. Structuring their study as a contemporary reexamination of Alexis de Tocqueville's 1831 study of American society, they identify individualism as the most influential American social virtue, one which prizes independence and self-reliance above all else (Bella et al xiv). A capitalist mythical narrative maintains that independence and self-reliance, when successfully navigated, lead to monetary reward and the social validation that 'winners' receive. Individualism values toughness and strength and recoils from perceived softness or weakness (Bella et al xiv). Bellah et al contend that singular devotion to the cause of individualism via the institutional infrastructure of our society and individual social pursuits has brought about a crisis in civic membership. This crisis is most readily expressed through a loss of civic consciousness and an absent sense of obligation to the rest of society. "There is something missing in the individualist set of values…individualism alone does not allow persons to understand certain basic realities of their lives, especially their interdependence with others" (Bellah et al xv). Although Bellah et al's scholarship does not adequately interrogate the structural inequalities and institutions that enforce these values, they do usefully identify the social dissatisfaction related to these values that plagues many Americans. Kamala Burden, 52, a dancer and dance therapist from Alstead, New Hampshire reflects,

> I think we [as Americans] have made our goals in life so external and so disconnected from nature. After the Industrial Revolution, it has become so … driven by this outside picture of success. I think we've gotten separated… the Industrial Revolution really got us very greed-oriented, very goal-oriented. I think when the economy crashed people sort of went "Hmmm…well, maybe we need each other" (Burden).

For many, professional success requires logging more and more time at increasingly sedentary jobs. Professional success can mandate sacrifices to one's physical health and often conflates productivity with purely mental activity, divorcing it not only from other people, but also from the body. For the dance students in African dance classes, egalitarian community-centered ideas about artistic expression centered in the body can offer organizing principles that dancers apply to their own practices in syncretic ways to cultivate joy through embodiment, community interaction, and civic responsibility. Narratives about African dance and culture defined in opposition to American values celebrating individualism allow Euro-American women to use West African social dance practices to ameliorate their perceived lack of embodied community. At the same time, these narratives reinforce existing colonial narratives about African people, the body and movement.

Embodied Movement: Energy, Rhythms, and Flow

Dancers describe their experiences with embodied fulfillment gained through communal movement to drums in terms of energy, rhythms and flow. Gena Corea is a 64 year old writer and co-director of a retreat center in southern Vermont. She has been participating in African dance classes for about twenty years. She reflects on her first experiences with this type of movement:

> There was the energy that people didn't really talk about very much. But I remember one African American friend who said, "You look radiant after every class!" There was an energy that filled you…..and of course my

> body felt wonderful from moving in that way. And it's quite different from being on a treadmill! You know that kind of aerobic exercise where you fit your body into a machine? I knew that wasn't going to work for me- and this was *joy*. I remember a German friend of mine… talking about basic human needs for food, shelter…joy. Something in me leapt when I heard that-joy described as a basic human need- giving that dignity and importance. Because this culture does not give dignity and importance to joy- it trivializes that. I think maybe it equates it with a kind of diversion, or 'killing time', passing time, and so forth, but it is a very dignified human need. And the need for joy was met in the class (Corea).

Corea juxtaposes the communal, interactive atmosphere of the dance class with the individualistic nature of exercising on a treadmill, an activity which held no appeal for her. Her description of being flooded with an energy which precipitated feeling of unmitigated joy suggests the dance practice has the potential to tap into sources of energy which lie dormant in everyday life. Furthermore, she delights in her friend's idea of joy as a basic human need, a tenet alien to, and often in opposition to, American ideals of individualism. Tracie Smith, a 32 year old farmer from southern New Hampshire, describes the energy exchange that the dancing elicits between people as a healing, life-changing force. Smith explains that this energy, provoked by the interaction between participants, occurs for each dancer, while energy exchanges occur between dancers, between dancers and instructors, and between dancers and musicians contributing live drumming.

> I just like being there and feeling that energy exchange between dancers playing out - there's something that is definitely very healing for me. I worked through a lot of shit because we have so much shit in our bodies and our minds and our emotions …I tell people, I don't think I would even be who I was today if I hadn't experienced [dancing in this way]. I feel like I needed that to get to where I was today and figure out what I needed to do for myself and who I needed to be. …All these energy changes get you to where you are…they totally changed my life (Smith).

Kamala Burden explains these energy transfers in the language of Body-Mind Centering, a holistic, creative, therapeutic approach to movement. Body-Mind Centering addresses

the complex reciprocal relationships between the body and the mind and holds that the natural patterns that exist in nature manifest in our bodies through physical structures as well through auditorily and kinesthetically experienced rhythms. Burden explains that there is a synergistic relationship between internal bodily rhythms and external musical rhythms that feeds the energy that Smith and Corea describe. She sketches out several physiological rhythms in the body and describes how they become starved in American culture.

> I think [the movement] is coming from another culture, but it's in our bodies- it's in our DNA. Literally! It's not at all a platitude- the rhythmic connection is *literally* in our DNA….The rhythmic aspect is something that is both physiological and interpersonal at the same time. People moving together, in a circle, where they can see each other, to the same rhythm, and when you get locked into a rhythm something happens that doesn't happen often because American culture has distanced itself from it- there's nowhere to get that- because it's not about let's get our heart rates up to one hundred and fifty beats per minute so we can burn fat so we can fit into this outfit that we saw that we really can't afford you know? I think there is this incredibly deep hunger for connection (Burden).

Thus Euro-American women describe their engagement with West African dance in terms of active resistance against what they perceive to be hegemonic and damaging American values. In *Doople: The Eternal Law of African Dance,* Alphonse Tiérou articulates the appeal of African social dance in a similar way. Although he finds the claims that African people possess a more instinctual connection to dance or have rhythm in their blood "nauseating", he asserts that this sort of movement appeals universally because it stimulates the internal rhythms of human physiology. "[The concept of] rhythm is not African, it is not the prerogative of certain peoples; it is universal because the rhythm is the beat of the heart" (12).

Other dancers describe the bodily pleasure and energy they experience in the dance in terms of 'flow'(Csikszentmihalyi). In *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi defines flow as a state in which an individual experiences intense inherent pleasure in a demanding activity accompanied by a loss of self-consciousness (62). The individual experiences a merging of awareness and physical action, and as Herbert Blumer notes, a quieting of the voice in one's head. Danks describes her experience with flow as a sort of purposeful daydreaming:

> When I close my eyes I can feel the vibrations … It just feels…I don't know…it's really hard to put into words; it just *feels good*. It makes me feel like I can separate from my insecurities and my self-consciousness, and if I just listen to the drums, then I can almost be outside myself and not worry about how I look or what I am doing, and just go with it. It's really freeing to me to feel that way (Danks).

Steihl agrees, noting that "you have to have the rhythm in your body so your brain kind of gets to shut off" (Stiehl). Smith admits that she is happiest in classes when she is not learning new movement because when she is able to stop focusing on external technique, "you could just get lost in it and feel what it means to you. I'd rather just forget about [the steps]!" (Smith). Although the experience of flow is relatively introverted, in this context, it is still contingent on the presence of others, as are dancers' descriptions of energy production and rhythms. In this context, community interaction feeds the physical embodied pleasure of the individual dancer.

Students and Community

Dancing in this fashion promotes individual embodied pleasure, yet these interactions also nurture dancers' social desires for community. Kamala Burden, 52, cites the sense of open community in her local dance class as essential to her experience there:

> I think I probably cried the first few times that I was there because the energy would come and be with me and it was very new. It wasn't 'new'

> and yet it was also NEW and, after you have been around the earth for a few decades, things stop being as novel as they were before… so there was this precious newness about it, and the community aspect of it! I just felt like Chelsea [the instructor] was so non-arrogant and so in love with the form and doing it because she enjoys it and because it's just *in her*. And so there were all these things, I can't really even put it into words how important it was to me, and it really brought me back to life (Burden).

Many dancers employ the narratives about African communities and dance that they have learned in class as inspiration as they create their own communities via movement. Instructors' descriptions of the synthesis of dance and everyday life 'in Africa' conform, at least to some extent, to Western discourse about Africa and dance. These descriptions shape the ways in which dancers interact in class contexts in the United States. Dance Africa performance troupe members often socialize after performances. "It was really fun and it helped solidify the community feeling because we would all do this thing we loved to do, and then we would go to breakfast and talk about how great the show was or how bad the show was" (Danks). The group has potluck dinners together throughout the year. During an interview, Polhemus expresses excitement to be able to host this spring's gathering. She reflects on the connection between African dance and personal community in her life:

> African dance is just so good for my soul. It just feels *good.* It just keeps coming back to community for me. I feel comfortable with the company always; I feel like we always create this space that I hope that everyone feels comfortable, because *I do*. I *love* to be there… I feel a little bit like I have a responsibility now--not about imparting dance knowledge, but much more about creating the community (Polhemus).

West African social dance, in this specific American context, provides a means for American women to establish community with other American women who share a common interest. If American women were dancing in a Senegalese or Guinean context,

their relationship with the dance practices and their perceptions about dance's relationship to community would be different.

Dance Africa is comprised of undergraduate students, graduate students and local community members. Many dancers have children, and between musicians, dancers and dancers' children, rehearsals are often populated with babies to people in their fifties, and many ages in between. Danks, Polhemus and Steihl agree that the cross-generational composition of Dance Africa and the way in which it welcomes children makes it particularly fulfilling. The women mention that guest artists also bring their children to rehearsals. Mandjou Koné, a Malian instructor who now teaches at University of California at Santa Cruz and one of a small population of female West Africans who teach dance in the U.S., was an artist-in-residence with Dance Africa from 2008-09, and often danced with her daughter tied to her back during rehearsals and even during a performance. An environment in which children and adults converge to dance encourage many mothers to continue to perform in the troupe even if they could not afford or find adequate child care. Polhemus recalls, "It felt completely comfortable, it was completely right. That's one of the reasons I want my kids there more often. That part of it for me is completely worth it. It has been a place where my children can feel comfortable" (Polhemus). Steihl, 23, also appreciates the diversity of ages Dance Africa embraces. "Having students, and older women and little kids helps us create our own little community" (Steihl). Most of the women with whom I spoke cited their personal embodiment of the movement and the importance of community as central to their dance practices. The public transcripts that instructors employ to explain African dance reinforce Western discourse about African dance at the same time as they provide a

means for Euro-American women to adopt a more satisfying, syncretic, American identity.

Applications of Narrative

Bellah et al note that when Americans do participate in communal activities, the purpose is generally self-improvement or personal interest. They assert that if the solution to our problems lies in reviving community, then communities must not be only self-selective (xxx). They also must function in terms of neighborhoods or localities. In southern New Hampshire, Kamala Burden applies her African dance classes to her occupation, social work, synthesizing many tenants of African dance classes with movement therapy in her sessions with developmentally disabled adults. In her movement class for adults at Monadnock Family Services, Burden and her clients dance in a circle facing each other and use call and response techniques to structure group dance. In her community in southern Vermont, Corea noticed that many people came to one or two African dance classes, but didn't return.

> I have had so many people tell me, 'You know, I went to a class and I loved what they were doing but it was just too hard.' I met one woman who said, 'I left the class and went home. I cried.' And it *is* too hard, and that isn't the way things should be taught. It can be made accessible (Corea).

Corea decided to begin offering a beginner's level African class, in which she teaches basic principles of West African movement, geared specifically to new dancers, older dancers, and people with chronic diseases who need to move. The class, entitled African Chi, brings together various expressive practices from disparate cultures in ways that Corea hopes will open up new avenues to bodily awareness, comfort and healing. She employs Qi Gong in the beginning of the class to let students become aware of their energy, then uses African movements to cultivate that energy.

> I had an experience recently with an older guy who was dragged along by someone else who heard about [the class] and he was recovering from a knee replacement- he was just *radiant* in it- and he said "Your class is everything I'm not. I'm stiff. I'm rigid." And yet he was moving. It was really awakening for him to find himself moving in those ways (Corea).

After dancing, participants use a combination of Qi Gong and reiki to harness the energy they have produced dancing and apply it to other participants' bodies for healing purposes.

In a similar practice, Carolyn Quinn, a local African dance instructor in Eugene, Oregon also feels that the healing assets that African dance can offer American students are sometimes best accessed in conjunction with other complementary styles. She recently began offering classes combining African dance and chakra awareness, a practice focused on cultivation of awareness of the seven non-physical energy transfer centers used in yoga, to local students after noting that the African dance alone was not always proving nurturing or healing for her students. Reflecting on her new class, Corea notes,

> I want *connection* [for the students], and that's the thing that's been different about this class really. There's really a connection that develops among the people in the class. I *know* there's powerful energy there. I *know* it can heal. I know there's a connection between this dance and healing, and I think working with the chi is a good way to get there. But it's an exploration for me, which I say to people, so that we're learning, we're exploring this together (Corea).

Corea's ultimate goal is for class to function as a workshop for non-Western healing methods that students can take back to their own neighborhoods and share with their neighbors. Corea's idea for neighborhood health tontines borrows the word tontine from a practice common in French-speaking Africa. Women form groups of friends and neighbors and each member of the tontine group pays a small amount of money into a common pot each month. Each month, the entirety of the fund goes to one member of the

group to fund the construction of a home, or the foundation of a business. Corea suggests that this grassroots microloan practice allows the women to thrive despite gendered institutional barriers which bar some women from obtaining loans from banks **(**Corea, "Neighborhood"). Corea envisions translating this type of community-based practice into a neighborhood health consortium. Corea's own neighbor recently had knee surgery. She explains how she visits his house for ten minutes a day to perform subhualla, a treatment similar to reiki, on his knee.

> I talk to him a little before and after- I get to know him- it binds us more- he's hurting, I help. I'll call on him for help – I *have* called on him for help- so it knits people together more. There's *a lot* that we can do for ourselves and each other outside of Western medicine, and it makes us more self-reliant (Corea).

Corea's goals illustrate a type of local civic responsibility that Bellah argues feeds essential social dimensions of the human experience. Her syncretic use of African dance and tontine practices are framed in terms of local autonomy based on networks of interpersonal reliance, challenging the individualistic notion that self-reliance must mean isolation and/or complete independence. Burden's, Quinn's and particularly Corea's ideas suggest that "real freedom lies not in rejecting our social nature but in fulfilling it in a critical and adult loyalty, as we acknowledge our common responsibility to the wider fellowship of life (Bellah et al xv-xvi). By decontextualizing West African social dance practices and then recontextualizing them in an entirely different environment, Burden, Quinn and Corea symbolically link dance practices to constructed values that have more to do with American ideals than they do with the African communities from which they originate. By doing so, these women create new artistic practices that they feel benefit and address specific ailments they observe in their American students and themselves.

My fieldwork in African dance communities in Oregon, Vermont and New Hampshire demonstrates that most dancers describe their interface with various kinds of African dance classes as healing. The amount of accurate information students possess about dance practices in Africa vary, but as instructors and students have both noted, this is not always the goal. They do however; adopt certain narratives about African people's relationship to dance as inspiration which functions as the basis for developing their own paradigms for artistic expression. Their comments testify that to be meaningful; the interpretations of these narratives are necessarily fluid and dynamic. The type of authenticity these dancers experience is not a fixed property of an object or a situation but rather a negotiated attribute of their own cultural engagement (Xie 6). For these dancers, authentic experience with African dance narratives and practices means a community interaction through embodied movement, which in turn nurtures a sense of connection, shared fate, mutual responsibility, friendship and trust (Bellah et al xxxvi). Despite the real *and* imagined nature of these narratives about Africa, they reveal social insights about Americans' desires for alternative stories about their bodies in relation to movement, rhythm and others.

> It's about the underlying thread of the collective message that needs to be brought here. The art form is what it's about. Being in a circle with a group of people dancing is a *desperate need* of people in this culture. Forget about romanticizing and colonialist, culturally appropriating ladeee la…can we get down to the fact that people need to dance in a circle together in rhythm? I mean, I could talk about this stuff all day (Burden).

Burden asserts that Americans seek out African dance classes in order to find an antidote to the alienation they feel from their own bodies and other people. In her estimation, it is not African culture that draws American women to African dance, but a deep-seated human need to dance communally in rhythm. Indeed, according Ms. Burden's logic,

many different kinds of dance could fulfill this perceived void. I suggest that the feelings of alienation from one's body combined with a sense that one's own culture lacks potential to heal the latter that Ms. Burden describes as an "American" ailment is actually a Euro-American ailment. Enlightenment narratives that divorce white people from their bodies remain prevalent—in *White*, his study of white racial identity, Richard Dyer explains that some white Americans feel compelled to try out others' cultural traditions because they report feeling uptight and out of touch with their bodies (10). Most of the women I interviewed did not seek out African dance classes because they thought it would fill this absence in their lives, but rather described locating it there as a happy accident. Many agreed that they could achieve the same end through various means, however in their lives; they chose to continue practicing the first thing that had really worked for them personally. Still, it is striking that all have found significant meaning and fulfillment based on generalized, sanitized narratives about foreign dance practices.

Instructors and Community

It is clear that many American students reap significant feelings of wellbeing and community spirit through their participation in African dance classes and performance troupes in the United States. However, West African dance instructors' relationship to a sense of community through dance classes is more complicated.

Many West African people who teach dance in the United States do not experience the same strong sense of community through dance classes that they provide for their students. Most are far away from their families, and many do not speak English or Spanish fluently. Many are in contact with friends and former

colleagues who are also teaching in the U.S. and make an effort to see each other. These relationships are often sustained through frequent phone conversations, as performers are spread out all over the country, depending on where they find work, or could obtain sponsorship. Instructors do meet other people from West Africa by working at festivals, conferences and performances; however although they share some cultural connections, they are often from different countries, ethnic groups, caste groups, etc. While this certainly does not rule out friendship and bonding, they do not have the ease of shared cultural background that their American students enjoy. Furthermore, for dance instructors, dancing is often associated with professional work and competition instead of relaxation and avocation. Portland dancer Jessica Sprick notes that when Ghanaians she knows get together to dance, "it's groups coming together and learning together and everybody's learning but it's for this purpose to have a product to go and perform," which changes the tenure of the environment considerably (Sprick). Although instructors may collaborate, it is often a working relationship as they are often competing for the same business.[i]

Habib Idrissu and Jessica Sprick explain how competition for business has stymied positive community building in the Ghanaian immigrant community in Portland, Oregon. Many performers who live in Portland and came to the U.S. with the hopes of teaching were sponsored by one Ghanaian musician who performs locally. Once they got here, the sponsoring musician expected performers to contribute to his performances in exchange for his sponsorship, hampering their ability to establish their own classes. The delay in their ability to

begin their own careers was frustrating, and many became envious of the few people who were teaching successful classes. Idrissu explains that teachers who did have successful classes were competing with each other and with American instructors, and even those who were not teaching began to spread gossip about the incompetency of other instructors. Idrissu explains,

> I think it has to do with that they're competing with this sort of "I know more than anybody else" attitude because they're not even teaching- I have realized that some people's classes have not been successful because other people were tearing them down. If someone is not a good teacher then they go make it so other people can't succeed either (Idrissu).

Idrissu cites a lack of leadership on the part of the sponsoring musician, who he believes cultivated the dysfunction in the community by participating and encouraging backbiting, gossip and competition (if newly arrived Ghanaians were not enjoying success teaching, they might have to return to work for less for him). After Idrissu, a U.S.-educated scholar and trained dancer and drummer moved into the community,

> there were a lot of people who came to Habib who said that they'd been searching for somebody who can unite people because right now nobody's willing to let anyone else take that position because everybody's competing. It's going to be interesting to see how that plays out--whether somebody can step into that role of facilitating and bringing people together without saying "I am the leader"-- which is a tough position to go into (Sprick).

Idrissu and his wife, Sprick, had been working on a fundraising project to buy small stovepipe ovens for families and schools in the northeastern region of Ghana from which Idrissu hails, aiming to slow the increasing pace of deforestation in the area and mitigate health concerns connected to open wood-burning stoves with poor ventilation. By partnering with Dance Africa and the University of Oregon Dance department, Idrissu and Sprick were able to secure free use of the university's dance concert theater and production assistance from the department and company. They invited members of the

Portland Ghanaian dance community, as well as many other professional colleagues from around the country to participate in the benefit concert. Eighteen dancers and drummers ultimately joined the production.

The Ghanaian performers enjoyed the opportunity to pool their resources for a common cause. In their downtime, they spent time talking, playing music, getting to know each other. The concert was a rare opportunity for performers to combine more challenging elements of professional rehearsal schedules with a collaborative, supportive, non-competitive environment. It provided an opportunity for dancers to show each other different styles of dances they had learned through professional experience without worrying about losing face or cultivating the professional persona of a complete expert. Idrissu and Sprick reflect, "They've all been very happy trying to see certain different ideas together. They're all calling asking when the next program is because I think they want it" (Idrissu and Sprick).

The Ghanaian dancers' experiences illustrate how pleasurable it is for performers to experience a sense of community through dance, yet also demonstrates that the ability to maintain such a community requires access to resources, economic stability, leadership and time to organize, luxuries that individual performers do not always have. Being a Dagbamba man, a U.S.-educated scholar who does not have to rely on dance instruction for his livelihood, and a traditionally trained dancer and drummer who learned his performance skills through his family, Idrissu occupies a distinct position from which to navigate multiple social and professional milieus to gain access and organize community-building events. The stovepipe benefit concert provided a venue for transnational performers who spend much of their time focused on how to raise money to support

themselves and send home to their families to experience a sense of community through dance, yet also highlighted how infrequent such occurrences are for many.

In this sense, American students' ameliorated sense of community, in some situations, depends on their instructor's separation from his/her own home, family and community. Caro Diallo has been able to finance the construction of a house in Ziguinchor for his mother, but of her six children, only one of them resides in Senegal. The rest all work in Europe, the United States and Canada to secure living wages that are not available to them at home, in part due to the effects of World Bank and IMF policy on the local and national economy.

Yet, as Ramón Grosfuguel notes, just because one is socially located in an oppressed position relative to power relations, this does not dictate one's epistemological stance. Economic and political power relations influence the lives of both students and instructors, however, as we have observed, many West African instructors use their position as cultural authorities to expand professional options while maintaining a sense of respect and value for their own beliefs and sets of knowledge. As African dance instruction continues to grow in popularity and visibility, perhaps divergent styles of pedagogy will contribute to a bit more healthy skepticism toward the notion that equates Western knowledge with universal consciousness, and in doing so, spark alternative ways to think about community.

Dance Africa member Steihl reflects,

> It's a good challenge for us to learn from someone from another culture because we're definitely not in control as much as we are when we're learning from people who are like us. That can apply to a lot of things I guess. They're going to give it to us how they want to give it to us. And we just have to be okay with that (Stiehl).

Notes

[i] Caro Diallo also alludes to this undercurrent of competition. He notes that this sometimes explains why some instructors do not teach too much of any one dance, because then devoted students might become good enough to try and teach themselves, which would add more competition for the instructors.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION: SHIFTING TIDES

The previous chapters of this project have applied a performance studies and anti-colonial approach to the study of African dance communities in the United States. Using ethnographic data, anthropological, dance and folklore theory, I investigated the ways in which narrative, discourse, social history, political economy, audience, and performance context all influence African dance instruction and student reception and contribute to diverse, multidimensional identities within dance communities. By making explicit the intertwining web of individual and community interests that inform instructors' narratives and students' reception of the latter, I hope to illuminate the complex power and social relations that inform this transnational arts practice. I do not wish to offer conclusions, but rather will review the material in relation to the original research questions in order to provide a starting point for further dialogue.

African dance represented by African and American instructors in the United States in various ways. Most African dance classes taught by Africans are taught by West African men who have previously performed in national Ballets or private dance companies. Many are griots, but some are not. They present African dance as an egalitarian, inclusive, community-minded practice. They teach mostly choreographed dances that were previously performed professionally as what they term traditional village dances, and frame the narrative that describes these dances in simplified, general language based on perceived audience interest levels, language barriers, and griot cultural practices. African dance classes taught by Americans are taught by women (and a few men) who often have an interest in providing more specific, detailed information to their

students while respecting the narratives their teachers conveyed to them, and still tailoring the narrative to fit the specific audience and context.

African and American instructors' narratives about African dance do influence the ways in which students conceive of Africa as a place and its relationship to dance. However, students' conceptions are also informed by their previous experiences and interactions. Furthermore, because each student's relationship with each instructor is so different, their relationship with mainstream discourse is predictably complicated. Many of the dancers with whom I spoke were well aware of the discourse surrounding African dance, and engaged with it critically, pointing out discursive elements they thought became codified because they were true and other elements they felt were the result of racist assumptions and colonial rhetoric. In general, most students were quick to dismiss elements that they perceived as negative, but supported most notions of African dance being uplifting, joyful, community-minded etc., because their own experiences confirmed these ideas. Moreover, I found that students were not overwhelmingly interested in locating any sort of African authenticity. Most were far more focused on their own relationship to the embodied joy and sense of community they gained through the practice, and were enlivened by applications of dance practices that they felt further cultivated community and a sense of well-being. Most seem comfortable adopting general, utopian narratives about Africans' relationship to movement and dance in order to use the ideas such narratives contain as a starting point for their own syncretic community dance practices.

Edward Schiefflin argues that for a performance to be successful in creating a shared social reality, the audience and the performer must have shared assumptions about

the import of the performance and the standards that govern performance so that the two roles mutually construct their social reality (717). Based on this definition, I suggest that African dance communities, in the form of classes, performance troupes and performances themselves, do *not* share a single social reality. Instructors, students, audience members both as collective groups and as individual people possess many different assumptions about in class and staged performances, based on their personal opinions, previous exposure and experience, and their cultural values. Some of these assumptions overlap, but many do not. Thus the classroom and stage environments both function as palimpsests; they contain layers of multiple social realities which merge together at points, and catch and tear at others. Piled on top of one another, the layers flatten and smooth like tidal water between waves, yet if one wades in, the tug of undercurrents, pushing against each other one moment, merging the next, is unmistakable. The social realities that populate African dance communities in the United States are multiple and contradictory, nourishing and unsettled.

As I began to formulate this thesis, it quickly became clear to me that I would be unable to pursue all of the important issues my informants raised. I decided to expand on the topics that were most germane to my initial research questions; however the other issues my informants detailed provide fertile potential for further research and discussion.

My research focused on specific, primarily Euro-American student populations for practical reasons (access to communities, developed rapport). However more ethnically diverse student populations express different motivations and in class experiences that deserve further investigation. Some African American students view African dance study as a way to connect to, participate in and/or reclaim their

cultural/ethnic roots and enjoying the dance practice. Others reject it because of associations between African movement and primitivism. The history of Euro-American plunder of African and African American artistic practices in the U.S. influences the ways in which some African American dancers view Euro-Americans' participation in the activity. How does this history influence community dancers' perspectives and race relations in classes and performance groups? Furthermore, the interactions between African American dancers and African citizens when African Americans visit West Africa highlight conflicting ways in which different populations conceive of African identity and cultural legacy. How does one's body, perspective, ethnic identity and personal history influence one's ideas of ownership/appropriate practice with regards to African dance? How can Euro-American people sensitively teach about and demonstrate African dance in areas where the population is largely Euro-American? What about in areas in which African Americans live? All of these questions demand further attention and ethnographic inquiry.

I note many times that most West African instructors in this country are male. The paucity of female West African dance instructors in the United States, despite the relative abundance of West African women who used to perform who live here, deserves further attention. Most West African women in the United States marry West African men. Many West African informants suggested that because of the oversimplified ways in which many Americans view Africans dancing (hyperactive and hypersexualized), West African husbands did not want their wives performing, their bodies effectively on display and exposed to constant judgment. The lack of female West African instructors speaks to a complex web of cultural conservatism in immigrant culture, American ignorance about

African dance practices, cross-cultural gender dynamics and obligations, marriage patterns among West African immigrants, and staged performance arts. In the future, I would like to continue ethnographic fieldwork that focuses on these women and their experiences in this country. On a related note, many informants spoke about the transcultural gender relations inside and outside of the classroom. Many people discussed gender relations in class between female students and male instructors and drummers, and the specific cultural negotiations related to gender expectations and roles that occurred when West African male instructors married American women.

Furthermore, why is it that American women so vehemently express a vacuum of embodied arts and community and remedy it through African dance practices, but there is no evidence of American men feeling this way? How *do* American men feel about this topic? How do social and cultural standards regarding typical male identity, behavior and relationship to different kinds of physical expression intersect with their opinions about community, dance, *and* specifically, American communities and African dance practices?

There has been very little scholarship on current West African gender dynamics *in* West Africa and its relationship to dancing. The influence of fundamentalist strains of Islam *and* European social standards both have been integrated into indigenous gender systems regarding public comportment (particularly concerning social dance) based on gender and caste. More inquiry and dialogue on this topic would enrich broader dialogue about West African dance practice, gender and caste influence and transnational pedagogy.

Despite Senegal's and Guinea's establishment of national dance companies soon after independence, many other West African countries also have national dance

companies and many others boast an abundance of privately operated companies whose primary mission is the presentation of traditional dance forms from indigenous ethnic groups. Why then, are almost all the instructors in the U.S. from certain countries, while others are hardly represented at all? Does this pattern speak to the international prestige of the Guinean and Senegalese national companies, the economic/political situation in each country, the relative ease/difficulty with which certain nationalities procure visas to the U.S.? All of these questions deserve more attention and discussion.

There are many conversations among African dance instructors who feel that the Touré era commitment to "purely African" arts has hampered the ability of contemporary African dance artists who perform anything other than the public village dances popularized by independence-era Ballets and continuously pedagogically identified as African dance to garner any international support or attention. Because their work draws on myriad contemporary influences, it is often discounted as relying on European styles and abandoning African pride. This phenomenon is highly problematic and deserves more attention.

Moreover, my ethnographic work calcified my belief that in order for scholars to responsibly pursue these and other facets of current African dance practice, be it classified as contemporary or traditional, must be situated in its specific social context. My hope is that examining the complex interests that influence instructor and student narratives and behavior will erode simplistic understandings of Africa as a place outside of history and contribute to the formation of a more nuanced, productive negotiation of the politics of identity, artistic expression, and race.

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