

The Spectacle of Globalization: Increasing Cultural Sensitivity in Order to Conserve Artistic Integrity

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Abstract

With the increased globalization of dance forms and touring productions, the presentation of the body and movement rest precariously between “dance” and “spectacle.” The high transfer of images and cultural knowledge risks misinterpretation, objectification, and exotification as it transforms into spectacle when presented outside its cultural context. Choreographers Faustin Linyekula, and Cynthia Oliver, among others, have maintained a heightened awareness to cultural specification and a sensitivity towards the presentation of images across cultural contexts so that the integrity of their art work is conserved.

In this age of technology and social networking sites, the dissemination of images seems to flatten the world within seconds. It would appear as if the easy exchange of information could eliminate national and cultural boundaries; however, I would argue that the ubiquitous transfer of images and cultural knowledge is at an even greater risk of misinterpretation, objectification, and exotification.

A short video clip used by the Central District Forum of Arts and Ideas in Seattle to market choreographer Cynthia Oliver’s *Rigidigidim De Bamba De: Ruptured Calypso* illustrates this argument (Oliver, *YouTube*). This video footage is what I would define as spectacle, the intentional or unintentional objectification of the body and dance forms that becomes a presentation of the exotic and virtuosic skills. Jane Desmond writes, “spectacle, an emphasis on sights, sounds, and motion, replaces narrative and with it the possibility of historical reflection”(xvi). Erasure of this historical reflection draws a blindfold over the historically unequal positions of communities and individuals, neglecting the power dynamics both in politics and economics as well as viewing. Through the lens of dance and performance, the globalization of forms and touring productions can easily become spectacle.

On the continuum of spectacle, there is the possibility for performances to stay within the control of the author who carefully leads the viewer through the cultural specificity adhered to the body and the movement, so that the performances can be translated across cultural platforms. In stating that cultural specificity is adhered to the body, I want to emphasize that identity and cultural production are constructions not stagnant truths (Chatterjea xiv). Additionally, I want to highlight the immediacy of dance in this discussion of identity, because the focus on the body draws attention to physical traits that are perceived to mark identity. As a result, social and cultural differences are seen as marked on the body as “natural” truths and race becomes a signifier of culture rather than a socially constructed discourse (Desmond xiv-xv). This is particularly important in light of this discussion on spectacle, because identity is a process by which the individual’s

subjective experience is affected by discursive practices. This becomes problematic when the discursive practices are created by hegemonic structures that inscribe degrading views of identity on an individual's bodily markers, making race and other attributes a signifier of cultural traits.

Additionally, it is important to note the plurality of identity and cultural practices and to note that identity exists on the micro level as a process of becoming for the individual completely relational to their positionality. Problems arise with cultural identity when it is used as an indicator of universality (Hall, 2001 26). Spectacle frequently glosses over differences in order to create a uniform Other.

I want to draw attention to the works of two choreographers who strategically avoid spectacle: Faustin Linyekula and Cynthia Oliver. These two artists, among others, have maintained a heightened awareness to cultural specification and a sensitivity towards the presentation of images across cultural contexts so that the integrity of their artwork is conserved. Their works reveal identity's dance between how we are recognized and how we choose to "struggle, resist, negotiate, fashion, stylize, produce, or perform" the recognition (Hall, 1996 14).

While Linyekula and Oliver's histories are vastly different, the former from the Democratic Republic of Congo and the latter a Bronx born, Virgin Island reared performer, they share a similar history of coming from countries negotiating post-colonialism and movement informed by Africanist sensibilities as described by Brenda Dixon Gottschild, Kariamu Welsh, and Ananya Chatterjea. The Euro-American world has often fantasized black Africa, intrigued by the traditions and practices that it has perceived as primitive, uncivilized, and sexually promiscuous. As a result, Oliver and Linyekula's work faces a list of expectations and stereotypes when presented beyond the Congo or the Caribbean to Euro-American audiences that either falls prey to misinterpretation or trivialization.

According to Virginie Dupray, manager of Congolese artist Faustin Linyekula, Linyekula does not like the stereotyping and pigeonholing of African artists (Personal interview). Faustin says: "I am a dancer. I am an African. Yet I am not an African dancer" (van Reybrouck). He tries to avoid festivals, which specifically showcase African contemporary dance in order to avoid the instant comparison of African artists who come from different countries with different economic cultural, political, and religious backgrounds (Dupray). Linyekula is interested in the personal territory of an artist and how he constructs a universe based on personal history rather than being a voice for all Congolese or all Africans (Voisin 12; Gottschild, 2007). However, Linyekula has realized that if he chooses to present work on the proscenium stage, he must play with the expectations of being African in order for his voice to be heard. "I used to think that it was enough for me to just tell my story. Then I realized that I had also to bring into my story the question of how it is perceived—how am I perceived" (Gotschild, 2007).

In 2007, Faustin Linyekula and Studios Kabako performed *Festival of Lies* in the Philadelphia Live Arts Festival. *Festival of Lies* is a poignant exposé of Congo's troubled past of colonization and revolutions that has confounded Linyekula's national identity (Linyekula). The piece not only tackles critiquing Congo's political history, but also dispels some of the stereotypes associated with African contemporary dance and reconstructs the proscenium stage. The audience sits around small café tables that line the

stage, eliminating the division between the audience and the performer as on the typical proscenium stage. The set up is more inclusive so that the audience is at eye level with the performer and is not confined to their chair. To begin the night, Linyekula picks up the mike to introduce his performers and to encourage the audience to support the arts by helping themselves to the cuisine provided at the bar. He insists that everyone get up at any time during the performance to make sure they are fed. Like all good Euro-American audience goers, no one leaves their seat once the performance begins. Everyone is focused on the work unfolding, not wishing to interrupt the atmosphere by filling his or her plate. However, throughout the evening, the invitation to converse with fellow guests or partake in the feast during the performance remains open.

Additionally, Linyekula creatively avoids the stereotypes of the highly sexualized, muscular African male body. At times this stereotype is hard to avoid, especially when dance calls for a certain level of athleticism and control of the body in order to express one's self. Thus, the highly sexualized, muscular body is hard to escape as Linyekula and his dancers are well trained with toned bodies that define beauty. According to French dance journalist Gérard Mayen, the valorization of the body privileged in African dance, particularly the male body displaying a nude torso, falls prey to the white gaze, which is intrigued with the exotic, sexual vitality of the black body (Mayen 48, 170).

About halfway through the piece, the dancers begin to tear off each other's clothes in a violent, sexual manner. The carved muscles become visible as the three are stripped bare except for tight black biker shorts. At that point, however, Linyekula interrupts the possibility to consume the bodies by calling for a short break since none of the audience has gotten any food to eat. By disrupting consumption, Linyekula inhibits the passively viewing of performance. The short intermission provides the audience time and space to consciously process the visual information and recognize the associations, images, and stereotypes that it may perceive. Whether or not the audience takes this opportunity to reflect, the intermission refocuses the attention on filling one's plate and conversing rather than on the bodies of the performers.

According to cultural theorist Stuart Hall, Caribbean identity, like the Congolese identity, is a problematic one, because of the Caribbean's long history of colonization and enslavement. As stated earlier, one's identity is informed by discursive practices. The Caribbean identity has internalized colonial practices of objectification and misrecognition creating a necessity to redefine one's own identity (Hall, 2001 31). However, the search for one's origins becomes impossible when the indigenous population has been completely wiped out, and the majority of the population has been transplanted there (Hall, 2001 26).

Cynthia Oliver's *Rigidigidim De Bamba De: Ruptured Calypso*, which premiered in 2009 at the Painted Bride Arts Center in Philadelphia, features six women from the Caribbean diaspora (Oliver, Performance). From Hall's perspective, Oliver's cast presents a twice diasporized Caribbean identity, the first diaspora being the Caribbean itself. The women's stories intertwine to weave a complex interplay of text, movement, and sound that pays homage to Calypso. In her Choreographer's Note, Oliver describes Calypso as "a music of social commentary, of humor, and an indicator of physical, political, and intellectual prowess" (Oliver, Choreographer's Note). Oliver's community of women idolizes Calypso and the Caribbean carnival wishing to return to the Caribbean

where dancing is socially accepted and where they would not be constantly viewed as an outsider.

The marketing clip used by Central District Forum of Arts and Ideas to sell *Ruptured Calypso* glosses over the artistic integrity of the performance and instead focuses on the sexual energy. The press quotes too—“erotically charged rhythmic dance,” “pumping, rotating, figure-eighting hips,” and “controlled chaos”—depict a primitive, erotic spectacle (Oliver, *YouTube*). Additionally, the subversive power of the movement is completely lost in the frozen images that highlight the sweat and the curves and silence the voice. The video clip splits the dancers’ mind/body vehicle by showing the feats of the body removed from the intellect. Brenda Dixon Gottschild surmises that whites have feared black bodies because “black bodies weren’t dumb; they were extensions of black minds—intelligent minds—in a physical landscape where the Cartesian mind/body split refused to take hold” (Gottschild, 2003 44). However, due to the mind/body division in Euro-American culture, products of the mind are valued more than the labor produced by the body. As a result, in this video clip, *Ruptured Calypso*’s message of resilience, self-love, and Caribbean pride is lost without the illumination of the geographical, historical and personal lineages of each dancer and their relationship to Calypso, a culturally constructed and ever changing form (Oliver, *Choreographer’s Note*). Additionally, this video clip instantly flattens Calypso to one dimension and leaves the audience free to generalize the staged experiences as representing all Caribbeans and to interpret the movement and costuming as solely sexual rather than a complex dialogue of sexual, secular, and sacred as presented in the actual production.

The piece begins with six women center stage with their knees bent low, circling their hips in a slow motion. Their eyes are slightly gazed towards the floor catching the outer rim of their hip circle. Each are dressed in a slightly different color scheme, but with the same tight, thin fabric that clings to their bodies’ curves. Nehassaiu deGannes coaxes the audience, “You’re going to see a lot of *winin*, but its not always what you think it means”(Oliver, *Performance*). These hip circles called *winin* are “the cream of the crop,” but like all the imagery presented in *Ruptured Calypso*, it has more meaning and baggage than its initial impression. So when deGannes asks the ensemble the cream of which crop, sugar cane or cotton, the silent hanging answer is neither crop, but the response is unanimously for sugar cane. As a metaphor for all the difficulties presented by the cast, sugar cane can be used as an antidote to the poisons of colonialism just like the women use *winin* to preserve their spirits when ruptured from the Caribbean.

Oliver’s choreography and vocal direction dare the audience to interpret the movement as solely sexual. As deGannes mentions, *winin* can be interpreted either as hypersexual activity or the summoning of a spirit. Often misinterpreted is the extended use of the pelvis. According to Gottschild, the Africanist aesthetic privileges the “democratic autonomy” of body parts where as the Europeanist aesthetic wishes to erase what Gottschild terms the three “b’s,” buttocks, belly, and breasts (Gottschild, 2003 147). Since Euro-American societies perceive the pelvis as a sexual symbol, movement of that area is considered lewd and vulgar (Welsh Asante 209). However, unlike Euro-American societies that not only cover up “disgraceful” private parts, but also abstain from moving these areas, African dance does not require the pelvis to be stationary.

True to the spirit of carnival the women are dressed in colorful, shiny fabrics that demand attention. Most backs are bare and the clothes are so tight that there’s no room

for anything other than the women's curvaceous bodies. However, Oliver empowers her cast and curbs the audience's consumption of their bodies by creating vocal counterpoint to the visual imagery. Each woman is fierce, defiant, and powerful. Their voices construct and control their image by offering multiple layers of imagery and meaning.

For example, the *wine* is always coupled with verbal descriptions that deconstruct the movement. The audience is never left to visually interpret the circling of the hips low to the ground without verbal cues. Almost like a dance class, the women are all present in a small circle or clump. One dancer acts like the instructor who informs the audience the subtle variation of the *wine*. She gives the audience a lens to read the movement, to analyze how low to the ground, how many hips are involved, how quickly the buttocks can circle, and whether the move is done solo or in a group formation. As a result, levels of virtuosity are created and the *wine* is understood as more nuanced than originally perceived.¹

On the continuum of spectacle, Faustin Linyekula and Cynthia Oliver's works stay within their choreographic control, because their work offers complex histories and interrupts stereotypes before they are fully formed in their audiences' minds. They represent an important artistic role model in our global community, one that owns its craftsmanship and is aware of its audience's positionality. In creating work specific to their own cultural identity, these artists pay close attention to the deliverance and mise-en-scène of information, so that the integrity of their stories are maintained and heard when presented outside their cultural context.

Many of the topics addressed in this paper deserve more time and depth than I have allotted and my initial inquiry has opened new doors of study. Of particular interest are French choreographer Jérôme Bel, Cuban-American choreographer Marianela Boan, and the collaborations between African American choreographer of Urban Bush Women Jawole Willa Jo Zollar and Senegalese choreographer Germaine Acogny. I would like to end with a quote from Charles Wiedman, "the performers and audience enter the house—although through different doors—from the same street" (Bull 270). In this current state of globalization with images easily manipulated and transferred, I would like to modify this quote by reminding us to be aware that our audience may enter through different doors, but also now from different streets.

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Notes

1. Oliver's use of text to frame the choreography and provide context is not the sole device that inhibits spectacularizing the performance. The delivery of the movement and the intention and focus of the eyes of the performers avoid a sexual objectification of the female body. Frequently, the movement is performed for the performer rather than as a presentation for the viewer and when offered to the audience there is an equality established in the gaze of the eyes, which meets the audience, rather than being coy or gazing down, and deters one from simply consuming the sexual body. Additionally, the voices of the women are so integral to their movement and presence that it emphasizes the fused mind/body vehicle that is alive and fluid and not silent.

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