

WOMEN AND MIGRATION(S) II



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Cover image: FIRELEI BÁEZ for Marie-Louise Coidavid, exiled, keeper of order, Anacaona, 2018. Oil on canvas. Installation view: 10th Berlin Biennale, Akademie der Künste (Hanseatenweg), Berlin, 9 June 9-September 2018. Photo: Timo Ohler. Cover design by Anna Gatti

24. Sustaining and Retaining

A Social Ecological Reflection on Cultural Dance Performance for African Women and Femmes in Higher Education

Arielsela Holdbrook-Smith

For Black students of migrant backgrounds at Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs) in the United States, Afro-diasporic cultural organizations offer an opportunity to find and take up space in ostracizing campus environments. The annual cultural celebrations hosted by these organizations are highly appealing to newcomers and seasoned students alike. These highly anticipated, student-led showcases become the stage for storytelling, meaning-making, and cultural connection. Between the artistic performances, the food catering, and the community collaborations, they are sites of self-definition and establishment of community, of creatively engaging with our migrant stories and journeys from the continent.

Cultural dances from a breadth of diasporic origins are often a highlight of collegiate cultural celebrations. Dance, as a cultural tool significant to many cultures of the African continent and its diaspora, prompts full body commitment and an opportunity for healing that only movement can provide. From a social-ecological framework, the use of dance among young adults from African immigrant backgrounds reveals a story about community resistance, resilience, and healing. For women and femmes of African migrant backgrounds, participation in cultural dance performances is a declaration of agency and identity, and a window to collective liberation.

An informal survey of ten women and femmes who participated as undergraduates in the annual Celebration of Africa hosted by the African Student Association at the University of California, San Diego over a period of seven years yielded key themes such as identifying (with) and remembering the migratory experience through cultural celebration. The graduates' heritages encompass multiple countries and regions across the continent, from Nigeria to the Democratic Republic of Congo. The responses assert that these community-based representations carry impact on every social-ecological level, from individual to societal.

African dance is critical to engaging in post-colonial pedagogy, and African Student Associations become vessels of decolonization for participants internally and externally. Ojeya Cruz Banks, a Denison University professor of Dance and Black Studies, articulates in her writing that "dance acts as a force for recovering non-Western forms of empowerment" (Cruz Banks 2010). The individual experience of partaking in dance performances is one of restoring agency. As women and femmes of African descent, some survey participants noted dancing in the cultural celebrations as an exercising of bodily autonomy and self-determination that is not always afforded to Black women and femmes. It is a performance that addresses the violence of internalized anti-Blackness, xenophobia, and misogynoir through the empowerment of moving our bodies in ways that declare pride. It is a bold reclamation of self in response to the 'othering' that occurs in university campus climates.

Interpersonally, as the choreographing students teach others, they hand down a foundational campus community history that exists between generations of students as a sort of cultural relic. As explained by multiple surveyed participants, it is a community-building, participatory experience that cultivates a sense of belonging among members. It is an artistic form of knowledge-sharing amongst peers of similar backgrounds, interpreting experiences of identity in tandem. The very process of collaborative choreographing and practicing for the culminating performance builds social networks, defining the stories we want to tell in the time we have at this institution and what the community will signify for present and future students. Collectively, the experience creates a home away from home, particularly for international and first-generation university students. Participants in these Afro-diasporic

dance groups often reflect upon this process as an important bonding experience during their undergraduate years.

For participants, dancing and choreographing for these cultural celebrations is a manifestation of joy as resistance. Afro-diasporic cultural celebrations, such as the University of California, San Diego's Celebration of Africa, are about claiming space. Celebration of Africa vocalizes the presence of a Black campus community that asserts its ownership of campus space physically and figuratively. It offers the opportunity to engage with African arts on a community level that extends to both local and global communities.¹ Celebrity appearances are a highlight feature of some events, while others may focus more on giving a spotlight to local African businesses in the area. Regardless, the emphasis on community reverberates throughout each celebration. Dancers in past Celebration of Africa events, for example, have had a unique opportunity to collaborate with local African drummers and musical performers in the San Diego area. The mutual support raises awareness for community resources while also providing a space to share in African creative expression with local organizers.

On a larger societal scale, university cultural celebrations address the exclusion of African immigrants from the migration narrative in the United States. Dance, as a form of cultural expression at these events, places into conversation the intersectional identities of being Black, African, and immigrant in America, pushing for visibility of Black migrants in a narrative which disproportionately impacts the African community. Dance performances in Celebration of Africa originate from multiple regions, addressing the heterogeneity of African cultures. Celious and Oysman posit that "racial identity theories, however, typically handle race as a simple Black-White dichotomy that overlooks within-group heterogeneity" (Celious and Oysman 2001). In one night, multiple groups take the stage to represent their cultures and histories, articulating the unique salience of their own cultural experiences and rejecting monolithic notions of the African experience. Our cultural contexts as women and femmes of African migrant backgrounds, while

1 The differences in celebrations between African Student Associations at various American universities somewhat depend on funding, as some institutions provide greater funding to student cultural organizations than others.

similar in some aspects, are also widely varied with nuances that deserve to be heard and respected.

Collegiate cultural shows remain significant for African-identifying women and femmes of migrant backgrounds, as they provide space for self-definition and community-building. As these events support students in making sense and meaning of their historical, cultural, and individual experiences, they also provide an opportunity for unapologetic celebration. The prioritization of joy as a gateway to resilience and autonomy creates a foundational environment for women and femmes to connect with others who look like them and who may share similar experiences. In the transition between cultures and geographies, cultural celebrations are a space of coming into our own as adults determining our individual and communal futures through the interpretation of the social and historical contexts that influence our multidimensional existences.

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