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Los Angeles

Performing Africa:
Memory, Tradition, and Resistance
in the Leimert Park Drum Circle

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy
in Culture and Performance

by

Giavanni ReShae Washington

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

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Doctor of Philosophy in Culture and Performance
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Professor Allen F. Roberts, Chair

This dissertation examines contemporary communal responses to the cultural trauma of slavery, specifically, how the participants in the Leimert Park Drum Circle in South Central Los Angeles perform memories and traditions to construct and re-locate an imaginary known as “Africa.” Leimert Park Drum Circle participants, or more aptly, “cultural actors,” have assembled in a distinctly African-centered gathering nearly every Sunday for the last sixteen years. Situated in Los Angeles’ larger West African drum and dance community, the Leimert Park Drum Circle acts as parchment on which primarily African American participants deploy their bodies as tools to inscribe their “African memories” and “African traditions.”

As a weekly occurrence, the events of the Leimert Park Drum Circle create an urban palimpsest – characterized by repeated inscription and erasure, trace production, and uchronia (no time) – through which cultural actors ideologically remap the imaginaries of Africa, race,
and time. Constructed through the cultural tracing of repeated inscriptions and erasures, “Africa” is the accumulation of memory and tradition – conflated, invented, or re-worked. Ultimately, “Africa” is a phenomenological location situated between a shared ambiguous history and the memories generated from that history.

The findings of the autoethnographically-based research demonstrate that we confront the trauma of slavery in addition to the politics of memorialization and historical representation through our weekly participation in the Leimert Park Drum Circle. Since “memories” and “traditions” can be performed anywhere and the presence of an urban palimpsest permits past, present, and future to exist at once, the imagined ideal of “Africa” is performed as a “no place, in no time,” where we resist and defy hegemonic practices aimed at erasing and invisibilizing us, our experiences, and our histories.
The dissertation of Giavanni ReShaé Washington is approved.

Donald J. Cosentino

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2013
DEDICATION

Without the Drum of those who came before me, I would not exist.

Therefore,

I lay this manuscript at the feet of my ancestors

whose migrations

– forced and otherwise –

positioned me to reimagine our past, present, and futures;

Especially my great-grandmother, Maxine “Mo’Dear” Hutchinson,

who implored them


to

“let that baby read.”
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VITA

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2001:  CULTURAL AMBASSADORIAL FELLOWSHIP/Rotary International – Salvador, Brazil
INTRODUCTION
PERFORMING “AFRICA”

I know my feet, all about them. Its like my feet are the drums and my shoes are the sticks...My left heel is...my bass drum. My right heel is like the floor tom-tom. I can get a snare out of my right shoe, a whip sound, not putting it down on the floor hard, but kind of whipping the floor with it. I get the sounds of a top tom-tom from the balls of my feet...[I get the hi-hat sound] with a slight toe lift, either foot. And if I want cymbals, crash crash, that’s landing flat, both feet, full strength on the floor.

Savion Glover (2000: 6)

Contrary to the banal assertion that our voices were silenced when the drum was taken from us, the drum has never ceased to be integral to those from whom it was ostensibly prohibited. Enslaved Africans and their descendants preserved “memory” and “tradition” through innovative performance. Exemplified by the African rhythm and movement repertoire that eventually developed into tap dancing, West African dance drumming manifested in various forms once in America.

Tap prodigy Savion Glover evocatively describes the human body as it transforms into what theorist Edward Casey calls a “place of meeting and transfer” (Casey 1987: 147), where memories and traditions of this particular cultural knowledge are “created, perpetuated, and sustained” (Roberts et al. 1996: 86). In this process, the drum’s attendant significations, memories, and traditions – embodied retention, modes of communication and transmission, a connection to Africa, the source of rhythms, cultural history – become inscribed in the body.

This dissertation investigates a group of African American cultural actors as they deploy their bodies as repositories, or places “of meeting and transfer,” in and through which their “African” memories and “African” traditions are performed, preserved, and perpetuated. Against the backdrop of a weekly African inspired cultural expression, I will consider that the body as drum transforms into a writing implement, filled with the inscribing potential of
phenomenological ink. I hypothesize that these cultural actors utilize corporeal technologies to become cartographers who perform maps of the following imaginaries: Africa, race, and time. I will theorize the Leimert Park Drum Circle in South Los Angeles, my primary field site, as the parchment on which Drum Circle participants ideologically remap their lived understanding, and, ultimately, re-locate “Africa” to Leimert Park.

This dissertation also examines how the cultural actors in Leimert Park resist and defy hegemonic practices aimed at erasing and invisibilizing them. They confront the politics of memorialization and historical representation – the manner in which slavery is remembered and not remembered in the national imaginary, for example – through their weekly participation in the drum circle. In her 1993 book, Regarding the Pain of Others, Susan Sontag indicts the nation-state and its memorialization practices. She refers to the conspicuous absence of a national “Museum of the History of Slavery,” calling instead for one that would tell “the whole story, starting with the slave trade in Africa itself, not just selected parts” in the United States (Sontag 2003: 86). Concluding that the presence of such a museum would require “an acknowledgement that the great crime was here,” she ironically cautions that this type of memory-work would not only “risk arousing an embittered domestic population against authority” (87), it would destroy the notion to which America clings. Such a museum would destroy America’s image of itself as “a unique nation, one without any certifiably wicked leaders throughout its entire history” (ibid). The nation-state’s need to perceive itself as immaculate requires the marginalization of, or a coerced forgetting among its constituency.

Even as the United States of America celebrates the sesquicentennial and fiftieth anniversaries of the Emancipation Proclamation and the Civil Rights March on Washington, respectively, African Americans still contend with the dehumanizing legacies of slavery and the
ruptures of the Middle Passage. Performance scholar Saidiya Hartman contends that slavery can be an experience that is “fixed or frozen in time, refus[ing] to be represented as past, but is perpetually re-experienced in a painful, dissociated, traumatic present” among present-day African Americans.¹ I hypothesize that the Leimert Park cultural actors, in a subtle alternative to the violence that Sontag cautions against, confront the trauma of slavery – a constellation of physical, psychological and social consequences – by constructing “Africa” to repair the initial source of the trauma.

I will investigate these research hypotheses through prolonged ethnographic engagement with and in the Leimert Park Drum Circle. Utilizing a theoretical framework I call the Urban Palimpsest, which privileges location over temporality, I will apply the characteristics of palimpsest – repeated inscription and erasure, trace, and uchronia – to examine how cultural actors perform memories and traditions to write “Africa.” My exploration will start with the query: What is “Africa?”

**Significance**

The theory of urban palimpsest offers a counterpoint to scholars investigating memory and tradition. The uchronia, or “no time,” generated by the urban palimpsest efficiently circumvents the protracted debate among scholars regarding the relationship between perceptions of history and constructions of memory. The following temporally based queries are muted due to the uchronic condition found in the urban palimpsest: Does memory represent “an active present of

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¹ The Holocaust is perhaps the most prevalent example in the “perpetual re-experience” of a traumatic past literature. Often, the Holocaust is claimed as the influential event in the development of trauma theory. Trauma scholar Ruth Leys’ critique of “the powerful trend in the humanities,” largely propelled by academic interest in the Holocaust, “to recognize in the experience of trauma…a fundamental crisis for historical representation” (Leys 2000: 16), highlights the conspicuous absence in the literature pertaining to the sequelae of the trauma of the Middle Passage and Slavery. This lacuna is not only adumbrated by the ‘privileging’ of the Holocaust, but also suggests that due to the discourse around it the Black Body is not valorized in academic discourse.
the whole past” (Bourdieu 1977: 56)? Is memory informed by an “acceleration of history” (Nora 1989: 12) resulting in a fragmented perception of the past? Is history perceived as continuous, enabling cultural actors to comprehend “memory as moving backwards and forwards” (Shaw 2002: 15)? Or is memory solely shaped by present concerns and thus moves only forward” (Halbwachs and Coser 1992: 25-28)? Since the urban palimpsest negates temporality, the notion of historical continuity becomes a non-issue.

Previous conceptions of memory either did not consider bodily practices or deemed them as insignificant. A significant lacuna Halbwachs left in his path-breaking text, *On Collective Memory*, was not considering “that images of the past and recollected knowledge of the past are conveyed and sustained by (more or less) ritual performances” (Connerton 1989: 38). And though Paul Connerton innovatively extended the work of Halbwach’s and others, he argued that behaviors based in “the capacity to reproduce a certain performance” (Connerton 1989: 13) are unmediated, primordial repetitions, which effectively separate the act from the meaning, history from memory, and agency from the cultural actor.²

This dissertation also contributes to the growing force within academia that labors to de-center the privilege of writing. Focusing instead on corporeal modes of inscription and cultural information transfer, I will present an alternative way by which memories and traditions cohere through various modes of performance. My theory of the urban palimpsest, through which cultural actors create an always already Africa, joins the ranks of scholars such as Rosalind Shaw and Diana Taylor who strive to validate embodied knowledge as an alternative way of knowing. Anthropologist Rosalind Shaw offers a “different way of remembering,” one that is “internal [and] literally incorporated into people and their social and cultural practices” (Shaw 2002: 5).

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² Connerton’s work diverges from other work on collective memory “over the question as to where the phenomenon of social memory is most crucially operative” (Connerton 1989: 1). These scholars include E. Shils, Z. Bauman, E. Hobsbawn, P. Nora, R. Boyers, B.A. Smith, P. Wright, D. Lowenthal and F. Haug.
Despite the absence in the historical archives and the discursive reserve of her study population, she uncovers memories of slavery conserved through alternative modes of construction and transmission. Though Shaw’s investigation is heavily reliant on Bourdieu’s *habitus*, and thus historical continuity, her exploration of embodied practices foregrounds the inadequacies born of strict attention to the historical archive.

Taylor’s *repertoire* has been discredited by others as a collection of “so-called ephemeral” actions generally constituted by “performances, behaviors and expressions” (Taylor 2003: 23). Taylor argues that these “ephemeral” actions “allow scholars to trace traditions and influences, [and] allows for an alternative perspective on historical processes” (20) because they permit individuals to assert agency. I extend Taylor’s argument emphasizing that the uchronic condition of the urban palimpsest captures such ephemera, putting each performance in conversation with those before and after it – the parts and sum of which are inscribed according to the agency of the cultural actor.

**Methodology: Performed Research/Researched Performance**

This project is an ethnographically based exploration of the Leimert Park Drum Circle and its participants. In addition to formal and informal interviews, I utilized a type of participant observation I call performed research/researched performance. In significant ways, this dissertation is performed – by drum circle participants, including myself – even as experience is translated into written description and analysis. In an interview with Don Cosentino, Black Atlanticist Robert Farris Thompson implores those doing fieldwork to be active, to be unafraid to commit mistakes, and to go with the flow (Thompson 2011: 67). The performed research/researched performance in which I engaged ultimately took over my life.
Before I describe how I will elucidate the place, the phenomena and the problems under investigation, I must highlight that I am unusually situated with respect to the cultural actors at this site. I did not insinuate myself into the Drum Circle in order to perform this research. I started playing dununs during the summer of 2004. I've been a musician-participant in the Leimert Park Drum Circle since 2006. I have been deeply involved with the West African dance drumming community in Los Angeles and beyond for nearly twenty years. I have performed with numerous West and Central African dance drumming ensembles in Tallahassee, Miami, and Los Angeles. I have attended several destination dance drumming camps; performed as a professional musician with Drum Café, a corporate team building drumming experience; and given instruction in both dance and drum.

Due to my long involvement in the dance drumming community of Los Angeles, my analysis possesses an element of reflexivity. My queries simultaneously address the “subject” and the “researcher.” Thus, the responses to the research must be analyzed as both subject and researcher. There is a further complicating aspect to this research. As one of the stronger bottom percussionists who frequent the circle, the ripples of my presence and absence are immediately noticeable. It is nearly impossible for me to observe the circle from some inconspicuous position. Nevertheless, the dialogical dimension of this research (Burawoy 1998: 16):

a. allowed me to intervene in the life of the participant,
b. facilitated analysis of interaction within social situations, and helped me

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3 Dunun, or djundjun, are the bass drums of the djembe orchestra from the Malinke of West Africa. A set of dunun comprises three barrel-shaped, double-sided drums, each of which is headed with cow skin. From smallest (high pitch) to largest (lowest pitch), they are the kenkeni, songban (also sangban or sangbani), and the dundunba.

4 The bass is responsible for ‘holding down’ the rhythm. As such I am not allowed the latitude that is afforded to the players of djembe or other instruments. I cannot stop, I am expected to play strong for the entirety of a rhythm – sometimes lasting 45 minutes – and I am very rarely given the opportunity to play a solo. I also wouldn’t have it any other way.
c. uncover local processes in a relation of mutual determination with external forces, which ultimately permitted me to manage the hyper reflexivity with which I ineluctably pursued this investigation.

I started my weekly sojourn to the Drum Circle in 2006. During my first quarter at UCLA during the 2006 summer session, my research interests lay at the intersection of the arts and global health. The Drum Circle was something I participated in because of my connection to the place and love of the drum. It was not until the near the end of my second year in this program that the Leimert Park Drum Circle revealed itself to me as a viable candidate for scholastic investigation.

Some quick library research uncovered very little in the way of scholarly treatment of Leimert Park, and nothing on or about the Drum Circle. By the time I took my exams and submitted my prospectus in September 2008, the Leimert Park Drum Circle had cemented itself as the primary field site for my dissertation research. Though I had been playing in the Drum Circle for years at this point, I began taking notes in May 2008. I attended, participated and collected data almost every week until August 2010.5

Notable absences included a five-week research trip to Guinea from December 2008 to January 2009 and a three-week honeymoon in July 2009. After the birth of my child, Sterling, in August of 2010, I only played in the Drum Circle a few times until May 2012. I visited the Sunday Circle with my son, but uncertainty about how to play while wearing a newborn, fear of damaging his ears, and birth-related complications generally prevented me from exerting the effort to load up my car with heavy drums, carry them from the parking lot to Leimert Park Plaza

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5 The Drum Circle does not convene during inclement weather. In Los Angeles this means any sign of rain, as water destroys the tension in the drumheads.
and set them up in front of the fountain. In May of 2012, Sterling and I played in the Drum Circle together for the first time. We now attend as many Sunday sessions as possible.

Research Sites

Although this project is primarily focused on the Leimert Park Drum Circle, it is also informed by other phenomena by virtue of a) my involvement with them, and b) their connection to the Leimert Park Drum Circle. First, my long history with the West African dance community extends beyond Los Angeles. Similarly, my drumming experience is not limited to the Drum Circle. While I have performed with a number of drum and dance ensembles since I started playing, I have the longest standing membership in the all-female drum collective Sisters Healing Inspiring Nurturing and Empowering (S.H.I.N.E.) Muwasi. I have taken West African drum and dance classes in greater Los Angeles, Northern California, several other states, and in West Africa, and I also have substantial experience exploring these practices outside of the Drum Circle, but still within the confines of Leimert Park. Members of S.H.I.N.E. and the dance drumming community of greater Los Angeles often participate in the Sunday Drum Circle.

My research is also significantly informed by experiences in domestic and international dance drumming camps. In 2005, I attended Camp Tambacounda, which was held in a Northern California National Park. Master percussionist Abdoulaye Diakiate from Tambacounda, Senegal endorsed the ten-day camp, which was organized by his students. Later that same year, I attended another ten-day camp, Torodo Camp, in one of Japan’s national forests. In 2006, I spent a total of seven weeks in Senegal, with my time divided between rural Toubab Dialaw and urban Dakar. Toubab Dialaw is home to Germaine Acogny’s L’Ecole des Sables. In 2006, I
also spent a week at a dance and drum camp in Ouagadougou hosted by Burkina Faso’s master drummer, Amadou Kienou. Finally, I attended Alseny Soumah’s dance and drum camp for 5 weeks from December 2008 to January 2009. This trip was particularly memorable as a military *coup d’etat* followed the death of the Guinean President Lasana Conté. Our experience was somewhat curtailed due to an enforced curfew and a moratorium on dance drumming for nearly a week.

**Terminology**

I employ the term “dance drumming” instead of drum and dance to acknowledge the inextricable link between the drum and the dance in many expressive cultures from Africa, especially that of the Mandingue. The term first appeared in the literature in the 1968 article, “A Possible Notation for African Dance Drumming,” by Ugandan folklorist Moses Serwadda and ethnomusicologist Hewitt Pantaleoni to elucidate the indissoluble relationship between the drum and the dance (Serwadda and Pantaleoni 1968). I came across the term while reading C.K. Ladzepko’s *Foundation Course in African Dance Drumming.*\(^6\) As the director of the African Music Program at University of California, Berkeley, Ladzepko offers a comprehensive study of the Anlo-Ewe musical customs prepared for the non-African. He uses the term “dance-drumming” to underscore the unbreakable relationship between dance and drum in his cultural context.

Researcher and American-born elder in the African dance drumming tradition Doris Green attests “there is an inseparable relationship between the dance and the music.”\(^7\) The music to these dances is rooted in drum languages, which are replicas of the spoken languages of the

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\(^7\) For simplicity and with apologies to my Mexican and Canadian neighbors, when I use the term “American” in this dissertation, I am referring to the United States of America.
people” (Green 2011: 24). Though I will discuss dancing and drumming in separate chapters, you will see that it is nearly impossible to isolate one from the other.

Style and Chapter Descriptions

Each of the chapters in this dissertation contains (sometimes multiple) ethnographic descriptions culled from my field notes. I use the passages not only to elucidate the major themes under investigation, but also to deepen the reader’s understanding of the process and structure of Leimert Park, the Drum Circle, and West African dance drumming communities both nationally and internationally. What follows is an overview of the four chapters.

My ethnographically-based investigation of memory and tradition in a “West African” dance drumming community begins in Chapter 1: “Preparing the Tools of Inscription.” A brief synopsis of the privilege of writing over other ways of knowing demonstrates the validity of performance and other corporeal technologies as conduits for cultural information transfer. I then delineate my theory of urban palimpsest, setting up the framework for the rest of the dissertation. I extrapolate from the urban palimpsest and examine “Africa” as palimpsest in order to understand how “Africa” had been conceptualized since the beginning of the colonialist project until now.

Chapter 2, “Inscribing the Site,” begins with a detailed description of the field site, contextualizing it within the American drum circle movement. I then pan out to survey the Black presence in Los Angeles beginning with its Afro-Mexican roots in 1781. I report the city’s development over the last two centuries, giving an account of the growth and then decline of Los Angeles’s Black population. Parallel to this discussion is a commentary on the
demographic and other changes that eventually led to Leimert Park being dubbed the “Black Cultural Mecca” of Los Angeles. Once I establish Leimert Park as a cultural center, I elaborate the Village as an episteme, while simultaneously describing the area’s brick and mortar sites of commerce and performance. To conclude, I offer America’s first African centered drum circle, Congo Square as a point of comparison for my investigation of memory and tradition practices in the Leimert Park Drum Circle.

The two subsequent chapters describe how memory and tradition cohere in this community. Chapter 3, “Dancing Uchronia,” develops four history vectors: Retention, Arrival of the Ballets, Technology, and Invention. The information embedded in these history vectors shapes the memory of West African dance drumming as understood and performed by Leimert Park cultural actors. The “no time” generated in the urban palimpsest allows the cultural actors to simultaneously perform each vector.

Chapter 4, “Truth in Repetition,” expounds on the technologies of creation introduced in the “Dancing Uchronia.” These technologies -- conflation, invention, and, reworking histories to betterfit well-established narratives -- support my argument that “traditions” become so in the Drum Circle through their repeated performance. This chapter is replete with ethnographic descriptions that serve as points of departure for discussion about authenticity, authority, and multiple strands of tradition.

Even amidst hegemonic violence and attacks designed to invisibilize, cultural actors in the Leimert Park Drum Circle continue to perform their memories and traditions. If, as Africanists Mary Nooter Roberts and Allen F. Roberts assert, memory is “always in the in-between, always becoming, always in the present, always enacted through the ‘now’ of bodily experiences,” then “Africa” is reconstituted in each performance of the Drum Circle (Roberts et
Leimert Park as urban palimpsest gives momentum to cultural actors who both construct and re-locate “Africa.”
CHAPTER 1
PREPARING THE TOOLS OF INSCRIPTION

Introduction

*Ethnographic Field Note*

**Date:** June 2008  
**Place:** Leimert Park Drum Circle  
Los Angeles, CA USA

“More Africa!

More Africa!

We Want More Africa!

We got plenty money,

but we ain’t got no

A...FREE...KAAA!!!”

The final syllables of the passionate chant seemed to decelerate as they floated across the drum circle. The words – gradually becoming replete with the weight of their power – reinforced the spinal undulations of dancing women, stealthily avoided unclad feet moving in response to percussive syncopations, and meandered through wisps of frankincense before penetrating the consciousness of the still-playing drum circle participants. As the rhythm ended, a bearded man hugging a djembe drum between his spindly legs chanted again. “More Africa! More Africa! We Want More Africa! We got plenty of money, but we ain’t got no AFRICA!” Still rocking to the beat that was now phantom, his salt and pepper dreadlocks swung vibrantly behind him, dancing in the echo of the previous beat, impatient for the call signaling a new rhythm. A palpable electricity surged through the eager crowd, resonating with that purposeful, mythic chant. A lead
drummer played a constellation of slaps, tones and bass notes in response. The subsequent rhythm was chosen. The rhythm developed as drummers fell in.

A distinctly Afrocentric “focused gathering,” the Leimert Park Drum Circle is a weekly ritual consolidated by Nigerian-born master drummer Najite Agindotan. Najite informed me that he established the drum circle to address several issues: the lack of a recognized venue within the African American community of Los Angeles for this kind of cultural expression; the lack of knowledge about the drum among local African Americans; and the yearning he saw in the community to make a tangible connection with Africa. Every Sunday for the last 15 years, at the paved portion of Leimert Park Plaza – flanked to the east and west by grassy expanses, to the north by Leimert Park Village, and to the immediate south by a large, white, round fountain – musicians, dancers, families, vendors, and the occasional non-African-American tourist descend on what is considered to be the contemporary center of cultural activity in Black Los Angeles. From about three in the afternoon until the sun drops beyond the urban Los Angeles horizon, the space becomes sacred, the event ritual, and the chants mythic.

Figure 1.1
Dancers in the Leimert Park Drum Circle
Photo by Giavanni Washington

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8 A focused gathering is comprised of “a set of persons engrossed in a common flow of activity and relating to each other in terms of that flow.” Further, the “recurring process,” takes place “in a space (floor) that is created by cultural preoccupation.” See Erving Goffman’s *Encounters: Two Studies in the Sociology of Interaction*, pp 9-10. 1961.

9 My relationship with Najite is complex: he my teacher of seven years, I sing in his Afro-Beat band, and I write grant proposals for his traditional music endeavors.

10 On August 28, 2008, I discovered that the drum circle was convened on a weekly basis before Najite’s arrival. I will expand on attendant issues of authority (i.e. African-ness) later in this dissertation.

11 I use the term ritual to denote an event recurring at regular intervals in the same place.
Performance Vs. Writing

Cultural critic Diana Taylor asks “whose memories, traditions and claims to history disappear if performance practices lack the staying power to transmit vital knowledge?” (2003: 5). The population frequenting Leimert Park has been uniquely involved in cultural production since the 1960s, and, as such, understands the value of “turning to forms of knowledge and practice not generally considered legitimate objects of historical inquiry or appropriate or adequate sources of history making…[in order to attend to] the cultivated silence, exclusions, relations of violence and dominations that engender the official accounts” (Hartman 1997: 11). Who determines what are “legitimate objects of historical inquiry” will be a question addressed in this dissertation.

Responding to queries such as Taylor’s with a resounding, “our memories, our traditions are lost,” participants in the Leimert Park Drum Circle consider performance a bona fide form of producing, preserving and perpetuating cultural knowledge.

Defined in Western discourse as “a phonetic system in which sounds of spoken language are translated into graphic signs in one-to-one correspondence” (Martin 1994: 15), writing has long been regarded a determinant of civilization. Theorists like Martin position ideographic and pictographic systems – such as nsidibi of the Eko of Nigeria or the raampa used by cattle farmers in Senegal – as the evolutionary antecedent of phonetic systems, thus relegating such forms of ideographic communication as “less advanced…according to a social-Darwinist model” (Roberts et al. 2007: 14). Ironically “all modern scripts, except Chinese and its offshoots, are descended from Egyptian,” which “drew from many highly codified [sub-saharan] African graphic systems” (Tuchscherer 2003: 37, 41). Despite this fact, “modes of inscribing meaning “born within cultures dominated by animism,” were considered by hegemonic thought to be, “ill equipped to discriminate between the reality of the signified and the signifier” (Martin 1994: 26).
The prominence of the fallacious myth of savage Africa in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries – based on a lack of writing, and thus civilization – instigated the primitivist paradigm under which myriad peoples suffered subjugation and enslavement.

In a somewhat esoteric paradox, these same primitivist assumptions notwithstanding, most ancient texts “originated in performance” (Havelock 1982: 5). In her book *The Archive and The Repertoire*, Taylor argues for “serious consideration” of the *repertoire* of “embodied knowledge” as a valid mode of cultural information transfer (2003: 82). The repertoire has often been discredited as a collection of “so-called ephemeral” actions generally constituted by “performances, behaviors, and expressions” (84). However, Taylor asserts and I agree that, “embodied practice, along with and bound up with other cultural practices, offers a way of knowing” (3). These non-textual modes of information transfer and ways of knowing are critical for populations with deep oral traditions and expressive performance modes.

**Leimert Park Drum Circle as Urban Palimpsest**

Part of the growing movement that challenges the privileging of writing over all other systems of inscription that “record, archive and transmit knowledge and information” (Roberts et al. 2007: 14), cultural actors in Leimert Park utilize corporeal modes of inscription in their weekly performance to make meaning. I argue that cultural actors in Leimert Park resist erasure and validate their memories and traditions by performing in and on what I call the *urban palimpsest*.  

Although there are several sites of resistive performance in Leimert Park Village,

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12 My usage is distinct from Andreas Huyssen’s conception of an urban palimpsest, which he employs to “discuss configurations of urban spaces and their unfolding in time without making architecture and the city simply into text” (2003: 81).
I focus on the Drum Circle and inscribing demonstrations therein since its weekly repetition makes it an excellent candidate for exploration.\(^{13}\)

A palimpsest, as defined by the fifth edition of the American Heritage dictionary, is a writing material or tablet or slate “that has been written upon several times, often with remnants of earlier, imperfectly erased writing still visible.” Though derived from writing, I am utilizing the palimpsest as a performative notion. Denoting a praxis and a mode of transmission, performativity in the urban palimpsest allows drum circle participants to arbitrate “the never simple relations between pastness, historicity, memory, and archiving with notions of presentness, futurity, movement, forgetting and destruction” (Allsop and Lepecki 2010:2). Performing the weekly ritual, cultural actors negotiate complex interactions emerging from the interplay between these layers.

Palimpsests were a byproduct of vellum recycling during “the seventh to fifteenth centuries…in the scriptoriums of the great monastic institutions” (Dillon 2005: 244). The vellum was effaced and reused. Over subsequent centuries, imperfectly erased writing would reappear in a “ghostly trace” as the remaining ink oxidized (ibid).\(^{14}\) Applied to a performative context, the Leimert Park Drum Circle as urban palimpsest embodies the cumulative inscription of its participants. While the traces that reappear on the tablet are physical vestiges of a physical act (writing), the traces left behind at the drum circle are the phenomenological remains of a physical act (traditions and memories). Multi-layered experiential texts are created by and negotiated through dancing, drumming and singing.

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\(^{13}\) See Chapter 2: Inscribing The Site; Sites of Resistive Performance

\(^{14}\) I am using Derrida’s “trace,” defined as the absence of presence, as his concept allows for the residue under investigation to be phenomenological (Derrida 1978). Art theorist Rosalind Krauss also popularized the term “trace,” but as a visual artist her trace is generally physical (photograph, footprint, fossil) and doesn’t account for experiential remnants (Krauss 1977).
Another characteristic of the Urban Palimpsest is the rather odd way in which time behaves. If traces are layered week after week, the phenomenological remains in each temporally distinct stratum are at interplay with each other. Scholar Sarah Dillon asserts that the “present” in a palimpsest “is only constituted in and by the ‘presence’ of texts from the ‘past’, as well as remaining open to further inscription by texts of the ‘future.’ The presence of texts from the past, present (and possibly the future) in the palimpsest does not elide temporality, but evidences the spectrality of any ‘present’ moment which always already contains within it ‘past’, ‘present’ and ‘future’ moments” (2005: 248). Traces bleed through to present (with the full potential of being re-inscribed in the future), rendering time arbitrary and inconsequential.

Extending this explanation to the performative context of the Leimert Park Drum Circle, then the present experience and performance of memory are full of past traces left behind by other cultural actors from previous drum circles. But trace production is not limited to the fifteen years of localized memory performance in the drum circle. The simultaneous presence of past, present and future in the urban palimpsest removes temporality as an organizing principle, privileging instead the location or place where memory and tradition are being performed. In his book, Remembering: A Phenomenological Study, philosopher Edward S. Casey suggests “place itself aids remembering,” and that “memory is naturally place-oriented or at least place-supported” (1981: 186-87). The Leimert Park Drum Circle as urban palimpsest, then, elicits and facilitates the inscription of memory. I will further elucidate the implications of “no time” in Chapter 3: Dancing Uchronia.

The Leimert Park Drum Circle as urban palimpsest is also a site where cultural actors subvert the historical construction of the Black Body, Blackness and Africa. Fraught with significations, the Black Body is itself a palimpsest “where an original inscription [was] erased
and another written over again and again. [But] the earlier inscriptions were never really fully erased so over time the result [is] a composite – a palimpsest representing the sum of all the erasures and overwritings” (Crang 1998: 22). Nineteenth century positivism held that African bodies “were supposed to be a kind of tabula rasa on which the “cultivated” whites, steeped in the tradition of writing and records, could imprint their own “knowledge” and cultural bias” (Tally 2008: 35). The mercantilist project that led to the Triangle Slave Trade inscribed – sometimes quite literally through branding or whipping – dominion, inferiority, and colonization on Africa and African bodies. Repeated throughout the centuries-long subjugation, slavery, and later, institutionalized racism in the United States, these markers have left the indelible prints from previous inscriptions about Blackness on the Black Body.

However, performance on the urban palimpsest foments a paradigm reversal through performance. The idea of Blackness “goes beyond its historically specific link to slavery and [transforms into]… an idea of resistance and decolonization” (Mohanram 1999: xiii). From subversive performance at the auction block to masked defiance while dancing for Massa to manipulative minstrelsy, Africans and their descendants have a long history of resistive performance. “Excavat[ing] at the margins of monumental history in order that the ruins of the dismembered past be retrieved” (Hartman 1997: 11), cultural actors perform on the urban palimpsest, capitalizing on the slippage of time inherent therein to mitigate, erase or write over prior dehumanizing inscriptions.

Replete with phenomenological ink, Leimert Park cultural actors are cartographers who perform meridians of memory and inscribe latitudes of traditions on the vellum of the Drum Circle. The recurrent performative cycles of inscription and erasure are a process I will refer to as “cultural tracing.” The practice of cultural tracing in this “focused gathering” inculcates
tradition and memory, which ultimately lead Leimert Park Drum Circle participants to produce
and claim agency by invoking various technologies of creation. These technologies – inventing
traditions, conflating information and reworking histories to better-fit well-established narratives
– are deployed in and through the urban palimpsest in efforts to construct and procure “More A-
Free-Kaaa!!”

Africa as Palimpsest
The dreadlocked drummer makes his desire known with his beseeching “More Africa” chant.
But what is “Africa?” And as a person of African heritage, why does he not possess it?
Assuming that he is not calling for the geographic landmass of the continent, what is it that he is
requesting? Positing “Africa” as a palimpsest allows for the examination of the trajectory of the
deployment of “Africa” and correlated significations. Over the last 600 years, myriad factions
with varied interests from European colonial powers to the cultural actors in the Leimert Park
Drum Circle have inscribed, effaced, and re-inscribed “Africa” to suit their needs.

Despite the efforts of modern scholars and political activists to restore Africa to her
heterogeneous majesty, the continent of over one billion people, more than fifty countries,
thousands of languages and untold cultural expressions is constantly reduced by the
homogenizing modifier “Africa.” Scholars in nearly every field are guilty of using “the term
Africa…as a placeholder for all things relating to that particular continent” (Eglash and
Odumosu 2005: 102). Ghanaian music scholar Kofi Agawu identifies this tendency to substitute
the whole for the part as “a metonymic fallacy”; that is, for example, “while Nigerian music is
African music, African music is more than Nigerian music” (Agawu 1995: 385).15 Widespread
and persistent in scholarship about Africa, this metonymic fallacy is partially responsible for the

conception that Africa is culturally homogenous. The same metonymic convention also prevails in vernacular discussions and references to things from and about Africa. The “More Africa” mantra demonstrates how lay individuals conflate all things African to a single modifier, ignoring the cultural, geographic, political, religious and linguistic evidence to the contrary.

Throughout colonial histories of the continent, “Africa” has been very specifically inscribed. Traces left behind by various inscribing factions intermingle subsequent inscription processes. Sometimes a contemporary faction is influenced by earlier inscriptions, while other times, a new faction will subvert and overturn earlier inscriptions. Preferring a clean slate, Leimert Park Drum Circle cultural actors wrestle with the epistemological ghosts of conceptual pasts in order to achieve more of whatever Africa is to them.

**Origin of the Metonymic Fallacy**

The metonymic reduction of Africa began long ago during what anthropologist Wyatt MacGaffey calls “the mythological phase [of the colonial project]…founded on a series of binary oppositions which contrasted the virtues of European civilization with their supposed absence from Africa” (MacGaffey 1981: 236). Those driving the colonialist project inscribed “Africa” as savage, dark, and uncivilized. Leaning on such descriptions as justification for civilizing processes, European powers treated Africa, its populations and resources as commodities, returning to it time and again as a supplier of near limitless stores of rubber, gold, oil, diamonds, and conscripted labor. Such a conception of “Africa” allowed for the “assign[ing of] things and beings both their natural slots and social mission” thus validating the “necessity for European economies and structures to expand” in to “savage” territories (Mudimbe 1988: 17). Such metonymical ideologies perpetuated the systems that disenfranchised, oppressed, and exterminated millions of Africans and their descendants.
Scholars from Africa Resist the Reduction of Africa

Given the dubious history of the myth of Africa, it is not surprising that many leading scholars from Africa consider the conception of ‘Africa’ to be a European invention (Hountondji 1983; Mudimbe 1988; Appiah 1992; Agawu 1995). In the latter part of the 20th century, these scholars rejected the traces resulting from previous European notions, expunging previous inscriptions of dominion and inferiority in order to re-inscribe heterogeneity and the privileging of emic determination.

Beninese philosopher and politician Paulin Hountondji is deeply critical of the widespread belief in the “thesis of a collective African philosophy” (Hountondji 1983: 62). He highlights the weakness of what he calls “unanimism,” describing such essentialist approaches as futile, tautological and ultimately devoid of meaning. In his important work The Invention of Africa: Gnosis, Philosophy, and the Order of Knowledge, philosopher V.Y. Mudimbe offers a “critical synthesis of the complex questions about knowledge and power in and out of Africa” (xi). Mudimbe is specifically concerned with the development of “Africa” as a discourse and the distorting epistemologies for both those who generate the discourse and those whom the discourse is ostensibly about. Mudimbe’s deep investigation into the genesis of Africa’s invention leaves no theoretical stone unturned as he apportions culpability to the colonial project, ultimately concluding “Africa” is a construction of European discourse.

Similarly, Ghanian-born cultural theorist Kwame Anthony Appiah designates essentializing views of Africa as “outgrowths of European racialism” (Appiah 1992: 62). Defined as “heritable characteristics, possessed by members of our species, which allow us to divide them into a small set of races, in such a way that all the members of these races share certain traits and tendencies with each other that they do not share with members of any other
race” (13), racialism is a system categorizing a species. Appiah offers a caveat, not unlike Stuart Hall’s observation of the near-imperative human need to classify, that when used as “a presupposition of other doctrines,” such a seemingly innocuous system is transformed into a paradigm of racism, which is the source of myriad injustices and moral transgressions.

*Myth of a Singular Africa among the African-Descended in America*

Appiah indicts two unlikely political movements as epitomizing Mudimbe’s concern about the effects on those about whom the racialist discourse is constructed: Pan-Africanism and Négritude. Nineteenth and twentieth century cultural activists, both in the United States and abroad, sought to inscribe freedom, self-determination, and agency on “Africa.” However, the palimpsestuousness of “Africa” obliged them to contend with the remnants of earlier European inscriptions.16 Though they were ostensibly inscribing agency on “Africa,” those at the helm of these movements found themselves in a precarious position atop a slippery slope since they, like those inscribing “Africa” before them, relied on racial solidarity as an organizing principle.

Widely regarded as one of the fathers of African nationalism, African American (Afro-American) Alexander Crummel, and others with similar political leanings, unfortunately “inherited a set of conceptual blinders that made them unable to see virtue in Africa, even though they need Africa, above all else, as a source of validation” (Appiah 1992: 338). Crummel conceived his connection to and right to speak for Africa on shared racial characteristics. The leadership of the Negritude movement similarly based their guiding philosophies on racial solidarity. As such, both campaigns fell into the same trap produced by European discourse: “a low opinion of Africa [that is] not easily distinguished from a low opinion of the Negro” (339).

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16 Poet and scholar, Michael Alexander coined the term “palimpsestuousness” to describe presence of prior texts in their subsequent adaptations (1997: 29). Scholar Sarah Dillon claims the neologistic adjective has “gained critical currency in recent years” (Dillon 2005: 244). I use it in a performative context to emphasize that cultural actors must always negotiate the inscriptions of previous parties.
Would be champions of the Negro cause unintentionally participated in perpetuating the racialist, essentializing discourse begun before the scramble for Africa.

One of Crummel’s contemporaries, W.E.B. Du Bois, was the first to use the term “Afrocentric” in the early 1960s. Using the neologism to describe his historical and educational perspectives, Du Bois proclaimed that Afrocentricity “seeks from a beginning of the history of the Negro in America and in Africa to interpret all history; from a beginning of social development among negro slaves and freedmen in America and Negro tribes and kingdoms in Africa, to interpret and understand the social development of all mankind in all ages” (Du Bois 1961). Molefi Asante indicts Du Bois’ conception of Afrocentricity as inchoate. Asserting that Du Bois was mentally coopted by European hegemony, Asante dismisses Du Bois’ claim to Afrocentricity stating that “he studied African people not from an African perspective but from a European one which employed Eurocentric methods to analyze and study black people” (Asante 2003: 23). Asante’s definition of Afrocentricity places “African people in the center of any analysis of African phenomena…and seeks to enshrine the idea that blackness itself is a trope of ethics” (2). Asante’s conception of Afrocentricity gained traction in the some areas of the academic arena in the 1980s.

Similarly, Black Studies professor Maulana Karenga formalized his Afrocentric philosophical teachings into a doctrine he dubbed Kawaida. Based on seven principles called the Nguzo Saba, Kawaida sets forth a value system by which the descendants of Africa in America should live. The founder of the holiday Kwanzaa, also based on the Nguzo Saba, places “African” people at the center of his philosophical thrusts and academic methodologies, per the Molefi definition (Karenga and Karenga 1998; Karenga 1997).
Though Manning Marable asserts “a practical connection between scholarship and struggle, between social analysis and social transformation” for Black scholars who “theorize from the Black experience” (Marable 2000: 18), contemporary American scholars of African descent like Asante and Molefi are often criticized as monolithicizing “Africa.” That is, they inscribe “Africa” with a static identity across time and space, generating a “continuum of shared interests, experiences, and challenges unifying African and Blacks in Diaspora” (Adeleke 2009: 12). Because Afrocentricity is organized around the principle of racial solidarity, it “reifies the very categories of racial oppression” that it seeks to obliterate (Gordon and Anderson 1999: 286). Lamentably, the tendency to homogenize across time and space erases or ignores experiential, linguistic, religious and other diversities, ultimately placing Afrocentric scholars next to their Pan-African forebears atop the same precarious perch.

“Africa” in the African Diaspora

As employed in the African American quotidian vernacular, the term ‘diaspora’ suggests a connection to an African motherland. In the academic arena, however, African Americans are not ascribed membership in said “diaspora,” according to the definitions developed by scholars. The chief concerns around the relationship between ‘diaspora’ and African Americans are: a) recent theorizations of ‘diaspora’ which do not strictly embrace the particularities of the African American experience; b) the fact that “Black Atlantic” scholars tend to privilege Britain in that context; and c) the geographic and topical focus on the Caribbean and Latin America.

Diaspora – comprised of the words speiro (to sow, to scatter) and dia (over) – referred to migration and colonization in Ancient Greece. In the last two millennia, the concept of diaspora has been mostly used to describe the political and religious displacement of Jewish populations.
The term emerged in the academy only after other theoretical models describing migration and assimilation proved fallible in the 1970s (Anteby-Yemini and Berthomière 2005: 1). A plethora of definitions were proffered in response to the call for deeper theorization around spatial, political, and social distinctions for the migrant groups in an increasingly trans-global world. Whether based on group cohesiveness (Medam 1993), religious or political organization (Bruneau 1995), possession of state of origin (Sheffer 1986), or possession of other characteristics (Cohen 1997), the particularities of the African American circumstances are not considered. One of the most cited definitions, by political scientist William Safran (1991: 83-84), describes diaspora as expatriate minority communities:

1. that are dispersed from an original “center” to at least two “peripheral” places;
2. that maintain a “memory,” vision or myth about their original homeland;
3. that “believe they are not – and perhaps cannot be – fully accepted by their host country”;
4. that see the ancestral home as a place of eventual return when the time is right;
5. that are committed to the maintenance or restoration of this homeland, and;
6. of which the group’s consciousness and solidarity are “importantly defined” by this continuing relationships with the homeland.

The African Americans who participate in the Leimert Park Drum Circle are indeed the descendants of those ‘dispersed’ from an original center to at least two peripheral places. They perform traditions and memories of “Africa.” The Drum Circle participants resist hegemonic practices aimed at dehumanizing and disappearing them. Of course, many may see “Africa” as the ancestral home, though it is not clear how strong the desire to return to the mythic homeland is, even when the time is right. In some communities and at certain times, however, a desire to
return to and restore the African homeland has been commonplace (Sidbury and Gellman 2008).  

Several Back-to-Africa movements coalesced in the early 19th century. In each instance, the “interest in migration reflect[ed] both the debased status of black people of the time and how Africa itself was perceived” (Handley 2006: 20). With sponsorship from the American Colonization Society, the first ships carrying people of African descent to be repatriated to Africa sailed in 1820. Despite the policies and motivations of the American Colonization Society being questioned and challenged by prominent Black leaders such as James Forten, Richard Allen, Absalom Jones, Robert Douglas and Frederick Douglass, the Society ultimately repatriated over 15,000 people of African descent (Forbes 1990: 219). The ships delivered its passengers to what would eventually become Liberia. At the turn of the twentieth century high profile Blacks like Bishop Henry Turner and Edward W. Blyden were pro-recolonization (Adeleke 1998: 513). Marcus Garvey founded the Black Star Line in 1919, though none of the ships ever successfully sailed to Africa (Macamo 2006: 57; Malcomson 2000: 223).

What academic definitions do not clearly account for is the subtle distinction between being expelled or banished and being taken from your home. Yes, in the end, either process results in the displacement of a group. But, Safran’s “centric” model is oriented around “continuous cultural connections to a source and by a teleology of ‘return’” (Clifford 1994: 303), effectively excluding African Americans.  

Bereft of agency, enslaved Africans were not exiled; they were egregiously captured and commoditized. Further, Safran’s model implicitly denies the particularities of the African American experience; that is, the “long history of slavery, the

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17 See any text that deals with the actions of turn of the 19th century Garveyism, Pan-Africanism, the African Methodist Episcopal Church, and the American Colonization Society. See especially chapters 3,4,5, and 6 of James Sidbury’s *Becoming African in America* (2007).

18 Diaspora models assuming continuous histories similarly exclude Caribbean and British Blacks.
legacy of scientific racism, and the complicity of rationality and terror in distinctively modern forms of domination” (Gilroy 1991: 193) are disregard or ignored by the Safran model.

In efforts to redress this definitional omission regarding an African diaspora, Black British intellectuals Kobena Mercer, Stuart Hall, and Paul Gilroy have produced scholarship about the Black Atlantic. Coined by Gilroy, the term Black Atlantic denotes a “modern political and cultural formation” (Gilroy 1993: 19) encapsulating the ensuing developments of dispersed Africans post-slavery. Though their reconceptions of diaspora are to be commended, Mercer and Hall deal primarily with issues of representation and identity in the Caribbean diaspora (e.g. Jamaicans or Trinidadians immigrating to England), while Gilroy “fails to explore the power that imaginings of Africa hold within various constructions of diasporic identities” (Gordon and Anderson 1999: 289). Though they deal with the Black Atlantic experience, these conceptions of diaspora are also not necessarily inclusive of the African American situation.19

Resisting and defying hegemonic practices designed to erase and invisibilize – in this case the privileging of expulsion over abduction – cultural actors resist the theoretical cornerstone of diaspora. In response to this epistemological violence, they innovatively modify the well-worn definition of diaspora by reversing the direction of desire for those dispersed in the diaspora. Rather than attending directly to the absence of and fighting for our legitimate claim for definitional inclusion, cultural actors dance, drum and sing every Sunday effectively re-locating “Africa” to the middle of the Leimert Park Plaza.

19 Other scholars have utilized the lens of hybrid African-influenced religions to examine myriad topics such as modernity and transnationalism. See Stephan Palmié’s Wizards and Scientists and (2002) Matory’s Black Atlantic Religions: Tradition, Transnationalism, and Matriarchy in the Afro-Brazilian Candomblé (2005).
Conclusion

Cultural actors in the Leimert Park, and similarly those in the larger Los Angeles African dance drumming community, construct “Africa” by inscribing traditions and memories during the Sunday Drum Circle. The responsible cultural actors shape power through discourse and language. Some cultural actors resist the myths, metonymic fallacy, and racialist constructions of “Africa” by reimagining and adopting “Africa” as a mnemonic metaphor signifying a shared experience in this country. For this population, the shared history is stronger and more compelling than the previously associated significations (e.g., Africa – savage; Africa – backward). Moreover, “Africa” the mnemonic is invoked because identification with specific geo-cultural groups is secondary to identification with other African American cultural actors, who supposedly have similar experiences. In the Leimert Park Drum Circle, for example, a female dancer may wear a scarf imprinted with an Adinkra symbol. However, her actual genetic connection to Ghana is less significant than the fact that the male djembe player in front of whom she is dancing, irrespective of his genetic connection to Ghana or Africa, shares the same ambiguous genetic history.

As cultural actors reverse the direction of diasporic desire and bring Africa to the Leimert Park Drum Circle, any and all previously derogatory associations are emptied out. The sign “Africa” is then filled up with metonymic significations – African drum, African dance, African music, African rhythm, African values, African aesthetics, etc. In a move of the Foucauldian variety, the cultural actors in the Leimert Park Drum Circle coopt the mythic process that normalized the fiction of savage Africa and utilize it to normalize an origin, a history, and attendant memories and traditions. Ultimately, “Africa” is a phenomenological location. Borne out of the weekly practice of re-locating Africa, the Leimert Park Drum Circle cultural actors
deploy the term as a composite of the drum circle’s performances. “Africa” is, as Clifford Geertz would say, “a story that we tell ourselves about ourselves” (1974: 27).
CHAPTER 2
INSCRIBING THE SITE

Ethnographic Description: Najite Blesses the Drum Circle

Date: June 2009
Place: Leimert Park Drum Circle

Exiting my car, the smells of hot peanut oil, cornmeal-battered fish, rice and mafe sauce, black-eyed peas, and collard greens emanating from the vendor stands envelop me like a mother embracing her child just come in from the cold. Inhaling deeply, appreciatively, I walk toward the percussive notes drifting in the air in an aural trickle from the not yet fully realized drum circle. Recognizing the car of a musician with whom I play in an ensemble, I walk to the driver’s side window of the early nineties, green, battered Chevrolet Blazer with a dent in the back door. I tap on the window to greet Mama Né. Swinging her salt and peppered dreadlocks, words tumbled excitedly through her wide smile. Her voice crescendos in a pseudo-Doppler effect as she rolls down her window “heeeEEEYYYYY GGGGGG!!!!!!” Quickly exchanging a greeting, Mama Né informs me that Najite hasn’t arrived as yet and that people in the drum circle are still warming up.

*   *   *

Najite strolls to the drum circle, positioning his chair in the southeast section of the paved portion of Leimert Park Plaza. His progress is slowed as he is stopped frequently and greeted by people both in and outside of the Circle. He shakes his well-worn djembe bag from his shoulder, depositing it onto a white plastic chair
yellowed with age and use. He pulls out his djembe and places it on the ground in front of his seat. After zipping the drum bag closed, Najite bends to access the bag’s side pocket. He extracts a water bottle and places the bag under his chair. He then walks to the northern most point of the Circle and like an oil derrick, lowers his extended arm holding the bottle while simultaneously bending at the waist and lifting one leg above the ground. He pours a little water in this fashion at each of the four cardinal directions. He finishes by pouring the libation in front of his own chair. Before assuming the playing position, Najite lights a white, seven-day candle. Upon sitting, Najite tucks several multi-colored beaded necklaces into his shirt. Settled, Najite officially plays his inaugural break.

On any given Sunday afternoon, as a critical mass of musicians arrives, chairs and drums are arranged such that a circle with a diameter between 15 and 25 feet is established. Drummers drum, dancers dance and frequent references to Africa – both direct and indirect – are performed. Leimert Park Drum Circle participants choose to utilize a circle as a well-known “dance-pattern in Africa” (James 2000: 140) to demarcate the tablet on which to make their weekly inscriptions.

In order to fully comprehend the role of the practices of Leimert Park cultural actors in constructing and re-locating “Africa” in the Drum Circle, I first offer a detailed description of the field site, contextualizing it within the American drum circle movement. I then pan out to survey the progression of the Black presence in Los Angeles from 1781, when it was primarily an Afro-Mexican pueblo, to the present day, in which Leimert Park is the contemporary center of Black cultural production. I then elaborate an epistemology of Village through which I analyze the area and its constituents. I conclude with a look at Congo Square, arguably the first African-centered
Genealogy of a Drum Circle

Many claim that drum circles have their origins in ancient cultures (Hart and Stevens 1990; Hull 1999). In particular, the ancient civilizations of Africa are often designated as the birthplace of drum circles. While it’s true that the djembe, a drum from the Mandingue region of West Africa and especially from Guinea, Mali, and Senegambia, is nowadays overrepresented in drum circle gatherings, drum circles do not exist, as such, in Africa, and are not of traditional African descent. Drum circles have been described as “a uniquely American development” (Charry in Atkinson 2005: 14) with a timbre and rhythm all of their own. Drumming and dancing in the Mandingue region is a profession of skilled artisans, not the all-inclusive, free-for-all as commonly experienced in drum circles in the United States.

As for the American ritual, renowned Grateful Dead percussionist Mickey Hart defines a drum circle as²⁰:

“a huge jam session. The ultimate goal is not precise rhythmic articulation or perfection of patterned structure, but the ability to entrain and reach the state of a group mind. It is built on cooperation in the groove, but with little reference to any classic styles. So this is a work in constant progress, a phenomenon of the new rhythm culture emerging here in the West.”

Hart’s description is apropos of the average community drum circle, which I will refer to as New Age, found on beaches, in parks, at festivals, on grassy knolls, or wherever the spirit

coalesces. In such circles, no geography, nationality, ethnicity, or rhythmic tradition is privileged. Participants can bring any type of percussive instrument and are encouraged to dance as the spirit moves them. This type of circle has its origins in the 1970 hippy movement (Hull 1999), and its purpose is to engage, uplift, and unify community.

In the 1960s, Nigerian percussionist Babatunde Olatunji “became a venerated father figure and spiritual guru to [this] predominantly White hand-drumming and drum circle movement” (Atkinson 2005: 3). It is, however, important to note that the djembe, a percussion instrument of Mandingue origins, has achieved not only international renown but has also been re-appropriated by Africans from regions other than those associated with Mandingue peoples themselves. As such, the spontaneous musical gatherings similar to the drum circles as defined by Hart are not unheard of in contemporary Africa. Though I have not observed in-person a spontaneous drum circle in Africa, I have watched several YouTube clips of said phenomenon.

Participants in New Age and African-centered drum circles congregate around the drum, dance in the center of and outside the periphery of the circle, and often claim to experience a sense of healing through community. A rhythm begins and ends at the behest of a specific drum call, or break. The “ability to entrain and reach the state of a group mind” obtains in both types of circles, but as the dreadlocked drummer so urgently protests, the ultimate goal of the Leimert Park Drum Circle projects beyond the localized group mind to achieve “more Africa.”

**Drum Circles in Los Angeles**

In addition to the African-centered Leimert Park Drum Circle, other circles exist in Los Angeles. There are, for example, long-established drum circles at Venice Beach and Griffith Park. The Venice Beach circle meets on Sunday afternoons and can grow to be quite large. I’ve
observed more than one hundred musicians comprising the circle. Described as “a celebration of the freedom to express oneself as well as the harmony and unity of the music and dance” on the Venice Beach drum circle website, this particular circle epitomizes the Mickey Hart definition as influenced by New Age and other pan-ethnic movements.21 One website claims that the Venice Beach drum circle is at least thirty years old.22

The Griffith Park drum circle, which claims to have “the most talented drummers anywhere,” also convenes on Sunday afternoons.23 Unlike the Venice circle, congas and related Latin-influenced instrumentation are foregrounded. As such, the circle in Griffith Park is categorized as a “Latin rhythm paradise” with a “great, intense vibe.”24

One of oldest African percussion stores serving Southern California, Motherland Drums, hosts weekly circles with African instrumentation for veterans and semi-monthly circles for women. REMO, a renowned drum manufacturer, holds weekly kids’ circles, community circles, drum jams, and a HealthRhythms circle for the elderly.

African Centered Drum Circles in the Unites States

While there is an entire subculture around the more prevalent, New Age drum circle in the United States, a few African-centered or African-influenced drum circles nevertheless enjoy long tenures. In the introduction to Babatunji Olatunji’s autobiography, ethnomusicologist Eric Charry notes that in such circles “there is a spiritual undercurrent of paying homage to ancestors


24 Ibid.
and restoring severed historical and cultural connection” (Cherry in Atkinson 2005: 16). As of today, four long-standing African influenced drum circles exist in America, including gatherings in New York, Oakland, and Chicago. These drum circles can also be considered urban palimpsests in some ways. The table below summarizes the characteristics of these well-established African centered drum circles.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Founder/Leader</th>
<th>Harlem, NY</th>
<th>Brooklyn, NY</th>
<th>Oakland, CA</th>
<th>Chicago, IL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Location</td>
<td>Harlem, NY</td>
<td>Brooklyn, NY</td>
<td>Oakland, CA</td>
<td>Chicago, IL</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year Started</td>
<td>1969</td>
<td>1968</td>
<td>At least a decade ago</td>
<td>Approximately 60 years ago</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Day/Time</td>
<td>Saturdays during the Summer until 10pm</td>
<td>Sunday 12 noon – dark</td>
<td>Sunday</td>
<td>Monday – Sunday; Summer; 9am to 10:30pm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instruments</td>
<td>Drums, trumpets, flutes, spoons, cowbells, gourd rattles, tambourines</td>
<td>Djembes, dunun</td>
<td>Djembes, congos, timbales, reco-reco, assorted other percussion</td>
<td>Congas, timbales, trumpets, saxophones, shakers; djembes are not encouraged</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rhythms</td>
<td>West African</td>
<td>West African</td>
<td>Some African-influenced</td>
<td>Afro-Cuban</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average # Participants &amp; Observers</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>30</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Rules/ Policies                  | No leader, anyone can play, respectful attire and dancing | Anyone can play | Anyone can play, women encouraged |

| Table 2.1 African Inspired Drum Circles in America & their Characteristics |

**Harlem, New York**

Initiated in 1969 during the annual Harlem Cultural Festival, the African centered drum circle in Mount Morris Park, later renamed Marcus Garvey Park, is undeniably resistive. Before the days of Harlem’s recent and ongoing, primarily non-African-American gentrification, the drum circle was “credited with helping to make the park safer over the years” (Williams 2008).
Sustained from season to season by a “core group of 30 men and women,” people attend this particular drum circle “because it has a certain vibration to it” (ibid). The drum circle persisted, despite the nearly two decades (1970s and 1980s) of the park serving as a locus for drug commerce. More recently, gentrification efforts in Harlem ignited clashes between drum circle participants and residents of a newly renovated high-rise across the street from where the drummers convene. During the summer of 2008, police were twice called in to relocate the drum circle. Before that summer ended, the Black Panther Party led a march in support of the drummers (Williams 2008b). The tension between the drum circle and the new property owners has continued since 2008, resulting in the police moving the drum circle twice. Nonetheless, the drum circle continues in the same spot, magnetized by over 40 years of inscription now reinforced by collective desire to avoid being pushed around for someone else’s interests.

**Brooklyn, New York**

Established in 1968 by the Congo Square Drummers, this circle is now sanctioned by New York City. Sunday afternoons, whether permitting, the drum circle hosts “irresistible rhythm, the vibrant dancers, and [a] celebratory atmosphere.”25 Situated in what has been officially dubbed “the Drummer’s Grove,” the Prospect Park Alliance added seating in 1997.26

**Oakland, California**

At the Bay Area Rapid Transit (BART) Ashby Station in Oakland, California, a drum circle convenes every Saturday and Sunday on the flea market side of the BART station. During my only visit, I didn’t quite understand why this particular circle is touted as “African.” The most comprehensive listing of US drum circles that I’ve ever come across assigns leadership to

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26 Ibid
the Bay Area African Drummers. There were plenty of djembes, to be sure, but the rhythms being played were not from the Mandingue repertoire. When asked, the circle’s apparent facilitator, who was tearing it up on some timbales and a sick set of bells, told me that the circle had been around for at least a decade, but that it wasn’t particularly African centered or inspired.

Chicago, Illinois

Established about 60 years ago by the 63rd Street Drummers, this drum circle occurs daily during summer months. Commencing as early as nine o’clock in the morning and lasting until after ten o’clock in the evening, the 63rd Street Beach Drum Circle privileges Afro-Cuban conga and rhythms. While not prohibited, djembes are definitely not encouraged. Musicians wait for “the heart and soul of the drumming,” or bass drums to start the rhythm and set the pace.

Description: Leimert Park Drum Circle

Several participants metaphorically refer to the Leimert Park Drum Circle as the “Drum Church,” or simply, “The Church.” Historian P. Sterling Stuckey claims that “spirituality [is] almost indistinguishable from art…to the cultures from which Blacks came” (Stuckey 2002: 41). Therefore, if certain forms of worship “were banned and survived only precariously in the circle dancing, which became the permitted secular form” (James 2000: 143), the fact that the drum practice in Leimert Park occurs in a circle is not spiritually insignificant.

The assumed sanctity of the circle is further substantiated by the presence of a white seven-day candle, the pouring of libations to cleanse the space at the beginning of each session,

the constant reference to God and the ancestors, the professed healing that occurs at the circle, the choice of modest clothing by many of the regular participants, and the collection of “tithes.” The tithes are collected in a basket or djembe hat, which is placed in the middle of the circle. The collection of ‘love offerings’ is counted by an elder, usually Najite, the ‘founding elder,’ and distributed, not necessarily equitably, to the regular drummers, or a drummer who displayed particular fortitude that day.

Unlike the drum circles of the the sort described by Mickey Hart, African-influenced or African-centered drum circles are concerned with rhythmic articulation and patterned structure; they are contingent on classical and traditional references from distinct communities in specific nation-states on the continent of Africa. In an African-centered drum circle in the US, the selection and progression of music is drawn from a repertoire of polyrhythms, generally from the Mandingue region of West Africa. Usually, the instrumentation comprises the djembe and dunun orchestra, but other percussive objects and types of instruments are acceptable, though not always encouraged.

Established in 1997, two concentric rings now delineate the Leimert Park drum circle. The outer ring comprises mostly standing observers, many of whom are compelled by the syncopated meter to sway or dance. Often one can find non-drum playing contributors in the outer ring as well. People play all manner of instruments including: trumpets, guitars, saxophones, trombones, flutes, South American pipes, whistles, and shekere, in addition to invented instruments. I have observed dried corn kernels in a plastic soda bottle utilized as a shaker, homemade bamboo saxophones, and even an elderly man leaning hard on one leg playing a corrugated trash receptacle with his cane. Nearly any kind of music-maker is accepted

A shekere is an instrument of West African origin fashioned from a dried, hollowed out gourd draped in a net of bead or shells such that a rattle-like sound is created when the gourd is shaken.
in the circle. Once in a while a cultural actor will participate with an incongruous instrument, such as a drum set. If the player cannot meld into the ‘African’ rhythms being played, the master drummer will ask him to not return with the disruptive instrument. This suggestive admonishment is not always well received.

Those playing more conventional “African” percussion comprise the inner ring. The master or lead djembe player generally sits in the southeast quadrant with the more proficient, accompaniment of djembe players to his right and the dunun, or bass drum, line standing to his left. The balance of the circle is composed of a regular cadre of less-able djembe players, congueros, and, frequently, a timbalero.

Myriad vendors, families on picnic blankets, young people practicing capoeira, and the occasional coconut man envelope the two inner rings, serving as a sort of bastion for the circle. The composition of this circle stays largely the same from week to week, but variations do occur. It is not uncommon to find members of the New Black Panthers or the political arm of the Hebrew Israelites in attendance.

The third ring is influenced by other crowd-drawing activities in Leimert Park. The effect is a slightly unpredictable, dynamic support system for the drum circle. The number of people varies depending on many factors including weather, other activities in Leimert such as the monthly ArtWalk or a festival, or whether it is a holiday weekend. A sizable crowd might be as large as fifty players in the inner ring and more than a hundred people in the outer rings. On the other hand, I have observed the drum circle with as few as ten musicians and just a trickle of vendors and observers. Usually, though, there are about fifteen to twenty musicians who compose the inner ring and perhaps fifty spectators in the outer ring.
Commencing between two and three in the afternoon, the drum circle will continue for hours. The rhythms last between five and twenty minutes, but on occasion will endure for as long as forty-five minutes. If the wind is right, echoes of the drum will wind west through the hills of neighboring View Park or float as far east as Western Avenue long after the sun has set.

The selection of rhythms during any given Sunday circle is largely dependent on the mix of people who show up to play. If a master djembe player is present, the circle will have a distinctly more organized sound, playing rhythms from the “African” repertoire. That is, the lead djembe player will be able to instruct the other circle musicians in the various parts on the different drums that comprise the rhythm. When Najite is present, for example, rhythms include those from the Mandigue areas of West Africa and are popular in Los Angeles, in addition to some of his favorites from the Ivory Coast or Nigeria.\footnote{Rhythms such as: Soli Rapide (Domba), Lamba, Dundunba, Sorsornet, Diansa (Yado), Mandiani, Sunu, etc. Though reticent to name them or identify their specific origins and meanings, Najite also facilitates what he calls “forest rhythms” from Ivory Coast and Nigeria.}

When a lead djembe player is not present, the rhythms tend to sound more similar to a “four-on-the-floor” or heartbeat patterns. The bass drum orchestra shapes the sound of a rhythm. As a result, the dunun players are the guides when there is no lead djembe musician present. The djembe players default to one of their regular, basic accompaniment patterns and the resultant musical concoctions, while wholly unrecognizable as Mandingue rhythms, suffice to spur participants to groove and dance.\footnote{The most prevalent basic accompaniment patterns are \textit{pa-tu-pa} and \textit{a-ni-so-ko-ma}. \textit{Pa-tu-pa} indicates a slap-tone-slap in a binary rhythm in which the \textit{pas} are played on the downbeat and the \textit{tu} is played on the upbeat. \textit{A-ni-so-ko-ma} can be played in binary and tertiary rhythms, where \textit{a}, \textit{ni}, and \textit{ma} indicate slaps and \textit{so-ko} indicate two tones. \textit{Ma} and \textit{ni} are played on the downbeats. According to my primary dunun teacher, Malik Sow, \textit{A-ni-so-ko-ma} means “good morning” or “Hello, how are you?” in Bambara.}

Some cultural actors will participate in the drum circle by offering a dance in the middle of the circle. Like the range of abilities among the drummers, clearly some have studied the
dances of this musical tradition and execute movements that have been taught as accompanying the rhythms being played. Others, not hindered by their lack of this specific cultural knowledge, enthusiastically submit to the power of the rhythm. A wide range of movement is performed including: jumping, swaying, perambulating, Black social dances, pop-locking, hip hop, tap dancing (with actual tap shoes and a portable wooden floor) and more.

The djembe, also known as the drum of fire, overpowers many other percussion instruments. Therefore, those cultural actors dedicated to or interested in Afro-Cuban rhythms convene on Saturdays in the same space to avoid being overpowered by the multitude of djembe players. On Sundays, a smaller Afro-Cuban group gathers, but they perform their palimpsest in the Degnan Boulevard, City-owned parking lot under the permanent canopy, which protects the temporary stage during festivals and other events. Very occasionally, a third drum circle will materialize in the other City-owned parking lot nestled between the stores on the western side of Degnan and Crenshaw Boulevards. Kaos Network hosts the monthly Rincon Rumbero, a community musical gathering for Afro-Cuban adherents.

**Brief History of Los Angeles/Leimert Park: From Black to White and Black Again**

Before its incorporation as an American city, persons of African-descent have participated in the development of Los Angeles. In fact, the majority of Los Angeles’ first settlers were Mexicans of African descent. According to historian Robert Mayer, the pueblo then known as Nuestra Senora La Reina de Los Angeles was settled in 1781 by “two Spaniards, nine Indians, one mestizo, eight Mullatos (sic) and two Blacks,” and their 16 children (1978: 86). Those of African descent represented 60 percent of the settling population.33

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33 See Appendix 1 for Black population in the Pueblo, City and County of Los Angeles from 1781 to 2010.
The African-descended population continued to grow throughout the first decades of Los Angeles’ Spanish occupation. “Racial intermixing resulted in mulattoes (sic) and mestizo quickly outnumber[ing] other groups” (Robinson 2010:22). Additionally, “the upward mobility of blacks,” was evidenced in “the election of a mulatto, Francisco Reyes, as the alcalde [mayor] in 1793” (24). Later, at least two Mexican governors, Manuel Victoria (1831-32) and Pio Pico (1832, 1845-46), were also of African descent (Forbes 1966: 244-45). In this same time period, the African descended population decreased as full-blooded Africans and those of mixed heritage continued to intermingle with non-Africans. By the time of Los Angeles’ incorporation in 1850, Los Angeles County was home to 15 persons of African-descent (twelve of whom lived inside the city limits) in a total population of 3,530 (0.42%).^34^1

Under American rule, African-descended people had a much harder time. The Fugitive Slave law, in effect from 1852–1855, protected White Southerners who brought enslaved persons of African descent into California despite slavery being illegal in California. A second law, the White Witness Only Law, “freed whites to commit crimes against blacks and other non-whites with impunity, as long as there were no other white witnesses present to testify against the perpetrators” (Robinson 2010: 30). Despite these and other racist practices, some Blacks were able to achieve financial success.

Robert Owens and Biddy Mason are among the most notable in this group. Owens, a landowner, was a cattle and horse dealer. Mason, with the help of Owens procured freedom from her Mormon owner who was moving to Texas (a decidedly more harsh environment for the enslaved), became a successful entrepreneur and also a wealthy landowner. One of Robert Owens’ sons married one of Biddy Mason’s daughters. According to geographic information

^34^ Robinson notes that this Census number is likely an undercount.
systems professor Paul Robinson, this family dynasty set the stage for the spatialized settling of Black Los Angeles. “The real estate activities of these two prominent families and other early financially successful Blacks eventually created the nucleus for the formation of a burgeoning black community to the east and the south of the old pueblo” (Robinson 2010: 31). The area now known as Leimert Park was part of this pueblo, officially known as Rancho Cienega O Paso de la Tijera.

Elias J. “Lucky” Baldwin acquired Rancho de la Tijera, as the pueblo was sometimes called, in 1875 (Department of City Planning 1998). The acquired area contained what later became known as Baldwin Hills, an area today bounded by Martin Luther King, Jr. Boulevard and Rodeo to the north, Marlton Avenue (Santa Rosalia Drive) to the east, La Cienega Boulevard to the west, and Stocker Street to the south. Developer Walter Leimert purchased the smaller area, situated almost in the dead center of Rancho de la Tijera and that would later become known as Leimert Park, “from Anita Baldwin Stocker, daughter of ‘Lucky’ Baldwin, in the early 1920s” (Robinson 2010: 31). In 1880, the Black population of the city was 0.91% (102/11,183) and grew to 2.38% (7,599/319,198) by the time Walter Leimert purchased the land that would become Leimert Park from “Lucky” Baldwin’s daughter.

During the next two decades, Los Angeles west of Central Avenue was off limits to Blacks and Asians (Davis 1992). Blacks lived mostly on or east of Central Avenue, securing it as the center of Black cultural production in the early 1900s. As Los Angeles increased in size, so too did the number of Blacks in the region. According to the U.S. Census, both the White and the Black population of the city of Los Angeles nearly doubled between 1910 and 1920.

Experiments in urban planning, technological advancements in the aerospace industry, and the move from agriculture to manufacturing (canning and other plants) led to the rapid
growth and development of 1930s Los Angeles. The railcar system expansion, commercial
development in the Angela Mesa Corridor along what is now Crenshaw Boulevard, and the
expansion of the Degnan Center, a shopping district located one block from the Green Car Line
on Leimert Boulevard, all contributed to the growth and settlement of the Leimert area in the
1920s (Department of City Planning 1998, I-2). By 1930, the city of Los Angeles was 3.14% 
Black.

Completed in 1933, developer Walter Leimert intended Leimert Park to be an exclusive
 enclave for the White middle class. In a Walter Leimert Co. advertisement called “Before You
Buy a House, Income Building or Lot,” Leimert billed the area as an “ideal home 
environment,” in which house values would “increase rather than decrease.” Leimert Park was
“considered a model of urban planning,” and selected by Life Magazine in 1938 as a site of one
of their eight sponsored houses nationwide (Chapple 2010: 73). According to an advertisement
in the same issue, “Leimert Park was created with the belief that beautiful surroundings should
not be the luxury of the wealthy few; that light, sunshine, air, trees, flowers, and buildings
coordinated to a harmonious plan are more important than anything else to the American home
families.” An advertisement for the Los Angeles Annual Small Homes Exposition hailed the
area as a “country club environment,” for its proximity to the Sunset Fields Golf Courses (two
18-holes and one 9-hole), prospective homeowners were further lured to Leimert Park by the
guarantees of the Leimert Park Community Association (LPCA). The LPCA boasted in the
same advertisement that it maintained “complete architectural control…[with] parkways and
even vacant lots [being] kept in permanent trim…guaranteeing [prospective buyers] permanently

35 No date, page 2.

36 Walter H. Leimert Co, “LIFE presents…your home for Life in Leimert Park.” n.d. The article itself is not dated,
but the sponsorship occurred in 1938, so the advertisement is probably from the same year.
against anything detrimental happening to mar the desirability or the value of [their] home,” further, “utility wires were buried or hidden from view in alleys, which allowed for the dense planting of trees down the community’s main streets.” The cozy streets are still tree-lined as originally intended, creating a lush, park-like setting.

Two events occurred in the 1930s signaling a forthcoming change in the neighborhood’s ethnic makeup. First, in 1930 the Leimert family gave (what was then called) Leimert Park Square to the City of Los Angeles as a gift to the community to use a public and open space (Exum and Guiza-Leimert 2012: 90). Then in 1939, “Walter Leimert sold the bulk of his shares in Leimert Park to various investors at the end of the Depression” (Macauley 1997:15). Although Leimert Park at this time was steadfastly White, the Black population of the city of Los Angeles doubled between 1930 and 1940.

Since the turn of the twentieth century, there have been two major centers of African American cultural production in Los Angeles: Central Avenue from the 1900s to 1950s and Leimert Park from the 1960s until now (Chapple 2010). Despite the fact that in the early 1900s Los Angeles boasted the highest homeownership among African Americans in the country, racist housing policies restricted the movement of non-Whites, influencing the migratory patterns of minorities within the city. Much African American cultural production was limited to Central Avenue before 1948, as Blacks were not allowed to live west of Western Avenue.

A one-and-a-half-square-mile planned community in the Crenshaw district of Los Angeles, Leimert Park was designed by Frederick L. Olmstead Jr. and John C. Olmstead, the sons of the architect and master planner responsible for the planning of New York City’s Central

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Park (Chapple 2010: 72). One of Southern California’s first planned communities for moderate income families, Leimert Park was initiated in 1927 and intended to be an oasis for the middle class (Harris 1992: 26). African-Americans, Asians, Mexicans, and Jews were explicitly excluded from purchasing homes in the area until the Supreme Court overturned restrictive covenants in 1948.38

By the early 1950s, however, African Americans started to settle on Western Avenue, slowly edging further west to Crenshaw Boulevard. White Flight ensued, and African Americans and Japanese Americans returning from World War II began to buy homes in the area. As a result, the Crenshaw area became desegregated, and increasingly African American by the 1960s. Many of the area’s first integrators moved into the area clandestinely. Tom Bradley, former Mayor of Los Angeles, was one of the first families to purchase a home in Leimert Park in 1950. He and his wife used a White frontman (Matthews 1981).

While several factors contributed to the consolidation of Leimert Park’s reputation as the center of Black cultural production in Los Angeles, the two most salient are the topography of the development and the concentration of artists with urges to create and express after the 1965 and 1992 uprisings. As already discussed, the topography of Leimert Park’s Village provides a sort of physical bastion from the goings on of the city, allowing cultural expression to flourish. The narrow streets invite foot traffic, while large city-run parking lots flank the outskirts of The Village, keeping vehicle movement to a minimum. Others attribute the “intimate and private nature” of Degnan Boulevard to “thoroughfares…[that] provide external buffers” (Macauley 1997: 4). 43rd Street and Degnan Boulevard are completely blocked off for the near monthly festivals and often are filled with impromptu music performances by a variety of local artists. Its

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38 See Shelley v. Kramer, United States Report 334 U.S. 1, 1948
The topographic configuration lends Leimert Park a sense of a protected community in which artists, residents, visitors, and tourists have a safe space in which to create, emote, dance, exhibit, and perform.

The Black population of Los Angeles increased more than five-fold in the twenty years before the 1965 Watts Uprisings. The swell in the Black population exacerbated the segregation in Los Angeles. At the end of World War II, Blacks who had worked in the defense industry or had served in the armed forces returned to a discriminatory housing landscape (Verge 1994). The nuisance of finding themselves relegated to certain areas coupled with White-on-Black violence and increasing police brutality sanctioned by the chief of police, William H. Parker, resulted in an eruption of frustrations (Kramer 2007). From the eleventh to the seventeenth of August 1965, the residents of Watts protested their marginalization. Journalist Bayard Rustin dubbed the uprising “the first major rebellion of Negroes against their own masochism and… carried on with the express purpose of asserting that they would no longer quietly submit to the deprivation of slum life” (1966). Despite the fact that “34 persons were killed, 1,032 were injured, and some 3,952 were arrested” (ibid), the community sentiment was one of victory because the uprisings “made them pay attention to us” (King, Jr. 1967: 112). The plight of Black Los Angeles could no longer be ignored.

In the years following the Watts Uprisings of 1965, African American artists were compelled to register their sentiments through the arts, and as such, exploded with “works that were politically significant. They were making statements that were social,” according to the Brockman Gallery co-founder Alonzo Davis (Harris 1992: 26). The Brockman Gallery, located in the heart of Leimert Park, “nurtured the early careers of respected artists like David Hammons and John Outterbridge. The mentors of Black art also exhibited at Brockman – Elizabeth Catlett,
Charles White, John Bigges, Noah Purifoy and Romare Bearden” (ibid). This cultural explosion paralleled the increase in the Black population, which grew by more than 60 percent between 1960 and 1970.

While not yet the enduring gathering place that it would become, Leimert Park was cemented as a gathering place for political rallies, festivals and as the terminus on parade routes in the 1970s and 1980s. There have been reports of as many as “5,000 people converg[ing] on Leimert Park at a rally that followed the march to hear speeches and rock songs denouncing apartheid” (McMahon 1985). In celebration of Los Angeles’ second hosting of the Olympics in 1984, “reggae groups, a 35-piece steel drum orchestra and costumed dancers” performed along a route that ultimately ended in Leimert Park.

Since the 1980s, Los Angeles has become decreasingly African-American.39 By 1992, in part due to this attrition, “Black Los Angeles was without an identified center for the first time since the earliest Black settlements took shape around Central Avenue in the 1880s and 1890s” (Chapple 2010: 74). Mirroring the same artistic development that occurred in Leimert Park in 1965, a renaissance of sorts occurred in Leimert Park in the years after the Rodney King verdict came down. Leimert Park became the “public meeting place” in which “Black Angelenos [would] demonstrate support for each other economically and politically” (73). They also needed to celebrate and reassert their social, cultural and political identities. As a result, Leimert Park has reclaimed its African-influenced atmosphere. Originally marketed as an exclusive enclave for a White middle class, Leimert Park developed into what has been called by the LA Times the “Black Cultural Mecca of Los Angeles” (Renwick and Aubry 1993: 16).

**Village as an Episteme**

The Leimert Park neighborhood is the larger geographic area bounded by Vernon Avenue to the south, Crenshaw Boulevard to the west, Leimert Boulevard to the east, and Coliseum Street to the north. Four streets, laid out in an irregular hexagon, safeguard Leimert Park Village – the neighborhood’s business, cultural and performance district (see figure 2.9). Leimert Park Village’s “circulation patterns limit traffic” (Chapple 2010: 73), providing a buffer from the vehicular bustle of Crenshaw Boulevard, the high residential density of the apartment living to the east on Leimert Boulevard, and the sometimes present and sometimes rowdy congregation of low riders just on the other side of Vernon to the south. Those who patronize the protected heart of the region endearingly refer to it as the Village.

![Figure 2.1](Sign on Crenshaw Blvd. at Entrance of Leimert Park Village. Photo by Giavanni Washington)

Though the geographic particularities of Leimert Park Village somewhat justify its continued appellation as *Village*, cultural actors in Leimert Park employ the term beyond its denotation as a “self-contained district or community within a town or city.”[40] Partly responsible for shaping the perspective and knowledge of cultural actors at a particular period, *Village* is an

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episteme through which community coheres. A shared locality with a constructed ‘Africa’ at its philosophical core, the Village is an imagined community (Anderson 1991). Irrespective of actual cognizance of every person in Leimert Park Village, the imagined community of Village represents a belonging perceived by the entirety of its membership. This perception is based on common interest, collective history, shared philosophy, ethnicity and a communal desire to breathe life into an African Village in the middle of urban Los Angeles.

African-influenced imagery and nomenclature bombard the patron walking north on Degnan Boulevard away from the park proper. Leimert Park is replete with African representations indicative of our hybrid accounts and memories of Africa including: Mediterranean (North African) architecture (Harris 1992: 28), Ghanaian Adinkra symbols, and African-inspired decorations on the potted plants, fences, and refuse receptacles. To create a Village consciousness, merchants, residents and cultural actors ubiquitously refer to “Africa” in Leimert Park. Many of the retailers on Degnan Boulevard utilize the word Africa or other African-related descriptor their store names and façades: Hakeem’s African Urban Wear, Zambez! Bazaar (see figure 2.3), EsoWon Bookstore, Museum in Black, Institute of Fine Braidery Arts, Africa by the Yard (see figure 2.4), African Heritage and Antique Collection, and Melchezedek Luv & Light Healing Center (enveloped in red, gold and green to revealing the owner’s Ethiopic/Rastafarian philosophies).

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41 The Los Angeles Neighborhood Initiative (LANI) spearheaded this beautification effort in 2003.
From the Caribbean, Creole and Soul Food restaurants catering to African diasporic tastes to the Black, culturally themed festivals sprinkled throughout the year, Leimert Park is celebrated through a palette borrowed from the African National Flag. The Pan-African Flag, also referred to as the Universal Negro Improvement Association and African Communities League (UNIA) flag, the Afro-American Flag, or Black Liberation Flag, is a tricolor flag consisting of 3 equal horizontal bands of red, black, and green. Red represents the blood that connects all people of Black African descent, Black is for the people, and green represents the wealth of Africa’s lands. Formally adopted by UNIA in 1920, the flag represents African or African American unity or pride. Red, black and green (and often gold) are a recurrent theme, coloring not only the buildings, but also the consciousness of the area.

Although context, history, and other cultural information may be altered or erased in the processes of conflation, Agawu’s “metonymic fallacy” is a pathway through which those in Leimert Park can create, recapture and reconnect with African aesthetics and values. Adinkra symbols from Ghana, for example, stand in for “Africa” in Leimert Park. The larger of the potted plants is decorated with *Pempamsie* (butterfly-like shape) and *Asase Ye Duru* (shaped like...
two hearts linked at their fullest points), which mean “sew in readiness” and “divinity,” respectively (see figures 2.2 and 2.5). The black diamond on the planter second from the right in figure 2.5 is emblazoned with the *Gye Nyame*, an oft-utilized symbol in African America meaning “before God there is none.” In addition to the refuse receptacles and clay planters that are decorated with the Akan graphic system throughout *the Village*, the sidewalk on the northwestern side of Degnan Boulevard, called Sankofa Passage, is lined with pyramid shaped plaques that pay tribute to 32 people who have contributed significantly to this community.42,43

These symbols not only contribute to Leimert Park’s status as *Village*, they enhance and legitimize it.

According to Zimbabwean graphic designer and typographer Sika Mafundikwa, author of *Afrikan Alphabets: The Story of Writing in Afrika*, the ideographic system of Adinkra symbols originated 400 years ago in Ghana and Cote d’Ivoire. One of the most recognized forms of what he calls “proto-writing in Afrika,” the symbols represent “proverbs, historical events, and attitudes as well as objects, animals, and plants” (Mafundikwa 2004: 33). Adinkra symbols are now a common motif in African American art, clothing, and other imagery such as tattoos and logos. Wielding such symbols, cultural actors can possess what they call “Africa.”

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42 Sankofa Walk is unfinished due to cost (personal communication with Clint Rosemond, director of Community Build/ Leimert Park Crenshaw Corridor Building Improvement District, August 17, 2009).

The diamond-shaped paver of Sankofa Passage is composed of two, two-dimensional pyramids attached at their bases. Each of the four corners has a Sankofa bird in it, while “branding symbols used during slavery have been placed along the perimeter to denote the atrocities of the horrific Middle Passage when Africans were forcibly removed from their homeland and dispersed throughout the Diaspora.”44 The Sankofa bird – either depicted as stylized hearts or as a bird looking backwards and/or taking an egg from its back – symbolizes the need for “looking to the past and learn[ing] from it.” It is thus appropriate that the Passage is named after one of the most popular Adinkra symbols utilized in America, the Sankofa. In this instance, the artist, John Outterbridge, intended his creation as a reminder “of where [African Americans] come from and where African Americans are now.”45 This narrative is alive and well in the African American imaginary.

However, there is a lacuna inherent in the narrative of returning to and remembrance of our origins. For many African Americans our genetic connection to Africa is still unknown. As such, we construct an “African” identity by pulling cultural markers from across the continent. Epitomized by culturally distinct symbols from Ghana, Egypt and American Slavery, Leimert Park and its cultural actors claim an African identity from this conflationary trope. Another storefront, seen in figure 2.7, similarly presents culturally distinct imagery from Africa. The images on the top of the building depict a Malian Chi Wara crest mask, an Ethiopian Coptic

cross, and an unidentified bird. The Egyptian Eye of Heru (see figure 2.8) is portrayed on the glass below the previous three images. This pan-cultural iconography in conjunction with the African references in the store names elucidates one pathway through which Africa is homogenized.
Resistive Performance Venues

Multiple performance spaces, cultural centers, galleries, and political meeting places contribute to Leimert Park’s identity as an artistic and political center. Deceased founder of Fifth Street Dick’s, Richard Fulton, attributed the Village-ness of Leimert Park to the “community harmony resulting from spaces that provide the opportunity for people to see, touch, and hear their culture.”\(^{(46)}\) Despite the high turnover of some of the stores and performance venues, Leimert Park’s merchants, residents, and regular patrons have created and support an “African Village” in the middle of urban Los Angeles. These venues exhibit at least some of the characteristics of the urban palimpsest, most notably insofar as the spaces are inscribed again and again with efforts of a community determined to resist erasure by creating and perpetuating its own traditions and memories.

Figure 2.9
Map of Resistive Performance Venues in Leimert Park Village
Map by Chris Masicampo and Giavanni Washington

\(^{(46)}\) *Leimert Park: the story of a village in South Los Angeles*, DVD, directed by Jeanette Lindsay (2008; Los Angeles, CA: Foster Johnson Studios)
The Vision Theatre (under renovation)

Currently closed for renovations, The Vision is a 1000-seat theatre in Leimert Park Village. Formerly owned by Marla Gibbs, the theatre is now under the aegis of the Department of Cultural Affairs of the City of Los Angeles. It has been closed for at least 10 years.

Recently, a consortium of representatives comprising local urban planners, the Department of Cultural Affairs of the City of Los Angeles and others coalesced to renovate the Vision Theatre and its environs to quite resemble The Grove shopping and entertainment complex located at Fairfax and 3rd Street. Driven by outside forces, this renovation will effectively erase all signs of Africa despite the overtly expressed wishes of the community and will likely result in forced forgetting and permanent erasure of a cultural center and all its attendant production (Cherry 2007: 2).

The Kaos Network Arts Collective

Kaos, as Villagers refer to it, is a community-based media production center and screening space. In 1991, Ben Caldwell established The Kaos Network as a meeting space for young people. Committed to “empowering the community to resist the overwhelmingly negative onslaught of images from the mass media,” the former UCLA film student has used the space, among other things, to train “generations of African American youth to seize the means of image
production and create their own.” Perhaps best known for “Project Blowed,” its Thursday night homage to hip-hop and rap, The Kaos Network acts as an incubator for aspiring artists. Many successful rappers and hip hop artists such as Aceyalone, Medusa, Busdriver, Freestyle Fellowship, and Jurassic Five launched their careers at “Project Blowed” (Lindsay 2008).

_The World Stage_

Situated on the southeast side in the middle of the 4300 block of Degnan Boulevard, the World Stage makes its home as another of the Village’s cultural pillars. The performance and education gallery was co-founded by drummer Billy Higgins and poet/activist Kamau Daadood in 1989. “The Stage,” as it is affectionately called, hosts weekly programming and provides “support, training and creative outlets for myriad artists and musicians in the area.” It is not uncommon to see Jazz greats, such as Dwight Trible, Howard Smith, or Rose Gayle, intermingling with the regulars at the weekly workshops (youth percussion, Anansi Writer workshop, Jazz Jam Session, Piano Workshop, S.H.I.N.E. Muwasi Women’s African Drum Circle, Sisters of Jazz, and Vocal Workshop) or performing at the Stage’s Weekend Concert Series.

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**Pan Afrikan People’s Arkestra**

The idea for “the Ark” occurred to a road-weary Horace Tapscott in 1961. In his words, “I got off the road to start my own band, to preserve black music. I wanted to preserve and teach and show and perform the music of Black Americans and Pan-African music, to preserve it by playing it and writing it and taking it to the community.” 49 Using music as a platform, the group “lead community efforts and activism as an artist collective with the community a central part of its identity and mission.” 50 In addition to free performances, the Ark provided affordable, community-oriented jazz and jazz training (Isoardi and Miranda 2006). In keeping with the mission to bring music to the people, The Pan Afrikan Peoples Arkestra even performed on flatbed trucks during the 1965 Watts Riots (Kohlhaase 1999).

**Babe’s and Ricky’s Inn**

Founded in 1964, Babe’s and Ricky’s was a mainstay for Blues performance on Central Avenue for 32 years. Financial pressures – in the form of tripled rent from her landlord who wanted to expand the liquor store he owned next door – forced owner Laura Mae Gross to relocate the club to Leimert Park in 1997. Both locations hosted noted Blues musicians such as B.B. King, Bobby Bland, T-Bone Walker, Lowell Fusion, Little Milton and Albert King. 51

**Fifth Street Dick’s Jazz Coffeehouse (defunct)**

Situated on 43rd Place, a couple doors down from The Vision and across the street from the site of the Drum Circle, Fifth Street Dick’s was the soul of Leimert Park Village until it closed. Veteran and former homeless alcoholic Richard Fulton established Fifth Street Dick’s in

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50 ibid

the early 1990s. In its heyday, Fifth Street Dick’s epitomized Village. The sidewalk in front of the venue was cluttered with small tables where people would play competitive chess games until the early hours of the morning. Inside, customers would pack the lower level to buy coffee and listen to poetry readings or welcome the jazz music floating down from the loft above. Fifth Street Dick’s was one of the few spots in the area that would stay open until five or six in the morning. The universal love and respect for the venue prompted regulars to protect and save it during the Los Angeles Uprising in 1992. Fifth Street Dick’s closed upon Fulton’s death in 1999, but was reopened on Degnan in 2005. Lucy Florence Coffee House occupied the space vacated by Fifth Street Dick’s in 2000.

Lucy Florence Cultural Center (defunct)

Founded in 1996 by twin brothers Richard and Ron Harris, Lucy Florence was named for their mother. Originally located on Pico in the mid-city area, the Harris’ moved Lucy Florence to 4300 block of Degnan Boulevard in 2000. The poetry readings, open mic nights, and live music filled the void left by the closure of Fifth Street Dicks’s. Some years later, the twins expanded into the larger property on the corner of 43rd Place and Degnan Blvd. Culturally related programming blossomed in the space that their sign described as a “World Famous Coffee & Sandwich House, Art Gallery, Movie Theater/Media Room.” The twins closed the coffeehouse in 2012 and returned to Georgia to care for their elderly mother.

The Dance Collective (defunct)

Though closed in 2005 due to rising rents, the Dance Collective still holds a special place in my heart. The studio was established shortly after the 1992 Los Angeles uprisings by dancer-

choreographers Pat Taylor, Lady Walquer Vereen, and Nzingha Camara. On any given evening, the studio’s bay window became opaque with the collective perspiration of drummers and dancers. Rhythmic percussive notes permeated the souls of participants and observers, who often packed the foyer and spilled out onto the sidewalk. Whether promoting “traditional” African, Afro-Caribbean, or American Jazz rhythms, the Dance Collective fostered cultural awareness and growth, while providing much needed space for cultural networking.

While the following three venues are not performance spaces as such, they are important threads of Leimert Park’s resistive fabric:

**Museum in Black (defunct)**

Founded in the mid 1980s by Brian Breye, The Museum in Black was dedicated to “ensuring that African American youth know who they are and where they come from” (Loukaitou-Sideris and Grodach 2004: 64). Informally known as the Mayor of Leimert Park while the Museum was housed in the Village, Brian Breye, singlehandedly amassed a collection of hundreds of items that elucidated a story of African America that is all too often swept under the rug. Exhibits displaying infant-sized shackles, Jim Crow-era “Colored Only” signs, and photographs of lynchings juxtaposed pictures of Black activists like Frederick Douglass and Martin Luther King, Jr., placards detailing the inventions and patents of African Americans, African masks, shrines, costumes, and farm implements. The *Los Angeles Times* recognized the institution as an “irreplaceable and incredibly important space that should be maintained at any cost” (Lebow 2002). Despite a $20,000 donation for operating costs in 2001, the Museum in Black succumbed to financial pressures in 2005 (Mitchell 2002). Initially, Breye moved the collection to a storefront on Central Avenue. Part of the collection is currently being stored at

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the California African American Museum and part is in Breye’s home while he seeks a permanent home for his vast collection.\footnote{Brian Breye in discussion with author, May 18, 2013.}

*Eso Won Books*


*Sika’s Fine Jewelry*

Nestled between a clothing store and an alley, Sika’s shop is a hub of activity. The sidewalk in front of Sika’s is overflowing with African inspired clothes and handcrafted jewelry, and it is not uncommon to find Sika there, sitting among his wares or playing chess with a Village regular. While the date of the store’s establishment is unclear, Sika has been a champion of the community for at least two decades. Though Sika’s store is not a performance venue, Sika himself is the co-founder and co-producer of The FREE Leimert Park Village African Art & Music Festival. Now in its third year, this festival took up the reins of the declining African Marketplace and Cultural Faire.
Summary: Village as an Episteme

Although context, history, and other cultural information may be obliterated in the processes of conflation, “Africa” as palimpsest provides a tablet primed for all manner of inscription. Those in Leimert Park can create, recapture, and reconnect with aesthetics and values that facilitate a newly inscribed “Africa.” Leimert Park Village boasts a high density of venues that encourage and provide space for agency-producing actions by the Villagers. A unit of space and time where “truth” is mediated, masticated and often turned on its head in the pursuit of validation, the term Village is also a social construction through which memory and tradition are performed, preserved and perpetuated. Village thus becomes an iterative process created by stakeholders in the community for the community.

Conclusion: The Original “African” Village and Drum Circle

Perhaps one of the first recorded efforts of Africans and their descendants achieving “More Africa” in America through a “focused gathering” is Congo Square. Located in what is now known as New Orleans’ historic district, Congo Square was the site of the original African drum circle in the United States. Described as “a gathering place, which began with the Native Americans, [and] resumed during the eighteenth century with African descendants and eventually citizens of all backgrounds,” this weekly assemblage was a tradition that endured intermittently between 1724 and 1850 (Evans 2011:1).

An 1817 city ordinance consolidated and confined the once multiple gatherings to “a public square in the back of town” (ibid). The activities in Congo Square were a “cultural continuum that existed during all three periods of rule – French, Spanish, and America” (ibid). Under French rule, Louisiana’s Code Noir “established Sundays as non-workdays for all inhabitants of the colony,” including enslaved Africans (ibid). Crowds as large as 600 people
Latrobe (1951) convened to revel in their truncated freedom and engage in the cultural activities from their homelands.

As very few instruments, if any, physically survived the Middle Passage and other transportation and transplantation routes such as those between the island nations of Cuba and Haiti and New Orleans, memory and available resources informed the refashioning of any instrument used in Congo Square or, for that matter, anywhere else that actively held Africans and their descendants as bondspeople. These improvised instruments included a variety of drums such as: “a long kind of narrow drum of various sizes, from two to eight feet in length, three of four of which make a band” (Schultz 1810: 197); a “square, stool-shaped frame drum,…a wooden hollow gong that was struck with a stick,…and a calabash with a round hole studded with nails and beat upon with two sticks (Evans 2011: 63). One observer reported seeing two different styles of drums played with “an incredible quickness with the edge of his hands and fingers” (Latrobe 1951: 50). One was played by “an old man…astride a cylindrical drum about a foot in diameter…[and the other was] an open staved thing held between the knees” (ibid). Other percussive instrumentation included: hollow drums; log drums; and membranophones. Body music also played a pivotal role in the orchestration of Congo Square. There were, of course, “hand claps, foot stamps, chest and thigh pats, shouts and ululations” (Evans 2011: 71). Beyond percussion, there were flute-like instruments called quills, marimbas, stringed gourds, and the banza as a precursor to the banjo.

Several observers noted that participants in Congo Square would not only congregate in rings or circles, but also danced in circles. The circle, which encourages community support and sanction, is a well-defined aesthetic of Central and West African-derived and -influenced cultural

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55 See Wash Wilson, Texas Slave Narratives in the Federal Writers Project for a description of how these instruments were constructed. Wash Wilson was a person of African descent who was enslaved in New Orleans during his early life.
expressions. Noted African art historian Robert Farris Thompson observes of present-day Congo Square that, “circles, ren-dered [sic] in paving stones, cover the square as if mapping the clusters of dancers. The original circles included ‘Minas,’ Bakongo, Mande, and ‘Gangas’” (Thompson 2011: 160). Circle dances from Western and Central Africa were the forebears to slave era dances such as the Ring Shout.  

Typifying another African aesthetic, those who composed the circle were engaged participants. “They joined the performers by clapping their hands, stomping their feet, patting their bodies, answering the calls of the chanter, adding improvised intonations and ululations…singing songs that accompanied the dances, shaking gourd rattles and replacing dancers who became fatigued” (Evans 2011: 89). Within the confines and constructs of slavery in another land, Congo Square cultural actors brought Africa to New Orleans.

Given the disparaged place that Africans and their descendants held in slave society, there is a remarkable array of witnesses who recorded notes about the dances in Congo Square (Latrobe 1951; LaTrobe 1980; Knight 1824; Le Page du Pratz 1758). These observations describe dances such as “the Congo,” “the Calinda,” “the Cungi,” “the Juba,” and “the Bamboula,” which scholars agree are distinct and African-derived. These dances served as the base from which several other forms of dance were later hybridized.  

The resemblance between the The Congo Square experience and the Leimert Park Drum Circle extend beyond their logistical similarities – weekly Sunday occurrence; circle as organizing unit; mixture of cultural expressions from Africa (particularly in the more recent iterations of Congo Square); innovations in instrumentation, etc. Both “focused gatherings”

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56 See Figure 3.1: Genealogy of Slavery Era Dances

exhibit characteristics of a performative urban palimpsest. Although the cultural actors may not be identical from week to week, the activities during the event are consistent. People gather to celebrate, vend, dance, drum, participate in social exchange, and otherwise perform “Africa” in and on Congo Square and the Leimert Park Drum Circle. As Robert Farris Thompson succinctly states, “black men and women momentarily regained their African origins when they dance” (Thompson 2011: 160). Ultimately, cultural actors inscribing “African” traditions and memories on a weekly basis continue to layer the palimpsest.

As the traces accumulate with Sunday sessions, the question of lineage becomes less important. The traditions and memories being performed and perpetuated in Congo Square – at least in the beginning – could ostensibly be linked to Africa or other geographic sources after the displacement of persons from various parts of their Caribbean dispersion. “A Daily Picayune article stated that members of African nations danced among themselves and would not dance near certain other groups” (Evans 2011: 89). Distinct groups would have eventually intermixed either by choice or requirement. Traditions and memories would inevitably be altered as a result of such intermixing. Similarly, the shared ambiguous genetic links to Mother Africa of the Leimert Park Drum Circle cultural actors result in the creation of memories and traditions.

In both the Leimert Park Drum Circle and, particularly, later performance events in Congo Square, such morphing traditions and memories do not abrogate or mitigate the validity of either group’s experience. Traces of tradition and memory accrue through the urban palimpsest, allowing cultural actors in both the original drum circle and in contemporary African-inspired manifestations to negotiate past, present, and possible futures. I turn first to memory and its accumulation among practitioners of West African dance in America in Chapter
3, followed by an in-depth analysis of the dynamics in the Leimert Park Drum Circle as they relate to tradition.
Introduction

At times during [the Middle Passage], there was the insistence that Africans dance to assure whites that they would remain lively enough to be delivered to the auction block in North America. In fact, the total being of African men, women, and children was the object of enslavement, and it was not uncommon for the branding iron to be used to identify them. But this was not the only brand they wore, for uncounted thousands wore that of the whip. In either case, to dance with such scars on one’s body meant that, no matter how true to traditional dance forms a particular African dance was, a new history of dance had begun.

Like the sky above and the beat of anguished hearts, the moves of the dancers were no mere social construct; their melancholy rhythms were as elemental as the flow of ocean currents, as real as the agony of those in the fetid holds of the death vessels. All who survived that passage would dance with such memories in mind (Stuckey 2002: 39-40).

Memories of slavery and the Triangle Slave Trade have inexorably become part of the lived experience of the progeny of the enslaved. Captured Africans transported across the Atlantic Ocean danced “melancholy rhythms” with “anguished hearts,” marking the beginning of a “new history of dance.” While the route of that marked history can be followed through the trajectory of African derived and influenced dance from the decks of the slave ships to contemporary Black cultural expressions, the vicissitudes of colonialism also gave rise to other relevant history vectors.

I utilize four such vectors – Retention, Arrival of the Ballets, Technology, and Invention – to explicate the subversive, agency-producing actions of Leimert Park Drum Circle participants. Various technologies of creation operationalized through these history vectors assist the contemporary Leimert Park cultural actor in mitigating the negative aspects of slavery’s legacies and negotiating their concepts of self and understanding of the world. These technologies – inventing traditions, conflating ideas/information and reworking histories to better-fit well-
established narratives – are deployed in and through the urban palimpsest in efforts to procure “More A-Free-Kaaa!!”

Shaped in some way by the Transatlantic Slave Trade, history vectors Retention, Arrival of the Ballets, Technology and Invention underscore contemporary practices around the memory of that rupture. Recall that the urban palimpsest is a site where time is inconsequential and participants arbitrate “the never simple relations between pastness, historicity, memory, and archiving with notions of presentness, futurity, movement, forgetting and destruction” (Allsop and Lepecki 2010: 2). The urban palimpsest absorbs the contouring effects of time, especially for those who, as historian Sterling Stuckey suggests, “dance with such memories in mind.” The simultaneous presence of past, present, and future allow cultural actors to perform the history vectors producing traces that privilege location over temporality. Each week, phenomenological residue – heavy laden with memory – accumulates, converges, and informs the weekly practice of the Leimert Park Drum Circle participants as they resist disenfranchising hegemonic attacks.

The following field note opens the discussion on how the Leimert Park Drum Circle as urban palimpsest makes it possible for participants to simultaneously negotiate the memories of multiple pasts. In the introduction to their edited volume, Activating the Past: Historical Memory in the Black Atlantic World, professors Andrew Apter and Lauren Derby argue that “history and memory are co-implicative, as are the invented and recovered aspects of the past” (2010: xviii). The slippage of time created in the urban palimpsest of the Leimert Park Drum Circle permits, and even encourages, dialogue between past, present, and future histories and memories, alongside their “cultural configur[ations]… and political motivat[ions]” (ibid).
Ethnographic Description and Analysis: December’s Dance of Reparations

Ethnographic Field Note
Date: June 2008
Place: Leimert Park Drum Circle
Los Angeles, CA USA

A man of slightly larger than average build and height, clad in old-school Black Air Jordan’s with a red Nike swoosh, Black nylon sweatpants, and a Black, oversized t-shirt entered the circle to offer a dance. Holding a placemat-sized piece of cardboard with both hands above his head, he began by deliberately tracing an inner ring. Thrice he marched around the circle, silently commanding the attention of participants and observers alike. As he began the last arc of his first turn, I was able to read the image on his t-shirt and the words on his cardboard sign. While dark, large, Hollywood-famous sunglasses rendered his face unrecognizable, the simple mantra on the sign, “REPARATIONS NOW!,” confirmed that this man was, indeed, the mobile vendor who sells a variety of political t-shirts out of his early model waxed-apple red van. His t-shirt, with an image of a slave-ship and its “cargo,” underscored the anger in his march and the broad, militant strokes of the script in which he had written his sign. Making his final turn of the interior circle, the advocate for justice and acknowledgement stopped his defiant march and faced the lead drummer. Holding the sign in his left hand and making a fist with his right, he carefully brought his two hands together, fist on cardboard, and settled them squarely in front of his heart. The vendor remained in that position until a butterfly deemed him a safe harbor.

The vendor calls himself December. In a later conversation, my concern about the lack of, and need for, federal acknowledgment of the iniquity of slavery before any plausible discussion
about reparations could begin was met with December’s fervent belief and faith that “the day soon come.” A few scant weeks later, on July 29, 2008, a resolution apologizing for slavery passed by a voice vote in the House of Representatives.58

Ethnographic Field Note, Continued

Date: June 2008
Place: Leimert Park Drum Circle
Los Angeles, CA USA

Suddenly, December was an anthropomorphic tangle of geometric angles. He dropped his hands, moved his elbows back as if he were about to perform a vertical push-up, took one step forward with his right foot, immediately shifting his weight to his front foot, bent forward at the waist, and cocked his head to one side. A dialogue between December and the drummers developed from this point. He performed several pop-locking phrases, accenting his movements and changing positions as if directed by the rhythm. Every few sequences he would freeze in a position, with a stillness that defied the exacting turbulence of his previous movements. The vendor’s dance continued with a flourish of popping, yet fluid movements, from which the careful observer might have discerned “Crip Walking” and the thrown-up gang signs. This sequence concluded in another expressive freeze. Transitioning out of an upright bouncy Crip Walk, he simultaneously bent ninety degrees at the waist, took one step forward with his

58 Although the Senate “stated that it will not consider the House’s apology resolution” (Samad 2008: 11), House Resolution 194 is the first official recognition of slavery from the federal government of the United States. This long-overdue acknowledgement comes 147 years after the “official” end of slavery. The affront of the delay is exacerbated by: a) the shorter length of time to other federal apologies; and b) the size of the population impacted by state-sanctioned atrocities (i.e. apology for the illegal overthrow of the Kingdom of Hawaii – 100 years (Washington Law Review 1996); apology to the ~120,000 Japanese-Americans interned during World War II – 53 years (Howard-Hassman 2004). Moreover, the bill makes no mention of reparations, which the formerly interned Japanese-Americans were granted.
right foot in first position, tucked the sign to his chest with his left arm, while his free right hand formed a fist and shot backwards, up into the air.

December’s last freeze not only silhouetted the symbol of the Black Power movement, it embodied the struggle of which that fist is a sign. December’s final resistive pose, sign demanding immediate reparations, and his t-shirt memorializing both those who survived or were lost during the Middle Passage paradoxically animated the vendor’s tumultuous inner anger, frustration, and resolve. That he was performing this protest in the middle of the Leimert Park Drum Circle accompanied by African drumming might appear a bit incongruous, but the urban palimpsest creates what many have called “uchronia” (Hastrup 1992: 113), defined as a “structured world, nowhere in time.” This uchronia enables the simultaneous presence of multiple vectors of history and myriad strands of memory.

I must take a short detour and discuss December’s performance with respect to his Crip Walking and throwing up of gang signs. Recognized as a form of counterliteracy by scholar Susan Phillips, gang dancing and hand signs combine “written representation with memorializing, mimesis, and movement” (Phillips 2009: 71). There is a long history in the literature of positioning writing as the decisive fulcrum between savagery and civilization. Scholars, such as Levi-Strauss, have argued “the primary function of writing, as a means of communication, is to facilitate the enslavement of other human beings” (Lévi-Strauss 1992: 292). Given that enslaved Africans, and later, those of African descent, were overwhelmingly forcibly denied the opportunity to develop literacy skills, other modes of expression and communication were created, performed, and perpetuated under the hardship of slavery.

According to Phillips, gang “dancing is just one of many body-centered expressive genres,” derived from “performative patterns established during slavery” (2009: 76). While Crip
Walking the performer uses his feet and hands to spell “out affiliations, nicknames, enemies, and memorials to the dead” (71). Therefore, December’s Crip Walking and hand gestures inside of the drum circle can be understood as a memorial and assertion of self inside his protest of a missing memorial to slavery inside the larger resistive performance of the drum circle.

History Vectors

*Retention: 1619 to Present*

The first of the four history vectors, *Retention*, begins at capture, continues through the Middle Passage, the subsequent 400 years, and manifests in the present. Throughout, cultural actors have employed myriad strategies and tactics to resist erasure. The mechanisms through which certain qualities have persisted into contemporary diasporic practices are sometimes contested. Nevertheless, the trajectory and evolution of African dance throughout the Black Atlantic since the forced migration of the Triangle Slave Trade has been well documented by many scholars in various disciplines.

Much academic attention has been given to the influence of African aesthetics on the development of movement in the Caribbean and South America. The relationship between memory retentions and the processes of *creolization* and *hybridization* is readily apparent in the dance traditions and religious practices performed in these regions. Noted art historian Robert Farris Thompson, for example, has exhaustively investigated the progression of the Mambo from its Congolese origins to its present day manifestations in Argentina, Cuba, Peru, Mexico, and New York. Thompson also published a book on the creole origins of Argentine tango (2005). Dance historians Lynn Fauley Emery (1988), Jacqui Malone (1996), Barbara Browning (1998), and Brenda Dixon Gottschild (1996) have likewise excavated the African origins of Brazilian

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59 I define erasure as systematic hegemonic practices meant to alienate certain processes of meaning making.
capoeira and samba. Other scholars, such as Katrina Hazzard-Gordon (1990) and Yvonne Daniel (2005) have investigated the religious, secular, and secularized aspects of African-derived dance in Cuba and Haiti.

Similarly, scholars have undertaken deep investigations into the development of African-descended dance in the United States since 1619. Developing what dance scholar Katrina Hazzard-Gordon calls “models of culture” and suffering from what Szwed and Abrahams call “desocietalization,” or a renunciation of the surface aspects of culture, African culture transformed into African American culture by retaining “much of [its original] African character” (Hazzard-Gordon 1996: 103; Szwed and Abrahams 1977). Not even a 1740 piece of legislature could obliterate the indomitable spirit of bonded Africans and their progeny. The legislation, which later became known as the Negro Act, did not allow the enslaved to “beat drums, blow horns, or use any other loud instruments,” and, further allowed “masters, overseers and other persons whomever,” to “take up whip” upon those who did. Further influenced by loss of language, inter-ethnic assimilation and a motivation to retain a sense of self (Hazzard-Gordon 1996: 105), these “models of culture” illuminate the resistive cultural practices that generated new dance forms.

The Juba

Many researchers agree that the Juba is the dance that has most heavily influenced tap dancing (Knowles 2002: 29; Gottschild 2003: 109; Emery and Emery 1988: 93). African in origin and known as the Djouba in Haiti, the Juba “has been mentioned in conjunction with West Indies as a sacred dance” (Emery and Emery 1988: 96). As the dance migrated throughout the Caribbean and the United States, it moved into the secular realm as “distinguished by the patting which accompanied it,” and “the stamping, clapping, slapping of arms, chest and thighs, which
appeared extensively when drums were prohibited” (ibid). In her article, “The Negro Dance,”
dance anthropologist Katherine Dunham described the “original African form, the Juba, or
Jumba, or Majumba,” as “primarily a competitive dance of skill” (1941: 997-98). Further
characterizing the movements, she continues, “one person steps forward in the circle of dancers
and begins exhibiting his skill, whereupon he is joined by a member of the opposite sex who
joins him in the exhibition. The people in the circle may rotate for a certain number of measures,
or may remain stationary, all the while clapping rhythmically, and encouraging the competitors
with song and verse” (ibid). Knowles characterizes the Juba leg movement as having “footwork
as similar in some ways to that of the Irish jig,” and it was also “done flatfooted,” and included
“an eccentric shuffling step in which one foot was continually lifted” (2002: 30). The Juba was
distinct from the jig in that “the upper body was also involved in the movement” (ibid). The
Pigeon wing, which employed the flapping arms that “were later refined as the circular arm
movements done during the execution of tap wings” (ibid), originated from the Juba.

The Juba and other dances are the slavery era progenitors of Harlem Ballroom dances,
tap dancing, jazz dancing and they are the great-great-grandparents of the more recent Breakin’,
Hip Hop, House and other Black contemporary dance practices (see figure 3.1). An African-
based dance culture endured and, moreover, flourished in the changing and unpredictable
sociopolitical landscape of the enslaved African and their descendants. Debate persists,
however, around the mechanisms through which African Americans have maintained “African”
memory in dance movement across generations.
Figure 3.1 Genealogy of Slavery Era Dances

See Appendix 2 for a list of the sources from which the above data was compiled.
Retention Mechanism Theories

Several theories exist regarding the mechanisms through which the African characteristics observed in these dances just discussed (and other cultural expressions) may have been retained. The transmission methods of such cultural behaviors and memories are likely contingent on temporal distance from the Middle Passage. Mechanisms that were in place during the nearly 250 years that Africans were being transported into this country are not necessarily the same ones that are in play in 2013 – 150 years after the abolition of slavery and 50 years after African Americans won the right to vote.

The Encounter: During the early days of US slavery, any African cultural continuity was necessarily shaped by the encounter between African culture and European/American social structures. Anthropologists Sidney Mintz and Richard Price consider “interpenetration” as posing “one of the most interesting and enigmatic questions to be weighed in examining the growth and character of so-called creole societies” (1992: 5).61 Any new cultural product was shaped by the memory of the Middle Passage or the realities of bondage and interminable forced labor. Instruments and foods were refashioned and approximated with local materials. Similarly, cultural dances were performed according to the restrictions of the slave state. The prohibition of the drum and eventual emergence of the ring shout and tap dancing are some of the clearest examples of the African/American encounter among African descended dance traditions in the United States.62

Interethnic Assimilation: The African characteristics observed in the dances discussed above may have been the result of what dance scholar Katrina Hazzard-Gordon has designated

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61 While they acknowledged the colonial encounter as limiting any resultant hybrid culture, ultimately Mintz and Price argued that possible Africanisms were obliterated rather than incorporated.

“inter-ethnic assimilation” (1996: 105). She posits “the customs, traits and habits under which ethnic specifics could be subsumed or most comfortably absorbed, while sustaining something of their original character, emerged most vigorously and became the initial outline for the emerging African American cultural complex” (108). With respect to dance culture, Hazzard-Gordon contends the characteristics present across ethnic groups included “segmentation and delineation of various body parts, including hips, torso, head, arms, hands, and legs, the use of multiple meter as polyrhythmic sensitivity, angularity, multiple centers of movement, asymmetry as balance, percussive performance, mimetic performance, improvisation, derision dances and call and response” (105). Though he doesn’t offer a similar theory of origin for these aesthetics in an American dance context, Robert Farris Thompson delineated similar principles twenty years earlier in his book *African Art in Motion: Icon and Act* (1974).

Deep Structure: Mintz and Price suggest one of the most important factors influencing retentions among enslaved Africans and their progeny was their “common basic assumptions about social relationships or the workings of the universe” (1992: 11). Referred to as “deep structure” in structural anthropology, Mintz and Price argue that such fundamental beliefs and values are “unconscious” (ibid).63 Dance scholar Cheryl Willis agrees, arguing “culture is inherent within a society and functions beneath the level of consciousness” (Willis 1996: 146).

Focusing on the aesthetics of attitude, musicality, and style in order propose a mechanism through which contemporary African American movement is connected with “its rich African heritage,” Willis analyzes tap dancing as “an expression of the deep structure passed on from African culture” (105). In this way, “deep structure” as a pathway functions still in contemporary practices.

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63 For more on the linguistic roots of deep structure, please see Clifford Geertz’ *Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight* (1974) and Claude Lévi-Strauss’ *Tristes Tropiques* (1955).
Blood Memory: While initially uncomfortable with the eternal eugenicist implications of the phrase, I find the concept of “blood memory” to be salient to the cultural retentions of enslaved Africans and, in particular, their descendants. I first came across the concept of “blood memory” in Thomas DeFrantz’s book, Dancing Revelations, in which Alvin Ailey is described as choreographing his first pieces based on his blood memory, or remembered fragments of his childhood (2006: 27). While not a far jump from the relatively innocuous association of Blackness and certain movements to the much more dangerous, spurious association with Blackness and, for example, lowered intelligence, or predilection for criminality, the phrase can be useful and must be considered an emic production of an African American cultural reality.

In her book Black Dancing Bodies, Brenda Dixon Gottschild shares a story about a colleague’s discomfort with validating the concept of “blood memory”:

“A German colleague of mine was upset about his idea of blood memories, even in an African American gestalt. For him, a professor of American Studies at Berlin’s Free University, the idea of anybody’s blood memories smacks of the racism that resulted in Germany’s notorious ethnic cleansing. But my rejoinder was that we must always be culturally specific in our observations. African Americans are not Germans hoping to establish an Aryan identity. Ailey is talking cultural history, not racial imperialism, and uses the term historically, not genetically. For Ailey, blood memories are a subtext in the script of what we see and experience as African American spirit.” (Gottschild 2003: 259).

That African Americans share a “blood memory” is, in fact, a notion bordering on essentialist. To maintain a safe distance from the upset and fear of Gottschild’s German colleague, I must rely on cultural theorist Stuart Hall’s assertion that the human need to categorize is innocuous (Hall and Jhally 1996). Destined to “dance with such memories in mind,” the mental and emotional sequelae of slavery are a shared constant in the cultural experience of most African Americans.
Robert Farris Thompson further demonstrates the presence of blood memory in various cultures from Africa through several interviews in his book *African Art in Motion*. Religious philosopher John S. Mbiti contributes to the concept of blood memory by declaring that “I am, because we are; and since we are, therefore I am.” (Thompson 1974: 28). A Kongo taxi driver admonishes that “our ancestors gave us these dances, [and] we can not forget them,” while a Béninois man from Ajashe insists “it is our blood that is dancing” (ibid). These thoughts suggest that transmission of this cultural belief borders upon responsibility.

**Summary: Retention Vector**

While one mechanism may be impossible to qualify today (*interethnic assimilation*), and another may still be in play in the 21st century but look very different than it did in the 1600s (*the encounter*), other mechanisms (*deep structure and blood memory*) may still operate in the present day much as they did in preceding centuries. As historian P. Sterling Stuckey astutely observes, “dance was the most difficult of all art forms to erase from the slave’s memory” (Stuckey 2002: 41). Irrespective of the mechanism facilitating retention, the body is the conduit through which each of these mechanisms is operationalized. Stuckey considers that the “body is mind…capable of inscribing in space the language of human spirit” (ibid). The memory that enslaved Africans and their progeny have inscribed since the Middle Passage accumulates in and through the body.

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64 Blood memory in dance drumming is related to the concept of embodied memory, which Diana Taylor maintains is a valid mode of cultural information transfer.
Nevertheless, the stage being different from life, it is necessary to resort to a certain amount of stage adaptation to make ourselves understood by a foreign public. In our African villages, the same dance may last a whole night without tiring anyone. The dances are, moreover, executed in the middle of a ring of spectators who also take part almost as much as the dancers and musicians. On the stage new conditions have to be created by means of different devices in order, on the other hand, to retain the freshness and reality of the dance and, on the other, to destroy the monotony which is quick to arise due to the non-active participation of the audience. That is the reason why we must take our dances only at their culminating point, shorten them and cut out a thousand details which are not important except in the public place of the village (Keita 1959: 23).

Beginning in the 1960s, I contend that history vector *Arrival of the Ballets* heavily influenced contemporary understanding of and fomented participation in traditional West African dance among American practitioners. Perhaps the most pertinent of this investigation, this history vector elucidates how invention is activated and sustained in what most American practitioners consider pure and authentic traditional African dance. The “tradition” that cultural actors, with earnest conviction, emulate and perpetuate evolved from producers deliberately manipulating traditional drum dances to create staged performances that would be successful among Western audiences. In spite, or perhaps because, of this paradox, cultural actors influenced by the *Arrival of the Ballets*, conflated information and innovated traditions for a new cultural milieu.

The national ballet of Guinea, *Les Ballets Africains*, and the national ballet of Senegal presented their first American tours in 1959 and 1971, respectively (D. Green 2011: 20). Their debuts showcased West African dances that were received as “authentic” and “traditional.” However, these Ballets offered hybrid and truncated cultural information. The Ballets comprised individuals from varied ethnic groups resulting in an amalgamation of dance, music, and

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instrumentation traditions (D. Green 2011: 21; Charry 2000: 194; Y. P. Daniel 1996: 790; Castaldi 2006: 203). Further, as so eloquently described above by the founder of Guinea’s national performing ensemble, the dances were adapted and spectacularized for the stage.⁶⁶

When the National Ballet of Guinea made their American debut at Martin Beck Theatre in New York City in February 1959, African-American audiences were politically and culturally primed to receive the information.⁶⁷,⁶⁸ A hotbed of political and social activism in the 1960s, New York was a long-established epicenter of African-inspired cultural production in the US. While it would be woefully inaccurate to claim little or no political or cultural actualization prior to this time period, I designate this time frame as distinct from previous periods due to the particular intersection that set the stage for the advent of West African dance in the United States.⁶⁹

**Political Actualization**

Arriving just as the Civil Rights and the Black Power Movements were dialogically engaged and shifting into high gear to change the political reality of Black America, *Les Ballets Africains* of Guinea represented the reclamation of “heritage and rights to an African identity and sense of self” (Watson 2008: 537-38). The independence movement in many African countries during the same time period must have stoked the flames of the burgeoning stateside crusade. Exploring

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⁶⁸ I partially disagree with Cohen’s argument that “genuine American interest in African performance…was still in its nascent stages when Les Ballets Africains arrived in 1959” (Cohen 2012: 14). African Americans were ready!

⁶⁹ This is also distinct from retentions. I am referring to the more recent Transatlantic movements of African Americans (and others) going to study in Africa and with the Ballets touring the States.
“traditional” African cultural expressions was well aligned with and indicative of the changing political climate.

In 1964, a few years after the *Arrival of the Ballets*, President Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act. The culmination of decades of political struggle and nine years of directed non-violent protest known as the Civil Rights Movement, the signed act outlawed systematic, systemic, and legally protected discrimination in schools, workplaces and public spaces. The Act further “mandated courses on Black and Minority studies into [university-level] curricula on a nationwide basis” (D. Green 2011: 16). Prior to this time “African dance [had] rarely been the focus of research,” and “no course on African dance had been given in the United States” (Hanna 1966: 303). A long-reaching sequela of the positivistic dehumanizing and infantilizing of Africa that fomented the colonial encounter, the lack of African dance classes in the university was a result of the political landscape and paradigm of devaluing African and African-descended cultural production and this legislation was the harbinger of significant change.

Physically corroborating the decolonization of Black folk since the Civil Rights era, the performance of these dances in that epoch earned them a place among what performance scholar Diana Taylor calls “repertoires of resistance” (2003: 271). Alongside capoeira, samba, carnival and hip-hop, the dances of the enslaved African and, later, the enslaved American-born African, were conduits through which cultural actors could successfully resist subjugation by transforming the hegemonically disparaged Africa into a haven, a respite from the perpetual physical, mental, and spiritual vilification of our heritage.
Cultural Actualization:

Since 1920, Africans and African Americans have endeavored to accurately and positively stage Africa and African movement. Early pioneers staging African dance in America were themselves from the continent. Nigerian-born Momodu Johnson\(^{70}\) and Efrom Odok\(^{71}\) and Asadata Dafora, from Sierra Leone, each “founded groups that taught dances” from their native countries (Heard and Mussa 2002: 143). All three reportedly performed with the Works Progress Administration’s Negro Theatre Unit, with Dafora’s group *Shogola Oloba* becoming the African Dance Troupe of the Federal Theatre Project in 1935 Harlem (Schwartz and Schwartz 2011: 33; Creque-Harris 1991; Beckford 1979: 42-3).\(^{72}\)

Momodu Johnson was the co-director of the short-lived African Dance Unit (Long 1995: 49-50). Johnson directed and produced an African dance drama, Bassa Moona, which premiered at the Lafayette Theatre on December 8, 1938 (ibid).\(^{73}\) While little is known of his work prior to 1930, Efiom Odok claimed to have founded his ensemble, Calabar Dancers, in 1921 (Poston 1938). He went on to contribute to and choreograph for theatrical and dance productions at Howard University, Hampton Institute, and Spellman College (Creque-Harris 1991: 23-24, 52-59).

Asadata Dafora choreographed and produced *Kyunkyor, or the Witch Woman* in 1934. Premiering at The Little Theatre in New York City, *Kyunkyor* was “the first opera presented in the United States with authentic African dances and music, performed in an African tongue by

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\(^{70}\) Spelled “Momodu” in LaToya Davis-Craig’s dissertation (2009).

\(^{71}\) Spelled “Effiom” in LaToya Davis-Craig’s dissertation; Spelled “Efiom” in Joshua Cohen’s 2012 article; Spelled “Efrom” in Heard and Mussa’s 2002 book chapter.


http://www.playbillvault.com/Show/Detail/6335/Bassa-Mona

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Three African-born percussionists of note are Guy Warren from Ghana, Nigerian-born Michael Babatunde Olatunji, and Ladji Camara from Guinea. In 1956, Guy Warren “was among the first Africans to record an album for dancing: Africa Speaks, America Answers!” (Heard and Mussa 2002: 146). Babatunde Olatunji, perhaps best known for his album Drums of Passion, was a Rotary International scholarship recipient who attended Morehouse College (Olatunji and Atkinson 2003: 85). In 1954, Olatunji moved to New York where he performed with Asadata Dafora (144). Later that year he formed his own company, the Drums of Passion Dancers, Singers, and Drummers (143). He taught Darlene Blackburn, a dancer and choreographer from Chicago, who later taught Alyo Tolbert, the founder of Muntu Dance Theatre in Chicago (Heard and Mussa 2002: 148). Muntu is now one of the premier African dance companies in the US.

Ladji Camara is credited with promulgating dance and music of the Mandingue in the United States. Arriving in 1959 with Les Ballets Africains, he is also known for bringing the djembe to America as he stayed in New York after the tour. Respected as “Papa” Camara among djembe enthusiasts in the United States, he is responsible for teaching the djembe orchestra to a generation of drummers. Papa Camara founded the Ladji Camara Dance Company in the early seventies.

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In the 1940s and 1950s, American-born pioneers made significant contributions to the legacy of the American practice of West African dance drumming. Georgia-born Nana Yao Opare Dinizulu founded Dinizulu’s Dancers, Drummers and Singers in 1948 (Heard and Mussa 2002: 148). He presided over the company for over 40 years until his death in 1991 (Anonymous 1991). James Hawthorne, better known as Chief Bey, is considered by many to be the African American Master drummer (Davis-Craig 2009: 46). According to Heard and Mussa, Chief Bey, a student of Ismay Andrews, has taught many drummers who have gone on to form their own companies including Richard Bird, Billy Bong, Neal Clarke and Olukoṣè (2002: 148).

In 1935, Katherine Dunham was awarded a Rosenwald Fund Fellowship to study the dances of the Caribbean under Northwestern University’s anthropology department head Melville Herskovits. Her experiences in Haiti, Jamaica, Martinique, and Trinidad planted the seed for what would become the Dunham Technique, which she developed while working on her master’s degree at the University of Chicago. Dunham defined the technique as “a series of forms or exercises derived from primitive rhythms and dance” (Beckford 1979: 49). Based largely on isolating parts of the body while moving others, Dunham’s subsequent choreography was heavily influenced by what she observed in Haiti’s religious practices.

Fellow anthropologist, trained dancer, and Rosenwald Fund Fellowship recipient Pearl Primus, born in Trinidad and raised in New York City, focused her early career primarily on “social-protest [and] spiritual dances” (R. C. Green 2002: 121). In 1948, Primus traveled to research dance in Africa, inclusive of the Gold Coast, Angola, Cameroon, Liberia, Senegal, and the Belgian Congo. Of her extended fieldwork Primus wrote, “Myself was transformed, yet underneath all this a deep process of analysis was taking place” (Primus 1949). While the fallacious metonym of “Africa” was used to describe much of her previous work, upon return
from her fieldwork, Primus’ choreographies reflected her increased desire for accurate portrayal of the cultural information observed in her travels.

Chuck Davis, founder of the Durham, North Carolina African American Dance Ensemble, studied with both Katherine Dunham and Pearl Primus (Schwartz and Schwartz 2011: 6). In 1968, nearly a decade after Les Ballets Africains first performed in New York, Davis founded the Chuck Davis Dance Company of New York, which eventually became “the first African dance company from America to tour Europe under the auspices of the U.S. State Department” (Heard and Mussa 2002: 151). With respect to its impact on the American practice of West African dance, the 1977 founding of DanceAfrica is perhaps Davis’ most enduring accomplishment. DanceAfrica is an annual festival exhibiting African dance companies in the United States. An opportunity for dancers, choreographers, and scholars to showcase and exchange information, DanceAfrica continues to build on the stage set by the early trailblazers.

Influenced by the Ballets’ staged interpretations of “traditional” West African performances, a number of New York-based dance companies would form and in subsequent decades grow into prominence.76 Maintaining ties to their performance birthplace, members and students relocating throughout the United States started other companies. It follows, then, that the “‘traditional’ African dance performed and taught in the United States today deviates from that as performed at its origin. That is, this “traditional” dance as perpetuated in the United States is actually a “ballet” practice introduced by the national dance drumming ensembles of Guinea and Senegal.


Baba Chuck Davis, who has traveled to Africa countless times to study, “insists what he is passing along is not ‘ethnic’ dance, but it is ‘authentic’ African dance for the purpose of theater” (Wolfson 2010). Davis continued, “In Africa these dances are learned on the soil, in the sacred forest, because they know once they take the dance onto the stage it becomes theater. They gather the essence, the authenticity from the soil. Once they leave the soil it is no longer ethnic” (ibid). The “traditional” dance performed and taught in the United States today deviates from that as performed at its origin, in non-proscenium environments (i.e., the villages and quotidian urban life). As such, the “tradition” that cultural actors seek and perpetuate is not in the strictest sense “‘traditional,” or produced in accordance with a long-established paradigm.

Nevertheless, a “tradition” is propagated among practitioners of West African dance drumming in America. A new narrative is created and perpetuated with purpose and function. In a tautological conundrum, present-day cultural actors wield the new tradition, invoking the past in order to legitimize their connection with Africa. The following passage demonstrates how a ‘tradition’ can become imbued and infused with new meanings salient to its contemporary practices.

$Lamba$, The Dance of Praise and Celebration

The telltale movements of $Lamba$, a staple in the American practice of West African dance and drum, are the grand, sweeping arm gestures and precise, marching movements of the feet. $Lamba$, performed in $boubous$ (over-sized shirts with extremely wide sleeves), is closely associated with the 14th century Malian king Mansa Musa, who is known for one of the largest, wealthiest caravans to safely complete the pilgrimage to Mecca.77 As a burgeoning dancer at Florida Agricultural and Mechanical University in the mid-1990s, I was taught that $Lamba$ was a

dance for healing and celebrations, with the exaggerated large-bird-in-flight motions of the
performers’ arms symbolic of giving praise to God and the ancestors.

Continuing my practice over the subsequent decade and half, I enrolled in classes in
every city and country I lived in or visited. *Lamba* was always a staple, but it was never quite
emphasized like it was in Tallahassee. Only recently, through the anthropological work of a
colleague at Florida State University, have I discovered the truth behind *Lamba*’s selection as the
foundational West African rhythm in Tallahassee: for many, many years, it was the only rhythm
that the drummers could play. In the early years of Tallahassee’s dance and drum scene,
drummers were forced to decipher rhythms from poor quality cassette tapes, and only able to
successfully parse *Lamba* from muddled recordings, however, it grew into a foundational rhythm
in that community. 78

This is significant because while it cleared up the *Lamba* myth as it existed in
Tallahassee, it did not address its widespread proliferation throughout the United States. That is,
in nearly every class in which I have danced *Lamba* – all over the United States – it has been
billed as a healing or celebration dance done at weddings or baptisms, for example. In fact, in
the lands of its origin, *Lamba* is a rhythm played to praise the griots, or *jelis*. According to noted
ethnomusicologist Eric Charry, *Lamba* is a rhythm “created by Kouyate *jelis* as a celebration of
being a jeli.” A Kouyate *jeli* living in Los Angeles recently corroborated this for me,
emphatically shaking his head while saying, “no, no *Lamba* is a rhythm for the *jelis* about the
*jelis*.“ 79 *Lamba* is not, in fact, a rhythm dedicated to praising God and the ancestors. Perhaps
something was lost in translation? One might speculate that ‘rhythm-for-celebration’ in the

78 See Andrea-LaToya Davis-Craig’s dissertation, “Building Community: African dancing and drumming in the

79 Personal communication, Aboubacar Kouyate, November 15, 2012.
American context became conflated with “rhythm-for-griot” since griots usually attend such celebratory events.

**Summary: Arrival of the Ballets Vector**

I claim that the veracity of the lore associated with *Lamba* as practiced in the States is not important. Deploying the conflation creation technology, cultural actors adapted the celebration and worship narrative of *Lamba*. African Americans participating in West African dance drumming in the 1960s and 1970s – after the arrival of the national ballets of Senegal and Guinea – were in search of ways to recapture purloined cultural information and fortify their connection with Africa. Bereft of adequate rituals, a result of slavery’s legacy, perhaps cultural actors created myths of origin, to satisfy their need for “stor[ies] to tell themselves about themselves” (Geertz 2005: 80). *Lamba* and the constructed lore inaccurately associated with it typifies the pathway through which vector *Arrival of the Ballet* is still feeding contemporary practices: the village custom is staged and subsequently interpreted and perpetuated as tradition among present-day cultural actors in the Leimert Park Drum Circle.

**Technology: Late 20th and Early 21st Centuries**

Thanks to modern technologies such as “airplanes, telephones, [audio recording devices, and] camcorders,” information passes quickly and easily between widely dispersed individuals in the diaspora (Clifford 1997: 247). Comprising two inputs, the Internet and travel, the *Technology* history vector impacts the contemporary practice of West African dance in America in that it is a conduit for new, corroborative and contradictory information about “traditional” West African dance drumming. Still emerging, *Technology* is continuously shaped by constantly evolving
methods of data capture (e.g., increased speed and integrity, combined with miniaturization and decreasing costs) and the panoply of ways in which users employ them. Similarly, such technological advances increase the efficiency and affordability of air travel. Cultural actors threshold the diaspora can now obtain “traditional” information through electronic capture and near immediate dissemination of said information or by capitalizing on accessible international travel to either bring culture bearers stateside or by traveling themselves to sites of origin.

**Internet: Digital Display**

Consolidated in 1993, the World Wide Web affects globalization by reducing time and space such that information can be shared instantaneously over great distances. The Internet also acts as an immense repository with the potential for the eternal storage of material. The rapid technological advances of portable digital recording devices have contributed to the upsurge of video-sharing sites, such as YouTube, on the net.

Effectively obliterating any obstacle to information procurement, video-sharing sites raise questions about cultural authenticity and veracity. Scholars have raised questions about novel opportunities “to visually expose the truth about the world,” “spin truth,” and “to invent and re-invent their sense of self” (Jarrett 2008; Faulkner and Melican 2007; Sacchetti-Dufrense and Nicholas 2008). Utilizing the Internet as a platform to share “traditional” content similarly raises questions about the viewer. What are the implications of such spatial and temporal distances between practitioners and the voyeurs? What are the signposts guiding interpretation (of language, movement, context)?

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80 The effects of the Internet are beyond the scope of this study as my field notes do not capture any Internet-related data, but represent fertile ground for future research.
Travel

In what Appadurai would call an “ethnoscape,” the Technology memory vector describes the “landscape of persons who constitutes the shifting world in which we live” (Appadurai 1996: 33). Immigration and tourism have recently and materialistically impacted the contemporary practice of West African dance drumming in the States. As is the case with rapid dissemination of cultural information through the Internet, increasingly available and accessible travel impacts the ability of immigrants and tourists to move, taking their cultural production with them, around the world.

Immigration: As people migrate, so too does any associated cultural information and production. Contemporary immigration of Africans to the United States clearly exerts some influence on the “memory of tradition” for those American practitioners of West African dance drumming by creating an input similar yet distinct from the information disseminated by the Arrival of the Ballets. Beginning roughly in the 1980s, increased immigration from Africa reinvigorated the American practice of West African dance.81

Immigration from Africa to the United States has grown 40-fold in the last six decades, therefore it stands to reason that the number of artists from Africa has also increased.82 Individuals migrate to the US for a variety of reasons: financial gain, ability to support family in homeland (Diouf-Kamara 1997; Pedraza-Bailey), to avoid political persecution and access to higher education. Black African (sub-Saharan, not including white South Africans) immigrants

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81 According to African History Professor Joseph Takougang’s 2005 article, this is largely due to “the 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act and the Diversity Visa Program that was introduced as part of the 1990 Immigration Act. While the 1986 Act made it easier for undocumented immigrants, including those from Africa then living in the United States to become permanent residents, the Diversity Visa Program, which was aimed at promoting immigration from hitherto underrepresented countries and regions of the world allowed up to 50,000 ‘qualified’ Africans annually to migrate to the United States through a lottery process.”

tend to congregate in New York and California. Consequently, California and New York host some of the most prolific centers of African dance drumming in the US.

Riding on the legacy left by the *Arrival of the Ballets*, immigration ushered in a second wave of dance drum artists. Capitalizing on the US thirst for knowledge about traditional West African dance drumming, fomented in part by the late 1980s “increased interest in the jembe[sic]” (Charry 1996: 66), immigrant dance and drum masters are often welcomed into American dance drum communities. As many of the recently immigrated West African dance drum artists are graduates of West African national ballets, the integrity and authenticity of their “traditionality” can be questioned.

As discussed earlier, the staged performances of the national ballets have been spectacularized and hybridized since the inception of the Ballets. The need to engage Western audiences required larger movements (Daniel 1996: 790-91), quicker choreographic and musical resolution (Keita 1959: 23) and theatrical costuming. African Americans interpreted this spectacularized repertoire as “traditional.” The Ballet’s larger, faster, and more dramatic repertoire became iconic of traditional West African movement among American practitioners.

For decades cultural actors in the United States replicated this sensationalized mode of performance as “traditional.” During the same time period, West African ballets continued on their trajectory, creating and staging sensational dances. As contemporary members from later versions of the first ballets insinuate themselves into West African drum and dance communities all over the US, their repertoire, invented and typically based in traditional village movement and music, is easily incorporated by American practitioners as authentically “traditional.”
Drum and Dance Camps (Tourism): Widely understood as concerning the movement of people and capital around the world, tourism is the second facet of travel comprising the Technology history vector. As described in the discussion of the previous memory vector, Pearl Primus was, with the aid of the “last and largest fellowship awarded by the Julius Rosenwald Foundation, the first of her contemporaries to visit Africa in 1948” (Schwartz and Schwartz 2011: 2). Just over half a century later, transatlantic travel is decidedly more accessible and efficient. As such, tourism – cultural tourism in particular – has played a significant role in the ability to procure cultural information from ostensible sites of origin. Specifically, I refer to the increased ability of practitioners of West African dance drumming to attend destination dance/drum camps.

The scholarly pursuit of cultural tourism has produced the subcategories of heritage tourism and roots tourism. Recognized as “one of the largest, most pervasive, and fast growing sectors of the tourism industry today” (Timothy and Nyaupane 2009: 1), heritage tourism (sometimes modified as cultural heritage tourism), is defined as “travelling to experience the places and activities that authentically represent the stories and people of the past and present.”83 Subtly, but significantly, distinct from conventional heritage tourism is roots tourism. Referring specifically to “groups of return[e]s who are usually unable to narrow their genealogical heritage beyond the broad area of West Africa” (Handley 2006: 20), roots tourism emphatically describes the African diaspora in America (and presumably elsewhere) returning to the mythical homeland.

The sociopolitical climate created by the Civil Rights Movement, Martin Luther King Jr.’s assassination, the publishing of Alex Haley’s Roots, and notably, the broadcasting of the

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eight-night miniseries contributed to a desire among African Americans to return to Africa (Clarke 2006: 140). In the 1990s, African Americans began to journey in record numbers to historical sites of memory along the west coast of Africa (Handley 2006: 24). The slave castles, forts and “doors of no return” in Ghana were, and still are, the most popular destination for African American tourists searching for or researching their roots.\(^84\) Despite the polemic around the commercialization\(^85\) of these lieu de mémoire, “certain sites are so ‘full’ of meaning that they cannot be rendered superficial through their commodification” (Edensor 2002: 5). The United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) designated the forts and castles along the Ghanaian coast as World Heritage Sites in 1979, undoubtedly cementing Ghana as an enduring destination for this kind of cultural tourist.\(^86\)

While not yet defined in the cultural tourism literature, I claim there exists another class of tourism pertinent to this investigation. Likely a type of roots or heritage tourism, destination dance and drum camps comprise what I call immersion tourism. Dance educator and psychologist Barbara Streets describes these international camps as “dynamic spirals of postcolonial oppression and resistance, sociocultural politics, capitalism, and an unbridled love affair with dance coalescing in a spinning mosaic” (Streets 2011: 79). Typically one to three weeks in duration, the American trend for attending international dance and drum camps began in the early 1990s.

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\(^84\) According to the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), Ghana received 442,000 international visitors in 2006; 300,000 more visitors than travelled to Senegal and no other West African country hosted anywhere near that number.

\(^85\) Given tourism is the largest industry in Ghana and Senegal, and growing in other countries with historical sites of slavery, there is debate around the manipulation of memory, the encounter between the autochthonous populations who receive them, and processes of making meaning.

The camps provide the opportunity for students to travel to Africa for a contextualized learning. Billed as a complete cultural experience, the requisite two to four daily dance and drum classes are taught in a compound in which resident family members attend to quotidian routines allowing visitors to gain a deeper understanding of the lives of those living in host countries (e.g., shopping at local market, meal preparation, travel by local transportation, gender dynamics, age-mate systems, rituals, celebrations, etc.). I have danced and drummed my way through four international camps and one domestic camp, with group sizes ranging from as few as three to as many as thirty participants.

In addition to the immersive home experience, dance and drum camp attendees can watch the rehearsals and performances of local and national Ballets and go on excursions designed to explore local cultural offerings. The camps I attended in Senegal and Guinea both arranged trips to local reputed slave ports, Goreé Island and the town of Faranah, respectively. Immersion tourists, then, are faced with a two-pronged question regarding authenticity: How authentic is the experience? How authentic is the information being disseminated during the dance and drum camps?

For the African American participant, an excursion to a supposed slave port heightens the immersive experience. While the study trip may have been primarily to expand a specific cultural knowledge (e.g., competency in dance drumming), expedition to a slave port engenders what Pine and Gilmore call “referential authenticity,” a perception that taps “into our shared memories and longings” (2007: 49). Desirous of a connection to the mythical homeland, visiting a slave port crystallizes a previously nebulous part of memory, and thus link, to Africa. The

87 Senegal – Germaine Acogny/L’école des Sables; Burkina Faso – Amadou Kieno; Guinea –Alseny Soumah; Japan - Camp Torodo with Abdoul Doumbia, Assane Konte and Mareme Faye.

88 Northern California - “Tambacounda West African Drum and Dance Camp” – Abdoulaye Diakaté (From Senegal)
African American cultural actor can stand in the physical location where, centuries before, an ancestor became mired in the initial atrocity of slavery.

Returning to the camp, the same cultural actor may have a renewed sense of purpose or profound yearning to acquire the egregiously denied cultural information being presented in the drum and dance classes. However, the integrity of the information transmitted is still under question. Dance scholar Yvonne Daniels suggests tourism dance performance encourages “experiential authenticity,” defined as the “replication of a past, an isomorphism or similarity of structural form” between the present and the imagined past (Daniel 1996: 783). In the dance/drum camp scenario, the past that is ostensibly being replicated is actually a contemporary creation, albeit based in traditional movement.

In my drum and dance camp experiences – save for L’ecole des Sables in Senegal which focuses on Germaine Acogny’s traditionally-based contemporary African technique – the dance and drum classes were taught by current members of local or national Ballets and the host master teacher, generally a graduate of a national ballet. As such, the information transmitted during these camps is as much an interpretation of the staged Ballet choreographies as the drum dances first presented to American audiences when Le Ballet Africains initially performed in New York in 1959. I came to question the authenticity of tradition after a conversation with master dancer Alseny Soumah during his dance/drum camp held in his Conakry family compound in 2008 as conveyed below:

**Ethnographic Field Note: Authenticity in Conakry**

**Date:** December 2008  
**Place:** Drum & Dance Camp  
Conakry, Guinea, West Africa

Although we’ve been in sweltering Conakry for two days, today was the first day of classes. I found it difficult to concentrate on all the choreography that Alseny
threw at us today as I tried to adjust to dancing barefoot on concrete. After my right Achilles tendon seized, I was forced to dance in my tennis shoes. Apparently we are going to learn at least ten rhythms; today we started with *Soko*, a male circumcision dance done after initiation is complete. Alseny further clarified that *Soko* is done for boys, ages fourteen to eighteen, in the winter after school is out. He gave some additional context, identifying *Soko* and *Soli* as male circumcision dances performed by the Malinke and Susu ethnic groups, respectively. At some point during today’s instruction, Alseny commented on the difference between ballet and traditional steps.

After the afternoon dance class today, I had the chance to speak alone with Alseny. No insignificant feat given the demands put on him by the thirty some odd people he supports throughout the year. Alseny came to check on us (the three students who had travelled from California to attend his drum and dance camp) in the hotbox that is our abode for the next three to eight weeks (each of us is staying a different length of time). The walls are painted what must be the same nauseating color of my father’s 1973 Bahama blue VW bug. Sitting on overstuffed nude leather (or was it pleather?) couches with the vibrations of the generator outside gently shaking the window, Alseny and I discussed the construct of otherness (particularly when you were originally of that group that did the othering) and transplantation.

Though a native of Guinea, the beads of sweat slowly forming on Alseny’s forehead betrayed his immigration and subsequent acclimatization to the East Bay. A close family friend wearing an orange Adidas soccer shirt and too-
tight brown velour pants arrived and sat very close to Alseny. Happy to be in Alseny’s presence, he gestured for us to continue our conversation and then enveloped Alseny’s hand between his own.

Unbothered, Alseny continued his monologue in which he delineated the difference between traditional and ballet movements. He told me that traditional dances generally only have three to five steps and everything else is made up by the ballets. He continued describing how “new” dances are made, “If there are fifteen members in a company, then each member will come up with a step…fifteen members, fifteen new steps. There are no wrong steps in a solo. Things changed once the Ballet got a hold of them.”

Even as diasporic people invent tradition, those in the homeland are simultaneously modifying tradition, or at least catalyzing change in the original tradition that diaporic populations are trying to capture. Fodeba Keith, founder of *Les Ballets Africains* asserts agrees that such change does not impact authenticity,

…for us, authenticity is synonymous with reality. In so far as folklore is made up of a country’s traditions, poems, songs, dances, and popular legends, it can only be the reflection of the life of that country. And if this life develops, there is no reason why folklore, which is its living expression, should not develop too. That is the reasons why the folklore of present-day Africa is as authentic as that of ancient Africa, both of them being the real expression of the life of our country at two different periods in its history (Keita 1959: 22).

From both emic and etic perspectives, these movements and accompanying rhythms are “authentic.” In either case, the practice is relevant to their particular context.

**Summary: Technology Vector**

As conduits for *Technology*, the Internet, tourism, and immigration generate innumerable transactions between music, dance, and people. Information and people are conveyed quickly
back and forth across the Atlantic Ocean fomenting a cross-pollination resulting in deliberate, and sometimes not so deliberate, innovations in tradition. Integrity, authenticity, and authority may lose their currency as power in these myriad transactions.

Invested in and respectful of the history, lore and the initiators of the dance drum rhythms he teaches, Alseny is one of the few continental West African dance teachers I have met who takes the time, as a matter of course, to share the meaning, history, geographical origins, and other related information with his students. During a master class he taught in Los Angeles before I attended his Guinean camp in 2008, Alseny called all the students together after the warm-up and divulged the cultural particulars of the dance he was about to teach.

_Bao_, from the forest region of Guinea, is a girls’ initiation dance from the Toma people. Alseny felt compelled to ask the village elders for permission before he brought the rhythm back to the States to teach it to American practitioners. A sense of responsibility permeated the room as dancers approached the rhythm with a gravity rarely found in a dance class. Complemented by small, deliberate upper body movements, this village rhythm appears deceptively simple with its syncopated footwork. What will become of the reverence for Bao and its village-traditional choreography in its trajectory among West African dance drumming practitioners in America?

_Invention_

The final history vector, _Invention_, commences with the initial forced migration of Africans through the Triangle Slave Trade and persists into the present. Acknowledging “no group, no matter how well-equipped or how free to choose, can transfer its way of life and the accompanying beliefs and values intact from one locale to another,” Mintz and Price make reference to a key stratagem critical for the cultural survival of migrating populations (1992: 1).
Invention relies in part on Hobsbawm’s concept of “invented tradition,” for its contribution to the memory patterns of current practitioners of West African dance drumming in the United States. Hobsbawm defines an invented tradition as “a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behavior by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past” (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1992: 1). Through several prior exemplars, I have shown that cultural actors invoke a continuity with the past to legitimize “traditions” that are in fact “invented, construed, [or] formally instituted” (ibid) in efforts to imbue themselves with authority and authenticity.

Hobsbawm argues that this perceived historical continuity “is largely fictitious” and as such any historic reference attributed to invented traditions are established through repetition (ibid). Bearing out the rest of Hobsbawn’s definition that traditions can also “emerg[e] in a less easily traceable manner within a brief and dateable period,” the following example substantiates his claim as to importance of repetition in the success of an invented tradition. The tenacity of this particular invented tradition is further strengthened by the ease with which it fits into familiar, agency-producing narratives of the responsible cultural actors.

**Wolosodon: The Case of the Misidentified Dance**

*Wolosodon* is a dance characterized by movement of bound limbs (e.g., hands crossed at the wrists and limited foot motion) and exaggerated hip and waist movement hailing from the South Eastern part of Mali, near Burkina Faso. Many teachers of West African dance across America perpetuate this dance as a “slave dance,” interpreting the movement vocabulary as representative of captives in chains being marched into slavery. Insisting that this rhythm be
played reverently, Broc, one of the leaders in the Leimert Park Drum Circle, would implore us to not “smile when [we] play[ed] this rhythm.” To do so would be disrespectful to those to whom the rhythm was paying homage – enslaved Africans being marched onto the ships in coastal West Africa and off the boats and into servitude in America.

_Wolosodon_ has a sister dance, _Jondon_, which is characterized by leaping, frequent up and down motions, and vigorous hand movements. _Jondon_ has been interpreted in the States as a dance of freedom; a dance of escaped captives breaking free from bondage. I have even overheard people in a dance class saying that this dance and rhythm epitomize and embody the African American pursuit of freedom. Immediately following the melancholic _Wolosodon_, dancers are instructed to perform _Jondon_ with joy, abandon and smiles.

My field research in Guinea uncovered a narrative negating the lore that is being and has been passed in drum and dance classes throughout the United States. While the story associated with _Wolosodon_ as elaborated by my collaborator, Guinean master dancer Alseny Soumah, was rather undefined and poorly sourced, he was adamant that the dance was in no way a slave dance. In a conversation on December 21, 2008, Alseny Soumah reported that his teacher, Sano, told him that _Wolosodon_ was “a nasty, sexy dance from Mali.” My research supports Alseny’s assertion that _Wolosodon_ is not a slave dance in the sense that it has been perpetrated in America.

When translated from Bambara, _Wolosodon_ means “dance of the house born,” where _don_ is “dance” and _woloso_ is “born in the house.” According to French anthropologist and

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Africanist Claude Meillassoux, the *woloso* are a slave cast holding “permanent but minor” positions in families and “mostly used as domestic servants, sometimes as confidential agents” (Meillasoux 1970: 101). According to ethnomusicologist Eric Charry, a *woloso* is the offspring of two *jons*, or slaves, “who was raised in the house of his or her master” (Charry 2000: 230). In fact, *Wolosodon* has been described as an explicitly sexual dance performed in “the tradition of the ancient aristocratic society…[in which] people of slave condition must perform grotesque and obscene dances for the enjoyment of their masters” (231). The dance and attendant lore of *Wolosodon* and *Jondon*, then, cannot possibly be, in their original incarnation, about the Triangle Slave Trade on either side of the Middle Passage. However, the narrative has developed in the imaginary of American practitioners of West African dance drumming as exactly that: a story of slave rebellion and cultural reconstitution.

*Summary: Invention Vector*

Of the many threads comprising the complex imaginary of African Americans, the narrative of capture, resilience and subsequent freedom, is idealized in the African American imaginary. The lore created and ascribed to *Wolosdon/Jondon* as practiced/performed in America fits seamlessly into this narrative, and as such, those who partake in the practice of West African dance may never question or investigate this lore when circulated. This is of course complicated by the fact that those responsible for the transmission of such information are often in positions of relative authority – elder, dance teacher, African – and are rarely challenged. The practice of venerating one’s elder is, ironically, itself a living “African” retention.
Conclusion

While highlighting temporality was necessary to contextualize the origins of the information contained in each of the history vectors, when analyzed through the lens of the urban palimpsest, time falls out of the evaluation. The past, present, and future exist simultaneously in the urban palimpsest. While the history vectors elaborated above were developed specifically for the Leimert Park Drum Circle participants, the framework can be generalized to those who practice West African dance drumming in America, elsewhere in the African Diaspora, and possibly to other diasporas with contemporary practices of “traditional” repertoires.

Fodeba Keita, founding director of Les Ballets Africains, corroborates my argument observing “In Africa too, just as there are the dances of our fathers and our grandfathers, full of majesty and wisdom, so the younger generations in the villages create today songs and dances which picture our times, already marked by three centuries of colonization” (Keita 1958: 174). If I were to apply this model to a Ballet in present-day West Africa, given this claim by Fodeba Keita and the earlier claim by Alseny Soumah that the Ballet repertoire is “all made up,” I would employ a vector called Colonialism to account for the lived understanding of contemporary youth whose present has been significantly “marked” by the colonial encounter.

Traces and memories created and left behind by the history vectors bubble to the surface allowing cultural actors in the Leimert Park Drum Circle to dance, drum, and sing with and as those marked by the brands, whips, and other conceptual inscriptions of slavery. The repetition inherent in the urban palimpsest means that future traces left behind by those who will perform are and will be similarly inscribed. These identifying markings were not the first, the last, nor the most significant inscriptions on the palimpsest of the Black body. Subverting the damning significations previously inscribed by hegemonic attacks – dominion, inferiority, colonization –
the Black body, itself a tablet, performs the weekly Drum Circle creating a second-degree palimpsest. Cultural actors shape their alterities by erasing the old and inscribing new significations on their bodies. The Black body as palimpsest folds over on itself as newly inscribed bodies then incorporate the residual traces of previous performances creating the urban palimpsest. The urban palimpsest, then, is the result of palimpsestuous Black bodies protesting hegemonic over-determination and performing “Africa” week after week.

Recall the pop-locking protest of December at the beginning of this chapter. Experiential traces from each of the four history vectors manifests in his seemingly incongruent contemporary urban expression in the middle of an African-centered drum circle. We observe: Retention in December’s angularity, an African aesthetic; both the political and cultural actualization components of Arrival of the Ballets in his raised “Power to the People” fist, t-shirt with the image of “slave cargo,” and his sign demanding “Reparations NOW!”; and Technology by dancing to West African rhythms introduced by the Ballets who traveled here via plane; and Invention in the layering of Crip Walking and memorials to fallen comrades on top of the impromptu conglomeration of the previous three vectors. The uchronic quality of the urban palimpsest allows December to dance resistively in the slaver’s cargo hold, at a Black Power rally, on the campaign trail for Obama, at a protest for reparations, and at his homeboy’s funeral. His innovative tithe made perfect sense at the “Drum Church.”
CHAPTER 4
TRUTH IN REPETITION

Introduction

Although cultural actors in the Leimert Park Drum Circle rely on a concept similar to anthropologist Alfred Kroeber’s classic definition of tradition as “the internal handing [of cultural traits] on through time” (1948: 411), the dance drumming as performed in the Leimert Park Drum Circle is not strictly “traditional” in this sense. Denoting continuity with an African past, Kroeber’s definition would imply that the performed traditions in the Leimert Park Drum Circle have remained unchanged throughout time. This perceived immutable core is problematic because “to do something because it is traditional is already to reinterpret, and hence to change it” (Handler and Linnekin 1984: 281). By virtue of the fact that practitioners of “traditional” West African dance drumming in Leimert Park Drum Circle are separated by significant physical, temporal, and ontological distances from the origins of the purported “traditions” they perform, the resultant “traditional” cultural production is necessarily altered.

Most scholars acknowledge that all cultures are constantly changing (e.g. Handler and Linnekin 1984; Clifford 1988; Handler 1984; Wagner 1975). As such, there can only be what is new. Anthropologists Richard Handler and Jocelyn Linnekin suggest that “tradition is not handed down from the past, as a collection of things; it is symbolically reinvented in an ongoing present” (1984: 276, 280).90 I argue that these reinvented “traditions” coalesce in the Leimert Park Drum Circle through three technologies of creation: conflation of information, invention of tradition, and the re-working of histories to better-fit well-established narratives.

According to Africanist Mary Nooter Roberts, children in some Muslim communities of Africa learn to read and write Arabic by writing and rewriting on the same tablet (2007: 95). These tablets become palimpsests as traces of previous inscription are always present. Because the traces are the accumulation of “prayerful words…the potency of the board’s Baraka or active and available blessing” (95) increases with each use. Applying this literary notion to the Drum Circle’s performative context, the weekly practice increases the potency or inculcation of “tradition” with each repetition. “Traditions” become more authentically “African” with each inscription.

Creation Technology: Conflation of Information

_Ethnographic Fieldnote: Dobale_

_Date:_ December 2008  
_Place:_ Drum and Dance Camp  
_Conakry, Guinea, West Africa_

The heat was so thick today that I imagined my body was a sharp ginzu knife slicing through the nearly impregnable air. It was the kind of heavy, oppressive heat that made even flies too lazy to buzz around. I was determined to dance today, despite the weighted air, since I am here in Guinea to research the historical and geographical contexts of the West African dances that we do in America. I have been here for nearly a week and Alseny has set four choreographies on us: _Soko, Dundunba, Guinée Faré_ and _Sumunuku_.

_Sumunuku_ is a village dance from the Baga people of Coastal Guinea. See-sawing movements of the arms match the oscillating cadence of the rhythm. I was diligently trying to execute a particular move, and not really paying
attention to how close I had maneuvered to the drummers. Snapping quickly out of my reverie, where I tend to spend too much time in my head when I’m learning new moves, I twice tapped the center of my chest with my right hand and deftly touched the ground in front of the drummers. Suddenly Mohammed, one of the djembe players for my classes, pushed his djembe such that it leaned akimbo on one of his legs and looked at me quizzically.

Caught in the net of his gaze, I stood frozen waiting for the question on his face to translate to words from his mouth. After a belabored moment Mohammed finally articulated his puzzlement, “why do you always do that?” My turn for bewilderment, I stood straight and searched for the words in French. Slowly, I responded that my semi-prostration, or dobale as I had been taught it was called, was a sign of respect and gratitude for the drummers’ knowledge and abilities. Performing this gesture at the end of every pass across the dance floor was drilled into me in my early days of African dance drumming in Tallahassee, where I attended college.

Over the years, I have found the practice to be widespread in dance classes across the United States, so you can imagine my confusion when Mohammed posed this question to me. In my decidedly poor and halting French, I tried to explain the gesture was intended to honor the efforts of the percussionists, but also to propagate the flow of energy between drummer and dancer. With a slightly turned head, Mohammed cut his eyes at me in an expression I can only assume conveyed skepticism and almost imperceptibly shrugged his shoulders. One of the other drummers, also a Mohammed, quickly explained that dancers
didn’t execute this movement in Guinea and relieved me of the self-imposed requirement.

I would come to understand that *dobale* is a term from the Yoruba in Nigeria denoting the prostration of oneself in front of an elder or someone in a position of respect. According to Art History and African Studies professor Mikelle S. Omari-Obayemi, the female version, *ikun’le*, is often interpreted by Nigerian women as a “a generic outward sign of respect and submission assumed by women when greeting their husbands, male or female elders, deities, or royal personages” (1996: 90). A full prostration requires males to lay face down on the ground, and modified versions require the person displaying reverence to touch the ground in front of one’s elder or respected community member. While both versions are performed in religious contexts throughout the Yoruba religious diaspora, I am not aware of this gesture in secular environments with the exception of the African drum and dance community in the United States.

To *dobale* is also commonplace in the Leimert Park Drum Circle. After a solo, dancers reverently touch the ground in front of the lead drummer or other drummers who have made a significant and supportive sonic contribution. Upon arrival, certain drummers will walk the interior of the circle offering a modified *dobale* to all present drummers. Instead of stopping and bowing in front of each musician, these particular drummers approach the four cardinal directions, bringing their hands to their hearts and, with closed eyes, bow and lower their heads. Other members perform a similar ritual upon departing the Drum Circle. Elder drummers sometime demand that the dancers *dobale* to demonstrate their gratitude to the circle’s musicians.

The adoption of the *dobale* convention elucidates the pathway through which information and cultures have become conflated as West African dance in America has developed. In West
African dance classes, or more specifically, djembe dance classes in which rhythms from the Mali Empire are taught, students are inculcated to *dobale* – a distinctly Yoruba cultural concept. Obviously, I have no problem with being encouraged, or required even, to show gratitude. However, that we were expected to perform this prostration of Yoruba lineage within an altogether different cultural context with little or no explanation is exemplifies the creation technology of conflation.

I suspect that many first-generation African American drummers and dancers – those engaged in the practice post-*Arrival of the Ballets* (after 1960) – performing djembe dance drumming were involved to some degree in religious activities based in the African diaspora (i.e., adherents of Ifa, Santeria, Candomblé, Palo, Lucumi, etc.) where the practice of *dobale* is commonplace. I can imagine African American cultural actors thirsty for knowledge from African forebears drowning themselves in any available information. What happened next could have simply been the overlaying of a set of values from one African-influenced context to a different African-influenced context. That is, cultural actors may have thought, “if, following African protocol (or tradition), we submit to and respect our elders in these religious milieus, certainly it would be appropriate for us to do the same in this more secular venue (i.e., African dance drumming).” The secular became conflated with the religious, and in an effort to confer authenticity and authority, the resulting custom was baptized an “African tradition.”

If we consider the *dobale* as “tradition” that has been inscribed in American practice of West African dance drumming, what remains once the Drum Circle is vacated is a trace of this so-called tradition. The original, that is, Yoruba religious meaning and function have been disconnected from the convention of presenting-performing respect through the *dobale* gesture. Over time, the *dobale* practice has become “a model of the past and is inseparable from the
interpretation of tradition in the present” (Handler and Linnekin 1984: 276). To execute the *dobale* in the Leimert Park Drum Circle or in the wider context of dance drumming in America is to adhere to a symbolically “African” custom.

While a practice with discontinuous origins, the *dobale* in West African dance drumming in America is now a recognized “tradition” among this group of practitioners. As performed in the Leimert Park Drum Circle and in the larger West African drum dancing community in Los Angeles, to *dobale* is to perform Africa “properly” – irrespective of the fact that the practice is not widespread in West African secular dance drumming contexts and is geo-culturally misaligned. In contemporary America, all practitioners – including African participants here in America – perform the *dobale* as a sign of respect, admiration, or even salutation. No longer restricted to the drummer-dancer dyad, the “*dobale* tradition” has already changed in its new context; it is performed also between teacher-student, student-student, teacher-drummer, and drummer-drummer.

**Creation Technology: Invention of Tradition**

In their original, historical context, the wisdom and social knowledge produced and transmitted through village rhythms was paramount to the perpetuation of a given society. According to C.K. Ladzepko, the well-known Ghanaian-born director of the African music program at University of California, Berkeley,

These real-life meanings of cross-rhythmic techniques were repeatedly driven home to me as I grew up gradually in a traditional *Anlo-Ewe* community. In this community, dance drumming is an integral part of the life of everyone from the moment of birth. A training [sic] in dance drumming is an essential part of the larger comprehensive preparation of every child for a productive and fulfilled participation in adult life. In this community, artistic elements are not abstract phenomena. They assume real-life characters. A main beat scheme represents a strong purpose in life and a secondary beat scheme represents an obstacle.
Tension created by the customary ordering of these characters conveys a number of ideas simultaneously.\textsuperscript{91}

Using Ladzepko’s parlance, the rhythms – the tension created by the main and secondary beat schemes – that undergird our lived experiences is different. While we may be descended from Africa, the cultural knowledge production and transmission critical to acceptance and success, for example, in Ladzepko’s sense of Anlo-Ewe society is not pertinent to African American cultural actors in the Leimert Park Drum Circle – if for no other reason that our material conditions vary widely. The need to adhere so strictly to lore and societal canons was less urgent in the large metropolitan centers in West Africa that were home to the first Ballets. In the far-flung drum and dance communities in America, where among some the desire to uphold the canon is strong, the need is almost nonexistent. Cultural actors, like Broc and me as demonstrated below, find ourselves caught in the middle of, one, our desire to concretize our connection with “Africa,” and, two, contemporary cultural production based on the transplantation of established “traditions” into new sociocultural milieus in which they become modified.

While I argue that the resulting “traditions” are only symbolically so, those “tradition” bearers who consider themselves responsible for the “traditional” transmission of a “traditional” culture may contest this distinction. I turn to folklorist Dan Ben-Amos who claims, “tradition has been a term to think with, not think about” (1984: 97), to parse the subtleties embedded in the several invocations of “tradition” in the previous sentence. The word is hackneyed, to be sure, and the concepts it represents are often conflated. In an effort to examine its multiplicity, this chapter also contains discussion applying Ben-Amos’ “seven semantic strands” through which tradition is invoked in both “rhetorical and theoretical contexts” (102). Briefly, these

strands are tradition: as lore, as canon, as process, as mass, as culture, as langue and as performance.

Ethnographic Fieldnote: Broc vs. Ballet Style

Date: August 2008  
Place: Leimert Park Drum Circle  
Los Angeles, CA

After exiting my parked car, I meander down Degnan Boulevard, the main drag in Leimert Park Village. Walking over the bronze pavers of Sankofa Passage past the often African-themed storefronts, pulsating rhythms take hold of me pulling me toward the drum circle. I stand on the northern outskirts of the circle, observing the participants in the ritual. I waited until I caught Najite’s eye. He then mouthed to me, asking me where my drums were. I told him in the car and he motioned with his head for me to go get them and bring them to the circle. * * *

Rocking his head back and forth to the rhythm that had built up to a steady beat, Najite slowly turned his head to the left, cocked his sunglasses-clad face up to me and gave me a slow, deliberate smile and a silent nod of encouragement. I was doing a sufficient job of “holding it down.” Najite put his right hand in the air, with his index finger extended to the heavens indicating to all the players in the circle the time had arrived to increase the rhythm and then end the song. All of the participants dug in, the rhythm increased to a frenzied pace with sweat dripping from noses, while hands became nearly invisible from the flurry of
activity. Najite played a final break to close the song. **DAT DAT DAT DAT**
**DA-DAT DAT DAT.**

Out of nowhere, all of a sudden, Broc, who is primarily a bass drum player and sitting in front of me (I play standing), began to yell in my direction. With dreadlocks flying from his hippocratically balding head, he shouts “why do you come out here with three drums? If you can’t hold down the rhythm, then you shouldn’t be out here with them. You need to be out here with a kenkeni and bell.” Burst of derision subsiding, Broc turned back to face his drums muttering, “if you were in Africa they wouldn’t let you out here like this. You’d just have a bell. Hell, women don’t even play drums in Africa.” He inhaled deeply as if to continue berating me, but was interrupted by Najite, “Broc, man,” Najite stated calmly in a heavily accented authoritarian manner, “leave her alone. I told her to come out and bring all of her drums.” He turned to look at me as he continued to speak to Broc, “she’s doing just fine.”

I was offending Broc’s “traditional” sensibilities because I am a dunun player who arranges my bass drum orchestra in an upright position. The dunun orchestra comprises three, barrel-shaped drums of increasing size and decreasing pitch. Usually strung with metal rings and thick rope, both drumheads are covered with cow skin. Dunun are stick drums and, as such, the thicker bovine skin can withstand the repeated striking by a wooden implement. The cow skin also produces a deeper sound when hit as compared to the goatskin heads of the djembes. From smallest to largest, they are: the kenkeni, the songbani and the dundunba.
The “traditional” arrangement requires three people to achieve the desired rhythm. A musician is necessary to play each of the three bass drums in the orchestra (dundun, songbani and kenkeni; plus a bell for each) in a horizontal arrangement. Thus, the “traditional” style is more personnel-intensive, whereas the vertical set-up only requires one person to play all three drums simultaneously.

The vertical arrangement of the dunun developed during the formative days of the National Ballets of Guinea and Senegal. Not unlike the variances observed in the dance as it moved from “tradition” to “stage” that I discussed in the previous chapter, the instrumentation also endured change. As distinguished ethnomusicologist Eric Churry notes,

The choreographing of traditional dances for the stage has led to two related, yet distinct, drum and dance genres among the Maninka: a village tradition (which can be carried on in urban areas) and a ballet tradition. Although rooted in village traditions, regional and national ballets combine diverse local styles, which would
rarely mix in a village context, with European ideas of a group choreography and stage presentation (2000: 194).

Quite literally turning “tradition” on its head, these performers took liberties with ancient customs, breaking, melding, and using them as a basis for innovation.

To avoid the conundrum posed by over-usage of the word “traditional,” I am going to utilize the term “village style” when referring to the horizontal orchestration of bass drums of the djembe orchestra. In keeping with the worldwide convention, I will refer to the upright orchestration of the dunun as “ballet style.” Many practitioners of West African dance in America consider village style or horizontal arrangement, in which three different musicians each play a single drum and bell, as genuinely “traditional.” However, “ballet style” is now taught as a legitimate form in its own right.

As “a model of the past…inseparable from the interpretation in the present” (Handler and Linnekin 1984: 276), the ballet style, clearly adapted from village style, is itself a symbolic innovation with a direct connection to the original village style. Despite the fact that Broc takes great umbrage with what he perceives as my thwarting of “tradition” by playing ballet style, he disregards the fact that the entire American practice of West African dance is based on reinvention for export and foreign consumption, not moored in village practice. That is, the practice is not internally, continuously identical as the Kroeber definition would have it. The result of concerted efforts to market a “national” Guinean culture for European audiences, the majority of the music and dance repertoires perpetuated as “traditionally African” among contemporary practitioners in America is an amalgamation of cultural information from various ethnic groups and does not, in fact, come directly from the villages.
**Analysis: Ballet Style vs. Village Style**

**Protocol and Expectations**

West African djembe music is polyrhythmic. A polyrhythm is defined by the *Second edition of the Harvard Dictionary of Music* as “the simultaneous use of strikingly contrasted rhythms in different parts of the musical fabric.” Polyrhythms of the sub-Saharan variety are also known as cross rhythms. Polyrhythms are the foundation of djembe music from the Mandingue region (and some maintain in music from sub-Saharan Africa⁹²). In the early days of the djembe, three djembes of different tones were utilized to create the polyrhythm.⁹³ Nowadays, the dunun have taken the place of the three distinct tones from the earlier djembe orchestration. Each of the three dunun plays a separate rhythm creating the bass line, which is then confronted with – sometimes multiple – djembe rhythms of contrasting meters. The result is polyrhythm against polyrhythm that somehow makes sense and seduces the listener, musician or dancer.

Musicians playing ballet style are obliged to play “parts of parts” to create a melody that approaches the original polyrhythm as played in the village style. As such, the single performer playing ballet style *should* have knowledge of all the village style parts in order to decide what to play and what to leave out in order to achieve as close an approximation as possible. A single musician versed in all of the village parts is, of course, the ideal if ballet style is the desired playing method.

There are generally three to five instrumentalists who regularly play dunun in the Leimert Park Drum Circle, though as few as one and as many as ten can be present. The majority of

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⁹³ *Landuma Fare: From the Heartland*, directed by Youssouf Koumbassa (2005:B-Rave Studio), DVD.
those musicians that play dunun play village style – the drum horizontal with a bell attached. My presence in the drum circle while playing ballet style violates Broc’s perception of what folklorist Ben-Amos would call “tradition as canon” (Ben-Amos 1984: 105). Representing the culmination of the process through which something becomes a tenet of behavior or a socially prescribed set of rules and regulations, “tradition as canon” in this instance would demand policing, especially along the lines of historically acceptable performance, inclusive of gender.

What Broc so easily dismisses, however, is that “creativity is necessary for the survival of tradition” (Ben-Amos 1984: 113). While playing ballet style does not wholly represent an intact “tradition” as passed down through the generations, the simple presence of the dunun does forward the West African djembe music project in Los Angeles. Despite the gaps in the village canon of the djembe orchestra generated by playing ballet style – no bells, players taking shortcuts and not learning all the original parts, the inability to play the entire melody – this way of playing is prevalent in the Los Angeles African dance drumming scene.

Playing upright is more cost effective and logistically practical for dance teachers who only need to secure and compensate one musician instead of three for local dance classes. Ballet style is also optimal when only one dunun player is available in the Leimert Park Drum Circle. A single musician playing ballet style is better able to achieve a full sound as compared to a single musician playing one drum. When both styles are present in the drum circle, a melodic depth is achieved that is not possible with just the village style.

Playing ballet style gives the musician an out, an escape, a reason not to be tied to the conventional way of executing the rhythm. Freedom from the canon provides for flexibility, which in turn fosters innovation. The musician playing ballet style is able to solo on top of the original polyrhythms, adding a dimension of creativity and individuality demonstrative of that
person’s lived understanding. As it happens in Leimert Park, this fusion represents the melding of African American experience with one of the realities of the African imaginary. These practicalities ensure that the interest in what is called “traditional” West African music remains high, the rhythms are still perpetuated in Los Angeles’ dance drumming community, and at least some of the original cultural knowledge is disseminated in the context of the Drum Circle or dance and drum classes.

*The Apprenticeship Model*

Though I am loath to admit it, Broc was somewhat correct in his accusation that I was flouting authority. While my intentions were far from nefarious, playing in the Drum Circle with all three dunun, especially in my early days, could be construed as violated protocol. Through his indictment that were I in Africa, “they wouldn’t let [me] out here like this,” and that I would “just have a bell,” Broc conveys a second strand of tradition at work. Perhaps most commonly intended when invoking the term “tradition,” *tradition as process* “implies the dynamics of transmission of cultural heritage from generation to generation” (Ben-Amos 1984: 116-117). Broc was correct in that I didn’t learn to play dununs under what I call the “apprentice system.”

I have it from several master djembe players that the apprenticeship model is alive and well in West Africa. In fact, aspiring percussionists start on the bell or the kenkeni, as Broc suggested. Sometimes they play the kenkeni or bells for years before being allowed to graduate to other instruments. Broc was invoking “African tradition” to confer upon himself the authority to berate and keep me in my place by challenging my path to playing in public. This also has the effect of challenging my gender and “its” right to play in public.

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94 Master dancer and drummer Mabiba Baegne, from Brazzaville, Congo was a student of Famadou Konate, renowned dununfola from Les Ballets Africains. During her classes, she recounts the story of how under Konate’s tutelage she played kenkeni for several years before graduating to other drums, and how that was the “African” way.
However, I am apprenticing, albeit in the newer technology of playing ballet style dunun. This was not a case of me showing off or deliberately defying procedure for the sake of being contrary. My first and long-standing drum teacher, Malik Sow, is a Senegalese man of Toro and Mandingue heritage. Malik started his long career in the Senegalese Ballet d’Afrique Noire, eventually serving as Director and Choreographer for Guinea’s Les Ballets Africains. He almost exclusively plays his dunun ballet style. Few in the Leimert Park Drum Circle cohort or the greater Los Angeles West African dance drumming community could legitimately or would ever try to accuse Malik of not being a tradition-bearer.

Ben-Amos identifies two subcategories of tradition as process that inform the transmission of this cultural information, tradition in time and tradition in space (Ben-Amos 1984: 116-117). The latter route addresses the geographic actuality that very few American students learn to play djembe and dunun the way a student in Guinea or Mali would be introduced to and taught these instruments. In the Mandingue region, would-be musicians are often born into a performance family. If they are not but demonstrate a special talent, they are selected for more formal apprenticeships. Either way, they quite literally grow up in the musical tradition; their training is woven into the fabric of their lives.

American students obviously do not live in such environments. As such, they are required to pay for classes from a local “master.” Like many students, I submitted to the “American apprentice system.” I simply paid for classes until I was proficient enough to be invited to come to dance class, where I could play in the ensemble for free. Playing dance classes permits students to continue to develop their abilities in exchange for their musical contributions to a class. Shortly thereafter, I was invited by multiple companies to perform in exchange for money – I became a professional musician.
Gender Roles

When Broc spat, “Hell, women don’t even play drums in Africa,” he was giving me insight into how tradition might function as lore in the American practice of West African drum and dance. Tradition in this strand “refers to the knowledge of customs, rituals, beliefs, and oral literature as defined and practiced by a particular group, and as transmitted within its confines from generation to generation” (Ben-Amos 1984: 105). While I can only conjecture the reason why Broc felt such deep-seated disdain for me, what is clear is that we differ in our perception of women’s roles in the Leimert Park Drum Circle and “African” drumming in general.

An anecdote, while outside of the scope of this study, suggests some of the notions about gender and drumming held by West African dance and drum communities throughout the US. As a burgeoning West African dancer in college, I quickly came to understand the relationships among drumming and dancing and gender. In Tallahassee in the mid 1990s, the drum and dance community was partitioned along gender lines. The drummers were nearly always men and the dancers were nearly always women. There was a solitary female drummer in the battery, but she was often maligned as being homosexual and she was, in fact, a self-identified lesbian. With respect to observing the reverse of this paradigm, it was much more likely to see a man dancing than a woman drumming in my college town – and in every dance and drum community I have experienced since then, both in Africa and America.

While it’s true that in most of the performances or cultural rituals I have witnessed in West Africa the women were dancing to drums played by male musicians, the women were not, in fact, barred from playing.95 Not only have I met several professional female percussionists

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while traveling in West Africa, I have even performed at a festival in Burkina Faso.96 Broc’s statement that I wouldn’t be allowed to play drums in Africa is a myth perpetuated by myths. Through the pathway of tradition as lore, several myths subtly converge to elaborate and perpetuate the meta-myth that women do not play drums in Africa – and by extension, should not be allowed to play in Leimert Park either. Researcher Leslie Marie Mullins observed a paradigm during fieldwork in Ghana through which members of society were inculcated with the following beliefs (Mullins 2003):

1. women are physically incapable of the strength to maintain rhythms for extended amounts of time.
2. women have no interest drums.
3. women’s duties lay elsewhere, presumably the kitchen and running/maintaining the household.
4. women can play other percussive instruments.
5. drumming causes sterility in women.
6. a woman’s menstrual cycle makes her unclean for the sacred ritual of playing the drum, and as a consequence she may bring harm or damage to the drum.

Some, if not all, of these beliefs have been similarly imprinted in the minds of the practitioners of West African drum and dance scene in America. The widespread diffusion of this paradigm is evidenced by the lack of women playing the djembe orchestra in the West African drum and dance communities in America. However, the differences in our social framework clear space for the advent of the female musician. A new tradition is created as the lore associated with a discriminatory belief system inevitably changes, as tradition is wont to do despite itself.

S.H.I.N.E. Mawusi is an all female drumming ensemble based in Leimert Park.97 After years of struggling for acceptance in the male-dominated drumming community, “Mama” René

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96 Festival Nya Nyere Nid in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso during the summer of 2006.
97 S.H.I.N.E. – Sisters, Healing, Inspiring, Nurturing, and Empowering; Mawusi – Ghanaian Ewe for “in the hands of God.”
Fisher-Mims envisioned a supportive and compassionate environment in which Los Angeles women could learn to play and practice the djembe orchestra. With the assistance of Janet “Djembe Jan” Nicholson and “Mama” Florence Penson, she founded S.H.I.N.E., as we often refer to the ensemble, in 2006. Rehearsing weekly at the World Stage, S.H.I.N.E. performs at festivals, school shows, community events, and life milestone celebrations. S.H.I.N.E. recently hosted its first African Drum and Wellness Conference at Motherland Music (March 2103).

The mere existence of a group like S.H.I.N.E. destroys the notion of continuous tradition. While there may not be strict prohibitions against women playing djembe in West Africa, notable women drummers are the exception. Whatever drove the meta-myth in “traditional” West Africa is likely present in contemporary Los Angeles. I have often described Mama Né’s early path-clearing efforts as “throwing ’bows”98 for those of us who have come up behind her. Though she is keen on recapturing, preserving and perpetuating traditional knowledge about West African dance drumming, she has ironically altered the tradition by creating a space for and teaching women. As a percussionist in the next generation, I am grateful.

Creation Technology: Reworking Histories to Better-Fit, Well-Established Narratives

As a self-appointed tradition bearer, Broc exemplifies Ben-Amos’ tradition as mass, whereby he carries and perpetuates tradition – literally, the heavy load of culture (Ben-Amos 1984: 118). Those who are perceived to possess such authority are the ones who control and influence the direction of the canon - even if the tradition is not recognized as invented. Evoking Africa as the origin and arbiter of practice – “if you were in Africa, they wouldn’t let you out here like this” – Broc establishes “the rules by means of which a given context is made sensible, by means of

98 Clearing space by moving people and obstacles out of the way by utilizing her bent arms, elbows out, to simultaneously protect herself and make a path on which others can follow more easily.
which further contexts are made possible” (120). Broc’s conviction that he is the grand referee of African tradition stems largely from his understanding of the African origins of drum circles. The strictures governing the activities in said circle are “African,” and therefore, in Broc’s eyes, justify his claim that I am breaking the rules further legitimizing his egregious behavior toward me.

**Ethnographic Description: The Patriarchy Rears Its Ugly Head**

Date: August 10, 2008  
Place: Leimert Park Drum Circle

“You need a husband!” admonished one of the elders in the drum circle in Leimert Park. The previous rhythm was over, but random slaps and tones were still to be heard as drummers examined their drumheads, tried to stay loose and warm, or practiced a technique learned in a recent drum class. The intermittent popping chatter ceased immediately as Broc, face contorted in anger, continued his castigation. He squeezed a melodic third syllable out of the second word as he shouted “I sa-ee-id…you…need… a…husband!” His words cut through the “magic” created by what Turner would call “spontaneous communitas” (Turner 1969: 139) that occasionally obtains during a Sunday afternoon session in the park. Not satisfied with this disruption of spirit, he held center court for just a bit longer; long enough to clarify to the befuddled spectators (who at this point was everybody else – drummers, dancers, observers) his motivation for singling out the culprit who had apparently breached some protocol – me! “If you had a husband, you would know how to talk to a man. You need to have some kids. Then you would know how to respect a man. You would know how to respect a man!”
Repeating this last phrase, Broc not only identified the source of his displeasure, but also highlighted his belief in “traditional African” gender roles, as he believes they should exist in the Leimert Park Drum Circle. In the subsequent eighteen months, Broc instigated many other exchanges elucidating his patriarchal ideology: Broc took sticks out of another woman’s hand while she was playing, to the great chagrin of those playing in and observing the Circle; he once stopped a rhythm to reproach a female dunun player for “having the audacity to come out to the drum circle, thinking she could play;” and while recapping one Sunday’s events to another drummer Broc reduced a female participant to her genitalia describing the earlier exchange as “getting all up in her pussy.”

**Ethnographic Description: Playing Over Authority**

Date: August 10, 2008  
Place: Leimert Park Drum Circle

Shaking his head sprouting baby locks where possible, he continued loudly, “I don’t know why you sisters think you can do that. It’s not cool for you to come out here and not hold down the rhythm.” I don’t know why Broc thinks the circle is his. He doesn’t run it. I thought the **drum circle** mediated community support and sanction. Not Broc. That scene from a over year ago repeated itself today. I was responding to his student’s request to increase the rhythm, “Come on, Sis. Let’s pick it up.” Broc told me again that I needed a husband. Balling his hands into fists, scrunching up his shoulders in a poor imitation of Governator Schwarzenegger, he added that I was “standing there ‘all manly,’” and this was probably the reason I wasn’t married. I couldn’t do anything but throw my head back and laugh.
I'm not sure if it’s the size of my drums, the fact that they are off the ground, the weight of my sticks, or my style of playing, but I am able to elicit relatively loud, powerful percussive notes from my drums. If I do not play according to Broc’s specifications, which are capricious at best, he really flies off the handle. At the end of the next rhythm, people, including me, started pitter-pattering on their drums while other musicians figured out what rhythm would follow. As there were no strong lead djembe players to play the call to start a rhythm, this took a little longer than usual,

In the middle of the circle, policing AGAIN, Broc turned around to face me and yelled, “EXCUSE ME! I SAID BE QUIET!!” He tried to return to his sermon but half the drum circle, including me, was still playing. Broc whipped his head back around and glared at me, his eyes pulsating with fury over my disobedience. He stomped his left foot, as if summoning power from the earth, and again shouted, “I SAID BE QUIET!!” It may have ended there, but he then sneered, as if to disparage, through his clenched teeth, “woman!” And that’s what set me off. I started playing Mendiani99 as forcefully as I could, successfully preventing him from his pontification. He protested when the others started following, but after about seven minutes, he yielded, went back to his dunun and joined in.

According to Ben-Amos, the trend in American anthropology is to deploy “tradition” as a synonym for culture. If tradition as culture is the “defining and identifying aspect of social life” (1984: 121), then the influence of a self-appointed tradition bearer on the customs, attitudes, and

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99 According to world-renowned Guinean Master Drummer Mamady Keita, Mendiani is from the Malinke ethnic group of Northeast Guinea. Virgin girls, ages six to thirteen, perform this dance. (Billmeier 1999).
behaviors would be considered tantamount to establishing a characteristic or set of characteristics such that a “culture” is readily apparent to external viewers and non-participants. Reliant on patriarchal attitudes purportedly passed down through the generations, Broc derives his drum circle authority from his belief in the narrative of “African” patriarchy. He must continually perform “properly” gendered roles so as to set them as culturally true lest the Leimert Park Drum Circle dissolve into a non-African hodgepodge.

*Ethnographic Description: Community Sanction*

Date: August 17, 2008  
Place: Leimert Park Drum Circle

He was Broc the Regulator as usual, promiscuously telling everybody what they were doing wrong, even making attempts to get one guy to stop drumming and leave the circle. When my friend Idris, who always wants to play, but never has a drum, showed up and asked to play my third drum (which I wasn’t using for that particular rhythm), I handed him my extra sticks and made room for him. I particularly enjoyed Idris’ presence because he was wearing a round, turquoise hat with large black feathers that danced with his head movements, making him look taller than his six feet and two inches. Of course, Idris did what Idris does, which is to play some pattern inconsistently in between, which drives the Western ear berserk. Usually, people don’t say anything to him because after all, he is African. As in actually from the continent, so they figure he knows what he is doing. However, today, Broc was not having it. He came over, and stood in front of my drums and pushed Idris away from my drums. Idris, who towers over Broc by at least a foot, was not so easily moved,
kept on playing. Broc then switched tack. He attempted to make both Idris and me stop playing—my drums—by placing his drumsticks in the path of my drum sticks, inches above the head of my drum. I tried to keep playing by insinuating my sticks such that they were under his. I’m still not sure how exactly the scene escalated from that frustrating, but relatively innocuous point to the next frame. Broc, then thrust his drum stick into my stomach. Before his action even registered, it was repeated. He jabbed me again in the stomach.

Given the sanctified nature of the Drum Circle and its physical shape, which serves to regulate the circle’s goings-on, it is not surprising that many conflicts are averted through community sanction. However, there are occasions—Broc jabbing me in the stomach for instance—during which even the “elders” must capitulate to the consensus of the community. I’m still not really sure what happened during the sixty seconds immediately following Broc’s severe transgression of my personal space—I sort of snapped. I just remember an inner rage rumbling at my feet, shooting vertically through my body and words, reddened with anger, attacking him furiously. Another community-recognized elder, whom I will call Bosainde, placed his hand on my shoulder, and spoke calmly in my ear, “No, sister, I got this. Just keep playing your drums. Do what you do. I got this.” His words transformed my rage into a strength, which strengthened my playing. Using my drum to enunciate my disgust and displeasure, I played, determined to show Broc that he did not shake me.

I don’t know whether it was Bosainde’s verbal admonishment that “You do not, ever, put your hands on a sister,” reproaches from other community members, or Broc’s own sense of distress at having committed such a clearly egregious act in his “star group,” the place and people with which “he identifies most deeply and in which he finds fulfillment of his major
social and personal strivings and desires” (Turner 1982: 69), but at the end of that Sunday’s Drum Circle Broc believed that he had redressed the event. Slowly and with downcast eyes, Broc walked over, paused on the other side of my drums and extended his hand to me. There were five single dollar bills in that hand.

Generally, I am not offered any portion of the “tithes” collected during the Drum Circle. When they have been offered, I have refused. However, in the two weeks previous to this particular Sunday, I was offered and accepted a portion, five single dollar bills each time, of the “love-offering.” As I extended my arm over my dundunba to receive the money, I thought to myself, “this is Broc’s way of apologizing.” While I was not ready to forgive or accept an apology from Broc, it was too late, the money was already in my hands. Broc then pressed his palms together, placed them over his chest in a prayer-like pose, serenely closed his eyes, and very deliberately nodded his head in the way people do after a yoga class. In taking that money, I may have unwittingly reinforced Broc’s intractable actions thus making myself a target for future exchanges.

Distinct from the 1990s battle about discursive authority in the field of folklore, the question of authority and authenticity for Leimert Park Drum Circle participants is not based in claims of sovereignty nor is it about outsider anthropologists revoking agency by pronouncing judgments on historical and cultural continuity. On the contrary, the question of authority in the Leimert Park Drum Circle is an emic one. Cultural actors attach themselves to a narrative to serve their immediate concerns. Broc, for instance, aligns himself with the patriarchal views of what he considers to be “authentic Africa.” As ancient history professor Eric Csapo attests, “truth was never a sufficient condition for something being believed or repeated” (2005: 278). The matter of veracity and accuracy is secondary to current agendas. With his invocations of
“African tradition,” Broc appealed to the community’s greater desire for Africa to crown himself as the authority of “Africa.”

Broc was a recognized leader of the Leimert Park Drum Circle and his outbursts became an accepted thread in the fabric of its culture. However, even the community circumscribed Broc’s assumed authority. While the overarching purpose of the Leimert Park Drum Circle is to perform “traditions” and “memory” in order to re-locate “Africa,” community sanction simultaneously limited Broc’s authority and prevented that particular behavior and associated lore from being inscribed as “tradition.” Ultimately, all Drum Circle participants are complicit in and responsible for the re-imagining of “A-free-kaa.”

Conclusion

Even as a culture is revived, that revival changes the tradition (Linton 1943). Nevertheless, these practices have been imbued with the status of traditional per the Kroeber definition. As an extension of Los Angeles’ “traditional African” dance drumming community, the “African” drum circle in Leimert Park facilitates the transmission of symbolically “traditionally African” cultural knowledge and values. Whether conflating information (dobale), inventing tradition (playing dunun Ballet style), or re-working histories to better-fit well-established narratives (patriarchal attitudes towards women playing drums), each process symbolizes the phenomenological efforts of cultural actors in the Drum Circle to re-locate “Africa” to Leimert Park by re-locating “African traditions.”

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100 I have not seen Broc since 2010. Rumor has it that he’s moved to Belize.
The Urban Palimpsest in Action

“Africa” is *not* a monolith, monolithic, or a myth. As palimpsest, “Africa” has been conceptually corrupted by various parties throughout her colonial history to validate the contrived justifications for ravaging her resources, human and otherwise. Taking cues from the previously described processes of opportunistic parties, the cultural actors in Leimert Park perform the Drum Circle to inscribe and re-inscribe their “African” memories and traditions in response to the sanctioned and protracted injustices perpetuated as the legacies of the Middle Passage. Those who contribute to the Leimert Park Drum Circle are pinning down a genesis for “the story we tell ourselves about ourselves” (Geertz 1974: 27). Historian Jan Vansina defines genesis as “a statement about a basic identity for most communities or collectivities” (1974: 317). Efforts to define, locate, and cement such a genesis render an ideologically remapped “Africa.”

The cultural actors in the Leimert Park Drum Circle utilize the qualities of the urban palimpsest to invoke and deploy “Africa” as a phenomenological location full of potential. Repeated inscriptions and erasures produce experiential traces of memory and tradition, which can be read as text. As they accumulate, the interaction between these trace-texts permits cultural actors to simultaneously encounter past, present, and future. Ultimately, the urban palimpsest generates a uchronia, a conceptual world with “no time,” or, perhaps, outside of time altogether. No longer bound by the construct of temporality, cultural actors perform these interactions and re-locate “Africa” to Leimert Park.

“Africa” is the accumulation of performed memories and traditions. The cultural actors in Leimert Park perform “African memories” informed by the history vectors I developed to
explicate their lived understanding and experience of West African dance drumming in America: *Retention, Arrival of the Ballets, Technology,* and *Invention.* Three creation technologies – *conflation, invention,* and *reworking histories to better-fit well-established narratives* – shape the performance of these “African” memories. And though I explored memory and tradition in separate chapters, creation technologies similarly shape the performance of “African” traditions. Further, memory and tradition are rather inseparably entangled whereby “memory leaves an objective deposit in tradition,” (Shils 1981: 167). Tradition is the impetus for action; it is the impulse for performing memory.

“Africa” is not tethered to place since memory and tradition can be exerted anywhere. “Africa” is a “no place,” or as translated literally from Greek, a utopia. “Africa” as a uchronic utopia – a no place in no time – challenges my earlier assertion that cultural actors respond to insufficient academic conceptions of Diaspora by reversing the direction of diasporic desire in order to *re-locate* “Africa.” Complicated by the arrogant and ethnocentric notion that any “African diaspora” began with the Middle Passage, conceptions of Diaspora ignore all pre-Transatlantic slave trade commerce, exchange, and contact that African populations had with extra-African populations.

In a more contemporary context, Diaspora is further complicated by what I call the “n<sup>th</sup> order” dispersion of peoples of African descent in the United States. In present-day America, one can find people of African descent with variations in their geographic linkages back to Africa. This “n<sup>th</sup> order” dispersion might include: a) those like me who can trace their lineages back through multiple generations in the US to an ancestor that was brought over directly from Africa, and many more who hope someday they will be able to identify African ancestors, but have not been able to do so to date; b) recently arrived immigrants from Africa; c) persons of
Caribbean birth of African descent; and more complexly, d) the children of the Caribbean Windrush who now comprise part of the Black British population. Where is the center in this tangle of reticulated dispersion? “Africa” as no place negates the geographic reality of and need for “center.” The epistemological violence that privileges exile and a “teleological cultural return” to some center is nullified (Clifford 1994: 303).

The utopian character of the urban palimpsest suggests that “Africa” can be performed anywhere. The uchronia produced in urban palimpsests enables “Africa” to exist in past, present, and future. Constructed through the cultural tracing of repeated inscriptions and erasures, “Africa” is the accumulation of memory and tradition – conflated, invented, or re-worked. Subtly distinct, we do not have to re-locate “Africa” because we are “Africa.” We are the genesis. Wherever we are, we are always already performing “Africa.”

The Forgotten Piece of Vellum: Required Sunday Medicine

There is a growing interest in the scholarly study of the healing capacity of music, percussion, and sound. I chose not to make “healing” a focus of this dissertation because it is too vast a topic worthy of its own investigation. Nevertheless, I would be remiss not to spend at least a little time exploring the transformative power of the drum, especially since for some participants the Drum Circle provides what elder J.J. Johnson has called “required Sunday medicine.”

I can relate that my experiences with music and percussion, West African dance drumming in particular, have been mostly positively transformative. I almost always feel revived, lighter, and

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101 Windrush describes the large influx of people of African-descent from the British Caribbean to the United Kingdom starting in 1948. The immigration derives its name from the Empire Windrush, which was the first boat to bring a significant cohort of Caribbean-born persons – mostly from Jamaica – to England to work and live. For an in-depth look at this movement and its social and economic ramifications please see the 2009 book, Windrush: The Irresistible Rise of Multi-Racial Britain by Trevor Phillips and Mike Phillips.

102 Percussionist and community elder J.J. Johnson, in discussion with author, 23 April 2013.
balanced after a dance drum session. Healing occurs through participation in the Drum Circle in the following ways including, but not limited to: palimpsest, sound, and community experience.

In “Sacred Scripts,” Mary Nooter Roberts describes the process through which palimpsestuous Qu’ranic tablets become “healing instruments.” By drinking the liquid used to efface an inked prayer from some such tablet, the ingested “medicinal beverage” is “considered to be one of the most effective forms of healing,” as it facilitates “the literal interiorization of holy prayers and protective formulae” (Roberts 2007: 96). If the participants and observers in the LPDC imbibe the sonic tonic to which the memories and traditions are performed, the healing power of the sounds and rhythms is interiorized.

While much anecdotal evidence exists with regard to the physical, social, emotional, and mental benefits of participating in group drumming, few scientific efforts have been made to rigorously investigate them. One of the first studies on the effect of group drumming music therapy as a modulator of biological variables concluded that “drumming subjects experienced immunoenhancing changes as compared to the control group” (Bittman et al. 2001: 38). Specifically, their facilitated group-drumming intervention “reverses the specific neuroendocrine and neuroimmune patterns of modulation associated with the classic stress response” (45). Leimert Drum Circle participants often make comments demonstrating their relief, restoration, and transformation after a Sunday session.

The group experience also provides opportunity for healing. Drum circles encourage inclusive participation – everyone is accepted regardless of age, (sometimes) gender, and experience level. This all-encompassing experience creates a safe place for individuals to emote, share, and create music. The Leimert Park Drum Circle in particular, “draw[s] on the communal tradition among people of African descent, embodied in the concept of a village, the within-
group sanctuary can provide the safety of a caring community, whose purpose in coming
together is to support each other in healing from a shared experience” (Watts-Jones 2002: 595).
In response to the trauma and mental, emotional and physical sequelae of the Middle Passage,
the Drum Circle participants re-create and re-locate “Africa” in efforts to heal the community.

**When the Vellum Cracks or is Otherwise Damaged**

For those who perform upon it, the power of the urban palimpsest lay in the generative capacity
of cultural tracing. The construction and deconstruction inherent in repeated inscriptions and
erasures yields the infinite inscribable potential of the urban palimpsest. Both the ink and tablet
must be present to perform an always-already Africa, a no place in no time. What happens when
ink or tablet is removed from the equation? The Leimert Park Drum Circle has faced, and in
some cases is still facing, forces that threaten to diminish the integrity of its vellum.

The Leimert Park Village Merchants Association and the local Business Improvement
District (B.I.D.), for example, are not pleased with the presence of the Drum Circle. The
merchants find the numerous vendors who set up in the park on Sundays to be in direct
competition with them. Also, the merchants find the general disregard for parking rules by those
visiting Leimert Park on a Sunday as impeding store access and potential commerce.

A moratorium on the vendor issue was issued by the city due to the protracted and as yet
unresolved legal battle between the unpermitted vendors and brick and mortar merchants on
Venice Beach and itinerant street vendors in other part of Los Angeles. As such, the police are
not able to intervene on the merchants’ behalf. Further, many of the owners also violate the rule
they would cite to have the vendors removed by placing their wares to sell on the sidewalks in
front of their stores.
During a B.I.D. meeting on November 23, 2009, the Drum Circle’s consolidator, Najite, even suggested collecting a fee from the myriad vendors who support the Drum Circle on Sundays. The monies would be split between the Merchants, the Drummers, and a security guard. Najite has more recently indicated his intention to collect a fee from the vendors, but made no mention of splitting the profits with the other two parties as mentioned in the suggestion’s first iteration. Irrespective of his desires and motivation, the reality is that Najite does not have the authority to implement either of these schemes.

Najite is frustrated with the Merchants and feels that they have missed many opportunities to support and sanction the Drum Circle. He has made more than one attempt to legitimize the Leimert Park Drum Circle and protect it from what he views as hegemonic attempts to remove the African presence from the area. He and I both investigated the possibility of obtaining a yearlong permit from the local Council District. While possible, it would require 52 separate applications and an accompanying fee for each submission. Since what little money collected during a Sunday Drum Circle is divided between a few of the present drummers and no individual or group has stepped up to assume the cost, the Drum Circle continues unpermitted. As such, any group pursues proper permitting can displace the Drum Circle. Vending and permitting issues aside, Leimert Park Village and the Leimert Park Drum Circle face a much more organized threat. Even as the cultural actors craft an ever-deepening conical spiral of traces each Sunday, the City of Los Angeles is planning to “restore” Leimert Park to its imagined commercial potential. Not only is the City-owned Vision Theatre being brought up to code, it is being remodeled and refurbished in the hopes of being turned into a cornerstone of cultural capital in the area. Unfortunately, local stakeholders are not being consulted enough or at all.

Despite the expressed wishes of the community and the explicit claim on the Vision’s website

103 Notes that I took during a B.I.D. at Community Build in Leimert Park on November 23, 2009.
that it will “provide substantive content relating to the black African American experience and its historical cultural root in the African Diaspora,” the plans portray a beautifully renovated Vision situated in a commercial area that very much resembles the latest incarnation of the exceedingly commercial Grove and is sanitized of any African-inspired character.  

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While issues related to illegal street vending and permitting “crack the vellum,” the City’s plan to modernize the Vision and surrounding environs is tantamount to “discarding the vellum” altogether. Fortunately for the cultural investors in Leimert Park, even when the vellum is removed or destroyed, the ink and its inscribing potential does and will not disappear. As Mama Nzingha Camara succinctly states in response to the threat of shut down, “we’ll just make it happen somewhere else” (Lindsay 2008). Never to be silenced or invisibilized, no matter where or when we go, we are always already MORE A-FREE-KAAA!!!!

104 http://visiontheatre.org/about/proposed-programs/
## APPENDIX 1

### BLACK POPULATION OF LOS ANGELES, 1781 – 2010

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>YEAR</th>
<th>Total City</th>
<th>Blacks in City</th>
<th>% Black in City</th>
<th>Total County</th>
<th>Blacks in County</th>
<th>% Black in County</th>
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**Spanish & Mexican Period**

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<td>9.63%</td>
<td>9,824,906</td>
<td>913,716</td>
<td>9.30%</td>
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</table>

* The De Graf article states the city total was 141 not 131

** Land Boom of 1887-1888

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- LA Almanac (www.laalmanac.com/population) via the US Census
- LA Almanac (www.laalmanac.com/population/po20.htm) via University of Virginia Geospatial Statistical Data Center (http://mapserver.lib.virginia.edu/)
- De Graf 1970
- Bond 1936: 12-13
- Census Data
- Chapple 2010
- Johnson 1971

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APPENDIX 2
SOURCES FOR FIGURE 3.1: GENEALOGY OF SLAVERY ERA DANCES


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