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Francesca Castaldi. *Choreographies of African Identities: Négritude, Dance, and the National Ballet of Senegal.* Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006. x + 246 pp. $50.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-252-03027-7; $25.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-252-07268-0.

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The Choreography of Ethnology

Francesca Castaldi's recently released book sheds new light not only on the current production and practice of dance in Senegal, but also re-illuminates ethnology and its ability to negotiate (or not) contemporary global cultural practice. Castaldi's dual training as dancer and ethnographer brings a unique insight to the culture of movement in late '90s Dakar. Viewing Dakar–its people, its cultures and its urban landscape–as a masterfully improvised dance of poverty and wealth, masculine and feminine, urban and rural, Castaldi choreographs her own narrative of discovery and interpretation.

One of the strongest components of the text lies in the author's presentation of her own body as a participating body, not the invisible body of the ethnographer. As a dancer, her research comprises not only the collection of information about dance, but also the active learning of Senegalese dance and the integration of these two fields of knowledge into one discourse. In her introduction, Castaldi reinforces her decision to integrate her own body into the corpus of her research and text by stating that "the removal of the body of the ethnographer from ethnographic accounts, which until recently has characterized ethnographic monographs, signaled a historical blind spot in the discipline of anthropology: to recover the original 'native' mode of life, the colonial presence was to be silenced from ethnographic accounts" (p. 5). Her insertion of self into her narrative, through her acquisition of dance and use of the first-person voice signals her departure from traditional ethnographic modes of re-presentation.

This publication of the author's doctoral thesis in Dance History and Theory, presented at the University of California, Riverside, combines multiple narratives into a single text. Researched between 1995 and 1998, her topic reveals itself through a series of first-person discovery narratives that rub shoulders with third-person documentary prose. Beginning with the viewing of a performance by the National Ballet of Senegal in Irvine, California, the author relocates to Dakar, where she again attends a performance by the National Ballet. Intent on analyzing the connections of the Ballet to local urban culture, the author then interrogates non-official dance practice in Dakar, where she makes her strongest contributions to the field of dance ethnology. An intermission arrives in chapter 5, with the telling of six "Tales of Betrayal." A story of violent rape after an evening of dancing precedes the narrative of a sexual encounter between a white female Peace Corps volunteer and a black Senegalese man. A theoretical white woman interacts with a black female counterpart, while two tales of girls and mothers conclude the pause in the ethnographic and theoretical work of the book.

Meant to be the "staging of a series of antagonisms intended to rupture essentialist assumptions of gender," the Tales "drift from an ethnographical fictional narrative to theoretical fiction in order to question the relationship between 'observation' and 'explanation' in ethnographic work" (p. 117). This inclusion of the "Tales of Betrayal," however, functions more as an interruption in the study of Senegalese dance, and the reader is forced to question

the relevancy of the Tales for this particular text.

Castaldi endeavors to explain such a rupture for she views this text not as a linear projection from thesis to conclusion, but rather as a circular narrative that "moves, hides, turns, and returns" (p. 58). She warns the reader that through her text she means to dislocate and produce "Dis/Order" (p. 6) such that traditional modes of consuming African dance and producing ethnographic scholarship are called into question. Following the polyrhythmic structure of the Senegalese dances under scrutiny, the book simultaneously explores politics, personal discovery, feminism, racism and a plethora of other topics that the author relates back to the practice and observation of dance. Yet, as the author herself notes, to the uninitiated spectator/audience member, such polyrhythms often confuse: "The *sabar* confuses me. I cannot understand the rhythm or the dance. It is so fast. I look at the legs and arms of the dancers spinning in circles ... I look for the logic that governs the sudden changes, and I am left dumbfounded" (p. 97).

Despite the textual freedom the author affords herself through an invocation of polyrhythm, the narratives do situate themselves within a theoretical framework largely based on the writings of V.Y. Mudimbe, specifically *The Invention of Africa* (1988) and *The Idea of Africa* (1994). In her reading of these two seminal texts, Castaldi presents Mudimbe's analysis of Africanist ethnographic discourse as historically having followed two conceptual frameworks, that of "epistemological Eurocentrism," where the Africa in question is defined as lacking in relation to its European counterpart, or that of "epistemological ethnocentrism," involving an over-specification of indigenous cultures and the refusal to relinquish essentializing discourse (p. 34). Castaldi reframes these two concepts as the Order of the Same and the Order of the Other and further proposes a third ethnographic conceit in which to encompass her own work, that of the Third Dis/Order. This Order represents a third generation in anthropological theory and practice according to Castaldi, where postcolonialism, feminism, postmodernism and globalism cause the field to question its own cultural frameworks and boundaries (pp. 58-59).

Castaldi interprets the Order of the Same as being no longer employed, having been a colonial ethnographic monologue, where "Africans figured ... only as refracting and amplifying signifiers of European identity" (p. 37). Still following Mudimbe, she posits NÃ©gritude, and hence Senghor, as being the primary voices in Senegal for the Order of the Other, where the desire was to separate African cultures from the European looking-glass in order to promote a (local) ethnographic, rather than Eurocentric analysis. "The scholars of the Order of the Other acknowledged the existence of African culture(s) and their specificities" (p. 47). Yet, as Castaldi correctly addresses, this Order of the Other discourse was created from within a European framework, its proponents having largely developed the discourse in Paris, France, and later exporting it, via Senghor's presidency in Senegal, back to Africa. NÃ©gritude, thus, was conceived as an anti-discourse to Eurocentric colonial practice, but from within the European metropole. Furthermore, as Senghor himself insisted, NÃ©gritude existed as a dialogue between European and African cultural and political realms. The timing of the release of Castaldi's contribution to the body of literature on NÃ©gritude is fortuitous, as 2006 marks the centenary of the birth of LÃ©opold SÃ©dar Senghor. President Abdoulaye Wade has declared a year of celebratory events be held in commemoration of Senghor's contributions to the nation and culture of Senegal. Despite the well-developed criticisms of NÃ©gritude that have emerged since its conception, Senghor himself is reemerging as a hero-figure in contemporary Senegalese culture. The man whose government oversaw the 1972 creation of the National Arts Institute (which included a dance division), the 1964 construction of the ThÃ©Ã¢tre National Daniel Sorano (which houses not only the National Theater Company, but also the National Ballet of Senegal), and the 1966 opening of the MusÃ©e des Expositions Temporaires to coincide with the opening of the Premier Festival Mondiale des Arts NÃ¨gres, not to mention the creation of the National Ballet itself in 1961, is undoubtedly due a large debt of thanks for his insistence that development be inextricably linked with culture.

In his opening remarks at the Premier Festival Mondiale, Senghor, speaking in English, used the occasion as a platform to promote his governmental philosophy of NÃ©gritude: "Listening to me, one might believe that Negro art is only a technique: an ensemble of means at the service of a civilization of the comfortable, or, in any case, at the service of material production. Let me explain: I have spoken not merely of economic growth, but of development ... I have spoken at the same time of the production of material goods and spiritual goods. When I speak of NÃ©gritude, I am referring to a civilization where art is at once technique and vision, handicraft and prophecy ... For culture is the first requisite and the final objective of all development."[1]

Tracy Snipe has noted that under Senghor a quarter

of Senegal's budget was directed towards education and culture.[2] While this funding remained essentially the same under the subsequent presidency of Abdou Diouf, Senghor's retirement effectively ended NÃ©gritude's official presence in political and cultural life. Although the end of NÃ©gritude politics may have liberated Senegalese cultural production from the need to serve a state-mandated regime of style and substance, Snipe further observes that "with the decline of NÃ©gritude, there was no strongly developed central philosophical premise for cultural policy."[3]

While Senghor and NÃ©gritude may have ushered in a cultural renaissance, and created not only the structures, but also the means to support the National Ballet (among other artistic endeavors), the relatively quick rejection of NÃ©gritude by the Senegalese even before Senghor's resignation makes it difficult to asses the current impact of NÃ©gritude on the National Ballet of Senegal. While Castaldi accurately relates the history of NÃ©gritude and Senghor's presidency at the time of the founding of the National Ballet, she struggles with the application of NÃ©gritude philosophy to the ballet troupe in its current configuration. Surprisingly, in fact, she does not relate Senghorian philosophy to the performances of the Ballet in Dakar, but rather uses Senghor to interpret the performances by the National Ballet that she witnessed in California.

Her interpretation of the California performances is based solely on textual sources: "I have chosen written texts as dialogical voices rather than interviews with performers and audiences to establish a more equal exchange in ethnographic dialogue, matching my own criticism with that of other cultural critics" (p. 22). These sources are on the one hand, the writings of Senghor and on the other, the "program notes and newspaper excerpts, which represent authoritative perspectives intended to inform and influence the audience's interpretation of the performance and, more generally, of African cultures" (p. 22). This textual analysis is contrasted against her analysis of the Ballet's Dakar performances, where Castaldi privileges interviews with the dancers and choreographers over the use of written texts as dialogical voices. This strategy seems to invoke the Order of the Other, against which Castaldi wishes to place her arguments. Yet, the preferencing of written narratives for her analysis of Western cultural consumption and her strict adherence to the format of verbal interview with anonymous informants in Dakar does call into question Castaldi's methodology, which still follows a strict anthropological model of fieldwork, collection/recovery and translation.

As the author narrates the performances in California and Dakar, she discovers the audience is largely the same (elite, Euro-American) both times. This seems to disrupt her original notion of constructing a thesis out of audience and performer relations. What may have begun as a study of the disparate means of cultural consumption by American and Senegalese audiences, is now abandoned as performances on both continents are interpreted by Castaldi to be consumed by elite groups of tourists and those of local wealth. Rather than take this as a revelation as to the singular audience that consumes the ballet internationally, Castaldi looks to find an arena where dance in Senegal is consumed by the local Senegalese. She finds this in the *sabar* (women's street dances) and in the Dakar nightclubs that offer "traditional Senegalese night" soirÃ©es. Within this new framework, she devotes much of her analysis to these latter choreographies and dancing venues. This allows her to maintain a traditional ethnographic framework by presenting herself as the sole interlocutor of a foreign culture. This would not be possible in a postmodern, global framework where the producers and consumers of dance are more deeply entangled in a common production of internationalism and cultural exchange. Castaldi notes in her introduction that "the confrontation between global consumers and authentic local producers lies at the core of the concept of 'world dance' " (p. 19). World dance is not what is under consideration in this book, for the author actively seeks out locality over internationalism. According to the author's perspective, the *sabar* remains a local movement, despite its being danced by the National Ballet. She argues, however, for a de-contextualization of the dances being performed on stage for foreign/elite consumption. The dance steps are choreographed rather than improvised; the dancers are paid performers; the dances are performed by groups rather than by individuals; and there is reduced exchange at the level of performance between the audience and the dancers on the stage (pp. 154-157).

A recent performance of the National Ballet in Dakar in conjunction with the 7th Biennale of Contemporary African Art, Dak'Art 2006, followed very much these same patterns. The audience was comprised mostly of visiting academics and art critics, with local Senegalese elite attending as well. The performers worked to directly involve the spectators in the performance, but there was obvious hesitation, much as Castaldi describes in her account of the Ballet's performances in Irvine, California.

Contrast with this a Saturday evening *sabar* organized in the same month by the women of GorÃ©e Island. GÃ«wÃ«l gi Seck, a young drumming group, set up in front of the City Hall and succeeded in exciting the attending women into a joyful frenzy of dancing. Having witnessed the whipping sequined skirts, the flying sand, the lost jewelry, the playfully erotic antics of the women and the energetic direction of lead drummer Ndiaw Seck, a reader of Castaldi's book better appreciates the animated voice she employs for her narration of the *sabar* she attended at Club LT in Dakar. Almost a decade later, her celebratory descriptions of the *sabar* still resonate for current street dancing practice:

"I could write calmly ... about the drums that are used for the *sabar* ... I could tell you about all the sounds that the drums produce ... But how to understand the rhythms played during the *sabar*? I listen to a cascade of sounds, exploding downward like water-bombs striking the floor. I imagine the impact of all that water, the weight of the sound-bombs created by the hands and sticks of the drummers exploding onto the dancers' bodies, activating their limbs into four independently circling mills while the spine shoots upward and the head and the eyes wander towards the sky.... The density of sounds excites the dancers to action, like water warmed to the boiling point erupting into motion" (p. 98).

One could write calmly; Castaldi could have employed the omniscient narration of the invisible ethnographer throughout, yet it is her enthusiasm for the dance and her bodily engagement with her subject that render this type of narration impossible. Her text jumps and leaps its way through her discovery of Senegalese dance. We readers are jolted out of our passive consummation of written text and catapulted along a bumpy road, like the daily commuters in the *car-rappits*. These colorful buses spewing smog that so captivated Castaldi during her residency in Dakar become the metaphor for our passage through her riotous, sometimes irreverent, often insightful contribution to the literature of African Studies.

Notes

[1]. LÃ©opold SÃ©dar Senghor, "The Function and Meaning of the World Festival of Negro Arts," April 1, 1966, manuscript, BibliothÃ¨que IFAN No. 4, 2162 (1): pp. 1-5; pp. 3-4.

[2]. Snipe, "Arts and Politics," p. 72.

[3]. Ibid.

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