Title
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Publication Date
2012

Peer reviewed|Thesis/dissertation
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By

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A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

African American Studies

in the

Graduate Division

of the

University of California, Berkeley

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Fall 2012
Abstract

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by

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Dancing Africa, Making Diaspora concerns the industry of West African dance in the United States. Considering the relationship between dance, diaspora, and belonging, Dancing Africa works to reveal the power of dance in shaping participants’ individual and collective identities through the premise of African connectedness. In other words, this dissertation considers West African dance as a meaning-making practice. Through the study of multiple West African dance and drum contexts – a Broadway show, dance classes in one Californian community center, a dance “homecoming” workshop in Guinea – it interrogates the ways everyday people (those typically excluded by the field’s privileging of textual archives) conceptualize, embody, and make use of the African diaspora. Ultimately, this dissertation shows how dance links the symbolic and physical dimensions of diaspora: the imaginative work that fosters diasporic connectedness and the physical movement through and across space that has, and continues to, yield variegated African diasporic communities.

This dissertation examines U.S. evocations of Africanness through West African dance in an effort to raise and answer questions about the performative capabilities of West African dance and to investigate the processes by which African diasporic communities are shaped because of and through this dance form. Based largely on ethnographic observations and interviews with West African dance participants, Dancing Africa, Making Diaspora shows how West African dance influences how participants understand what the African diaspora is, and how they see their own raced and gendered bodies in relation to it. This project reveals the bearing that West African dance has on participants' lives by asking the following questions: In what ways did diaspora play a role in the career of West African dance as a formal practice in the US? Why do people take part in West African dance and what “work” does it do for them? How does gender and nationality affect one’s positioning in these various communities? And finally, how has the commodification of the form impacted meanings of diaspora, blackness, and Africanness? Dancing Africa reveals the operations through which this dance economy both widens the circle of African diasporic “we” and continues to police its ever-shifting boundaries of belonging.
INTRODUCTION

_Dancing Africa, Making Diaspora_ concerns the industry of West African dance in the United States. Considering the relationship between dance, diaspora, and belonging, _Dancing Africa_ works to reveal the power of dance in shaping participants’ individual and collective identities through the premise of African connectedness. In other words, this dissertation considers West African dance as a meaning-making practice. Through the study of multiple West African dance and drum contexts – a Broadway show, dance classes in one Californian community center, and a dance “homecoming” workshop in Guinea – I interrogate the ways everyday people (those typically excluded by the field’s privileging of textual archives) conceptualize, embody, and make use of the African diaspora. Ultimately, this dissertation shows how dance links the symbolic and physical dimensions of diaspora: the imaginative work that fosters diasporic connectedness and the physical movement through and across space that has, and continues to, yield variegated African diasporic communities.

Over the past two decades, a burgeoning African arts scene in America has blossomed. This constellation of economic niches function as “contact zones” where diverse people, and their ideas about Africa, collide. I argue that the formal teaching of West African dance and drum were born out of a black American desire to connect to diasporic “roots.” What initially began as a reconstitution of American blackness _vis-à-vis_ a proximity to Africa through African dance in the 1960s has since grown into a popular economy that is today unmistakably characterized by the vast number of non-black people who constitute the majority of its participants. _Dancing Africa_ reveals the operations through which this dance economy both widens the circle of African diasporic “we” and continues to police its ever-shifting boundaries of belonging.

"West African dance” is a placeholder for a host of styles generalized in this way by instructors and dancers alike. This study takes special interest in Guinean dance; under this nationalistic umbrella live hundreds of dance styles that are geographically and ethnically specific. As Kariamu Welsh-Asante writes "Dances from Ghana, Nigeria, and Senegal are the most numerous […] because scholars have done more research and documentation in these countries." Ghana and Nigeria being Anglophone countries begins to explain their presence in American academic literature. Senegal's characteristic dance style – Sabar – and its prevalence in the U.S. since the 1960s in part explains its presence as a topic of scholarly interest. While this dissertation takes a decided look at dances from Guinea – which is by and large the most prevalent West African dance “style” taught currently – participants also cross-train. Interviews understandably and unavoidably implicate experiences from other Afro-diasporic dance and drum trainings. Thus, this dissertation commits to an analysis of Guinean dance while simultaneously acknowledging the circuits of influence between it and other forms. I use "West African" throughout to refer to a broader community of West African dance that my ethnographic participants are implicated in.

In focusing on the dynamics of Guinean artistic practice this dissertation puts pressure on the broader category of "African Dance" which blurs the heterogeneity of the continent's fifty-four countries and their expressive cultures. Scholars, critics, and dancers alike have used "African dance" to denote "ethnic" (nonwhite) dances. The continental signifier "African" indexes the massive geographic space from which a dance comes. Considering Africa's immensity, few generalizations of the continent or its dances can be made. "'The African dance' never existed," as Joann Kealinohomoku puts it plainly in her canonical essay "An
Anthropologist Looks at Ballet as a Form of Ethnic Dance.² Even earnest efforts to discuss the nuances and specificities of African dances often ascribe onto it notions of the primitive, the animalistic, the static.⁴

Few definitions can be offered about traditional African dance that do not cross into the precarious grounds of African universality. What traditional African dances share is their coming from Africa. They are polyrhythmic (multiple rhythms happen concurrently) and typically are incorporated into the texture of everyday living.⁵ Dance is an integral part of celebrations, events and spiritual ceremonies. In Pearl Primus's emphatic language, “Dance in Africa is not a separate art, but a part of the whole complex of living. [...] African dance is basic, vital!”⁶ Dance links the physical and metaphysical aspects of life – a material social world and the belief systems that are used to interpret living.⁷ African dance is cued, orchestrated, and punctuated by specific and correlating rhythms or drum patterns. In Guinean dance, that rhythm is typically kept by the djembe, a rope-tuned mid-size drum made of carved hard wood with a piece of untreated rawhide that covers its top.

Dancing Africa, Making Diaspora, in addition to commenting on the specific history of and dynamics in Guinean dance practice, considers the role of West African dance in shaping ideas around race, movement, and the African diaspora. It argues that previous studies on the African diaspora privilege the physical crossing of national boundaries. A critical engagement with symbolic travel – an important means through which people employ the African diaspora within their local communities – can raise and answer meaningful questions about the contemporary purchase of diaspora. I argue that a narrow definition of diasporic travel (i.e. solely as the crossing of geopolitical boundaries) neglects a number of people who, through dance, engage ideas of dispersal and connectedness that characterize the African diaspora.

Dance as a field of inquiry into the African diaspora is important for a number of reasons. First, considering African Diaspora Studies’ emphasis on the literary or linguistic, an attention to dance helps us understand the body’s capacity to embody the African diaspora. Dance as embodied cultural heritage makes it useful in studying diaspora because inscribed in both choreography and muscle memory are nationalist histories. In other words, dance is a means through which knowledge – about the nation, about diaspora – is transmitted and received. Second, an attention to dance reveals relations of power – through it social identities are rehearsed and negotiated and, since dance styles are taught across ethnic and cultural lines, differences and similarities are revealed. Further, we must consider the ways the African diaspora is engaged symbolically, or else we risk excluding the vast majority of people who constitute the African diaspora but do not have the means to or interest in traveling-by-passport. A focus on West African dance reveals the ways African diasporic communities continue to be constituted, shaped, negotiated, and transformed today. Not only are they sites where individual and communal identities are constructed, they are also moneymaking spaces that trade in on Africanness for profit.

This dissertation examines U.S. evocations of Africanness through West African dance in an effort to raise and answer questions about the performative capabilities of West African dance and to investigate the processes by which African diasporic communities are shaped because of and through this dance form. Based largely on ethnographic observations and interviews with West African dance participants, Dancing Africa, Making Diaspora shows how West African dance influences how participants understand what the African diaspora is, and how they see their own raced and gendered bodies in relation to it. Thus, belonging – the achievement of feeling as though one is a constituent of a particular place or community – is central here. This
project reveals the bearing that West African dance has on participants' lives by asking the following questions: In what ways did diaspora play a role in the career of West African dance as a formal practice in the US? Why do people take part in West African dance and what “work” does it do for them? How does gender and nationality affect one’s positioning in these various communities? And finally, how has the commodification of the form impacted meanings of diaspora, blackness, and Africanness?

Interventions

Diaspora is more than a description of a historical phenomenon; it functions in more complicated ways than as noun. In addition to describing the dispersal of black peoples across the Atlantic and the residual communities that movement engendered, diaspora is also performed, played with, appropriated. A compelling definition of diaspora comes from Saidiya Hartman who puts it simply: diaspora is “both an existent territory with objective coordinates and the figurative realm of an imagined past.” This definition proves useful insofar as it signals both the material and the ideological work that constitutes diasporic-ness and holds in one palm the structural and the affective dimensions of the concept. Movement is, undoubtedly, a central trope in all theorizations of diaspora. Routes, roots, exile, migrations, displacement, homecoming – terms frequently invoked in the describing of diaspora – all in some capacity figure in them bodies or ideas in motion.

Dancing Africa intervenes in the body of African Diasporic scholarship that has relied on restricted conceptualization of travel and movement and has centered on individuals with the means to (or whose circumstance forces) international travel. One of the gifts of African Diaspora Studies has been its thoughtful treatment of movement (the inaugural dispersal of African peoples, their subsequent traveling, and the residual conditions of communities shaped by such movements).9 Scholars like Stuart Hall, Brent Hayes Edwards, Saidiya Hartman, Jacqueline Nassy Brown, and Kim Butler all discuss the significance of travel on black life, culture, and politics. Paul Gilroy's The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness represents a lucid example of the strengths of the field, and its limitations. Gilroy powerfully undertakes a history of black transnationalism in an effort to lay bare the ruses of ethnic particularity. He considers the ways African diasporic peoples embody/ied modernity and argues that travel and exchange (of expressive culture, of material goods) deeply influenced black identities in Europe and the New World. Gilroy defines the “Black Atlantic” in this way:

The specificity of the modern political and cultural formation I want to call the Black Atlantic can be defined, on one level, through [a] desire to transcend both the structures of the nation state and the constraints of ethnicity and national particularity. […] They have always sat uneasily alongside the strategic choices forced on black movements and individuals embedded in national and political cultures and nation-states in America, the Caribbean, and Europe.10

Gilroy calls for an attention to the ways in which black culture is shaped by transnational travel. Paying special attention to literature and music, he argues that the international travel that structures these cultural forms cannot be fully understood within the ideological confines of the nation-state. Yet, Gilroy's definition of travel is a narrow one that looks only at the kinds of movement through and across nation-states that the protagonists of his book – W.E.B. Du Bois,
C.L.R. James, the Fisk Jubilee Singers – embark upon. And while we understand well at the book's end that Gilroy adamantly rejects ethnic and national particularity, he does not account for the ways peoples within their nation's geographic boundaries might, too, travel in ways different, but no less important, than the men at the center of his scholarly work. Gilroy is but one example of African diasporic scholarship that relies on strict definitions of travel to discuss black transnational exchange. While scholars like Brent Hayes Edwards in The Practice of Diaspora: Literature, Translation, and the Rise of Black Internationalism, Jacqueline Nassy Brown in Dropping Anchor Sail, Setting: Geographies of Race in Black Liverpool, and Saidiya Hartman in Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along a Transatlantic Slave Route open up rich conversations about the centrality of movement in African diasporic life, and its influence on black cultural formations, they all suggest confined definitions of travel.

Dancing Africa, Making Diaspora builds on these scholars' important works by raising and answering questions around the ways in which people shape, and are influenced by, transnationalism without necessarily traveling in the traditional sense. I propose that a more capacious conceptualization of travel is necessary – one that considers “symbolic traveling”; one that considers dance-as-travel. The fields of Performance and Dance Studies extend useful frameworks with which to approach such a project on diaspora and dance. Many existing texts on African diasporic dance typically focus on a single company or choreographer. This body of scholarship uses practitioners and dance institutions to raise compelling questions about race, performance, and politics during specific historical moments. We can think of the important works by scholars like Anthea Kraut, Peggy and Murray Schwartz, VêVê Clark, and Thomas DeFrantz who have written on Zora Neale Hurston, Pearl Primus, Katherine Dunham, and Alvin Ailey respectively. These authors' work is useful in that it uses a specific person or group to make larger claims about the efficacy and politics of dance. It leaves room for more studies on the ways people who may not be a member of a company, or a choreographer, or a black person for that matter, engage Afro-diasporic dance. What far-reaching implications have those noted practitioners made on quotidian dance practice? one might ask. Another body of scholarship that this dissertation builds upon is that which considers African origins of American dance. We can think here of authors like Susan Manning, Brenda Dixon-Gottschild, Katrina Hazzard-Gordon, and Jacqueline Malone who look at a history (sometimes an evolution) of black dance, and evoke Africa in order to delineate cultural continuities and divergences. These authors position African dance as departure or genealogical beginning for more contemporary dance and focus on the ways Afro-diasporic styles inflect other dance lexicons. There also exists a series of texts that theorize African dance. Authors who work in this vein are Doris Green, Kariamu Welsh-Asante, and Alphonse Tierou. These works focus on African dance as practiced on the African continent; none outside of it. African dance as performed contemporarily is rarely discussed; what's more, African dance pedagogy is paid little attention, since logics around the dance being “part of the culture” often cloud rich discussion about the teaching and learning of it.

How is the African diaspora pursued and embodied by those who may or may not have the means to travel internationally, but do have the means to pay for a dance class? How can we think about diaspora as something that continues to be shaped and (re)defined everyday, in spaces that capitalize on African diasporic culture to those willing and interested in consuming it? Occupying the disciplinary intersection of African Diaspora Studies, Performance Studies, and Dance Studies, this dissertation works to answer these questions.
Theoretical Framework

African Diaspora Studies works to describe the history and nature of transnational communities – precisely what this project is most eager to examine. Here I outline the key theoretical terms upon which this project is grounded.

Definitions of diaspora abound; indeed, “attempts to identify and make sense of the African diaspora are almost as old as the diaspora itself.” Building on the scholarship of William Safran, Kim Butler, and Benedict Anderson, I refer to the term as both a political and analytical concept. Diaspora both emphasizes the connected experiences of people dispersed by the slave trade(s) (which includes an analysis of the identities that are formed as a result of this dispersal) and offers a language with which to describe the communities forged across national borders.

Political scientist William Safran outlines a set of features that characterize diasporas: dispersal to two or more locations; collective mythology of homeland; alienation from host land; idealization of return to homeland; commitment to the maintenance and safety of the homeland; and connection to homeland that defines the diaspora’s “ethnocommunal consciousness and solidarity.” While this checklist approach offers a useful blueprint, its use of the Jewish diaspora as a “model” suggests an “ideal type”. Demarcating static definitions for a traveling, comparative project, James Clifford argues, risks “identifying the diasporic phenomenon too closely with one group.” “We should be able to recognize the strong entailment of Jewish history on the language of diaspora without making that history a definitive model.” Although scholars agree that each diaspora is historically situated – and that diasporas are distinguished by “the style in which [nations] are imagined” – more work needs to be done in teasing out the nature of those distinctions. Such work should include analyses of the diversity and heterogeneity within diasporas as well. Africana Studies scholar Kim Butler, in her offering of characteristics unique to the African diaspora extends her own list. She argues that African diasporic communities first, after dispersal, move to a minimum of two destinations. Second: for a community to be diasporic there must be some relationship to an actual or imagined homeland. This is the foundation of a diasporic identity. Third: a self-awareness of the group’s identity must exist; diasporic communities are conscious of their membership. Lastly, diasporas have a temporal-historical dimension – they are “multi-generational […] they combine the individual migration experience with the collective history of group dispersal and regenesis of communities abroad.”

Benedict Anderson’s previously evoked Imagined Communities is an important interlocutor since his conceptualization of "nation" helps describe African diasporic communities. Anderson argues that nations are imagined political communities – meaning both limited and sovereign. It is imagined because members within a particular nation will never meet or know their fellow constituents, yet they maintain feelings of their accord. Anderson acknowledges that most communities are imagined because “regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship.” Anderson's scholarship allows us to see the African diaspora as an imagined, socially constructed, political community. Yet his focus on print culture and the media around which nations are made functions somewhat myopically. He argues that “fellow-readers, to whom they were connected through print, formed, in their secular, particular, visible invisibility, the embryo of the nationally imagined community.” Yet there have always been, and continue to exist among African diasporic peoples, a valuation of the embodied, the nonverbal, the social.
A singular focus on texts “squeeze[s] out […] the whole realm of complex, finely nuanced meaning that is embodied, tacit, intoned, gestured, improved, coexperienced, covert – and all the more deeply meaning because of its refusal to be spelled out.” That these forms resist the prescriptions of the text – the archive, perhaps – does not mean that their ephemerality does not itself constitute a substance around which to build a national (or diasporic) culture. “Performance has been, historically, disavowed as historical practice,” Rebecca Scheinder writes. Yet it is precisely an attention to performance that can illuminate how the “imagined community” gets constituted by embodied practices, not just texts. We can use Anderson’s articulation of nation in order to think through the ways that West African dance class participants feel connected to a larger diaspora without having personally encountered most of that diaspora. From where do West African dance participants receive information about African dance generally and the African diaspora more broadly? How is the dance space itself a medium for participants to perform diasporic connectedness?

While a great deal of scholarship has been published on the history of the Transatlantic slave trade, and the ways in which black American communities have imagined Africa in order to redefine conceptions of blackness, a consistent scholarly discussion on dance as a means through which people (black and not) pursue a connection to the African diaspora, or on the ways dance structures discourses about the African diaspora, remains unrealized. While there does exist a tradition of scholars whose work expresses interest in dance as a practice of diaspora – Katherine Dunham, Pearl Primus, Zora Neale Hurston, Jayna Brown, VèVè Clark, Halifu Osumare, Anthea Kruat, and Nadine George, for example – more theoretical work stands to be undertaken. We can begin to understand the relatively small number of texts that deal with this topic as a consequence of the challenges that performance archives pose (their ephemerality, for example) plus the literacies of movement that reading dance demands. Much more difficult to point to, but influential nonetheless, is the seeming devaluation of dance as subject of serious intellectual inquiry, and the relegation of black dance to "ethnic" dance. This project concentrates on West African dance to examine how the form engenders African diasporic communities, both real and imagined, starting with the most individual unit of the space – the single dancer.

Notions of “Africa” and “Africanness,” their changing signification, diversity of meaning, and relationship to an African diasporic identity are central to Dancing Africa. The notion that Western desires have shaped meanings of Africa is a phenomenon a number of scholars have taken up. The important work by Valetin Mudimbe, The Invention of Africa, for example, and the more recent work by Curtis Keim Mistaking Africa examine how Europe and the U.S. respectively have constructed Africanness. The idea of Africa being constituted through a web of representations from without (Africa) draws from Edward Said's Orientalism which looks at the ways the East is constructed by the West – as opposites, and as a series of representations tethered to European imperialism. Said describes Orientalism as a "Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient." This relationship between representations and systems of colonial domination connects to a more recent scholarly text – Paulla Ebron's Performing Africa – in which the author proposes the idea of "the Africa" by which she means an object that manifests through multiple performative tropes. These authors reveal the processes by which Western desires heavily influence how Africa is perceived and understood. In African dance classes we are able to see the kinds of demands dancers (often unwittingly) place onto instructors that are structured by misconceptions of what Africanness means. As Mudimbe charts the West's framing of the Other, he also discusses how the Other (African philosophers and writers, mostly) talk back to those very representations. This is an
important dimension of this project: not only am I interested in the ways Americans view Africa (and how this is connected to how they view or see themselves) but I am also interested in the ways in which West Africans, particularly dance instructors, engage those assumptions.

The idea of an Africa (productive in that it emphasizes the diversity of imaginings) is also useful in that it helps us understand the implications of the category "African dance" itself. One might rightly question the vagueness of the classification, and how little its continental qualification (i.e. African) actually tells us about this form. The fact that African dance is described so generically (unlike other "non-ethnic" dance forms such as ballet, modern, jazz, tap, etc.) through the vast, heterogeneous continent from which it comes has everything to do with the invention of Africa.

That diaspora is constituted by both difference and sameness becomes apparent when considering West African dance practice in the U.S. African Diaspora Studies has productively driven home the fact of difference in the making of diaspora. The scholarship of Stuart Hall, Jacqueline Nassy Brown, Tina Campt, James Campbell, and Edmond Gordon, for example, have excellently unpacked the centrality of discord, disjuncture, and difference to diaspora. Brent Hayes Edwards’ work on transnational literary politics strikes an especially incisive cord. Edwards uses décalage, a French term meaning "that which cannot be transferred or exchanged [...] it is the work of 'differences within unity,' an unidentifiable point that is incessantly touched and fingered and pressed." Edwards uses décalage to discuss how “articulation is always a strange and ambivalent gesture,” yet articulations of diaspora need to be approached in this way in order for African Diaspora Studies to achieve its analytical potential: an awareness of the ways that African diasporic communities are socially, performatively constructed, coupled with an understanding of the heterogeneity that exists within them. Edwards' interest is in literature; yet, his notion of décalage can successfully be applied to the West African dance communities that anchor this project. Décalage can be applied to nonverbal “utterances” that get taught, translated, and remixed through dance pedagogy. Because there exist diverse and often competing definitions of Africanness and African dance, the range of meanings point to diaspora’s existence. For example, décalage can help us think through the ways that both elder black Americans (who see Africa as their ancestral home, in turn making the dance their cultural inheritance) and young white female dancers (who believe West African dance is available to anyone, regardless of race) both see themselves as members of the African diaspora. Décalage also provides a useful framework through which to consider the choreographies themselves – how they circulate transnationally, transform, and undergo choreographic casualties as they transfer between bodies. How can we account for this range of interests and investments without searching for an impossible resolution? Peoples’ ideas of Africa are shaped, shattered, and rebuilt by pressing up against others' in the space where West African dance happens; décalage is a useful concept through which to analyze the convergence of the manifold reasons why people participate in this dance form.

This work does not assume the static nature of social categories like race, class, gender, and nationality. An explicit assertion throughout is that identity categories are made and enacted everyday. Africa is made into an object through a number of performative tropes therefore I look to Performance Studies to attend to the live event that is West African dance and its fleeting repertoire. Performance, then, becomes a useful analytical tool on multiple levels: the first level reads African dance as a formal (i.e. organized) event – this may be a dance class in a studio or a performance on a stage. In this sense performance specifies the style, form, and context where West African dance happens. Second, I am interested in performance as an
enactment of social categories. Performance in this vein considers the ways we rehearse and perform our selves (as black American, or female, or heterosexual, for example). In relation to West African dance classes, this vein of performance allows us to think through West African dance as a space and a means through which people perform social categories. The third level looks at performance as a field that constitutes discourses around Africa. This last interest, using performance as an analytic, considers the constructedness of Africa as a field of discourse – that is, how Africa has and continues to be framed, by whom, and why. This project argues that performances of West African dance make real impact on larger conceptualizations of Africanness, and that we must take performance seriously if we are to understand the way individual performances implicate larger processes like diaspora, migration, citizenship, and cultural belonging.

Intimately connected to performance is the notion of performativity. As Andrew Parker and Eve Sedgwick write, "performativity has enabled a powerful appreciation of the ways that identities are constructed through complex citational processes." 33 Stuart Hall helps us understand the relationship between performativity and identity categories when he outlines two related ways of thinking about African diasporic cultural identity. The first position sees "cultural identity" in terms of "one, shared culture, a sort of collective ‘one true self,’ hiding inside the many other, more superficial or artificially imposed ‘selves,’ which people with a shared history and ancestry hold in common." 34 Here cultural identity is about a mutual historical experience that produces an "oneness." The second position recognizes that, in addition to points of similarity, "there are also critical points of deep and significant difference which constitute ‘what we really are’; or rather—since history has intervened—‘what we have become.’" In this second definition, cultural identity is both a matter of 'becoming' as well as 'being'. 35 Performatives – those kinds of utterances that enact as they name, or in dance’s case, do something in their enactment – emphasize the constructedness of identities, of discourses, and communities. Hall's theorizations can be productively applied to West African dance and diaspora as terms that are both historically rooted and undergoing constant transformation. Performativity connects these two exegeses, forcing us to think historically and contemporarily about definitions of West African dance at once.

Methodology

As a project that considers West African dance as a means through which diaspora is performed (enacted) and made (constituted), I utilize methods from Performance Studies, Anthropology, and Cultural Studies. Ethnography, the method that documents, interprets, translates, and describes a human society (or aspect of that society) to another – anchors the bulk of this project. The use of ethnography to study how African diasporic identities are negotiated is an underemployed tactic. Edmund Gordon and Mark Anderson underscore this fact when they write:

We call for ethnographic attention to the process of diasporic identification. To date the most critical gap in the theorization of diaspora is the lack of studies that attend to the ways particular communities and individuals draw cultural and political inspiration from one another to imagine themselves as ‘Black’ or ‘African.’ Rather than assigning identity and positing how people should participate in the making and remaking of diaspora, we must investigate how they actually do. 36
I use critical ethnography to build an archive about African dance classes. Critical ethnography can be described as a self-reflexive mode of traditional ethnography – one that is constantly invested in laying bare the ethnographer's biases, investments, and failed attempts at cultural translation. Critical ethnography is concerned with ethics, the short and long term effects that the ethnographer's presence and project has on her community, and about respecting participants’ rights.

Because I am interested in the ways the African diaspora is made and remade through the medium of dance, critical ethnography helps me describe and interpret the performative dimensions of West African dance through participant observations and in-depth interviews. I spent two years as a participant observer at the Malonga Casquelourd Center for the Arts, taking dance classes and writing about them at their end. In addition to these participant observations, I also conducted eighty interviews with West African dancers, instructors, and drummers. In addition to asking for participants at the beginning of classes and asking people individually if they would like to participate, I disseminated a call for participants through two African dance listserves (AfricandanceNYC, and SFbayafricandance). The call asked for participants eighteen years old and over, who have taken or still take West African dance at the aforementioned dance studios. I did not specify participant gender or race in the call. From this general invitation – asking people to share "their experiences in West African dance classes" – I received thirty-four responses. The majority of those who responded were white American women, ages 24-52. This original interview pool did not accurately reflect the constituency of the classes themselves, although it did reflect the racialized and gendered dynamics this dissertation works to explicate.

Relying solely on this method of recruitment proved problematic, since my interview pool should (and did not then) reflect the racial and sex make-up of the classes themselves. Thus, after I analyzed the interviews generated from the first call for participants I issued a second call, specifically targeting the groups I saw as being insufficiently accounted for in the first set. I wanted more interviews from black American women, non-black or white American women, continental African women, and drummers of all races. I began to ask people individually if they would be interested in participating. Those I had interviewed kindly introduced me to other potential interviewees. From this second interviewing effort I conducted an additional forty-six interviews. I use anonyms to maintain and protect interviewee confidentiality. If real names are listed, they appear at the request of the interviewee.

When possible, I scheduled in-person interviews with those who expressed interest, recorded the conversation for accuracy purposes, and transcribed those interviews personally. For those with whom I was unable to meet in person, I scheduled a phone interview. During interviews, I asked each participant how they self-identified racially and also asked them to consider how they are racialized by others, in order to get a better sense of the subject position from which they spoke. In a space where racial contentions brew, this also helped me make sense of the vast number of pronouns interviewees used to describe race and gender dynamics (i.e. “they,” “we,” “those folks,” etc.). Other core interview questions revolved around interviewees' history with West African dance, how they defined West African dance, and how they conceptualized the African diaspora. I also asked more open-ended questions so as to generate stories as opposed to clipped answers. For example: How does West African dance feel on your body? And, are all people treated the same in West African dance classes?

With respect to the chapter on dance classes in Oakland, this project represents a kind of "native" or "indigenous" ethnography – defined as ethnography conducted and written by a
member of the community that is the subject of the study. To be sure, the position of being a
native ethnographer is not to presume a kind of inherent understanding or connectedness to any
of the participants in this study. As Lanita Jacobs-Huey suggests in her ethnographic study of
black women's hair care and like Jacqueline Nassy Brown mentions in her study on black Liverpudlian women, there can be a revelation of deep diversity made visible when the
ethnographer is herself a member of the community that she studies. As the works of these two
authors reveal, indigenous ethnography is productive in that it shows heterogeneous subject
positions and perspectives within one community.

Diana Taylor writes that, "performance transmits memories, makes political claims, and
manifests a group's sense of identity." Performance Studies' attention to both traditional
performance and the performance of everyday life – and its interest in the relationship between
structures and individual agency – make Performance Studies well-suited for taking on questions
about the performative dimensions of the African diaspora, and the roles individuals play in
defining that diaspora. If, as Brown argues, the African diaspora is a "racialized geography of
the imagination," how do certain meanings become attached to it through dance? What kind of
power do individual actors have in transforming those meanings? Performance Studies offers a
sustained attention to performance that compliments African Diaspora Studies, while African
Diaspora Studies offers Performance and Dance Studies an attention to the ways in which bodies
are racialized and implicated in transnational networks of exchange.

Outline

The first chapter, “Fela!: Diaspora in Three Moves,” analyzes the Broadway show Fela!
and looks at the strategies of display used to create and market this musical. It considers the role
dance plays in the production, asking the simple but wrought question: what makes this show
and its dance “African”? I propose that in Fela!, diaspora moves on three different registers:
choreographically, affectively, and commercially. The operations of diaspora in these three
variants reveals the malleable nature of diaspora: in each, diaspora is evoked differently and used
to resolve a diverse set of needs. Informed by interviews with members of the ensemble, the
show’s producers, and participant observations of its audience, I argue that Fela!”s popularity
and palatability have to do with its framing of the African diaspora as both distinctly black and
racially transcendent.

The second chapter, “West African Dance Classes at the Malonga Casquelourd Center
and the Politics of Belonging,” focuses on Oakland, California. It looks at the history of the
Malonga Casquelourd Center for the Arts – one of the oldest spaces dedicated to African arts and
culture in the Bay Area. I closely examine the dynamics within West African dance classes
therein. I argue that a power struggle over this shared space exists: one pulled most strongly
between West African dance as a site for white sexual regeneration, abandon, and social utopia
on the one hand, and as a site for black transnational cultural alliance and claims to Africa as
black “lost mother” on the other. Importantly, this chapter looks at the ways race, gender,
sexuality, and nation intersect, compete, and are enacted in these classes. Based on interviews
with community members and participant observations, I look at the dynamics between dancers,
instructors, and drummers.

Unquestionably, tensions arise in this community around who West African dance
belongs to and why, modes of conduct both on and off the dance floor, and the impact of
dancers’ intimate relationships with teachers and drummers. Ideas of belonging and authenticity
emerge prevalently in this chapter. Race resurfaces often, since blackness is typically the measure of diasporic belonging. Reasons for why dancers enter classes are as abundant as are reasons for why they leave; I show that dancers’ diverse and often irreconcilable interests and investments have everything to do with diaspora. Throughout this chapter I also discuss symbolic travel, or how the dancers that participate in this space embody the African diaspora. I unpack the ways dancers describe themselves as connected to the diaspora, and how West African choreography makes them feel linked to both the contemporary diaspora and to an African ancestral past.

In “By Another Route,” the conclusion, I position my own dancing body as an instrument of diaspora, discuss my own relationship to West African dance practice, and consider the number of ways my body positions itself and gets positioned within the various spaces where it lands. Here I also discuss the relationship between African Diaspora Studies and Dance Studies. What kinds of questions might an African Diaspora Dance Studies field ask? What role does Africa play in scholarship on black dance more broadly? I conclude with a discussion on my own experience during a West African dance "Homecoming" trip – a month long workshop that escorted international students to the African continent in the name of cultural exchange. I consider the dynamics I witnessed during one dance workshop in Guinea, West Africa. I examine what happened when students’ imagined Africa confronted the actual place, and unpack the ways that Africanness functioned within it as a purchasable commodity. The workshop raises important questions around dance tourism and the swapping of monetary currency for affective or familial purchase. Although heuristic, this dance workshop can shed light onto the ways an American West African dance industry enlists communities on the African continent – in Guinea – into its fold.

*Dancing Africa, Making Diaspora* works to reveal how people – those who self-identify as black and those who do not – incorporate notions of diaspora into their everyday. It argues that West African dance and the communities which surround its instruction and performance can reveal the ways in which diaspora can be marketed, consumed, fashioned, and embodied. Throughout this dissertation I show how dance is an important “place” through which to better understand the purchase of the African diaspora today – and also how dance is itself a method that, in its doing, shapes and (re)makes diaspora.
Welcome na de Shrine!

_Fela!_ – the musical about the Nigerian musical icon Fela Anikulapo Kuti (1938-97) – tells an abridged and nonlinear story. It is his last night performing, Fela explains. Emotionally dispirited, physically fatigued, and politically exhausted, the musical takes place post-"Unknown Soldier": the raid at Kuti's compound, Kalakuta Republic. On February 18, 1977, a swarm of 1000 soldiers assailed Kuti's home. Most of its sixty residents were assaulted, including his wives, many of whom were raped and severely abused. His mother, Funmilayo Anikulapo Kuti was tossed out of a second-story window and died a year later by injuries caused during the attack. The musical begins after Funmilayo's death – Lagos, 1978 – at Fela's club and place of worship, the Shrine. _Fela!_ takes us swiftly through Kuti’s diasporic life story: from descriptions of his parents to his move to London to study at the Trinity College of music, his stay in the United States to his return to Nigeria. His efforts at honing a sound, coupled with an increasingly staunch political dissidence, stitch the autobiographical pieces together. By the end of the musical, Fela is depicted as a fatigued but hopeful freedom fighter who, upon communicating with his deceased mother in a third, dream-like space, refuses to abandon his "beloved Nigeria."

_Fela!_ made its off-Broadway debut in 2008 at 37 Arts in New York City. Conceived by Bill T. Jones, Jim Lewis, and Stephen Hendel, written by Jim Lewis and Bill T. Jones, and choreographed and directed by Bill T. Jones, _Fela!_ quickly received wide acclaim. "One helluva party," as New York Times theater critic Ben Brantley described, _Fela!_ had accrued an arms-full of awards by the end of its five-year tenure. It was in 2010, two years after the show’s premiere that _Fela!_ moved from the 300-seat off Broadway theater to the 1,050-seat Eugene O’Neil Theater. It was here, at the O’Neil, that I saw my first of eight viewings of _Fela!_.

It was clear what all the fanfare was about. The show was beautiful: an intertextual and bricollage set, a strong leading actor, precise choreography, and a compelling story-line rendered a powerful telling of the musician’s life and legacy. Although I had seen all-black casts on Broadway, never before had I seen an African protagonist (save maybe for _The Lion King_). The musical’s privileging of a black African as its subject asserted that his narrative was important and worthy of staging and sharing. It was a noticeable shift from the white-centeredness that characterized most of Broadway’s productions and audiences. This intervention – in tandem with the witty staging of Kuti’s diasporic travels and the thoughtful attention to Yoruba practice and ritual – stirred me. Also, the choreography constituted a great deal of its content: it was amalgam, itself a hybridization of different forms and techniques – on the whole deft, precise, and diasporic.

Informal post-show audience feedback complicated my excitement. It wasn’t that drastically different opinions of the show existed; everyone loved it. The diversity of reasons for why folks enjoyed it so much was striking though. Most audience commentary, while celebrating the choreography, naturalized the dancers’ performances and thereby denied recognition of the precision that came through mediated rehearsal. Nevermind the fact that the majority of the ensemble were trained modern dancers with little formal experience in West African dance, there remained an assumption that a kind of unprocessed, organic movement unfolded onstage. "How ‘natural’ those women were; they were just meant to do this,” two women gabbed while exiting the theater. “There’s nothing more exciting than African dance!” a woman squealed.
outside while waiting take a photo with the cast. That the dancing in Fela! made audiences want to be better dancers themselves represented another predominant response. ("I wish my body could do that!" and “We need to find a club immediately. I need to dance right now.”) The dance was lust-inducing too – as affirmed by the man behind me in the refreshments line who, when asked by his friend what he thought of the show thus far, grabbed his crotch and admitted he didn't know how much more he could take. And then there existed a kind of incensed response expressed by black folks particularly: “See how they treat us when we got some real shit to say?” a middle aged black man asked me rhetorically. Despite the variegated nature of what each audience member was responding to, how they all responded – which is to say, strongly – connected them all.

The pervasiveness of Fela! in New York City and in popular culture made more urgent a critical reading. After my first viewing I began to notice Fela! all over. I constantly received emails about events featuring the Fela! cast: “Spirit of Africa, Soul of Brooklyn” block parties; New Years ‘Felabration’ events; DanceAfrica ‘African Markets’ starring the Fela! Queens; Afrobeat parties nationwide. All were marketed towards, organized and populated predominately by young black urbanites; a concentration of these types of events took place in Brooklyn. In places that were less concentrated by young Afro diasporic city dwellers, Fela! existed too: Miami Heat commercials, Vogue Magazine spreads, mayoral fundraising events, subway train advertisements and more. What was it about this show that allowed it to penetrate so many different kinds of spaces? How was each using diaspora differently?

This chapter discusses the ways in which the African diaspora figures into the Broadway show Fela!. I outline the different kinds of "movement" that constitute this show, thereby offering a sharpened understanding of the central role movement plays in the making of the diaspora.44 I offer a reading of Fela! through the terms of diaspora, movement, and performance to argue that diaspora is practiced and performed contemporarily and that everyday folks utilize diaspora to make sense of their own individual and group identities. More specifically, I show that through Fela! we see diaspora working on three interrelated levels, making three different “moves.” The first is a choreographic diaspora that operates at the level of performance. Here I argue that the dance in the show indexes a cultural hybridity characteristic of the African diaspora. The second move is an affective diaspora: Fela! encourages afro conviviality – processes of black cohabitation and interaction – within the cast, among its audiences, and between disparate black worlds. The third move is a commercial diaspora; I look at the marketing and circulation of the musical itself to argue that diaspora functions as either hyper-black or abstractly universal.

Interpreting these three “moves” demands an appraisal of Kuti’s repertoire; in order to read Fela! as an embodiment of diaspora we must first consider the politics of Africanness, global blackness, and authenticity that operated within Kuti’s own performances. This will show that contemporary diasporic performances remain in conversation with, and are refashionings of, past performances. I look at Kuti’s repertoire with an eye toward dance and moving bodies more generally. While many of the biographies and critical writings on Fela Kuti focus on the artist’s music and marital life, few directly discuss the ambiguous role of movement, choreography, or his infamously provocative dancers on his career. Considering the intimacy between Nigerian rhythms and movement, discussing Afrobeat music without an acknowledgment of the work that sound does on the body, and the way dancing bodies affected the music, proves futile.45 Locating the body in the musical listening helps us understand how the durability of this musical genre (including its recent and widespread circulation and appropriation in the U.S.) hinges on its
capacity to be danced to. Such an historical approach reveals how much of Kuti’s politics, sound, and dance were influenced by movement – both real and imagined. A consideration of the historical record bares a tension between a stated African authenticity and a diasporic sensibility that roams throughout Kuti’s repertoire – one that trails into the Broadway show.

Shuffle and Groove: Making African Authenticity

Traditional West African music – like West Africa – is diverse, poly-lingual, and varied in its form. Yet and still, certain musical continuities exist and in order to effectively understand the changing nature of Fela Kuti’s sound, we must grasp the characteristics of his musical foundation. Understanding the heterogeneity of African musical forms, while also cognizant of general properties common in most West African music, Sola Olorunyomi offers a list of recurrent features indicative of this regional musical genre: "call-and-response pattern of vocal music; the bell rhythm of the gong which denotes the lines; the predominant use of the pentatonic scale; the speech rhythm growing out of tonal inflections of African words and chants; the use of polymers and polyrhythms, and musical instruments used as symbols."\(^{46}\)

Repetition is also a crucial element of traditional West African, Yoruba, and Afrobeat music – it brings out a rhythmic tension that constitutes a beat. Repetition also locks the listener to the song, compels them to dedicate to the song their attention and teaches them how to move in accordance with its rhythm.

Kuti’s first band – the Koola Lobitos – played a mix of Highlife, American Jazz, and traditional Yoruba musical forms and was established with his friend J.K. Braimah in 1958.\(^{47}\) Kuti played guitar and Braimah, saxophone. From 1958 to 1962 Kuti lived in London while studying at the Trinity College of Music. He struggled there and took longer than expected to pass his exams, but along the way he encountered and began to intensely study American Jazz music and met and married his first wife, Remi Taylor.

Jazz music influenced him deeply. The Koola Lobitos, categorized by Kuti as ‘Highlife Jazz,’ a musical fusion with main stylistic and structural devices of Nigerian dance-based highlife as its basic scheme evidenced Kuti’s newly inspired interest in blurring musical genres.\(^{48}\) Kuti worked to incorporate improvisation, elaborate orchestration, and complex harmonic movement. Lacking a musical arrangement that could harmonize all of Kuti’s musical influences, the Koola Lobitos’ sound was consequently dense, aggressive, and in the eyes of Kuti’s mother, Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti, “un-Nigerian.” “Start playing music your people understand, not jazz,” she advised.\(^{49}\)

In 1969 an opportunity arose for Kuti to travel to America. He pursued it. Kuti was groping for a new musical sound and political ideology to match and saw his pending US trip as an opportunity to hone his band’s image. Since Kuti’s return to Nigeria from London in 1967, his highlife jazz band was met with little fanfare. Kuti had yet to achieve a sonic synergy between his different musical influences; the high number of inspirations, plus his now orchestra-sized band, rendered an unfulfilled sound. The crowdedness of Kuti’s musical arrangement was one of the fundamental problems with highlife jazz: it was comprised of stacked instruments – chaotic to listen to, and ultimately, undanceable. Between 1967 and 1969 he played to empty clubs in Ghana and Nigeria, refusing to edit his music in order to accommodate the current West African trends marked by the popularity of black American soul musicians like James Brown, and Sierra Leonian soul singer, Geraldo Pino.
Highlife, it can be argued, inaugurated Kuti’s musical genre. During the post-World War II moment, highlife became influential in Anglophone West Africa. Newly discharged black soldiers returned to West Africa touched by the Western-style live music and nightclub performance they encountered during their travels. Consequently, highlife (sometimes called palm-wine guitar music) grew in its number of musicians, resembling more closely the structure of an American orchestra.

Olorunyomi argues that of all highlife musicians, Rex Lawson's iteration of highlife inspired Kuti most. "Combining the three-membrane drum, two/and one-membrane conga drums, and the Western trap drum set with cymbals […] serve[d] as the immediate catalyst for Afrobeat," he explains. Afrobeat had a number of musical influences: traditional Nigerian music, highlife jazz, American soul and funk music, and Latin rhythms as well. An edited and more gracefully orchestrated form of highlife jazz, Afrobeat was streamlined with one-cord vamps, an extended overture, and horns punctuating the music. It was moody and rich, as opposed to crowded and chaotic. A complimentary mix of Yoruba rhythms, American funk, and West African highlife, the sound was more muscular and easier to dance to. By muscular, I mean that the Afrobeat sound was moody, upbeat, thumping. It escorted the body into groove, particularly through its incorporation of the bass or, as Kuti described it, the yansh (the ass).

As Tejumola Olaniyan points out, Kuti’s travels to the US and his encounters with black America, Black Power literature, and Black Nationalist movements are widely understood to have inspired a new direction for him and his music. But Kuti’s interest in finding a popular sound brewed before then. In an interview with Carlos Moore, Kuti explains that in 1968 (a year before his trip to the US) he was in need of a new sound and a compelling political ideology: “I must identify myself with Africa. Then I will have an identity. […] I must give it a real African name that is catchy.” He “dashed” (paid) the press to hold an intimate press conference where he announced he’d be describing his music henceforth as “Afro-beat.”

Early into Kuti’s U.S. trip, he found himself gigging in Los Angeles where he met Sandra Isadore, a black American woman and Black Panther Party member. He spotted her from the stage while playing at an NAACP event and asked her to accompany him after the performance. She agreed. Sandra became his girlfriend and, in addition to supporting Kuti and his band financially, she introduced him to black nationalism. She gave him books by Malcolm X, George Jackson, Angela Davis, and Nikki Giovanni, which he used to begin to analyze the underdevelopment of Africa, postcolonialism, and the disorganization of Nigeria specifically. In America, through a proximity to black Americans, Kuti honed and anchored his pan-Africanism through texts. The black literatures that Kuti encountered gave him historical and theoretical tools with which to sharpen his understanding of Nigeria. “Everything about Africa started coming back to me,” Kuti shared with Carlos Moore, as though these newly introduced analyses of Africa (and a broader black diaspora) were always present in him, only waiting to be excavated. An African continental crisis, Olorunyomi argues, was Kuti’s foremost artistic muse. But Isadore played a meaningful role in Kuti’s political transformation. Her patience and her support of Kuti and the Afrika 70 inspired their song “My Lady Frustration.” Then playing five shows a week at the Haiti de Citadel club owned by Bernie Hamilton (who would later star in the television show “Starsky and Hutch”), Kuti played their new song. Kuti recalls:

I took the microphone and said I was going to play 'My Lady Frustration.' I didn't know how the crowd would take the sound, you know. I just started. Bernie was behind the bar and he almost jumped over it…'Fela, where did you get this fucking tune from?
Whaaaaaat!' The whole club started jumping and everybody started dancing. I knew then I'd found the thing, man. To me it was the first African tune I'd written until then.56 Inspiring the club patronizers to jump and dance evidenced the song’s success. Dance, both by Afrobeat’s audiences and by Kuti’s dancers, inextricably connected to the rhythm. Bodies obliged to dance marked the pleasure of listening and the efficacy of the song being “African.” This “dance factor” can be seen as a significant difference between highlife jazz and afrobeat. As John Chernoff explains, "In African music, excellence arises when the combination of rhythms is translated into meaningful action; people participate best when they can 'hear' the rhythms, whether through understanding or dance.”57 In response to another early Afrobeat single, Nkira Nzewgu offers: “Then ‘Jeun K’oku’ came and blew us away. It was local, it spoke about our home reality, and most important of all, it met our critical requirement of sophisticated sound. To those for whom music meant dance, it was also a welcome shift from the ‘dance-less’ jazz sounds of Fela’s Koola Lobitos.”58

Over time, Afrika 70’s songs grew longer. Many of Kuti’s records were only one song: side A would contain the full song with lyrics and on side B, the instrumental. Even the full version would often contain a long instrumental overture. "I can’t stand all that short music,” Kuti explained. “We dance long distance here, so no three minute music for me.”59 The music became, in a sense, characterized by the body’s implementation of it. It grew “more corporeal,” as Olaniyan explains, “calling on much physicality in dancing and its presentation more dramatic and sensational.”60 The song’s length prompted an endurance dance – a groove that engendered an elongated shuffle.

Three Moves

Choreographic

Diaspora moves choreographically within Fela! as it did during Kuti’s performance repertoire. By this I mean that the dance in the Broadway show indexes the cultural hybridity characteristic of African diasporic expressive cultures. This register is especially important to unpack since Fela! was so regularly misdescribed by critics and audience members as authentically African. A diasporic reading productively destabilizes notions of essential Africanness to lay bare the contingencies and diverse cultural influences that shaped the dance – both within this musical production and within Fela Kuti’s performance practice historically.

Music inaugurates the show. The dance is soon thereafter summoned. The band (with Brooklyn’s Afrobeat group Antibalas as its core) line the left half of the back wall. No actors appear on stage at first. The set is brightly decorated and elaborate. It has a piecemeal quality: shards of tin line the walls, rainbow twinkle lights sparkle, and painted pictures of a few Yoruba Orishas crown the stage. After a few minutes expire, two dancers take the small cage-like nooks on the downstage corners. They sink into a squat and break into deep hip rolls, enunciated by their skirts that flick pieces of cloth back at each revolution. Their hips move without stutter while their arms and knees follow – eased syncopation, and polyrhythmic. The dancers’ faces appear indifferent and their disposition is not inviting. They scan the audience with a kind of uncaring appraisal until Fela saunters through the audience flanked by four men, his stiff arms up and parenthetically framing his face. More Queens enter through the aisles and inhabit the space onstage, the catwalks, and the cages.
Of an ensemble of twenty-two, there are only three substantive speaking roles in *Fela!*: Fela, Funmilayo, and Sandra Isadore. The remaining nineteen ensemble members are dancers, standing in for the infamously large Africa 70 crew of musicians, dancers, and singers. Without lines, the dancers who play Fela’s Queens serve different purposes throughout the show: during transitions they do him favors like light his joints or strap on his saxophone; when not in motion they drape the stage like streamers; they are hype women; and they provide the shrilled antiphony in many of the songs. Most times they are fully engaged in deft choreography. The dancers move with a quickness that manages somehow to be syrupy. No hip rolls are cut short in an effort to keep pace. They wear a calm face and body despite the choreography's athleticism. The execution is precise yet individualized; personalities poke through the movement, even without scripted lines.

Movement-as-dance is an important register on which diaspora plays out. On the level of choreography it is “diasporic” – by which I mean an amalgamation of many different Afro-diasporic dance forms: Sabar, Djembe, Haitian, Cuban, Guinean, and Modern. In this light, the choreography can be understood as “black” not so much in the parts that make its sum, but in the impossibility of finding what’s at the bottom. Its African diasporic-ness is measured by the impracticality of separating influences, choreographic genealogies and flares. Danielle Goldman writes, “The most radical aspect of [choreographer Bill T.] Jones’ call, and perhaps the easiest to miss, is that he genuinely seeks a sum larger than its parts. He rejects an either/or situation, where the viewer alternates between focusing on identity one moment and form the next.”

Goldman’s reading of Jones’ artistic sensibility is evident in *Fela!*: here the form is also the (diasporic) subject.

If diaspora is understood as a state of hybridity, as Paul Gilroy, Brent Edwards, and others have suggested, the movement in *Fela!* – in its genre blurring, border crossing, and themes of exile and homeland – reflect this aptly. To be clear, the movement in *Fela!* being diasporic is not synonymous with it being “African.” Reviews of the show that categorize *Fela!* as “African dance” rest more on the surrounding tropes of Africanness than the movement itself. Jeffrey Page, member of the ensemble, a West African dance choreographer for the television show *So You Think You Can Dance*, and choreographer for Beyoncé’s “Who Run The World? (Girls)” describes the choreography in *Fela!* in the following way:

The dance that is happening in *Fela!* is not African dance. When you say ‘West African dance’ that’s a place. That's a geographical place that is located somewhere in the world; it has a very specific location. So I wouldn't call it "African dance." It utilizes certain [African dance] aesthetics because the dancers are from [the company] Forces of Nature and different companies that hold the craft of African dance high. But it’s not African dance.

Page stresses the importance of place and choreographic particularity here. Rather than reading the dance as simply African, he emphasizes the composite nature of the choreography. Its strength, he argues, comes from Jones’s ability to cull movement from various dance lexicons. The notion of hybridity is especially apt considering too that much of the movement in the show was developed through workshops. As many of the dancers I interviewed indicate, Jones asked his ensemble how their bodies could embody certain themes, events, words, and relationships. Individual moves were assembled into movement series. Yet, diasporic-ness is often misread as African, a point that Page’s comments also raise. Jones’ choreography and directing aesthetic...
(with the help of other markers of Africanness like bright costuming, bare-footedness, and minimally dressed black women dancing) contributes to this slippage. The show’s catchphrase, “Original no artificiality,” collaborates in this conflation too. The “original” referent is unclear: is it Fela Kuti, *Fela! the musical*, or both?

*Fela! the musical* cannot alone bear the responsibility of broadcasting a specious notion of African authenticity. As I’ve already indicated, a return to the archives suggests that Kuti’s “original African music” was the sum of diverse musical influences and performance mediums. Choreography became an increasingly important aspect of Kuti’s live performances. Regarding *Africa 70*’s early performances only one dancer, Dele, is cited in any detail. Information about her is scant as it appears she, unlike many of the other dancers, never married Kuti and has for this reason or another fallen out of the record. In an interview with Raymond Dumas, Tony Allen (band leader of *Africa 70* and co-engineer of Afrobeat), mentions the role of Dele:

My goal as a drummer was always to watch Dele dance. Dele was a great dancer. I would design patterns to make her move in the way I found her the most beautiful. That is where those patterns come from, to command her to move in various ways. The relation to the woman in the audience to the dance is always part of our music.\(^{63}\)

Dele functioned as both muse for and vessel of the Afrobeat sound. Her dancing evidenced the genre’s efficacy as “African” dance music. As the Afrobeat sound became more refined and Fela and *Africa 70* became, as Niki Coker calls, “the most formidable rhythm machine in tropical Africa,” the role of dance evolved.\(^{64}\) The number of dancers grew and dance performance became a vehicle through which Kuti could rehearse his investment in “African traditions” – his version of which not only promulgated, but also supported, his unorthodox views on sex, marriage and women. In short, the dance embodied Kuti’s stark inconsistencies – especially as they related to gender roles. Dance in Kuti’s performances had a nuanced function: it indexed the performative nature of authentic gendered Africanness. Dance, sound, and ideology then, were intimately connected enterprises.

Despite its nuance, Kuti himself framed dance and his dancers simply as vessels of unmediated African womaness even though their movements were cosmopolitan and painfully rehearsed. During his 1969 stay in New York and later Los Angeles, Kuti shaped more than just his sound. He began incorporating multiple dancers into his live performances. The “locomotive artists,” as Nkiru Nzegwu calls them, were typically his girlfriends, and steadily increased in number between 1970 and 1975. After opening his Lagosian club Afro Spot, Kuti crafted his live performance aesthetic that, although predicated on his new interest in “traditional African custom,” were deeply touched by black American performance traditions.\(^{65}\) As Ogugua Iwele – Kuti’s concert manager and later, *Fela!* tour manager and accent coach describes,

The dancers if you ask me, as a youth there, the dancers were actually seductive. What would make a girl a really hard dancer in fact is to shake like, “if [we] were making love I would mess you up.” You know that kind of stuff […] like Vegas showgirls or whatever but with an African side to it. It was not over-elaborate like Vegas. It wasn’t that demeaning. Now that you're asking it was very typical, that concept. That also goes to show you that Fela had [a very] American “show” concept, you know?\(^{66}\)
The privileging of scantily clothed and racy dancers at the Shrine (sometimes housing them onstage in cages) was based on an American performance proclivity that employed sexual suggestiveness (skimpy clothing, salacious movements) to attract audiences (Fig. 1). Thus America served as both a performatively generative site for Kuti and also one that became the tape against which he constructed his authentic Africanness later in his career.

Figure 1. “Dancing at the Shrine”. Photograph by Bernard Matussiere.

The attention Kuti paid to choreography is better understood when one considers his belief in the responsibility of dance to uphold “African retentions.” In Kuti’s estimation, dancing style revealed what kind of woman a dancer was. In his 1972 song “Lady” for example, he compares the Westernized “Lady” with the “real” African woman. The “Lady”:

She go wan make you open door for am / She go wan make man wash plate for am for kishin / She wan salute man, she go siddon chair / She wan siddon for table before anybody / She wan take piece of meat before anybody / Call am for dance, she go dance Lady dance.

The “real” African woman:

African woman go dance / she go dance the fire dance / She know im man na master / She go cook for am / She go do anything im say / But Lady no be so / Lady na master.

“Lady” was ensnarled in the politics of African womanhood. In contrasting the Westernized “Lady” who is aggressive, haughty, and inauthentic with the “real” African woman who is
submissive, strong, yet always subordinate, Kuti prescribed and policed gender roles. Real African women, untouched by Westernization, could be detected by their dance.\textsuperscript{68}

Reporters on and critics of the Shrine framed dance as an example of African hypersexuality, raunchiness, and spectatorial pleasure. What was in the beginning an interpretive groove marked by a characteristically Congolese \textit{wine}, became increasingly choreographed.\textsuperscript{69}

“The dancing started out with Dele as free expression,” Kuti’s son, Femi Kuti, explains, “but toward the end, those dancers were really just like striptease.”\textsuperscript{70} An important part of his public persona rested on his marital and extramarital excesses, his lewd and/or antiestablishment lyrics and his sexual stagecraft.\textsuperscript{71} He was vocal about having many girlfriends and sexual partners, having sexual intercourse with at least two women a day, and indulging in sexual activity for several hours daily whenever possible.\textsuperscript{72} The following description by Michael Veal, one of Kuti’s biographers, is emblematic of the kind of attention typically afforded to the dance:

On stage, [Kuti’s] undulating dancing style projected far more explicit eroticism than the rule among popular singers in any style, and the Afrika 70 dancers, including Aduni Idoowu, Funmilayo Onilere, Omolara Shosanya, and Najite Mokoro, presented highly eroticized solo dances. A typical maneuver might involve a dancer bouncing around the stage on her haunches, thrusting her pelvis forward while gesturing outward with her hands as if she were ceremonially bestowing sex upon the audience. A dancer might feign intercourse by thrusting her hips against the floor while skittering about the stage on all fours, or might lift one leg high in the air while rotating her hips against an invisible partner. Another became legendary for the way in which she would allow her buttocks to vibrate rhythmically to the music while the rest of her body remained perfectly still.\textsuperscript{73}

The dancers’ physical appearance (performing bare-breasted or wearing decorative brassieres or “tops made of sheer transparent material, beads and garments that enhanced their buttocks – brief wrappers or white Gucci panties”) and their movement inspired a lascivious interest in Kuti’s publicly performed private life.\textsuperscript{74} Newspapers and media outlets depicted Kuti’s brides as in “bondage,” “victims of indoctrination,” and “misfits.” But Kuti’s wives came from many different backgrounds, ethnic groups, and social classes so any wholesale reading of the dancers’ sensibilities, life perspectives, and intentions is slippery. Carlos Moore, in his 1978 \textit{This Bitch of a Life}, challenges these charges by showing how each queen worked based on her talents and interests: they worked as deejays, singers, dancers, managers, or cashiers – and although it varied according to job and seniority, on average they received a salary of 35 naira a week. Some were conduits of spirituality, particularly after the passing of Kuti’s mother. Some sought out Kalakuta primarily because it offered them opportunities to dance.\textsuperscript{75} Indifferent to negative reviews of his work and life, Kuti continued to situate their dancing and lifestyle choices within the rhetoric of traditionalism. Nkiru Nzegwu makes a solid point that Kuti’s take on appropriate gender roles was grounded heavily on what he perceived as “authentic” Africanness and tradition. She writes, “The catchy tempo of the song, Fela’s deployment of ‘African’ signifying authenticity and indignity, and the term ‘lady’ as implying deculturation and otherness, prodded listeners to afford legitimacy to Fela’s thesis.”\textsuperscript{76} Yet Fela’s notion of authentic African relations was misinformed. She describes how the African woman who is intuitively natural to Kuti was actually constructed around the 1880s when Christian gender norms and Victorian ideals of civilized living were imposed onto Lagosian peoples. These ideals differed drastically from indigenous practices. “While the indigenous meaning stressed autonomy and economic
independence, the Christian viewpoint stressed economic dependency and subservience.” Thus Fela’s definitions of “tradition” and indigeneity are derived from a Western inflected model of the nuclear family – one that, as posited by “Lady” – is un-African. “Suffice it to say that Fela’s ‘Lady’ deploys an imagery that seems intuitively true about African women yet is fundamentally Western.”

Even though more diverse forms of movement happened at The Shrine, readings continued to describe its dance as overt displays of simple and legible sexuality. Kuti’s daughters, Yeni and Sola, often danced onstage (both were members of the Calabar and Ibo dance troupes), but it is the Queens who are remembered as the “movement machines” at the Shrine. And even though much of the movements there were perfunctory (dancers would sway from side to side, two-step, or wine), writers depict it only as a string of sex tricks. Further, they frame those more catchy moves (which do themselves, of course, require practice and training) as evidence of an innate hypersexuality, despite the fact of their rehearsal.

Vivien Goldman’s description of a night at the Shrine is typical:

The cages and their occupants certainly affected our British cameraman. Lithe movers, wearing a twist of a halter bra, the dancers’ firm thighs flashed erotically beneath their blue micro-skirts and waist beads. One dancer stared intently into the lens, as if challenging the cameraman to hold her rapidly flickering undulations steady in the frame – which he did, for what was probably the longest take in the entire shoot. The primeval pussy power conjured by Fela was working as planned, even though he was in prison, far away. Many of those compelling moves did find their way into the eventual broadcast. But while they unleashed erotic fantasies, the most drooling voyeur had to be aware of another meaning at work. The circular swivels and percussive thrusts of Fela’s dancers’ hips represented the ultimate yoni – the Earth Mother and the Fertility Goddess, Mama Africa.

Even in his absence, Goldman grants Kuti responsibility for summoning them to move. She depicts the dancers as both hypersexual spectacles and earth mothers; their movement evidence of their “primeval,” ancient, sexual prowess. Kuti’s investment in upholding an image of himself and his band as authentic – having an original and unmediated subjectivity – worked backhandedly to ascribe ‘real’ African womanness with only erotic or maternal meaning. Writers like Goldman reiterated that which Kuti previously asserted about himself and his community.

Alternate readings of the Shrine and its dancers exist. Nkiru Nzegwu, for example, writes a thoughtful treatment of the role of dance in Kuti’s career and the conflicted feelings some Nigerian women expressed that were complicated by Kuti’s sexist ideologies couched in the rhetoric of tradition and smuggled in through swinging beats. In recalling the soundtrack that accompanied her secondary school days in Nigeria during the 1970s, she describes the influence the Africa 70 dancers had on she and her schoolmates:

The dancing girls…those locomotive artists of Afrobeat were a sight to behold! There was no question that Fela’s dancers were instrumental in the success of the new sound. We imitated their contortions, tried out their moves and worked to outperform them. We marveled at their flexibility. We practiced, sweated, rhythmically snapped our upper torsos back and forth and pushed ourselves to acquire the desired dexterity and flexibility.
Kuti’s dancers were contagious and their movement summoned others into practice. As Ann Cooper Albright writes in *Choreographing Difference*, dance makes the spectator watch empathetically. That is, one is always aware of their own musculature when watching performances that test the body's physical capacity. While the Africa 70 dancers responded to sound through body, their bodies too inspired emulation. The band was, in turn, pursued by fans who wanted to try choreographies out on their own bodies. The listening to their sonic creations, coupled with their embodied performances (that people wanted to both watch and emulate), impacted Africa 70's success.

There was, and still remains, a tension in Kuti’s performance repertoire between an unstated diasporic sensibility and an overly stated (essentialist) conceptualization of Africanness. Calling him a “cosmopolitan nativist,” Olaniyan suggests that Kuti’s gender politics must be considered as a slippery intermingling of tradition and modernity. This approach appears productive in interpreting the following interview with Kuti and Sol Olorunyomi. In it, Kuti described decorum at churches and traditional West African shrines to contextualize the nakedness at his own.

Don’t African mothers expose their bodies in the shrine when they wear small dress? Even you see their (breast) Oyán at the shrine? So, you don’t know? Don’t they have music at these shrines? Don’t they also have music in their churches? Don’t you know (that) when you have ritual dance … ladies dance semi-nude? I say in our traditional shrines, don’t they have naked ladies dancing? Don’t you know about it? That in Africa, they dance bare-breasted at shrines? Sometimes the women go completely naked? Oh, that is why I say you university people bore me.”

Kuti is culpable of promulgating a specious authenticity. Ingrid Monson puts it nicely when she writes that “claims for an idealized ‘Africanness’ articulated and transmitted through music […] are sometimes disquietingly similar to twentieth-century nationalist assertions of an opposite political valence.” Kuti’s idealized notions of Africanness (framed as redemptive, more accurately depictive) unwittingly resembled the antiquated ones he hoped to dispute. His restored “original Africanness” (unsullied by Westernization) worked differently to reinscribe an essential Africanness – Africa as a site of conservative and uneven gender roles, a homogeneous country instead of a heterogeneous continent.

Kuti’s crystallizing nationalism (which he described as *Blackism* – a Pan African sensibility which believed dispersed black people shared a linked fate) inspired him to retire the themes of love and romantic relations for more dissident songs about tyranny, governmental disorganization, and the dangers of westernization in Nigeria. In so doing, Kuti fashioned himself into an “authentic African” – regularly suggesting supposedly pre-colonial African traditions as a remedy to Nigeria’s – and more broadly the black world’s – political and social ailments. He believed colonialism caused all of Africa’s problems; he thus exempted pre-colonial Africa from conflict and in turn framed it as a pure utopic era. By anchoring his own stage and life practices in “African traditions,” Kuti worked to fashion himself as an “authentic” African. Kuti’s “cosmopolitan nativism” privileged “authentic” African traditions as a remedy for the obstacles plaguing Africa like health care, mass unemployment, and even soccer losses – and yet he was also a transnational, diasporic figure whose political radicalism was sparked outside of Africa and who consistently articulated an “identity of passions” with black folks.
elsewhere. This appears in many of his songs and reaches into the rationalizations of his eccentric lifestyle. His belief in the power of the traditional to heal Africa and also as an archetypical era to fashion one’s life after touched the realm of dance: “Like every other aspect of Fela’s mighty 70-person show,” one reviewer wrote of a Shrine performance, “the style of dance was closely controlled by the great bandleader himself and was intended to be as purely African as possible. Each step was rooted in the old African way. Later, when Kuti’s musical vision began to extend “beyond the dance floor,” and he began to downplay his music’s function as “dance music” in interviews (emphasizing its reflective, didactic qualities), the number of his live dancers increased and he mandated more dance rehearsals grounded in supposedly “traditional” Nigerian dances. Kuti’s repudiation of Afrobeat as “dance music” (i.e. blithely social), while increasing the number of dancing bodies onstage, symbolized his attempt to train his female dancers in light of his developing vision of tradition.

Photographs taken by Janet Griffith sometime between 1975-78 starkly reveal the rehearsal process that mechanized Africa 70’s live performances. In the first four visible dancers in plain clothes lean forward, hands clasped behind their necks (Fig. 2). Their rehearsal attire is much more conservative than their performance costume; plainclothes underscore the distance between their everyday-ness and their staged personas. Kuti leans slightly against a wall with his hands on his hips, one leg taught, one bent; his look is evaluative and purposeful. Additional onlookers, not including Kuti, watch the women move, emphasizing the significance of the performance at hand. In the second image Kuti instructs the central dancer who bends slightly at the hips, her left arm outstretched like a parenthesis on its back (Fig. 3). The remaining two women in the photograph watch the centered woman exact her movement. An exchange of attentions is conveyed, each actor seemingly deliberate with their focus. These photographs together depict the rehearsal process that would eventually render a live performance. That the live performance might have ultimately been read as unrehearsed, unmediated, and innately “African” is the power and speciousness of both Kuti’s performance politics and the Broadway rendering of his life story that would circulate thirteen years after his death. Kuti and Fela! use choreography to mobilize an Africa.
Descriptions like those heretofore cited of the Africa 70 dancers’ performances as mimetic of sex – or transparent, legible displays of overt eroticism – prove to be reductive and uncomplicated readings. They fail to acknowledge both the diversity and contingency of their performances. They fail to interpret the ways in which diaspora both “troubles stereotypes of black dancing bodies as unthinking, uncivilized exotics,” as Anthea Kraut writes and also “replaces the hierarchies and dichotomies on which primitivism rests with a model of black influences and exchange not wholly dependent on any white arbiter.”91 The Africa 70 dancers’
movement indexes something else which is connected, but not reducible, to their sensuality. Instead of thinking about sexually mimetic dance as unoriginal and simulated, a more rich reading calls into question a male-centered spectatorial hegemony that saturates most readings of their performances. In other words, when we think of the dancers as agents – as moving for themselves – we productively trouble readings that overinvest their bodies with only reproductive male gratification potential. Audre Lorde’s conceptualization of the erotic proves useful here in that it urges us to complicate the notion that the dancers’ performed sexuality was simple, untaught, and solely for the consumption of men. In “Uses of the Erotic,” Lorde writes, “The erotic has often been misnamed by men and used against women. It has been made into the confused, the trivial, the psychotic, the plasticized sensation. For this reason, we have often turned away from the exploration and consideration of the erotic as a source of power and information, confusing it with its opposite, the pornographic.” With regard to the Africa 70 dancers, then, Nigerian newspapers that often wrote about them as impressionable, lewd, and valuable only insofar as their performance yielded male pleasure refuse the possibility of the dancers’ own volition and blur the ways in which their collective performance mechanized Kuti’s authentic African project. In thinking about the dancing Queens as emissaries of Kuti’s gospel of authentic Africanness and as having agency (however constrained), we resist the impulse to read the Queens as performing an unmediated African womanness; we better understand the contingencies that occasioned their performances. In so doing, we can understand how that which is named “authentic” is really the sum of contingencies, rehearsals, and calculated and sometimes improvised performances. Approaching Kuti and the Africa 70 dancers through this lens can reveal “what the [racialized and gendered] body knows, what it is capable of and what, what it does–does.”

A diasporic analysis of Kuti’s performance betrays his claim to African authenticity. It exposes the role of movement in both embodying and corroborating this production of national identity. To be truly African, as Kuti’s work would have it, was not a birthright; it was not an inheritance. Alternately, being a “real” African demanded a slippery embrace of the precolonial and the active repugnance of the Western. Where Westernization ended and modernized Africanness began proved murky. There was little room in Kuti’s life for political ambiguity. His songs are forthright and emboldened – not vehicles for weighing, but rather a place to state that which the performer already knew; a site to share his political and musical arrival. We would be remiss to take Kuti at his word. Looking at the ways in which he pieced together his politics and performance reveals, more than wholesale acceptance of his authentic Africanness, the power of his performative. It is in the dance, in the movement, where we see the threads of identity performance untucked, peeking out, threatening to unravel. It is here that dance rehearsal embodied and became a means toward another set of trainings.

Throughout Fela! there is a tension between the desire to stage such nuances of Kuti’s life and the need to offer a packaged story that is accessible to mainstream Broadway audiences. In an interview with the New York Times, a few of the dancers explain that they researched the Queen they were appointed to play in order to infuse their performance with researched meaning. One dancer notes, “We had to do a lot of research for this. Especially me not knowing the full story and coming from my religious background – in order to give the characters what they deserved to have in order to be told truthfully, I had to really get deep into what their lives [were] and then allow myself to allow them to exist in me. Especially being that in my regular everyday life…our ideals are different. So for me that was one of the hardest processes. I found myself constantly saying ‘this is their story, they have a right for it to be told
as authentically as possible." The ensemble consulted Carlos Moore’s aforementioned book *Fela: This Bitch of A Life*. Videos and documentaries were watched. Longstanding conversations among the ensemble were had.

Evidently Jones worked to thoughtfully stage the nuances that characterized Kuti’s personality, even while a number of Kuti’s contradictions were causalities of the production. According to one ensemble member and musician for the show, Jones directed the Queens’ performances toward Fela. As Jones has said, "I didn't want to fall into the trap of this being a fascination with polygamous lifestyle." Consequently, the dancers appear rather impervious to the audience: "If you look at our face and attitudes during the play, it's not a 'look at me.' We are not grinning and gyrating and trying to please. We are there to create a community, to make a statement, to help create music." This point is legible throughout the musical, and works to contain a sense of voyeurism that such a performance could engender. While the characters within the scene of the Shrine evidence a self-containment and self-contentment, their world is also made available to the audience’s spectatorship and participation. During “Yellow Fever,” for example, the dancers form a solo circle. Here the Queens’ sexual tricks appear unabashedly for audience consumption. One woman drops to her knees then arches backward, reaching her shoulders toward the floor while shimmying. Another female dancer kicks up into a straddle three consecutive times and on her fourth leap, descends into the splits where she rests her elbows on the ground, holds her chin in her hands, and jiggles her backside. Her face remains impartial while on the ground, she glances at an imaginary watch. Her inconsequentiality might confirm the audience’s assumptions: these kinds of exercises are exotic for the audience, and mundane for her.

Intersections of gender, sexuality, and nationality are embodied in *Fela!’s* movement. For one, although there are male dancers in the ensemble, they play “area boys” — neighborhood patronizers of the Shrine. Although they also join in on the choreography there are clear distinctions between the male and female dancers’ movements. The women’s movements are more sexualized. Tasks are gendered too: the women run errands far more than their male counterparts. Jones attempted to stage an accurate depiction of Kuti’s lifestyle through these subtle differences. Showing the power of the Queen’s domain while holding onto Kuti’s signature misogyny (“It’s part of the natural order for women to be submissive to man. Yeah. Africans know that one. We don’t have to argue about that one”) is held within the movement in *Fela!*. The show’s only moment where the Queens exercise seemingly unchecked agency (a rare moment when Fela is absent from the stage, coincidentally) is during the solo dance circle. Their domain as “Queens,” then, is certainly limited and overseen. The existence of male dancers does not expunge this fact.
The tension between African authenticity and a diasporic sensibility reveals itself throughout the movement in Fela!. Although the dance is described as authentic, the hybridized nature of the movement, plus the "difference" that the show yields between ensemble and audience, suggests its diasporic dimensions. The notion of authentic Africanness is laced within the dance in Fela!; since the protagonist describes himself as an “original African man,” it is fitting that the terms of originality and authenticity are applied to movement as well. In an act called “Yellow Fever,” Fela asks the audience to stand and join him in an “underground spiritual game” (a quote from Kuti’s song “Yellow Fever” about the prevalence of skin bleaching creams in West Africa) (See Fig. 4). “Underground” connotes the lowering of one’s body into squat position. At Fela’s cue, the Queens slowly sink. He then instructs their hips to bump a set of numbers on an imaginary clock. He starts at one o’clock; then twelve o’clock; then twelve-and-six. It gets more difficult: one-seven-one, three-six-nine, four-one-nine. “Four-One-Nine. That’s the Nigerian criminal code for fraud. But no fraud here. This is the real thing. What time is it? Time for originality.” This moment invites the audience into the dance and coaches them through movements that index originality and insiderness (code for fraud). This scene suggests that, in an authentically 'African' world, women move to rhythm of male command. But, in addition to the claims-to-realness projected onto the Queen’s dancing bodies, diaspora materializes through the distance between the Queens and the audience. Although Fela oversees all (both ensemble and audience), a distinct difference exists between the Queens’ performance and the audience’s. The choreographic casualties engendered during Yellow Fever – the audience cannot move like the Queens, movements are lost in translation – underscore diaspora as unresolvable difference, as decalage.

Affective

Diaspora works affectively in Fela! as well. The show engenders feelings of transnational connectedness, exile/homecoming, linked-fate, and communal pride among both the cast and its
audiences. Diasporic belonging – seeing oneself as a member of a global black community, and having some constituent of that community corroborate your belonging – was mediated through *Fela!*. Diasporic belonging serves as a strategy toward making a national black minority into a global majority; to salve the United States’ legacy of racism and social and economic inequality which structure the lives of black Americans.

On December 15th, 2010 the hip hop group The Roots hosted their fourth annual Holiday Jam concert at B.B. Kings, New York – a free event which featured surprise guests to perform for the evening. On the dance floor was a young black woman with a towering afro, vinyl gold jumpsuit, and geranium lips. Her face was dressed with small turmeric-colored dots which cupped the bottoms of her eyes and trailed down along her cheeks. The dots were meticulous – all equal size, clearly the work of a steady hand and committed time. Later, she squeezed her way next to me at the bar, and while there, I asked her how long she’d been painting her face that way; where she’d got the idea from. She said she started painting her face after seeing the Broadway musical *Fela!* and that it made her feel good. It highlighted her features and emphasized her darkness, too – like the “Queens” in the play (Fig 5). She directly fashioned herself after the characters in the play. The appeal, in her eyes, anchored itself in an unabashed claiming of black bodies as attractive and dark skin as being worthy of accentuation. In the Queens this woman found aesthetic inspiration.

![Figure 5 “Queens”. Photograph by James Petrozzello. 2010.](image-url)
At that same Holiday Jam, among performances by artists like John Legend, Estelle, and Aloe Blacc was a special performance by the cast of *Fela!* A few of the dancers from the show’s ensemble staged a small semi circle. Taking turns in the middle, they danced to the Soli djembe rhythms played by a cast-member while Questlove kept pace in the back. When Patti LaBelle, who in 2010 was cast as Fela’s mother Funmilayo, came onstage the crowd exploded. A sea of camera phones emerged from the throng. “If you haven’t seen *Fela!*” stated the Roots crew rapper Black Thought, “you have to. I can’t explain it. It’ll change your life.”

Feelings of transnational connectedness, exile, longing, and linked-fate not only frame the narrative trajectory, but also manifest among the cast and through the show’s reception. In this sense, *Fela!* “moves” those who it encountered it – emotionally, fervidly. In *Navigating the African Diaspora: The Anthropology of Invisibility*, Donald Carter offers up the concept of “diasporic nostalgia,” which he describes as “a desire for an imagined world that has not yet come into being, a desire for a liberation from the legacy of colonialism, postcolonial states, and global conditions.”

This desire, this longing for a black world untempered by structural and social inequalities, is an important level on which diaspora plays out. For the ensemble, *Fela!* represented a connection to diaspora which imbued their performances with deepened significance and responsibility. Being part of the show not only allowed them participate in the telling of a black story, but it also extended a means for them to travel “home” to Nigeria. In March of 2011, the cast had one concert-like performance at the New Afrika Shrine. In April, they had full performances at the Eko Hotel Expo Centre in Victoria Island, the first in Lagos and the second in Naija. Their trip was sponsored by the Nigerian production company Broken Shackles. The cast’s visit to Nigeria induced especially resonant feelings of diaspora. Producers and actors (with whom I spoke) and critics consistently framed their trip as a “return home” for the African-American, African, and Afro-Caribbean cast. On performing at the New Africa Shrine, Sahr Ngaujah – who originated the role of Fela – evokes diaspora-as-homecoming. He writes, “As we crossed the threshold of the shrine it seemed as if everyone in the place agreed on what the first utterance to us should be. From the front door to the stage door, all we heard greeting us was: ‘Welcome home.’ Indeed, we had arrived.”

A dancer in the show explained, “It was amazing. Even our preparation was like an everyday experience at the Shrine. We changed and we got dressed, did our makeup in the same room that Fela’s queens did it in and Femi’s queens do it in. So to really feel that was pretty amazing. Being on that stage, being in that level of sweat…it was really really organic and real. Authentic.” Kevin Mambo, who shared the role of Fela explained post-performance:

Wow. First performance in Naija! They laughed and cried with us. A boy came to me during the walk-around and asked me to return from the dead with tears in his eyes because Naija needs me, and after the show during “Gentleman”, the audience mobbed us with love love love. Words can never express. Diaspora touching and sharing together. How could we be so fortunate? Humbled and exhilarated.

Whereas Mambo’s reflections emphasize diaspora-as-connection, Sahr Ngaujah evokes diaspora-as-homecoming. In recounting his and his castmates’ performance at the New Afrika Shrine he writes, “As we crossed the threshold of the shrine it seemed as if everyone in the place agreed on what the first utterance to us should be. From the front door to the stage door, all we heard greeting us was: ‘Welcome home.’ Indeed, we had arrived.”
The cast’s performance in Nigeria was framed as homecoming for the ensemble; for Nigeria, it was framed as honorarium (for being subject of this Broadway show and home to its protagonist). There was also a third role that the journey played: to authenticate *Fela!* itself through a positive Nigerian reception. Diaspora is clearly at work here: an American cast efficaciously performing Kuti’s life collapses the distance between the play and its referent. A black sameness is consequently revealed. “When we first arrived people would say: ‘How can you bring Fela from America to Nigeria? Fela belongs to us,’” Ngaujah recounts. “Before we left they told us: ‘Fela has come home.’ I don’t think they were talking about us – they were talking about his spirit.”106 In a review of the show, one author writes “Whatever skepticism they might have had about a non-Nigerian playing the role of their national hero seemed to vanish with the first ‘Yeah Yeah’, and at the end of the show he was greeted with a standing ovation. One member of the audience […] who had been a close friend of Fela’s, told me ‘Now in my life, I have witnessed two Felas – Fela, and Sahr/Fela.’”107

Back in the States, the Broadway show fostered a sense of belonging and community. Not only is the performance set in the Afrika Shrine, but there is also a detailed sheet in the program that works to orient the audience to the production about to take place and prepare them to participate in it.108 In so doing, it makes the audience a collective surrogate for the real thing. It clandestinely lists rules of conduct, lays out what can be expected, and welcomes the audience into the show as part of the performance. If a leaflet was not enough to embolden the audience to commit to the terms of the show, producers built moments into the show that force audience members to participate further. These come through the breaking of the fourth wall, which for reviewer Charles Isherwood was meant to “allow the audience to have some intellectual perspective on the material,” but instead “elevate(s) sensation over substance.”109 Disagreeing with Isherwood in his claim that substance is consequently lost by the ensemble’s own use of the orchestra pit throughout the show, such intermingling certainly does (productively) sharpen sensation. By collapsing the distance between the staged performance and the audience, the audience cannot entirely exculpate themselves from the show’s happenings; the forced proximity refuses exemption and embolds the audience’s sense of being there.

Black audience members evidenced a certain kind of diasporic affect in response to *Fela!* – the show became a subject around which to organize communities, celebrate this Nigerian icon, and literally fashion African diasporic-ness. Seeing the musical eight times over the course of its run, there was an unarguable and bright pride black folks exuded in seeing the show. The financial and emotional support of *Fela!* implicates diaspora insofar as black audiences’ delight comes from a perceived connection to the story the show tells, and also a relationship to the performance of blackness that it promulgates. Diasporic nostalgia is at work here. As Carter writes: “I never knew my boat, yet I consider myself a part of the diaspora. Some would suggest that this distant trauma – the unintentional seaward movement of which I am a descendent – has left in its wake a ‘structure of feeling,’ a way of being if you will, that has some trace of that first boat.”110 Carter’s reading of diaspora is apt; his building on Raymond Williams in locating diaspora as state of being in the world that is engendered by a dissatisfaction with one’s current location reverberates in a number of black responses to the show. In one promotional video on the website, two black women gab about what they’ve just witnessed. “[It] made you want to run out in the middle of the aisles and connect with a part of yourself that you prolly haven’t connected with in so long. And just spin and twirl and jump and shout.”111 Post-show feedback and informal interviews revealed the fact that black people saw themselves reflected and implicated in Kuti’s story, in its crisp performance, in its aesthetic handsomeness. “I ain’t neva
seen that many beautiful black people on a stage like that,” one woman professed. “I’m just so thankful.”

_Fela!_ became a thematic site through which events were organized, Afrocentric crafts were sold, and Afrobeats dance parties had. On Facebook, pictures of friends with colored dots on their faces at a monthly “Afrobeats for Ya Soul” party popped up in my feed. At a MoCADA (The Museum of Contemporary African Diaspora Arts) event, folks rocked tight skinny jeans and “vintage” t-shirts stamped with Kuti’s face. An “African Marketplace” festival featured the “Queens of _Fela!_” who will help you choose among the many different African fabrics.” The Caribbean Cultural Center at the African Diaspora Institute hosted “The Nu Black Magic presents _Fela!’s Funk N’ Trunk Shopping Party._”112 The cast could also be seen on the Jimmy Fallon Show, in _Vogue_ magazine, and oddly enough, in Miami Heat commercials.113 There was no denying the fact that many black people loved the show because they felt it represented them in a way they were delighted to be represented. Folks felt implicated by it, reflected in it, and proud of it. Questlove theorizes why Kuti has become so popular among the hip hop generation by drawing parallels between Kuti’s life and legacy and the origins and interventions of hip hop.

Fela is the one African figure whose story resonates with modern American hip hop culture. The trials and tribulations that he went through politically, socially, creatively: it’s the story of hip hop. It’s the story of taking nothing and turning it into something. Hip hop is very familiar with the opposition from the police. Hip hop is extremely familiar with polygamy of sorts. Hip hop is extremely familiar with talking back to authority and the government and being that of a rebel spirit. His melodic structure, the way that he could make eight instruments play very small parts but once he put it together it was something so hypnotic and so powerful. It was undeniable. […] This is a person whose music is as strong as his lyrics [are] then just as strong as his lifestyle.114

In drawing relationships between the social worlds in which Afrobeat and hip hop were structured Questlove ties these two musical genres into a web of diasporic influence. Questlove explains how hip hop artists like Busta Rhymes (in “Teachers Don’t Teach Us Nonsense”) and Mos Def (in “Fear No Man”) incorporated Fela Kuti’s lyrics into their own songs. “I definitely see a reflection of his music on a lot of the post-soul movement,” Questlove explains. “That’s why we gravitated towards him so much.”115 In outlining the shared aspects of these two musical genres and their cultures, Questlove argues for hip hop as Afrobeat remixed.

The blog post Questlove wrote after seeing the off-Broadway show further makes clear the redemptive potential invested in _Fela!_ After his first viewing he wrote for four hours about the show. “I witnessed a miracle tonight and it is a MUST you read this,” he wrote. “I believe I found life again.”116 Questlove was so moved by _Fela!_ that he became a cultural and financial broker and recruited Will and Jada Pinkett Smith and Jay Z to the musical. The support of these black American celebrities came with symbolic and financial support. Questlove’s dedication to the show reveals an affective relationship between himself and a community to which he belongs — a community where Kuti evidently belongs too. This affective quality of diaspora (as Carter suggests vis-à-vis Williams, a structure of feeling) is shaped by political and economic repression that inspires the hope for an elsewhere, or at least a different somewhere. In responding to whether or not _Fela!_ had special significance for black folks, one dancer explains:
I feel every black person needs to see it while they can. It will do something for them by way of identity and closure and acceptance. A lot of things that happen in *Fela!* – the show and even in his life – we shy away from knowing because of the taboos colonialism set on it. I feel like all black people should know that. Then they won’t be ashamed of their bodies, they would appreciate each other better, they’ll appreciate Africa, they’ll appreciate identity, they’ll appreciate music. They won’t fear the drum. It’s so necessary. A lot of black people don’t know who they are, don’t know the riches of their culture…their heritage. They’re ashamed of their past and yet they need it. For their own sanity.

*Fela!* fosters a set of diasporic relationships and extrafamilial networks through which these overlapping communities found respite, inspiration, and also comfort. Diaspora in this sense is not so much about physical transportation as much as it is a state of feeling. This is the second diasporic move *Fela!* makes.

**Commercial**

*Fela!* moved in ways that extended beyond Brooklyn; the ways in which the show circulated nationally embodied a third, commercial use of diaspora. *Fela!*’s marketing team utilized diaspora to either accentuate the show’s blackness or, conversely, to distance itself from blackness in an effort to position the musical as a universal story.

In many of the cast’s appearances, their blackness is accented. (Fig. 6) This spread in *Vogue* magazine, for example, pictures them modeling jewelry. Their black skin functions as a canvas for the Lindhardt pieces they model. Only the men look the camera head on.
A 2010 Miami Heat season opener commercial further evidences an obvious reliance on the cast’s blackness.\textsuperscript{117} Here, images of the \textit{Fela!} ensemble work to support a narrative of a basketball dynasty – Lebron James, Dwayne Wade, and Chris Bosh. This commercial evokes themes connected to diaspora – kinship, redemption, redress – while popular stereotypes of black bodies – natural athleticism, predisposition to physical tasks – connects these two differently performing black groups. Footage of the black dancing bodies – decontextualized (but for the song’s “Everything Scatter” title) faces painted with white eshun powder, barefoot, and dressed in raffia – spliced within the black hoop stars together induce trite tropes of blackness and Africanness which punch up this spectacle of black athleticism. Fela’s (Sahr Ngaujah) broad grinning smile that ends the commercial further highlights the joyously athletic blackness by which these two camps are connected. There are a number of linkages being drawn between the dance, basketball, and the racialized people who practice them both. On the level of marketing and advertisement diaspora – a belief in the connection between dispersed black groups – circulates too. Here, a connection between specifically named black Americans and a vague unspecified Africanness is punched up in marketing materials so as to authenticate \textit{Fela!’s} “realness.”

The choosing of Bill T. Jones – indeed a masterful choreographer with an impressive professional record, including having choreographed for the Broadway show “Spring Awakening,” but with little to no training in Afro Diasporic dance forms – as co-conceiver, co-writer, director and choreographer also exposes the operations of diaspora. Although lead
producer Steven Hendel admits that he had “no clue who Bill T. Jones was” when their mutual lawyer suggested Hendel contact Jones to gauge his interest in “helping to produce this idea [he] had for a musical on Fela Kuti,” Hendel “didn’t consider any one else.”

Jones – a black American choreographer with deep roots in predominately white postmodern dance forms of the 1970s and 80s – for a while flinched at being called a “black” choreographer. As scholar Carl Paris has argued, blackness appears burdensome to Jones in some moments and full of choreographic possibly in others.

Jones’s involvement in Fela! is, like his career, difficult to make any wholesale statements about. In many ways Bill T. Jones’ involvement in Fela! is a logical extension of his previous works, while in others Fela! appears to be a disjuncture from his repertoire. While the terms of Jones’s invitation to the project are clear, Jones’ own interest in the musical is less straightforward. Jones’s hand in Fela! seems, on its face, to fall in line with certain trends of his past career. For example, Jones has taken on works that address and seek to reveal the operations of social categories (ones that he himself occupies): blackness, queerness, maleness, and illness. But Jones’s interest in using these topics thematically came after decades of openly resisting them, seeing himself as a pure postmodern avante guard choreographer with little to no racial solidarity or communion. As Danielle Goldman writes in I Want to Be Ready: Improvisational Dance as a Practice of Freedom, in the early 1980s Jones appeared no longer interested in satisfying his audience: “With the Acconci strategy in place, I was able to deconstruct this identity. Deconstruction yielded solos that were confessional, often painful, taking unpleasant emotions and exposing them spontaneously in a fashion that was brutal on both the audience and me.” This new interest in deconstructing his identity yielded confessional and jarring works in which “Jones traded on his status as the sexual, political, and ideological Other, using a captivating movement style as the site for personal narrative.”

Jones’ knack for choreographing pieces that speak to the complexity of identity trails through Fela! Yet, Jones’s own fraught relationship to blackness, plus his relatively limited experience in Afro-diasporic dance forms, makes it seem as though his longer career, and his loose connection to diaspora, outweighed his specific experience. Carl Paris argues that, “Jones has throughout his career found his racial identity to be useful. […] Jones has not been shy about referencing aspects of his black culture when it suited him.” In the early 90s Jones’s new direction took a noticeable shift from the kinds of work he was producing with the American Dance Asylum and his earlier pieces with the Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane Dance Company. Previously, Jones flinched at being categorized first and foremost as a black choreographer. He writes: “I rankled at being called a ‘black artist.’ Coming of age in the sixties, I had embraced a host of values that placed a premium on freedom from social definition, and being so described seemed an attempt to diminish individuality, to reduce the possible interpretations of what I was trying to express. It seemed perpetrated by racist people.”

Despite his stated discomfort with being seen as a black choreographer, Jones never cleanly separated himself from the theme of his race. Even his more abstract pieces are “replete with racial and political elements as well as an ample use of African American music, poems, and situations.” Insofar as his career has been invested in (even in his distancing from) blackness, Jones appears to be a good fit for Fela!. But his disavowal of blackness – coupled with, what some have argued, his exploitation of it – makes Jones a curious fit to not only choreograph but to co-create the show.

Despite Jones’s impressive and lofty resume, he has very little training in black diasporic dance forms. In his autobiography Last Night On Earth, the only mention Jones makes of African dance training is brief and certainly does not appear to yield enough experience to
choreograph an entire Broadway show. In discussing his early dance training, among Cunningham, ballet, and improvisational dance classes, Jones writes of taking West African dance classes from the Trinidadian Percival Borde (husband to Pearl Primus). Although it does not appear that Jones took Borde’s class for too long, his experiences in them made a mark. In his retelling of Borde’s style of teaching, class facilitation, and pedagogical nature Jones explains that, “Magnificent arms would open and all time slowed. I saw my history. Dancing as old as the Nile. Dancing that would take me to my grave.”

And later, “I understood this dancing. My body recognized its rhythms. And yet when I tried to move to them I’d miscalculate, stumble.” Here Jones evidences both a feeling of connectedness and also an embodied distance between that innate feeling of belonging and the incapacity of his body to execute the steps. In this moment and throughout his experience in Borde’s class, Jones learned of West African dance’s rigor. He quotes Borde: “You’ll never do that. Never. None of you have it. But come, let’s try again.” During another moment in which Borde taught Watusi movements Jones quotes him as saying, “It will take you ten years to learn how to even hold the sticks, but we shall try.” The distance between Jones’ own assumptions regarding his connection to the movements and his body’s limited facility in carrying them out underscores the disparity between identifying with a dance, and having mastered that dance form. Too often, as can be seen with readings of Fela!, the distance is collapsed between the black body dancing, and the dance that that body does.

In press material and interviews about the show, Jones draws parallels between himself and Fela Kuti. Indeed it is as if Jones understands that his own investment in Kuti’s story is important and question raising, that his own reasons for participating deeply effect how the show is received and read. It should also be noted that, even though Jones co-created the show with Jim Lewis, there are significantly more interviews with Jones than there are with his colleague. In online videos of Jones on the process of creating Fela! he frequently connects his own life with that of the show’s protagonist. “What I love about [Kuti],” he explains, “is that his politics and his desire for art making and beauty and meaning and truth ring so true in his music and in the legacy that he has left. […] He speaks of a type of rebellion but a rebellion that has as its ultimate goal authenticity, truth, yes, peace, and beauty even. All things I’ve been in search of my whole creative life.” In another video interview, Jones shares how he first encountered Kuti’s music and the relationship he sees between them.

Do I see a relationship between me and Fela? Tangentially, yes. We’re both black men, we are both men who have had our run-ins with authority, we’re both men who have and have had robust sexualities, but I find Fela to be a bit of a teacher for me. I find that I am still very much in the school of high modernism – a European construct. Fela threw off that description and went after something more elusive, something more substantial in his desire to be an authentic African man. So maybe what draws me to Fela now is my pursuit of authenticity.

Jones links himself and Kuti together by highlighting a number of shared social categories, and personality traits. They are connected by their blackness, their appetite for sex, their coming up against the law. Authenticity (of what exactly, is not altogether clear) is the yardstick that measures the distance between them. Jones positions his own training in European dance forms as somehow unauthentic and in so doing solidifies Kuti as more purely African.

Despite the efforts Jones makes to connect his and Kuti’s lives, the most glaring omission from the show and discussions around it is Kuti’s death from complications of HIV/AIDS and
Jones’s own HIV seropositivity. The easiest and most broadcasted rationale is that this information might possibly overwhelm other aspects of Kuti’s life that the producers wanted to foreground most. Practically speaking, it would have been impossible for Kuti to announce his own death. But even in the show’s postscript which closes the musical, an emphasis rests on the reception of Kuti’s death, more than it is on the nature of his passing. The collective decision to not say raises, through its ghosting, tropes of illness and disease – contagion, for that matter – which are so often ascribed to African bodies. As Barbara Browning writes, perhaps “[a] reading of AIDS might seem abhorrent, particularly the literal-minded kind of reading which would see the physical illness as causally related to a moral or sexual ‘illness.’” Yet this effort to trouble Africanness as sickness through the circumnavigation of this fact backhandedly reaffirms the stereotype. In the sense that silence might act as passivity, the silence around AIDS keeps intact the very assumptions that the production team feared might interfere with the audiences’ reading of the show. Unarticulated illness makes Fela! easier to consume. Since we know that “the epidemiological is always infected with the economic,” this decision is ultimately bound up in profitability.

It is surprising that Kuti’s illness is absent from the play, especially because Jones has been, throughout his career, generous in offering up his own subjectivity, especially as it relates to HIV/AIDS – at times too much, scholars and dance critics argue. Jones has been open about being HIV positive. The co-founder of his company and partner of seventeen years, Arnie Zane, passed away from AIDS. Jones has, like race and masculinity, made AIDS a central topic of some of his dance pieces. The passing of his partner from AIDS and the inescapable reality of mortality that he faced, inspired Jones to take a decidedly “black stance” in his work. Jones thereby linked his partner’s death, his own foreseeable passing, and a desire to say something “black.” With regard to Jones’s piece “Last Supper at Uncle Tom’s Cabin/The Promised Land” he writes, “I reasoned that if my time was limited, that if I was to follow Arnie soon, I would make a work that articulated all the questions that I have lived with, all the questions that have shaped me. I would speak in a voice that was decidedly African-American.”

The absence of any discussion on AIDS in Fela! or by the show’s producers calls into question the ways in which black stories are able to be told, and the kinds of nuances that, even in the effort to honor them, fall away in lieu of thematic palatability. In the sense that “disease might be read as a literizing or making manifest the social atrocities practiced against those afflicted,” in the case of Fela Kuti, homophobia, the stigmatization of protected sex couched within a larger debate on tradition versus modernity, and lack of access to consistent medical treatment are circumvented through the silence around Kuti’s illness. When I asked a producer why this fact is missing in the show, he responded by describing how the mention of Kuti’s illness would “take away from the show.”

Jones is part and parcel of a broader trend of emphasizing black American endorsement. In a press video from the night of the Broadway premiere, all but one interviewed celebrity (Sting) were black Americans. The show’s poster (Fig. 7), which prominently displays Shawn “Jay-Z” Carter and Will and Jada Pinkett-Smith as presenters plainly evidences Fela!’s dependence on black Americans. Their names are large and presented in such a way that they appear to be the lead actors. Not only is it misleading in the sense that their names provoke the viewer to look to the picture in search for them, but having these three people as “presenters” is itself a bit of a rhetorical stretch, as they came to the project well-into its New York run. Questlove’s “100% Authentic” exclamatory quote further emphasizes the show’s persistent evocation of black folk to support its legitimacy. On the level of script, the privileging of Sandra
in the narrative and the casting of Patti LaBelle as Funmilayo all work to play up the role of black Americans in Kuti’s career and as supporters of the show.\textsuperscript{137}

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=0.5\textwidth]{fela_promotional_flier.jpg}
\caption{Fela! promotional flier.}
\end{figure}

One the one hand, the relationship between black Americans and Africanness is punched up in marketing materials so as to authenticate \textit{Fela!’s} “realness.” On the other hand, blackness is, from the perspective of its producers, de-emphasized in order to make the show inviting to non-black audiences. Interviews with the show’s producers downplay \textit{Fela!’s} heavy reliance on diasporic connectedness. The show’s producers frame \textit{Fela!} as a universal story applicable to all, irrespective of race. For example, despite one producer’s claim that his biggest goal in working with the show was to bring in a black audience, and that he loves “Santa Claus moments” where he gives black folks “in need” tickets to the show, he also claims that “[\textit{Fela!}] is so beyond race, it’s so beyond any of that. But that’s the kind of society we live in.”\textsuperscript{138} Another producer offers a similar perspective:

To me this was a show about standing up for human dignity and being courageous, and the fact that it happened to be music created by an African was secondary. I didn't realize though that in America, when you put on a show and the cast is black, that it becomes a “black show” and elements of race enter into how people respond to the show. It occurred to me that the only thing racial about the show is that all the performers are black. It’s not really about blacks relationships with whites, or whites oppressing blacks -- it’s blacks
oppressing blacks, and blacks sticking up for human dignity. Where is all this angst about race? As we thought of recasting I was thinking: maybe we should have a white person cast as the mother. Really it doesn't matter to me. […] Also the human species came from Africa! We are all Africans, and one of the things I'm convinced of in my own mind […] what makes Fela’s music so totally absorbing and so totally human? I think [Fela’s is] the music that 50,000 years ago… when we were all living in the bush in Africa and we were celebrating a kill or a victory or a birth and we were all hanging around the fire beating drums and singing… those were the rhythms.\(^{139}\)

This producer’s comments reveal a tension between blackness and universalism. Even though Fela! is a black diasporic story in that it centers the transnational relationships and shared struggles of dispersed black peoples, and even though the show’s marketing team relies on those very connections to sell the show, he frames blackness itself as inconsequential and the citation of it as a preoccupation with racist logics. Thus Fela! employs diaspora to attract black audiences and enter commercial markets even while it draws from the tropes of diaspora to widen the circle of “we.” In the producer’s logic, what’s meaningful about blackness is its universal breadth, a ubiquity that ultimately renders race itself meaningless. The slippery supposition in universalizing Fela! is that there is something insufficient in it being just a black story – that diaspora can only be popularly consumed when it is unyoked from the structures of inequality that produce it. In order for diaspora to be universal it must somehow exceed blackness, somehow share with the audience its deeply diasporic accomplishment of hope without the burden of the structural violence that informs and rubs up next to the delight.

### Conclusion

In the play, during an interaction with the deceased Funmilayo, Fela’s ghosted mother refuses to condone his scheduled departure from Nigeria and rebuffs his attempts to blame himself for her death. By the end of Fela!, the protagonist has recommitted himself to Nigeria, the Shrine, and his people. “My name is Fela Anikulapo Kuti, ‘he who carries Death in his pouch.’ And with music as our weapon, we will be back here tomorrow, and the day after, and forever… (smiles) So, yeah, make me your next Black President!” Despite the violence administered on and against Fela and his family, despite the demolition of his equipment and musical archive, despite the impotence he suffered from the abuse and the attacks, and despite his never-ending strings of imprisonment, this Fela is hopeful, dedicated, and above all, smiling. Let’s not forget that he is also dancing, along with his Queens, through the aisles and offstage. We leave with the message that no tragedy is heavier than hope. The exclamation in the show’s title is no accident; it is its desired aftertaste and emphatic proclamation: “More than a musical. An ecstatic phenomenon.”\(^{140}\) It works to undermine (or even negate) a certain seriousness, sadness, and unreconciled longing. With Fela!, the burden (like his mother’s coffin) is left in the theater, allowing the audience to leave with glee.

“There is no show like this you have ever seen before or will ever see again,” Alicia Keys explains in a Fela! promotional video. Her assertion has been the seed of this chapter’s interest. What is true is that Kuti was a figure of painful contradiction: he was the son of Africa’s foremost feminist activist\(^{141}\) and advocated sexism, he vehemently critiqued tyranny and ran a deeply hierarchical compound.\(^{142}\) Indeed “such a spectacular figure [like Kuti] is already a sure candidate for uncomplicated and one-dimensional appropriations, especially given the pressures
of ‘watered-down’ labeling demanded by mass culture marketing.”143 Yet the historical setting of the show (which ends in 1978) permits it to neglect Kuti’s ensuing troubles: based on pending lawsuits his songs were banned on the Nigerian radio, he became increasingly paranoid of his Africa 70 crew, his wives divorced him and, perhaps most profoundly, he suffered and died from AIDS after having infected at least three of his wives. No show can encompass all of that antimony; it is not my desire that *Fela!* accomplish such an impossible task. Rather, I have called attention to the ways in which the producers tell his story story to make larger claims about the attractiveness of this specific narrative, to suggest that diaspora and movement (in these three iterations) play an important role in the narrative *Fela!* tells.

Kuti’s politics, sonic creation, and performance sensibility were all diasporic in nature. Each were deeply informed by his transnational wayfaring; each were affected by black America in particular. Diaspora moves throughout Kuti’s career much like diaspora moves throughout *Fela!*. Kuti’s authentic Africanness was in its formulation and is, in its continued circulation, diasporic. The Afrobeat rhythm is a bricollage of dispersed sounds; the lyrics were inspired by transnational travels; the performance (dance, costume) indexed performance forms from within and without Nigeria. The study of movement unveils the traces of diaspora in the making of authentic Africanness. Considering the citational and repetitive qualities of performance, in turn, forces us to destabilize Africa, African music and African dance. Fela Anikulapo-Kuti, as both icon and as Broadway protagonist reveals how that which is considered “authentically African” might be better understood as diasporic – that African authenticity implicates a broader transnational network where materials, culture, and ideas flow through and beyond national boundaries. Tracing movement in the three variants that I have discussed lays bare this fact.

A reading of movement within *Fela!* offers a sharpened understanding of the various ways diaspora is evoked contemporarily. Diaspora is a powerful analytic in that it is constantly and diversely co-opted, used to suit different purposes and satisfy a number of needs: those personal, historical, and financial. Most enthusiastically, I have shown the ways that diaspora is enacted and enlivened through performance; to provide example of diaspora as verb. Diaspora – as Saidiya Hartman, David Scott, and Stuart Hall encourage us to see – is not an essence, but a positioning. An attention to movement, in the three variants that I have laid out here, makes evident the choreographic, affective, and commercial nature of the African diaspora.
Fighting Family

The first time it happened Fatimah tried with everything she could to restrain herself. She found it hard to stay focused on the class; it helped that she knew the Yankadi movements well. Muscle memory and the drum’s compulsion eased her away from slapping Allie that first time. Fatimah sweats at the talk of it and leans in closely when she tells me that to make matters worse, a long blonde hair found its way to her mouth at the class’s end. "Can you believe that shit?" she asked me. "Her hair was in my mouth! Took everything in me not to pull all her damn hair out when she tossed that shit in my face." Anger eventually clears out of Fatimah's clutched shoulders, giving way to the exhaustion tucked behind it. She sighs and shakes her head softly as she reaches behind her hips, releasing the knot that secures her sweaty lapa. "We can only put up with so much, sis."

The second transgression was Fatimah's last time in that particular class. "I was just walking to my line and I guess I bumped into her, and then she just slapped me," Allie described. "I was bleeding! She doesn't own this class. I paid, too."

Fatimah puts it differently: "The bitch stepped on my foot, tossed her hair in my face, and had the nerve not to say excuse me. So I had to knock her out." Allie's indetermination over what exactly happened exculpated her from the conflict. Her conjuring of the blood that broke through her lip, the site she touches gingerly in retelling the story, worked to underscore the unreasonableness of Fatimah’s actions. Dominant consensus among white participants in the class was that Fatimah was hyper-aggressive, “racist against white people,” and just plain mean. Allie was obnoxious for sure, but benign, they said. “She [took] up a lot of space,” but that didn’t warrant violence. Most readings hit a moral register (it is never mature to slap someone) – and ultimately relied on the terms of economics: they both paid the same fifteen dollars to take the class and thus shared equal rights to the space. Just because Fatimah was black did not mean she could go ahead and slap whomever she wanted to. Both versions of the event were tendentious.

Allie’s offense had everything to do with a history her white female body insouciantly indexed, an ongoing history made even more apparent by her unawareness of it. Her way of being-in-the-class touched Fatimah deeply but left no physical markings. Other than “doing too much” and “taking up too much space,” sparse language existed to address Allie’s impact. The West African instructor’s response further elided the conflict: "we are a dance family! Family does not fight. We are here to love the African drum and dance. To be happy." Fatimah was banned from the Malonga Center for a week, and from the West African djembe dance class indefinitely. A few months later when the instructor rescinded Fatimah’s expulsion she refused to return to the class. "My own people didn't even have my back. These Africans and their fucked-up politics. Do anything to make the white folks comfortable so long as they get their dollar."

This chapter gives historical context for the scene that inaugurates it. While on face value it appears to be a contention based on a seemingly plain black/white binary – or, as one interviewee explained, “childish shit that I just don’t have the time or the energy for” – the
moment, contextualized by a broader history, indexes more complicated dynamics. A look at this site of research disrupts any assumptions of a unanimity over what the dance practice means and does. The Malonga Center – expressed by one interviewee as “crass but fragile” – is entangled with competing desires that explosively interfere with one another. In this chapter, I examine the manner in which West African dance functions performatively toward the making of African diasporic affective belonging. Belonging in these classes is an achievement; it is pursued, competed for, and bought. The work that West African dance practice does in shaping how participants conceive of diaspora and their own relationship to it is of paramount interest here.

West African dance classes, I argue, initially began as a redefinition of American blackness vis-à-vis a proximity to Africa in the 1970s, and has since grown into a wide-reaching niche that is today unmistakably characterized by the vast number of white American women who patronize these spaces. Anchored by ethnographic field notes and interviews stretching across twenty-four months, I argue that the space underwent a major transformation: diasporic belonging became increasingly democratized, and Africanness commodified. I consider the transformation of West African dance from a community practice wherein membership hinged on being black to an industry that promotes a broad, racially unspecific Africanness. In the latter, the metric of belonging is consumption couched in the rhetoric of colorblind family and African spirit.

West African dance classes, by which I mean those kinds of classes that are marketed as such – djembe, sabar, and kutiro – are “contact zones” where meanings of Africa and its diaspora are produced and used to negotiate power and identity. As pedagogical space, ritual space, and performance space, West African dance classes are performative; they function as technologies of African diasporic identity and community making. Classes are sites where information exchanges bodies, gets reinterpreted during that embodied traffic, and iteratively configures participants’ identities. Performativity asks us to question whether there is anything guaranteeing that participants act a certain way. (Other than a historical precedent, there is not.) It also asks us to think of West African dance classes as a constellation of social relationships that convene around notions of origins and social belonging. This chapter asks: How and why did West African dance grow in popularity and what are the stakes of its development as a commodity? How do race, class, gender, and nationality co-function to organize how individuals act in the space? And also, what is the relationship between blackness, Africanness, and diaspora; why and in what moments are they conflated?

Why People Do West African Dance

“I think everyone who steps in the room can all agree why we're here: we're gonna dance. I think that if I look at anyone outside of it, then that's when we get personal,” Rhonda – a forty year-old, black American woman raised in Oakland – explains to me as our interview rounds out. We are in the corner of the third floor studio in the Malonga Center, waiting for a class to begin. When we started the interview the room was empty; as we get deeper into conversation dancers trickle in, quickening the pace of our interview and clipping Rhonda’s answers. Earlier the quiet and emptiness of the room allowed our discussion to roam, steep in the space a little. More and more white women were coming in though – which was noticed by both of us – shortening her book-length thoughts on whiteness, Africanness, and blackness into text message-length quips. Whispered Girl, you know-s and I won’t say much about that cause now we in
mixed company-s surrogated more explicit responses. By now most of everyone who is taking class has arrived – Rhonda and I are two of three black women in the class of twelve – and they all lead themselves in individual warm ups since the instructor has yet to arrive. Folks understandably ear hustle our conversation. Rhonda and I are talking privately in public, after all. Our growing audience is apparent.

“Listen” – Rhonda cinches our discussion – “if I always relate everything to dance, then it’s perfect; there’s no imperfection. I’m not perfect, but again, dance is perfect. Let me keep my focus on what’s so perfect and then I can rise up in that. So nothing could detour me from it. Not no personality conflicts, not no women conflicts, not no I-dated-that-guy-last-week shit...none of that. It just doesn’t even matter.” We can feel our audience’s discomfort; it spreads to us. They wonder what we have been talking about before and how we landed here. Some express that very same inquiry to me after the class ends (“that seemed like an interesting conversation, huh?”). I get the feeling Rhonda does not want all of her opinions made available to this broader (predominantly white) community. Ending, then, on the flawlessness of the dance, unsullied by the politics that surround it, seems a safe (inoffensive? disarmed?) place to land. Despite her claim that the dance is perfect – enough – her self-censure evidences the fact that what the broader community felt about her mattered. The space that contained the dance was always of consequence.

The Malonga Center sits in the eastern part of downtown Oakland, California. The city of Oakland renovated the 1920s building, turning it into a space for community art production. Originally called CitiCenter, and later Alice Arts, the building’s name was changed in 2004 after Malonga Casquelourd – Cameroonian Congolese drum teacher, pillar of the African dance and drum community in the East Bay, founder of the company Fua Dia Congo – died unexpectedly in a car accident. Part apartment building, with five dance studios, additional meeting rooms, and a 350-seat theater space, the Center emerged as a unique site in Oakland that embodies the shifting politics of black diasporic social, artistic, and political life. Previous black arts spaces like Everybody’s Creative Art Center, CitiCenter Dance, and the Alice Arts Center informally folded into the Malonga Center. It has served as the home to the Oakland Ballet, the Oakland Ensemble Theater, Dimensions Dance Theater, Bantaba Dance Ensemble, Fogo Na Roupa/Omulu Capoeira, and Diamano Coura West African Dance Company, among others. “I never found anything as rich and as varied and that had as much to offer as the Malonga Center,” one well-traveled interviewee explained.

In many ways the Malonga Center embodies major shifts around theorizations of the African diaspora. The space itself changed from one in which African diasporic belonging was thought to be made through sameness, to one that is constituted more accurately by difference. The fact that the class space is fraught though does not negate its status as a community. The diversity and incommensurability of why people go are what Alondra Nelson calls the “factness of diaspora.”

Reasons why participants continue to return to the space abound. One shared reason is a sense of community, even though not one interviewee expressed having achieved a full and dependable belonging. For all, feelings of welcome and exclusion intermixed. Janice, a forty-seven year old white woman who has been frequenting the Malonga Center now for twenty years explained to me how difficult returning to this “hostile” space is. Yet in some ways her unfulfilled inclusion and its implicit promise of a more full belonging – “To be remembered; to be known; to be acknowledged; the personal relationships” – kept her going. “One of the things that attracts people to West African dance is a sense of community building. Who the
community is is never really clear but [still], there’s that sense,” another interviewee explained. People are there because they want to be, and there is something both in the movement and in the space that houses those movements that compels participants to arrive, pay, and return.

The positive aspects that folks get out of practice – “Its one of those few inches off the floor type feelings”; “it’s like church” – must be meaningful, especially considering the fact that the price tag for attendance is so steep. The average interviewee took between one and five classes a week, on average three. With each class costing fourteen to fifteen dollars, dancers (the drummers don’t pay to participate) spend about $180 per month: about $2,160 per year on dance classes alone. This does not take into account dance workshops (which many attend), during which dancers take up to four classes in a single day, or dance camps and other traveling trips that themselves cost hundreds and thousands of dollars respectively. Thirteen interviewees explained that they moved to the Bay Area for access to the Malonga Center – the promise of a robust diasporic dance schedule inspiring their relocation. Interviewees often evoked the stifling class politics, and the freedom they felt living in the Bay Area, in the same breath. “Open-minded,” “diverse,” “live and let live,” and “tolerant” were all used to qualify the Bay Area’s unique character.

Some felt it necessary to "turn on blinders" to the dynamics of the space in order to enjoy the fruits of the dance practice. Regardless of the feelings of doubt – “Am I just dollars? Is it just teaching? Is it just money? Do you care? Do you even want us to get it?” – participants continue to frequent the Center. Ultimately, participants found that “nothing is hurting me and it still seems to be calling me.” Sometimes it does "come down to physical shape. I get a workout.” West African dance “does the trick,” explained Sarah. Classes were events people looked forward to in their day, budgeted for, and forewent other activities (and necessities) in order to participate in. When finances threatened their capacity to dance, they went anyways and observed. When they could not financially afford to go to a class they took it anyways. Or they went without electricity in their homes, ate cheap sandwiches for dinner, and walked to work instead of driving or taking the train. The feeling occasioned by doing the movement convinced participants to return. Rhonda explains that she feels “Very lifted. Very blessed” when dancing. “At times I feel like there is a group of people that are with me that I don’t even see but their presence is there. And when it’s on that level its really anointed. That’s how I feel.” Despite the drama, folks return to the space because it offers something worthwhile – a resource that outweighs (even while it informs) the tensions therein. It is a space where, to borrow Harvey Young’s language, “the jouissance of blackness [is] tempered with pain.” In what follows I explain the historical context of such challenges.

Stay Home, Go Elsewhere

The channels through which West African dance was taught in the Bay Area and transferred between bodies resists neat chronological narrative, although it is clear that West African dance practice did not exist in the late 1960s and early 1970s as it does today. Haitian and Afro-Caribbean dances were the Afro-diasporic styles taught most regularly. The popularity and institutionalization of the Katherine Dunham technique – and the ways in which this dance
The Dunham technique found its inspiration in West African and Caribbean movement traditions (strong yet flexible torso, syncopated rhythm, a command of one’s core); the dance world labeled it “primitive” but it exceeded this racialized category to be later interpreted as “modern.” As one San Francisco State dance instructor explained, “We could do Dunham cause it didn’t scare the dance departments. We were still wearing leggings and the whole nine, so that didn’t scare anyone. We [black women] knew what we were doing was black though.” The Dunham technique not appearing “too different” from what was already being taught allowed a relatively smooth entry into higher education school systems. White dance departments found this Afro-diasporic dance palatable, even while (from the perspective of black interviewees) Dunham felt refreshing simply because it was unapologetically black.

Elder black Americans who were present during the marked emergence of West African dance classes in the Bay Area (late 1980s and early 90s) attribute their original interest in black diasporic dance forms to Assadata Dafora, Pearl Primus, and Katherine Dunham especially. Although none of these teachers completed permanent residencies in the Bay Area, their dance disciples did. Ruth Beckford and Albirda Rose, two black American women who were licensed practitioners in the Dunham technique, taught classes at San Francisco State, Laney College, and small studios in the Bay Area regularly. Dunham technique, interviewees explain, ushered them into other Africanist dance forms. It treated their bodies kindly and implicated a history they felt connected to. Dancing, in other words, provided an instrument toward self-identification and a knowledge of history. Black American women felt “in their bodies” while doing it; natural. The pleasure that came from dancing was tethered to a larger racial project. It made them feel at home inside themselves. Susan, a fifty-four year old black woman and Oakland native explains, “I got kicked out of every dance class I went to. My teachers said I didn’t wanna learn and that I had a bad attitude. Ha! Come to realize I just didn’t like what they were teaching me. I didn’t like how they were teaching me. I knew I was a dancer though. Ms. Beckford showed me that I was a dancer.”

To whom the West African dance community traces its origins evidences gender privileging and the politics of African authenticity. Continental African men were most regularly acknowledged as breaking open the industry. Only black Americans named other black Americans as making meaningful contributions to the dance and drum practice. Most interviews argue that Zakarya Diouf “brought African dance to Oakland” and “popularized the dance class format” but archives point to the fact that black American women were teaching West African dance prior to his arrival in 1979. In the early 1970s, black Americans founded the first West African dance companies in the Bay Area. Sister Linda Johnson founded Ballet Sabar in 1978, a Senegalese dance company that performed Sabar as the core of its performance repertoire. During that same time Nzignha Camara of Los Angeles traveled back and forth to West Africa and returned to the States to share the movement knowledge she had acquired. Yet the African dance and drum community wholly attributes its origins to the arrival of a transcontinental crew of African men: Malonga Casquelourd (Congo by way of Cameroon), C.K. Ladzekpo (Ghana), Zak Diouf (Liberia), Allassane Kane and Abdoulaye Diakite (Senegal). The origins of the African dance scene as of these men’s making typifies the authenticity afforded to African bodies that black American women did not receive.

Black Americans laid the foundation for the West African dance industry in Oakland. In the late 1960 through the 1970s, the teaching and learning of West African dance was intimately connected to Black Power Movements that came on the heels of the short Civil Rights
Movement. Reaching back and stretching past slavery, Africa became a productive analytic in reconstituting blackness. As Kevin Gaines writes, “In a nation that has traditionally imagined its culture and legislated its polity as ‘white,’ ‘African’ has often provided for African Americans a default basis for identity in direct proportion to their exclusion from national citizenship.”

Redefining blackness through the terms of Africanness worked to resituate black Americans’ origins. Dance was not outside the bounds of this political project; dance was instrumental in promulgating it. Sister Linda – who first started taking African dance classes with Papa Camara at the Malcolm X Community Center in Compton in the late 1960s – expresses the “work” that African dance did during this moment:

The early 60s and 70s – that, for me, was the utopia. That was the cream of the crop. That’s when the Africans came and weren’t inhibited on teaching us. They were more excited about seeing somebody like them as opposed to competing and feeling like we were taking something from them. It was so open. At that time it was about consciousness. To me we went from being black to being African…for us to be blacker than what we were. Right after James Brown, right after the Watts Riot, right after "Say It Loud, I’m Black and I’m Proud" it was really something good to be blacker than black. The Africanism connected to the blackness gave us a consciousness in that early 60s and 70s when African dance was coming about – especially the djembe. It was an awakening all over the world cause that’s when the African [companies] first began to defect. It was what we are at our best. At that time it was mutual; [Africans] were not brainwashed by the Caucasians yet. It was black on black empowerment. There was a lot of healing and revealing going on.

A long-standing relationship existed between African Americans and continental Africans, wherein allegiance and alliance gave strength to the black arts community in Oakland. Those relationships were shaped by race, citizenship, and gender. During the late 60s, two black American elders explained to me, a shared blackness provided the grounds for collaboration. “[African teachers] would thank us for being interested in our roots, would say they couldn’t believe how good we were and that we danced like Africans. We used to teach them how to conduct a dance class because no such thing existed like that in Africa. They mighta had rehearsals but the class format was something new altogether.”

Whether or not “desire and imagination [were] enough to bridge the rift of the Atlantic,” West African dance practice worked to redefine blackness through the analytic of “an Africa.” “Folks wanted to be real black!” Christine explains. “Not just black, un uh, they wanted to be so black they were African. Worked hard at it too.” Black Americanness, in Christine’s terms, sat on a spectrum where black Americans believed there existed, and in turn pursued, a more authentic blackness through ongoing encounters with Africanness. Racial essentialism proved to be strategic and productive for this community of artists. On the heels of Black Power movements, which had special resonance in the San Francisco Bay Area, black Americans were searching for ways to incorporate a righteous blackness into their everyday. The example of Palo Alto – a city south of San Francisco where a number of African residents lived – teaches us about the extent to which Africanness mattered as a rubric of blackness in America. Earl explains: “Black folks were calling themselves Nairobi. They had a vote as a matter of fact to secede from East Palo Alto. They wanted their own city [that] was gonna be based on black nationalist doctrine.” The establishment of Black Studies Programs at San Francisco State,
UC Berkeley, San Francisco City College, and Laney College – all in the San Francisco Bay Area, all of which offered African dance classes – exemplifies the intimate relationship between the political project of full black citizenship, Black Studies, and dance practice. In a 1969 program pamphlet for the SF State Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority Inc. Chapter’s annual showcase, for example, a picture of five black women in raffia skirts, hair plaited in ornate patterns, and woven bras fill the first page. Their arms are all raised in the shape of goalposts, hands pointing upward. Knees bent, torsos contracted, their image stands above the words: “African cultural dance performance.” Fliers and programs abound for what was, in the early 70s, the recently established Kwanzaa celebration (founded by Maulana Karenga in 1966). All list a “cultural dance” component. Programs for events like these suggest the contributive role dance played for working and middle class blacks as a vehicle toward and site of black pride, or the arts “as a modality of black politics.”

Dance provided a way of “getting elsewhere,” of feeling “found.” Without the means to actualize a visit to the continent, dance served as a different kind of physical pursuit of diasporic travel. “I wanted to go [to Africa] so bad! Could barely scratch up the dollars to pay for a class though. Wasn’t no way I was getting to Africa. I just went another way,” Imani explains. Many articulate West African dance as a means of traveling without passport – an undermining of the financial requirements that traveling, in its literal sense, necessitated. Rhonda explains how she wanted to be “more than just a one-country dancer. Why stop in Central [Africa]? Keep it moving. Be all up in West Africa. Why stop in Senegal? Be in Guinea.” This relates to Stuart Hall’s definition of diaspora, which he describes not as an essence but as a positioning – a “production” that uses representations to “restore an imaginary fullness or plentitude, to set against the broken rubric of our past.” This definition is especially apt when applied to a West African dance context. While positioning here is about situating ones identity within historical racial memory, it is also about movement – about the ways in which dance makes possible that first iteration. Positioning in this context suggests how moving one’s body can function as a means to situate one’s history. West African dance classes provided a meaningful way to escape the hardships and distractions of home. Esther says, “I am telling you, I would have gotten in so much shit if I was not dancing all the time. Oakland in the 70s?! The classes were free a lot of the time, you know. So I’d go to escape my crazy home.” An alternative home was in the dance.

West African dance and drum can be understood as what Jacqueline Nassy Brown calls a “diasporic resource.” She explains: "diasporic resources can include 'cultural productions such as music, but also people and places...[and the] iconography, ideas, and ideologies' of one black community that are employed by another as formative schema for political consciousness, collective empowerment, and identity formation." Black American men in particular expressed their pursuit of African drumming as a means to honor Africa, its diaspora, and their own local black communities. Many – both black and nonblack participants – thought this connection to diaspora was visible in the execution of the movement itself. Talk about the dance “coming naturally” and being “in our bones” happened often. Rhonda explains that black people have a unique connection to West African dance that white folks do not:

This is a very opinionated thing on my part: I think that we do. I really do. I was always around rhythmic things. I just feel like it felt like I came home or something. And I feel like I hear that story from a lot of black people. When I watch maybe Caucasian people...they really put their time in; they study. It doesn’t seem like its second nature the
way it feels like for the black people. I guess it depends on the different places you’re dancing from.\textsuperscript{182}

Black bodies dancing index the “place” of diaspora, not in a genetic or biological sense, but by way of the work they put in to know the form, a labor (or life practice) motivated by a feeling of connection to the dance. One could argue that within blacks’ proficiency in the dance lives the very distance between them and the perceived culture where the dance is from. In other words, the fact that the institution of slavery banned the practice of West African dance and drum later became the motivation for mastering it. The learning of West African dance and drum provided a pedagogical and psychic tool in learning the black diaspora better through its music, in turn resignifying what blackness meant through the trope of Africanness. A shared feeling of dispossession, homelessness, and structural racism is the “place” that manifests in their movement.

For African Americans coming of age in the 70s and 80s, African dance mediated their relationship to their own blackness. Sometimes investing in a fictive Africa that was idyllic, pre-colonial, and immune to modernity, African dance was a way to manage the feelings of dispossession and un-rootedness that being of-the-diaspora engendered. Yvonne Daniel, in her work on Haitian, Cuban, and Bahian religious practice and dance forms, argues that black bodies dancing collectively “accumulate spirit, display power, and enact as well as disseminate knowledge. Worshipping performers reenact what they have learned, what they have been told, what they feel, and what they imagine.”\textsuperscript{183} In Oakland, West African dance practice embodied a larger project to be, in Sister Linda’s words, “blacker than what [they] were,” to be “African.” The dance brokered a relationship to Africa by making the dancers feel connected to their immediate dance and drum family and tethered to Africa through its dance. A pride came also from the radicalness of expressly claiming Africa as a black American possession. Baba Tunde explains: “oh we scared the shit out of white people and that made us happy” – laughter sputtering out from him – “but we were more proud to be together, knowing we were a threat.”\textsuperscript{184} Being counterculture by being “extra black” generated delight.\textsuperscript{185} Black women discussed how unpopular it was among their friends to embrace African culture, yet highlighted their deep investment in pursuing it. “Wearin’ African print, takin’ African dance classes…that shit wasn’t cute,” one interviewee explained. “Shit, I used to get laughed at. Now everybody wants to take an African class. Wanna go to Africa for a month, come back, and teach they own classes in Boulder.”\textsuperscript{186}

Although guilty of perpetuating a homogenized and idyllic Africa through dance, it was also that same dance practice which introduced participants to the diversity and heterogeneity of the continent. This happened in part by way of the previously listed cohort of West and Central African men who offered variety into African dance and drum practice. All started new dance companies shortly after their arrival, further professionalizing this artistic practice. Interviews recall those early years soon after their relocation as a time of fun, dedication, and community building. Although not without its contentions and challenges, older participants (between 45 and 70 year olds) frame this moment (the late 70s to mid 80s) as the most exhilarating time of their dance and drum careers. Companies like Ceero, Fua Dia Congo, Diamano Coura, and the previously mentioned Ballet Sabar were constituted solely of black American women. It was in the early 80s that those classes that were previously scattered across the Bay Area at smaller studios and universities took permanent residence in what is now The Malonga Casquelourd Center for the Arts. Early West African dance classes evidence creative autonomy, communal
organization, and the inextricable bond between art practice and life. “You know back in the
day,” Kweku explains, “when we used to drum and dance it was all about community, family,
gathering, sharing; support systems were great. The financial side of it – the economics –
[weren’t] in place so much. It’s not like you didn’t do gigs and stuff like that, but a lot of it was a
grassroots type movement. Meeting at the park or having a good time, hanging out, stuff like
that.”187 Places where African dance and drum happened became spaces of black diasporic
communion. An affective affiliation bonded the group, not necessarily money.

In the early 1990’s the terms of African authenticity usurped the logic of a black diaspora
as West African dance became increasingly commodified. This altered interactions between
individuals since "Commodification presumes the existence of property rights over processes,
things, and social relations, that a price can be put on them, and that they can be traded subject to
legal contract. The market is presumed to work as an appropriate guide,” David Harvey writes,
“an ethic – for all human action.”188 This allowed African men to label themselves as “master
teachers” even when their training in African drumming was sometimes sparse and occasionally
shallow. Black American men, most in the their 50s, all articulate a blatant politics of
authenticity that eventually discouraged them from participating in the community in ways they
had prior. Most West African teachers I interviewed however, thought it was just about crazy
that anyone would question whether or not they were better at the form than African Americans.
American racial politics were dramatic, they said. “Black people here want us to feel like them.
They don’t want us to talk to the whites. But why? They are closer to each other than they are to
us.”189 Still, many (mostly non-continental Africans) believed that classes became less rigorous
as they became increasingly marketed as “authentic.” Ana says, “We knew something was
different when we had alla these classes but we stopped learning the histories to the rhythms.
That was first time we had to ask and be like: so, where is this from? And they would fumble!
‘Oh this is some village shit you ain’t never seen before.’ Mhmm.”190 Ana’s words point to the
simultaneous increase in the number of African dance classes and the decrease in the teaching of
specific knowledges. Denouncing black American competence buttressed African expertise.

The accession of younger West African dance and drum teachers, with their own
financial and immigration concerns and limited understanding of American racial politics,
shifted the dynamics within the community. A foremost interest in monetary profit (as opposed
to a pursuit of diasporic roots) increased the number of classes and boosted participation. Black
American involvement dwindled. Gloria puts it this way: “there was a transitional state in the 90s
because there was anther group of Senegalese and Guineans that came. That was the last group
for me that came with respect. After that, it was loose boogie.”191 “Loose boogie” signifies the
ways in which a desire for monetary profit corrupted the quality of both the community and the
art form. It also indexes a marked increase in white participation, the escalation of ego, a waning
commitment to rigor, and the swelling function sex played in the space. In short, West African
dance classes transfigured from a black American diasporic project to a not-necessarily-black
African industry. Earl, drummer for Ceedo and Bantuba Dance companies, puts it well:

There began [a] politics of superiority and privilege: the predominance of people who
were from the continent who play the music versus people who were from the United
States who played the music. […] There was a sense that got communicated that if you’re
from Africa, it’s assumed that you grew up in the music, that you’re a master at it, and no
matter what other teaching people had, you [were] supposed to defer to that. […] It was
like they were saying: “you don’t even get to question why this white person is inside this
company or in this music because it’s our music.” So for those of us who have a political consciousness around Black Nationalism, black liberation movement in the United States, [and freedom struggles] generally, that was a push back for a lot of people – a silent pushback often. People would grumble about it but there was never any direct conversation. A lot of politically conscious black folks were like: you don’t understand. We struggled to get back to this music. This is something that was outlawed in North America. You couldn’t have a drum on a plantation; you couldn’t lift your foot off of the floor two inches in some religious celebrations in some communities. Part of the systematic oppression has been to diminish the access to and importance of all these cultural manifestations. So to have a white person be privileged in that, to get access to all of this information simply because they had resources was a bit of an affront.

If you go to Kweku's shop there’s his first drum. He carved that drum; it looks a little off balance. That’s an important symbol. That’s somebody in Chicago, Illinois who is connecting with West African culture to the point that he became a craftsman in the drums. So he felt like: “I earned my place in this, I studied with everybody. [...] He was like: “man these brothers come here and act like we don’t know shit.” Some people were coming who had learned how to play music late in the game; they [come] here, and all the sudden they're master drummers, simply because they're from Senegal or Guinea, or Mali. And Kweku is like: I been studying for 15-20 years at this point, and yet I don’t get no props, no respect. He wasn’t even looking for respect – he was looking for acceptance. “This is what I do for a living and yet y'all acting like because I have the historical misfortune of being born African in the United States it’s not my legacy.”

African citizenship measured dance and drum facility. Extending from this logic was the belief that black Americans, because they were not born in Africa, would never be able to master the African drum like a “true African.” Babacar, a sabar teacher, evidences this: “how can [black Americans] know like we know? You can’t know better than us; we grew up in it from small-small.” 192 Black American men (who had demonstrated a dedication to the learning of the art form by way of consistent training and participation at dance classes and rehearsals, in addition to frequent travels to West Africa to learn the art form in its organic settings) posed an economic threat to some of the newly arrived West African teachers. While black Americans pursued an African return (both imaginatively and figuratively) of roots-seeking, affective kinship connections and black consciousness, West Africans pursued an American dream of financial security and citizenship. Continental Africans challenged the black American belief that one could get closer to Africa through training. No matter what they did, black Americans could never be African. That distance – between being of-the-diaspora as opposed to the original site of its dispersion – caused deep factions within the community. Yet dance and drum was a strategy for both groups to pursue their attendant dreams. Both agendas were linked in other discreet ways: despite new instructors’ disbelief in and criticism of black American’s capacity to master the art form, their flourishing black Oakland community cushioned newly migrated West Africans who were able to tap into its social, professional, and political networks upon their arrival. Black American women in particular who were teaching and invested in West African dance provided a social and financial cushion for recently immigrated West Africans. They offered opportunities to guest teach, homes to live in, food to eat, professional networks to tap into, a student base, and sometimes citizenship. “Any African you see right now, they stayed
with me,” Gloria explains. “I used to own that big three story house across the street. They ALL used to stay in my house. For a long time. At one point I had nine men staying with me for about ten years.”

In addition to providing a familial network, black Americans played a large role in professionalizing West African dance and drum and offering artistic space that would cultivate the economic niche of African arts and culture. The San Francisco Ethnic Dance Festival, for example, used to be headlined by Bantuba. Now in its thirty-fourth year, “The San Francisco Ethnic Dance Festival was a big event that we always auditioned for and we would always get in,” Earl explains. Later the festival began to privilege continental African groups and companies from further away. An evening performance that happened annually “The Africans Are Coming” exemplified the tension between black Americans and continental Africans. Earl explains:

“The Africans are Coming” started to symbolize this tension: that continental folks would come and say "we're bringing this all to you" and people here would be like "we been doing this, we been here, we been figuring it out." In the diaspora we had to figure it out. Ya'll might have come with the whole cloth, we came with the quilt. But we ain’t any less African than ya’ll so when you say "the Africans are coming,” what do you mean?"

It never elevated to any dialogue or debate about it but it was definitely symbolic of the tension between continental Africans approach to this art and African American's approach to the art.

That black Americans thought of themselves as no less African than continental Africans reveals the way they saw belonging not in terms of citizenship, but through the terms of race – a shared epidermal schema. This antagonism was the substance of black American disagreement with both African authenticity and white participation. Belonging to the diaspora, it seems, was about longitudinal sameness. Certainly meaningful differences in life experience, citizenship status, literacy, and access to resources (those economic and political) existed between black folk on the continent and black folks in the diaspora. “The Africans are Coming” expresses an undertone of threat both to the impenetrability of the US nation, and to the security of the existing West African dance community. It foreshadows change: that “The Africans” are coming has little import unless their arrival instantiates difference, after all. That (these new) Africans were on their way threatened not just African American instructors, but the community they had been fostering since the 60s.

Gloria named the challenges that “those Africans coming” gave subsequent rise to: “As an African American teaching, the Africans are literally tryna tell people we don't know what we are doing. They're trying to boot us out, even here in the Bay Area.” Earl and Gloria’s comments reveal the ways in which African authenticity grew as a dominant rubric in part because the terms of inherent continental facility shrunk professional competition and, in some cases, masked a lack of rigor and deep knowledge of the form. The influx of West Africans who called themselves “master teachers” generated a host of contentions in the community about degrees of training and the ways in which nationality and gender impacted the respect one received from new participants/customers. As the number of “master teachers” grew, black American men in particular retired from the space. Black diasporic kinship was no longer the space’s explicit compass; it became apparent that being of the diaspora did not mean being of the continent. "We used to pray for a teacher,” Djafa solemnly explained. “Then all the sudden there were master teachers everywhere, but they didn’t know what they were teaching. One class I came to with my
drum, and the instructor told me ‘nah brotha we cool. We got enough drummers.’ I ain’t never been told that. That was it for me.”

Being informed that there was literally no room for him signified a distinctly new era. White men and their continental African teachers began to constitute the majority of the class’s drum corps. The space’s orientation had changed: it now catered to new students with little embodied knowledge of the community’s history. Many non-black participants were relieved that they did not have to first pass through the gate of black American antagonisms in order to participate. “I think the ‘family’ sense is not as strong because I think that now the new flurry of dancers and dancers coming in, they don’t have that connection,” Rhonda explained. “That connection,” it seems, was a racially affective relationship to Africa. When Africa figuratively denied them membership, black Americans were forced to resituate their relationships to the Malonga Center and its operations.

Belonging is made in part through exclusion – the fact that others do not belong. As E. Patrick Johnson reminds us, “Individuals or groups appropriate [blackness] in order to circumscribe its boundaries or to exclude other individuals or groups. When blackness is appropriated to the exclusion of others, identity becomes political.” This raises the question: how can everyone in the space belong longitudinally if belonging means someone who wants to cannot? As Saidiya Hartman writes, "Kinship was as much about exclusion as affiliation." Previously, white folks were the casualty of black American belonging; when these new teachers arrived, black Americans became the stake of white belonging.

African American drummers and dancers, marginalized by the privileging of continental Africans and their privileging of white Americans, decided to establish their own dance companies that were, they hoped, without some of the compromises they saw as corrupting the community. The premise was: “African American-led, partnering with Africans from the continent. We gonna make this music together. We gonna acknowledge musicianship and dance. It ain’t about where you from, its about what you can do.” This, for them, diverged from: “if you were from Africa you could do no wrong and if you’re from the United States you have to watch every thing you do, somehow you gotta earn your way back to this music – when essentially some of these white folks were paying their way into the music – when essentially some of these white folks were paying their way into the music.”

Participating in both African American-led and West African-led groups proved to be yet another point of contention. Directors of the West African-run companies asked them to choose. Earl explains that “there was a moment when Allasane [said] ‘well you can’t be in both things. You can’t do Ceero and you can’t do Bantuba at the same time. You have to pick.’ He said it to me directly during a break at a rehearsal and I asked, why? Why are you asking people to make that decision? And he was like ‘well, people will get confused...’ Sounds like a control thing to me.”

Interviewees marked a noticeable shift in the racial makeup of the community in the early 90s. Antoinette explains that the Malonga Center “had a meltdown. There was a time you saw an African dancer you knew that she was conscious, educated, and a humanitarian. That’s not applicable anymore. Anybody can do it. Back in the day it was a lock down, only certain people could get in. And it wasn’t for the Caucasians; now it has been opened up. You gonna loose something – either your roots or your leaves. I pray that we do not lose the roots.” Earl echoes Antoinette’s observation: “You go to Malonga now, it’s white folks. That’s who you see – not only dancing but teaching stuff and owning it. If you Google ‘djembe’, the site that came up most often was a site up in Marin, and in this dance company there were no black people anywhere on the website. All white folks, wearing traditional West African clothes. It’s almost like what we see in jazz.” Black Americans situated their passion for, and the eventual
appropriation of, West African dance within a longer history of exploitation of black expressive culture. Many were unsurprised – but yet and still, pained.

The awareness of the transfiguration of the space did not belong only to those who were there to witness it. Even those who entered the scene later knew that the community they joined was markedly distinguished from its predecessor. “From what I’ve heard from stories about how things used to be and how they are now,” one drummer explained to me, “it seems like I came in after an era ended. It was a new era of loosely connected drummers and dancers. Many people kind of disintegrated. Seems like there’s less solidarity in it; just everybody getting what they can, you know? Financially.”

West African instructors in the 1990s mobilized the desires of non-black people to participate in the practice for their own financial security. Offering West African teachers free rehearsal space, room and board, food, and transportation, and working as de facto personal assistants allowed white Americans to enter and feel comfortable at the Malonga Center in ways previously unavailable to them. “Essentially some of these white folks were paying their way into the music” Earl explained. “It worked like this:

I’m gonna offer you a job and a place to live and that way I get to be around you 24/7. You work with me, you live with me, and now you’re somewhat dependent on me and I get to ask you anything I want to ask at any given time. "Show me this part again." It’s 10 o’clock at night: “show me this part again.” That is buying access; and if you don’t have the resources to do that, your only access becomes dance class at the Malonga or, if you happen to be in a dance company, maybe you’re gonna learn while you’re in the company. So much of that purchasing power created access to information beyond the level of detail you would normally get beyond the level of hours you have exposure to it.

This generation of teachers was, according to elder dancers and drummers, unlike their predecessors in meaningful ways. “Malonga [Casquelord] was one of the people who got the connection. His appreciation for the African in America and the freedom struggle here was much more profound than some of the people coming after him who had only been exposed to the music.” Now that the majority of the teachers are, in Earl and Kweku’s opinion, unaware of black American history, and now that the dancers themselves don’t see the need for that particular context, “how the center is operating now bothers a lot of us.” Kweku explains that he first remembers seeing white participants drumming in the early 90s. By the mid-90s they were common fare. “I think it was the Africans that introduced the white people more so,” he says. “Because the brothers were still, you know, ‘down with the whitey’ and all that.” Kweku can even remember the name of the first white male he saw in the space. “I think he worked with Abdoulaye doing some flooring. He came around, carrying Abdoulaye’s drums, bringing him food.”

What initially began as a redefinition of American blackness vis-à-vis a proximity to Africa through West and Central African dance has since grown into a wide-reaching niche that is today unmistakably characterized by the vast number of white Americans who patronize these spaces. Interviews reveal the fact that a power struggle over this shared site exists: one pulled most strongly and palpably between West African dance as a site for explicitly black transnational cultural alliance on the one hand and – as the next section will show – a site for racially indifferent social utopia. In other words, a tension exists between West African dance as a psychic black project and West African dance as a commodity.
Strategic Diaspora

Many black American participants felt that, with the influx of younger teachers, the community got “slick: a bit corrupt.” Non-black participants, on the other hand, generally saw the shifts in the classes as positive – an indication that the community was growing and thriving. This section discusses contemporary West African dance class operations. It pays special attention to the ways instructors manage the desires among participants in their classes. It reveals the ways instructors tow the line between West African dance as a racially indifferent commodity and West African dance as a psychic black project. Lucy explains one of the obstacles she sees teachers struggle with:

It seems that the teachers would like as many people as possible to take their dance class, for sure…it’s their living. But then at the same time [they] are also very aware of having to keep different groups of people happy and depending on who they’re talking to, will emphasize certain parts of the dance versus others. Like, for example, a teacher to an African American person will talk about racial connection (brotherhood, sisterhood, that kind of thing). And then to a white person, perhaps, or to a nonblack person, will say, "oh no this is not just for black people this is for everybody, we all can learn and so on and so forth. So basically emphasize different things to different people without really fully...there is no definite position that the teachers can take. It’s impossible really; in order to keep as many students as you want to have you can’t ever say "Its for this group, it’s for that group."

Another explained that she found “the West African space slightly more hostile. Even to this day there are people [by] whom I feel tolerated. Lets just put it that way.” How do instructors manage this tension and what role do they see themselves playing in it? Current West African instructors come from political realities wherein race does not function commensurably as it does in the U.S. Certainly West African instructors cannot be expected to assume the subject position of black Americans. Yet for many, an American brand of racism (finding themselves having transitioned from a black-majority state to a black-minority one) imposed new racial identifications. The precariousness of their status in the U.S. engendered a strategic approach to their professional careers as instructors – an approach characterized by a fluidity of racial affiliation wherein diaspora is elastic trope, stretching wide or shrinking tight its own definition to suit whichever racial group is its audience. Instructors sometimes denounce an affective affiliation with black Americans in the company of non-blacks and in the presence of a predominantly black group use the language of racial “family” rooted in the presumption of a shared state of struggle. In the first scenario, belonging means togetherness in spite of race and in the latter, belonging simply on the terms of it.

During formal interviews West African instructors typically circumnavigated around race. When they did utter it, they did so begrudgingly – as though race would bear no import were it not for Americans who refused to “get past it.” Instructors were careful about not appearing to favor any one racial group: “I welcome [whoever] comes,” one instructor explained. And another: “my classes are like one family. It’s what the Bay Area is about. There are people from everywhere here, and the drum connects us.” Yet during in-group moments those same instructors explained to me how important it was that I take West African
dance classes, that they prefer having only black people in the first lines, and the fact that more black Americans did not appear interested in learning “their culture” saddened them. Most believe that West African dance has special resonance with African Americans, but some teachers expressed feeling that black Americans remain just as far away from it as any other non-continental African. Other teachers explained that, while they definitely did believe that Africa is connected to its diaspora, that affiliation itself did not constitute the grounds upon which they designed their identities. Some explained that harping on such things indicated both the distance between these two groups and the privilege of (African) Americanness. Black Americans complaining about identity, while they seemed to be enshrouded in abundance and comfort, came off to them as a bit ingratiating. “I understand. I get it, but I can’t cry with you…I have to eat,” explained one instructor.

Most often though, West African teachers publicly frame (typically amidst majority white company) West African dance as colorblind and indifferent to race in an effort to ensure future consumption. As Lena Sawyer helps us understand vis-à-vis African dance classes in Stockholm: “racialized understandings of people, places, and cultures are meanings that can be strategically employed or discarded to meet individual dance instructors’ desires for legitimacy.” In the case of contemporary classes at the Malonga Center, the rhetoric of racial indifference – a closeness supposedly engendered and strengthened by refusing race as an important axis of social differentiation – dominates. This makes white Americans comfortable and equal partners in the project of West African dance and sharpens black Americans’ pungency. Black American feelings of superiority, of having special stakes in and claims to West African dance, was undermined by African teachers who made the practice equally available to all. Some instructors even describe the class space as providing respite from racism, prejudice, sexism, and other kinds of inequalities that take place outside of it.

Teachers’ ambivalence around racial tensions manifests most clearly when explicit altercations arise. Nearly all interviewees expressed teachers’ hands-off approach to dealing with conflicts in the class. Even when fistfights broke out, other students mediated. Teachers expressed either no knowledge of the racial dynamics in the space or no interest in entertaining them. Most felt detached from such fights, explaining that in America a black/white dichotomy over-determines how people interact with each other. That is not where they come from; that is not their compass for social interaction.

In addition to strategically mobilizing race, invisibilizing the economy of the industry by focusing on themes of family, connectedness, and love for the drum contributed to the growing business of African dance. Class and citizenship had much to do with the choices newly arrived West Africans made in order to establish themselves as invaluable to the community, even though the majority of interviews I conducted with West African instructors on the whole reveal a discomfort with talking about money as an important, if not decisive, consideration. During interviews conducted on-record, instructors frequently rested on the language of ‘family’ and ‘universal love’. Instructors routinely explained their classes and teaching careers as a gesture of generosity. In other words, teaching was about wanting to share the culture because it makes people happy, not because it is profitable. Often times the mandatory payment for class is framed as an "offering" – feigning voluntary donation; shrouding the operations of global capitalism that govern the space. How the drummers’ tips get distributed evidences a class-consciousness among continental Africans: “There’s a subculture within the African community to pay only Africans,” explained one drummer. “We are fellow Africans living in America. We have to help each other out. We have to make sure we have solidarity and to stick together.”
If expressed publicly, instructors couch monetary investment in the terms of familial responsibility. If regularly attending students took a break from class, interviewees expressed the dread they felt bumping into their instructor who would ask where they have been, why they have been absent, and remind them that they have bills to pay and family to support in their home countries. Lucy explains,

You develop this loyalty [to teachers] when people have a certain personality or seem like such a well-intentioned, and very talented person, you want them to do well and to have their work valued. It seems like such a hard life to teach dance, being an immigrant and all the financial issues. So it’s just this feeling of semi-responsibility. After you’ve been going for a little bit (maybe a year, year and a half, two) where you almost feel loyalty. Like, I should go and support. […] There was a lot of guilt associated with it. 212

Dancers sometimes decide to go to class out of a consideration of a particular teacher’s wellbeing. I did not encounter one instructor who was not regularly sending remittances to their families in a home country which “play a major role in ensuring economic survival of entire family units.” 213 Undoubtedly, teachers’ business strategies reflect a consideration of their own family’s wellbeing. While some teachers are upfront about upholding their fiscal responsibilities, others were more clandestine about the centrality money plays in their professional careers. After counting the money collected after a very small class, for example, one instructor sighed under her breath: "this can’t pay my rent." But at the class’s end she asked us: "Please bring your friends so we have better time, so class is more fun."

The growing industry of African dance democratized Africanness in large part because of the evacuation of racialized language from its history and its practice. An immediate belonging to the class has come to require only showing up and paying the class fee. The language of inclusivity prevails, betraying the fact that the consistent articulation of inclusivity only suggests the predominance of its opposite. Diaspora then transfigured from a distinctly black project to universalist one – a wide diaspora of “we” that lent itself to anyone with fifteen dollars to pay for a class. Africa materialized as a symbol for the world, as opposed to a symbol of blackness. Although those folks from earlier West African dance and drum camps (and their opinions that West African dance should privilege black people) remained in the space, their gospels no longer served as the consensus. At least publicly, universalism redefined the terms of diaspora. As West African dance emerged as a new commodity, instructors dislodged race as an organizing principle of the classes. The rhetoric of “Mama Africa” lost its vigor as the “talking drum” emerged as a signifier for universal heartbeat.

In other words, African was no longer seen as synonymous with black. "Africa is spirit. It jumps into you. The djembe knows no black, no white, no purple. The djembe knows heart," an elder Guinean teacher explained. What was before a means of redefining American blackness vis-à-vis a proximity to Africa has since turned into a space that clandestinely disassociates itself from blackness so as to encourage non-black patronage. Feeling as though their efforts to institutionalize West African dance were disregarded and forgotten by younger West African teachers, many black Americans retired from the space out of exhaustion or out of feelings of neglect. Some continue to take classes in spite of their knotted feelings of delight for the form, ownership of the space, and invisibility within its dominant history. Gloria affirms: “We ain’t no guest. They [white folks] the guest. No matter how few of us there are, they the guest. This is their playground; but see this? This is my home.” This feeling of propriety or ownership (who is
the host and who is the guest) structures West African dance classes today as it has since their beginning. “What are we to do with the art form other than put it on our mantles?” James asked me. His point was one about the risks in arresting feelings of black loss and dispossession into the dance. “You cant lay all of that burden down on this art,” he says. “You have to speak to it with the art...all of your frustrations, you have to speak it. You can’t strangle it.”

Pursuing Belonging

“People talk a lot about West African dance classes being welcoming and open to all – what the world should look like. Do you think folks are treated the same in West African dance classes?” I asked 63 year-old Blanche over the phone. “Hell no!” Peals of laughter were escaping her. “Who you been talking to?! Girl, please. They’re judged right off the bat based off of their abilities, lack of abilities, the degree to which they flop around the class or not.” Although everyone is judged, “people are accepted into the West African dance community a lot more readily if they are of African descent. That’s obvious,” Mark explained. After now having discussed the context of West African dance classes, here I unpack the dynamics within them. I focus on the various ways individuals navigate the community.

Classes share a common structure: payment to the instructor for class, warm up, teaching of the day’s choreography, “across the floor” (where the choreography is broken down into shortened segments and danced in moving lines), a solo circle, and a procession of “thank yous” to the drummers – at which point donations for the musicians are customarily offered. It would seem at face value that dancers haphazardly arrange the lines, but the formation of the lines follows a formula; understanding this decorum is essential to apprehend the ways dancers matter in and to the space. The front row consists of practiced dancers (sometimes handpicked by the instructor) who have a facility with the rhythms and their accompanied breaks. Strong dancers also make the next one-to-two lines. The middle-to-back lines consist of beginners whose position toward the back affords them more time to digest the movements. The most seasoned of dancers, the elders, or those with some longevity in the community have the last rows reserved for them. If there are men dancing in the class, they close out the lines; children, if present, commence the rotation.

“Lines” metaphorically represent the order, steady momentum, and indefinite performativity of the class space. Choreography that travels requires dancers to comply with the class’ velocity, and if unable to keep up, to jump out, allowing the force of direction to continue. A deeply policing space, West African dance classes inculcate participants through repetition and also through repercussions for infractions. Other dancers carry out these regulations more than the teachers. A hiccup in one line implicates many. For example, if a dancer slows down, she falls out of her own line and consequently into another. If she becomes distracted and misses her place, dancers might shoot her a formidable look, slow down the next line to account for the stammered pace, stop the class to make a speech reiterating how the lines work, or improvisationally rearrange the row, replacing her with another dancer. Less organized classes corrupt one’s ability to dance full-out. Those who do not yet know the rules of the space learn them as the class unfolds. “Sometimes unsuspecting newbies will hop in the front line and I’m like ok; I dunno know...maybe they can handle it. At some point you look around and they’re not there anymore. It’s like mhmm.” Blanche breaks into laughter.

Despite West African dance class’s increased diversity, black folks are more readily welcomed by other black folks than nonblack participants. Nicole explained to me that when she
After about a year of frequenting the space, she somehow outed her racial identity. “Girl all the sudden folks were calling me ‘sis’! I swear it was night and day.” Saber, a Filipina interviewee elaborates:

My observation anyway has been that black women are accepted and warmly embraced by other black women when they walk into the space whereas white women are ignored for the most part and sometimes even outright rejected. And, I have also seen people enter the space with different assumptions. It depends on how you enter the space. Some people walk in – and it does tend to be white women who behave this way – with a sense of entitlement, immediately walking up front and center. People all respond to people who are entitled. That’s everybody. Other white women will respond with hostily to a white woman who comes in and expects to be taken care of by the teacher.

Although black American involvement has been marginalized, black bodies are still by and large treated as authorities. Janice says “I don’t want to see a white woman in dance class all the time and then have her completely mispronounce or have no clue what some rhythm is. That’s a part of respecting traditions. They didn’t come out of nowhere. If an African American person wants to forget the name of the rhythm, that’s their business. I don’t write tickets that way.” As evidenced here, the very same action done by a white or black body engenders completely different responses: either reprimand or disregard. Even with “the mean girls” (as some interviewees referred to an especially formidable crew of black American women), deference remains. Black bodies are largely assumed to be more competent in the dance form than non-black bodies. Folks in the class might, for example, recede a bit behind the black women while learning choreography. Students might wait until the instructor handpicks the front rows so as to not go where the instructor or the advanced dancers believe they do not belong. The class by and large assumes black proficiency.

The ways participants express their opinions about others happen in both subtle and explicit ways. Individuals’ visibility in and rights to the space might be questioned when another dancer walks close up to another, grazing her but offering no recognition of that proximity, as if her presence is so inconsequential that her body is transparent (which is to also say obvious and incidental). Others protest (quietly or blatantly) dancing in line with particular people. Physical contacts like fist fights sometimes take place. In all circumstances, such acts are efforts to govern the space and to teach, maintain, and ensure modes of conduct. A diversity of investments in West African dance gives shape to the class facilitation. Spaces outside of, but connected to, the dance class also inculcate norms of behavior and serve as sites where belonging is pursued. Hallways and bathroom/changing rooms are intermediary spaces where students pursue and rehearse belonging. Bathrooms and their attendant “bathroom politics,” as one interviewee categorized it, “are some of the most hostile spaces on earth.” Hierarchies of belonging manifest in the satellite sites surrounding the dance class and, just like the classes themselves, the ways dancers express or work to renegotiate their status are manifold. One interviewee describes some of these ways:

Someone walks in and says hello to whoever is in [the bathroom] and nobody responds. Someone comes in and looks for a place on the bench to put their stuff; the people who have their stuff on the bench don’t move it over; will turn their back on that person.
There’s a conversation and people try to join in on it – since it’s usually about a dance class or a teacher – and no one responds. Like, they pretend that that person did not comment. That’s passive. So, aggressively: a lot of comments around “I did this, and I used to dance with this company, I used to dance with that company.” Talking about all the dance teachers as if they’re their family, they know them intimately, and they’re very very close to them to the affront of everyone else. Talking a lot about your own personal body politics in very sexualized ways, [...] talk in sexual terms about the drummers and what you’ve done with them. Pretending to talk low so everyone can't hear but everyone can hear about whose sleeping with whom or, saying somewhat derogatory things about the drummers wives – most of them are married but then have girlfriends. The wife's friends might be in the bathroom, and you know that. It’s endless.  

Even though non-black women may feel welcomed in that space (there are few explicit hostilities) does not mean that discussions amongst black Americans about increasing non-black participation do not occur. No matter how many white folks there are in the space and no matter how amiable folks are, behind the scenes conversations about white participation still take place.  

Resentments about white folks’ access to West African dance and drum – like those expressed by elder black Americans earlier in this chapter – carry through to contemporary classes. Those who have the means to pay for five classes a week are, by and large, not black women with full-time jobs and children. Even though they would like to train as much as they can, black women’s budgets and schedules tend not to allow for such regular practice. While eighty percent of interviewees mentioned having to be mindful of the money they spent on dance classes, it was only black women who expressed having to stop dancing altogether until they found more funds. Non-black dancers, on the other hand, expressed having only to ‘cut back’. “African dance is wonderful because I can afford to do it,” explains Lamine. I don’t have that much money but I do have enough money to take three classes a week. I certainly don’t have much money. I’m not doing much traveling, for instance.”  

Overly zealous white women and those who appear to fetishize Africa (since fetishizing is not unique to white folks alone) get judged. There are multiple ways dancers’ conceptualizations of Africa manifest in the classes. Clothing and attire, for example, oftentimes suggest the ways in which dancers imagine Africa and West African dance. A lapa, or piece of fabric, is worn around the waist covering the backside. If there are any prescriptions on clothing, a lapa is certainly the most basic requirement; instructors often sell them before and after classes. Some dancers (typically young white women) disregard this formality for a number of reasons. Some articulated wearing a lapa as stale and conforming: lacking in freedom of personal expression. Instead, they wear clothing that suit their ideals of Africa better. Wearing animal print, hot pants, rainbow colors, no underwear, and even raffia, they enact their own caricature of Africa through dress. Trish explains that she chooses not to wear a lapa because she is “obviously not African,” and white women in African clothes “irritates the black women more.” Which way is more respectful? she asks herself. She is “always wanting to do whatever is most respectful.” Projections of Africanness also manifest through an indifference to learning the actual steps being taught and a general inattentiveness to form. The class space consequently becomes a canvas for projecting the knowledge that the dancer already enters with, as opposed to the space cueing the dancer’s behavior and choices. In this regard, West African dance serves as proxy for racialized performances that might not be sanctioned elsewhere. Indeed, the continental qualifier "West African" inflects the movement practice with specifically racialized,
sexualized, and gendered investments – assumptions and demands that other dance forms do not shoulder. As one Asian interviewee explained, “with some white folks, I don’t know, people have talked about it in front of me, like its exotic. They think its fun and exotic and I hate that word – it makes me cringe a little bit. Maybe the drummers. I mean honestly I do think that there are people who want to meet drummers.”

Intimacies are another method of belonging. Sex, marriage, and children with West Africans can resituate an individual to the broader community. Interracial dating happens so frequently it is seen as another mark of “white takeover.” A competition of affections about the furthest extent to which one would go to support "the culture" are deeply racialized and gendered as well. Kamala, a member of a West African enthusiast group of white women who call themselves “Blue-Eyed Africans,” explained the following to me: “The black women were hostile but they warmed up. I think they started to realize we were just as invested as they were. We were marrying teachers just so they could stay in the US. They might not even have teachers if it weren't for us. They weren't doing that. They wouldn't go that far.”

Putting aside the fact that black women frequently did, systematically, marry West African men so as to procure for them American citizenship and that Kamala does not know this, her placing herself and her other Blue-Eyed Africans as ‘more committed’ to West African dance and drum heavy-handedly reveals the competitive nature of dance practice. Later in our conversation, Kamala mentioned bearing children with West Africans as another way of investing in the art form. She was certainly not the lone example of white female interviewees who expressed having children with West African men as an indication of their deep love for Africa and its cultural expressions. The framing of marriage out of an engaged and respectful immersion in the culture carried with it the language of colorblindness that failed at the moment of its utterance. In Kamala's case, for example, she explained that her marrying Muhammad was ‘indiscriminate’ and an act of generosity that worked to fulfill her indebtedness to West African dance. Here, a single drummer becomes metonym for West Africa; her donation of citizenship an investment into the future practice of the art form. Her attempt to dislodge race as a controlling factor in her marital decisions thus immediately falls back upon itself.

Reasons for why white women in particular come to West African dance abound. Interviewees position American culture, which they articulate as hyper-consumptive, capitalistic, and sexually and morally policing, against “an Africa,” framed as utopic, sexually liberating, and often pre-colonial. Trish explains how, after taking modern classes for a long time, she decided to take African dance class. This coincided with her therapist’s urging that she get in contact with her “red energy.” “That would be, like, your capacity for anger, the power you get from deep emotion,” she explained after I admitted I did not know what red energy was. She continued: “Somehow I envisioned African dance as rooted in a kind of tribal war-like red energy. I just put this together in my own mind that this would be a good way to get in touch with my red energy. That kind of dance [African] is not as dispassionate as modern dance, it’s definitely more rooted in emotions. It is war-like too.” Here Trish invests the dance with ancient meaning. The dances are “time honored motions that have a lot of integrity. They’re not something that somebody made up after thinking about it for two minutes. These things have evolved over hundreds of years and have a lot of integrity. Its very powerful,” she explains. But actually, they are made up. Although inspired by tradition, teachers reinvent moves. The dances are always choreographies. This does not make the moves any less important. “[West African dance] is more animal-like. Its just primal, its basic,” Trish explained. These kinds definitions of African dance as instinctual and tribal are carried across racial lines, to be sure. One non-black
interviewee explained, “I think that there’s for some folk a sense of roots maybe. I’ve heard African American women saying ‘why don’t more African American people take West African dance?’ There seems to not be a lot of knowledge around the different parts of Africa – and not by just African Americans but Americans. People go cause it’s an ‘African thing.’ We’re Africans. Or, our ancestors were, so there’s that.”

Individuals try to prove to the community their right to belong in a number of ways. Solo circles are special moments where students can re-ingrain or redefine their relationship to each other. It is a space where facility with the day's material gets tested through the rubric of improvisation. At best the solo circle is a space for recapitulation, a moment where the dancer imbues the teacher's choreography with her or his own particularity, building new sentence structures with the teacher's grammar. At worst the solo circle is abandonment – lacking structure and evoking moves with gossamer-thin connection to the class's earlier choreography. The response from the circle indicates whether or not a performance has reaffirmed or shifted an individual’s standing. For example, at the end of one Guinean class, the instructor motions enervated dancers to form a circle. With his right hand the instructor stirs the air: "come around"; with his left he raises an index finger: "one at a time." Discerning looks break through the timid dancer's faces. Solo circles can undoubtedly be intimidating. “I see why people drink or do drugs before they go onstage. It’s scary. It’s really scary” Louise explained. As the circle came to an end a young white woman, Abbie, went in. She skipped against the inner edge of the circle, collecting attentions.

Earlier in the class, at the moment of line formation, some of the women exchanged eye rolls when Abbie positioned herself in the back line – the line of veneration where the oldest, often times understated and musically inclined dancers go. When Abbie held back from joining the middle lines and reserved herself for the last, Georgia turned her head toward the window and let a smack of the lips puff out. That last line protested Abbie's nerve to self-select into a spot earned by time by retreating slowly behind her as they crossed the floor. Disowned, Abbie consequently found herself in a row of her own.

Reserving herself for the last slot in the solo circle, Abbie plowed around in an oval. At the cue of the break she began – stacking choreographic parts from Lamban together, shortening moves, stretching out others long, keeping the djembe drummer's attention. She pointed toward her feet indicating to the drummers that she would now be doing something new, which she did, immediately. After, her moves turned syrup as she wound her hips while walking slowing to the drummers, syncing that last drummer's slap with a wallop of her hips. The class, entirely surprised and impressed, folded at their hips touching both hands to the ground – an offering of respect. One black woman, one of the most skilled in the class – took her thumb and pressed it hard against Abbie’s forehead: “well done.” The other few white women in the class flocked to her, themselves sharing a certain kind of pride in her claim to that space. In short, Abbie's use of the solo circle resituated her relationship to the community. Her facility with the rhythm, despite the jerkiness of her movements at large, brokered respect among the other folks in the class. Although Abbie’s solo circle performance was most immediately her own personal accomplishment, the response her solo engendered by some of the other white women in the class made clear that her achievement was theirs also. "Girl, you killed it," her friend exclaimed. And in the dressing room another: “the look on Gina's [a black woman] face was priceless. I wish I had a picture." Comments like these made plain the fact that Abbie's performance was a racial contest, and that the prize for winning was a right to belong – not only for herself, but for the other white women in the class too.
During my two years of fieldwork, and decade-long training in West African dance, the number of “Abbies” – those white women able to resituate their relationship to the authenticators in the room (elder black women) – are few and far between. Far more ordinary are those whom the community tolerates because they’ve been going to dance classes for a while and people get accustomed to seeing them, those who evidence a commitment to learning (“As I improved I didn’t get pushed around as much”), and those who “do too much” (who are policed by others in the class). “I’ve seen some people come to class, and they have been so rhythmically challenged I cannot watch them when were going across the floor cause they will throw me off,” Blanche explains. “It’s just. That. Distracting. It’s like what are they doing?! Oh my god! And the instructor doesn’t say anything to them and just allows them to continue slopping along. I’m thinking: they’re certainly not learning anything. They’ve just spent their money and they’re just doing what they want. It’s just not cool.” This last category of student treats Africa as costume, worn in order to behave in ways not typically sanctioned outside of the dance space. The dance class can easily morph into a site of transgression. “It is liberating,” explained Allie. Thus, freedom and containment commingle within this space. Whereas for black folks West African dance is frequently articulated as a site of being "found" (anchored; having arrived), for white folks it is generally articulated as a site of freedom (loose; untethered). In both “an Africa” is a common denominator that mechanizes particular relationships between the dance, individuals, and group identities.

It is not just flailing white women who get policed. The dominant racial order of a black-white dichotomy works to render invisible bodies that do not legibly belong to either of these racial groups.

For people who are not white and not black visibly, our experience is actually this weird...it is kind of ghostly...it’s like we’re invisible. We don’t get the hostility as much, or at all. Which in a way is good; I’m mixed about it because it has allowed me to dance without too much trouble from anybody. We kind of have this strange position which I think is the case in the United States, where things tend to be around a black/white paradigm where we kind of are there but not there. We're kind of filler. We can be default color or default white depending on who else is in the room. It’s this very strange position because you don’t get questions like "why are you here?" We do, but not that much and it’s just sort of like taking up space. Maybe there’s a slight push and pull between proving alliance to one of the groups. That actually does happen a little bit. People testing around to see whose side you are on kind of thing.

A heterogeneity of blackness is also refused by a persistence of highly specific racial dogmas. Iterations of blackness that are not anti-white get ostracized too. In other words, as Lucy puts it, “there are all kinds of passing.” Karen, a self-proclaimed “negro” (“I don’t favor much all of the changing titles for being black,” she says) puts it this way: “there are a lot of Afrocentric territorial people who think others should not be in the group. And I was surprised to know this because that’s one of the things that I thought was no longer in existence but it is. I guess I tend to forget because I’m not like that.” Blackness is wielded in this space as a retaliation for those whose actions or words indicate that black Americaness is inconsequential. It is to un-level the dancing field, to say: this belongs to us and even though the terms of belonging have changed, there is another test one must pass. Those black women who are seen as bullies by the broader community (irrespective of race) are at least addressed respectfully to their faces. No one says
anything confrontational about them in public because the stakes are too high and impression management matters so much.

Conceptualizations of race and nationality are always already gendered, confounding the terms upon which individuals are expected to participate. Thus, the opportunities for and ways in which people are able to belong to the diaspora depend on gender. Heteronormativity and hyper-sexuality comingle with race and class to render policed ways of being-in-the-space and ways of dancing. The roles the community expects one to assume, the critiques levied on individuals who misbehave, and the treatment the violation of norms engenders are all impacted by gender. By and large men drum and women dance. There are just about as many female instructors as dance instructors though, although still, among dance instructors, there are more men. A few interviewees noted though that “The good women that I consider excellent female instructors...there’s a time limit for them. Unless they’re married to a drummer.” Gender roles are inflected by the trope of “traditional Africa” which turn the dance class into a suspended space – outside of time and outside of context. Contemporary gender dynamics get remixed by assumptions of “how it is over there” – an Africa wherein women dance, men drum, and all are happy with their lot.

On the whole, men dominate the drum teaching trade. Very few men dance, although a handful do exist in West African dance companies. In dance classes, however, there are hardly any men at all. In terms of drumming, women expressed receiving resentment when wanting to pursue the form. “The attitude of the males [drummers] is definitely territorial. Another form of discrimination,” explained Janice. Some women have established their own drum circles where they are able to train outside of the glares that come with training in larger, more public spaces. Many women expressed wanting to drum, but they never play for classes or workshops. There is one woman in particular who regularly plays the bells during one West African dance class who “gets a lot of flack in the West African dance classes,” Natalie explains. “They are very rude to her. She goes, but they’d be happy, I think, to not have her there. They’re always complaining about the bells. I’m actually happy she’s there, in a way. I do want there to be at least one woman standing up there with them.” Further, for those who are not stereotypically gender-conforming, the space is hostile, an extremely heteronormative space, including for teachers. Lucy explains, “The teachers that display ways of behaving, clothing, hairstyles that don’t fit into a certain way of thinking about the divisions between men and women and sexuality also get laughed at, talked about, whispered, questions around their sexuality. That's men and women. If a woman has no hair or short hair or men danced to femininely, the women too masculine, or whatever...whisperings. So conservative.”

Although all navigate the sometimes-rocky terrain of being in the space, it is clear that white folks are forced to do much more explaining vis-à-vis their intentions with West African dance than black folks do. White participants were, for the most part, either walking on eggshells or stomping eggshells into crumbs. White folks doing West African dance “deserves some explanation. What are your motives? Where do you come from? Where's your ancestry from? How do you identify with who you are? Specifically who you are. Your family. Do you know your background. Do you know how your family got here? Do you know what your family did to other families? That sort of thing comes into question,” Mark explained. A certain anxiety over being misunderstood, of being lumped with less thoughtful white women, was a looming fear. White women worked hard to disassociate themselves with others who they found disrespectful. Some explained that white women who took up too much space or behaved crazily during class embarrassed them. White interviewees explained their presence in West African dance spaces as
a state of hyper-visibility and invisibility at once, or a bobbing between the two. “As someone of European descent and lighter color skin, there just has to be an understanding that you’re gonna be questioned. You gotta be open to it. It’s warranted. Its part of the character you should aspire to hold. You need to answer provocative questions with a positive and open heart.”

Many white women shared stories about how they work toward self-awareness and understanding in the dance class space. Some contextualized the mistreatment they receive predominantly from black American women. Being “self-aware” (i.e. thinking about the dance classes as a part of larger system of race, globalization, and appropriation) was mandatory work for some. Janice explains:

For myself as a white person wanting to understand how to respect the traditions and what does it mean to be in community with – as a white woman and a white lesbian for what that’s worth – in a diverse community including predominantly African American women, African men and women and then a whole lot of white women and some white men. So [my] evolution [in these classes] is about how I fit in the community and how I fit in an African cultural and spiritual tradition with African Americans. What can I do to be part of it; what are the appropriate things for me to do to be part of it?228

For some of those white folks who have spent years in African dance classes, questioning their own intentions and being mindful of the space they occupy never ends. Even though the constant questions get tiring – “After a while it gets wearing if people are coming at you with a negative energy because of the color of your skin. You start to question: is this something worth all the trouble? Cause it’s not gonna stop” – all found that yes, it was worth it. They would continue to endure the questions, however begrudgingly.229

Even white participants who have frequented the space for twenty-plus years have yet to feel as though they fully belong. Below, Trish explained the extent to which she goes to find reconciliation for her being white in an ‘African cultural space.’

Being African, it must be a richer experience because it’s your own culture. […] Here’s someone else's culture and we’re wanting to…For me, I think: I have a grandson who’s part-Jamaican; my daughter in law is part-Jamaican. Then I think: well that’s a good reason for me to learn. It’s almost like that’s my excuse for why I want to learn so much about all of this – for my grandson...it is his heritage. But then it's like I’m using that as an excuse for myself, for why I can do it. I don’t know…everything does go back to Africa anyway. I did a genealogy DNA thing and there were four areas in Africa where people do have my same DNA. At one point I was trying to see whether or not I had anything in my background.

Trish believes, as evidenced by ‘anything’, that black people have a more rich experience than other racial groups. Hungry to make sense of and justify her participation in African culture, Trish searches for ways to trace a line of logic from her white female body to the continent from which the dance comes. At first, her grandson provides a link. Later, she pursued biological testing to find out if ‘any’ of her might possibly be black – if she “has anything in [her] background.” Trish thus saw her whiteness as emptiness: as culturally vacuous. White people “didn’t grow up with a culture,” she explains to me. Ultimately, she loves to dance because it
makes her feel as though, even if it’s not her “original culture, that [she is] somehow keeping it 
going. Somehow I’m keeping it alive.”

One opinion is that African Americans have special rights to the space; another is that 
they do not. If the dance is available to all, who belongs goes no further than who paid to take the 
class. Kim tells a story about her experience in this African dance space and her specific 
relationship with one black American woman. When I asked if she felt welcomed in her dance 
classes at the Malonga Center, she replied:

As a white person in those classes I’ve had to fight my way. I’ve had to really really push 
my way into it. No, I did not feel welcomed. Many many years went by and I was 
pushed, I was shoved, I’ve had one young lady tell me I shouldn't be there after about ten, 
twelve years of dancing. My eyesight has been degrading so now I occupy the front row, 
every class I’m in the front row. Really, very few people like to be in the front row. I’m 
not even pushing anybody out. Plus I’ve been doing it for so long I actually know most of 
the steps. My rhythm is getting pretty good. So as far as I’m concerned its not bad that 
I’m in the front row. Those young ladies would push me around and just say nasty things 
to me! And it wasn't that long ago – maybe three years ago – this one young lady she told 
me over and over again that I shouldn't be in the front row. I shouldn't be representing 
African dance. She told me when I dance next to her she can't dance because I’m all off' 
[laughter]. That was a very difficult experience for me. I didn’t try and argue with her too 
much. I did have a good talk with her. We were in a situation – quick side story here.

Kim explains to me that a few years back she noticed a poster advertising a special workshop 
around tying gele (head wrap) properly. She’d “been fascinated with that. I’ve got a full 
wardrobe of African clothes cause when I was married to my Congolese husband his family gave 
me so many clothes.” She didn’t know the wrapping techniques and decided she would go to the 
class that was taking place at an “African American café of some kind.” “So I walk in,” she 
continues

and who’s there but this young lady – the one that a couple months prior told me all those 
nasty things. She wasn't nice to me at all. She’s the one who was teaching it and I was the 
only one that came! So there was just the two of us, face to face. When I walked in the 
door she said "oh no! It's you! I knew you'd be here." That poor girl she just really hated 
me. When I’m in dance class – that’s the one time especially in my life – I am always 
upbeat, [in an] openhearted mood, happy, friendly…really good things. So when 
somebody comes at me with this nasty stuff I do not take it personally. Because I know 
I’m not giving it out. It's just her. It’s just coming from her. So anyways we get to this 
workshop […] and I said this tells me we were meant to be, we’re supposed to talk this 
over. So I sat her down and I said: look, you've got to tell me what's going on; why did 
you say all those really nasty things to me? Well, it turned out it was because I was 
marrried to a black man. And she told me that she didn’t have a boyfriend because I 
marrried this man with black skin. She said "when I’m together with my friends, you think 
we’re talking about music or art or the whether? No, we’re talking about you and people 
like you." She was just really angry. She was an angry woman.
It took me all of ten years to stand there in that room and say to myself "this is my moment, I'm gonna claim my space, I'm gonna dance my heart out, and I'm gonna love it and it doesn't matter what other people are thinking. I was so darn sure that I was in the right place. I don’t want to make it like: white people should be allowed to do African dance. I don’t want to say that. It’s too specific. But I do believe that it’s right for me to be there.”

Kim calls moments like her encounter with Fatim “racist reactions” characterized by individuals who harbor self-inflicted negative attitudes towards other people. She qualifies her statement by explaining that “the racism only comes from a small percentage of people there; there are a lot of people that don’t participate in that.” Seeing racism solely as a personal choice that manifests interpersonally fails to recognize the phenomenon’s structural, sociohistorical functioning’s wherein all are implicated in its operations. To call Fatim racist and explain her behavior as only a travesty of her poor attitude is to misunderstand the history of the dance classes, and a broader socio-historical black diasporic context. Fatim being “mean” is not the most salient aspect of this story: the fact that an African American woman was teaching a course on traditional West African head wrapping, that the workshop took place at a black American café, that Kim was the only person to show up, and that Fatim expected her too all underscore the commonness of this moment. There had to have been a precedent in order for Fatim to predict Kim’s showing up. And although Fatim gestures toward the likeliness of the situation (not only by her anticipation of Kim’s attendance but also through her mention of the conversations she has with her friends around the intersection of dance, race, and romance) Kim still seems to position the incident as, well, incidental. She is unable to understand this event within a longer history of cultural appropriation. This is one of the most profound contentions of the space: blacks typically see West African dance as indexing history whereas white participants see it as a break from history. For example, in explaining how she behaves in dance classes, she simultaneously absolves herself from the conflict. She continues:

I actually got closer to the African culture than some of the African American people that I was dancing with that didn’t think I belonged there. I was totally emerged in African culture for 10 years. I stayed in the Congo and I dressed in African clothing sometimes and I listened to nothing but African music – I’m still this way even though I’m not married [to my husband any longer], my whole existence was with African people. So I felt more African than some of the African American people in my class. I could never have explained that to anybody and I didn’t try. I definitely didn’t doubt that it was good for me to be there. I think most people were open but I think there is some racism going on there.²³²

Kim itemizes the ways in which she is close to “the African culture.” I noticed a meaningful difference between black and non-black interviewees: white folks often tried to prove their proficiency in the culture whereas black folks assumed their inheritance of that culture. Six interviews with other white American women explicitly listed the ways they saw themselves being more African than black Americans; not one black American performed such itemizing. The listing exposes the distance from that which is being described as close. While white people may feel as though they have an abundance of the signs of how they conceive of Africanness, the fact of blackness would always be missing. What appears lost on many white participants is the
notion that what connects black people of the diaspora to Africa is a continued state of disenfranchisement, not necessarily African fashionings. While the dance was a strategy for all to achieve certain goals, black participants did not have the option of leaving their blackness in the dance studio. Opting into West African dance, my the collection of interviews suggests, was an option for white folks – and for blacks, a necessity.

Kim makes a number of important points about the kind of abuse that happens in dance classes. A number of white interviewees expressed their understanding of, yet frustrations about their mistreatment by black American women. Many white Americans in particular explained that the treatment they receive (although they can still make sense of it) feels unfair. Many point to Black Americans' meanness, violence, or indifference as at once situated in a longer history of black dispossession and yet also as unreasonable. Most expressed a certain relief and excitement when I asked them about whether or not they felt welcomed in the class space. They, for the most, part had not – but they explained that they understood why. “White folks are always stealing other people's culture, coming in and taking out whatever they wanted,” Celine said.

Still, they expressed the hurt that remained even after the understanding. Being refused acknowledgment, folks not saying hello or remembering their names – these were all quotidian acts that hurt feelings. Some chalked it up to being the price one had to pay by virtue of their being white in that space; for others, enduring some of this violence was a badge of honor: reason for why they now belonged. “I paid my dues,” Kim declared.

Some white women have developed coping strategies for surviving in these spaces. Complimenting black women profusely, “staying out of their way,” and keeping to their lines are all ways they report actively working to minimize black resentment. During a phone interview an interviewee (assuming that I was white based on my voice) explained how “we” can do no right in African dance; that someone is always trying to fight “us”; that she was sorry “those ladies” carried so much anger. “It’s sad,” she said to me. “I’m done trying to fit in.” But the shock that spread across her face when we met in person during a dance class a few weeks later indicated something different. This interviewee fumbled over herself, explaining that she meant what she said but, God, she hoped she hadn’t offended me! She didn’t think all black women were like “that.” Our assumed shared racial particularities allowed for a frank discussion (on her part) that, I got the sense, would not have otherwise happened had she known I was black. Although the interviewee affirms her original comments, it was obvious she regretted how she had articulated them; our in-group status made it so that she didn’t have make certain qualifications that she otherwise would in mixed company. Her ‘being done’ with trying to fit in, then, was not altogether true. Her fear over my reaction revealed the fact that she did care, and more: that she wanted my black self to understand where she was coming from.

Drawing the Line

Anyone could take a dance class but not just anyone could join a company. Although most of everybody agreed that West African dance was a commodity and should be available to all, folks were less generous when it came to the terms of performance. The anxiety around white bodies doing West African dance professionally was not confounding. No matter how accustomed to (or tolerant of) white bodies people were in classes, nobody proved to be post-essentialist. Many expressed feelings of discomfort around white people doing African dance professionally in the first place – not to mention getting paid to do a “black” art form. Overall, most thought it was fine to participate in the economy of the art form by paying for classes, but
instances where white people profited (either monetarily or in terms of cultural capital) from it were not acceptable. When the consumers of the commodity begin to sell it to others, the stakes proved to be a little higher.

In describing the differences between practicing West African dance in Oakland versus smaller states with less robust African arts scenes, being unable to perform in a company was a marked point of difference. Although more dance existed in Oakland than in other places, the companies that did exist had been there for years and those companies were historically black. Sure, some teachers started their own companies that welcomed non-black dancers (typically those founded by a West African drummer and his non-black wife), but the companies held in highest esteem (and with the most longevity) foreclosed, often times silently, non-black participation. "Nobody wants to see a white woman doing African dance on stage," said Celine. Performance was where white resignation most blatantly emerged. “I will never be one of those white people who’s like: I deserve to be part of something that isn’t mine,” she asserted. Thus, while taking a dance class does count as claiming “something that isn’t [hers],” performing and more broadly explicitly questioning the dynamics of the space does. Some folks explained that white people are excluded from opportunities to perform professionally because of their skin color, not their dance skill. "I get it," Janice said – even though a sadness and disappointment trailed behind her concession. Here was an understanding that there was something meaningful in having an all black troupe doing African dance, and that a white body was an affront, if not plain awkward, for audiences.

Another example of the line being drawn at performance: one mixed raced drummer explained to me that after having rehearsed with an all African American dance company for two to three month for an Ethnic Dance Festival performance, that same company disinvited him from participating. He explains:

In the end they decided to go and find an African American drummer, or African drummer, to learn the choreography and play. Now, whether or not that person is more proficient in drumming is to be determined but I definitely knew the choreography, had put in my time. I knew this was always an option. I accepted it. […] In the end I wasn’t even part of the performance because of the color of my skin – because I’m not brown or black. Obviously I wasn’t African American and it was the ethnic festival so the representation needed to be more appropriate, I guess.

Even though he didn’t “take it personally,” that he “underst[ood] what the reasonings are,” and acknowledged that he was just beginning to learn to play for classes and “probably wasn’t that good anyway” he underscore his dedication to the dance troupe and the performance. A disappointment remained post-understanding. In this understanding is an unarticulated hope that, one day, performance will be based on proficiency and not a racialized aesthetic. Here, the power of visual representation trumped loyalty to the company. He distinguishes this group from “those people who are essentially colorblind, and see through your heart and know in a brief encounter what your intentions are, what kind of drummer you are when you play.” Kim tells of another moment:

Just last night in my drum class…the teacher [is] finally forming a drum group. He wants eight men for a performance group. They’re just not enough African men. It’s so hard for them. I don’t know what it is. Then someone mentioned: there’s this one guy who’d be
interested in doing it but he’s white and [the teacher] said, "well, you know, he’s not really a strong enough drummer." Yet he was encouraging a brand new student to hurry up and learn. It makes sense. They’re wanting to show traditional African drumming so if you have a white guy in there...I guess it is different. This one particular one guy I’m thinking about – he’s a regular drummer at the dance classes so I’m thinking: maybe that’s fine for dance classes but if you’re actually performing on stage…

Those instructors who invited white folks into their companies were ostracized from the black community or were at least talked about as “consorting with the Euros.” Rhonda explains that the companies should look like how she thinks Africa does: black. “I just don’t see the point of it cause it is African and unless Africa takes a new form, in my mind I’m always identifying Africa to black. I don’t care how many people migrate there I still think black. So to me I want to see black companies prevail. There’s definitely [white] companies out there. People gon’ start a company wherever they want. They do it all the time." Rhonda’s reasoning for being in support of all black companies is essentially that only black people live in Africa. Instructors who had all black companies explained to me that they chose the best dancers. A number of varied and competing reasons existed among the community. Such differences in opinion pointed to the difference which constitutes African diasporic communities.

Some white folks were unsatisfied with those reasonings and felt that if non-black folks were allowed to put all their money into West African training that they should be able to join a company or teach their own class. “Why wouldn’t I? I train. I know what I’m doing. Because I’m not black I can’t practice something professionally? Hate to break it to you but I know a lot more than the front row most times.” Other white women, despite their dedication to the artistic practice and, in some cases, belief that they were indeed better than African Americans, intoned that they would never take a class from a white person. While some explained it as not wanting to take employment opportunities away from Africans who might be in more destitute situations, others felt like it was just “wrong.” They would never teach West African dance, even at their friends’ urging – and would certainly never take a West African dance class from a white person. Overall, the vast majority of participants wanted to learned from black bodies. While anyone could take a class, the standards proved drastically different when it came to instruction.

Conclusion

Competing desires and ambitions make the Malonga Center. One group always saw another as curtailing the possibility of its improvement: if black folks would be a little more kind the space would be more peaceful; if white folks stopped catering to Africans the craft would be held in a higher regard. Every interviewee thought that the Center and the craft could be more amiable and the complicated dynamics, mitigated. “Everyone [has to] get over their shit though.”

So long as the craft remained for-profit, few saw hope in radically shifting the terms of and dynamics within the space. Without “guiding elders to approve or disapprove of the structure and content of what’s being taught,” meaningful changes appeared even more unlikely. Earl explains this well:

At the age and experience that I am, I want the art to be healthy. I want it to be vibrant in the Bay Area community. I think everybody should have access to it, but I still feel very
protective of this art so that it will carry both the mechanics, the techniques, the
modalities of the art as well as the relational healing and renewing properties of the art. If
those things are in balance, it doesn’t matter so much to me who is doing it. But my fear
is that, when people don’t come from a cultural perspective we lose the meaning. We
have the form, but we don’t have the substance. That’s something that gets passed down.
That’s something that elders in the music share with you.

As the industry expands and more and more people participate in and shape the face of the
movement practice, an urge remains the keep the form as something that, if it isn’t in the pockets
of black people, is at least recognized to be of their cultural sovereignty. “How much do we lose
thirty years later if the only people doing this are of European ancestry? Good intentioned…will
take it and do whatever their gonna do. We know as African Americans our reticence around that
kind of thing is such that we see what happens. We end up with Elvis when it was really Chuck
Berry. How many more times culturally do we offer ourselves and what we do only to be then
left out of it?” Earl asked.

In addition to a lack of African financial control over the dance and drum space, one of
the biggest resentments among the community is that the opening up of the form has
consequently made the dance and drum practice less rigorous. Blanche said that she heard
instructors a number of times express their fear of “giving away too much information so that
it’ll be one more thing that has been taken from us and used to generate income for another
ethnic group. I’ve heard a lot of that,” she says. “We teach them a few licks, they don’t have it
all, and then the recipient of those few licks runs off holding themselves up to be all that and a
bag of chips and they don’t really have all the chips. Or maybe they don’t have the bag, they just
have the chips.” Blanche’s metaphor gets at the ways in which students take a small piece of the
form and capitalize on that small bit of information – in turn making deep training
inconsequential.

The class space is unique in that it is a site of both physical training and ideological
consumption. Unlike staged performances by African dance ballets, for example, that extend
access only to final performance renderings, classes lay bare the mundane, unspectacular aspects
of African diasporic performance. They also allow us insight into the ways this dance form gets
utilized by a community of folks much more wide and varied than those who perform
professionally. Arguing that West African dance classes at the Malonga Center are spaces where
a connection to the African diaspora (and, by extension, Africanness) is pursued by black and
non-black people, I have shown how this center fosters, and how the dance is used as a means of
pursuing, African diasporic belonging.

Classes are spaces where diaspora is taught through the body, and are also spaces where
that embodied difference materializes. The woman "doing too much" and the person “half
stepping,” for example, all reveal something substantial about diaspora: the number of
differences, miscommunications, and failed attempts at translation (bodily and otherwise)
constitute the diasporic-ness of the space. In other words, what gives this space the insignia of
diaspora is its unfulfilled belonging. Some might feel entitled, and some righteous, but none
satisfactorily “home.” The constant pursuit of belonging, the attempted shaking off of
placelessness, the being “here” and “elsewhere” is what characterizes diaspora. The closest thing
to home for most folks at the Malonga Center is inside the dance; the dance is place that extends
redress and reconciliation.
“Will West African dance survive the magnetism of money?” Jeffrey asked me. “Cause right now that’s what it is. Most of the teachers, they want to be paid. They don’t care what, who, when, where, why; they want to be paid. They are trying to get money to send to their families in Africa. They’re trying to get money to live comfortably here in America. They don’t care nothing about the information, they want to get paid. That’s a scary thing cause that’s a detriment to the craft. Don’t try and fool people with a back flip sequence. Do real work.” The question of “real work,” of financial security, and diasporic networks this American West African dance industry implicates – particularly in West Africa – anchors what follows.
“By Another Route”: Concluding Thoughts

This conclusion has two aims: to discuss the relationship between African diaspora and Dance Studies and to suggest areas of study that might sharpen our understanding of the contemporary politics of West African dance. In suggesting future areas of study, I offer my own examples of how I have begun to pursue broader questions – about dance tourism specifically – that the body of the dissertation could only gesture toward. Throughout, I locate my own dancing body more prominently to acknowledge in a sustained way my own subjectivity, and how it is/was of consequence to the ethnographic sites that I continue to occupy.

My own body is evidence and instrument of diaspora. It indexes the uses of diaspora insofar as my dancing self is both a site of and resource with which to travel. Through dance I have gone, as some of my interviewees put it, “elsewhere.” I have danced toward another vision of what my Oakland, or New York communities can look like: healthy, in constant pursuit of knowing more about the diaspora, and in pursuit of knowing each other. My training and practice – my honing – never feels done, and while the dance does not necessarily feel "mine," doing it does feel like home. I have negotiated my identity as a black woman and have tried to figure out how I belong, and matter, to a black diaspora. Through dance I have felt connected to a broader dancing community and have felt, also, my skepticism swell in the presence of “dancers who would not dare to walk into an advanced ballet floor-barre class looking as raggedy as they did [in an African one].” The chaos and complexity within, the pleasure that comes from exacting the movement, the space to own the dance through my own flair of performance, there being no agreement on who should be there or why, or who does it best and who worse – the constantly changing rubric of performative success and failure – is the stuff of diaspora. "What we share,” after all, “is precisely the experience of a profound discontinuity.”

Dance sent me to other coasts and continents – to Oakland, New York, Chicago, Fresno, Conakry, Toronto and Veracruz. From the class, the conference, the workshop, the homecoming trip, to the professional stage. Such traveling continues to etch new routes and paths of connection, travel, and translation. Dance has gotten me stamps in my passport – itself an emblem of the rooted/routedness of my citizenship in the US and my belonging to diaspora.

Dance also sent me to the literature and pushed me to design new archives. Where were the people with whom I danced in the books? If not the actual people, where was a recognition of what they were doing – dancing Africa – as producing meaning and wedding theory and practice – making diaspora? I found it strange that in a field fixed on movement, dance could possibly be so hard to find within it. African Diaspora Dance Studies existed in the space between other fields – African American Studies, Performance Studies, Dance Studies. The places where I was able to find dance in the literature buttressed, indeed permitted, the research undergone to yield this dissertation. It builds on the work of theorists of dance and race who have already laid a sturdy theoretical foundation on which to anchor discussions of diasporic movement. Scholars have created rich work that raises compelling questions about black dancing bodies, geographically-specific dance forms, and the field of black dance more broadly. In what follows I build from the categorical literature review offered in my introductions to trace the shape of the field of African diaspora dance.

**African Diaspora Dance Studies**
I have outlined popular categories of black dance scholarship in this dissertation’s introduction – scholarship on individual black choreographers and companies; scholarship on African dance as practiced on the continent, scholarship on American black dance and its evolution, scholarship that theorizes an African aesthetic. Here, I will talk specifically about the intersection of African diaspora theory and theorizations of an African aesthetic in order to raise questions about how the field of African Diaspora Dance Studies might build upon, and necessarily intervene in, works on African dance.

Scholarship on black dance necessarily, although often implicitly, values a Performance Studies orientation which from the outset privileges nonverbal articulations of identity, history, and politics. It questions academia’s overreliance on textualism which “squeeze[s] out…nuanced meaning that is embodied, tacit, intoned, gestured, improvised, coexperienced, covert—and all the more deeply meaningful because of its refusal to be spelled out,” Dwight Conquergood argues. Of course, a field predicated on movement and choreography highly values embodiment. Even when considering performance’s relationship to written texts, Performance Studies continues to think through the gifts and challenges of ephemerality. Rebecca Schneider writes that “Performance practice has been, historically, disavowed as historical practice,” yet historically, in Afrodiasporic cultures, performance has served as a powerful tool for the dissemination of culture. To study black performance communities within an academic space that devalues the significance of the embodied as efficacious knowledge production must negotiate how to put down in text performances which move through the world generally disinvested in a hierarchy of expressive forms.

I mention the significance of performance and, by extension, performativity, because it is a constant fact of black dance that the form, and communities which surround it, are always being made, produced, undone. Yet the fact that “performance becomes itself through messy and eruptive reappearance,” through “the ritual repetitions that mark performance as simultaneously indiscreet, non-original, relentlessly citational, and remaining” often gets buried in black dance scholarship under assertions of the traditional, essential, and natural. African Diaspora Studies and its interest in discontinuity – in performativity, too – has the potential to question theorizations of African dance as essential.

Scholars have worked to define “black dance” in complex and diverse ways. While some have used it to refer specifically to African American dance, the term “black” as Tommy DeFrantz argues, was turned to in the 1960s “in large part because of the Black Arts movement and its collective attempt to define a ‘black aesthetic.’” “Black”, during this historical moment, was utilized to take on global resonance. African Americans connected their experiences in the U.S. to those global black populations elsewhere endured. “Black” thus indexed both the specificity of a national experience and the international condition of blackness as second-rate citizenry. “Black” resituated a national minority into a global majority. This shift in political denomination touched dance practice. Whereas dance scholar Lynne Emery circumscribed “black dance” to “dance performed by African Americans in the United States,” Katherine Dunham (in a preface to Emery’s second edition text) extended that definition of the term to mean “the dance forms of people of African origin.” Richard Long, in his text The Black Tradition in American Dance describes “black dance” the following way:

The mere physical presence of Black dancers in a modern dance work or in a classical ballet clearly should not invoke the use of the term “Black Dance.” Clearly dance that arises in a culture or a cultural milieu which – for whatever reason – is called Black may
be called Black dance (in the same way in which music so circumstanced is called Black music). Such cultures include those of sub-Saharan Africa, and the Africanized components of Western hemisphere cultures such as the Afro-American, the Afro-Brazilian, and the Afro-Cuban. In other words, Black dance, Black stance and Black gesture are non-verbal patterns of body gestures and expressions which are distinctively Black African or originate from their descendants elsewhere.249

Long argues that “black dance” should not be mistaken with black dancing bodies but instead refers to a tradition of movement which nonverbally articulates a black ethos. Here, “black” takes on global meaning. Dance scholars have interpreted that “black” in “black dance” as African, positioned as the indelible (and apparently ever-legible) marker of blackness. In other words this “African origin,” as Dunham put it, became fundamental to identifying and analyzing “black dance.” Insofar as Black Dance Studies leans toward an essential and utopic idea of what that “African origin” is, it will rub up against African Diaspora Studies which positions differently the idea of Africa.

Scholarship on the broad category of "African dance" works to name an African aesthetic with which to apply to theorizations of Black Dance, sometimes at the expense of obfuscating the diversity of Africa. Considering the heterogeneity of the African continent, to describe a theory of dance by way of this descriptor inspires quick associative characteristics that are ascribed to the African continent and consequently African bodies. While both African Diaspora scholars and Black Dance scholars position Africa as an origin, what that origin represents and how it operates with regard to diasporic identities differ greatly between them. This distinction is legible within discussions on dance.

Resisting the tendency to homogenize Africa through the very terms of Africanness while attending to its significance requires grace of thought. With regard to African diasporic dance specifically, a number of scholars have treaded these murky waters. Yvonne Daniel’s work on Afro-Caribbean dance, Nadia Ellis’s scholarship on Jamaican dancehall, and Tommy DeFrantz catalogue of writings about African American dance practice (both historical and contemporary), for example, all examine black dance without subscribing to static conceptualizations of an African past.

Efforts to assert "African dance" as an effective lens through which to study black dance more broadly must acknowledge the dynamism that the term encompasses. Kariamu Welsh-Asante, perhaps the foremost American scholar on African dance who developed her own African dance technique called Umfundalai, argues for the broad category of an African aesthetic. First though, in clarifying her use of “African,” she writes that “Africans are all people of African descent.”5250 Already there is a move to equate not only all diasporic subjects, but all Africans, as the same. Welsh-Asante identifies seven “senses” that constitute commonalities in all African dance – polyrhythm, polycentrism, curvilinear, dimensional, epic memory, repetition, and holism. I will briefly describe these pillars since Asante’s work is widely cited in the field of African Diaspora Studies, her commonalities in African dance list serving as a rubric for interpreting other kinds of black dance.

Polyrhythm refers to the inextricable relationship between music and dance and the multiple worlds of sound within single rhythms. Polycentrism concerns time – a "polysense" wherein the dancer understands the world of the rhythm and is thereby able to embody the texture of the music. Curvilinear, the third sense, has to do with shape and structure. Roundedness, circuity, an indifference to symmetricality characterize this dimension.
Curvilinearity, when misinterpreted by those without a dance literacy, and when estimated by Eurocentric rubrics of dance, can easily be mistaken for techniquelessness. Welsh-Asante lists the fourth sense as dimensionality. "There is a plateau feeling, an area perceived as depth that arises out of African dances. The dimensional aspiration speaks to the supernatural in space, the presence beyond the visual presence. The dimensional aspect is characteristic of all the sense in that it is by definition extrasensory, involving oral tradition." This refers to extra senses – depth of sound and feeling that might not be immediately legible to the viewer/listener. Her sixth sense is holistic; no one part ought to overwhelm another. The quiet is as meaningful as the noise; stillness, just as important as moving. Repetition – which intensifies both sound and movement – constitutes the seventh sense. "Time is a factor," she writes, "but enough time rather than a set amount of time." These senses together make an African aesthetic in dance. Like one characterizes the Western or Eastern, Welsh-Asante is after the African. She writes that "The need to understand the various cultures has been largely taken up by historians and anthropologists, but the aesthetics and artistic perspective has been missing and are necessary to properly understand the dance of Africa." Her work attempts to remedy this gap.

Theories of the African diaspora remix Asante's elucidation of an African aesthetic. Through diaspora we can think of an African aesthetic that might be characterized by the similarities in dance form in spite of difference and follow that the difference equally constitutes its "Africanness." In this sense, Africanness can be seen "not by essence of purity, but by the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity [...] by hybridity." An African diasporic approach, then, would question whether difference was a threat to Africanness, or a part of its very substance.

Welsh Asante's scholarly and embodied contributions raise important questions for further areas of study. Her Umfundalai technique – now over forty years old – draws on "universal African aesthetics" and, in pulling from a number of African diasporic dance lexicons to render a new style, follows the legacies of choreographers like Katherine Dunham, Pearl Primus, and Alvin Ailey who institutionalized their own brand of movement. Yet Asante's work – like much scholarship on African dance – focuses on the traditional. And while this work is essential to the field of African diaspora Dance Studies because it sketches a historical precedent with which we can use to make sense of the changing role of African dance from community-based to performance-based, we also need to historicize African dance so that we free it from the logics of supposedly pure, unfettered, traditionalism. Even in recognizing that there are thousands of ethnic groups in Africa and by logic, abundantly diverse opinions on the aesthetics of and approaches to art production, Welsh-Asante still errs of the side of romanticizing African dance production. In discussing the role of the artist/choreographer, for example, she writes:

There are no permanent stamps of the creators, only the changing designs, rhythms, movements that change with the performers. What the work represents is guarded and revered but not the identity of the creator herself/himself after the creation has been completed even though the profession is respected and acknowledged. The mark of the artist is in her/his creativity, not in time, nor in her/his person. The element of performance or signature usually deals with the work itself and the culture it represents, not the person of the creator.
She distinguishes this approach to the art with artists who are not in tune with their spiritual calling. "The artist is considered 'chosen' and the rejection of this role is often considered sacrilegious,” she writes. “This is not to be confused with the economics of being an artist when one has to make decisions based on survival, but on the philosophical and spiritual aspect of being an artist.” But her analysis leaves me with questions. Can we unyoke the artistic production from the artist him/herself? To what extent is artist anonymity inherently African? Furthermore, can we remove economics out of our reading of dance historically and contemporarily? An attention to the terms of economics during the “traditional era” might help us better understand the contemporary politics of an African dance economy.

African Diaspora Dance Studies resists the notion that a frozen Africa can be divisible in all black dance by recognizing, for example, a black American use of Africa without suggesting that such imaginative work is either absolute or unreal. In studies on black dance Africa has served as a meaningful source of identity-making. Its constructedness as the symbol at large of diasporic origin – its phantasmic nature – necessitates a careful examination of its logics. How it continues to be reiterated – its meaning transformed or undermined – is crucial to understanding its continued power. An attention to dance and performance provide unique lenses through which to get at these operations, particularly because of the degree to which its emphasis on the embodied recognizes practice as theory.

Theories of diaspora – particularly its critical examination of the work Africa does on the identities, politics, and cultural productions of those within its diaspora – complicate scholarship on black dance that fixes Africa as a pure parent of black dance. The field of African Diaspora Dance Studies continues to raise questions about what constitutes the "black" or the "African" that describes a dance, it also considers (like Welsh-Asante and others do) how an attention to dance practice can tell us much about how (dis)connected those within the diaspora are through their creative expression. And, importantly, scholarship on African diasporic dance gets at the unsaid, not just the professional but the quotidian, the body's capacity to act in its moment of movement.

With regard to the study of Guinean dance in particular, more work remains around the dances themselves. For example, while this study is first interested in the site of West African dance (and the social spaces that surround it), more historical work needs to be done on decalage as it relates to the choreographies themselves. By tracing the history of the choreographies we might better understand how the movements have changed as they circulate transnationally. We know that the dances taught in formal classes, although frequently discussed as traditional, are indeed modern – inspired by the past but with license to interpret that choreographic legacy to yield something new. The repertoire of Guinean dances deserve more sustained attention and detail; their histories contain narratives of travel, diaspora, and identity politics. Take the dance Kuku, for example. Elder interviewees explain that when Guinean dance classes first started in New York Kuku was the only dance that was taught – so much so that it became synonymous with Guinean dance. During one dance class, I asked an elder black woman what rhythm the drummers had just started playing. She waved her hand flippantly: "You think I know? Back in the day everything was Kuku. Then it seemed like every move had its one name." How did this rhythm go from being the only one taught, as some participants suggest, to being rarely taught in New York and Californian classrooms alike? Or Yankadi/Makru. How did these two dances become connected? Why does the slow, syrupy movements of Yankadi get followed by the thumping Makru? Were these always conjoined rhythms or was their marriage decided
along the way? Also, what of the dance class repertoire – those rhythms that are taught regularly – being overwhelmingly Susu?

Other important questions surround the politics of choreography as it relates to West African dance. When does creativity become a slur and when does it become a compliment? Why are West African dance teachers assumed to be sharing only tradition – which in turn suggests that they are only vessels and not creative artists? All of these questions require careful study before any wholesale claims about the politics of West African dance in the US can be made.

“Homecoming”

When I mentioned to black folks that I was going to Guinea, West Africa to research, their excitement snatched away my own ambivalence; exchanged for it unambiguous meaning. “You get to go home,” I was told. Although it was clear why a trip to Guinea was absolutely reasonable for my research (Guinean dance is most popular these days), I did not feel as though there was a clear logic for my own personal redemption. I’d never completed a family tree that stretched past my grandparents’ generation; had never paid for a genealogy test either. As far as origins went, Guinea could be Ghana, could be Liberia, could be South Carolina: there was no pointed evidence of my being from there. Even if I had pursued “root seeking,” it was not the specificity of my family’s history that made folks see me as retuning but the impossibility of knowing an origin more specific than a continent (or region thereof). I might not be from Guinea but, as a black woman, I was of it. Or so their reactions gestured. Nevertheless, I wondered how it was possible to return to a place I’d never been.

Their excitement had more to with Africa than with the particularities of Guinea. I was asked to kiss the ground once I got there, to bring back some the dirt, even to transition from plane to land through West African choreography. “Hit doundounba as soon as you get off the plane,” one friend said jokingly. To them, it seemed, I got to leave my black American world of fragmentation for the cohesion and comfort that an African home would no doubt provide. So often we used Africa to define ourselves from outside of it. Africa as “the missing term, the great aporia, which lies at the centre of our cultural identity and gives it a meaning,” Stuart Hall writes. I wondered if Africa would resolve this aporia or if such a mark of diaspora remained your condition wherever you found yourself.

I had decided to travel to Guinea to research the dance workshop model. New York instructors announcing their cultural exchange trips constantly accented dance classes. Come summertime, one was almost guaranteed to leave a dance class with flier in hand encouraging us to travel under the tutelage of some particular master dancer/drummer. Workshops typically last for two to four weeks. A month-long trip runs for about $1800 on average, excluding airfare, visa fees, and other associated costs like vaccinations. Included in the workshop price are two dance classes and one drum class daily, room and board, meals, various tourist trips, and a ride to and from the airport. If a drum teacher hosts, more drumming than dancing will structure the day’s activities. A number of West African teachers explained to me that, similar to West African dance classes in the U.S., the majority of participants who attended these workshops in the early ‘80s were African American women; today participants are mostly white women. African American West African dance practitioners corroborated this. Entire (African American) West African dance companies used to travel to Ghana, Guinea, Mali, and Senegal for group training. The popularity of these workshops (in New York alone I knew of eight instructors who
all had workshops in December or January), and the way others articulated the workshop’s demographic change among participants, intensified my desire to know more. How does symbolic travel lay inroads for literal travel? How might that literal travel get overdetermined by the symbolic ones?

I had other questions too. Dance workshops are often marketed as “Homecoming Trips,” an encounter with “Mama Africa,” and a return to “the source.” Each designation implied the logics of genealogy, diaspora, and connection. “The source” alone suggested multiple meanings: the “home” of the dance and the home of the teacher – a geography that was itself the teacher of teachers. Implied in workshop materials was the notion that going to Guinea promised pure learning, unsullied by the transformations that the dance being outside of its own home created. Marketing materials and the dynamics of the trip I would later see, borrowed tropes of diaspora to obscure its own economy. Marketing materials sell the workshops doubly: West African dance practice becomes a resource for both physical and spiritual transformation.

In what business was “the source”, I wondered? What were students paying for and who was getting paid? And paid in what, exactly? For myself, that I had studied Guinean dance as a young child begat my later training, which begat my academic research, which begat a student schedule flexible enough to allow me to travel and just enough space on a credit card to store the workshop’s fees. Being able to get to Guinea did not mean I was able to afford it. I wondered if other folks made these kinds of budgetary decisions in order to attend. How could others afford to pay the steep price for the airfare, for the visa and vaccinations, and for the time to take off from work? And why Guinea? I charged the plane ticket, weathered the vaccination needle pricks, packed a suitcase with heat, humidity, and dancing in mind, and prepared myself for Conakry.

I’d been working already with the idea of symbolic travel – how the ideas of diasporic connection structure and are embodied through West African dance. I had thought long about the kind of traveling my ethnographic participants do, the ways that they position themselves in relation to Africa through dance. "These symbolic journeys are necessary for us all – and necessarily circular,” Hall writes. “This is the Africa we must return to – but by another route: what Africa has become in the New World, what we have made of ‘Africa’; ‘Africa’ – as we re-tell it through politics, memory, and desire.” I wondered then what happens when the symbolic journey is pursued physically? In the diaspora – made and remade through bodies whose movement yield complex identities – this dance tourism surely constituted different example of being rooted and routed. The absence of Africa is what allowed an ‘Africa’. I wanted to see how the two interacted.

On December 31st I arrived in Conakry. A giant “Welcome” dashed the front wall of Samba’s house. In a country where French is the official language and Susu the local one, the English greeting plainly revealed for whom the welcome was directed: foreigners, not those who lived in the community (unless they themselves were willing to welcome those foreigners). Paintings of Africa, drums, and dancers decorated the walls surrounding the house. A walk through the front gate led you around a gazebo and water well toward a two-story home and addendum single floor unit house. A straw mat-covered courtyard connected the units. Blue and orange hexagon-shaped tiles stamped the floor. By the afternoon, when the sun was on top of us, the mat refracted confetti patterned sunspots on the ground.
My community’s farewell and Guinea’s welcome fit handsomely. Welcome home, I was told. Or welcome back. This workshop was a marketplace in the clothes of home.

Samba organized a party in celebration of our arrival that evening. The couches were moved from inside the second house to the courtyard. Two women from the workshop who had arrived earlier purchased a crate of warm beers. The DJ rolled in a giant single speaker and within an hour clothes had been sweat though and clung to dancing bodies. The little ones and elders alike danced late enough to welcome the next morning. At this party, the importance of finding a girlfriend early in the trip, to claim rights to a foreign body, was made plain that first evening. Some persistent Guinean men and women trailed workshop participants. A steady rotation of workshop women sought respite from the tenacity of resolute men by breaking away from a dance to sit on the couches or retreat to their rooms. Some offered looks that begged for another to intervene in a danced courtship. Samba wove throughout the courtyard to check in on us. “Are you okay?” he asked me. Shuffling up to my right ear he asked me about the gentleman on my right: “Is he bothering you?”

During classes many of the men drummed; a handful (about six) danced. Part of their compensation for doing tasks around the compound was in the form of dance classes. The women cooked, cleaned, or washed clothes. Everyone was hired (through their communal arrangement) to protect, serve, feed, entertain, and transport the dance workshop participants; the fee Guineans paid took into consideration their seasonal responsibility to work when students came. Those of us attending the workshop – of which there were sixteen – came from various countries. Nine of us were Americans. Five students came from New York; students traveled from Vermont, Atlanta, Denmark, Brazil, Finland, Spain, and Australia. Irrespective of place of origin, participants were financially comfortable – seeing as how they have the means to amass two thousand dollars plus all the fees associated with getting and being there, in addition to the freedom to be able to step away from responsibilities for a month in order to participate.

When workshops were not in session the house functioned as an artist commune, housing twenty-five or more people who lived communally, sharing talents and responsibilities. Everyone who lived there worked there. There was small cohort of resident assistants (Samba’s inner circle) that collected rent, make sure bills were paid and that food came on time. The compound was large – decadent compared to the majority of Conakry homes. Both units together contained some ten-plus rooms. When the workshop began those same artists become a proxy village. The number of people employed through Samba and his workshop was astounding. From the woman cattycorner to the compound who sold oranges and piles of small menthol candies, to the principal down the road who directed a secondary school for Sierra Leonean refugees, everyone at his home – guest teachers and drummers, the security guard who moonlit as the resident deejay – were hired by Samba. Everyone catered to our needs once we arrived. The four or five Guineans that regularly occupied each room moved to the roof, the gazebo, or the porch to sleep. Since their sleeping quarters were public space to the workshop participants, they could not rest until we did. Rarely did one see them lie down. It was only during the third week of the workshop that a woman asked at the breakfast table where the drummers’ rooms were. “I think we’re in them,” I said. She was astonished, “I feel horrible! They sleep outside because of us?” Her friend intervened: “Oh come on! We paid a lot of money for this thing.”

Although not everyone could show up unannounced at Samba’s house, many people came in and out to watch the dance classes. Knowing that his workshop looked like a grab-bag of opportunity to those wanting the privileges an international friendship might offer, Samba worked to make his home feel safe – about dance first and foremost. For example, during the
first week of classes I noticed one of the drummers ogling me. I mentioned this to another drummer who in turn told Samba. That gawking drummer never again played lead djembe for the rest of the workshop. A few weeks later I explained to Samba that, during the previous evening, one gentleman had demandingly asked me to stand up and dance with him over again despite my having already declined. “Who else was around?” Samba asked. Within minutes he had gathered everyone who was there to inquire about the details of the event. When the pushy gentleman showed up the next day to watch our morning class, Baba explained that he was no longer welcomed there. “I don’t like hungry men,” Samba told me. “I’m sorry.”

“Do you think people learn to drum just to come to these workshops?” I asked Mamady, the workshop’s drum class teacher. “Yes of course, because the commercialization of culture has exceeded the borders of Guinea and everyone will want to do business as a ticket out of poverty,” he said, just short of “duh.” The popularity of the workshops inspired younger Guinean men to pick up drumming for the opportunity it extended to meet foreign women. The gendered nature of drum and dance made it so that drumming, at least in this particular workshop, was solely the role of men. “These drummer here, they don’t know anything about African music. But everybody knows Samba. They know he brings a lot of women.” The drummers did not get paid in cash. Many were learning their craft as the dancers were. But in exchange for a seat among the drum corps was admission to this overwhelmingly female workshop community. There was a precedent that encouraged them to do so. In Samba’s twenty-two years hosting this workshop, there have been seventeen marriages between those who have met as a result of it.

One day while sitting in the courtyard, a man wearing a Yankees cap crept through the gate holding hands with a woman, dreadlocks to her waist. We smiled at each other as they walked down the side corridor into the courtyard. By the duration of the brief walk Fauso and Angela took from the front gate to the front door, every Guinean resident there had rushed toward and hugged Faoso tight. Some pinched his clothes to draw attention to his new appearance. Fatim snatched off his hat and put it on herself as Faoso smiled wide, pretending to grab for it back. At every second it seemed someone else would dash the previous encounter, making a braid of excited homecoming. Angela had quickly plotted herself on a bench near the well, choosing not to be an obstacle for those that wanted to get to him. Samba appeared from the house. “Mr. Samba,” Angela drawled. “Angela, Angela, Angela,” he said. They high-fived, caught fingers, and let their linked hands swing.

Angela explained to me that she attended Samba’s workshop in 2006. She and Fauso live in Seattle. She was an office administrator and he a FedEx employee. Later, Nahzi filled out their story: Fauso used to be Samba’s driver. He met Angela through the workshop. They were married by the end of it. For two years she saved for enough money to return to Guinea, retrieve him, and bring him back to Seattle. “Before, he didn’t know anything, no English and look – he speaks good, he has black American wife, he has everything. He was just the driver.” “You don’t even have to be drummer to find wife,” he says.

Fauso ducked away from his friends to explain something to me, noticing my interest in this unexpected event. “I worked here many many years! I know this guy (he points to the security guard sitting in a plastic chair in the gateway). I told Samba ‘today everyone is coming to see me. Keep the doors open. Guinea wants to see me. Let everyone in today.’”
The bodies of participants seemed to function as both homecoming and the promise of escape. Some women expressed to me that they felt new in Guinea – powerful, wanted, and seen. Like someone else’s winning lottery ticket. But a distance still remained despite the delight that came from certain interactions. Some would outright explain their interest in a particular drummer but would later, almost excitedly, complain about how that same musician was “stalking” them during the day, as if they had offered no indication of interest. Discussions around Guinean desire for them far outweighed discussion around their own desire for Guineans. Some expressed how sad the musicians’ poverty made them, how impressed they were that Guineans managed to be “so happy and appreciative all the time. I just can’t imagine…”

Guinean men mobilized the assumptions and desires of workshop women for their economic, social, and political enfranchisement. None of us spoke Susu and few spoke French. The men at Samba’s place were often asked to accompany us to the corner store, the market, to clubs. The women who worked there were unavailable to join since they were incredibly busy cleaning, cooking, and doing laundry. In exchange for these favors, tips would be given to and Coca Cola and beer would be bought for the men. During these moments of “off time” drummers would explain how difficult life is in Guinea, about recent deaths in the family and the associated costs such happenings occasioned. When dinner was served (we ate apart) one drummer asked Roxanne, a dancer, if she could bring him out some food because he did not have any money and was hungry. Roxanne explained the situation publicly during dinner, and asked what each of us thought: should she give him food, or not? She ended up making him a plate which she snuck outside so that the other drummers would not get jealous. Although these moments were quick and fleeting, they were also abundant and belied a sense of delight it seemed some women felt in doing good for Guineans. “One song we hear too often is the one in which Africa serves as a backdrop for white fantasies of conquest and heroism,” the novelist Teju Cole writes. “Africa has provided a space onto which white egos can conveniently be projected. It is a liberated space in which the usual rules do not apply: a nobody from America or Europe can go to Africa and become a godlike savior or, at the very least, have his or her emotional needs satisfied.”

Framing relationships through the filter of community service permitted participants to do as they pleased without addressing their own motivations and desires. There were things that some workshop women wanted from Guinean men that were articulated far less publicly and less often – intimacy. Although no relationship was identical and not everyone was looking for lust, I did hear trends in the kinds of ways Guinean men were described sexually. One woman couldn’t believe how much she underestimated how many condoms (which were on the suggested packing list) she needed. Another that she was never going to leave because she’d never been so “relaxed” in her life. While these kinds of statements were smuggled through the relatively light and presumably apolitical nature of “girl talk,” it became abundantly clear that they equated Guinean men with drumming and thrilling but temporary intimacy. Some women’s actions indicated that they saw “the continent as one big black heart making for the projection of illicit expectations…and the vicarious thrill […] of being bitten if you were to put your hand inside, to bring back ‘home’ an exotic disease.”

By the second week a culture of sex saturated the workshop. A walk through the house in the evening was something like an accidental scavenger hunt for fastened bodies nuzzling in corners. Drummers were not allowed inside the main house, so tucked corners and other relatively discreet nooks where utilized. “Everyone has a boyfriend,” Samba said knowingly – so
much so that once the workshop was well into its routine and we traveled to other locales, announcements were made that if participants wanted their boyfriends to travel with the group the girlfriends would have to pay for their food, lodging, and transportation, and that couples could get separate rooms if they so pleased for an extra fee. Only a core group of drummers (about five) would be traveling with us; everyone else had to pay their own way. By the end of the trip the community of folks who lived at Samba’s house addressed female participants as “Madame [insert man with whom they were always seen’s last name].”

Sister Africa

When no white bodies were around, workshop residents talked to me about how important it was that I was there – “for the both of us.” Samba said he wished more black people came on the workshop and that he hoped my and Oye’s – a black American man from New York – going would inspire more “of us” to attend in the future. Mamady explained that black people do not come because they “do not need it. The people with little experience pay the most. Why would someone pay so much money for something they know?” I thought about those elder black women who told me before my leaving that they used to attend this trip every year and wondered what shifted.

One evening I went out in the courtyard to see who was around. The power was off but in the near distance I could see a tiny flashlight glow reflecting off the yellow piping of Abdoulaye’s windbreaker. Voices were low but distinguishable. “Inuwali,” I said quietly. “Jazzy! Come come.” Ibrahim immediately shuffled out of seat. I said “no, thank you, I’m happy with the floor.” Everyone had a chair but myself. “See, you’re fine” Nahzi said. “You don’t need nothing. One of the guys.” I knew that my class and citizenship afforded me the opportunity to be seen as having the status of man. I figured there was something about our shared blackness, too, which made me closer to the gentleman in ways that were vague but influential nonetheless. Gender was always a consequence and in Guinea it was no different. My female body during dance class was spectacle; outside of the house I was visible in a different way. Even during a routine ID stop I was asked by police officer s to get out of the car and take out my passport. Upon realizing that I had stupidly left it at the house, I was told there were “other ways” I could get through beyond paying a small fee. “One of the guys,” of course, was subjective.

We sat in the dark courtyard drinking beer in a circle. Ibrahim asked me about my family – I went to my room, retrieved my phone, and came back to show them some pictures. They said everyone was beautiful. I showed them baby pictures of me; they laughed. Hands flicked in the air trying to get one person to pass the phone around more quickly. Fode pointed to one picture of my sister, Gina. “This one,” he said. “Her name is Gina,” I replied, “she’s a nurse.” “Une medcin?!” Nahzi faked coughed, handed my phone back, and told me to call her because his life needed saving. “Bring her back with you next time.” We laughed. Ibrahim lifted out of his seat and walked around the edge of our circle. He stopped at me, squatted to my seated-height, and rested his arm around my shoulders. “Sister Africa,” he called me. “We’re so happy you are here,” he intoned. It was important that I bring more “like us” to Guinea, advised Mamadou. “Yes, and start with your sister,” Nahzi chimed in. Only when we were by ourselves – during this moment and thereafter – did they refer to me as Sister Africa. Thoughts about whether or not this title felt genuine were immediately intercepted by thoughts that I was being hustled. I tried to move through this thought. Even if I was being hustled, would knowledge of this remove the warmth such an embrace undoubtedly carried? The feeling felt good but I was still interested in
the source of the utterance. In other words, was affective kinship a means to an end or an end to a means?

The day of Simone’s (a workshop participant) wedding I sat with Balakai at his home in Dixonn as we waited for a friend to return from picking up his drum that he would play after the ceremony. We sat on the edge of the mattress lying on the floor. I was dragging my fingers along a skin waiting to be stretched over a drum frame; Balakai was picking apart a marijuana nugget and spreading the crumbs into a rolling paper. “You’re ok, right?” he asked. I said I was. “After the wedding, I want to talk to you about life in black America and the artist’s life in Guinea.” He continued, “I told Mamady that I want to find an intelligent black American woman. Black American women are best because they understand more about Guinea. They want to talk. The whites, they come and fuck. They leave. Never talk to you again. You call them in the US. They don’t answer. They answer and say ‘do you need some money?’” The splif was half burned. He tilted it toward me; I said it was best that I not head to the mosque high. “Why do you think that?” I asked. “I live it,” he said. “I tell you: the workshop-whites want to have sex with African man. Fuck everywhere.” He also said that he has slept with women and later asked them for money. I asked how long those kinds of relationships last long distance. “A few months until they get tired of sending you something.”

These candid conversations happened only privately. Balakai’s disclosure suggested that I was somehow connected with him in a way other white bodies were not; it complicated the horizontal belonging bestowed upon all who paid. Here was a moment where the commercial, affective, and political forms of diasporic belonging connected. While the trip explicitly invited all who could pay and claimed everyone equally as family, it also required those on the continent (who wanted to benefit from our tourism) to uphold this idea. Balakai’s comments though (and there were many more with him and others throughout the trip), undermine the idea of unilateral belonging.

Over espresso one morning, Samba and Moussa told me their memories from the first dance workshop Samba had organized in the late ‘80s. Samba’s career began in “street dancing”: while attending public events he would perform; audiences would offer tips. Ballet Djoliba recruited him in 1972 after seeing him perform at a wedding. Ten years later, he traveled to New York on a three-month teaching contract. “Oo I loved New York. I didn’t want to go back. I wanted to stay,” he explained to me one evening. Samba moved to New York after dancing thirteen years with the ballet. In addition to his dance career he also had a brief stint as a pop singer in Guinea. In 2005 Samba recorded a few songs and accompanying music videos that became incredibly popular in his home country. His songs are still played in Guinean bars, clubs, and parties still. His musical career, coupled with the esteem that his dancing has engendered, has made him widely known throughout the country.

Although Samba describes himself as shy, the attention he commands in Guinea is grand and unrelenting. Everyone calls him “Gran”; a host of “petites” take care of him, his family, and his chateau. He traveled always with an entourage: two brothers, cousin, driver, one or two close friends. When we went out as a group, entire bars were cleared out for us. Rounds of Guilex beers were retrieved. Wherever we landed, the deejay played Samba’s songs within fifteen minutes of our arriving. They recited shout outs over the microphone – explained that Samba was in the house joined by his fote students. Samba appeared deeply unmoved by the clamor that followed him like a tail; the hullabaloo seemed routine for him – expected and boring, something he endured because he knew it would excite workshop participants. All sang along to his songs and danced, some lingered near him. Someone was always crooning to him his own song.
Occasionally Samba would look up, smile, and wave softly. Most times he watched his shoes or a TV that played Guinean music videos. “Here, everybody knows me,” he told me at a bar after I asked if all the attention felt awkward for him. A rail-thin young woman was challenging him to a staring contest, snaking her head in whatever direction he turned his. She mouthed his song lyrics while wining slowly, sipping her warm beer intermittently. He offered a single wave and half smiled. Turned to my ear. “In New York I’m just an African man. Nobody talks to me, not even my neighbors. I tried but they’re very mean.” Being African in New York sometimes depressed him. Samba is one of the most beloved West African dance teachers in the country and folks in that community recognize him widely. Outside of it, though, he was “just” an African man. To go from being relatively anonymous to famed was a transition he said he had to get used to. The traveling that yielded such a transition was a privilege though, and he was articulate about his gratefulness. The fact of his traveling informed his fame: in Guinea Samba was the New Yorker who had people paying him to visit a county from which the drummers who worked for him would love to leave. “How much you pay for this trip?” Mariama, Samba’s niece and cook, asked me. About two thousand dollars, I explained. “You pay too much to come to a poor place,” she told me.

Making the workshop available to the broader community bolstered Samba’s reputation. Even though drop-in visitors were not able to join the dance classes, making the occasion of the workshop available to the Guinean public brokered relationships between Samba and his neighbors; and the dancers and broader public. Audiences turned the dance classes – which were marketed as private, intimate, and focused – into public shows. It invited Guinea into his success and brokered respect. Audiences regularly populated each class – even during the 9am morning class visitors sat on neon plastic chairs, sipped water out of small pouch, and recorded us with their camera phones. The afternoon class contained more students of all ages who dashed to Bagatai after school let out. Businessmen in suits and ties came. Elderly women from the village nearby made their way over. The gazebo was packed with bodies watching us learn, many entertained by the funny fotes who had the privilege of traveling across the country for a dance class they could get at home. Two small girls and their mother, whose home neighbored Samba’s, climbed their way up an electric pole to the top of the fence dividing the two properties where they perched, sometimes tossing a few Guinea francs at us. Occasionally during a class I would hear small voices above me, look up, and see three small brown faces smiling, wagging thumbs up: “c’est bon,” they’d say.

Samba’s incumbency was made known outside of the dance classes themselves. Three weeks into the workshop we had a public performance nearby which broadcasted Samba’s significance as a Guinean artist. In between acts Samba would come onstage and solo a bit. We were the final act of five. A woman’s percussion group – Tayely – performed; a fire-eater and a solo koura artist performed too. Our newly minted workshop company performed Yankadi/Makru, Gumbe, Sofa, Mandjiani, Soko, Soumounoukou, Sinte, and Sorsonnet dances on a square dust pit under a thin necklace of lights. I mistook Samba’s quiet for aloofness – as innate and not strategic. His reticence, I would learn, efficiently navigated the different expectations, desires, languages, and dance skills that characterized the workshop.

**Workshop Pedagogy**

In New York classes I was certainly no expert. I went to the front line begrudgingly and only when directed to so by the instructor. No students pushed me upfront either or assumed that
I knew the rhythms. I had only been there two years and in a community into which many dancers are born, one did not hop in the front who did not want to get reprimanded. But in Guinea, Samba placed me in the center of the front row for every class. When going across the floor the same positioning applied. Myself, Sarah and Janet (the co-organizers for the trip) typically occupied the first row. This made sense: of all the students (except for Oye who danced in the back with the rest of the men), we were those who took classes with Samba regularly in New York and were most familiar with his dance style and pedagogical approach. The other students were beginners. Their movements either had a stiffness or a gumminess that made Samba’s choreography look like one long indistinct sequence. Beginners were also marked by the way in which they tried to learn new choreography. They tried to mimic Samba – something like buying a garment because it looks befitting on someone else, without paying attention to whether the size or color actually suits you. Part of learning someone else’s choreography came first with the resolve that you would never do it as they did; you pursued their technique without trying to impersonate their style. In Guinean dance, the head follows the hips which follow the feet. You know a dancer is not starting with the feet when arms and torsos flail.

On the roof one evening, Samba explained to me that he wanted to keep me challenged and that he would be splitting the group up by beginning and advanced levels. “There are only two advanced dancers here,” he explained, “so it’s difficult.” I asked if he knew that the majority of his beginning students were teachers themselves, and that all were in West African dance companies or offered regular classes in their hometowns. I had just found this out myself over the course of the first week. During meals, dancers discussed the years they had been dancing, who their teachers were back home, and the number of students that patronized their classes. This came as a shock to me since the vast majority of dancers obviously and admittedly knew very little about the dances and even less about the music. To hearken back to my previous discussion of Oakland, access to the opportunity to teach was more possible in places where there were fewer practitioners. Unlike nonblack participants who stated that they would never get the chance to perform, no less teach, this logic did not apply to participants in smaller cities.

At end of the workshop Samba tested our knowledge of the rhythms we had learned. He asked the drum corps to play a rhythm and he chose a student at random – who then had to identify the rhythm’s name, explain where it was from, and do its respective choreography by themselves. The minority of dancers recognized the rhythms although, when a particular rhythm was named, most remembered its accompanying choreography. Participants appeared noticeably anxious. Although I was certainly no expert (when my turn came I mistook soli for soko), when dancers went into the middle of the circle Samba looked at me as if to ask whether or not that student completed the choreography correctly. I would gingerly nod yes or no and Samba’s response to them echoed.

A respect for Samba’s choreography as artistic property was lost on most participants who video recorded nearly all dance classes and performances and articulated their excitement about going home and to teach what they had learned. I couldn’t help but think how some of the workshoppers were slow to learn and quick to teach. For example Julie, a white woman from Santa Cruz who on the first day of the workshop expressed her interest in adopting an African baby, decided to teach a woman (who was only there one day) choreography from earlier weeks. Samba didn’t want Julie to teach the material – the woman she was teaching had not paid for the workshop, and thus had not paid to learn. His discomfort was communicated to Julie. Although the woman being taught appeared to receive this news generously, Julie was not as understanding. She asked how she was supposed to know the difference between the traditional
steps and Samba’s steps – weren’t they traditional after all – and as such, owned by no one? The only way she could remember the steps was by teaching them she explained.

During one of our discussions about the dance trainings of workshop participants Samba said that he did know that most of the workshop participants taught their own classes. “These people live in places where there is no African dance. None. So they learn a little something and teach.” I asked him what he thought of that fact – betraying my own crestfallenness, my obvious judgment that these women had the audacity to share that which they did not know. “It’s fine,” Samba said. “For where they live, its fine. In New York…that doesn’t work.” But I couldn’t tell what exactly made it fine. Was it ok because they were teaching in places deprived of African culture, giving liberty to anyone who wanted to share? Was it ok because these women were teaching in places where better teachers were not? Or was it ok because they were teaching students who did not know any better? I got the sense that “fine” was predicated on all of these rationales. Performance has everything to do with audience, after all; no performance can be condoned that its audience had not sanctioned. “In the African sense, the work itself must have life and be worthy of the praises and approbations of an audience,” Welsh-Asante explains. Only an audience could mark a performance successful. What that might look like, say, in Maine, might be significantly different than in New York.

During the workshop a perceived possession of African authenticity seemed to trump whiteness and render race, especially black Americanness (which was an unavoidable and decisive fact in the U.S.) inconsequential in Guinea. Or at least officially. In classes the prevailing opinion remained that black bodies were inherently closer to West African dance than non-black ones. Belonging to the community meant then being accepted by black Americans. In the workshop, citizenship reigned supreme; the structure of it required Guineans to accept anyone there, irrespective of race, in order for them to even participate. Race was not made an “issue” in Guinea (a rubric for inclusion); consequently, fewer questions were raised about our own positionalities and investments in the form. The workshop’s success at being “the source” seemed to have much to do with its ability to come to terms with those who attend: it lended itself to whatever we needed it to be. (Songs were taught outside of class when a workshopper wanted to learn in that moment to sing, lunch had to come earlier because one woman needed to nap by a certain time, fried eggs made one participant nauseous so twenty hardboiled ones where made instead, food came too slowly in the morning so the cooks were required to begin cooking at 5:30 instead of 6:30). A broader geopolitical and economic reality coerced those Guineans present to accommodate such requests since carrying them out affected their immediate and future economy. But the notion that Guinean’s “loved to sing all the time,” were “born to cook,” and were naturally hospital – as some around me interpreted – misunderstood the economy that drove this particular tourist culture.

In Guinea, students circumnavigated around the significance of race since nationality provided an obvious divide between workshop participants and Guineans. Privilege, if articulated, was more often couched in the language of Americanness or Europeaness, not whiteness. At the same time though, workshop participants’ whiteness was an obvious point of contention – mostly by people who were not employees of the workshop. Outside of Bagatai grunts and eye rolls ensued when Guinean locals were forced to move to make room for us at the club; elder women visibly resented our being ushered to the front row of dance “spectacs” or being brought to the front of the drug store line to pay for items; those standing in doundounba circles laughed incredulously when we were forced to solo but were ahead of or chasing the beat.
Overall, it became clear through discussions and participant observations that Guinea was a relief from the racial politics of elsewhere. “Guineans just aren’t tripping! They love everyone,” one workshopper explained. I struggled to make sense of this. It was unfair and unwise to attribute any personality absolutely to economics, and yet there was such a difference between the dispositions of those who were hired to make us feel like family and those who were not. Our outsidersness occasioned a certain presentation of Guineanness. In this sense, too, we were positioning ourselves, getting positioned, and requiring others to position themselves in relationship to our interaction. “Cultural identities are the points of identification, the unstable points of identification of suture, which are made, within the discourses of history and culture. Not an essence but a positioning.”

Through conversations it became clear many did not understand that the workshop generated significant income and that everyone in the compound collaborated in the project of keeping us happy. The frequency of comments that conflated the workshop culture with all of West African culture was high. “I wish I had so much pride in my country like Guineans do,” my roommate explained. “What I wouldn’t give to be able to just sing and dance all day, all my life,” explained another. After one woman got sick and asked a drummer if he had or knew where to find stomach medicine, another intoned “ask Africans about drum and dance, you’re good. Medical advice, not so much.” Even down to the last few hours of the workshop it seemed as though participants’ conceptualizations of West Africa and Africans had not been critically challenged. When packing into the car heading to the airport Lucia asked, in all seriousness, if Guineans did anything else well other than sing and drum. “What are other jobs that they do?” Even in the airport, after Mamady had paid the security guard to allow him to accompany us in because we had more bags than we could carry, resolved some seating conflicts with the Air France staff, and helped prepare us for customs, Julie asked (while at the security gate) if he wouldnt mind going over all the songs he had taught us so that she could record them and practice them at home. Mamady, obviously exhausted and not in a position to say that he did not want to – or that he was technically off the clock, and that asking a grown man to sing at the drop of a hat at the airport was disrespectful – explained instead that the security guards probably would not like an impromptu performance.

Outside of the workshop the expectations participants had about Africans and Guineans – as being exceptional in their difference, “other” – manifested. Picture taking, for example, mediated our collective relationship to the broader communities we found ourselves in. The most mundane of Guinean living was seen as exceptional to some students: a small black boy doing nothing other than sitting on a rock drinking a pouch of water became “exquisite.” “Can I take your picture?” one workshop participant asked. “The color orange is so beautiful against your skin.” Women carrying rice sacks on their heads while eight months pregnant became a statement of how regal African women are – not at all about the politics of labor. Later we found ourselves in a car accident after our driver made too close of a turn, consequently smashing into a taxi next to us. A sea of screaming police officers amassed while our bus stood parked in the middle of an insanely congested intersection. This scene inspired a chorus of giggles on the bus. One woman took her camera out to capture “the circus” ignoring Samba’s plain, and repetitious declaration to never take photographs of the police.

At the end of our trip Allhasane explained to a few of us around the kitchen table that “if you don't love the dance will not love you.” He was explaining our individual strengths and weaknesses as dancers. On the penultimate day of the trip a dancer asked him for feedback – he had watched every single class, afterall and must have some opinion on our techniques.
Allhasane appeared shocked and hesitant to tell us straight. Not only was he not Samba, but he was also not in a secure enough position to make any paying customer potentially angry at his candid assessment of their skill. Despite our collective request that he share, not all were equally willing to accept his notes. To one woman who was open about her various intimate relationships with drummers during the course of the trip, he said: “if you play less you’d be better dancer.” She explained that she had never been more serious about dance in her life as she was right then. To one perfunctory dancer he explained, “You need to just try. It’s clear you have just started.” She looked shocked, explained that she was not a beginner and that she had been doing West African dance for years. “I’m so sorry, I can not tell,” he said, sincerely apologetic. To me he warned not to be too confident, that I do not engage my entire body while dancing, and showed me one move I continued to do poorly. This feedback would have never been given unless it was solicited; criticism was not part of the workshop package.

It seemed like workshops participants wanted to experience Guinea, but did not necessarily want the place to reflect back to them an image of themselves. This hostility reared around discussions on dance practice more than anything else. How much of this had to do with how we might have already decided what Guinea could teach us and what it could not before we arrived? The dance workshop occasioned diverse opportunities for those who paid to go on it, those who were employed by it, and those who belonged to a broader community of Guinean drummers and dancers. I only stayed for the duration of the trip; I did not witness the house after we had all left. Did we leave a trace? How were we remembered? How might our going (like our coming) be routine? A tourist experience was for the tourist temporary, but a string of temporariness was a somewhat permanent season at Samba’s home. How does Guinea roam through their lives after the plane has taken off, once we have unpacked, and settled back into our respective homes?

What dancers get from the workshop, from going to “the source,” might be best measured by what happens when they get home. I was able to catch glimpses of the ways some workshops participants incorporated their Guinean experience into their daily lives. Some used the fact of their having gone to Guinea with Samba to buttress their own expertise and fuel businesses that were predicated on Guinean labor, bodies, and artistry. A laptop case company (cases that cost one woman five dollars to make in Guinea were sold for forty dollars), a West African e-photo store (photos of anonymous dancers – with the photographers signature on the back – were sold for thirty dollars), and dance class (marketing materials urged students to come take advantage of “beautiful African moves I learned during my African dance intensive”) were all mechanized through Samba’s workshop. The workshop served a greater role than providing opportunities for Guineans and Samba himself. It was an avenue of professionalization for the participants as well. All parties involved circumnavigated the financial opportunity that was the workshop.

Saidiya Hartman writes that, “The country in which you disembark is never the country of which you had dreamed.” While the Guinea of my imagination did not match perfectly with the Guinea from which I disembarked, the degree to which Samba’s workshop tried to collapse the distance between the two was marked. The dance workshop can show us how West African dance can do a number of things, among them: foster relationships to Africa and generate an economy. It opens up rich possibilities for thinking about the operations of diaspora. In creating avenues for people outside the continent to get to it, the workshop show us how dance itself can be on the move. Even while rooted in Guinea, the routedness of the form invites many into its practice.
Itinerant Ethnography

Imagine: another dancer, myself, and a group of six Guinean percussionists were at the airport in Veracruz. We had just finished two shows for an Afro-Caribbean music festival there and were in the process of checking bags – a giant feat when one has an orchestra of giant dundun drums, djembes, krins, balafon, cora and other smaller instruments. The three that would not fit in our checked luggage we decided to carry. Before we could approach the security gate, an airport employee explained that the krins would be confiscated. “It’s an instrument,” we said. It didn’t look like any instrument the security staff had seen however, and it was so weighted that it apparently “could be used as a weapon.” “Everything can be used as a weapon,” Moussa retorted. “Hand it to me,” the guard demanded, inspecting the particularities of the long slitted drum.

One of the percussionists tried to reason with him. “We’re musicians. We just got back from a show. We play these.” The security guard was unmoved. Abu reached for a bag that carried the krin’s two smooth wooden sticks. He slid them out, sat where he was on the floor, fixed the krin between his legs and played. I felt a pull to dance – not because the music invited me, but because, for some reason, it seemed as though our getting home depended on it. The krin’s music itself did not seem to immediately register for the guard. Dropping my bag down next to me I moved softly. My embodied rhythm proved the instrument’s utility. Those waiting to get through security watched confusedly. “Ok,” the guard resigned. “Go on.”

While we were relieved that the three instruments were allowed to leave with us, we were also left with residues that having to play – in order to be allowed to go home with what we came with – deposited. Those who had watched the spectacle asked, on the other side, if they could take some photos with us. The scene must have been entertaining. Yet there we were dancing and drumming because we felt we needed to. We were always a show, it seemed. Performing was not just our profession but a method of protection, if not a tactic of negotiation so as not to miss our plane. Performing was not only why we were there in the first place, but it became a means through which to travel more freely.

This dissertation is about belonging to multiple places at once. Or nowhere holistically ever-always. While the place for diaspora dance studies exists, it is still in need of explosion. Studies of African dance offer the particularities of geographic location – yet, we are in need of works that attend to the condition of inbetweenness: the subjectivities that are made from being “betwixt and between.” Certainly, my Veracruz airport gives my status of “airport anthropologist” another meaning. Is this not the work one does to study diaspora: moving often, passing through different rubrics of security, improvising one’s self so that the self is legible? While we need not sacrifice the depth and rigor that comes from being in one place long enough, diaspora studies could also benefit from an attention to the ephemeral – the dance, the theater performance, the tourist trip. We know that, although these things do not stay forever, and resist the fixedness that the written text provides, they remain. They do work.

I have looked at the ways bodies move in West African dance contexts to comment on the significance of West African dance as a practice of diaspora. Dance creates the place of Africa. It has historically been and continues to be a site where individuals negotiate self and community. Through the various archives this dissertation examines, we see the different ways African-ness and diaspora manifest. We see its importance in the lives of participants, the economy that spins around it, and the far-reaching implications (those social, economic, and political) of this practice. We also see its itinerancy and refusal to be still. In this, we extend the
theorizations of Stuart Hall, who suggests that identity is always being made – as opposed to being an “already accomplished fact” – identity “as a 'production', which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation.”

Dancing Africa, Making Diaspora is an ethnography of the ephemeral. It considers how the unprofessional dancer, the West African dance novice, the temporary traveler, the constant come-goer, the three-month visa traveler, and others pursue and utilize diaspora “by another route.”

9 The Transatlantic Slave Trade is most commonly regarded as the origin of the African diaspora, although other scholars rightly note that the East African Slave trade, which preceded the Transatlantic, was too responsible for catapulting millions of African peoples throughout the world. (See Joseph Harris's The African Presence in Asia: Consequences of the East African Slave Trade, and Edward Alpers' The East African Slave Trade, for discussions on this.) African diaspora studies then as a knowledge project looks at the nature of such dispersals. More specifically it concerns the origins, movement, adaptations, and transformations that characterize black travel.

She writes, “This specific type of dispersal is a necessary precondition for the formation of links between the various populations in diaspora; the internal networks linking various segments of a diaspora are a unique feature that differentiates them from communities that result from other types of migrations.” “Defining Diaspora, Refining a Discourse,” *Diaspora* 10:2 (2001), 191.


Ibid., 7.

Ibid., 46.


Many scholars have expressed interest in the ways black Americans have used Africa to design a more "positive" past – one that does not see slavery as the origin of black expressive culture. Afrocentrists have been most commonly critiqued for the practice of forging a neat and romantic narrative of African retentions – or "roots narratives" – that homogenize a heterogeneous African continent. See for example, Maya Angelou's *All God's Children Need Traveling Shoes* (1986), Molefi Asante's *Afrocentricity* (1988), and James Campbell's *Middle Passages* (2007).


Diana Taylor's definition of repertoire is a useful concept for this project as it defines the nature of African dance classes and African dance performances clearly. She defines repertoire as "enact[ed] embodied memory: performances, gestures, orality, movement, dance, singing -- [...] those acts usually thought of as ephemeral, nonreproducible knowledge. [...] The repertoire requires presence: people participate in the production and reproduction of knowledge by "being there." The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas (Durham, London: Duke University Press, 2003). 20.


Hall, “Cultural Identity and Diaspora,” 236.


Statement of welcome in Fela! playbook.


Fela! received Tony Awards for “Best Choreography,” “Best Costume Design,” “Best Sound Design”; “Outstanding Broadway Chorus” Award from the Actors Equity Association’s Advisory Committee On Chorus Affairs; Outer Critics Circle Award for “Outstanding Choreographer”; Obie “Distinguished Performance Award: Sahr Ngaujah” (2009); Lucille Lortel Awards (2009) for “Outstanding Musical,” “Outstanding Choreographer,” Outstanding Costume Design,” “Outstanding Scenic Design”; Fred & Adele Astaire Awards for “Choreographer” and “Female Dancers” among others.

In contradiction to the neighboring feedback I received, in many of the interviews conducted, most dancers expressed their having to get used to being on stage and dancing provocatively. Elasea Douglass for example, when asked how she feels dancing in the show explained “I feel alive. Vulnerable. To move that way with confidence knowing that women seeing it are feeling insecure or self-conscious but the guys seeing it, depending on who they are, might be lusting for you in a way you might not want to be lusted for. It’s very vulnerable but it takes tapping into a part of you that can be a little detached and bold.” (Interview w author, May 18, 2011).

“Diaspora” throughout this chapter refers to the African diaspora.


Kuti here and throughout refers to the actual man, Fela Anikulapo Kuti, and “Fela” will be used to refer to the protagonist in the musical Fela!

Highlife is a dance music that originated in Ghana in the 1900s and spread throughout West Africa, especially Nigeria and Liberia. It is a mix of brass-band music, Trinidadian calypso and American swing.

Carlos Moore, This Bitch of a Life (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books), 73.

Olorunyoni, 23.

Olorunyoni, 10.

Veal, Fela, 84.

Moore, This Bitch of a Life, 75.
Despite being born into a politicized family Kuti did not assume his mother’s political dissidence and penchant for protest until after his travels to the US. Kuti’s mother, Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti was a feminist activist who spent her life in the fight for African liberation and woman’s rights. Reverend Israel Oludotun Ransome-Kuti, Kuti’s father, was a secondary school principal. By the 1970s the country of Nigeria was in crisis. Colonialism and British indirect rule had since its very inception in 1914 imposed foreign rules of organization on Nigeria that completely restructured the country’s political, economic, and social life. Its efforts to incorporate 250 plus ethnic groups, Christianize the country, and Westernize almost every aspect of Nigerian life did not, upon the country’s independence in 1960 dissolve once the country shook itself from its colonial powers. "The political manifestations of a dependent economy that emerged at independence […] was one that played up a patron-client relationship within the civil polity."

As Richard Joseph and others have cogently describe, a patron-client relationship emerged and worked to dominate the Nigerian political order. Such an economic stratum is characterized as "government by contract" wherein a bourgeois class emerges not by way of their own economic ventures, but "merely in relation to agency commission doled and received from transnational corporations. […] This outlook is neither national nor market-driven from oil wealth as middlemen, import-export agents and commission-takers." Such a political figuration bred a number of social ailments. Lagos, as the center of the nation's economic and financial sector (and Kuti's predominant site of performance), was hit especially hard. Domestic abuse, drug addiction, alcoholism, unemployment, and violence plagued the city and with little to no formal protections from the state despite its rising militarism, folks ended up retreating to their own, fenced-in enclaves. Such a political order became recurrent themes within Kuti’s lyrics.

Moore, This Bitch of a Life, 85.


Veal, Fela, 173.


Dumas, “Afrobeat’s Vice President,” 77.


Tony Allen (Africa 70 lead drummer) explains, "They had gone to Whiskey a Go-Go where they had dancers on platforms and cages in short skirts and go-go boots. The entire atmosphere made an impression on Fela's mind. When they came back to Lagos, they set up the Afro-Spot [nightclub] at the Empire Hotel. They had Dele dancing and a bunch of other girls in these pedestal cages; no one in Nigeria had ever seen anything like this.” Raymond J. Dumas, “Afrobeat’s Vice President,” Wax Poetics No 39 (2010): 77.

Ogugua Iwelu, interview with author, December 23, 2011.

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Wine refers to a circular movement of the hips. The move is found in many Afro Caribbean and Congolese dance forms.


Veal, Fela, 133-134.


In describing black American trumpeter Lester Bowie’s stay at Kalakuta republic in 1977: “He asked Keywe what she saw in Fela, why she chose to live in this kind of arrangement. She wanted to dance, first of all, she said. And there was a unique solidarity among the women that she didn’t quite know how to explain.” Brent Hayes Edwards, “Crossroads Republic, Transition No. 97 (2007), 116.


Ibid.


Veal, 182.

Goldman, 103.


Olaniyi, “The Cosmopolitan Nativist.”


Kuti’s song “Gentleman” (1973) for example critiques Nigerian men who have been westernized. He situates himself in contrast: “I be Africa man, original,” he explains. “Gentleman” (1973).


Ibid.


Yvonne Daniels, Dancing Wisdom: Embodied Knowledge in Haitian Vodou, Cuban Yoruba, and Bahians Candomblé (University of Illinois Press, 2005), 5.


Anonymous ensemble member, interview with author, August 28, 2010.


Moore, 235.

Donald Martin Carter, Navigating the African Diaspora: The Anthropology of Invisibility (University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 18.

It should also be noted that Fela! played at the Royal National Theater in London, which was the first Broadway performance to be invited by the RNT.


Sahr Ngaujah, “Taking Fela Kuti home”

Ibid.


The flier reads: “It’s Lagos, Nigeria, in the late 70s. The hottest musician in Africa is Fela Kuti. His club he calls the Shrine. But its no ordinary club, and he’s no ordinary musician. He’s created a new kind of music, Afrobeat – pounding eclectic rhythms […] mixed with incendiary lyrics to openly attack the corrupt and repressive military dictatorships that rule Nigeria and much of Africa. […] So, if you’re determined (and lucky enough) to get in, it’s sure to be a night to remember. But first you have to get there. The Shrine is in one of the most dangerous parts of the city. […] Best to show up before 11pm. […] Fittingly, Fela keeps his own small army, and has surrounded his compound with electric wire. And for spiritual strength and protection, the Shrine’s walls are covered with tributes to “The Ancestors,” gods and humans, alive and dead, who like Fela put their lives at stake for what they believe. When the stakes are this high, anything might happen. Welcome na de Shrine!” (Fela! leaflet)


Carter, 56.
This event, which took place on June 20, 2010 was described in the following way: “You’ve heard his music. You’ve seen the hit Broadway musical. You’ve marveled over his Black Presidential style of fashion. Now, get ready to shop in his rhythmic flow as The Nu Black Magic presents Fela’s Funk & Trunk Shopping Party! This event features the finest independent clothing and jewelry designers in New York City with one of a kind pieces and wearable art. This event is sure to start your summer off right and make you a Fela disciple for sure. And of course listen to the a.mazing sounds of an all female DJ line up as they spin great great beats and tunes!” http://www.cccadi.org/node/619.

Questlove’s full manifesto has been removed from his website, Okayplayer. Excerpt have been reblogged by the website Buggin Out, accessed March 2, 2011. http://bugginout.wordpress.com/2008/09/05/fela-a-plea-from-uestlove/.

Interestingly, Jones’ reading of the dynamics in Borde’s class carry special, timely, resonance. Not only could his description apply to a number of West African dance classes today, but it could also be applied the Fela! audience and the range of investments in the show. He writes: “Beautiful drummers sat at one end of the room behind Percy, ritual priests to a shaman. A small coterie of black women, with Angela Davis Afros or tight cornrows and perfectly knotted gailais, always demand the front position as if to say, 'This is our culture and we claim it.' Behind them were the openly enthusiastic long-haired hippie types, who were there 'digging the vibes' of yet another experience. And there were the chunky Long Island girls -- daughters of bankers, lawyers, doctors -- who, in their fresh, crisp jogging suits, were mingling with different castes of people for the first time in their lives. The expressions of their faces vacillated between consternation and guilty ecstasy.” (Jones, Last Night on Earth, 108.)
Backstage with Riedel: Bill T. Jones Brings Fela to Life,” *New York Post*
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RA_g2rFaJHw.

In 1994 Jones choreographed a piece “Still/Here” – a mixed-media performance based on a number of “survival workshops” that the choreographer facilitated in ten American cities with people who had survived various illnesses. Generating movements inspired by the survivors themselves Jones quilted together the piece. Reviews of this show were varied, the most common of them interpreted the show as “both sensitive and original,” while others saw it as “victim art.” (Anna Kisselgoff "Bill T. Jones's Lyrical Look At Survivors," *New York Times* 2 December 1994; Arlene Croce "Discussing the Undiscussable," *New Yorker* 26 December 1994).


http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MPVQbLcs53Q

One might also consider Beyoncé’s posing in blackface in the March edition of French magazine *L’Officiel* as an additional performance of diasporic deference. The issue, which was meant to honor Fela Kuti, styled Beyoncé as an “African Queen. *L’Officiel* writes, “To celebrate its 90th birthday […] the festivities start with the March issue, with Beyoncé on the cover. She agreed to pose for an incredible fashion shoot, with the theme of African Queen, paying a tribute to the legendary Fela Kuti. Far from the glamorous Sasha Fierce, the beauty posed for the magazine with amazing fashion designers clothes, but also in a dress created by her mother. [It is] A return to her African roots, as you can see on the picture, on which her face was voluntarily darkened.” Translated and reposted in “Beyonce Covers French Magazine…In Blackface,” Clutch, accessed Feb 19, 2011, http://clutchmagonline.com/2011/02/beyonce-covers-french-magazine%E2%80%A6in-blackface/.


Anonymous Producer 1, interview with author, October 24, 2010.

Flier quotation.


Pax Nicholas, percussionist and member of Afrika 7, explains that “Fela was a legend, a hero. I learned so many things from him, and I will always respect him. He came from a very influential family, and due to his wealth and popularity as a musician, he became even more powerful in Nigeria. You can say that to many people he gained the status of a king. And here was the big contradiction: Fela talked a lot about freedom, but he himself behaved like a slave master to us. I really must admit that he treated us very badly. There was a lot of brutality going on in Kalakuta. He had some thugs who would go beat us up people whenever anybody had disobeyed the kings rule, or even when nothing had happened as was my case." Matti Steinitz, “To Challenge a King,” *Wax Poetics*. Africa Issue No 39 (2010): 48.

Olaniyan, “The Cosmopolitan Nativist,” 76.

Fatimah, interview with author. 2/13/10.
A lapa is a piece of fabric worn around the waist by women when practicing West African dance. Lapas cover the backside and mediate sexual attention. They are also a means of self-fashioning and ethnic affiliation.

Allie, interview with author, February 27, 2010.

Christine, interview with author, October 1, 2011.

Jackson, interview with author, August 13, 2011.

It should be made clear that these national categorizations implicate hosts of specific dances that are geographically, ethnically, and contextually specific. It should also be noted that the dances that are taught in most classes, although framed as traditional, often come from national ballets – as the next chapter will discuss. They are choreographies enacted for the stage and as such, are already plucked out of their contexts, already deliberate performances of national Africanness.


Rhonda, interview with author, August 20, 2011.


Alondra Nelson uses “The Factness of Diaspora” with regard to the ways DNA “roots” testing (by companies like African Ancestry) depend on a set of diasporic affective tropes in order to buttress their scientific findings. “The legitimacy of genetic genealogy testing is built on cultural scaffolding,” she writes. “Including the 'authentic expertise' of scientist-entrepreneur Rick Kittles, the process of affiliative self-fashioning embarked upon following the receipt of test results, and the diasporic relatedness that this information may support.” I apply the factness of diaspora to a West African dance class context in order to account for the ways race as ontological essence (i.e. black people are more connected to Africa; black people do West African dance better than other racial groups) depend on a set of ideas around blackness-as-Africaness. Nelson’s theorization is useful here in its underscoring an ambiguity around any firm definitions of diasporic belonging. “The Factness of Diaspora,” *Rites of Return: Diaspora Poetics and the Politics of Memory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 35.

Janice, interview with author, April 16, 2011.

Lucy, interview with author, February 9, 2010.


Sarah, interview with author, October 20, 2009.


Blanche, interview with author, February 1, 2010.

in *Kaiso!: Writings By and About Katherine Dunham*. Edited by VêVê A. Clark and Sara E. Johnson (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2005), 302.

164 Margo, interview with author, October 2, 2010.

165 Susan, interview with author, February 2, 2011.


168 Annette, interview with author, August 3, 2011.


171 Christine, interview with author, October 1, 2011.

172 Earl, interview with author, September 9, 2011.


176 Rhonda.

177 Imani, interview with author, September 13, 2010.

178 Rhonda.


182 Rhonda.


184 Tunde, interview with author, August 19, 2011.

185 Christine.


187 Kweku, interview with author, August 8, 2011.

188 David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford University Press, 2005), 165.

189 Fode, interview with author, September 4, 2011.

190 Ana, interview with author, December 8, 2009.

191 Gloria, interview with author, November 11, 2011.

192 Babacar, interview with author, June 6, 2011.

193 Gloria.

194 Earl.

195 Djafa, interview with author, September 1, 2011.

196 Rhonda.
198 Hartman, Lose Your Mother, 42.
199 Earl.
200 Earl.
203 Earl.
204 Kweku, interview with author, September 3, 2011.
205 Lucy, interview with author, October 17, 2010.
207 Samba interview with author, January 1, 2012.
212 Lucy.
214 James, interview with author, August 19, 2009.
215 Blanche.
216 Nicole, interview with author, October 22, 2011.
217 Saber, interview with author, September 15, 2011.
218 Lucy.
219 Trish.
220 Saben.
221 Kamala, interview with author, April 21, 2010.
222 Lucy.
223 Lamine.
224 Lucy.
225 Jackson, interview with author, July 13, 2011.
226 Natalie, interview with author, June 6, 2010.
227 Nicholas, interview with author, September 1, 2011.
228 Janice.
229 Mark.
230 Trish.
232 Kim.
234 Kim.
235 Rhonda.
236 Alice.
Earl.

Scott, Anna Beatrice. “Spectacle and Dancing Bodies That Matter: Or, if it Don’t Fit, Don’t Force it,” in Meaning in Motion: New Cultural Studies of Dance. Edited by Jane Desmond (Durham: Duke University, 1997), 264.


Schneider, “Archives,” 103.


DeFrantz, “African American Dance: A Complex History.”


Welsh-Asante, “Commonalities,” 73.

Ibid., 77.

Ibid., 81.

Anna Scott adds seven more characteristics to Welsh-Asante’s: low to the earth, undulating from the center outward, polyrhythmic, emphasizing of the pelvic girdle, containing body part isolations, having the whole food touch the ground, and bent knees. “Spectacle and Dancing Bodies That Matter: Or, if it Don’t Fit, Don’t Force it,” in Meaning in Motion: New Cultural Studies of Dance edited by Jane Desmond (Durham: Duke University, 1997), 264.

Ibid.


Welsh-Asante, “Commonalities,” 73.

Ibid., 74.


Anonyms are used to protect participant confidentiality.

References to dialog throughout this discussion on Guinea are drawn from my fieldnotes, not transcriptions of recordings.


The workshop class was facilitated like a regular West African dance class. It began with a warm-up. Then, one of two formats took place: either a new dance was taught by building choreographic segments at each line revolution (accompanied by drumming), or the dance was taught our places while the drummers took a break. Once learned and rehearsed without music, the drummers were invited back and we performed what we had learned with music. At the end of the class we sometimes formed a solo circle, into which each person was required to go.


The number of private conversations I had with Guineans about black diasporic connections and disconnections indicated that while race did not determine who could go on Samba’s trip or who would be accommodated in Guinea, it was a meaningful consideration.

Hall, 226.


Hall, 222.
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