Racialization, Gender, and the Negotiation of Power in Stockholm's African Dance Courses

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> "To just be, it is a way of being, that we Westerners many times lack but that in Africa is taken for granted" (African dance course participant, as cited on www.djembenytt.se)

The marketing and consumption of "African dance"[1] in Stockholm, Sweden are potent sites where gendered and racialized meanings are under fierce negotiation. This paper is an exploration of the micro-politics of globalization, that is, how abstract and generalizing descriptions of processes of globalization are also a part of the negotiation and production of identities in everyday encounters and spaces in the city of Stockholm Sweden.[2] I discuss the ways the travel of peoples, goods, and capital has also brought about new encounters and negotiations of meaning and power that occur in the "non-spectacular" aspects of everyday life (Essed: 1991). "African dance" courses can be understood as specific "contact zones" where meanings of Africa are produced in global dialogues (Ebron 2002:40) and used to negotiate power and identity. Modern meanings, and in particular, those based on bound meanings of "race," geography, and culture, have also necessarily come under reformulation and rearticulation. Questions of who "legitimately" belongs, and what criteria this belonging is based upon, have become hot questions for not only nation-states but also individuals and their local understandings of community and self. These questions and debates frame the interactions and performances of identity even within micro-spaces such as dance courses.

In particular, this paper looks at how racial ideologies are enacted in constitutive yet shifting relation to class, gender, and other ideologies of power. I argue that while processes of globalization (mobility of individuals, ideas, goods) have contributed to the meeting of peoples once thought to be "far away"—power asymmetries articulated through categories of "race," gender, and national belonging, are not necessarily discarded in spaces of African cultural production and consumption in Sweden. Instead, in the dance courses where I have been interviewing, observing, and dancing over the last 10 years debates about “authenticity” and the geographical space of Africa are used to refigure, disrupt, and affirm class, gender, and racialized ideologies of power.

As such these negotiations point to how meanings of “Africa” and “Africans” are not static, but historically specific and under constant reformulation (Mudimbe 1988; Pratt 1992; Ebron 2002). For example, the criteria used to define concepts such as “Africa”, “Africans”, and “African cultural productions” have been given varied significance by different actors positioned in different locations and time-periods. These are meanings that are not only racialized, but also gendered and sexualized. Perhaps most well known are the ways that black African men and women’s bodies have long been a foil onto which Western capitalist longings for a different self, culture, and nation have been projected (Gilman 1985; Morrison 1992; Roediger 1991). At different historical periods, geographical locations, and cultural contexts, racialized understandings of “Europe” and normative “European men and women” have been created through opposition to an imagined “Africa” and “Africans.” These historical imaginings of Africa as an “Other” have been used to legitimate colonialist exploitation as well as specific identities where privilege and subordination were legitimated through intersecting discourses of race, gender, sexuality, and culture.

Yet, as the work of Appiah (1992), Ebron (2000, 2002), Stoller (2002) suggest, even counter arguments that have sought to redeem Africa often unwittingly reproduce colonial categorizations and dichotimizations and re-inscribe “Africa” and “Africans” as unified place and people. As a potent global commodity Africa continues today to be imbued with specific meaning within specific contexts. This paper addresses one such space where Africa is invoked and enacted and discusses how these performances are linked to the cultural politics of race and gender in Stockholm Sweden.

African Landscapes

In urban centers of Europe such as Stockholm Sweden processes associated with neo-liberal economic and political globalization have gouged welfare state benefits and contributed to the creation an employment culture increasingly driven by policies of “flexible employment” and workplace “restructuring.” These policies have produced negative social effects upon men and women in Stockholm, as the 1990s has seen an increase in women’s stress and employment “burn –out” as they try to balance the pressures of career in a gender segregated employment market with the demands of family life. For those men and women who bear the categorization as "migrant" in Sweden, migration to Europe has not often brought the economic security and acceptance sought, instead, many encounter not only a gender segregated employment market but also one that is racialized (De los Reyes 2000). Migrants, and especially those from non-European countries face discrimination in the employment market (Sabuni & Sawyer 2001) and for many migrants, and in particular those carrying markers of a racial and religious "Other" in Europe (for example name, phenotype, appearance), alternative employment, status, and advancement strategies are often used. These strategies can include studying, finding employment in the informal economy, and/or migrating onwards to other European countries, Canada or the United States.

As a group Africans[3] in Stockholm experience relatively high unemployment, and when employed, they tend to find employment overwhelmingly in the low-paid service sector positions (as cleaners, public transportation, and in elder care) (ibid: 2001). However, compared to other "immigrant groups", such as the numerically larger groups of Iranians, Finns, and Greeks who live in Stockholm, African cultural productions are markedly visible in the public landscape of the city of Stockholm. In the last 10 years shop signs can be observed in the Stockholm landscape that read: "Afro-Viking", "African Pearl Hair Salon", "Afro Art", "Tropicana", "Afro Exotic Center" and "African Bazaar". While many of these shops are geared towards servicing the African population in Stockholm with items important to maintaining diasporic community in Stockholm (for example, hair products and styles, clothes, food products, telephone cars, CD and cassettes of music, and videos) dance courses are in comparison a commodification of Africa geared to a non-African mostly ethnically Swedish population.[4] There have also developed in the last five-ten years more tertiary spaces whose emergence can be attributed to the growing popularity of "world music" in Sweden (and Europe) where, in addition to local musicians' participation, well-known artists such as Youssou N'dour and Salif Keita have performed to sold out concert halls.

There is a gendered labor division within the "African landscape" carved out in the city of Stockholm; for example, it is mostly African men who are the primary entrepreneurs in the African discotheque and dance and drum businesses/courses and African women in the sale of food, hair, and clothing. African men's interest in creating public spaces of African need to be understood in relationship to the exclusion of migrant men, and African men in particular, from "Swedish" discotheques, bars, and restaurants. As one of the alternative economic niches carved out as a result of African (men's) migration, the "African dance" courses discussed in this paper is just one public African space in the Stockholm landscape.

Gambian men have a particular history as dance and drum instructors in Sweden, whose specificity according to anthropologist Bawa Yamba (1983; and with Ulla Wagner 1986) can be traced to their specific pattern of migration to Sweden. In comparison to the East Africans who came with grants associated with Swedish development projects, African-American war resisters and jazz musicians, South African and Namibian activists, and Liberian students who came in the 60s and 70s, Yamba suggests that the Swedish political and social climate that greeted the Eritrean and Gambian migrants later in the 1980s differed significantly (1983: 30-31). If the climate was, according to Yamba, "friendly" and the Africans "studious" in the 70s, in the 80s Sweden was in recession when Eritrean's came as political refugees (Yamba 30-31) and Gambian young boys migrated to Sweden mostly for adventure and economic reasons (Wagner and Yamba 1986: 202). Moreover, the economic recession made for markedly different encounters with Swedish society for the two groups and Eritrean's, classified as "political refugees" received a variety of resources and economic support by the Swedish state, whereas Gambians, as holders of three-month visas, received no assistance (paraphrased from Yamba, 30-31).

For Gambian men then, one of the ways to stay in Sweden was to quickly "get attached" to a Swedish woman and one of the few options available to extend their visas (Wagner and Yamba 1986). It is likely that economic and social vulnerability explain why just this group has, since the 1980s, been central in the marketing of African dance (and drum) courses in Stockholm. Gabriel,[5] a Gambian man in his 40s who was then unemployed, linked the economic vulnerability of Africans in Sweden with the dance courses they offered in Stockholm. He said:

> If you are an African, one way to survive is to teach African dance or drum, it doesn't matter if you have never danced professionally or trained at home under someone! Here you can teach them (Swedes) anything and even say you are a 'Masta'!…they (Swedes) will think it is African tradition just because a black is doing it. (August 3, 1995)

Gabriel's description speaks of the difficult time that many Africans, in particular Gambians, have on the Swedish job market. In order to gain employment, Gabriel suggests that some African men re-make themselves into musicians and dancers and benefit from racial stereotypes of musicality and sensuality associated with their bodies.

Barkary, a Gambian dance instructor in his late 40s who had taught in Stockholm for over 15 years, also described his involvement in African dance courses as linked to Swedish cultural politics. Where Gabriel stressed economic marginalization and the unemployment of Africans, Barkary suggested that teaching African dance was not only about economic exchange (he worked as a subway driver), but also about the transformation of negative meanings of Africa. He invoked racialization, culture, and power inequalities when he said:

> I think you become a victim of discrimination and segregation if you don't have a strong self-confidence. I am proud of who I am. When someone looks at me as a Black man I am proud. But when someone comes on the street and says 'you are black!' you become irritated, because he is thinking black is something negative. And this is very serious and important. And this is one of the reasons I am not leaving African dance. You know I drive a subway, for 12 years, and that is how I live. But I won't leave African dance. One of the main reasons [I teach African Dance] is to maintain my culture, to spread it out, so people can learn. 'YES! We [Africans] are here! And you should be proud!' (May 6, 1996)

Both Gabriel and Barkary's description of African dance is framed within a discourse of racialization and marginalization. African dance is used as a way to negotiate and challenge existing power inequalities through both strategically reproducing, as in Gabriel's case, and in Barkary's redefining, historical meanings of Africa. For Barkary, the instruction of African dance in Stockholm contains the possibility of redeeming Africans and African culture from degrading Western, and Swedish, meanings.

Marketing "an Africa"

If black African men were the primary instructors of "African dance" courses in the 1980s through the early 1990s and courses were restricted to the large cities, in 2003 African dance has increased in popularity and courses are now offered from the North of the country to the Southern tip not only in cities, but also towns. There has been another shift as well, as today white Swedish women are at least half of those who market African dance courses and work as dance instructors. Collaboration between instructors exists in this "African scene," for example, it is not uncommon to see web homepages offering African dance and drum courses offered by a black African man and a white Swedish woman "team" who have a family business. As will be later discussed, white Swedish women's participation in dance courses can serve as an "entry port" into the African scene in Stockholm, which sometimes can lead to friendships, sexual contacts, marriages, children, and/or becoming Ebron (2002) calls an "African enthusiast" a person who works to promote African culture (music, dance, art, literature).

On these web pages African dance is marketed similarly; bright colored backgrounds frame texts that give information, dates and prices for "African dance" courses in Sweden as well as offer dance performances for schools and/or companies and parties.[6] More recently tourism to specific African countries, in the form of 2-3 week dance/drum/kora trips, are available to those African culture enthusiasts with more money and time. Such web sites are evidence of how the commodification of culture has become an important "object of economic attraction" central to globalization (Ebron 2002: 164). In these web sites the desire to consume cultural diversity via tourism compress geographical space and time—"Africa" is at the same time both "close" (courses in Sweden) as well as "far away" (in African countries). Shared among advertisements is the concept of *personal transformation* through African dance. For example dance is described as giving: "fun," "joy," "community," "energy giving," "life giving," "harmony," as well as "dancers regain contact with their natural selves." In these spaces, consumption of African culture promises not only to make available physical exercise, but also an alteration in self.

Michel Foucault has written extensively about the ways that political and economic projects are intimately tied with the body; and in particular how understandings of Western bodies, as modern and controlled, were recreated by 18th century Western discourses of self and sexuality (Foucault 1995). His insights have been taken up by scholars who have argued that one way modernity has been negotiated in Western industrialized centers is by contact with and the embodying of people and cultures *imagined* as not modern, but natural and premodern (Stacey 2000; Ebron 2002). This desire for contact with nature and the natural can be traced in the Swedish context to the late 1800s industrialization and the new bourgeoisie class' interest in nature. Yet 20th century Swedish modernization also focused on the individual body as a way to re-shape the nation and its citizens into modern subjects, with body movement and comportment now indexing class and national belonging (Frykman and Löfgren 1987). As many scholars have pointed out, these processes of nation building and the development of new subjectivities have been tied to colonial discourses of gender, race, and sexuality (Stoler 1995; McClintock 1995; Anthias and Yuval-Davis 1993; Ware 1992). For instance, racialized and gendered discourses of Africans and African sexuality as both "natural" and "excessive" have been used to discipline and control white women and their sexuality (Ware 1992; Stoler 1995). Within this context, African dance course spaces can also be understood as "contact zones" of "safe" sexualized contact between white Swedish women and African men that enable women to explore the boundaries of their own racialized desire.

Yet at the same time, African culture and African dance in particular have long been important tools used by Westerners to question and critique Western society and life (Browning 1998). In particular, it is the embodied quality of sensuality attached to Africanness that is lauded by Western dancers of African dance, *just because* sensuality and sexuality are qualities rejected by Western societies. These qualities also invert contemporary Western stereotypic visions of Africa and Africans as "infectious" and in these moments, instead, it is Western society that is "sick." On the global stage, therefore, dystopic images of contemporary Africa are in dialogue with the strategic imagining of Africa as anti-capitalist, a place of tradition, and "an idyllic un-stratified Africa, the Africa of 'African music'" (Ebron 2002:34). This is an Africa that can be consumed in the contemporary context within what Jackie Stacey has called the "cultural supermarket" (2000), a space where especially Western women are presented with the possibility for *self-transformation* through the consumption of commodified "global cultures" (i.e. "Third World" cultures). In this global marketplace, "an Africa" (Ebron 2002) – marked by the particular (and limited) constellation of music, dance, aesthetics – has been fashioned to meet Western desires, longings, and anxieties over modernization.

In Stockholm, therefore, African dance emerges as a marketed, consumable product of leisure; a product that promises not only sensory and bodily pleasures, but also a shift in the self. If the dance instructors were in the early 1990s generally West African men in their 20s-early 40s, today in 2003 white Swedish women in their 30s are at least half of those teaching African dance. However the dance student population has remained the same – students are overwhelmingly female and white Swedish or Finnish women, ranging in age from 20 to the early 50s. A few of the women I met had high paying jobs as lawyers and journalists. However, the majority worked in lower-paid female-dominated social service sectors such as childcare, nursing, dental hygiene, the post office, and social work. These were women who had experienced some of the negative effects of globalization and economic restructuring during the 1990s. Some of them were on full or part time sick leave, with “burn out” and stress symptoms making them unable (or unwilling) to participate in paid work.

For many white middle class women the new gender contract that emerged in the 1960s, where the state sponsored a shift in the ideal of women and work to meet employment needs (Hirdman 1994), has not made good on promises to level men and women’s work activity. Today women in Sweden continue to work more than men and are often described as “working double” as they still have the main responsibility for reproductive work (Nyberg 2003). However, as economic historian Paulina de los Reyes (2000) reminds us, the shift in gender contracts that occurred in the 1960s and supported “women’s” entry into paid work occurred within a context where childless working class white Swedish women as well as minority and migrant women had already been working outside of the home for a long time.[7] The Swedish employment market continues to be both gendered as well as racialized and, as is the case elsewhere in Europe, migrant women are today continuing to “fill the gaps” for Swedish women and the problem of managing earning, caring, and domestic responsibility (Gavanas & Williams 2004; Ehrenreich & Hochschild 2002; Nyberg 2003). However, while the increased demands of society surely affect all women in Sweden it is important to point out that the women in the particular dance courses I attended were not only overwhelmingly white and non-migrant Swedish, but also had expendable income to spend on self-care. Hence, there are clearly class and ethnic dimensions to the strategies that women in Sweden employ to cope with the increased demands they face in the society.

In a society experienced by many dance students as stressful, exercise and a refocus on their own body are perceived as ways to regain a sense of control. "African dance" can thus be placed into this larger frame of geopolitics and perceived social insecurity as courses are strategically marketed to speak back to middle class anxieties and longing for peace of mind and calm. A 2003 brochure marketed a weekend "African dance" workshop that promised energy and happiness:

> "West African dance has its origins in everyday practices and traditional ceremonies and is danced today among other things at parties, weddings and baptisms. The movements are natural and organic, the dances are performed barefoot and accompanied by drums. You train your strength, feeling of the rhythm, and coordination. In communication with the drums you find energy and happiness."[8]

In this brochure the main ingredients of "the Africa" created in African dance course spaces were revealed and weaved together a tantalizing image based on tradition, ceremony, and community. Interestingly, this advertisement specified dance to Western Africa, and provided more context than was usual. However, the Africa that was invoked was one where people were natural, organic, and sensual and where dance students would find something.

That the dance students in the African dance courses I attended sought a sensual transformation was evidenced in the special clothes the women changed into before the course began. Taking off "work" or "street" clothes, most students brought with them to these dance spaces special clothing that was used to aid them in their transformation; armless shirts of light material and tight synthetic pants that cover the legs. Such tights, shorts, leotards, and tee-shirts were also frequently brightly colored, multi-colored, animal print and/or batik-patterned, and women often accessorized their outfits with wooden-bead necklaces and earrings or with scarves that were tied around the hips and sometimes heads. The emphasis on the hips, by tightly wrapping brightly colored scarves around the waist, was often even encouraged by dance teachers, as mobility and "looseness" in the hips was often stressed by instructors to students. What is significant is that these were not clothes that would be worn outside of the African dance course space, either for work or for leisure. The dance clothes seemed to aid women in transforming their bodies into more natural, and thus more African, bodies. Sometimes women would also apply lipstick and eyeliner before the class started, suggesting that for many of the women, sensuality and femininity were integral to their African dance.

In fact, the theme of *becoming a real woman* emerged in interviews as a potent frame for understanding oneself as a dancer of African dance. For example, one student, an unemployed postal worker in her 40s, said that African dance allowed women dancers to "re-connect with our feminine and womanly sides. We can be real women again." This imagined re-connection with a more *natural womanly self* could be related to modern Swedish gender equality discourse that promised that a more equal division of reproductive labor in the home would accompany women's entry into paid work. Instead, many Swedish women now work double duty, and the effects of this "become part of the body in the form of tensions, seen in bunched shoulders and stiff hip movements" (Berg 2001:168 translation my own). It is through consuming Oriental and African dance that some Swedish women envision their own gendered transformation and the possibility to revisit a womanly self that has been worn out by working to meet multiple demands. This reconnection with womanhood is framed by understandings of "traditional gender identities" that existed in a pre-modern Swedish past, as well as imagined "traditional" gender relations of specific migrants in Sweden. White Swedish women's consumption of cultural products associated with the lifestyles and "cultures" of patriarchical "Others," as well as their talk about becoming "real women" again through this consumption, suggest the ambivalent, contradictory, and paradoxical gendered aspects of commodification and consumption.

Annika, a white Swedish instructor of African dance who was in her 30s, stressed the transformative aspects of dance when she explained why African dance was so popular among women in Sweden. She said:

> There is a big sense of *community* in the [dance] courses. You can come and look like you want. The way you look, *any kind of body*. You don't need to come in and conform to a certain form, like in Classical [dance]. Then there are those who go because it is a very good form of exercise, but then it also opens you up, it affects people...you move

> your body and in an organic way. Your body feels good and it influences your soul and everything. Your psyche. So that people keep at it year after year. People become so very changed. (May 10, 1996)

Here belonging in community and alternative criteria of the body are named as important reasons why women dance African dance. Dance is also described as producing an effect in the dancer—they become "open", "organic", and "feel good" in the body and in the soul and psyche. It is through the body in movement that the soul and psyche are changed.

Of course, African dance in Stockholm also undergoes a considerable process of interpretation and translation that is related to the cultural politics of belonging in Stockholm. Two African teachers with whom I spoke noted that dance steps and music were tailored to (what they saw as) student's expectations and ideas about Africa in general, and African dance in particular. This meant that they taught dance movements that were "easily broken into increments," those that "were less complicated". Further, dances taught in dance courses were often described as "traditional dances" and did not include those urban African dances popular on the dance floors in urban settings in both African and European countries.ix Both teachers spoke disdainfully about the ways that many of the (women) students regarded these courses not as spaces of complex cultural transmission, but, as Barkary said, as "a place to exercise", to "sweat and go home." Here some of the power asymmetries within the commodification of African culture emerged — students' interest in physical exercise and reconnection with a "natural" self clashed with instructors' stakes in presenting African dance as a "real" dance form that requires years of training, studying, and deep specific knowledge.

Annika also complained about students' pre-conceived notions of African dance and their low expectations:

> A lot of people think that African dance [is] oh it is only to hop around and be free and not do anything but that is in fact not African dance, that is your own dance to a drum. That is also cool because you ... it is using a lot of improvisation. And there you feel yourself to be free, but later you get steps. To go into it and work...that is how I have been taught, and that is what I would like to pass on. (May 10, 1996)

Here “African dance” was described as simple, as improvisational, as being “free” to move to drum music. This was in implicit comparison to the many years of dedicated study required of students of “Western” dance forms such as ballet. Annika responded to the characterization of African dance as “just hopping around” by asserting the importance of learning “steps.” Indeed she suggested that like other dance forms, in African dance there are specific “steps” that must be “taught” and repeated, and that they would not necessarily be quickly “validated” as correct.

While both Annika and Barkary earlier attributed African dance’s popularity to its *openness* as a dance form, distancing it from the “strict” controlled movements in more “classical” dance, they also asserted a similarity between dance forms by describing the boundaries of African dance. This contradiction mimics the “sedimented logics” that Ebron argues have been historically created in relation to “African music” – on the one hand, African cultural production is seen as “creating communal experience,” but on the other hand, it remains in “a self-conscious dialogue with Western standards” (2002: 35).

Barkary drew parallels between the transgression of the boundaries of African dance to racialized inequalities in Swedish society. By positioning himself as a male “immigrant” in Swedish society, he challenged Swedish dance teachers’ authenticity as instructors of African dance:

> People tell me “I dance *Saba*” but it is their teacher who has taught them *saba*. And what kind [of saba] is it?! There is *Wolof, Jolla* [ethnic and language groups], many others play *saba* so differently. It feels a bit stupid but you don’t say anything. I think it is very important, I am not criticizing anyone, what is most important is that our culture is spread. But it is important that it is not spread the wrong way, so that it can always continue. If you are going to teach *kokou* ... it is about respect you need to really go out and learn *kokou*. Many people go on a trip and then open a school— it is strange. What do they think? I have been living here [in Sweden] for 19 years and have listened to Swedish music, but I am not going to try to teach Swedish music and say ‘this is what Swedish music is like!’ It is about respect! But with African dance, it is a way to express feelings, it isn’t just to write and ... I am still trying to learn, and I can’t understand how they take it up so quickly. The Swedes were able to dance as well as anyone else, but it

> takes patience and to really go in and learn. It takes more then to go down for two weeks or a month in Africa and learn it is much more. It is very limited. You learn to dance as the teacher every country and every culture has its own steps and tune. But the steps I teach [I say] 'it is important to recognize the step and what you are doing, how they [in an African culture/countries] do it when they do it (May 6, 1996).

Here, Barkary's comments spoke squarely back to Swedish cultural politics and brought the issue of power to bear on the dynamics of translating African dance into the Swedish context. In particular he argued that African dance was decontextualized when taught by white Swedish women in Sweden, and particular that dance steps which were formed in specific contexts (in Africa) have been lifted and reproduced in Sweden without recognition to their origins. He critiqued the white Swedish women who (like Annika) opened "African dance" schools in Stockholm and suggested that they lacked respect not only for "African dance," but Africans as well. He compared Swedes' relationship to African culture to his relationship to Swedish culture, and asked rhetorically why Swedes who travel to African countries to study dance did not reciprocate his acknowledgement of the rich complexity of Swedish culture. The heavy weight of many centuries of unequal power-relations between Africa and Europe frame his statement as Swedes' position of power and privilege in Africa contrast sharply with his position as a migrant in Sweden. Further, it should not be forgotten that the introduction of white Swedish women as dance instructors carves away from an economic niche created by West African men in Stockholm. Yet this is not part of Barkary's explicit challenge, instead he introduces racialized understandings of space, place, and culture to critique white Swedish women's *legitimacy* as dance instructors.

Central to Barkary's challenge to Swedish instructors' legitimacy to teach "African dance" was the concept of a geographical Africa. Africa and physical proximity to Africa were important cultural currency for validation of one's positioning in relation to "African dance". According to Barkary, Swedish teachers were brazen and disrespectful primarily because they had not spent much time in Africa, and hence lacked a deep knowledge and respect for the complexity of African dance. This legitimating device emerged when Barkary discussed the difference between the Swedish and African contexts for transmitting “African dance”. He described how he had grown up with dance, and referred to a specific context and community:

> What happens is that the experiences I have, they are due to the fact that I learned to play [drums]. It was an old man [uncle] who taught us and people [were] watching while we were dancing. To mirror and to play [the drums]. Those are two different things to mirror and to dance African dance. ‘What is it that happens when you dance?’ ‘Why are you doing this?’ [What happens is that] you come more and more into yourself. This is how you have to truly learn. (May 6, 1996)

Once again an African context is invoked as the more “legitimate” space for the transmission of “African dance”. Instead of the Swedish dance class settings, with their mirrored walls, fluorescent lights, and repetition of the same dance steps over and over, Barkary invoked a context of kinship and community, where an elder male taught and friends and family watched. “Africa” is an important conceptual referent and source of legitimation to both dance instructors and students alike; as contact with, birth in, and duration of time in African countries embellished people with cultural capital.

Where one learns “African dance” mattered also to Annika. As a white, Swedish, woman working as a teacher in a sector dominated by black African men, Annika had encountered questions as to her legitimacy as an instructor of African dance by both students and teachers. As for Barkary, geographical spaces *in* Africa were also significant legitimating sources. For example, she pointed out that she had taken “more than ten trips to Guinea Bissau and to Western countries to participate in dance classes,” a fact also noted in her dance brochures, in which she was described as:

> Annika: West-African Dance. Artistic leader and founder of … [name of dance group]. With more than 10 years of experience of African dance, and with recurring regular trips to Africa along with a burning love for dance as an expressive form for the desire for wholeness and a meeting- over-boundaries, Annika has been given respect and acknowledgement as an inspirational pedagogue and dancer within Sweden and outside of the country, not least in West Africa.

Experiences outside of Sweden, frequent travels to Africa, and the respect (both inside of Sweden and “not least” in West Africa!) were used in the pamphlet to silence bound understandings of ”race”, geography, and African diasporic cultural production. In this way, Annika spoke back to the racialized economic imbalances between Europe and Africa that Barkary raised.

Annika also described how dance courses were sites where hegemonic historical understandings of African peripherality, and European centrality were critiqued, and even occasionally inverted. Annika invoked this inversion when she responded to my question about how she was received when she took students to Africa to study dance:

> They appreciate it a lot when we go down [to Africa]. Most of them, there are exceptions, the majority were incredibly positive, we went down, for one times sake the whites come down, we learn their culture, instead of going down to change and take away everything they have. Instead of going down to judge, we came as small thankful pupils/children. (May 10, 1996)

In this configuration, “Africa” was the source for African dance, and Sweden was presented as peripheral to such cultural production. Whites went to the “source”, a geographical Africa, to “learn” rather than to “change and take”, and Africans were described as appreciative to be, for once, teachers rather than pupils. In both Annika and Barkary’s descriptions bound racialized understandings of people, places, and cultures are meanings that can be strategically employed or discarded to meet individual dance instructors desire for legitimacy.

Not surprisingly, bound understandings of bodies and their movements also framed student meaning-making and performance within the “African dance” courses. I became aware of the salience of the usage of bound meanings of people, place and culture early on in the dance courses. On the first day of Annika’s class, while we were in the locker room changing into our “dance clothes”, some students asked each other whether the instructor was a “Swede” or an “African”. One student would only take courses offered by Africans and said that Swedish teachers were “unable to really dance African dance. Africans have dance naturally”. After hearing that Annika was “a Swede” this student packed up her clothes and decided to leave the course. These clusters of meaning also were invoked when some students compared their own (named as “Swedish”) dance abilities to the Barkary’s (named as “African”). Finally, Annika also invoked African difference when she described the differences between Swedish and African bodies:

> Well, generally I think that Africans have an ‘earthy’ feeling that we [Swedes] have to work to get. We have to really consciously work to go inward and try to find that feeling, work [ourselves] downwards to the earth and find that about dance while they...yes, and they just have it. It is so incredibly wonderful to see the musicality in the body that isn’t as obvious for us. ... in part also because we don’t have it in our society in the same way. ... Then the cold does its job, my God it is like, you can’t bend steel! ... One becomes softer when one is down there [in Africa]. I can feel it myself, one is softer. One becomes more relaxed. The climate also plays its part in many aspects. (May 10, 1996)

In this description, African and Swedish bodies were polar opposites. African bodies were “soft” when compared with “hard” Swedish bodies. If African bodies were more genuinely “earthy,” “soft” and musical, Swedish bodies had to work hard to “soften”, bend, and go inwards and downwards towards the earth and dance. These differences were, in Annika’s estimation, due to society and climate. It was through “African dance,” work, and travel to geographic Africa in particular, that Swedes “worked” to make their bodies like Africans. Africa was created as the *space* where bodies were “natural”, “soft”, and closer to earthy “instincts,” qualities that Swedes were imagined to lack. Once again differences, in culture and regional belonging, were inscribed on the body.

However bound notions of race, culture, and nationality present a serious dilemma to those who sought to transmit African dance in Stockholm, as well as those white Swedish women who strove to consume African dance. For if African dance were “natural” to Africans, how then would it be possible for “stiff Swedes” to learn? Barkary addressed stereotypical notions of Africans having more “natural” dance abilities than Swedes by strategically re-working links between biology and culture:

> Many of you think Africans are natural dancers and that Swedes cannot hear the rhythm of the drums, and thus you cannot dance. But this is

> not true, we all grow up hearing the beat of the drum, we originate from the same place and that is our mother's stomach. The first thing we hear as humans is the boom boom boom of our mother's heart. (February 26, 1996)

Barkary creatively invoked the same language of biology implied in people's characterizations of "African" and "Swedish" natures. Indeed, he later told me when I interviewed him that he was tired of hearing that "Africans have dance in their blood". Instead, Barkary when referring to *dance students,* invoked the common language of maternity, as he drew an analogy between African dance and music and with the experience in the womb. Here, the sound of our mother's heart was a powerful equalizer to charges of biologically different "natures," and the boundaries of a community of African dance were opened to include white dancers.

Yet embellishing nationality with specific "natures" can also invest black Africans with cultural capital and authority as transmitters of African culture in ways that ultimately prove beneficial to African instructors. Some Africans employed these ideas to strategically present themselves as experts. Here "nature", an essence of racism, was re-worked to create employment for at least a few of the many unemployed Africans in Stockholm and challenge the "authenticity" of white Swedish women who have been marketing themselves as instructors of African dance.

This irritated white women instructors like Annika because it challenged and de-legitimated her abilities as a teacher of "African dance:"

> To be African, and that means drummers too, if only you are African, they [Swedes] think it's right, what you do is right just because you are ... [African]. And that might not be right? You could hear a person playing in the subway and you just think 'No!' But people think that it is correct just because it is a black that is doing it. That can also be translated to dance ... someone doing it that really can't do much. But people come to that person anyways, just because, just because he is black. (May 10, 1996)

For Annika, linking culture, nationality, and race held little social meaning, and she criticized the ways male African bodies, as black bodies, were perceived to be more "natural" musicians and dancers than Swedes, and white Swedish women in particular. Yet whether she agreed or not with these meanings, it was clear from her responses that bound racialized meanings of people, place, and culture required careful negotiation if she was to be taken as a "legitimate" teacher of "African dance." She did this creatively later in the interview when she said, "I have asked myself very often 'do I have a right to do this as a white?' [But] Mamadou has always supported me. He just says 'there is no difference between black and white. The main thing is that you have respect and that you are an artist'" (May 10, 1996). While she strove to legitimate herself, she couldn't escape the discourse of European imperialism and cultural theft in Africa that haunted her efforts. Yet she chose instead to highlight those moments when such boundaries are transgressed and suggested that sincerity in learning was more important than geopolitical power inequalities between Africans and Swedes in Sweden.

Racialization and Cultural Politics of African Dance

"African dance" was not only an economic niche for black African men living in the periphery of the Swedish economy, and a cultural one for stressed out white Swedish women to through an encounter with an imagined Africa, and meet their natural womanly selves. It was also a space where people *performed* "Africa" to debate racialized, gendered, and sexualized understandings of belonging and community in Stockholm. As such, dance classes were "contact zones" where peoples historically imagined as "far away" and distant from each other negotiated identities and power. In these particular spaces "African dance" was commodified and formed through the desires of middle class white Swedish women and working class black African men, desires that were at the same time rooted in Swedish particularities and broader historical and global relations. The cultural politics of belonging in Stockholm, and in particular hegemonic and static meanings of people, place, and culture were reproduced, but also strategically opposed. The huge pop music scene, modern and technologically sophisticated (Palmberg & Kirkegaard 2002) remained outside of these processes, even though they are perhaps more central to peoples daily lives in urban African cities. The Africa created in dance spaces was neither urban nor modern, and instructors faced pressure to re-present an authentic Africa grounded within a "natural" pre-modernity as they at the same time struggled to draw in historical and contemporary power inequalities and geopolitical relations between Africa and Europe.

As such the Africa performed and debated in particular spaces such as dance courses in Stockholm must be understood as formed through, and negotiating, power relations embedded within the processes of commodification and Western demands for "authenticity," "pre-modernity" and understandings of naturalness. These are all potent ingredients for identity work as men and women in these spaces nationalize their bodies and movements to critique, as well as to legitimate their own, and others, gendered and racialized belonging. While static, bound understandings of nation and racialization were a potent bundle of meanings to be reckoned with, Barkary, Annika, and the students I spoke with, all portrayed the criteria of belonging and community as under fierce negotiation, and constant change. Their performances of Africa within Stockholm's dance courses all pointed to the ways that power is constituted in multiple, contradictory, and conflicting intersections of ideologies of "race," gender, class and geopolitics and how in the end, mobilizing boundaries along lines of "race," gender, and class is always available to people because of the unequal power relationships among cultural producers and consumers in Sweden, and indeed, globally.

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Notes

[1] "African dance" is a non-specific term often used in Sweden to refer most broadly to body movements performed to (live) drum music.

[2] Thanks to Isar Godreau and Diana Mulinari for our discussions about the politics of "ethnic" dance courses and to Deborah Thomas for constructive editorial feedback. The interviews cited in this paper were conducted as a portion of a larger Ph.D. research project on Swedishness, racism, and Black diasporic identities in Stockholm (Sawyer 2000, 2002) conducted during 1995-6. During this period I participated in three different introductory and intermediate level "African dance" courses offered in Stockholm and conducted participant observation as well as structured tape-recorded interviews with instructors and dance students.

[3] When I refer to Africa, I am referring to "Black Africa", that is, sub-Saharan Africa. The reason for this distinction is that many Africans themselves often make a distinction between Arab northern Africa and "Black Africa," and because I believe that the stereotyped racialized and sexualized images associated with Black peoples though overlapping with stereotypes of Arab Africans, are distinct.

[4] From here onwards the term Swedish will be used to refer to those people who have not migrated to Sweden. However in an effort to mark opposition to the racialized aspects of the everyday usage of the term Swedish (as white), the term *white* Swede will be used to point out that not all Swedes are white

[5] All names of informants have been changed to protect their anonymity.

[6] The sense of being a "community" has been strengthened via the web newspaper newspaper www.djembenytt.se (new djembe) that provides information on different "African dance" and drum courses, workshops, and trips to African countries being offered in Scandinavia.

[7] For example women were the *majority* of labour migrants to Sweden up until 1955 and worked mainly in the sector of "housework" as well as the textile industry (de los Reyes 2000: 36).

[8] All translations from Swedish to English are my own.