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BODYSRIPTS:

Mami Wata, Diaspora, and Circum-Atlantic Performance

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree Master of Arts
in Culture and Performance

by

Elyan Jeanine Hill

2013

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

BODYSRIPTS:

Mami Wata, Diaspora, and Circum-Atlantic Performance

by

Elyan Jeanine Hill

Master of Arts in Culture and Performance

University of California, Los Angeles, 2013

Professor Allen Fraleigh Roberts, Co-Chair

Professor Mary Nooter Roberts, Co-Chair

By examining the uses to which the pan-African water goddess Mami Wata is put in Eve Sandler's art installation entitled "Mami Wata Crossing" (2008), Kimberly Mullen's dance *Yemanja, Mother of the Deep* (2012), and Chris Abani's novel *GraceLand* (2004), I present these mediums as important but overlooked means of history-making and expressions of diaspora that are often excluded from written histories. Through attention to three specific works, this thesis attends to the roles that the iconography of Mami Wata and her Caribbean sister Yemanja play in framing "artistic genealogies." I employ oral interviews with textual and performance analysis to explore Mami Wata as a sign for intercultural exchange. This thesis begins with an examination of how worship practices honoring Mami Wata intervene in current scholarship on the black Atlantic. In chapter two I consider Mami Wata as a complex, shifting deity through which traumatic histories can be reexamined. In my third chapter I focus on the ways that artists continue to negotiate racial and cultural identity by integrating images of African and Afro-

Caribbean water deities into embodied performances. In my last chapter I use a fictional text to reveal ways that artists combine and transform local and foreign images as a means of exploring gender, genealogy, and globalization in an African context. My work convenes a dialogue across artistic mediums and between the disciplines of Dance Studies, Black Atlantic Literature, and Cultural Studies by demonstrating ways contemporary artists are imagining and inscribing themselves into specific canons through embodied and aesthetic practices.

The thesis of Elyan Jeanine Hill is approved.

Janet M. O'Shea

Yogita Goyal

Allen Fraleigh Roberts, Committee Co-Chair

Mary Nooter Roberts, Committee Co-Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2013

To my father,

for teaching me to love Africa

To my mother,

for being my first teacher and continuing the journey alongside me

To all of my sisters,

since sisterhood is the most precious thing I know.

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Introduction:

A Nigerian Elvis impersonator...An altar commemorating the passage of enslaved blacks over the Atlantic Ocean...A woman dancing the many roads of a New World orisha onstage in Venice, California. Though peripheral to mainstream culture, each of these practices—the Nigerian boy trying to dance like Elvis, the syncretic altar in a museum, and the performer mixing Afro-Brazilian and Afro-Cuban traditional steps with other improvised movements in the urban context of Los Angeles—reshape and challenge understandings of the transatlantic diaspora. The artistic works to which these deceptively simple snapshot moments are linked by the presence and influence, in a variety of ways, of the pan-African water deity Mami Wata. By closely examining the uses to which Mami Wata is put in Kimberly Miguel Mullen’s improvised dance *Yemanja, Mother of the Deep* (2012), Eve Sandler’s art installation entitled “Mami Wata Crossing” (2008), and the novel *GraceLand* (2004) by Nigerian author Chris Abani, I posit these mediums to be important means of history-making and expressions of diaspora that are often excluded from written histories and archival records.

Mami Wata manifests as a mermaid deity, and her devotees recognize her dominion over both ocean and river. She is worshipped throughout many West African nations and ethnic groups, and in urban centers and rural villages in vastly different manifestations. Mami Wata is part of a vast pantheon of water spirits who appear in many different forms. Whether she appears as a mermaid, snake charmer, or Hindu goddess, with a fish tail, mirror, light or white skin or with long, wavy or straight hair, her iconography and appearance identify her. The name Mami Wata (spelled in a variation of ways depending on the type of pidgin English spoken in specific nations) comes from the pidgin versions of the words “mother” and “water.” Significantly, such pidgin languages with reduced grammars and lexicons usually arose from contact between

Europeans and Africans with no language in common (Mintz and Price 1992: 20). Such trade languages combine words from many different tongues to becoming the *lingua franca* of people of many different backgrounds, much as Mami Wata, as a globalized figure, has become a unifying and mutually understood hybrid symbol for her devotees scattered all over the circum-Atlantic world. She serves not only as an intermediary between African traders and European and Indian others, but as a way of bringing ancient, local beliefs about water spirits into dialogue with ideas of capitalism, globalization and the needs and desires of individuals navigating contemporary urban spaces and economic conditions (Drewal 1988, Egonwa 2008, Meyer 2008).

Through attention to three specific contemporary works, I investigate the roles that the iconography of Mami Wata and her Caribbean sister Yemanja play in framing artistic genealogies. “Mami Wata Crossing,” *Yemanja, Mother of the Deep*, and *GraceLand* each illustrate ways that Mami Wata and her Caribbean sisters provide a better understanding of the networks through which West African practices are dispersed, reinvented, and perpetuated. In this study, I develop a theory of performed histories that are perpetuated through networks of performance, or “genealogies of performance” (Roach 1996). I do so through examining specific choreographies of collective memory, or stylized means of constructing memory and creating mnemonics through the (sometimes) ritualized movements of the body. Here I employ Janet O’Shea’s definition of choreography as all decisions made about performance, training, and the presentation of a dance to discuss the performances that I examine in this study (O’Shea 2007: 11).¹ Like O’Shea, I frame choreography as the act of engaging in discursive articulations of histories through physical practices that are carefully localized and often re-envisioned and re-localized by practitioners in order to cultivate and create new belongings (O’Shea 2007: 12, 24).

¹ O’Shea’s definition of choreography is drawn from and extends the work of Susan Foster and Cynthia Novack.

I also explore the uses and significance of the pan-African water goddess Mami Wata as a metaphor and sign for diasporic, intercultural exchanges.

The works of Abani, Sandler, and Mullen each demonstrate the interconnectedness of different regions and afford me an opportunity to present practices with ties to West Africa, the African Americas, and the Caribbean in my theorization of diaspora. In order to complicate seemingly simple regional identifications, I have chosen artists who identify themselves in ostensibly contradictory ways. Each mobilizes ideas of genealogy, inscription, and performed memory in ways that expose the limitations, or inability, of the archive to maintain living histories. The chief research methods for this project include in-person and telephone interviews with these artists and textual and archival analysis to answer questions including: How are these works contributing to, transforming, and extending specific traditions? How do these works stage the dynamics of traditional religious practices? How does the “repertoire” remake and reframe the “archive”?² How do these works expand ideas of diaspora and demonstrate transatlantic interactions? How do these artists present the body as a significant historical document?

Instead of constructing an ethnography of black Atlantic religions, I analyze diaspora as articulated through the aesthetic use of black Atlantic ritual practices. In order to focus on the ways that artists frame diaspora, I engage with the artists who focus on practices associated with black Atlantic religions, or African derived religions, often framed as “traditional.” These artists employ so-called “traditional” forms as means of coping with and re-imagining creolized communities and forming their own, seemingly contradictory, interstitial identities. I hope that by including choreographic analysis and interviews of artists with close readings of texts, this

² In the *Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (2003), Taylor explores the rift between the archive of materials which are seen as enduring, stable and unmediated and the repertoire of body knowledge, live performances, or lived experiences often dismissed or devalued as inferior ways of generating and preserving knowledge.

work will reveal ways that performances and ritual practices invade and transform understandings of the archive. In this study I address ways three contemporary artists are framing and understanding diaspora and how their work is produced through the use of black diasporic networks of transnational exchange. Though this study seeks to investigate the ways that performance and the presence of bodies in specific spaces destabilize the archive, I conduct archival research through many texts, videos, and photographs of performances and focus on ways that artists mobilize performances to interrupt or reinterpret the work of the archive.

I seek new ways of accessing and understanding the voices of subordinated, colonized and enslaved peoples, who historically have been excluded from or misrepresented in many archival accounts. Such accounts rely primarily on written documentation of events in regions where writing has not been the primary means of maintaining and preserving knowledge of the past. I address these issues by presenting three contemporary forms of history-making that are improvised, in-process, or fragmented, and which present various significant historical time periods. Through attention to the branching genealogies of the artists and the many influences present in the works themselves, I examine the multiplicity and diversity of the histories of dispersed people in order to demonstrate the diasporic links that can be traced through the enigmatic figure of Mami Wata. While the term “diaspora” has long been used to denote racial or cultural fraternity and affinity, I frame dispersal of African peoples and cultural forms through attention to artistic practice and the pathways by which such practices are conveyed across generations, racial categories, and national and cultural boundaries.

In this thesis, I extend work by Henry John Drewal who has theorized Mami Wata as a figure through which Africans have translated and understood the foreigners. My exploration delves into the tension between Mami Wata as a way of resymbolizing and transforming the

European image of the mermaid and the West African view of the goddess as a part of distinctly African beliefs in water spirits that predate colonial encounters. I will also put scholarship on Mami Wata in conversation with the discussions of diaspora rallied by Cultural Studies scholars such as Brent Hayes Edwards and Paul Gilroy, who have interpreted diaspora as a way of thinking outside of nationalistic biases. I argue that Mami Wata worship sometimes functions similarly by allowing her devotees to theorize transnational connections through Black Atlantic religious repertoires that emphasize hybridity. Though beliefs in water spirits predate colonial encounters, the cross-cultural aspects of Mami Wata worship arose from the mixing of many groups and the need for a deity through which negotiations of cultural difference could be mediated.

Though the term “diaspora” remains laden with promises of eventual return to a culturally static African motherland, I wish to mobilize this term in the context of the circum-Atlantic movements that Mami Wata has made historically, as well as the artistic expressions that are the result of such movements. Although Gilroy and Edwards mention the arts as an important means of constructing diaspora, they focus their analysis on the music of the African diaspora. I argue that these Cultural Studies texts need to be extended through a closer consideration of the significance of corporeality in constructing diaspora and in maintaining and creating histories, because such histories and memories are physically transferred from one generation to another through dance as well as music. Throughout, this study attends to the significance of corporeality in an investigation of shifting diasporic identities, the ways in which those identities have been reconstructed and stylized, and the complex networks through which they are reimagined. My work will facilitate dialogue across mediums and between the disciplines of Dance Studies, Black Atlantic Literature, and Cultural Studies. I also present ways

that contemporary artists of the diaspora are imagining, constructing, and inscribing themselves into specific archives and canons.

In the first chapter of this study, I review significant literature on the African diaspora, the archive, creolization, genealogy and Mami Wata that pertains to my work. By tracing Mami Wata as an urban, savvy deity with links to European and Indian traders and indigenous West African beliefs, I contextualize the goddess within the framework of circulating trade networks. I also show how Mami Wata is linked to ideas of difference within unity, racial hybridity, and cultural syncretism, which often characterize theories of diaspora and creolization. Such investigations will clarify the ways that contemporary artists have resisted the categories of the archive and created work that illustrates transnational networks in action, in part, through the peripheral, hybrid status of Mami Wata.

In my second chapter, I explore how African American visual artist Eve Sandler's complex, multimedia installation, "Mami Wata Crossing," brings Mami Wata into dialogue with the ruptures of the Middle Passage journey and employs the goddess as a means of remembering and reframing histories of loss. Sandler mobilizes archival images of her ancestors and familial paraphernalia to reinterpret and reexamine traumatic histories and present difficulties. In her work, Mami Wata becomes a conduit for certain memories of disorientation. Guest curator Henry Drewal and Fowler Museum staff aid Sandler in constructing a new archive and inscribing the unwritten histories of her family through a family tree, an altar made from inherited household objects, and a video image of her own body being both drowned and cleansed. Her body becomes the canvas through which she claims and re-contextualizes histories lost to the Atlantic passage. I investigate how this American work might engage in a transatlantic discourse with African practices honoring Mami Wata.

In chapter three, I analyze specific genealogies of performance and artistic heritage. Where Sandler constructs an altar through ritual practice, Kimberly Miguel Mullen actually choreographs the movements of her body into an altar in motion. Mullen's work presents the body as an altar at the crossroads between sacred and secular, thus extending and complicating the Afro-Cuban and Afro-Brazilian dance traditions in which she has apprenticed. Her work also demonstrates the many possibilities for cultural hybridity of a goddess as enigmatic as Yemanjá and the connections between this goddess and the many West African "roads" of which she is composed. I have taken classes with Kimberly Mullen in order to better understand the dance traditions that she teaches and to analyze her innovations upon those traditions. Mullen, located on the cultural interstices between many cultures, negotiates her relationship to Afro-Caribbean communities through dance. In the process of examining these dance practices, this study will also scrutinize mechanisms of creolization and the ways that cultural hybridity has developed and continues to function in Africa, as well as in the Americas.

In chapter four, I show how Abani explores West African dialogues with and translations of certain aspects of U.S. visual culture in his novel about a Nigerian Elvis impersonator. Abani creates a character who constructs his transgressive identity through dances based on the movements of foreign film stars. Abani illustrates the types of alternate literacies required to interpret West African material culture and the ways that such indigenous images can become melded with and reinvent classic Hollywood formulas. In *GraceLand*, Abani emphasizes ways that African nations have been influenced by "transnational flows," a concept defined by Arjun Appadurai through the term "mediascapes" in which individuals construct their own complex global identities through the fusion of multiple forms and imported images (Appadurai 1996: 33). The narrative that Abani constructs demonstrates how traditions are made and remade

without any clear, “authentic” original. He calls certain West African gendered identities and traditions into question by presenting the novel’s protagonist, Elvis Oke, as a post-gender character who decides to follow the artistic traditions of his mother rather than his father. Abani also complicates ideas of Nigerian identity by using the iconography of Mami Wata to construct Elvis as a placeless, hybrid, and globalized figure. I contextualize Abani’s illustration of this type of West African creolization within the framework of the wider diaspora and the transnational networks inherent to the Black Atlantic world. In this thesis about performed memories and diaspora, these artists are linked by shifting understandings and recurring and reorganized iconographies of Mami Wata. Mami herself slips in and out of view as a sign of transatlantic contact and serves as a way for individuals to bind many elements together without blending or flattening the differences between them.

Chapter 1:

Mami Wata and the Roads of Dispersal

The phrase “transatlantic diaspora” evokes ideas of forced migration, cultural circulation, and the ways that descendants of the enslaved have coped with the cultural ruptures and social transformations of European colonization and the Atlantic slave-trade. Though scholars originally used the term to refer to dispersed Jewish populations, the term “diaspora” has undergone many transmutations in black popular culture, from its association with pan-Africanism to its political clout during the American Civil Rights Movement (Edwards 2001). The term, used in popular culture to designate the biological descendants of enslaved blacks who were forcefully transported to the New World, often evokes the romanticized possibility of a “return” to Africa. Yet, diaspora, in addition to designating specific populations, represents many minoritized, transnational identities. For the purposes of this study, diaspora functions as a marker of identity and cultural hybridity rather than as a denotation of a direct biological or cultural link to Africa. Through my three case studies I demonstrate ways that networks of diasporic exchange are often constructed across racial and cultural difference. Communities within the transatlantic diaspora construct such networks through the circulation of knowledge about practices that perpetuate, extend, interrogate, and reinscribe African legacies.

The archive, often understood as stable and unmediated in the West has long functioned as a way of categorizing, controlling, and silencing subjugated groups (Taylor 2003: 5). Since the archive, as materials including written documents and significant cultural objects that are often seen as enduring or permanent, has often functioned as a tool of subjugation and erasure, I take the ways that artists have interrupted and re-constructed the archive as an important point of departure in my examination of diasporic networks. Many pan-Africanist thinkers have

employed concepts such as biological purity and heritage to invoke the force of genealogy as a tool of tracing neat, linear, legitimating histories and origin myths that can be charted through family trees and written records. As a genealogically unplaceable hybrid being who is neither fish nor human, neither completely African nor European, the goddess Mami Wata links concepts of creolization and genealogy together and appears in a variety of racial manifestations from East Indian, European, to African or racially ambiguous (Drewal 1988, Meyer 2008, Rush 2008). Mami Wata, praised through her circulating iconography and local festivals and spirit possessions, shows how elements of history-making, whether in the archive or the repertoire, are intertwined. The ways that she has been differently imagined and performed within Africa and in the New World demonstrates the importance of concepts of racial and cultural difference *within* the provisional unity of the diaspora.

Who is Mami Wata? : Historical Background

Scholars often link Mami Wata to colonial contact between European traders and coastal West Africans because of her pidgin name and her association with the European mermaid. In his ground-breaking article on Mami Wata worship, “Performing the Other: Mami Wata Worship in Africa,” art historian Henry John Drewal argues that West Africans adopted Mami Wata’s iconography from the mermaids on the figureheads of trading ships, linking local African beliefs in water spirits to the European images of sirens (Drewal 1988). Mami Wata, born of creolization and inter-cultural exchange, has a highly contested genealogy, since she is associated with traditional African beliefs and with imported Indian and European philosophies and mythologies. Drewal frames Mami Wata as a marker of hybridity and as a means through which Africans have historically understood European and Indian racial others with whom they have traded since the 16th century. Drewal shows ways that the practice of Mami Wata worship

produces a plastic identity that West Africans employ to contend with foreign control and the global economy (Drewal 1988: 181).

Far from passively accepting cultural impositions, Mami Wata devotees appropriated European images in order to understand outsiders and assert their right to reinterpret and reinvent foreign customs. By presenting Mami worship as an “ethnographic” practice by which devotees study, analyze and perform European and Indian others, Drewal argues against the belief that such worship is merely an imitation of European cultural practices. Such observations are important to my examination of Abani’s *GraceLand* since the protagonist, Elvis Oke, reconstructs and reinvents Western images and artistic practices. Though Elvis Oke’s impersonations of Elvis Presley could be dismissed as merely derivative, these performances enact a similar type of repurposing as that employed by Mami Wata devotees in remaking the figure of the mermaid. In his own way, Abani’s protagonist also uses ritual and performance to understand Western others. In *GraceLand*, Abani reframes transatlantic exchange by depicting a Nigerian artist imitating a white American celebrity who is himself imitating black American artistic practices and styles.

Through diasporic networks of exchange and the global circulation of popular and sacred images, practitioners continue to shape worship practices and iconographies of Mami Wata. For example, the artist Eve Sandler describes her work in “Mami Wata Crossing” as a ritual altar that pays homage to her ancestors. Thus, Sandler, an African American devotee, contributes to practices honoring Mami Wata, a foreign African goddess, developing her own artistic practice as a form of Mami Wata worship. Through such intersecting and multidirectional pathways of information and cultural exchange, diasporic practices do not move in one direction but rather, as

indicated by Joseph Roach's discussion of "*circum-Atlantic*" performance, such practices *circulate* and turn back upon themselves.

Significantly, many African scholars, including Osa D. Egonwa, argue vehemently against Drewal's claims that Mami Wata is a way of understanding Eurasian others, asserting the goddess is a continuation and modern translation of a variety of ancient African practices that predate colonial contact. In "The Mami-Wata Phenomenon: 'Old Wine in New Skin,'" Egonwa argues that the ideas constituting the figure of Mami Wata have been in existence in African cultures and religions since long before colonial contact. He takes offense at "Euro-American" accounts which consider Mami Wata to be an imported idea, which Africans subsequently claimed as their own (Egonwa 2008: 217). He insists that Mami Wata is not merely, if at all, about white others, but about mediating among the many different language groups and cultures present *within* West African contexts. Anthropologist Joseph Nevadomsky also argues in "Mami Wata, Inc" that Drewal's work often glosses over the agency of West Africans who use Mami Wata worship as a means of examining *African* rather than European others. For Nevadomsky, Mami functions as a way of processing differences between ethnic groups or national colonial contexts. Mami Wata's primary efficacy, he argues, lies not in her foreign identity but in her ability to facilitate negotiation among many different African understandings of water spirits. She operates on many levels, as a catch-all for many different pantheons of African water spirits and as a means of understanding and claiming the European and Indian others who brought dangerous wealth to the West African coast from across the water (Nevadomsky 2008: 357).

Yet, Mami Wata worship has been adapted by devotees to fit contemporary needs and continues to operate as an important means of understanding and negotiating globalization, capitalism, and hybridity in much of West Africa. Though Mami Wata functions as a means of

reading, analyzing, and incorporating foreign images in daily life, she is not primarily about Europeans but, rather, encodes contact between groups and serves as an interface between West African practitioners and foreigners and even serves this purpose among different African ethnic groups. In this way, Mami Wata becomes a means through which devotees mediate, analyze, and integrate racial, cultural, and economic differences into ritual practice and popular culture. The deity is also an interface between past and present, a palimpsest that is constantly being reinscribed by her followers.

Mami Wata also functions as a vehicle through which many devotees express ambivalence about integration into a modern global political economy. Birgit Meyer's work on West African Pentecostal views of the devil, usefully explores the types of agency that Ghanaians express through Mami Wata as an emissary of the devil, and the ways that the mermaid spirit has been employed as a means of exploring gender and sexuality (Meyer 1999). She makes a case for viewing Mami Wata as a culturally accepted image that communicates desires for sex and money or money through sex (Meyer 1999: 202). As such, Mami Wata has come to represent the desires of young people to operate on a global scale and participate in a global market through funds obtained through paid sexual encounters (Meyer 1999: 203). Meyer captures how encounters with Mami Wata often reveal the latent desires of subjugated individuals to move beyond local limitations and operate on a global scale through prostitution (Meyer 1999: 203). In light of Meyer's theories about the ways that Mami Wata worship expresses modern desires at odds with certain local, communal practices and beliefs. Devotional practices honoring Mami Wata function as a powerful lens through which to examine Abani's *GraceLand* and his young protagonist's dreams of economic independence, his negotiations of gender, and his abortive schemes to operate globally through illegal trade and prostitution.

Mami Wata and Yemanja

In turning to Mami Wata's New World sister, Yemanja, it is easy to resort to direct comparisons; yet, for the purposes of this paper, it is more important to examine the mechanisms of creolization and or diasporic exchange at work between the two deities. In "Celebrating Salt and Sweet Waters: Yemanja and Oxum in Bahia, Brazil," Drewal discusses Yemanja's connections to Mami Wata, to Yemoja from Nigeria, and to the goddess Oshun. He describes Mami Wata practices as commuting back and forth across the Atlantic as blacks moved between Bahia and the Bight of Benin between the 17th and 19th centuries (Drewal 2008a: 167). Choreographer and dance ethnologist Kimberly Miguel Mullen and musician Mia Doi Todd, who wrote the spoken word for *Yemanja, Mother of the Deep*, also link certain roads of Yemanja to Mami Wata and credit Mami Wata as an influence on their understandings of Yemanja. Though, Yemanja manifests in very different ways from Mami Wata and often serves very different functions in the lives of practitioners. Yemanja is seen as a "universal" mother, as queen of the ocean; she reigns over maternity, salt water, and the sea. Yemanja represents healing and nurture (though she can also be fierce) rather than the harsh and communally divisive power of Mami Wata, who also heals, but only for a price (Frank 1995, Olmos and Gebert 2003: 86). Yemanja worship shows how West African practices assumed new meanings in the Americas and were remade into new rituals. Where Mami Wata is associated with the immense wealth of the slave trade and the fear of consequences, worshippers of Yemanja developed religious practices that combined many different African practices with European images and beliefs. Through Yemanja the enslaved claimed, and their descendants continue to claim, the Atlantic Ocean as a space of healing and renewal.

Mullen joins this legacy through her artistic practice, remaking and reframing Yemanja. Though not culturally Afro-Cuban or Afro-Brazilian or even an initiated practitioner of *orisha* worship, Mullen has become inducted into traditions of dancing for the *orishas* through apprenticeships with Brazilian dance pioneer Rosangela Sylvestre and with Afro-Cuban dancers Juan Carlos Blanco, Juan deDios Ramos Morejon and Teresita Domé Perez. This complex non-biological genealogy links Mullen to the enslaved Africans who brought *orisha* worship and dances to the New World. Through such convoluted lines of descent, the dances for the *orishas* “survive,” change and take on a variety of meanings for artists in different communities. Mullen was given the dance of Yemanja during an apprenticeship when she was deemed ready by her mentors and she has performed the traditional dance for over a decade. In *Yemanja, Mother of the Deep*, Mullen expands the traditional dance for Yemanja in order to express herself, and to explore her own story and the cultural elements that she brings to the black Atlantic dance forms she practices. Closer examinations of such processes by which black Atlantic traditional religious dances continue to be creolized and remade are important means of putting local practices solidly in the context of the global networks by which they are produced.

Constructing and Re-constructing Diaspora:

The distinctions between the terms “creolization” and “diaspora” are critically important to this study. While both imply hybridity, cultural exchange and mixture, creolization is localized to specific spaces or regions, such as the New World, where many different groups meet and practices and beliefs become blended and re-made. On the other hand, diaspora is defined through the *movement* and dispersal of specific groups and the exchanges that occur as a direct result of the forced migration of groups from one location to another. Diaspora is tied to a different type of mobility and circulation than creolization that has become conceptually linked

to certain locations in scholarly discourses. To frame the ways that Africans have historically hybridized “traditional” practices through trade routes or pidgin languages, colonization and religious conversions and ways that hybridity and syncretism continue to function in West African nations, I employ the term creolization (Mintz and Price 1992, Apter and Derby 2010). I will focus on the efficacy of the term *diaspora* in order to address the direct circulation of information and people that has occurred between West Africa, the Americas and Europe and which has constructed an awareness of collective black international movements. I build upon George Shepperson’s 1965 definition of the diaspora as any and all instances of “the African abroad” and build upon that conceptual framework of travel and migration by taking racial mixing, cultural and artistic exchange into account as important constitutive elements of diaspora, the functioning, mobile and conceptually slippery presence of Africans and African cultural elements throughout the world (Shepperson 1965).

The instability of the term “diaspora” has been theorized in detail by Brent Hayes Edwards, who traces it from its original use to refer to dispersed Jewish populations through its many transmutations in black popular culture, and by Paul Gilroy, who renames and reinterprets diaspora as a way of thinking outside of nationalistic biases. Though the term often signifies the scattered biological descendants of enslaved blacks and has become laden with promises of eventual return to a culturally static African motherland, diaspora, in addition to designating specific populations, represents many different minoritized, transnational identities. For the purposes of this study, “diaspora” functions as a marker of identity and what Charles Johnson describes as “cultural dizziness,” rather than as a denotation of a direct biological or cultural link to Africa (Johnson 1998: 142). I use the term specifically to discuss the cultural collisions that took place over the course of the Middle Passage itself and the ways these encounters

transformed and creolized the cultural identities of both the enslaved Africans and the Western participants in the slave trade.

Through analysis of the black Atlantic as a unit, Paul Gilroy challenges black American political and cultural histories that have been written along nationalist lines. In *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, Gilroy calls for a rhizomorphic and fractal view of the development of intellectual histories amongst the peoples of the black Atlantic (Gilroy 1993). He also argues that modernity and tradition do not have to be understood as polar opposites and redefines the word “tradition” as a living experience of the changing same, a crossroads through which cross-fertilization can occur, rather than a signifier for a lost African past (Gilroy 1993: 188, 189, 199). He recognizes that any cultural phenomena that could be understood as survivals “have been severed from originals” and have taken on new meanings and significance in new contexts (Gilroy 1993: 223). He also defines tradition as a repertoire in constant flux through which hybridity can be understood and interpreted. Such redefinitions of “traditional” practice allow me to read Mullen’s choreography as an interpretation of traditions which foregrounds the ways in which “traditional” dances have taken on new meanings for different groups. The movement practices function as an important expression of a hybrid identity for Mullen herself, who does not practice *candomblé* and is not of Brazilian, Cuban, or African descent. She employs these dance forms, in part, as a way of performing her adoption into a genealogy that arises from the *candomblé* tradition by way of her dance instructors and mentors from both Brazil and Cuba.

Art historian Robert Farris Thompson theorizes diaspora through specific continuities in artistic practice, arguing that cultures throughout the African Americas have retained visual and movement practices that resemble, reassemble, and reconceive the African religious and artistic

practices of the Kongo, Fon and Yoruba peoples (among others). Though Thompson traces these practices along paths that move linearly from Africa to the New World, I wish to focus on global *networks* operating in multiple directions, which will enable me to develop a dynamic diasporic framework for evaluating practices within the context of the black Atlantic. In *Flash of the Spirit*, Thompson argues that *vodun* and other black Atlantic religious practices represented “Africa *reblended*” (emphasis his, Thompson 1984: 164), such that he links specific practices directly back to what he judges to be their African counterparts and precedents. My work acknowledges the significance of the relationships that Thompson presents without relying on *direct* connections to West or Central African origins. I focus on the ways that these practices are evidence of the many exchanges of knowledge and training among artists and across communities, nations, and continents, which allow communities and individual artists to fulfill specific needs.

Those enslaved African dancers and dance-makers who found themselves in the New World had different needs and existed in very different cultural, social, and economic contexts from those Africans who remained on the African continent. As such, any rituals connected to West African water deities, including those for Mami Wata, have taken on new meanings in New World contexts. These practices have been reblended indeed according to the circumstances of the practitioners themselves. The choreographies of specific rituals, such as ceremonies honoring Yemanjá, have been adjusted accordingly to include many different influences. Thus, the diaspora that I trace in this study does not constitute a linear genealogy but, rather, seeks to attend to the many discrepancies and disjunctures within the black diaspora that makes it difficult to frame as a unified whole; where Thompson traces a more or less linear genealogy, I trace a layered and interrupted genealogy of artistic exchange.

Borrowing from Edwards' theories of translation, I examine both Mami Wata and Yemanjá as continually in translation and transition (Edwards 2003). Through Edwards's work, which frames diaspora through difference and as network of discourses *across* difference, I discuss ways that Mami Wata and Yemanjá are dissimilar and yet inextricably linked in Mullen's dance about the former. I do so in order to account for the ways that the identities of these water spirits are constantly in flux and as a way of presenting disputes without resorting to the language of "authenticity" or "origin." Edwards argues that internationalist discourses travel in ways that require translation and reformation. Such generative discourses enable debate and conflicts that often manifest themselves in the ways certain words or philosophies are translated (Edwards 2003: 7). Edwards reads such translations as articulations of particular struggles and competing ideologies within the diaspora (Edwards 2003: 11). In this way, Mami Wata and Yemanjá each serve as important translations of certain aspects of the other and devotees often use these water deities to stage debates about identity, cultural heritage, and mobility.

Performance and the Archive:

Following models that attend to performance while engaging with specific archives, I examine the ways that the archive has been co-opted by artists in order to inscribe African cultural practices within Eurocentric spaces, specifically within the frameworks of the novel, the proscenium stage, and the museum. In the *Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas*, Taylor explores the rift between the archive of materials that are seen as enduring, stable, and unmediated, and the repertoire of body knowledge, or lived experience, which is often dismissed or devalued as an inferior way of generating and preserving knowledge (Taylor 2003: 5). In order to acknowledge that the archive, far from replacing performance or embodiment, is, rather, in constant dialogue with these complex forms of representation, I

explore elements of the archive *and* the repertoire that incorporate the images or iconography of Mami Wata as a thematic inspiration.

Through her iconography and the scholarship inspired by her, Mami Wata is clearly represented in the archive. She also has a significant presence in the repertoire through the dance, processional, and storytelling practices through which her followers remake her with each new performance. Her presence in the repertoire is constantly in dialogue with her presence in the archive since many devotees incorporate and reinterpret her iconography and reframe scholarly perspectives in performances and rituals. While important to acknowledge that embodied performances generate, record, and transmit knowledge, Taylor asserts the importance of not banishing physical practices to the past or ignoring the fact that such enactments are constantly remade and re-appropriated (Taylor 2003: 21). The archive is an important means of understanding embodied practices that must be critically analyzed in dialogue with embodied performances. Though the archives are often seen as unchanging and impervious to modification, each of the archival mediums within which Sandler, Mullen, and Abani create—the museum, the proscenium stage, and the novel—are destabilized, deconstructed and remade by these performances occurring within them. Such scenarios illustrate the ways that black Atlantic artists repurpose and/or deconstruct the rigid institutional frameworks within which they improvise as a form of resistance and identity formation. Arguing against Joseph Roach’s view that cultural transmission occurs primarily through processes of narrowing and substituting that he calls “surrogation,” Taylor demonstrates that cultural practices are also perpetuated through multiplicity and proliferation (Roach 1996: 7, Taylor 2003: 49). The enigmatic figure of Mami Wata, who exists as part of a broad, sweeping and ever-expanding pantheon, is a good example

of this type of multiplicity. The goddess cannot be clearly or completely defined because she is always being remade and is constantly in flux due to the dynamics of the repertoire.

Creolization in Africa and Abroad:

In the process of exploring “Mami Wata Crossing,” *GraceLand*, and *Yemanjá, Mother of the Deep*, this study will also investigate certain mechanisms of creolization and the ways that cultural hybridity has historically occurred and continues to function in Africa, as well as in the Americas. In *Central Africans, Atlantic Creoles, and the Foundation of the Americas*, Linda Heywood and John Thornton focus on continuous processes of creolization experienced by Central Africans both in Africa and, once enslaved, in the Americas (Heywood and Thornton 2007). Though Heywood and Thornton focus on the Central African origins of a specific type of Portuguese, Christianized creolization, their view of creolization in Africa as a continuous project between Westerners and Africans—in which different parties maintain varying levels of power—reveals room for further study of the ways that Atlantic creolization, which began with the European trade in goods and slaves, continues in Africa through the proliferation and dissemination of Western media and artistic images. The performances of power, clear cultural surrogations, and obvious creolization through the influences of Western media make Abani’s *GraceLand* an excellent novel for examining the ways that West African creolization allows artists in the diaspora (both Abani and his protagonist) to imagine and create alternatives to restrictive traditional and exclusionary Eurocentric frameworks. Since the word “creole” first designated native born persons of European ancestry in the New World, the term “creolization” is often associated either with indigeneity or with mixed race identities (Olmos and Paravisini-Gebert 2003: 5). Such markers of creole identity develop through fraught discourses of

authenticity and ideas of genealogy. To re-examine creolization within a West African context, the significance of theories of genealogy within the African diaspora must also be reinterpreted.

Genealogy:

Literary historian Johnathan Arac defines “critical genealogy” as a process of finding out where you have come from in order to determine alternatives to present circumstances (Arac 1987: 2). I employ his theories in relation to Joseph Roach’s “genealogy of performance” to link both concepts to my own theory of “artistic genealogies.” In “Mardi Gras Indians and Others: Genealogies of American Performance,” Roach argues for an expanded definition of performance that includes non-literate, non-textual cultural performances (Roach 1992). He defines his “genealogies of performance” as the “transmission and dissemination of cultural practices through collective representations” (Roach 1992: 462). I am interested in applying this concise definition of “genealogies of performance” to specific cultural practices, such as the piecemeal coming of age ritual arranged and choreographed by Sunday, the father of Abani’s protagonist in *GraceLand*. In response to such theories, which base diasporic connections on the tenuous link provided by racial identification (who, for example, determines which people are African enough to be a part of the African diaspora?), diasporic genealogies can be envisioned as webs of artistic heritage rather than direct lines of descent. Inspired by Roach’s performance genealogies, I employ my theory of “artistic genealogies:” the choices made by individual artists about which legacies to modify and which heritage to claim. I argue that such artists are linked to the African diaspora by the artistic choices through which they lay claim to Africa and to subjugated, liminal, circum-Atlantic identities. Mami Wata and Yemanjá, as deities who travel between and across cultures, provide a framework for examining cultural, racial, economic, and gender differences within the provisional unity of diaspora and emphasizing the significance of

artistic practice in shaping and reshaping written accounts of the histories that forged the transatlantic diaspora.

Chapter 2:

Palimpsest Memories and Diasporic Identities in Eve

Sandler's "Mami Wata Crossing"

African American artist Eve Sandler's multimedia installation "Mami Wata Crossing" specifically addressed links between Mami Wata, genealogy, and the middle passage journeys taken by enslaved Africans across the Atlantic to the New World. The installation was part of the Fowler Museum's exhibition, *Mami Wata: Arts for Water Spirits in Africa and Its Diasporas* (2008), guest-curated by Henry John Drewal. Sandler's installation reveals the emerging possibilities of staging interactive histories, multi-layered interpretations, and ongoing practices within museums. Exhibitions including *Sacred Arts of Haitian Vodou* (1995); *A Saint in the City: Sufi Arts of Urban Senegal* (2003); and *Wrapped in Pride: Ghanaian Kente and African American Identity* (1999) have paved the way for the inclusion of an installation like "Mami Wata Crossing" by presenting interactive installations that frame the museum as an important zone of contact, rather than merely a place of cultural conservation. Throughout the exhibition of *Mami Wata*, the deity was presented as a continually shifting, transnational, and contemporary goddess. Themes of Mami Wata's ongoing dominion over rivers and oceans organized the movement of bodies within and outside of the exhibition space in areas like the restrooms and water fountains where signs stating: "This is Mami's Wata, Please use it wisely," were on display. Such curating touches allowed museum-goers to participate in ongoing shifts and adaptations of Mami Wata's multiple and complex meanings and uses in the lives of practitioners around the world.

In "Mami Wata Crossing," Sandler linked the mermaid deity to the difficulty of tracing a genealogy in the face of historical exclusions and the importance of reframing histories through

embodied practice. In a personal interview, Sandler described her ritualized practice and observed that her work has always dealt with sacred themes to which she was introduced through her maternal grandmother (Sandler 2012). She created “Mami Wata Crossing,” in part, to address and unveil histories in order to reckon with them. Her installation was the final display in the exhibition, the last encounter that viewers had with Mami Wata before exiting. In this chapter, I argue that Sandler’s installation contributes to an exhibition that subverts specific archival colonial legacies of museum spaces by installing a black female archive in the form of an altar. She uses the figure of Mami Wata to negotiate histories of enslavement and memories of trauma that arise from her family history. I then examine how memories, as the raw materials of histories, are encoded on bodies and material objects to create new archives (Le Goff 1996: xi). I argue that, through her installation, Sandler reexamines and challenges dominant narratives and represents voices that have often been excluded from written histories. Next, I emphasize the importance of Sandler’s African American altar as a way to meet her devotional and personal need to heal and cleanse past and present wounds. I will also consider resonances between Eve Sandler’s practice and that of West African Mami Wata devotees. In conclusion, I argue that Sandler maps palimpsest memoryscapes that layer multiple narratives in the contours of the installation. Through this work, I seek to contribute to Cultural Studies and Dance Studies by illustrating ways that Sandler’s installation displaces dominant narratives through stylized embodied practices.

Colonial Legacies and Museum Practice

In collaboration with curator Henry Drewal and the Fowler Museum, Sandler subverts particular colonial legacies of the institution of the museum by including the unwritten histories of her family within the museum context. In “Mining the Museum: Artists Look at Museums,

Museums Look at Themselves,” Lisa Corrin discusses Fred Wilson’s well-known work in his exhibition *Mining the Museum* to argue that “to speak of the ideological apparatus underlying museum practices is to speak of the relations among power, representation, and cultural identity; of how history is written and communicated; of whose history is voiced and whose is silenced” (Corrin 1994: 9). European art and natural history museums arose, in part, from a desire to categorize and control colonized others and to display the trophies of conquests. Corrin asserts that “museums are places where sacrosanct belief systems are confirmed on the basis of hierarchies valuing one culture over another” (Corrin 1994: 1). By pointing out such legacies, Corrin emphasizes the status of museums as institutional systems that have historically devalued the perspectives of cultural others. Yet, current shifts in critical curatorial practice illustrate ways that many museum professionals resist the colonial origins of the museum space. Museums like the Fowler, and many others, in conjunction with curators including Mary Nooter Roberts, Allen F. Roberts, Henry Drewal, Donald Cosentino, and Robert Farris Thompson, seek to challenge hegemonic approaches to museum practice by creating interactive and performed exhibitions in which they present the many, sometimes contradictory, voices and perspectives of the artists and peoples represented. In such exhibitions, curators encourage viewers to experience museum spaces through the sense of touch, smell, and sound, as well as vision. In such ways, many curators continue to challenge preconceived notions of museum as static spaces. Sandler’s artistic approach participates in this type of practice. She worked with Drewal and Fowler museum staff to bring new voices into the space of the museum by inscribing her own narrative on the walls of the museum.

Like many other artists in the exhibition, Sandler constructs an archive of her own by including items that evoke specific histories. Yet, by featuring fragments from cash crops

(peanut, cotton, and tobacco) that were historically grown through slave labor, she effectively conjures up the voices of the enslaved and includes these narratives within the institutional spaces available to her. Though such important inclusions have become the norm in innovative museum practice, Sandler's installation depicts a devotional practice at work in rewriting family histories. Through work like Sandler's in conjunction with innovative curatorial practice, museums, as institutions where such histories are unveiled and displayed, function as hubs where members of the general public can engage with obscured, belittled, or misapprehended perspectives.

Rewriting Traumatic Histories

Through her own material archive, Sandler brings the past into the present, demonstrating how the ghosts of the past haunt and inform the present always. Sandler incorporated "sound, video and still projections to evoke the sea as a site of crossings, loss and continuity" (Drewal 2008b: 193) and positioned a video image of her own body being ritually baptized by clear water within the roots of the family tree she painted to represent her known ancestry. By presenting images of her moving body as an aspect of her family tree, Sandler constructs an installation that goes beyond static representation to illustrate how historical events leave lingering traces in the present. In *Wizards and Scientists: Explorations in Afro-Cuban Modernity and Tradition*, Afro-Cuban historian Stephen Palmié relates how he began to question Western historical processes that systematically exclude certain types of information from the archive, after being told by an Afro-Cuban acquaintance that he was being haunted by the ghost of an enslaved African who wanted to have his story told and remembered (Palmié 2002: 6). Palmié argues that

the idea of the existence of “something” like Tomas [the ghost] (whatever ontological status we may accord him) indicate[s] that there *also* exists a history that largely escapes—perhaps cannot be inscribed at all—into the narratives that we construct from the logs of slave ships, plantation account books, or the diaries of slaveholders” (Palmié 2002: 8).

Sandler’s installation addresses memories of slavery by recreating the space of the past in the present and delving into histories that have eluded written historical accounts. By re-writing dominant narratives within the space of the museum, Sandler takes up a tradition of African American artists, especially novelists, who use the form of the novel, despite their “ambivalent negotiation” of the form, in order to give voice to their understandings of suppressed histories and to present voices that cannot be found in official historical records (Gilroy 1999: 218).

By integrating histories of New World enslavement and West African Mami Wata traditions into a single lineage archive, Sandler effectively disrupts homogenous narratives of “America.” She specifically addresses the gaps in historical accounts of American slavery and in her knowledge of her family. She includes voices that have been lost to historical record by placing an empty frame memorializing “all those African ancestors whose names are unknown, and whose faces we can only imagine and conjure up in our thoughts of a distant, yet ever present past,” between the precious photos of her great-great grandparents Luke and Ludy Wade (Drewal 2008b: 195). Contributing to the overall aim of the *Mami Wata* exhibition, and following the theoretical ground paved by two of curator and artist Fred Wilson’s major exhibitions dealing with the histories of enslaved Africans and their descendants in the Americas, Sandler brings the repressed voices of the enslaved into the realm of representation. In *Mining the Museum* (1992) and *An Account of a Voyage to the Island Jamaica with the Un-Natural*

History of that Place (2007), Wilson does not pretend to provide his viewers with unmediated access to the realities of slave-life. Rather, both works are grounded by an effort to re-tell and re-stage the past and foreground what Huey Copeland and Krista Thompson call “the inordinate difficulty of gleaning the histories of the enslaved through the objects and material traces left within the archives of the governing classes,” in their article “Perpetual Returns: New World Slavery and the Matter of the Visual” (Copeland and Thompson 2011: 3). Similarly, instead of attempting to present slave life directly, Sandler’s assembled archive displaces dominant narratives by providing alternatives that supplement and subvert official histories.

Black Matriarchal Archive

Sandler encodes the histories of her maternal ancestors and effectively constructs a matrilineal archive through the use of metonymic objects, items closely associated with specific individuals, events, and spaces. In this altar, she includes items that are important reminders of the lives and perspectives of her maternal relatives. In “Creating Mami Wata,” Drewal remarks that the sounds of water filled the space, warping the atmosphere of the installation into a physical and aural, as well as a visual, experience. Drewal details how Sandler

 painted the wall blue with a “family river” as opposed to a “family tree.” In its sources and tributaries, rivers, streams, and creeks, she inscribed the names of her ancestors from Africa to the Americas. In the center, below this wall mural, was a video of the artist being bathed/baptized under flowing water. The gurgle of water filled the space. Below this was an antique table filled with souvenirs of her family’s history—cotton balls, beads, rings, shells, coins, et cetera. In the center of this lineage memorabilia was a live

goldfish in a bowl with coral and a ring of cowrie shells (a museum's nightmare, a visitor's delight!) (Drewal 2012: 54-55).

When describing how understandings of genealogy have influenced her installation, Sandler recounts that “the materials in... the altar are things that belonged to my grandmother or belonged to my mother, or the perfume bottle... that my mother gave to my grandmother that she kept,...and actual soil from North Carolina, [and] the broken watch was my grandmothers” (Sandler 2012). Sandler layers many sites and time periods in her work through the use of specific objects. She integrates elements from Halifax County, North Carolina, where her mother's family is from, including the soil and the peanut, tobacco, and cotton plants. Through the antique table, broken watch, and perfume bottles, she also refers to the domesticity of her grandmother's home. I view the broken watch as a symbol that encodes and emphasizes Sandler's understanding of the haunting of the present by unresolved past events. The fact that the watch can no longer move forward, that time is stopped, may serve as an allusion to ways that time can be experienced as agglomerated, or knotted, around traumatic past events that have left unhealed wounds. I argue that this black Atlantic altar also functions as a *lieu de memoire*, or site of memory, meant to stop the work of forgetting and materialize memories through which specific histories can be rewritten (Nora 1989: 19). Sandler identifies the impetus for her inquiries into her family history and genealogy as the death of her grandmother, an important source of family knowledge. In “Between Memory and History: *Les Lieux de Mémoire*” Pierre Nora claims that “the moment of *lieux de mémoire* occurs at the same time that an immense and intimate fund of memory disappears, surviving only as a reconstituted object [,]...a heritage consolidated” (Nora 1989: 11-12). The loss of an important “fund” of memory in her grandmother led Sandler to discover more about her family and, eventually, to create the

installation, which I view as an important, if temporary, site of memory. Through metonymic objects Sandler fixes her memories spatially, creating an altar that functions as a site of memory.

By constructing a black matriarchal archive, reframing discourses of agency, and referencing the significance of the labor and skills of women, Sandler decentralizes patriarchal narratives of enslavement as representative histories of African American women. Sandler's great-great-great grandmother was an African who survived the middle passage to become a slave on a plantation in Halifax County, North Carolina. She evokes the Atlantic and her grandmother's middle passage journey in the installation by filling the space with the sound of water. In "Mami Wata Crossing" Sandler presents photographs of Luke Wade, the son of this unnamed African woman, and his wife Ludy, who were both born into slavery (Williams). Elements of the installation evoke personal memories, which Sandler places within the context of larger historical events. She argues that "by connecting personal histories, or stories, in my family to these historical events, [we can]... look at things that are happening in my family...that happened in many families. You know, [enslavement] happened here and it happened in Africa, and it happened in North Carolina" (Sandler 2012). She uses metonymic objects to put her ancestors in dialogue with past and present histories. Sandler also articulates the histories of her African great-great-great grandmother and her great-great grandmother Ludy Wade in the form of a poem. The poem accompanying the installation in the exhibition catalogue is both lyrical, as if Sandler is piecing together sparse oral histories, and stilted, as if imitating the matter of fact descriptions of the female Africans in slave ship ledgers and antebellum plantation account books. Sandler focuses the poem on her anonymous African ancestor and on Ludy Wade, supplanting the story of the white slave master named Cole in her retelling:

African woman
name unknown
bound to cross over
with a shell
Cole got land
got maps
got her
at Jamestown

African mother
Woman
name unknown
Cole got her
with child
African woman
with baby
Luke born in tides
bound to cross over

Ludy
swim
siren song
embrace arrowheads
African/Indian
Medicines
names unknown (Sandler 1999: 33-56).

Even Luke Wade's story is included as an aspect of the lives of the obscured women. The refrain of "name unknown" laments the gaps in archival and oral accounts and asserts the importance of remembering even those ancestors whose names remain unwritten. She also gestures toward the silence in her family record concerning Native American relatives and further disturbs compartmentalized and exclusive narratives that strictly separate African American and Native American histories.

By claiming her African ancestors in "Mami Wata Crossing" and representing fraught histories of multiracial, multicultural families in the early 1800s, Sandler embeds many layered

counter-histories, through which she understands her own connection to a creole transatlantic diaspora. Sandler identifies herself as the descendant of a line of spiritual healers that includes Ludy Wade. Through Ludy she inherited “medicines,” or healing practices and domestic rituals, which she had always supposed were African. She also describes the difficulty of finding information about her Native American ancestors because of a dearth of older people who knew the stories and because of traditions of silence around Native American relatives, which, she reasons, may have been to protect these relatives from the repercussions of the Indian Removal Act of 1830. During her research into her family history, she found that many of the cultural elements and domestic practices that she had mistaken for African were actually Native American (Sandler 2012). She found that she was digging up stories that many of her relatives did not want to remember. Many of her southern relatives were conspicuously silent about their Native American and enslaved relatives but quite vocal and very proud of having white ancestry (Sandler 2012). Sandler returned to North Carolina for the Wade Family Reunion after not visiting since childhood. In her interview, she chuckled about the fact that many such reunions were inspired by the release of the television miniseries *Roots* (1977). It was only through the images of Luke and Ludy that she was able to get parts of their story out of family members, when she found “these very old photographs of Luke and Ludy [who] are as far back as our family tree goes. [Relatives] said...Luke was the son of a slaveholder and an African mother” (Sandler 2012). She was more shocked by the way that the Wade family felt about these histories than about the crime that started off her family tree as she knows it. When she returned to the South expecting a *Roots*-like journey into her family history she quickly realized that

what I thought was going to be about pride was actually very mangled and weird. Then there were many relatives who were really, really, really proud of being, umm...being

descended from the slave master. It was very disturbing when I realized that what I thought was going on with my generation. What was going on in the South was really, really different. They were very caught up with being light-skinned (Sandler 2012).

Sandler synthesizes such varied elements into a syncretic altar for Mami Wata in order to address the crossings, maternal legacies, racial and cultural mixtures, journeys, and historical events on both sides of the Atlantic, all of which have shaped her personal identity.

Healing the Past

The installation that Sandler constructs functions as an ongoing ritual practice whereby she faces and negotiates traumatic family legacies. I examine the installation as a means through which Sandler re-members her maternal legacies, in part, by honoring the domestic work and survival of her ancestors. Sandler remembers her mother and her mother's mothers by creating a ritual altar paying homage to the significance of their domestic and agricultural labor. By reliving memories through embodied practices, Sandler actually pays homage to the domestic work and the intellectual labor of her mother, grandmother and earlier women in her family. Sandler creates a type of intimate, and eerily haunting, semi-domestic space by including the antique table, thimbles that stand in for the work of mending and repairing, and the live goldfish. The fish in particular evokes Mami Wata and reminds viewers that the altar is a space requiring maintenance. In a personal interview, Sandler recalled that her grandmother also maintained and cared for altars of her own and she feels that her artistic work carries on "the work of women in [her] family in that...[she works] with things that are sacred, things that [women] carry around that can make us ill" (Sandler 2012). In such ways, she recognizes a maternal legacy in the rituals she practices and through which she remembers the women lost to historical amnesia. For

Sandler, the journey and the practice of creating the altar and searching through histories of loss and recovery are more significant than the final product. She included ancestors whose names are unknown to her in her archive by choosing a medium that does not require words to commemorate. Sandler tended and cared for the altar as she built it and found it extremely difficult to allow others to care for the installation during the exhibition (Sandler 2012). In such ways, Sandler's installation works as a type of inscription that eschews words in favor of practice and process, and pays homage to her maternal ancestors by celebrating and focusing on healing, cleansing, and nurturing, often considered to be women's work.

Sandler created this African American Mami Wata altar to meet her devotional and personal need to address traumatic historical events. She has felt deeply connected to water deities from India, the Caribbean and West Africa for many years and distinguishes Lakshmi, Oshun, and, later, Yemaya and Mami Wata as deities that have captured her imagination. A traumatic near-drowning experience as a child led her to explore her interest in water spirits more fully. She recalls how her work started to incorporate more water as she began using and creating cleansing rituals in the work (Sandler 2012). For Sandler, as for many devotees of Mami Wata, Oshun and Yemanja worldwide, the water deity functions as a way to address the full spectrum of illnesses, including historical maladies passed down through generations. When asked about the purpose of the installation and its function in her own life, Sandler answers that

we are all a little haunted by these historical experiences. We are all a little traumatized and [I] really need[ed] to work with [my past and] those [historical experiences] and put them in the light...you can't look at [these histories] if you don't know [them] and you can't cleanse [them] if you don't know [them]; you *need* to know [them]. For me I guess

Mami Wata has given me a way to do that: to look, to claim, to understand and then to cleanse (Sandler 2012).

In this way, her devotion to Mami Wata actually serves a therapeutic purpose in her life. Sandler periodically carries out ritual cleansings and the video images in “Mami Wata Crossing” document one such cleansing (Sandler 2012). In Judy Rosenthal’s text on *vodu* in Togo, she asserts that *gorovodu* practices, including devotion to Mami Wata, serve to treat the full life text of the individual: mental, physical, and spiritual. Rosenthal illustrates ways that *gorovodu* treats such ailments without “teasing apart...the body from the mind or from the numerous souls that make up an individual in all his or her overlapping with totemic plants, animals, deities and ancestors” (Rosenthal 1998: 42). Similarly, Sandler deals with her own need for healing by first addressing historical traumas that have affected her ancestors. As she began to learn more about Mami Wata, she describes a driving need to get to the root of her family histories, which propelled her artistic work “to involve more and more healing and more and more cleansing, more and more ritual, and more and more examining things from my own life, to understand things that were passed down to me, that I don’t even understand, that I am still dealing with” (Sandler 2012). Through her own devotion to Mami Wata, Sandler addresses issues of conjuring up past histories and cleansing and healing those histories through practice and ritual.

Mami Wata Altar

Many practitioners of African religions, including Mami Wata devotees, recognize the importance of treating the past as well as the present in order to develop relevant, adaptable histories to address contemporary difficulties. The installation generates and mobilizes memories, the stuff from which histories are constructed, while also functioning as a way to

reframe past histories and confront present circumstances. In her poem, Sandler speculates on Mami Wata's role in her family history:

Mami Wata/Olokun/Yemeja/Oshun
African Mermaids converge
swim with fish women
sing to you
Wooden carvings
On the bows of tall ships
Bound to cross over

Mami Wata
wash your trouble
swim
siren song
embrace wood
and flesh
the water (Sandler 1999, 7-20).

She illustrates links between her grandmother's passage across the Atlantic to American enslavement and expresses her own need to work through the past, to "embrace wood/and flesh/the water," by bringing difficult family histories to light and accepting them as aspects of her identity (Sandler 1999, 18-20). Yet, her reference to Mami Wata on the bows of slave ships also incriminates Mami. Since Mami Wata has been linked to trade, including the trade in slaves, and dangerous consumption, she is sometimes described as a "cargo cult goddess" whom devotees consult in the hopes of acquiring financial blessings (Cosentino 2010, 87). Much of Mami Wata's iconography, including her mirror and her long hair, developed from the mermaid figureheads of slaving vessels and trading ships and may have served as a way of understanding the wealth, illicit opportunities, and shameful slave trade that put European wealth in African hands (Drewal 1988, 161). Through Mami Wata, many devotees encode African perspectives of the slave trade using material culture and performance. Sandler employs Mami to bridge gaps between West African and African American experiences of the triangle trade. Rosenthal argues

that "statues and paintings associated with Mami Wata...seem to be repositories of [a]...recurring uncanny impression 'left by particular encounters,' with a more distant north, including the ships of the first European traders to reach the West African coast" (Rosenthal 1998, 117). As such, Sandler re-contextualizes West African impressions of colonial encounters by analyzing and approaching her family histories through knowledge of Mami Wata. She incorporates findings gained from Mami Wata devotional practices into her interpretation of past and present circumstances.

Using the framework that knowledge of Mami Wata provides, Sandler places her installation in dialogue with West African Mami Wata practices. The phenomenon of Mami Wata arises, in part, from the circulation of images from Europe and India to West Africa combined with indigenous African practices. Devotees perpetuate knowledge of Mami through the circulation of such images, in print and on the web, *and* the migration and movement of individuals between nations, cultures, and ethnic groups. In this way, religious devotion to Mami Wata constructs transnational, virtual, and imagined worlds, like the textured, multi-layered world of "Mami Wata Crossing." Sandler describes her family as very heavily politically involved with the newly independent West African nations in the 50s and characterizes herself as well-informed about what was going on in Africa politically from a very early age. She has also visited West Africa numerous times to learn about local cultures (Sandler 2012). She claims that it was natural for her "to understand that Mami Wata could be [her] vehicle for understanding the Middle Passage," a way that she could grapple with the historical traumas by serving the deity in order to be released from affliction (Sandler 2012). The installation of the altar in the museum does not nullify the effectiveness of the altar as an ongoing ritual process, as well as an aesthetic practice. Sandler notes that including the live fish in the altar reassured her that the altar would

be cared for. As such, she insisted on including the fish as assurance that the altar would be appropriately maintained, and as a signifier of the presence of Mami Wata. For Sandler, the fish represents Mami Wata and nurturing the fish was like serving Mami in order to give and receive a blessing through the altar. Through the practice of creating and maintaining this Mami Wata altar, Sandler repossesses and reclaims hidden histories “through ritualized forms of embodiment” (Apter and Derby 2010: xvi). In *Activating the Past: History and Memory in the Black Atlantic World*, Andrew Apter and Robin Derby present the diaspora as a “zone of historical conjunctures characterized by ethnic mixing and hybrid forms from the very beginning of the triangle trade,” acknowledging long-standing histories of creolization on the African continent. Sandler combines understandings of West African practices with limited knowledge of her African heritage, acknowledges her Native American ancestry, and unveils and reassembles important African American archives, demonstrating the complexity of diasporic identities.

Palimpsest Memories

Through her poetic invocations and her recognition of the complexity of her genealogy, Sandler depicts a palimpsest history in the form of a museum installation. By placing fragments from the lives of her mother and grandmother, the visual records of her family tree, and photographs of Luke and Ludy, while also acknowledging and mourning the gaps in historical records, she creates a stratified history, which allows the many narrative threads to converge in one place. Zimbabwean artist Berry Bickle speaks of her own artistic work of re-writing using fragments of archival written records and her focus on:

what happens in the re-writes—how a contemporary space is evoked by placing a fragment [or fragments] from history or the past in the present, the distortions of time or

editing, creating a distillations of the past. This process does not add to the facts; instead, it subjectively brings chosen layers to a surface (Bickle 2007: 227).

Sandler uses her non-textual archives in much the same way, to “re-write” histories in order to create a space for mourning and remembering. Apter and Derby advance the concept of palimpsest memories, which explains how repressed memories, like those represented in “Mami Wata Crossing” and encoded in other rituals performed for Mami, can recur in the present (Apter and Derby 2010: xvii, xx). Through her staging and manipulations of the space, Sandler allows chosen layers to surface and creates a palimpsest memoryscape, in which certain histories surface for a time only to rejoin the swirling multiplicity of histories with which each memory is interwoven (Basu 2007). This ongoing ritual practice, which overthrows Western notions of time and encodes specific memories linked to broader counter-histories, performs Sandler’s layered memories through objects and images, which coalesce into a conglomeration of troubled histories, the significance of female legacies, and information obtained through diasporic networks. She also projects a video of a cleansing ritual that she performs as an important aspect of the installation.

The very presence of images of her body asserts the importance of reading the body and understanding the histories she presents in conjunction with an embodied performance. Though Sandler creates an archive through the altar, the archive is flexible and does not petrify or crystallize the histories she presents since this particular archive can be rearranged in many different ways based on personal memories. The video has been interpreted in a variety of ways: it has been described as depicting baptism, weeping, drowning, and cleansing from a variety of different sources (Drewal 2008 and 2012, Williams 1999, Sandler 2012). This space for interpretation allows viewers to reframe and reconstruct historical events in the present based on

their own experiences of the evocative objects of the altar superimposed on the images of the performance of a cleansing ritual within the very same space.

Conclusion

The Fowler Museum participates with Sandler in presenting an interactive installation and mobilizing archival materials to create competing histories. Through close examination of Sandler's complex presentation of a sacred altar, juxtaposed against her performance of a cleansing ritual and her construction of a female archive, I trace many diverse cultural influences on her artistic work and emphasize a branching genealogy of practice that reaches across temporal, national, and cultural boundaries. The installation also functions as a memorialized past, or site of memory, through the links that Sandler makes to the past using metonymic objects. Yet, "Mami Wata Crossing" functions like a palimpsest in which stratified histories collide, revealing new meanings and connections between disparate events and time periods. Paul Basu argues that the palimpsest memoryscape is a medium in which the accretion of information "occurs in an uneven manner and...is constantly being excavated and reburied, mixing up the layers, exposing unexpected juxtapositions, and generating unanticipated interactions" (Basu 2007: 254). Sandler's installation exposes such unanticipated interactions between Native American heritage, African American histories, and African practices that have been curated to address the contemporary identity politics involved in selecting a heritage upon which to build artistic work. Much as Sandler delves into the past to formulate and express her identity, dancer and choreographer Kimberly Mullen focuses on restructuring and restaging dynamic, contemporary black Atlantic practices through the memories and histories encoded in the Afro-Caribbean *orisha* dances that she performs. By virtue of such performances that reshuffle and reorganize archival material to meet specific needs, the "archive is always in

process, subject to additions, subtractions and reconfigurations—interventions conditioned by new experiences and reconfigurations” (Fisher 2008, 204-205). As a foreign deity, Mami Wata affords alternatives to established modes of representation and identity formation (Drewal 1988: 161). Where Sandler’s work demonstrates the usefulness of Mami Wata in restructuring histories of loss that overlap national boundaries, in the next chapter I focus on Mullen’s choreography as a demonstration of ways that those located on the fringes of black Atlantic communities continue to influence and expand these cultural practices.

Chapter 3:

Dancing Altars, Inscribing Bodies and Dynamic Traditions in Kimberly

Miguel Mullen's *Yemanja, Mother of the Deep*

Choreographer and dancer Kimberly Miguel Mullen participates in an artistic genealogy of dancers and religious practitioners from Cuba and Brazil; the dance piece *Yemanja, Mother of the Deep* is the product of these transnational, transcultural, artistic genealogies. Building upon Joseph Roach's performance genealogies in *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance*, I employ my theory of *artistic genealogies*: the choices made by individual artists about which traditional practices to transform and remake. I argue that such artists are linked to the African diaspora *by* the artistic choices through which they lay claim to Africa and to circum-Atlantic identities. Through such genealogies, I address ways that a non-black American like Mullen, who is not a practitioner of black Atlantic religions, can be included in the African diaspora and I posit diasporic genealogies as important networks of artistic heritage. While Sandler structures a matrilineal genealogy by linking images and iconography of Mami Wata to African American histories in the form of a stationary altar, Mullen engages with genealogies outside of her family history, choreographing her body as an altar in motion and negotiating her relationship to *Yemanja* and Afro-Caribbean communities through dance.

Yemanja, Mother of the Deep constitutes a complex, contemporary statement on the framing of diaspora. Contributing to dance studies work by scholars including Janet O'Shea and Susan Foster, I explore how Mullen's body functions as a point of convergence for many histories and cultural forms within the framework of the dance (O'Shea 2007, Foster 2012). I frame diaspora in terms of the movement of the cultural forms that have developed through the

dispersal of Africans around the world, which includes Mullen's improvised tribute to the goddess Yemanja and to the Afro-Caribbean and Afro-Brazilian dance forms that she practices. In this chapter I reframe understandings of the transatlantic diaspora through attention to practices linked to the international, transcultural, and migratory goddess Mami Wata since her devotees continue to employ imported and exotic objects and dance practices to reinterpret foreigners and to influence understandings of water deities throughout the black Atlantic. Though thinkers including Alexander Crummell and W. E. B. Du Bois have often framed the African diaspora as a collective that only has room for blacks, I argue against such foreclosures since they exclude artists like Mullen, who practices Afro-Brazilian and Afro-Cuban dance forms, from participation in the transatlantic diaspora. Such narrow definitions of the transatlantic diaspora cannot account for the work of artists like Mullen, a Hawaiian of Portuguese and Filipino descent, who exist between cultures and practices. Through attention to choreography, I explore ways that many black Atlantic communities have employed alternate forms of literacy to encode their histories or genealogies through dances and how so-called "traditional" practices become transformed through the process of transfer from one body to another.

In this chapter, I build on Edwards's theories that frame diaspora through difference and as networks of discourses *across* racial and cultural difference (Edwards 2003: 13). Through such redefinitions of diasporic affiliations, I redefine the reach and influence of the transatlantic diaspora based on practice rather than birth. I also investigate the ways that Mullen has been influenced by Mami Wata traditions in her creation of a contemporary dance work. Mullen's choreography in *Yemanja* is based on traditional dances but incorporates improvised movements and is influenced by many traditions, especially Afro-Brazilian and Afro-Cuban *orisha* worship.

I examine the artistic genealogies in which Mullen participates as diasporic discourses across national boundaries and cultural differences. Yet, I do so without ignoring the fact that many non-blacks have appropriated and exploited the traditions and histories of black members of the transatlantic African diaspora. From blackface minstrel shows to Elvis Presley, the art forms of black peoples have long been misrepresented and commercially exploited by dominant groups. Such difficulties and troubled histories often lead scholars to rigidly exclude non-white practitioners of black Atlantic forms and to label them as “inauthentic,” derivative or otherwise unacceptable. Rather than lampooning or excluding Western artists who apprentice within African forms, I propose acknowledging the nuances and unresolvable complications involved in the status of such cultural outsiders and the significance of their work to the traditions of the transatlantic diaspora and to notions of ethical cultural exchange.

Through the process of apprenticeship, Mullen has received permission from respected dance masters within Afro-Caribbean communities to perform and adapt specific dances. She has been adopted into Afro-Cuban and Afro-Brazilian communities as a dancer but still identifies herself to as a cultural outsider. Though she works as an Afro-Caribbean dance instructor, choreographer, and performer, she must constantly negotiate her position within the communities in which she has apprenticed by demonstrating understanding of cultural values through movement practices. She performs as an expert in Afro-Caribbean dances but acknowledges and confronts her status as an outsider to many of the religious and cultural practices with which the dances are associated. Her ongoing negotiations of these communities and her work in bridging the gaps among different Afro-Caribbean dance forms constitutes an important example of a relationship to Africa and to the transatlantic diaspora based primarily on artistic choices and ongoing practice. Mullen’s relationship with both Yemanjá and Mami Wata arise, like Sandler’s,

out of the transnational circulation of sacred images and knowledge. Yet, Mullen's links to an artistic genealogy are based, not in her matrilineal legacies but in her extension of traditional forms that she applies to her own hybrid identity.

In her performance piece, Mullen demonstrates the power of the body as a type of document which can carry and reinterpret important information even across cultural, linguistic and national boundaries. In this chapter, I will first unveil the ways Mullen challenges the traditional framing devices associated with the proscenium stage. Next, I present my own experience of the show and examine *Yemanja, Mother of the Deep* through choreographic analysis. Through such analysis, I frame Mullen as a dancing altar and investigate how her body operates within both sacred and secular practices during the dance due to the influences of her training. I will then argue that Mullen participates in an important artistic genealogy which links her to the African diaspora through artistic practice and oral tradition rather than through cultural inheritance. I will conclude by examining how the show demonstrates ways Mami Wata and Yemanja are engaged in a continuous transatlantic dialogue that is mobilized through ritual and artistic practice and performance.

Yemanja, Mother of the Deep was performed for two weekends only between March 30th and April 8th 2012 in the intimate setting of the eco-friendly Electric Lodge in Venice, California. The performance featured live music by singer/songwriter Mia Doi Todd and composer and Afro-Cuban religious practitioner Alberto López. Mullen combines the influences of her training in Silvestre technique, a contemporary dance technique based on Afro-Brazilian symbols developed by Rosangela Silvestre, with traditional Afro-Cuban and Afro-Brazilian dance styles in which she has apprenticed with dance masters including Teresita Domé Perez, Juan Carlos, and Juan Dedios for the past seventeen years. Mullen's choreography in *Yemanja*

operates in dialogue with her 2010 performance of *Essensibility*, a duet undertaken with colleague Rosangela Silvestre and with the seven minute solo of Yemanjá's dance given to Mullen by her Afro-Cuban dance mentor Teresita Domé Perez. In *Yemanjá*, Mullen determines the syntax of the choreography based on the many roads, or *caminos*, of Yemanjá so that the dance moves from the aspects of the deity associated with the depths of the ocean to those linked to shallow water, reversing the customary order.

I decided to attend the April 7th showing of the piece on a whim as a way of learning more about Yemanjá, whom I had often heard referred to as one of Mami Wata's New World sisters (Drewal 2008: 167). Before entering the black box theater I passed by a small altar with a doll in tribute to Yemanjá. The doll was dressed in turquoise and surrounded by candles. She also donned the beaded Yoruba-style crown meant to designate its wearer as the queen of the ocean. As the musicians began to play and Mia Doi Todd began to sing lyrics that added narrative poetry to Mullen's embodiments of Yemanjá, I understood Todd's function as a guide through each transformation that Mullen, as Yemanjá, experienced. The dance begins with the road of Yemanjá Olokun and ends with Yemanjá Mayalewo.³ *Hauntingly, Mullen, dressed all in white with her arms held behind her back, comes onstage as Yemanjá Olokun. Caught in the center-stage glare of a bright white light, she strains against invisible bindings, the tension apparent in her chest and shoulders. Her shoulders heave and her undulating back expresses the frustration of imprisonment yet, despite her efforts, her arms remain firmly clasped behind her back. Her struggles culminate in the violent freeing of her arms. Her newly freed arms wave and gracefully unfurl, complementing the celebratory arching of her back and the joyful movements of her knees, legs and feet which stir her frothy white skirt into a frenzy...*

³ The dance moves from Yemanjá Olokun, through Awoyo, Assessu, Mayalewo, Ogunte and ends with Akwara. I have fractured the movement descriptions and included them in my argument in a different order to demonstrate thematic developments and to convey transformations of Mullen's character during the piece.

Choreographing Black Atlantic Literacies

Mullen's performance applies black Atlantic epistemologies of the altar to the Westernized space of the proscenium stage. She rejects the legacy of the proscenium stage, which uproots dances by confining them to a formalized theatrical space, and, instead, integrates the audience in the process of constructing the body. In *Reading Dancing: Bodies and Subjects in Contemporary American Dance*, dance scholar Susan Foster argues that the proscenium theater separates audience members from the world of the performance and necessitates specific forms of literacy to decode the dance (Foster 1988: 60). Mullen positions the musicians, an 8-person live band and singer Mia Doi Todd, on stage in a semicircle surrounding the space in which she dances. The audience is thus positioned as the necessary completion of the circle in which the dance takes place. Mullen also includes the audience in the labor of constructing the character, since observers watch each costume change, which introduces a new facet and road of Yemanjá. Thus, Mullen presents her body to the audience as a point of convergence upon which objects accumulate to represent aspects of the deity.

Throughout the dance Mullen assembles the elements of Yemanjá's iconography needed to portray and reimagine the deity on her own body. Improvising, Mullen choreographs as she goes, much as histories are worked and reworked in and through successive telling and presentations. In *Choreographing Empathy: Kinesthesia in Performance*, Foster defines choreography as the implementation of specific choices in movement and demonstrates that performances derive meaning from specific histories and cultural moments (Foster 2012: 4). Composer Alberto Lopez was inspired by traditional rhythms to create original music and Mullen describes the importance of dancing the transitions between different drum rhythms. She notes the high value placed on improvisation in strictly established patterns of movement within

orisha dance communities and emphasizes the fact that the dance, though improvised, is never freeform. Thus, improvised dances inspired by black Atlantic religions can be examined choreographically, as intentionally organized movements with specific social and cultural meanings (Mullen, Personal Communication, May 22, 2013). Mullen also asserts that learning to go into trance was an important part of her training and that, even when she goes into trance, as a performer she never allows herself to be completely overwhelmed by the deity or the trance because, if she allowed such a thing, “there would be no show” (Mullen, Personal Communication, May 22, 2013). Even though such dances are improvised based on the whims of the deity (in possession) or the character and movement patterns that best represent the *orisha* (when performed), they constitute an important form of literacy and a means of presenting, conveying, and reimagining histories. Such systems of inscription function not only as ways communicating but as ways of knowing and understanding the world (Roberts et al 2007).

Mullen moves to a trunk onstage and pulls out a blue dress and a blue skirt. As she covers the white dress of Olokun with these new items, the frenzy of Olokun begins to fade and her movements take on a sparkly and rolling quality, as one movement melts into the next. As Yemanja Awoyo, the movements of Mullen’s arms evoke the shimmering waves of the ocean. Her feet sidle gracefully and her body sways gently as her skirts flare about her legs, demonstrating the lazy shifts of the sea. Mullen speeds into more aggressive movements and her face expresses the intensity of a trance-like state. Her hair flies, obscuring her face, as she begins to revolve. As she spins faster, circling in one direction and then another, her arms trace their own opposing circles in the air above her head. She finally exhausts herself and drops to the ground in a heap.

The Body as Altar

Mullen's body functions as a type of altar, or meeting place, in the dance and encodes specific, improvised alternate literacies. Through props including the beaded Yoruba crown, the full layers of blue and white skirts, the machete, the shawl and the mirror, which illustrate different facets of Yemanja, Mullen fulfills one of the basic purposes of the altar, to define the face of the divinity (Thompson 1993: 30). In this way Mullen creates an overlapping surfeit of imagery on the surface of her own body. In *Face of the Gods: Art and Altars of Africa and the African Americas*, Robert Farris Thompson characterizes the black Atlantic altar as a stylized bricolage of meaning and point of convergence. Altars come in many forms and can be stationary, drawn in chalk or sand, or inscribed through the movements of the body. Though Thompson focuses on altars as assemblages of objects and artistic processes with specific meanings within different cultural contexts, he also addresses the ways stylized movements can endow spaces with meaning. I extend such theories through my exploration of how Mullen's body functions as an altar in motion in the context of the dance as she choreographs new ways of understanding and reading Yemanja.

Since Yemanja Assessu manifests in turbid or agitated waters, Mullen reaches out her arms, searching, as if through the dark and clouded waters as the lights fade in. Her arms begin to move as if she is collecting and splashing water across her face and body. She moves laboriously, with a swaying gait, displaying her moody nature as she mimes taking a message from vocalist Mia Doi Todd to Olokun, into the depths of the ocean.

The performing body that Mullen constructs functions as a specific type of black Atlantic altar in motion. In *Sacred Arts of Haitian Vodou*, Donald Cosentino describes the aesthetic of the altar as "constantly reworked and reactivated" (Cosentino 1999: 28). Thompson also emphasizes

the importance of invention, innovation and memory in the construction of altars. Though Thompson shows that most altars are improvised, he focuses on the fact that they are intentional, whether formed in a home, on a riverbank, in a forest, or on stage (Thompson 1993: 60). Mullen overthrows national and cultural boundaries by bringing together Brazilian and Cuban dance forms in her body and refusing to discriminate between the two within the context of the dance. Mullen is very clear about being inspired by many different cultural elements, chief amongst these influences being her Cuban and Brazilian mentors but not remaining tied to the traditional mores or perspectives of these practices. By not discriminating between Cuban elements and Brazilian elements in her improvisation of the deity, she physically bridges entrenched cultural barriers and extends Yemanjá *orisha* dance traditions. In this way she also builds bridges between different ways of understanding the body and perceiving the deity.

Throughout the piece Mullen shuttles between the set movements of the Cuban *orisha* dance, which was given to her by Perez, and her own innovations, which weave the roads of Yemanjá together differently than in traditional practice. Mullen's body functions as the point where these different cultural practices in honor of the same deity meet and manifest. Thompson's understandings of the black Atlantic altar also allow me to read Mullen's body as a transatlantic altar capable of crossing national, cultural, or metaphysical boundaries. Though Mullen's choreography does not constitute a possession ritual, she does embody the deity and, in doing so, she reinterprets the deity and affords her audience the opportunity to do the same. Aligning himself with a quote from visual artist Robert Motherwell, Thompson indicates that the job of the artist is to make the spiritual actual so that it can be possessed (Thompson 1993: 109). Mullen performs this work through her body, allowing spiritual elements to be experienced by observers. These movements, like the altar, become a visual prayer.

Through the murky waters we come to the fierce, rapid drum rhythms of Ogunte. From a chest onstage Mullen pulls a grass skirt and machete to represent Ogunte's warrior nature. As she adds Yemanja Ogunte's iconography to her ensemble, Mullen's physical energy changes drastically from Assessu's ponderous, careful movements to the predatory coiling and uncoiling movements of Ogunte. Her shoulders shake as if in anticipation of a fight and she springs, hacking at the air with her machete. She dances in duet with the lead drummer who has a center stage solo before Ogunte begins to dance and continues to interact with Mullen throughout this road of Yemanja. Mullen moves across the space at times as if challenging the drummer and other times as if delimiting her territory.

Afro-Caribbean Artistic Genealogies

Through her choreography, Mullen demonstrates the dynamics of traditional practices and how they are transferred from place to place, body to body, and one cultural context to another. Mullen's status as an American of mixed race who does not practice Black Atlantic religions and who is deeply dedicated to the dances born of Afro-Cuban and Afro-Brazilian religious practices, brings up questions of how African diasporas are constituted and the ways that non-blacks play an important part in the perpetuation of the artistic practices and traditions of the transatlantic diaspora. Mullen identifies herself as of Filipino descent on her mother's side and Portuguese through her father. She has always considered herself to be the product of colonization since her parents met through histories of European colonization in the Philippines and were forced to elope since their families forbade them to marry outside of their race. Mullen credits her mixed race identity as an important factor that drew her to study the Caribbean. She felt linked to the island nations where mixed race people seemed to be the norm. As an undergraduate Mullen wanted to learn more about colonization in the Philippines but had more

ready access to black studies and Caribbean studies courses through which she learned to apply knowledge about European colonization to understandings of Filipino culture. As she travelled to the Caribbean and learned more about the cultural and religious practices, she found dance to be the best way to connect with local cultures. Her studies of Afro-Caribbean dance forms continue to inform and mold her amalgamated identity.

Through her apprenticeships with Afro-Caribbean dance masters, Mullen's teachers include her in specific genealogies. In *Yemanja*, she has chosen to pursue Afro-Caribbean dance in ways that contribute to these creole dance traditions. Mullen participates in an artistic genealogy through which she is linked to the cultural practices of the African diaspora. In interviews and personal communication, Mullen was very clear about the fact that her dance masters, who include black Atlantic religious practitioners and professional dancers, initially retained the right to decide when she was ready to learn and to perform the dances of Yemanja. These dance masters have also taught Mullen a lot about both the sacred and artistic aspects of the dances in cultural context. Mullen worked with black Atlantic religious practitioner and professional dancer, Juan Carlos Blanco who maintains strict boundaries between sacred and secular dance events and holds that performance is not the same as religious practice (Mullen 2005: 30).⁴ Dance master Juan deDios Ramos Morejon, like Blanco, argues that religion is not present in secular performances of Afro-Cuban dances and that choreographers make artistic rather than devotional choices when choreographing theatrical performances.⁵ Mullen also apprenticed with Teresita Domé Perez who was born into African *cabildo* traditions and taught and approached Afro-Cuban dance through her faith (Mullen 2005: 22). Perez's grandmother was a daughter of Yemaya and she practices what she calls an "African" style of *orisha* dance

⁴ Blanco is a professional Afro-Cuban dance performer and practicing Babalawo, or priest, in the ifa divination system. For the full interview see Mullen 2005.

⁵ Morejon worked as founder and performer in the Conjunto Folklorico Nacional de Cuba (Mullen 2005: 45).

that preserves African traditions. She feels that an *orisha* can never be excluded from dances done in tribute to them and that performing sacred dances serves to extend religious traditions (Mullen 2005: 57).

Choreographing New Legacies

Through these legacies, Mullen performs traditional dances in a secular context while maintaining respect for the religious aspects of the movements. In her unpublished Master's thesis, *Dancing for the Orichas: Performing AfroCuban Folkloric Ritual Dances*, Mullen acknowledges that, while Afro-Cuban dances have flourished in schools and theatres nationally and abroad, the religious traditions and rituals that inspire the dances arise from histories of oppression. The Cuban government attempted to suppress Santeria through legislation until the late 50s. After the Cuban Revolution, Brazilian dances and music associated with black Atlantic religions gained popularity through tourist interest, which started to swell in the early 60s (Mullen 2005: v, 55). Yet, Mullen defines her contribution to these legacies as that of an educator and scholar who exposes audiences to the character of the *orishas*. Through Perez, Mullen participates in a genealogy linking her to a specifically African heritage, through which the dance maintains and perpetuates memories of African traditional practices (Mullen 2005: 56). Through such artistic choices, Mullen takes part in a subjugated, liminal, circum-Atlantic identity by "opening [herself] up to uncharted geographic territories and sacred dimensions of the unknown" (Mullen 2005: 75).

Mullen's snake-like motions evoke the winding paths of a river. As Yemanja Akwara, she oscillates on stage, moving from one side to the other, as if to indicate that she is neither sweet nor salty water, but the mixing of both, the confluence of river and ocean. She remains adorned in the crown, mirror and shawl of Mayalewo.

Mullen operates in the interstice between the sacred and the secular because she blurs these boundaries in her own work as a result of training from teachers with different perspectives. Though Morejon and Blanco claim that performances are always separate from religious practice, Perez insisted that the form and content of the dance are already set by the *orisha*. Perez also taught Mullen to dance Yemanja by believing that she actually becomes the deity (Mullen 2005: 11). Perez also taught Mullen that the *orishas* do not discriminate and can manifest anywhere and “mount” a non-initiate as well as an initiate. Though Mullen carefully presents Afro-Caribbean dances artistically rather than religiously, she is able to project the energy of Yemanja onstage because she understands how to embody and internalize the character of the deity and appreciates the religious significance of the movements, blurring the lines between sacred and secular perspectives. Mullen builds upon her teachers’ differing perspectives to determine how best to adapt performances of Yemanja in order to extend the artistic genealogies with which she engages. In *The Archive and the Repertoire*, Diana Taylor theorizes that embodied performances structure ways of thinking and of knowing in more dynamic ways than theories like Bourdieu’s *habitus*, in which behaviors are replicated generationally, would indicate. Taylor also argues that transmission of embodied knowledge sometimes works through doubling, replication and proliferation rather than a direct substitution (Taylor 2003: 49). Mullen does not attempt to replace religious forms of the dances with a new definitive version of the dance of Yemanja. She instead seeks to contribute additional perspectives on Yemanja and new ways of approaching the dances of the *orishas*.

Mami Wata in the New World

In order to contribute to traditional practices, Mullen and her collaborators draw upon various influences including that of Mami Wata. Mami Wata continues to influence

understandings of Yemanja in the transatlantic diaspora through her visual representations and iconography. When asked if the figure of Mami Wata influenced her understanding of Yemanja as she prepared the music and lyrics for the show, Los Angeles based singer-songwriter Mia Doi Todd answered that

there was a traveling visual art exhibit on Mami Wata and it got the cover of the New York Times. It was a painting by Moyo Ogundipe, a Nigerian artist who lives in the United States, and I was captivated by this image. I cut it out and it lived on my refrigerator...I did not know very much about Mami Wata at that time and I did not know when I cut it out that this was connected to Yemanja though...I had recorded ‘Canto de Iemanja’...There were images in that show that were from all over the world. [It] was inspiring that we could contribute to the ongoing creation of Mami Wata (Mullen and Todd 2012).⁶

Todd, who commissioned Mullen to choreograph for the music video of her track of “Canto De Iemanja,” illustrates the power of what Appadurai might call “mediascapes,” through which images travel across nations and result in transcultural amalgamations (Appadurai 1996: 35).⁷ Todd’s experience also demonstrates how, through the circulation of visual culture, artists continually construct new visions and understandings of the circum-Atlantic world, such that Todd and Mullen were able to integrate images and understandings of Mami Wata into their portrayal of Yemanja. In this way, Mami Wata continues to place artists from very different backgrounds, geographical locations, artistic genealogies, and varying levels of artistic authority in an ongoing dialogue, just as the lyrics of this Los Angeles show were shaped in part by a

⁶ The exhibition was *Mami Wata: Arts for Water Spirits in Africa and Its Diasporas* (2008) organized by the Fowler Museum at UCLA and the painting was *Mami Wata* (1999), Acrylic on canvas, by Moyo Ogundipe.

⁷ “Canto De Iemanja” was originally performed by Vinicius de Moraes and Baden Powell in 2011.

painting of Mami Wata that was displayed in the same exhibition as Sandler's installation and created by a Nigerian-born artist who lives in Denver.

When watching the show, I was shocked to hear Todd mention Mami Wata in a performance completely devoted to Yemanja. Todd intoned "Yemanja Awoyo, Ancient One, Mami Wata, Mermaid Queen, in your womb the universe revolves, all of life emerges from you" (*Yemanja* 2012). In the piece, as Mullen dances Awoyo, Todd speaks adoringly, as if to Yemanja herself, stating that "your prizma colored crown,/ The rainbow serpent Oshumare,/ Unites earth and sky,/Yours is the ocean" (Mullen and Todd 2012). In this same way Mami Wata devotees associate the deity with snakes and rainbows because of the Indian-made chromolithograph print that circulated in West Africa starting in the 1880s (Drewal 1988: 169). Rather than framing Yemanja as derivative, I argue, as does Judy Rosenthal in *Possession, Ecstasy, and Law in Ewe Voodoo*, that *vodu* practices, which I would extend to include New World black Atlantic religious traditions in honor of the *orishas*, are characterized by change and fluidity as a result of the rapid inclusion of new ideas into traditional systems (Rosenthal 1998: 46). As such, though difficult to determine the paths along which information has been transferred, Mami Wata and Yemanja continue to change and shift based on popular culture, migration, and the ways their images and iconographies circulate. Yemanja is not merely influenced by past understandings of Mami Wata, but by current practices and contemporary art that honors the deity. This exchange of ideas and images reveals a transatlantic diaspora that moves in both directions and is linked through artistic practice and production, both directly and indirectly.

Yemanja is linked to Mami Wata through a constant and ongoing dialogue between practitioners on both sides of the Atlantic. In "Celebrating Salt and Sweet Waters: Yemanja and Oxum in Bahia, Brazil," Henry Drewal discusses Yemanja's connections to Mami Wata, Yemoja

from Nigeria, and the goddess Oshun. Using Pierre Verger's argument in *Trade Relations between the Bight of Benin and Bahia, Seventeenth-Nineteenth Century*, Drewal describes Mami Wata practices as commuting back and forth across the Atlantic as blacks moved between Bahia and the Bight of Benin between the 17th and 19th centuries (Verger 1968). Drewal makes a case for influences in both directions, to and from Africa, on the formation of Yemanja: "she returned to Africa with Afro-Brazilians only to become conflated with Mami Wata—because both are often represented as mermaids and are seen as 'mothers' of the sea" (Drewal 2008b: 167). Yet, these Afro-Brazilians in West Africa must also have brought their own creolized practices to bear on Mami Wata traditions, and those who travelled back to Brazil must also have taken with them new understandings of both versions of the water goddess. Mullen choreographs Yemanja Mayalewo based on the trope "of the vain and painted white woman with hand mirror and perfume," which devotees combine with knowledge of ancient water spirits in the worship of Mami Wata (Rosenthal 1998: 117). Rosenthal links the trope of the vain white woman to the Yoruba Yemoja, Cuban Yemaya, Brazilian Yemanja, Haitian Ezili Freda, and Ezili Lasiren, claiming that in each of these places the land is seen as a place of order, while the ocean is acknowledged as a hub of wildness and, she suggests, problematic femaleness.

As Yemanja Mayalewo, sometimes known as a forest witch, Mullen carefully and coquettishly wraps herself in a white, lacy shawl and begins a hip swaying dance as she mimes collecting items from the forest to create healing medicines. She moves sensually, adorning herself in the beaded crown and carrying a decorative mirror in which she admires her own beauty, preening girlishly.

The practices associated with these pantheons of deities function as repositories for the impressions left by historical encounters, including colonial encounters between European and

Indian traders and West Africans, histories of forced migration and of more recent and ongoing exchanges between West Africa and the New World. Mullen recognizes that such shifts and changes in traditional practice and interpretation have become “a point of contention amongst people inside of the culture and people viewing it from outside [which stems from] this constant conversation about how to preserve the culture and how to evolve it with the current trends” while preserving the authenticity that gives the traditions their depth (Mullen and Todd 2012). Mami Wata devotees and Yemanja initiates actively cultivate processes of remembering in their bodies through the stylized mnemonics of performance and ritual practice. Similarly, in *Yemanja*, Mullen and Todd demonstrate ways that Mami Wata and Yemanja are engaged in a continuous transatlantic dialogue that is mobilized through ritual, artistic practice and performance.

Diaspora Beyond Race

Through her Afro-Caribbean artistic genealogy, Mullen engages with the African diaspora through practice rather than racial solidarity. In *Yemanja* she uses her training as inspiration to tell her own story so that she could “pour back into the traditions” from which she has learned so much (Mullen, personal communication, June 11, 2012). Mullen holds that, after years of training, Afro-Caribbean dances have become a part of her body; she felt that it was important to merge different dances in non-traditional ways to represent her own experience of the traditions (Mullen and Todd 2012). Much like Mami Wata devotees assembling foreign objects ranging from Muslim prayer mats and chromolithographs of Hindu deities, to imported perfumes and white dolls, Mullen and Todd synthesized many different belief systems and mythologies in the performance.

Both Todd, who is of Japanese American and European American descent, and Mullen describe themselves as New World people whose families do not practice African traditions. Yet, they brought the elements of *Yemanja* together with the utmost care and respect, taking artistic license but also consulting their collaborator, Alberto Lopez, who kept them in touch with an insider cultural perspective of Yemanja. Yet, Mullen in particular felt that the Afro-Caribbean dances she has learned have now become an expression of her own identity, not merely an abstracted tradition, and that these dance practices have become an important part of her personal understanding of self (Mullen and Todd 2012). For Mullen and Todd, I argue that the choreography and lyrics of the show function at times as “metaphoric self-portraiture.” In Moyo Okediji’s “Inbetweeners: Mami Wata and the Hybridity of Contemporary African Art,” he examines Mami Wata as a helpful metaphor for understanding contemporary artists who exist between cultures. He presents ways Mami Wata’s iconography has interested artists like Valente Malangatana and Moyo Ogundipe as a means of self-portraiture (Okediji 2008: 479). Okediji also argues that, despite the image of the vain white woman, Mami Wata is not, in fact, about being white but about transcending race because she celebrates self and translates the self into the space of the other (Okediji 2008: 491). In this way, Okediji’s argument about Nigerian artists who exist in the interstices between West Africa and the West applies to Mullen and Todd’s position, to varying degrees, as cultural outsiders able to transcend race through the stylized embodiment and the artistic interpretation of Yemanja and the connections between Yemanja and Mami Wata that they have made.

Interpreting Tradition

Yemanja, Mother of the Deep demonstrates the dynamics of traditional practices adapted to fit contemporary needs. Mullen grappled with the balance of evolving the traditional format

while remaining true to the form (Mullen and Todd 2012). Mullen expands the roads of Yemanja into a full length work to claim the deity as a means of self-expression and to respectfully push the boundaries of the dance traditions in which she has been trained (Mullen, personal communication, June 11, 2012). Todd, who describes herself as a complete outsider to the religious traditions, engages with the project on a completely artistic level and notes the richness in pulling from and improvising upon traditional practices. She realized that, as an outsider, she had an innovative perspective that cultural insiders valued. For instance, one of the guitar players in the show was overjoyed to have a new song for Assessu. She found that she was able to contribute to the rich traditional practices as an artist working within the mythologies of Yemanja (Mullen and Todd 2012). West African devotees employ worship of Mami Wata as a means of comprehending, navigating and negotiating racial and cultural hybridity. In this same way, *Yemanja, Mother of the Deep* enacts a type of cultural hybridity that moves beyond the conventions of the creole practices from which they draw their cultural influences, a hybridity which figures Yemanja and Mami Wata as globalizing forces. Much as Mami Wata devotees have adapted traditional water spirit practices to affect contemporary difficulties, Mullen contributes to the rich and multilayered traditional dances that she has been taught in order to give “people who are, like [herself], outside of the tradition...permission to interpret the material in a way that will help the tradition to maintain the integrity of it in a way that will do good in the tradition” (Mullen and Todd 2012). Mullen and Todd, as cultural “in-betweeners,” extend traditional practices by continuing to adapt them to the needs of the present, including the construction of non-exploitative global identities and the repurposing of traditional images as a means of building bridges between cultures. Mullen’s artistic revisions of Yemanja cultivate and

construct new belongings for herself and others and make a space for different types of hybridity and identities within black Atlantic practices.

Conclusion

In effect, I interpret the transatlantic diaspora as a network through which individuals on both sides of the Atlantic, claiming many different racial, cultural, spiritual, and religious identities, participate in creolized African practices. I have demonstrated ways that Mullen and Todd use the iconography of Mami Wata and Yemanja to construct a place for themselves within the African diaspora and to express their own hybrid identities through the characteristics of a Yoruba *orisha*. I have framed Mullen as a dancing altar to show how she reinvents Yemanja through improvisation, process and practice. Mullen's choreography demonstrates ways of participating in black Atlantic traditions that emphasize the dynamics and relevance of traditional practices in contemporary settings. Although I push for closer examination of artistic genealogies as a means of better understanding the cohesion and disparity within the transatlantic diaspora, I do not mean to dismiss the significance of cultural specificity. Significantly, Mullen does not present or discuss Afro-Caribbean practices as universal or homogenous, but rather points out disagreements within and outside of Cuban and Brazilian religious communities. In fact, she makes an important contribution to the study of *orisha* dances by physically combining different understandings of the *orishas* through her movement vocabulary in *Yemanja*, and putting these varying and different approaches to the deity in dialogue with one another. Mullen, Todd, and Lopez demonstrate how artists have employed Yemanja, and understandings of Mami Wata, to transcend national boundaries, bridge cultures, and contribute to vibrant traditional practices.

I have pointed out the ways that Mullen and Todd have been influenced by the international circulation of Mami Wata's iconography to demonstrate how Mami offers a

framework for discussing movement between and across cultures without ignoring important local practices. In this chapter, I have unveiled one example of the contemporary and continual influence of West African Mami Wata practices on the production of knowledge about Yemanja and demonstrated how bodies caught on the fringes of a culture may sometimes create new ways of understanding important embodied traditional practices. In *Yemanja, Mother of the Deep* Mullen and Todd include and integrate Mami in their portrayal of Yemanja and explorations of cultural identity. In the coming pages I will explore how Chris Abani creates a protagonist who combines a heritage that is, like Mullen's artistic genealogy, geographically, racially, and culturally removed from the place that he calls home. Abani's protagonist extends and reinscribes foreign ideas through his movement practices. Where Sandler combined a matrilineal archive with a continued ritual practice and Mullen defines her relationship to her inherited culture and chosen legacies through dance, in his novel *GraceLand*, Abani brings together creolized choreographies, an African mermaid, and a female archive.

Chapter 4:

Genealogy, Gender and the Circum-Atlantic figure of Mami Wata in Chris

Abani's GraceLand

In his novel *GraceLand*, Chris Abani explores the ways that his young protagonist, Elvis Oke, caught on the cultural fringes of the busy urban center of Lagos, Nigeria, reactivates and reenacts notions of cultural identity through his body. Abani reworks the genre of the *bildungsroman*, or coming-of-age novel, in the story of an Igbo boy growing up in the shadow of his dead mother, Beatrice, and his demanding and disappointed father, Sunday. Abani, born in 1966 in Afikpo, Nigeria to an Igbo father and a British mother, describes *GraceLand* as a manifesto that integrates an Igbo cosmology into a very modern 21st-century novel. He wanted to talk about gender, sexuality and the performance of masculinity through violence and upon the bodies of women within a Nigerian context (Abani 2006).

The novel shuttles between the years of 1974 and 1983 and moves from Afikpo (where Elvis lives from his birth to 1980) to Lagos where Elvis and his father move after his mother's death. The present of the story largely takes place in the booming city of Lagos where Elvis subsists as an impoverished outsider. Elvis Oke bears certain resemblances to Abani as he also hails from rural Afikpo, endures torture while held in a Nigerian prison, and ends the novel by immigrating to the United States. Elvis survives torture, rape, and extreme poverty, and becomes involved in criminal activity including drug dealing, prostitution and human trafficking. Through the alternate literacies enabled by the presence of Mami Wata's iconography in the novel, I read the deity into Abani's narrative as a means of understanding Elvis Oke's complex negotiations of gender, globalization and his hybrid artistic practice as an unrecognizable, Nigerian Elvis impersonator. By constructing *GraceLand* as an assemblage of different texts and alternate

literacies, including performance, Abani challenges and interrogates the form of the novel and its particular colonial history. Abani demonstrates the generative subversion that is possible within embodied practices by showing how Elvis uses performance to navigate genealogical legacies and various cultural influences in order to fashion his own identity within restrictive social systems.

Abani's Mermaid

In *GraceLand* Abani foregrounds African systems of knowledge. In *Inscribing Meaning: Writing and Graphic Systems in African Art*, Africanist visual culture scholar Mary Nooter Roberts et al challenge assertions that Africa is not a part of the literate world by presenting a history of literacy in Africa and examining the visual aspects of these textual forms. They argue for scholarly recognition of alternative literacies in Africa and its diasporas (Roberts et al., 2007: 13). Roberts et al emphasize the importance of understanding African forms of literacy from African perspectives, since literacies are culturally determined. They indicate that alternate literacies often involve processes of translating and interpreting visual images (Roberts et al., 2007: 20, 23). Such systems of inscription function not only as “technologies of communication,” but as “ways of knowing and affecting the world” (Roberts et al., 2007: 14). As such, the image of a blue-skinned mermaid that Elvis Oke observes in the peripheral space of a fetid communal toilet takes on new meanings and functions as a way of understanding the world, for those able to decipher the iconographies on display. Mami Wata makes her ambiguous appearance in the novel through such alternate literacies. Elvis observes a faded and defaced mural depicting a river scene as he squats in the toilet; he notes that

On one wall of the toilet, the landlord, in an attempt to clean things up years ago, had painted a mural. Faded now from years of grime and heat, the river scene, with a mermaid holding a baby in one hand and a staff of power in the other and a python draped around her neck, was still discernible. A crown hovered over her black hair, and stars gleamed in the air around her blue body. Her face, however, was scratched out. He wondered who had done that, and how they could have endured the stench long enough to do it (Abani 2004: 79).

Though Mami Wata's name is never mentioned in the novel, Abani troubles ideas of Nigerian identity by using the iconography of Mami Wata to construct Elvis as a hybrid, globalized figure.

Through the presence of a mermaid, Abani makes use of creolized West African visual literacies to frame Elvis's creolized artistic practice. In her article entitled "Mami Wata and the Occluded Feminine in Anglophone Nigerian-Igbo Literature," Madhu Krishnan argues that the image Elvis encounters in the reeking bathroom is "one of a pantheon of sea and river goddesses called Mami Wata, a general name used for the hybridized river and sea goddesses popularized across Africa and the African diaspora in the nineteenth century" (Krishnan 2012: 2). Through the literacy enabled by Igbo cosmology, the mural is easily read and interpreted without the benefit of words or text. Krishnan relates that, in Igbo cosmology, a water deity name Idemili created the world and contends that Anglophone Igbo novelists have addressed the effacement of the feminine aspects of Igbo religious practice, through the return of the hybrid figure of Mami Wata as a contemporary translation of Idemili (Krishnan 2012: 4). Krishnan references Sabine Jell-Bahsen's assertion that Mami Wata represents and encompasses many elements of womanhood in pre-colonial Igbo culture (Krishnan 2012: 4). Though Krishnan identifies the mermaid as Idemili, the image could be representative of many different aspects or

manifestations of the Mami Wata pantheon. Her body, blue like the Hindu god Krishna, may reference Hindu pantheons as Mami Wata iconography often does, or encode her exoticism, since Mami Wata's skin color can vary in her iconography from white to black as she represents both foreignness and indigeneity.

As a hybrid being herself, born out of creolization and encounters among different ethnic and racial groups, Mami Wata represents an important means of reading Elvis's impersonations of "the king." Many Mami Wata devotees use specific artistic practices to understand the increasing globalization and hybridity of their communities and to link themselves to transnational flows in meaningful ways, much as Elvis Oke does. Caught in this way, culturally and physically between worlds, devotees know that Mami Wata is neither black *nor* white, fish nor woman, but an entirely new creature. Moyo Okediji argues that the identity of the contemporary African artist is similarly ambiguous. He asserts that, much like Elvis, the contemporary African artist exists between West Africa and the West, a state which Africanist art historian Ulli Beier has described as the position of the Caucasian Negro (Okediji 2008: 479). Beier borrows the term Caucasian Negro, or *oyinbo dudu*, from the Yoruba

who apply the phrase to African artists who are exposed to Western aesthetics, artists consequently regarded as somewhat different from the rest of the population. Somewhere located between two [or more] worlds, the contemporary African artist lives a hybrid experience...S/he is a being from two or more worlds—a cultural mulatto, a social freak of international proportions, with a streak of alienation: an in-betweener (Okediji 2008: 479).

Elvis, exposed to foreign aesthetics through films, manipulates these foreign images much as many devotees repurpose exotic, European-made objects for personal gain. Elvis, like these Caucasian Negroes, finds himself alienated from Igbo cosmologies and many traditional practices (including a coming of age ritual that his father arranges for him) and beyond the direct reach of Western culture (Okediji 2008: 479). He also, as just such a Caucasian Negro, stranded between multiple cultures, inhabits a diasporic landscape that is analogous to the bodyscape of a goddess who is neither fish nor woman but a hybrid of both (Okediji 2008: 479). Elvis lives in Legos as a Caucasian Negro, his impersonations illegible to both Nigerians and Western tourists.

Elvis's Liminal Identity

Rather than portraying Elvis's identity as a disadvantage, Abani emphasizes the possibilities of subversion and the ways that re-choreographing Elvis Presley allows Elvis to understand himself. This use of foreign imagery to redefine complex contemporary West African identities mirrors the ways that Mami Wata's status as a foreign goddess allows devotees to participate in the global marketplace on their own terms by repurposing foreign objects and images. Abani emphasizes this form of hybridity and interstitial identity not only through Mami Wata's presence in the novel, but also throughout the novel during Elvis's many applications of whiteface make-up in preparation for his performances. Though Elvis only knows America through photographs, films and music, his exposure to Western aesthetics and culture alienate him from many aspects of Igbo traditional practices. He does not even recognize Mami Wata when faced with her on the wall of the bathroom because he cannot interpret the particular combinations of visual literacies with which the water spirit is associated.

By attempting to wear the skin of the white, Western other, Elvis comes to understand his position between cultures. His inability to directly experience the benefits of Western culture are emphasized by his wistful desire to be “born white, or even just American” (Abani 2004: 78). As he smiles through the white powder covering his face, “it spread across his face in fine tendrils that grew wider as he laughed until his skin showed through. I look like a hairless panda, he thought. Without understanding why, he began to cry through the cracked face powder” (Abani 2004: 78). Thus, he comes to understand himself as a social oddity. Though all of the Lagosians in the novel are exposed to influences from around the world through imported visual culture, Elvis, as an artist caught between two worlds, performs these influences in ways which are completely illegible to Nigerians and foreigners alike (Abani 2004: 12-13). In this way, Elvis’s placeless and partial identity defines the aesthetics of his artistic work. He participates in the global exchange of images (the economic flows that bring Western images to Nigeria) by putting on whiteface to imitate a white musician [whose name he shares] who spent his life imitating black artists. Though his dance practice locates him awkwardly between cultures, Elvis’s practice enables him to participate in capitalistic exchange on a small scale as a creative consumer by transforming the Hollywood images he receives and repurposing these images through the uses he makes of them.

Dancing African Creolization

Through Elvis Oke’s dances, Abani illustrates the ways that many Nigerians have found alternative means of understanding, contributing to, and controlling the aspects of capitalistic modernity that affect their daily lives. By repurposing imported objects for their own personal and devotional needs, Mami Wata devotees lay claim to knowledge of Western cultures and seek financial blessings to match the wealth of foreign merchants (Drewal 1988, 173). Since Mami

Wata functions as a very pointed way of dealing with Western capitalism and understanding wealth brought to West Africa from Western and Eastern cultures, she is associated with Hinduism, imported white dolls, long hair, white people, light-skinned women and excessive beauty. She thus affords an excellent means of deconstructing Elvis's performances of whiteness and his consumption of imported images. She also help us to understand the ways that he repurposes, resymbolizes, and transforms Hollywood images, actual choreographies, and the movements that he observes in the films from which he borrows. He uses dance steps learned from Elvis films and Bollywood films to imitate and embody a white pop star famous for his appropriation of African American musical styles and dance moves. The image of Mami Wata in the narrative helps link the novel to syncretic West African practices and addresses the malleability of some of the cultural elements through which Elvis reevaluates Western images.

Elvis puts on whiteness through whiteface and Western choreography in order to claim an identity through which he can reject the gender norms, violence, and cultural mores which have been forced on him by his Igbo father. In *Translating the Devil: Religion and Modernity Among the Ewe in Ghana*, Birgit Meyer shows how Mami Wata represents the desires of young people to operate on a global scale and participate in a global market using funds obtained through paid sexual encounters and captures how, in Christianized contexts, encounters with Mami Wata in dreams and rituals often reveal the latent desires of subjugated individuals to move beyond local limitations and operate on a global scale (Meyer 1999, 203). Meyer observes that in the West African media, specifically in Nigerian popular films, Mami Wata comes to represent transgressive sexuality. Meyer further sees Mami Wata as a vehicle for expressing ambivalence about integration into a global political economy. She makes a case for viewing Mami Wata as a culturally accepted image that communicates desires for sex and money, or

money through sex (Meyer 1999, 202). The predatory capitalism that Abani depicts in the novel leads Elvis into many dangerous business schemes, including prostitution and human trafficking. Thus, Mami Wata worship functions as a powerful lens through which to examine Elvis's negotiations of sexuality and his abortive schemes to operate on a global level through illegal trade and prostitution. Elvis sees his dancing as a way to avoid the limitations and violence of a capitalist economy in which he must sell his body or the bodies of others to survive. Much as Mami Wata devotees use specific ritual practices to negotiate their ambivalence about capitalist modernity, Elvis uses dance as a mediating force through which he examines and evades the harsh realities of capitalism. Elvis's artistic identity allows him to challenge Nigerian masculinity and to combine aspects of feminine Igbo traditions, which Abani links to the presence and resurgence of the figure of Mami Wata, with the Western genres through which he expresses himself.

Female Legacies and Competing Voices

Elvis Oke's mother's writings function as an alternative legacy in the novel, and form an integral part of his artistic genealogy. Elvis's mother Beatrice enacts the type of feminist agency by writing her journal as an archive of Igbo women's histories. Abani presents alternatives to the exclusion of women from significant social positions that can be explored through an examination of Igbo interpretations of Mami Wata. Krishnan argues that Abani questions the fossilization of gender discourses along the lines of Western colonial norms by presenting Mami Wata as a representation of the feminine aspects of Igbo and West African culture, which have been overwritten through colonial practices. Krishnan contends that Igbo novelists, including Buchi Emecheta and Flora Nwapa, often address the effacement of the feminine aspects of Igbo religious practice by incorporating the hybrid figure of Mami Wata.

Krishnan notes the ways that Mami leaves traces on Abani's text through the legacies and significant roles of the female characters in the novel, including Elvis's cousin Efua, his grandmother and, most importantly, his mother Beatrice. Krishnan insists that the feminine becomes a secret tongue that weaves throughout the novel and takes up a marginalized, peripheral and essential position in the narrative, so that women's histories become inscribed in the text (Krishnan 2012: 11). The effaced feminine decodes the novel through the figure of Mami Wata, who functions as a discursive space where ambiguous relations can be played out and fractured experiences of modernity can be assembled and mobilized. Krishnan's work captures the significance of the feminine in the novel and the ways that the feminine becomes linked to Mami Wata and to literacy. Krishnan shows how Abani uses the mysterious figure of Mami Wata to present alternatives to the exclusion of women from significant social positions. Abani challenges the colonial legacies of the novel form and supplies Elvis with an alternative to patriarchal violence through the legacy that Beatrice leaves him in the form of a disorganized archival record.

Abani's novel is composed of three different voices: the central narrative of Elvis's experiences, Beatrice's seemingly randomly arranged diary of recipes and home remedies, and the voice of an outsider ethnographer observing Igbo culture. The ethnographic voice represents Abani's rejection of performing and explaining Igbo culture from an insider perspective, in the way that Chinua Achebe does in *Things Fall Apart*. I view these many voices as a critique of the Eurocentric, patriarchal baggage of the novel form. In "Word Play: Text and Image in Contemporary African Arts," Art Historian Elizabeth Harney argues that, in Africa, the book is already marked by histories of European conquest and missionary endeavor. She traces ways that African artists often reveal their distrust of the form by incorporating deliberate fragmentation,

with “pages, excerpts, and snippets of larger works...separated out for interrogation, floating free and unbound by convention” (Harney 2007: 222). Abani’s novel binds narrative voices in ways that allow them to interrupt and frame one another, with each voice speaking into the silences and pauses of the other. He assembles the fragments of seemingly-disparate texts, constructing undercurrents of implied meanings. Abani includes non-narrative recipes from Beatrice’s book and moves between temporalities within the structure of the novel. He repurposes and vexes the form of the novel through the performances of the characters’ bodies within the narrative and through the interactions and juxtapositions of different narrative fragments.

Inscribing Igbo Womanhood

The novel enacts the invasion of the archive, or material records of events, by the repertoire of performed or lived experiences through the ways that Beatrice’s archive of cooking and the anonymous ethnographic record of the kola nut ritual are continually interpreted against Elvis’s performances, his developing repertoire of experiences. By structuring the novel in this way, Abani prompts readers to reinterpret the archive and reveals the pliability of archival materials. He scatters these archival elements throughout the narrative to frame Beatrice’s African archive, which records the forgotten performances of Igbo women as they cook countless meals and prepare healing potions. Thus, the novel frames the archive as valid primarily in relation to the performances and lived experiences that they attempt to record. Abani’s construction of *GraceLand* implies that the archive must be interpreted through and against performance.

In the journal she leaves Elvis as his only maternal inheritance, Beatrice employs the genre of the recipe to record her memories and interrogates histories of subjugation. Elvis

acknowledges the strangeness of his mother's choice of a recipe book, acknowledging that "nobody he knew cooked from recipes. That was something actors did on television and in the movies: white women with stiff clothes and crisp-looking aprons and perfect hair" (Abani 2004: 146). Through this choice, Beatrice adds these nuggets of rural women's wisdom to the multiple, multicultural influences in her son's life. In contrast to the pristine presentations of white women in the films Elvis associates with recipes, Beatrice constructs a lasting archive that exposes the labor and sweat required to prepare Nigerian meals. Her journal functions as a type of grimoire, a book of spells, which advocates women's wisdom as a way of healing the body through its own movements: "cooking is always a good time for healing, so you must wash your pain, rinse and wash again until you have washed out your bitterness in the green bile" (Abani 2004: 16). Beatrice proposes that, through the body, through repetitive movements, the bitterness of the past can be erased. Beatrice uses the foreign genre of the recipe as a way to inscribe a black female presence in the archive and as a means of healing through hybridity.

Through her own version of *écriture féminine*, Beatrice writes women into Igbo histories; she overwrites male supremacy in many aspects of Igbo sacred life by presenting a legacy that can balance the destruction caused by masculine concepts of honor. In her famous work *The Laugh of the Medusa*, Hélène Cixous asserts that "woman must write herself: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies... Woman must put herself into the text—as into the world and into history—by her own movement" (Cixous 1994: 78). Beatrice writes about the food that women, excluded from the hospitality of the kola nut ceremony, ate as a result of a patriarchal system in which they were subordinates: "the simple fare is considered the food of the poor, or those serving an intentional penance. The latter group comprises mostly women who have been unfaithful to their

polygamous husbands. In these cases, the punishment meant that they had to cook mouth-watering dishes daily for their husband and family, but themselves eat only roast yam and palm oil” (Abani 2004: 81). Beatrice thus highlights the female artistry and labor required to cook complex, mouth-watering dishes daily. She also exposes the contradictions of the patriarchal system by describing women being punished for seeking the same kind of pleasure in multiple partners that their husbands already have, choosing to include even transgressive female identities. By focusing on practices in which women play central roles, she defies the kola-nut ceremony in which “women take no part” (Abani 2004: 172). Her journal, comprised of a “collection of cooking and apothecary recipes and some other unrelated bits, like letters and notes about things that seemed as arbitrary as the handwriting” (Abani 2004: 11), is intentionally disjointed. She follows in the footsteps of feminist scholars such as Julia Kristeva and Cixous who advocate woman’s writing, or *écriture féminine*, as a type of writing through which women challenge male control over the written word.

Elvis describes the journal as “unrelated” and “arbitrary.” Yet, through this seemingly disorganized collection of information, Beatrice claims a legitimate female Igbo history and tradition capable of accepting and embracing the disjuncture and discontinuities inherent to performances of memory. Beatrice presents a counter-memory, which takes into account the difference between how history is transmitted and how it is publically (and privately) performed by “the bodies that bear its consequences” (Roach 1996: 26). Though the public enactments of Igbo histories and traditions are often male dominated, Beatrice’s journal records the quotidian histories of domestic chores and cures. Significantly, Beatrice allows Elvis to draw an image of his own—a wobbly child’s drawing—in her journal, making space for his contribution to her

feminist archive (Abani 2004: 44). Thus, her histories do not constrain her son, but make space for his own attempts at inscription, and for multiple visions and histories as well.

Performed Genealogies

Conversely, Sunday, Elvis's father, performs memory in ways that leave no room for dissonance. Sunday stages a piecemeal coming of age ritual by which he unsuccessfully attempts to gloss over historical disjuncture and perpetuate patriarchal lines of descent. This ritual includes Elvis in a "genealogy of performance." In *Cities of the Dead*, Roach defines genealogies of performance as the interactions whereby memory is transmitted from one generation to the next. Employing Michel Foucault's theories, Roach argues that these genealogies demonstrate how

discontinuities rudely interrupt the succession of surrogates, who are themselves the scions of a dubious bloodline that leads the genealogist back to the moment of apparent origin in order to discover what is and is not "behind things": not a timeless and essential secret, but the secret that they have no essence or that their essence was fabricated in a piecemeal fashion (Roach 1996: 25).

Sunday's coming-of-age ceremony suffers from these same discontinuities that Elvis refuses to ignore. By claiming that a chick skewered on an arrow is an eagle newly shot by a new initiate, Sunday tries to gloss over the discontinuities that challenge his claims to a pure history or an unbroken line of succession. When Elvis is handed a baby chick and told that he has just shot an eagle in order to become a man, he questions the gaps in the fabric of the ceremony. These discontinuities literally disrupt the ritual as Elvis struggles to grasp the fact that the physical practice of the ritual does not match its verbal presentation by his male relatives. Yet, as he

probes, he discovers that this performance “operates as both quotation and invention, an improvisation on borrowed themes, with claims on the future as well as the past” (Roach 1996: 33). His interaction with Elvis reveals the ill-fitting, make-shift parts with which Sunday has invented an entirely new ritual out of his memories of former rituals.

Abani repeatedly frames Elvis’s patriarchal legacy as a violent one that extends beyond his family to reflect the types of patriarchal structures inherited from British colonization of Nigeria. Elvis grasps the futility of defining himself based on his capacity for violence or his ability to take from the weak like his Uncle Joseph, who sexually exploits both his nephew and his own daughter. Abani sets Elvis’s violent encounter with his Uncle in the Protestant church, suggesting close kinship between the exploitation of the weak, missionization, and the colonial project through which the British introduced their language, religion, and patriarchal institutions to Nigerians. Abani also illustrates how patriarchal power is maintained through tenuous lines of exclusion, which are often reaffirmed by the silencing of outcasts who blur the lines, such as the homosexual prostitutes who are commonly beaten by police (Abani 2004: 77).

Even during Elvis’s imprisonment, his beating and torture betray the sexual anxieties of his captors and their desire to reestablish their own manhood through violence. Ironically, the distinction between the powerful and the powerless, the masculine and the emasculated, is based on a homosexual rape. Elvis is rubbed down in a white paste, reminiscent of his whiteface drag make-up, and then, “[his jailor] laughed and massaged Elvis’s penis faster and faster” until Elvis “shot semen all over his torturer’s hand” and is declared to be “a homo” (Abani 2004: 295). In “Becoming Black and Elvis: Transnational and Performative Identity in the Novels of Chris Abani,” Amanda Aycock observes that “conformity to gender roles weaves throughout the novel as a force destructive to both men and women, denying women access to full personhood”

(Aycock 2009: 13) and robbing men of confidence in their own social roles. From the dead chick in Sunday's ritual, to police beatings of homosexual prostitutes and Elvis's sexual exploitation by his own Uncle and by corrupted law enforcement, Abani drives home the violence of Nigerian patriarchal institutions. He also frames a need for alternate genealogies and new formulations of Nigerian masculinity, by presenting Sunday's aggressive, ineffective, and untenable legacy.

The performances Elvis's parents produce are part of "genealogies of performance" because they contend with the disjointedness of cultural transmission and are presented as substitutes for earlier, communal enactments of memory. Sunday's ceremony and Beatrice's writing both demonstrate Roach's assertion that "a genealogy of performance for the circum-Atlantic world is...an intricate unraveling of the putative seamlessness of origins. It is at once a map of diasporic diffusions in space and a speculation on the synthesis and mutation of traditions through time" (Roach 1996: 30). Elvis's navigation of each performance produces changes in his behavior and choices, which are an important product of such genealogies. Through his performances of tradition and masculinity, Sunday seeks to proscribe and contain Elvis's identity within the disciplining, patriarchal structures of the nation, while Beatrice's writing affords him the space to construct a transgressive identity.

Elvis Oke choreographs himself as a problematic surrogate for Elvis Presley by inhabiting, reinventing, and claiming the skin of the white, Western Other. Elvis's experiences with and methods of repurposing the images and movements associated with Elvis Presley become important aspects of his construction of a hybrid identity. Elvis rejects both feminized and hyper-masculine identities as an artistic choice through which he transforms the legacies of his parents. Through his dance practice, Elvis participates in the global economy, laying claim to

and repurposing imported images, much as Mami Wata devotees resymbolize and adapt foreign objects to their own devotional and personal needs. Like these devotees, Elvis enacts a type of tactical agency allowing him to “make-do” within restrictive systems.

Framing Identity, Filming the Self

Like his mother, Elvis analyzes and reframes his experiences of Nigerian culture through concepts borrowed from Western genres. As a frequent movie-goer and film enthusiast, he allies himself with the white gaze by assuming the director’s point of view in his own understandings of self. He often wonders how he would frame his life as a film if *he* were the filmmaker and compares it with the John Wayne Westerns he watches (Abani 2004: 29). Unlike Beatrice’s writing, he attempts to “sculpt” time, demonstrating what Roach calls the “pronounced desire for the telos of perfect closure” (Roach 1996: 33). Elvis’s imagined filmic scenarios are the means through which he questions patriarchal concepts of masculinity. Though Abani seems to acknowledge the slippage between shooting a picture and the violence of a gun to expose the brutality of Elvis’s filmic gaze, he demonstrates that Elvis practices these conventions with a difference. In *Visual and Other Pleasures*, feminist film scholar Laura Mulvey argues that:

[i]n a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact (Mulvey 2009: 19).

In Elvis’s fantasies he alternately identifies with the active male gaze of the filmmaker and the passive female subject coded for visual and erotic impact. During his moments in drag, as he

strives to embody Hollywood portrayals of whiteness, he scrutinizes his own body as if through the lens of a camera. Elvis's imagined forays as a director reveal his split sexual identification with the male power structures, which impose the structured gaze upon the filmic subject and with the passive display of the traditional Hollywood actress. Yet, he is continually frustrated by the burdens and anxieties of traditional gender roles.

Displaced Choreographies

Elvis uses dance as a *tactic* through which to trouble the *strategy* of traditional gender roles. Through dance, he choreographs alternatives to the performances of Igbo identity available to him. Elvis reinvents his identity through the mobility available to him through foreign dance styles, particularly the dances of Elvis Presley. He does not bind himself to a specific place but, rather, transcends place. In *The Practice of Everyday Life* Michel de Certeau juxtaposes the abstract concepts of the *strategy* and the *tactic*. The intentional visibility of the *strategy* and its division of space allows for the practice of panopticism, in which foreign Others can be observed and scrutinized in the interest of controlling them (de Certeau 1984: 36). The *strategy* delimits its proper place, while *tactic* is forced to “pull tricks” and seize opportunities (de Certeau 1984: 37). The *tactic* that Elvis chooses is to transcend place through artistic practice. Elvis claims elements of Western power structures that he experiences from afar through films and the types of economic control exerted by foreigners.⁸ By putting on white-face, Elvis wields an object of power and analyzes whiteness through mimesis, as do the Mami Wata devotees when they incorporate European dolls, imported perfumes and Muslim prayer mats into altars and ritual performances. These rituals transform these exotic objects of power into forms of critique and

⁸ Abani depicts foreigners from Middle Eastern nations paying for sex in clubs and funding human, organ, and drug trafficking to supply wealthy patrons in Europe and the US.

commentary on the communities and political systems through which they arrive in Nigeria and the histories of exploitation and mercantile exchange that inform contemporary inequities. Thus, Elvis uses dance as the means through which to evade and resist patriarchal domination and capitalist exploitation.

Despite his fascination with Elvis Presley, Elvis Oke's obsession with the pop icon is not based on an obsession with any particular place. He is not even sure that he likes the idea of America (Abani 2004: 56). Elvis's obsession with dance and film is connected to his desire for literal and social mobility in contrast to the ways that the global economy has trapped his father (Abani 2004: 187). In *Worlding Dance*, Susan Foster advocates that dance scholars "examine dance, not as a reflection of individual or cultural values, but as culture. As culture, dance is in(sinew)ated with power relations...And this cultivation of the corporeal takes place within and as a part of the power relations that operate throughout the body politic" (Foster 2009: 7). Elvis's adaptations of American dances constitute an inheritance that can be attained and maintained without resorting to violence or servility. His dances function as a means of negotiating power relations. After the leveling of the slums, when he works as a guardian for the little beggar children, "he often thought about teaching these children how to dance. He didn't expect it to save them, but it would give them something in their lives that they did not have to beg, fight for or steal" (Abani 2004: 310). Elvis Oke evades rigid power structures and limiting binaries by choreographing an alternative: a creolized form, which borrows from Western culture without sacrificing its connection to local understandings and traditions. Through performance, Elvis mobilizes his own perspective on the culture and economic structures of Lagos while also participating in global flows of information and artistic exchange. Through the genealogies of performance he inherits from his parents, Elvis also forges a path toward a post-gender identity.

Choosing (Post) Gender

Like Mami Wata, Elvis is of ambiguous sexual orientation, not completely identifiable as heterosexual, homosexual or bisexual. Elvis defies categorization as a result of his post-gender identity while Mami Wata is not even always female since she exists in pantheons of both genders; she is alternately hyper-sexualized, luring men through sexual promises, and asexual, demanding complete abstinence from her devotees in exchange for financial blessings, she is linked to both lesbianism and transgressive heterosexuality (Hindrew 2008, Meyer 2008, Shaw 2008). Though not bound to or by specific locations, Elvis is as affected by local culture as Mami Wata is understood through her local manifestations, such as the river goddess Idemili. In her article, Krishnan shows how the water goddess is sometimes “re-appropriated as a means of insisting on the heterogeneity and dynamism of precolonial traditions that, though irrevocably altered by the passage of time and the imposition of colonial cultural context, remains retrievable and itself fertile” (Krishnan 2012: 15). Despite Elvis’s rejection of his father’s version of Igbo tradition, he is heavily influenced by his mother’s presentation of traditional Igbo women’s wisdom. Okediji claims that, in addition to “performing the other” (as Drewal argues), Mami Wata erases the conventional boundaries between the self and the Other. She reiterates “the Lacanian impossibility of imagining self without the other” (Okediji 2008: 491). Creolization functions in Africa as a continuous project between Westerners and Africans, in which different players maintain varying levels of power. For example, Elvis is a problematic and inauthentic substitute for Presley because he operates outside of institutional frameworks. Elvis Oke defiantly brings together many different cultural threads into new practices and adapted traditions, participating in the creolization of Igbo cultural practices, to imagine and create alternatives to restrictive traditional and exclusionary Eurocentric frameworks.

Elvis seeks a dramatic alternative to gender binaries. Instead of taking the place of the rapist, when twelve year old Blessing offers herself to him, Elvis seeks a revision of masculine sexuality that is not enacted upon the bodies of others, or performed through the subjugation of others (Abani 2004: 311). Abani puts Elvis's sexual explorations aside somewhat problematically: Elvis never asserts a sexual identity but seems content to efface his own sexuality in favor of his vision of a generative castration, which could protest the destruction caused by the violent masculinity of men like his Uncle. Though Krishnan argues that Elvis strives, throughout the novel, toward a more feminized masculinity that could connect him to his mother and to Presley, I assert that he strives *through* the vehicle of the occluded feminine toward a post-gender identity (Krishnan 2012: 12). As he waits for his flight to the U.S., Elvis is inspired by a scene from James Baldwin's *Going to Meet the Man* in which a white man castrates a lynched black character. He imagines the

kind of scar that would leave. It would be a thing alive that reached up to the sky in supplication, descending to root itself in the lowest chakra, our basest nature. Until the dead man became the sky, the tree, the earth and the full immeasurable sorrow of it all. He knew that scar, that pain, that shame, that degradation that no metaphor could contain, inscribing it on his body. And yet beyond that, he was that scar, carved by hate and smallness and fear onto the world's face (Abani 2004: 320).

In this vision, the phallus becomes a sacrifice that creates rather than destroys. Through his sexuality, or his asexuality, Elvis seeks identifications allowing him to incorporate his maternal heritage and reverse the damage from the legacies of violence that are his only paternal inheritance. The castration he envisions heals and inscribes like his mother's journal and mirrors the rough scar of his mother's mastectomy. Elvis longs to escape definitions of his identity based

on his sexual orientation. He imagines a productive violence, which would repurpose his masculinity as a source of communal life-giving rather than a weapon. Both paternal and maternal “genealogies of performance,” the performance of ritualized violence and that of healing inscription respectively, allow for interactions through which Elvis is able to shape an identity that rejects gender in favor of more fluid concepts of identity. Through his artistic genealogy with his mother, Elvis chooses to identify with a form of history-making which includes female voices and locates itself between cultures and outside of limiting gender identities. Mami Wata devotees critique patriarchal systems by creating a counterculture that recuperates the power of these structures for their own ends through mimesis, dance, and ritual practice. In a similar way, Elvis also creates a counter culture to the patriarchal control exerted by his father, his uncle and the corrupt law enforcement that he encounters while in prison. He does so through dance and through the adaptation of his matriarchal legacy into effective rituals.

Conclusion

The figure of Mami Wata, though not a structuring concept in Abani’s novel, clarifies the types of agency that Elvis accesses through his dance practice and his artistic genealogy. Through attention to Mami Wata’s fleeting presence in the novel, I have demonstrated the significance of Elvis’s contributions to a female genealogy and his rejection of his male lineage. Yet, more importantly, by connecting the practices of Mami Wata devotees to the obviously hybrid and multicultural performances that Elvis fashions by restaging foreign choreographies, I illustrate the significance of West African creolization in understanding circum-Atlantic networks. In *GraceLand*, Abani frames transatlantic cultural exchange and influence as complex and multidirectional; he notes that “once dialogue is introduced, the subversive element comes in...America exports itself to Nigeria in this way, and Nigeria digests it and then exports itself

back to America in a completely different way” (Abani 2006). Abani creates an African protagonist whose cultural identity and artistic practice develop through influences from Bollywood dances and Hollywood glamor as well as from Igbo traditions. Through Mami Wata, a goddess and name born out of transnational contexts, devotees channel foreign images, objects and philosophies, using African belief systems to produce new art forms and reconstruct African identities based on contemporary needs. By rejecting many elements of Sunday’s violent, sexist, and exclusive version of traditionalism and extending Beatrice’s creole, feminine legacy, Elvis, like many Mami Wata devotees, discovers a practice that can accommodate his transcultural identity. Like Mami Wata’s devotees, Elvis finds himself able to synthesize many different cultural influences into new forms and practices. By staging Elvis Oke as a surrogate for Elvis Presley, Abani foregrounds West African participation in contemporary transnational networks of cultural production. Elvis’s performances demonstrate the power of embodied performances to remake and define culture by intentionally forgetting and omitting certain performances while pointedly remembering and restoring others. Through his choices and choreographies, through specific omissions and revisions, Elvis performs his memories of his dead parents along with the dances of Elvis Presley. The non-textual histories at play through the presence of Mami Wata’s iconography in the novel, also serve as an important key by which to understand Elvis Oke’s complex negotiations of gender, sexuality, and destitution. Abani illustrates the subversive power of embodied practices by showing how Elvis uses performance to navigate genealogical legacies in order to imagine and create alternatives to restrictive traditional and exclusionary frameworks.

Conclusion: Mami Wata and Circum-Atlantic Performance

Mami Wata's renown throughout Africa and increasing popularity in the Americas exemplifies ways that cultural practices move across the constructed boundaries of race, nation, and ethnic difference. Eve Sandler, Kimberly Mullen, and Chris Abani rebuild and remake ideas of Mami Wata through three important mediums of expression: art installation, dance, and fictional literature. In all three works, I attend to the conscious choices involved in constructing identities and reconstructing histories that are then displayed through the movements of the body. From Sandler's cleansing ritual with her arms and hands moving across her body under a flow of clear water to heal traumatic histories that are her inheritance from her predecessors, to Mullen's accumulation of signs in the form of an iconographic ensemble through which she functions as a dancing altar, through movement and ritual these artists redefine the boundaries of diaspora by encoding and projecting the energy of these fluid and shifting water deities. Abani's novel does a different type of work by combining an archive with a performance practice, showing the work of performance in contextualizing and remaking archival sources. Abani also takes foreign images and remakes them, exemplifying the aesthetic and process of West African Mami Wata worship, which continues to develop and change with the needs of devotees. This triad is only the beginning of the important work that remains to be done to connect artistic practices of the transatlantic diaspora to ways communities inscribe identity and pass on cultural values and aesthetic practices through their bodies. This project is about reframing the ways that scholars think about the circulation of information and transmission within the diaspora through performance as well as the archive. Abani, Mullen, and Sandler put archives in motion, showing how these seemingly stable sources, found in the museum, situated in the space of the

proscenium stage, and in written histories, gain meaning in relation to the ways they are performed, adapted, and reinvented.

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