The Quilt
Towards a twenty-first-century black feminist ethnography

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MEIDA:

‘The word macomère is widely used in the Caribbean to mean “my child’s godmother”, “my best friend and close woman confidante”, “my bridesmaid or another female member of a wedding party of which I was a bridesmaid”, “godmother of the child to whom I am also godmother”, “the woman, by virtue of the depth of her friendship, who has rights and privileges over my child and whom I see as surrogate mother.”’

(Helen Pyne Timothy)

MSHAÏ:

In 1998, the Association of Caribbean Women Writers and Scholars (ACWWS) launched the inaugural issue of the journal MaComère, devoted to scholarly studies and creative works by and about Caribbean women. Each of the first four issues began with a reminder of the importance of self-naming and self-articulation. MaComère then presented an eclectic, stimulating quilt of creative fiction, academic papers and book reviews; conversations with and tributes to significant literary and scholarly figures; and information on new publications from the Caribbean.

Women and their lives, experiences and ways of being were centred in the process of knowledge-production, dissemination, and consumption. Reading the journal, one had the sense of participating in a rich conversation that explores, models, manifests and analyses what it means to belong to a particular gendered intellectual tradition celebrating the diversity and unity of a community of scholars.

MEIDA:

Part of a larger project created by a four-person collective called ‘The Quilt’, this article reflects, on a different scale, a similar vision. It is a conversation between scholar/artists, exploring what it means to be African/black, female/feminist cultural workers at this moment in time. Over the course of our fieldwork and homework, we each experienced moments where our ‘profane’, leaky, curvy, mother/sister/daughter/macomère bodies, bound up in the polities of our national and ethnoracial identities, unsettled the ‘sacred’ spaces of our field sites and academies, often in unintentional and unexpected ways. Across our experiences in the field as African/black women immersed in ethnographic communities that we are either original members of or provisional inductees, we find we are dealing with similar struggles and concerns. We compare our collected stories of variegated blackness noting their differences and continuities. We process the value of blackness in cultural practice examining the labour these stories perform on the ground embedded within the cultural contexts in which they live. Using the tools of respect, laughter, play, reflexivity, and flexibility we interpret and make meaning of stories. We are code-switchers, navigating between our official training in academia and the

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1 See Helen Pyne Timothy, ‘About the Name’ (1998), tracing the socio-cultural, linguistic and intellectual genealogies of Macomère (macumé, makumeh, macoomé, macomeh) and other linguistic/geographical variants.

2 For other seminal examples of written and embodied black feminist collaborative models such as that of the Combahee River Collective, see edited volumes produced by Barbara Smith (1983); Stanlie James and Abena Busia (1993); Carole Boyce-Davies and ‘Molara Ogundipe-Levil (1995); Carole Boyce-Davies (1994); Beverly Guy-Shetlar (1995); Irma McClaurin (2004) and the performance work of Urban Bush Women <http://www.urbanbushwomen.org/>.
home-knowledges we have learned by growing up and living African/black and female.\textsuperscript{3}

\textsc{Mecca:}
Serendipity brought us together, but we have since developed a commitment to articulating a common space from which to follow our separate research interests. Blending performance theories, black feminist theories, cultural theories and performance-centred methodologies with critical ethnography, we set out in this essay to begin to imagine the contours of what we are naming a twenty-first-century African/black (black/African) feminist ethnographic theory and praxis. We use our field sites in Panamá, Trinidad, Kenya and the United States of America to analyse how the matrix of race, gender, nationality, location and class affect understandings and expectations of what it means to be ethnographers in the field and how this is manifest in our experiences and work. We explore our epistemological frameworks, acknowledging the legacy we have inherited, while claiming the right and responsibility to articulate who we are and what we are committed to in the journey towards a collective vision.

\textsc{Mshaï:}
Like ACWWS, our intellectual work has been closely tied in with our living. As Patricia Hill Collins argues, everyday actions, experiences, lives and ideas are critical to the process of theorizing for black feminist scholars (2000: 3 Caribbean novelist and cultural critic George Lamming (2004) conceives Caribbean language ‘as a field of power relations’, noting distinctions between the ways in which ‘official King’s English’ and ‘vernacular’ or ‘home’ languages are used to assert different kinds of agency dependent on social context.
viii). We can, literally, find ourselves in *macomère* relationships that are ‘so firmly gendered and honou(r) the importance of friendship in relation to the important rituals of marriage, birth and (implied) death’ (Timothy 1998: i).

In the midst of labouring together through classes, exams, discussions and multiple presentations of our work – all the joys and travail of graduate school and beyond – we also share bride/smaid, co/mother, confidant, sistah/friend, colleague relationships which have become central to our theorizing.

RENÉE:

Stitching Dwight Conquergood’s definition of critical ethnography as ‘committed to unveiling the political stakes that anchor cultural practices - research and scholarly practices no less than the everyday’ – with Deborah Reed-Danahay’s definition of autoethnography as ‘self-narrative that places the self within a social context,’ this performative quilt is a critical methods exercise (Conquergood 1991: 179, Reed-Danahay 1997: 9). We locate our subjective positions as critical ethnographers in relation to our field and academic communities to build an intellectual scaffolding for the work we do. The differences distinguishing our individual research interests, projects, sites and selves do not erase the consonances that convince us of the possibility and profitability of finding common ground with which to begin to explore Frantz Fanon’s call to identify a [collective] generational mission (Fanon 1963: 166).

We embark on this process engaging the technologies of our present moment, which facilitate more collaborative and performative processes (despite static, glitches, program incompatibilities and time differences) to extend the patterns our mentors so carefully have sewn while preparing our own legacy for those who will come after us. These digital technologies extend our abilities of reach across space to recover, create and maintain productive kin, kith, collegial and coalition relationships. We intend this ‘Quilt’ as a means to begin addressing the theoretical and practical commitments of a twenty-first-century black feminist ethnography. Divided into four ‘frames’, the first lays out the genesis of our collaborative relationship. The second uses examples from our individual research to analyse theories and major terms/concepts that underpin our collective project. Cognisant that definitions can be used to exclude, marginalize, authenticate and disempower, we offer these terms/concepts not as absolutes but as reference points on a broader map. Self-naming is critical to our project. African/black women have all too often been imagined, defined, labelled and packaged in ways that are at odds with who we are and understand ourselves to be. While the second frame approaches our gendered experiences through race, ethnicity and national linkages, the third reverses the flow by analysing our relationship to feminism/ist and marking some of the mundane ways our gender impacts our experiences in the
field as well as the academy. We conclude by rehearsing some of the key tenants we deem critical for a twenty-first-century black feminist ethnography.

**G E N E S E S**

**M E I D A:**

‘I would start with the following assertion that the challenge of any discourse identifying itself as black feminist is not necessarily or most immediately to vindicate itself as theory. Its challenge is to resist the theory/practice dichotomy, which is too broad, abbreviated and compromised by hedging definitions to capture the range and diversity of contemporary critical practices, including the range and diversity of the contributions of black women to that discourse. A far more valuable and necessary project would proceed from the commonplace assumption that no consideration of any intellectual project is complete without an understanding of the process of that project’s formation.’

(Deborah E. McDowell)

**M S H A I:**

‘This is a world in which I move uninvited, profane on sacred land, neither me nor mine, but me nonetheless. The story began long ago . . . it is old. Older than my body, my mother’s, my grandmother’s. As old as my me, Old Spontaneous Me, the world.’

(Trinh T. Minh-ha)

**M E I D A:**

Version 1

London, July 2006. We made a collective trans-Atlantic crossing to explore black subjectivities at Performance Studies international (PSi) #12, where we presented papers on a joint panel on the politics of nation, culture and identity in Afro-diasporic performance. Conflicted descendants of the painful encounter of British imperialism with Africa, we unexpectedly found ourselves seeking out the familiar in the urban spaces of ‘black’ London.

So there we were: attending to international performance-centred research at the conference, witnessing England beat Trinidad and Ghana beat the Czech Republic in World Cup soccer on the television screens of local pubs, re-crafting conference papers, shopping, sight-seeing, negotiating the transport system, eating at Indian, Caribbean, Lebanese and Afghani restaurants, dancing in a mostly white crowd as Chicago house-music legend Frankie Knuckles re-mixed Martin Luther King’s ‘I have a dream speech’ to a house-beat. It was all surreal. Then, a moment of normative rupture: a call for papers for this journal issue. Our London experiences, particularly the generous responses of participants at our PSi panel, as well as what became the first performative iteration of this project as ‘The Quilt’ at the National Communication Association conference in San Antonio, Texas, were crucial in shaping the direction, process and product of this paper.

**M S H A I:**

‘Let me tell you a story. For all I have is story . . . The story depends on every one of us to come into being. It needs us all . . . needs our remembering, understanding, and creating what we have heard together to keep us coming into being.’

(Trinh T. Minh-ha)

**R E N É É:**

Version 2

Evanston, Illinois, November 2005. As an initiative of the Institute of Diaspora Studies, led by Michael Hanchard, we co-convened the first Northwestern University Black Diaspora Performance symposium. The groundwork for this article grew out of the rich discussions/debates we had in crafting the symposium proposal, creating its panels and experiencing its presentations. The symposium created a forum for several emerging scholars who use the lens of performance to explore the African/black diasporic experience to present work and receive feedback from each other and senior scholars in the field. This essay reflects the epistemological foundations of that
gathering as well as its commitment to sharing contextualized field experiences grounded in theory.

**MSHAÏ:**

‘The story began long ago . . . For years we have been passing it on, so that our daughters and grand daughters may continue to pass it on. So it may become larger than its own proper measure, larger than its own in-significance. The story never really begins nor ends, even though there is a beginning and an end to every story, just as there is a beginning and an end to every teller.’

(Trinh T. Minh-ha)

**MECCA:**

Version 3

Many places throughout time. This version reaches back to the generations of intellectual mentors, teachers and peers who have brought us to this present moment. Although we have not physically met many of them, they have taught us, by living example, how to forge bonds of trust, reciprocity, deep listening and obligation. It is the story of several intellectual traditions all weaving into what we are articulating here as a twenty-first-century black feminist ethnography. Their influence teaches us how to connect more fully with our ethnographic communities by being as astute to our interconnection and interdependence under global systems of production and consumption as we are to local specificities and uniqueness.


**MSHAÏ:**

‘We memorise, recognise and name [our] sources, not to validate [our] voice through the voice of an authority . . . but to evoke [them] and sing [recognising that] in this chain and continuum [we are] but one link.’

(Trinh T. Minh-ha)

**MSEA:**

'The Quilt’ is indebted to D. Soyini Madison’s tripartite black feminist approach to ethnographic research and documentation as well as her activist approach to scholarship. Further, she has served as the unofficial ‘traveling midwife’ of this paper and symbolic midwife of this project by chairing conference panels in London and San Antonio. We are also indebted to Sandra Richards, who endured having all of us, although – thankfully for her – not at the same time, in her Black Feminist Theories class and who has been invaluable in supporting, productively critiquing and urging this project forward. These ‘sista-doctas’, melding black feminist theories and performance ethnography, represent the many whose voices make the timbre of our own richer, as we speak in words that are formed by what they first gave to us (Jones 1997: 51–67).

**MEIDA:**

Besides our use of conference calls, email exchanges and occasional face-to-face sessions, a large bulk of this piece emerged in the world of cyberspace.5 With their ability to link transnational and diasporic citizens in disparate physical locations, Web tools – word processors, blogs, interactive websites – are redefining how twenty-first-century scholars imagine and perform collaborations. In this digital environment, we were able to upload our words and images, often working and...
commenting on each other’s work simultaneously, if not seamlessly. The Web tool’s ability to manage multiple written voices has, in some ways, made the messy process of shaping, navigating and honing one collective offering from four wilful voices more possible and pleasurable. Indeed, at times, the act of writing together has felt like collage play and artistic co-scripting.

RENÉE:
As our words mingle in cyberspace, our voices connect over long-distance conference calls made possible by the digital telecommunications revolution, which forced phone companies to create flat-rate local and long-distance cellular and home calling plans. We swap digital photos on-line like our mothers swapped Polaroids. Yet, just as this process bridges geographic distances between us, it has also produced moments of irreducible difference among us.

MSHAÏ:
As we reflect on the possibilities of working together in collegial partnerships that transcend boundaries, we have found our process reflecting the inherent challenges of doing so. We represent diverse intellectual traditions; we come from two disciplinary homes; we work in four countries; and we carry different national passports. Each brings her own sets of investments to the table, similarly strengths, weaknesses and schedules that have no respect for the timetables we set ourselves. We have learned to accept each other, with our different body rhythms, varied work patterns and diverse methodologies.

RENÉE:
This process has demanded that we actively work as critical ethnographers and black feminists as we engage the terms and tools we use. We have all come to un-know and re-know terms and locations we thought we knew (black, African, diaspora, blackness, feminism/ist). We have spent hours reckoning with perspectival nuances of these terms. As in the field, our moments of discord have often been just as generative, if not more so, than our moments of agreement.

MSHAÏ:
As we have worked on articulating definitions, representing perspectives, ordering priorities and sometimes, the most sensitive of all, editing each others’ words, we have also learned the arts of tactful negotiation, graceful capitulation and communal living. Sometimes, unable to agree, we have worked with accommodating diversity; at other times we have found alternatives that have surprised all of us.

MECCA:
As we speak across our different disciplines, ethnographic sights, nationalities, ages, etc., we do so not as a means of erasing the experience which have produced our particular positionalities but as a method of engaging in our own coalition politics. More than simply stating the multiplicity of black women’s experiences, our coalition politics places them in dialogue in order to understand the nuanced ways that black women are erased, are silenced and/or fall into ‘the gap’ (Scott 1992; Crenshaw 1995). The paradigm of the quilt allows us to accomplish this while keeping in mind the meta-narratives and internal logics that connect us to one another. In this regard, we draw on the black/African women’s tradition of quilting to offer this multivocal, polyrhythmic, improvisational narrative as evidence of our experience as a space for redress and reconciliation, as a symbol of hope, possibility and transformation, and as a code for ourselves and others (Barkley Brown 1989; Davis 1998).
**BLACK/AFRICAN: AFRICAN/BLACK WORLDS**

**MSHAI:**

“What is Africa to me?”

(Countee Cullen)

**MECCA:**

“How Africa is represented in global politics, and international political and cultural economy, determines how Black people the world over are treated.”

(Lisa Aubrey)

**RENÉE:**

“The African Continent/African Diaspora question... will not be resolved by the universalization of the black experience... Rather it will be better and more meaningfully addressed through a serious commitment to forging intellectual, [socio-political] and cultural linkages and constructing economic bridges that are grounded in the recognition and appreciation of the commonality of origin and the divergences wrought by historical imperative.”

(Obioma Nnaemeka)

**MEIDA:**

The concept of diaspora in relation to Africa has undergone radical definitional shifts. It is defined as: 1) a historical narrative and process of dispersal, loss, trauma and violence, 2) a historical narrative tracing migrations across the globe, 3) an evolution of pan-Africanist, post-colonial and decolonization discourses (early-and mid-twentieth-century anti-colonial Independence movements); and 4) a rooted epistemological identity that many of us avow (i.e., ’I am a diasporic, transnational person’).

Across these shifts in the use of diaspora as process, product, space and identity, the tropes of ‘African-ness’ and ‘blackness’ have been under constant negotiation, not solely on theoretical terrain but in actual embodied practice. Like diaspora, ‘blackness’ and ‘African-ness’ emerge as differing epistemological orientations and ontological political projects.

These terms of naming mark both our membership within and our distance from the ethnographic communities with which we work. To tell ethnographic stories honestly and ethically, we must address the multifaceted aspects of our own experiences, explicating what we mean when we name ourselves ‘black’ and/or ‘African’. Who do these names attach us to and distance us from? These terms are strategic indicators.

**MECCA:**

In the case of African/black worlds, the relationships between memory, power, agency and cultural performance resound out to create transnational disjunctures, linkages and familiarities. Sometimes these sites and experiences bounce irreducibly against each other, while in other moments they find comfort in collective experiences of identification. Thus, the work we do as scholars (and as members of African/black worlds) not only connects us to specific sites and communities of African-ness/blackness but also calls us to imagine and seek out the transnational and diasporic connections crossing our work and the communities we invest in regardless of the ultimate unpredictability of tracking people, cultural material and ideologies that cross borders (Vertovec 1999; de Certeau 1984).

**RENÉE:**

We dispel the notion of a ‘trouble-free’ transnationalism, (Conradson and Latham 2005: 227) acknowledging that blackness and African-ness often meet on an ‘asymmetrical field of power relations’ (Pratt 1992: 7). We are always negotiating and redefining what we mean - and what’s at stake - when we invoke notions of community, solidarity and kinship within and across these worlds. How do we address hegemonies of value between different valences of blackness?
When we began this project over the summer of 2005 with the simple agenda of bringing together a group of peers to deliberate on 'Performing the Black Diaspora', we had no idea of the scope of the intellectual adventure on which we were embarking. Two years later, we find that in exploring what Joseph E. Harris calls 'the global dimensions of the African diaspora' (1992), we have begun to re-define and re-articulate our own intellectual and artistic identities, affiliations, priorities and commitments.

At our 2005 Black Diaspora Performance symposium, Lisa Aubrey, Professor of Political Science at Ohio University, served as a respondent on a panel entitled 'Diaspora and Citizenship: Redefining Affiliations and Allegiances', which included research presentations considering African/black experiences constituted across local, regional and transnational grounds. Tanya Shields explored the contemporary significance of the Haitian Revolution; Mohammed Mohammed examined community tensions over urban space between Ethiopians/Ethiopian Americans on one hand and African Americans on the other in Washington D.C.'s U Street neighbourhood; and I interrogated class and intra-ethnic tensions within Afro-Trinidadian folk and postmodern dance practice. Seeking out continuities between the presentations linked not directly by content but rather by meta-themes – defining cadences of blackness and/or African-ness, cultural authenticity, citizenship and the politics of belonging – Aubrey enlisted Pearl Robinson's term the 'culture of politics' to summarize the panel's potential social and political labour beyond academic documentation and analysis. Using performance and cultural practice as modes of agency and sites to negotiate blackness/African-ness, she noted, 'The culture of politics . . . empowers communities to reuse and replay past experiences through memory to achieve desired ends' (Aubrey 2005; Robinson 1994: 1).

In this light, the aforementioned panel became larger than its respective parts. Collectively, these examinations, crossing the Caribbean, U.S., and Africa, reflect models of African/black community negotiation on a global scale within a transnational diasporic frame. The Haitian revolution is a historical and symbolic phenomenon that continues to reverberate powerful discourses of decolonization, freedom and social justice, standing not just for itself but also signifying connections to African/black liberation struggles everywhere (Black Power, 1960s and 1970s anti-colonial Independence movements, Civil Rights, etc.). Washington's U Street neighbourhood exemplifies the infinitely expanding nuances and valences of African-ness/blackness that, once brought together, can often ignite in clashes over civic rights and belonging and/or create incredible demonstrations of pan-African/pan-black community and consciousness. Examining the class and power dimensions of Afro-Trinidadian folk and postmodern dance leads to the possibility of considering macro issues embedded in African/black cultural practices. Attaching cultural performance to class and economic difference highlights difficulties in achieving democratic and equal representation and debates over what cultural criteria define 'authentically' African/black cultural practices between the myriad class orientations representing these communities (underclass, lower working class, middle class and the elite).

Like the panel, the work of 'The Quilt' encompasses both the terms African continent and its diaspora(s). We use the 'African/black' (black/African) in this project conscious that there are black communities (such as in the Pacific region or from/in Asia) who do not identify in any way with Africa as their
homeland, just as there are also African communities that are not black.

RENÉE:
Part of the project of a twenty-first-century black feminist ethnography is to develop an awareness for modalities of blackness within discourses of Africa, modalities of Africa within discourses of blackness, and all of the messiness in-between.

MSHAT:
Cognizant of the influence of historical, political and social forces in shaping the diverse contexts of African/black local, national, regional and global experiences, we find ourselves asking the following questions:

MECCA:
What is added when we engage discourses on the African/black world and the historical relationships between its different parts in multiple languages – Swahili, Hindi, Spanish, Arabic, French, Mandarin Chinese, English, Yoruba, Gullah, Creole, Portuguese, Wolof, Russian or any other – currently in use?

RENÉE:
If, as Lisa Aubrey urged during the symposium, we centre Africa in our spatial understanding of its diaspora(s), what would it mean to look East, North and South as well as West, to think of the Indian and Pacific Oceans and the Mediterranean and Red Seas as well as the Atlantic Ocean, in our search for diverse experiences of what it means to be African/black and ‘scattered abroad’ on a permanent basis?

MECCA:
In what ways can historical and present examples of transnational migrations and partnerships within the continent, between diaspora and continent, and within the diaspora, deepen Africa/black world research?

MSHAT:
How do the diverse experiences of the contemporary continent and diaspora compare and contrast with those of the historical diaspora and continent? How can these similarities and differences be negotiated to help in the project Cheryl Johnson-Odim proposes – of creating a sense of shared black community out of what is often perceived, for better or worse, as shared identity?

MECCA:
As black women ethnographers, we are both agents of change and complicit actors within our current world system. Thus, as much as we understand our work as a community-building enterprise and critical intervention, we also understand our obligation also to look inward. How do we make sense of our own ambivalences to particular national identities but also admit our attachments and our access to particular privileges of civic participation (i.e. some passports allow more mobility than others)?

MEIDA:
From relatively empowered spaces, how do we deal with issues of authority, allegiance, privilege, ownership and preservation across the African/black world? What is our place and responsibility in the negotiation of intra-diaspora, diaspora/continent and intra-continental politics? We are each loaded with personal prisms and baggage through which we experience and make sense of blackness, gender, class and power – how do we carry these ideologies into the field? What transgressions do these preconceived perspectives bring on in the field? And how do we redress them?

MSHAT:
What responsibilities do we have towards other scholars who work in the same spaces or on the same issues and whose different identities create a different set of challenges/possibilities for them? How do we address imbalances in access to resources, in
the different privileges national, gender and other identities bring or take away as we work in particular field and academic communities? How do we nurture each other – and allow ourselves to be nurtured – while ensuring we do not become complicit in complicating the work of others?

**MEIDA:**

How do we address the multiple, and perhaps sometimes clashing interpretations of Africa as a site with shifting meaning and value dependent on one’s location as continental African, Afro-Caribbean, African American, European Black (or countless other derivations)? Is naming self/project ‘African’ a discussion about origins and continuity? Is naming self/project ‘Black’ a platform to connote shared struggles and experiences as ‘black folk’ globally? Is the term ‘blackness’ less about a temporal and spatial origin/centre and more about exposing often unequal conditions and qualities of lived ‘black’ experience?

**RENEE:**

How do discourses of blackness on the continent compare and contrast with those in the diaspora? Likewise, how do discourses of African-ness in the diaspora compare and contrast with those on the continent?

**BLACKNESS**

**MEIDA:**

Performance and cultural practice serve as useful tools in the project of revaluing blackness and African-ness, particularly for this twenty-first century moment in which DuBois’s problem of the colour line and Fanon’s thesis that black folks’ ‘self-division is a direct result of colonialist subjugation’ remain resonating dilemmas of experience across the African/black world (1967: 17). We are constantly battling the sustaining logic of a Western hegemonic narrative that creates blackness as an ‘archetype of the underclass’ (Amkpa 2006). Or as Wahneema Lubiano succinctly states, ‘Poverty and crime . . . wear a ‘ . . . black face – not in reality, but in the public imagination’ (1997: vii).

**MSHAÏ:**

It was in Australia – a country that often slips out of global discourses of blackness – that I began to learn this experientially. In Australia, blackness is associated, first and foremost, not with those who identify with Africa in descent but with those who claim Australia as origin. Discourses on blackness primarily engage the indigenous Aboriginal experience; in contrast, black/Africa-ness reads exotic and alien – ‘unAustralian’.

In 1999–2000 through my association with an arts-community group for African-descended youth, I was invited to join a theatrical production 'The Torch', an exploration of Australian identity that focused on historical and socio-cultural relationships between indigenous and various sectors of immigrant Australia. As a member of the devising team, I became familiar with official government reports such as the one by the 1991 Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody, often referred to in the public sphere as the ‘Black Deaths in Custody inquiry’. In trips to Yorta Yorta ancestral land and interactions with members of that indigenous nation, I began to understand for the first time universal blackness as a global historical narrative with

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8 The Yorta Yorta nation’s ancestral lands are located in parts of northern Victoria and southern New South Wales. At the time, they were pursuing a native land title claim, one of the first Aboriginal communities in mainland Australia to do so after the native Title Act was passed, allowing Aboriginal communities to claim back Crown land and waters. In 2002, the High Court of Australia upheld a decision determining that the ‘tide of history’ had washed away, and thereby extinguished, their native title rights. For more about the Yorta Yorta and their claim, see Wayne Atkinson (2001) and Andrea James (2003).
practical implications that have nothing to do with a particular geographical space, a national GDP or the availability of resources. Australia taught me that while deficiency is not a synonym for black, to be black often means to be pushed to the margins of society.

At the same time, I continued my work with the youth group. One day, I was informed by the project manager that a couple of the parents were uncomfortable with the name that we had agreed on for the group: ‘Young, Gifted and Black’. The problem was in the ‘Black’. These adults initially expressed misgivings that the name was misleading as ‘people would think it was a group for Aboriginal youth’. I explained that the name was taken from a speech by Lorraine Hansberry and provided the text for their perusal as well as a CD with Nina Simone’s tribute to Hansberry celebrating the ‘million boys and girls who are young, gifted and black’ scattered globally. One parent became even more insistent; she did not want her child associated with a ‘Black’ identity that referenced African American culture, which she viewed as problematic. Another worried that the identity ‘Black’ performed a kind of militancy that he was not too comfortable with. Ultimately, the group held on to its name; the young African Australians I was working with were even more dismissive of their parents’ concerns than I was. But I, a child of the independence era who grew up in a country and a time where my blackness was unproblematically taken for granted, who had sung innumerable times that black, in the Kenyan flag, represented ‘the colour of African might’ and was ‘proof that [I] belonged to the land’, acquired a new understanding of the complexity of meaning in relation to blackness.

RÉNÉE:
I became a foreigner twice in 2000, first in my tongue and then in my body. From my earliest visit to the small Afro-Latin town of Portobelo, Panamá, my body felt at home even though my tongue did not. When I relocated to Chicago from Durham, North Carolina, the challenge was reversed. The ‘United States’ masks a vast socio-cultural landscape of porous but separate micro-nations. I am from a southern ‘nation’ by the sea where people generally eat slower, story-talk longer, drink sweet ice tea and call carbonated drinks ‘soda’ rather than ‘pop’. When friends of my age group in Chicago recollect seminal moments from their young adulthood, the backdrop is usually house music, whereas my theme tracks are most often hip-hop. We connect through our parents’ music, the vinyl soul, funk and R&B albums they played before we were old enough to buy our own and to which many of us have returned as thirty-somethings. When friends in Portobelo share their coming-of-age stories, they are often to the beat of salsa romántica, reggaton, reggae and Congo. We first connected at the place where Panamánian DJs mix hip-hop with reggae. Having danced salsa and merengue for over ten years now, I dance them with the same freedom as I dance the other two. So, before my tongue learned Spanish or my consciousness grasped Congo, my dancing body was finding ‘home’ in Portobelo (Alexander: 19).

MECCA:
During the second weekend at the Ronald K. Brown / Evidence workshop, we went out to eat at a restaurant downtown. We were a large party of about ten people, all of whom were of colour except two white women. After the hostess informed us that their only big table would not be available for another forty-five minutes to one hour, we asked if they would break up the party so that we could be seated. We were told that they could not fulfill our request because they had other customers, and the hostess proceeded to sit the white couple that entered the restaurant after us. We looked at one another in disbelief at what was happening and asked to speak to the manager. When we finally spoke, he was very short with us. When it seemed like our complaints were not registering with him, I threatened to report the restaurant to the Better Business Bureau for discrimination. When I did this, the manager’s
entire disposition changed, and he tried to get us to sit down and eat in the restaurant. We took his information but refused to stay. What are the ironies of having a collective experience of the same types of discrimination that fuel Ron Brown’s work? Outside we joked that we should have sent the two white women among us inside to ask for the table. I know this was our way of trying to diffuse a painful experience.

Renée:
Just as my phenotype, dress, dance vocabulary and music preferences aligned me with local contexts of blackness in Portobelo, my status as a thirty-something, single woman with no children living abroad linked me with a nexus of ‘outsider-ness’. It connected me with the two younger white female U.S. Peace Corps workers as well as the two female Corporación Española workers with whom I shared living space. We all had the privilege of passports and visas, which afforded us travel and affiliations with governmental agencies at home that had financed it. ‘Gringo’ was a floating signifier that my blackness sometimes deflected and that my privilege at being able to travel under a U.S. passport and study in Portobelo sometimes absorbed. At home, I was black American; in Panamá, I was American black.

Meida:
Unlike the other dance companies I work with, who are mostly middle-class in orientation, Malick Folk Performers is predominantly comprised of lower-moderate-working-class Afro-Trinidadians. My then-husband, a local, would often argue with me about travelling on maxi-taxis to Malick Folk Performing Company’s rehearsals in Barataria, telling me with concern, ‘Trinidad has changed. What you used to do you can’t do again. A woman travelling late by herself is a dangerous thing.’ To ease his dis-ease, we made arrangements for a pick-up on most occasions.

In this way, I became acutely aware of the Laventille neighbourhood through the self-regulating effects it had on my body. Often, I was issued warnings by word of mouth not only to be cautious of the ‘Hill’ but also to be aware of the potential danger in Laventille’s neighboring villages: ‘Pray your car never stalls on the highway near the Beetham.’ / ‘Watch yourself taking Lady Young Road into town. There’s a stretch they like to rob people on.’ / ‘If you’re not from Laventille, you can’t go up there alone. You have to know someone.’ My research boundaries were being policed and my body disciplined into perceiving Laventille as no-access territory. In truth, I never made it deep up the ‘Hill’, but even my encounters with adjacent villages - Barataria, Morvant, Belmont, even parts of San Juan - were stamped with traveller-beware utterances. In subtle ways, the pathology inscribed upon Laventille leaked out onto the areas touching its geography.

On another occasion, I was invited to sit in on a Best Village rehearsal at Success Laventille Composite School, located just off the Eastern Main Road. As I was travelling in daylight and not heading too far up the hill, my husband, though still anxious, backed off. Part of his relenting, I believe, was on account of another friend doing research in Trinidad accompanying me. What I remember most about that day is not the actual rehearsal, but rather an encounter with a man who worked at the school. During a rehearsal break we went to his office, and he handed us several pamphlets to browse. They were newsletters produced by Laventille residents, detailing various community development imperatives from after-school and adult learning programs to environmental sanitation projects and cultural arts endeavours. His urgency to show us another side of Laventille, one that is largely absent from most media and public discourse representations, stands as the defining moment of that fieldwork memory.

In the same vein, Malick Folk Performing Company uses Afro-Trinidadian folk forms as tools of uplift and cultural education. Unlike broad institutions of national and municipal
government, education and commerce, these community systems of productive citizenship do their work at a smaller scale, focusing on everyday activities that transform civic consciousness. Through folk drumming, dancing, theatre and choral singing, Malick strives to empower Trinidad’s lower-working-class black community countering the circumscribing pathology that names Laventille and similar environs as ‘deliberately choosing’ the path of dependence rather than self-help and entrepreneurship (Ryan et al. 1997: vii). They are a significant instance of local civic efforts to re-humanize and revitalize Trinidad’s black under and working class through the practice of folk performance. In such a way, they generate new archetypes of blackness and new symbols of hope (McNeil: 109–12).

RENÉE:

‘Blackness, like performance, often defies categorization.’

(E. Patrick Johnson)

MSHAÏ:

Blackness/African-ness serves as cultural currency that gets defined/articulated/ performed in a plethora of ways, by both those who identify as African/black and those who seek to embrace or be embraced by it. As black feminist ethnographers mentored by women warriors who have fought against hegemonic narratives, we follow Audre Lorde in transforming silence into language and action - articulating, validating, affirming, performing and supporting diversity even as we cerebrate communality. Our stories are ultimately about hope, even when they record pain, confusion, sorrow, disillusionment or exclusion. As we acknowledge, document and reflect on our experiences and those of the communities we work in and with, we are reminded of the work that still remains to be done. As we quilt them into multi-faceted conversations reflecting the messy and complex diversity of the identities we share, we find support, strength, inspiration and guidance to answer Lorde’s challenge to do the work we are called to (1984: 41–2).

INSIDER/OUTSIDER

MECCA:

‘I experience Black belonging on American soil as a space of flux and ambiguity constituting multiple identities; however, this belonging remains a discursive and material association with specific bodies based on historical, social and political arrangements that are regulated through law, culture and the everyday.’

(D. Soyini Madison)

MEIDA:

My first memories are of my grandmother’s house, the corner of Spaulding and Jackson on Chicago’s Westside. I remember the ‘Fifth City’ movement, a social reform rhetoric and practice actualized by the African American residents of the neighbourhood. I went to Fifth City pre-school, ran the block with other neighbourhood children to the ‘penny candy’ store jangling loose change begged from our elders, and I learned to love and respect the black sculpture of an ‘Iron Man’ that stood in the centre of the neighbourhood’s shopping centre. It was a testament to the strength and resiliency of ‘black community’ in a post-Civil Rights era still ripe and anxious with activist promise. Now the ‘Iron Man’ is gone. The shopping centre has been boarded up, a standing reminder and signifier of unfulfilled revolution.

I shift spaces to the opposite side of town, Chicago’s Northside. My nuclear family moved away from Grandma and cousins, aunts, uncles and the rest of the extended kin. I grew up in the multicultural landscape of Rogers Park. I learned to acquire a taste for Mexican, Indian and Caribbean cuisine. I learned to engage others who did not look or sound like me. I learned the foundations of a black feminist ethnography from a white inner-city teacher
who was also my mother: Quiet observation. Time-intensive engagement. Deep listening. Forging trust. Always seek community and coalition.

On Chicago’s Northside, I also learned lessons about the ebb and flow of development, not just as a physical happening but also as a psycho-social process. Rogers Park is a testament to the tussle of social change. And living next door to your neighbor does not mean you will be fast friends or even cognizant acquaintances. In one breath, I admit my city is a segregated one. In another, I witness exceptions to the rule.

Though I did not know it, I packed these lessons with me when I made my journeys to Trinidad. It was there that I began to learn how to embody the persona of an official ‘ethnographer’. Fieldwork requires active role-playing, chameleon-like character. I was always being read differently. By appearance I was a shifting signifier: ‘White lady! Ey Reds! Ey Spanish! Cocopyal’. By occupation I was multiple too: Mother-American–Researcher–Trini by association (married to a Trinidadian and married to the culture). And these ways of being perceived and being known were contingent passes or denials to cultural access. With so many researchers now coming here to do their research, I often felt I was being tested. What was my right to seek the knowledge and codes of this place? What was my right to ask these questions? Local citizens challenged my audacity to enter their country-nation-culture and to ask to know their precious stories even as they shared them with me. And they were right. Fieldwork and ethnography are gifts of reciprocity, not imperial entitlements.

RENÉE:

‘The spaces within the research domain through which indigenous research can operate are small spaces on a shifting ground.’
(Linda Tuhiwai Smith)

MECCA:

I began dancing West African dance when I was eight years old. My mother put my older sister and me into a class at MindBuilders Creative Arts Center in Bronx, New York. My mother was introduced to African Dance when she was 14 years old through her Summer Youth job in the Bronx. She described this moment to me as a spiritual awakening and wanted us to experience the same sense of belonging she had when she danced. While I was growing up, African Dance was always about reclaiming a particular heritage and history, and it continues to serve that function. I have come to see it as part of a project that sought to create connections to Africa and the African/black diaspora through embodied practice. It celebrates the cultural and physical beauty of blackness, as well as articulates a history of struggle and resistance. From my life experience I have been able to better understand the political, social, cultural and psychological imperatives behind maintaining and creating such connections through blackness, the way that ‘for many black people in the United States, embracing this belonging, however it is articulated or whatever the level of its consistency, becomes a matter of saving one’s life and one’s sanity. This kind of belonging falls beyond intellectual or philosophical pondering; it is psychological and physical protection’ (Madison 2005a: 541). This physical and psychological protection is what my mother wanted to equip my sister and me with when she enrolled us in our first West African Dance class. When I first encountered Ron Brown’s work, as an undergraduate student at Duke University, I was immediately drawn to this aspect of his work. My project has been about exploring the possibilities for transformation and community-building in Ron Brown’s dance, as well as in the specific dance workshop within which I studied. Through dialogue and interaction in the field, I have been able to realise the silence produced by my own positionality.
MSHAI:
How are ‘investments’ assigned to the black/African female ethnographer based on appearance, gender, races, language, country of origin, history, and/or class? How do these investments impact our presence(s) and projects? How do the frames of ‘insider’ and ‘outsider’ shift within this matrix of African-ness, blackness, gender, nationality and class? How does this matrix affect the ways we claim ethnographic authority and what we recognize as our responsibilities to the communities with which we work?

RÉNÉE:
Fieldwork did me as actively as I did it. There were days when I was not quite sure who I was, let alone what I was supposed to be doing. I ate different foods; my body changed; my mouth filled with a second language; the container I carried my project in sprung a dozen leaks, spilled all over the floor and caused some new knowing to sprout there.

MECCA:
During the dance workshop, the degree to which I was an insider and/or outsider shifted depending on the interaction, illustrating, as Linda Tuhiwai Smith argues, that there are ‘multiple ways of being both an insider and outsider’ (1999: 137). Moreover, these were not static, bounded identities; instead, they were continually changing configurations that developed interactions at the workshop (Naples 2003). Most of us were strangers to each other, so we were engaged in a constant process of forming and re-forming bonds and connections.

RÉNÉE:
In the early days of my field research, I felt like a smiling bobble-head riding backward on a dashboard. Like the dash-toy, I witnessed my surroundings a blink or two out of sync with real time. My Spanish proficiency was a distant frequency on a radio dial. Sometimes, it tuned in perfectly. Other times, I strained to understand through layers of static. Even in my dreams, the language forming in my mouth was a taffy my tongue and teeth pulled and re-pulled to make pliant. By most evenings, my head hurt with the strain of trying to understand and be understood in this second cultural and verbal language. I was a foreigner, fo-reig-ner. Now, that’s another taffy word.

MECCA
With our interlocutors Aisha, one of the other dancers, used the style of my locks to place me inside what she called the ‘Atlanta Lock Crew,’ a group of about five women all of whom had thin, groomed locks. Only one of the dancers in this group actually lived in Atlanta, so this designation was not about actual differences in region of origin. Instead, it was a rhetorical device, which employed the language of class and regional location to articulate a boundary around respectable self-presentation Aisha perceived at the workshop. Even as an imaginary boundary, it was one she worried a mis-step could have placed her outside of. During our interview she revealed to me that because of her preoccupation with this boundary she spent the first weekend doing her hair. She stated that she did not want to be ‘the representative of the black ruffians’.

I was unaware of this boundary during my fieldwork at the dance camp. All of the black women participating in the workshop who did not come with Evidence as apprentices or interns had natural hair. In fact, there were so many black women with natural hair at the workshop that we often had exchanges about the positives of natural hair and shared hair-grooming techniques. When Aisha mentioned it during our interview, I was a bit surprised.

Our interlocutors form their own interpretations of us in the field. Some show us to ourselves in ways that take us off guard. Others grant us access and legitimacy in the field.9 With regards to interactions between black women, I think that it also illustrates another way in which boundaries around ‘good’

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9 During the question-and-answer portion of her presentation at the Northwestern University Sociology Department Ethnography workshop on Wednesday, 14 February 2007, Celeste Watkins talked about the narratives that form around you in the field. She was referring the impressions that respondents had of her and the way that she would have to change her self-presentation in different environments. The title of her paper was ‘Am I My Sister’s Keeper? Racially Representative Bureaucracies in the Post-Welfare Reform Era.’
and ‘bad hair’ are being articulated in this present moment when it has become more of the norm to see black women with natural hair.

**MEIDA:**

‘In Ghana, West Africa, the words “white girl upstairs” disrupted my reality of belonging (that I’ve always known) to its very core. I represented something else to him. At that moment, it was representation that eclipsed any notion of belonging.’

(D. Soyini Madison)

**RENÉE:**

During the first few months of my field research, I used routine to re-inscribe my sense of home and to reestablish my sense of order. Several times a day, I criss-crossed the small town of Portobelo in lock-step with my self-imposed schedule. Monday, Wednesday and Friday mornings, I took additional Spanish classes with Maestro Andes, a retired local Spanish grammar and composition teacher. Tuesdays and Thursdays, I agreed to facilitate a Spanish/English intercambio (interchange) class for friends who worked as Congo visual artists. I tried to write/journal/lunch between noon and 2 p.m. each weekday and tried to do at least three interviews per week. It was ridiculous.

**MSHAÏ:**

On the continent, I am often assumed to speak for the Diaspora; in Diaspora, I find myself, unwittingly, representing an entire continent - most of which I have never visited. My life has taught me that race and gender mean different things in different contexts; the heterogeneity of the black female experience continues to surprise me as I see it reflected on my body through different lenses. Having lived in Diaspora, while I do not claim to be of Diaspora, I understand how difference as well as similarity characterizes black spaces. I know that I am ‘black’ differently depending on a host of variables, from the nationality of the last immigration officer to stamp my passport, to that people I am interacting with at any given moment. I remain the same person inside, but doing the work that I do in the body that I have has meant something different to the communities I have lived and worked with in Kenya, Australia and the U.S.A.

**MECCA:**

‘Insider research has to be as ethical and respectful, as reflexive and critical as outsider research. It also needs to be humble. It needs to be humble because the researcher belongs to the community as a member with a different set of roles and relationships, status and position.’

(Linda Tuhiwai Smith)

**RENÉE:**

My routine, which served me well as a frantic young scholar living and working with equally frenzied peers, did more to mark my U.S. ‘outsider’ identity, than my tongue did. How does the black female ethnographer trained in the States make herself a spectacle? By being more present to the work than to the community; by focusing more on the project than the process. When I finally allowed myself to ‘live’ in Portobelo, to sit on the stoop with other women, to laugh and story-talk across my small yard while hanging laundry, to hop in a car with friends and go just for the sake of going, to form bonds of kinship based on my status as neighbour, friend and macomère, Portobelo and I became more knowable to each another.

**MEIDA:**

I navigate between memberships: I am still a child of my local environments - Chicago’s Westside and Northside communities. I am now learning a new role as a mother of a three-year old boy, an emergent civic member to humanity who will know his Trinidadian heritage as much as his African American and American ones. And, I am a citizen of the black diaspora, learning that blackness is manifold in its
variations and that I am obligated to document these experiences as such. Always, the precious ideas of community, solidarity and coalition are on my mind. And ethnography is the quiet revolution I commit to in practice.

**PERFORMANCE ETHNOGRAPHY**

**RÉNÉE:**
In London, at the 2006 Performance Studies international conference, my co-authors and I relished riding the Tube. With child-like glee, we anticipated the recorded female voice warning, ‘Mind the Gap’ as the train doors yawned in sync. The caution meant that one should be careful of the space between the more stable platform and the moving cultural conduit that imbues it with meaning. From my first visit to Portobelo, Panamá, in 2000, performance ethnography as a mode of critical ethnographic research has served as that type of productive warning in the dangerous hollows between what the community says, what I hear, and vice versa. Through its reliance on dialogism, performance ethnography serves as a steady reminder of the gap and a method to traverse it. It calls us to engage its presence not as a wound to be healed or hole to be filled but rather a critical contour of discontinuity between the researcher and the communities within which she works.

**MÉCCA:**
‘I learned many things about research in my own community through those women. I never really did justice to them in the report I eventually wrote as an assignment; I never quite knew how, never possessed the skills or confidence at the time to encapsulate the intricacies of the researcher/researched relations or my own journey as a beginning researcher. But I remember learning more about research and about being a researcher from that small project than I did from any research course, any lecture or any book.’

*(Linda Tuhiwai Smith)*

**RENÉE:**
We focus here on performance ethnography’s potential to open a space for dialogues around race, gender, ethnicity, class and nation, which may unveil the ideological investments of the ethnographer no less than those of the communities with which she or he works.

According to Conquergood, dialogic performance ‘bring self and Other together so that they can question, debate and challenge one another’ (1985: 9). As a mode of critical analysis, it serves as both an engaged practice to increase understandings across various boundaries of ‘otherness’ as well as a method of meta-analysis (Madison 2005b: 167–8; Johnson 2003: 8).

**MSHATI:**
Considering performance ethnography’s utility within the process of moving towards a twenty-first-century black feminist ethnography, we ask: How might blending Dwight Conquergood’s triple ‘c’ approach to performance studies with the core tenants of black feminist ideology serve critical ethnographic research? How might staging one’s research in the field or academy create new opportunities for dialogues and deeper analysis? How might critical attention to misunderstandings and missteps, ‘the gap’, reveal taken-for-granted assumptions that we bring to bear on the communities with which we work and/or that the community brings to bear on us?

**MÉCCA:**
‘It is almost useless to collect material to lie upon the shelves of scientific societies. . . . The Negro material is eminently suited to drama and music. In fact, it is drama and music, and the world and America in particular needs what this material holds.’

*(Zora Neale Hurston)*

**MÉIDA:**
Writing alone is not enough to display the complexity of blackness as lived experience. **We**
The Quilt

understand the body as a vested site of cultural negotiation. Cultural practices are an enacted politics of citizenship. What people ‘do’ connects them to specific communities of belonging. Therefore, simply to write is to ignore other modes of communication through which bodies make meaning. In our moment, embodied performance, aural and oral communication, video and image documentation and cyberspace must all be acknowledged as critical spaces both to search for ethnographic content as well as to communicate our own ethnographic analyses.

Mshaï:

’Soo money I had borrowed, I put on a show at the John Golden Theater on January 10, 1932, and tried out my theory.’

(Zora Neale Hurston)

Renée:

For the past seven years, I have been engaged in a critical ethnographic study of an Afro-Latin community located in the small, predominantly Roman Catholic town of Portobelo on the Atlantic/Caribbean coast of the Republic of Panamá, its performance practice known as 'Congo’, and its practitioners who call themselves by the same name. Focused on the politics of black-identity Panamá, I analyze the Congo tradition and its shifting position within twentieth-century discourses of blackness.

The Congos of Panamá are cultural descendants of the Cimarrones, runaway enslaved Africans who fought for and won their freedom during the Spanish colonial period.11 The Congos of Portobelo, like other Congo communities along the Caribbean coast of Panamá, use ritual performance to celebrate and share their history, traditions and cultural practices. Such performances generally occur during carnival season (Congo season), which begins on 20 January and concludes on Ash Wednesday. The performances cast the blacks/Congos against the devil/Brutal enslavers. (Jiménez 2000; Smith 47–8; Alexander 95)

Meïda:
The ethnographic narratives we document are interventions on both local and global scales. They are parables of importance, reflections for the local communities who made them in the first place as well as lessons for a global audience to bear witness to.

Renée:

On 12 July 2003, I directed the last performance ethnographic project of my extended research year in Portobelo. Entitled ‘El Museo Congo’ (The Congo Museum), this performance-ethnographic project succeeded in the end because several of my collaborators and I slipped into the gap. In the breach of our misstep, the crisis it opened up and the various modes of communitas that followed, I learned how generative the gap can be.

Mshaï:

Gloria Naylor begins her novel Mama Day with the cautionary story of an ardent researcher who goes back home on extensive field work ‘from one of those fancy colleges mainside, dragging his notebooks and tape recorder . . . rattl[ing] on about “ethnography”, “unique speech patterns”, “cultural preservation” and whatever else he seemed to be getting so much pleasure about out of’ (1993: 7). When his research is finally published, no one in the community has any regard for the work, which may have plenty to say to others but has nothing to offer them. As far as the community is concerned, the researcher - despite being one of their own - didn’t know what to ask, whom to ask it of, or how to go about asking. ‘Pity [he] couldn’t listen,’ Naylor tells us, ‘or he wouldn’d left here with quite a story’ (1993: 10).

Again and again I find myself wondering: Am I asking the right questions? Am I going about that in the right way? Am I speaking to the right

11 Cimarrones assisted English privateers like Francis Drake and pirates like Henry Morgan to successfully sabotage Spanish colonial trade practices in Panama and to secure their own freedom.
people — especially those who are often ignored or forgotten?
And — most difficult of all — am I truly listening?

MEIDA:
Tending ethnographic relationships is a process combining care, play, flexibility, the ability to observe and listen and a desire to be good to those who have been good to us. I find myself charged with an obligation to represent a multidimensional visceral telling of these precious lives and their practices of committed citizenship. The stories they have been willing to share with me are significant documents of cultural labour and cultural power, and they must be handled with care.

RENEE:
Staged in the ruins of San Jeronimo, a Spanish colonial fort in the heart of Portobelo, ‘El Museo Congo’ was a collaborative art installation-performance created by seventeen local, national and international artist/scholars invested in the Congo tradition. A month in the planning, ‘El Museo Congo’ sought to analyze what it means to be a contemporary Congo practitioner/artist and/or co-performative witness.

Unfortunately, we could not have chosen a more inopportune date for our project. Our ‘El Museo Congo’ took place just hours after Hurricane Claudette entered the coast as a strong tropical storm flooding some chambers of the fort, creating a muddy mess in others, and providing us all with what a friend would later call ‘a good test of character’. By the 2 p.m. opening, the weather had not yet allowed us to complete our set up. As the sky had emptied and the ground had overflowed, we were crushed to learn that someone had stolen the candles and destroyed the feathers, Pamela Sunstrum had installed for her project. This type of beginning makes it easy to lose one’s bearings and slip into dark hollow places.

Entitled ‘Volaré’ (I’ll fly away), her piece was a healing ritual and altar space created in the holding area in the back the fort where enslaved people are believed to have been held. When we learned of the theft, we were unsure if it was in response to a perceived act of brujería (witchcraft) or whether it was meaness, mischievous thievery, thievery for necessity or something more random. Regardless, we were all deeply hurt. The Congo artists were even more concerned because they did not want this to be the memory Pamela would pack with her later that day to take back the States. As we waited for the rain to subside on the morning of the exhibition, we worked frantically to rebuild Pamela’s piece. Because we wanted a better ending for our story than the one the hurricane and vandalism were offering us, we all decided to sacrifice elements of our individual pieces to ensure her project’s success. Her project became ours too. By day’s end, it was the most powerful piece of our collaborative project, not only because of its artistic value but also because it pulled us out of the slump and worry that the weather had created and gave us even more incentive to rise above it.

As I was trying to locate materials to help Pamela rebuild her installation and brainstorming with Estaban and Alejo to re-imagine ours, Carmelita, a women from Spain and an employee of El Grupo Española (The Spanish Corporation) pulled me aside and chastised me for ‘allowing’ Alejo to ‘damage’ the fort.

‘Dañe el fuerte?!’ (Damage the fort??!), he wondered out loud. ‘Su nuestro hacer con lo que queremos!’ (It’s ours to do with what we want!).

MEIDA:
As I write, James Clifford’s notions of partial truths and ethnographic fictions become real to me in a new salient way (Clifford and Marcus

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12 The local artists were Virgilio ‘Yaneca’ Esquina, Virgilio ‘Tito’ Esquina, Reynaldo Esquina, Gustavo Esquina de la Espada, Ariel Jiménez, Jose ‘Moraito’ Angulo, Manuel ‘Tato’ Golden, Jeronimo Chiari, Hector Jiménez and Danilo Barrera. National and international artists included: Jenny Arribu, a visual artist from the United States who initiated a children’s art class in Portobelo; Carla Escoffery, a Panameña visual artist studying in the United States who assisted with Jenny’s class; Pamela Sunstrum, a visiting Botswanan artist from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill; Michelle Lanier, an independent artist from the United States; and me. Panamanian photographers Sandra Eleta and Gustavo Esquina shared their art practices by helping to document the event.

13 Carmelita, Estaban, Alejo and El Grupo Española/The Spanish Group are pseudonyms.
Continually, I find myself drawn to stories that inspire me. Each story I approach with fear, hesitation and overwhelming awe. And, in each story I find moments of laughter, renewed excitement and connection as I revisit field journals, collected images, audio and videotapes and transcribed conversations. Words take on a new power.

**RENEÉ:**
The hurricane caused us to relocate to a different chamber of the fort. Between the tropical storm, having to reorganize spaces, and the theft of Pamela’s materials, I was not thinking about the preservation of the remains of the four-hundred-year-old fort when Alejo located nails and began hanging our materials in the new space. I had seen banners and decorations nailed to its walls on numerous occasions, so the thought did not strike me as abnormal. In his anger over Carmelita’s comment, Alejo reminded me that the Spanish Group had not complained when artists from Panamá City had put the same kinds of nails in the fort during an event they co-sponsored several months prior. At that, he continued hanging our piece, and I went to put out other fires.

**MEIDA:**
How do we - as scholars who are cultural workers - complicate debates about ownership, tradition, innovation and authority by tracking some bits of culture and eclipsing others? How does what we craft on paper and in performance intervene, making some small dent in established perceptions of what we thought we knew or what we ignored up until now?

**RENEÉ:**
That night, the gap roared wider and swallowed us all. After a strained dinner together, Carmelita called me an ‘Imperialist American’ and chastised the Taller Artists for their lack of concern for their cultural heritage. For her, a woman of Spanish heritage and an employee of El Grupo Española, which had recently established a presence in Portobelo, I represented a selfish U.S. agent more interested in completing her own project than protecting the Spanish cultural heritage in the region. From my perspective, a foreign white woman was asking me, a foreign black woman, to tell a local black man what he could and could not do in his own hometown. Alejo asked why he should revere something that was used against his ancestors and why he should have to attend to the concerns of an extranjero (stranger) from Spain. That was the gap. As we tumbled, we coalesced around different feelings of rage and entitlement. The Congo artists felt the fort was theirs to use; the Spanish Grupo felt it was theirs to protect and I, the black female critical ethnographer, the performative co-witness and agent, had taken a side earlier in the day in my choices and in my silences. Carmelita and I both had been attracted to Portobelo around issues of cultural history, presentation and analysis. She had come for the town’s Spanish colonial legacies; I had come because of its black diaspora ones. The nails in the fort did not cause the fissures; they simply aggravated them. The same ‘culture of politics’ the Congos enact each carnival season, which tells the story of the Congo/Blacks’ victory over the Devil/Brutal enslavers, still reverberates in Portobelo. With a chuckle and a sigh, our hostess remarked, ‘It’s the Cimarrones and the Spanish all over again.’ I could learn more from the gap than on the platform.

**MEIDA:**
Ethnography is our base to build partnerships, collective communities and to privilege voices that may not be heard in the public realm. We deal with the cultural practices of the everyday that affirm, embed, shore up and contest the status quo. Our work emphasizes the ‘possibilities’ of alternative ways and means: the quietly done and engaged, the hard everyday work that builds up/tears down through persistence. We know this in our muscles as
much as our minds, because we learned the power of the story, not just through the academy but through home knowledge (Christian 2000; hooks 1990; Moruga and Anzaldúa 1983). Though ethnography is seemingly benign, with its mundane focus on the everyday practices of life, we recognize ethnography’s power to relay the labour inherent in citizenship as an engaged practice. The power of the word, the power of bodies, the power of communication. Our tender are stories, personal and collective narratives, gathered in the field. We do not privilege macro-politics and macro-structures though we embed them in our analyses, for they are the charge-points, the events that make our micro-work ‘go’. Ours is a time intensive practice documenting and detailing minute productions of culture. We recognize bodies as always cumbered with multiple narratives of social, economic, political and cultural weight. We chart how bodies, as active consumers and makers of meaning, perceive and make use of the power structures they live within (family, work, education, government etc.). How do people react to power? How do people engage power, not only as a force upon them but as a force they dialogue with, contest and tactically use in contexts that change constantly? Power from above is not only to be experienced; power is navigated and negotiated with (de Certeau 1984; Trouillet 1995; Pollock 1998; Savigliano 1995).

**BLACK WOMEN ETHNOGRAPHERS: PROFANE ON SACRED GROUND?**

**M S H A T:**

‘This is the world in which I move uninvited, profane on a sacred land, neither me nor mine, but me nonetheless.’

(Trinh T. Minh-ha)

**M E C C A:**

‘In the interactive model, the relative significance of race, sex, or class in determining the conditions of black women’s lives is neither fixed nor absolute but, rather, is dependent on the socio-historical context and the social phenomenon under consideration. These interactions also produce what to some appears a seemingly confounding set of social roles and political attitudes among black women.’

(Deborah K. King)

**R E N É E:**

‘The narrative of one life is part of an interconnecting set of narratives; it is embedded in the story of those groups from which individuals derive their identity.’

(Paul Connerton)

**M E I D A:**

Ethnography encounters are ethical, activist, ambassadorial, coalition-building acts. They are also balancing acts. We manage fieldwork floating along our multiple affiliations of belonging - to the lessons and values we learn at home, to the codes of ethics and knowledge we learn in academia, and to the new expectations and forms of knowledge we are exposed to in the field. Fieldwork is also a taxing process on the ethnographer’s body; she must always be aware of her changing position. Which hat does she wear in what location? How do her multiple commitments coexist and clash? How does she keep track of the personas she must inhabit?

**R E N É E:**

The nexus of our raced, gendered, classed, nationalized selves leaks out in unpredictable and uncontainable ways.

**A L L:**

Our Beginnings in the Field

**M S H A T:**

‘When are you going to get married?’

**R E N É E:**

‘Se murió tu babe?’ (Did your baby die?)
The Quilt

MECCA: 'What are you doing to give back to your community?'

MEIDA: 'Where’s Jaden?'

MSHAT: The most disconcerting time I was asked this question during fieldwork was not by a family member, although – or maybe, because – they ask often, but by a professor, a potential mentor, who has known me for over a decade, a teacher, familiar with my work as an artist and scholar.

I run into him shortly after I get back to Nairobi to begin my fieldwork and visit his office to present my project, first, out of courtesy as he asks me to go do so, and then also because I hope he will be a useful resource.

He goes through the written summary and listens to my presentation with no question, no comment. And then:

‘Are you married? Are you engaged?’

Then he proceeds to gently admonish me that the doctorate could always wait, but I am not getting any younger and need to ‘find someone now’.

Says that is the research project I need to be focusing on right now as the doctorate will ‘severely hamper’ my chances of finding someone willing ‘take me on’.

RENEE: I’m struck dumb by the question.

At 4, Naomi stands in the green space between my yard in Portobelo and the street, white saucers with big dollops of maple syrup looking up at me. She bites the left side of her lip with her remaining front tooth. It is one of the rare times that her face is not smiling. She is sad for me.

I have seen her several times a week for at least eight weeks. I visit with her parents, she’s stayed over . . . what would make her . . .

It’s my Spanish,
I must have heard her wrong or heard her right and misunderstood the meaning.
I’m concentrating too hard to mask my shock

‘Como?’ (What?), I ask her
‘Your baby. Your little boy,’ She clarifies.
‘Did he die?’
‘No, querida,’ I say. ‘I don’t have any babies.’
‘oooh,’ she says, face closing in contemplation.
Then opening back up.
She smiles,
I smile back
still a little off-centre
and watch her run back towards the street to play with the other children
I blink hard to snap out of it.
So this is how people are trying to make sense of me . . .

MECCA: This past summer I had a troubling exchange with one of my family members. He stopped me in the hall of the house in which we were dressing for a graduation, to ask me about school.
I told him about my fieldwork at the Ronald K. Brown / Evidence workshop, how empowering that was, and my interest in Cuba.
He then asked me ‘Well, what are you doing to give back to your community? How are you making sure that others around you can get to where you are?’
Both very important questions.
I assumed he was referring to my family members, so I told him about the educational and job resource information I’d been sending out.
He then started to talk about a theology class he was taking.

He said he was reading about white evangelical women who would go around and make speeches, but they would always do it underneath, or with the permission of, their husbands. He said something to the effect of 'back in the day, women would not make a name for themselves. Usually they would take on their husband’s name'.

I asked him about women like Sojourner Truth, what would he say about that. He was not happy with my reply.

I wonder if in his mind giving back to 'your community' means giving up my dreams for the success of a husband?

M E I D A:
‘Where’s Jaden?’ I am often asked.

And I realize how much the question irks me. As if the child must be attached to my hip. As if as ‘mother’ I must be with him 24-hours-a-day. I do this for myself but also for my child, for my family and friends, for an artistic career that I want to create alongside a scholarly one.

And even my husband falls into this trap of perception. Something he could not do in Chicago. In the States we wouldn’t have the extended-family childcare set-up that we have here.

What I am in the midst of is a dilemma of work ethic, time perception, a difference of cultural tradition and gender roles, and a struggle over power. And what is this situation doing to and for my child? At one end, I think this is quality time with his aunts, uncles and cousins to experience Trini culture firsthand, to grow up in it and be a Trini child for a bit – which he would never get from me. I have also had the opportunity to be more flexible, to just ‘be here’, more like a stay-at-home mom for the beginning of his life. Yet, at the other end, I have to do my work – this fieldwork – which requires time, energy and focus (much like another baby to take care of).

The balance of wearing the mommy hat, the fieldworker’s hat and the spouse’s hat is not a position easily achieved. Is there any space – home or academia – to talk about this? Seems more like a reality that lives in silence. Is it a silence suffering from an ignorance of not knowing or a force of prescribed reality and pre-assigned gender roles? I don’t know.

M S H A T:
While we consciously choose here to identify what we do as ‘black feminist ethnography’, we recognize the changing and contested nature of the terms ‘feminism’ and ‘feminist’. The diverse choices our female mentors have made regarding their use of these terms encourages in us a respect for the plurality of labels that African/black women use in their gendered approaches to improving their world(s).

Some engage these terms, embrace and own them working to expand their use in and in reference to African/black women, communities, concerns and contexts; others have chosen to reject these terms entirely or to qualify them differentiating them from understandings marginalizing African/black peoples and experiences; while still others are wary of all form of labeling refusing to be caught up in debates on definition.

M E C C A:
‘When people ask me rather bluntly every now and then whether I am feminist, I not only answer yes, but I go on to insist that every woman and every man should be a feminist – especially if they believe that Africans should take charge of African land, African wealth, African lives and the burden of African
development. It is not possible to advocate for the independence of the African continent without also believing that African women might have the best that the environment can offer. For some of us, this is the crucial element in our feminism.’

(Ama Ata Aidoo)

MSHÀÍ: Some African/black female scholars have made the choice either to reject these terms entirely or to qualify them, differentiating their own work from understandings of feminism/ist associated with historically recent European and American social movements founded to struggle for female equality (Oyewùmi 2003: 1). There are those who prefer to use alternative terms, such as Alice Walker’s womanism/ist (1983: xi, xii) and Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi (1985: 72) or Clenora Hudson-Weems Africana womanism/t (1998: 153-4). Others distinguish black/African feminism/ist from other understandings of feminism/ist centring African/black women very specifically in descriptions of themselves and their project: Black, Africana, African or African feminism/ist or womanism/ist, African feminism/t etc. The thoughtful analyses that have produced these distinctions draw attention to the ways in which other factors – in particular race, class, ethnic/national identity and sexuality – intersect with gender in determining the experiences, challenges and priorities of African/black women.

Still others are wary of labelling, refusing to get caught up in debates on definition, claiming by their silence on the matter the right not to be named by others, even though they may engage in the kind of work others label ‘feminist’ or that performs ‘feminism’. As Obioma Nnaemeka explains, they are not hung up on ‘articulating their feminism’; they just do it. . . . [W]hat they do and how they do it provide the ‘framework’; the ‘framework’ is not carried to the theatre of action as a definitional tool. It is the dynamism of the theatre of action with its shifting patterns that makes the feminist spirit/engagement effervescent and exciting but also intractable and difficult to name. (1998: 5)

RÉNÉE: As I sit shoulder-to-shoulder with my sisters, macomèresa, friends binding patches of fabric together, I realize that I have not experienced critical/performance ethnography and black feminist ideology as separate. On my body, in my experiences, in my training, they have always cohered. Of the four black female scholars under whose direction I trained in undergraduate and graduate classrooms (that there were only four speaks to the state of black female representation in the academy as instructors and professors), all are community-centred women who call themselves black feminists. D. Soyini Madison was the first to introduce me to critical ethnography. Her pedagogy, praxis and everyday life braids critical/performance ethnography and black feminist ideology intimately. When several of my co-authors and I entered a doctoral program together, we took (US) black feminist theories with Sandra Richards and the same semester we took critical/performance ethnography with Dwight Conquergood. His handouts included quotes from Zora Neale Hurston and lyrics from Sweet Honey in the Rock.

In a moment of self-consciousness, I watch my hands dance needle and thread through thin sheets of cloth, my body learned to quilt this way before my mouth learned the names of things.

MÉIDA: ‘Particularly for people of colour, life-lived, whether on the concrete pavement of inner-city streets or the backwoods of a rural southern community, is the root of our beginnings and the root of our understandings. The early quotidian experiences of the people we knew were our “first sight”, and it is through them that we began to name and theorize the world.’ (D. Soyini Madison)
As scholars seeking to articulate what we do, we have chosen to use these terms while acknowledging the right to self-naming and self-definition, in order to bring together diverse influences which address our positionality, priorities and commitments as African/black female scholars. Our gendered and racialized bodies are inseparable from the epistemological frameworks we use. We do not agree with everything emanating from our mentors; we do not always agree even among ourselves, and the daily challenge is to identify ‘the piece of the way to go’ with each of the theories (Boyce-Davies 1994: 46) without getting trapped into commitments that contradict our own. Identifying work that fits in the broad gamut we have identified above as ‘feminism/feminist’ allows us to bring into the conversation voices, perspectives and experiences that might otherwise be isolated from each other.

This includes not only the diversity embodied in and articulated by African/black women but also in other ‘feminist’ intellectuals whose commitments are similar to our own - Trinh Minh-ha, Chandra Mohanty, Gloria Anzaldúa, Purinma Mankekar and so many others. Their insights contribute to the shaping of the research methodologies, priorities and interpretative paradigms articulated here as central to twenty-first-century black feminist ethnography.

These concerns make black feminist ethnography a necessary radical intervention for this moment, our moment, the twenty-first century. Through stories, we address black disempowerment by reframing blackness itself. We are concerned with stories of survival, community and self-development, and the formation of critically active and positive instances of cultural citizenship, which transform blackness from its place as a troubled and devalued source into a valuable one. We are speaking about and with everyday folks concerned with creating equitable civic engagements to serve the ongoing work of de-colonizing minds.

Unlike past historical moments where protest and agency were made combustible through large-scale forums negotiating civic rights - slavery, Civil Rights, anti-colonial Independence movements - our moment, perhaps, has a quieter but no less important revolution to serve. Most certainly, we acknowledge our due to those ancestors and those moments preceding us.

They are the foundations for our contemporary plight towards social change. Yet, even as we share similar concerns and a similar ethos with previous movements, questions resound for this particular moment we are living through:
MECCA:
What are we struggling against and for now?
What under-girds our notions of ‘struggle’?
What is our purpose? What will incite a paradigm of social change today?

MSHAÏ:
How is value assigned to different experiences and modes of blackness? How can we talk about the range and diversity of black experiences on a global scale?

RÉNÉE:
How do we honour and uplift the modes of knowing and being we are invested in and use across-the-board in all the communities we engage? How do we bring them into conversation with each other?

MEIDA:
At the root of this work lies an ethical responsibility, an oath obligating each of us to navigate carefully and honestly through our multiple allegiances to our local histories and homes, to those ethnographic communities in which we work and to academia, in which we build our future livelihoods. It is a balancing act without end.

ALL: These are our beginning steps towards a twenty-first-century black feminist ethnography.

TENETS OF A TWENTY-FIRST-CENTURY BLACK FEMINIST ETHNOGRAPHY

MEIDA:
To build my work on the foundation laid by those who had gone on before

RÉNÉE:
To hold in trust what I have received as a legacy for those who come after me, not just in the academy but in all the communities I belong to

MECCA:
To find a way of speaking out – of articulating what it is I have to say, even when I can’t find the words immediately

MSHAÏ:
To honour and affirm Black/African women’s ways of speaking and making meaning

MEIDA:
To know, honour and cite Black/African scholars and artists in my work

RÉNÉE:
To build coalitions that respect differences even as they seek points of similarity

MECCA:
To make room for collective meaning-making, that embraces others’ ideas and concerns and input

MSHAÏ:
To bear witness

MEIDA:
To bear witness

RÉNÉE:
To bear witness

MECCA:
To call up memory, consciously respecting its power to heal as well as to hurt

MSHAÏ:
To claim space for those who have been marginalized in the spaces that I work

MEIDA:
To analyze, working to understand why what is so is so, and whether it should stay as is or change . . . and how
RENNÉE: To offer solidarity to struggles that are not my own but that challenge the same oppressions

MECCA: To challenge artificial boundaries that separate activism, artistry and analysis

MSHAÏ: To build my peer-group, even as I mentor and seek mentors

MEIDA: To always embrace

ALL: with joy

RENNÉE: The call of scholarship – and do my best to make what I do a joy

MECCA: To not be afraid to trust the aspects of myself as a spiritual super-natural being

MSHAÏ: To not be afraid of who I am – a twenty-first-century African/Black woman who is a creative intellectual and passionate about the things I care about

MEIDA: To expose the inequities of power through the stories bestowed to me through the rites of fieldwork

RENNÉE: To document, unveil, inspire and incite change through the story in its many forms – oral, aural, embodied, written and digitally mediated

MECCA: As invested agents in a worldwide human community

ALL: we imagine and put forth the visions of community we desire

MSHAÏ: Through the stories we seek

MEIDA: The stories we are told

RENNÉE: And the stories we choose to tell

ALL: These are the Tenets of a Twenty-First-Century Black Feminist Ethnography

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