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Contingent Stories of Anthropology, Race, and Feminism

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Beginnings

Deliberations, meditations: On the subject of anthropology and on the intersection of feminism, black feminism.

Suggested frame: "autoethnography," interpreted here as an exploration of the intersection of autobiography and anthropological practice.

Critical question: What are the terms under which one can proceed to address these subjects?

Through an intimate consideration of both form and content, I explore the topics of anthropology, feminism, black feminism, and autoethnography. It is my position that an autoethnographic approach must track back and forth between a personal sense of the way things were, the *memory* of events, on the one hand, and on the other, the institutional markers, texts, and features of public culture that provide guideposts and social referents of that experience. Autoethnography raises questions surrounding personal memory and its relationship to social history. The intersections between the self and social history and the cultural artifact of institutional structures serve as the scaffolding for mapping a social history of anthropology and feminism.

A memory: At age thirteen I discovered Zora Neale Hurston's autobiography, *Dust Tracks on a Road*.[1] This book introduced me to anthropology and the importance of African American culture kept alive in folkways and stories. These stories were exotic to my Northern imagination – magical in their apparent Otherness. They created a world outside of the terrors of junior high school. I would visit the central library and order Hurston's books from Special Collections, for she had not yet become the popular icon we have known of late. Her writing raised new questions: What was the relationship of black women to creative writing? Who had permission to authorize and convey the experiences of the black community? For many, I know that the answer was simple: It was the men of the Harlem

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Renaissance, who presented themselves, and were represented by scholars, as the legitimate voice for the race. Although I now have adopted a more critical stance toward Hurston's views, it is this memory, an embodied moment, that pointed me toward anthropology as a discipline. Hurston's work created a space for me to imagine black women as critical voices amid a world that dismissed black women's vision of community.

Yet Hurston, for all her guiding insight, could never have imagined the social, political, economic, and intellectual developments that allow us to speak of a black feminist anthropology today. My memory of her story cannot erase the texts, politics, and subjectivities of sixty years. Rather, my reflections upon the intellectual and social debates that have informed the context in which my own ideas developed provide a "partial truth" of this social history.[2] Yet the reflexive mode of presentation I use obliges a self-conscious effort that I also be attentive to details that get mobilized to recount the trajectory of my ideas: What is the process of my presentation, of selection, and the ordering of the "facts"? How are temporality and location integral to the story I convey?[3]

These concerns are present even as I introduce the general direction of the essay. Indeed, my commitment to interpreting the relationship of feminism(s) to anthropology is my contribution to the broad analysis of how ideas about feminism and race, and scholarship are always unfolding in relationship to larger historical processes and social events. Indeed, it is useful to note the shifting terms under which black feminism as a category can now be naturalized. The early efforts of cultural critics Barbara Smith, Hazel Carby, bell hooks, and Patricia Hill Collins, along with the countermove by others toward the use of the alternative term *womanist*, helped the notion of black feminism circulate in wide-ranging debates. In no way, however, should these uses of the term *black feminism* be collapsed into a single meaning or invocation. I trace this formation of black women's subjectivity in multiple ways that parallel this history of changes in our understanding of the social location of women, categories at once viewed only as relations among women and men, to a more recent shift toward the use of the term *gender*. This later use finds the concept of gender to be an important analytic category. It allows one to see the intersection of gender with other power-laden social relations.

As an anthropologist, my research is sparked by an interest in representation (that is, the making of Otherness) and performance (or the enactment of self) as they relate to the social history of the African Diaspora. This interest also draws me toward issues that surround the politics of contemporary Africa. Thus, I chose The Gambia as the site for my research because of its significance for African Americans.[4] Like many, I was strongly influenced by Alex Haley's *Roots* journey in the seventies, which traced his history to a Gambian village.[5] But I have also resisted the hegemony of African American representations of the African continent.[6] As a result, a few of the research questions that have guided me are: How do we make sense of African political economies? How is The Gambia – one of the smallest countries – to survive economically without an agricultural or industrial base? How is culture turned into a commodity?

In my work I analyze representations of Africa from varied sources both in and beyond Africa. What do scholars, political leaders, African Americans, and Gambian cultural performers mean by African culture? After all, although Africa is the place of memory for those in the African Diaspora, it is also more than that – it is a place with its own varied histories and debates.

More recently, these concerns have taken me to explore the memory of Africa in the southeastern region of the United States. How have we imagined African influences in the most "African" of sites in North America? Here again, I am interested in the role of Africa in African American discourses of identity formation. But I also cannot forget the political position of sub-Saharan Africa in international debates over geopolitical relations. These interests were formed early in my intellectual trajectory through a particular political moment in which I learned the importance of an internationalist perspective that moves back and forth between particular sites of meaning, but

with a sense of wide-ranging, transnational contests over power and meaning.

The privileging of race in the U.S. political arena, or the urging of one to choose a single identity over another – as if these social selves could be shed of the histories that created them – seems, in hindsight, reductive at the very least. We have now grown accustomed to the notion of multiple and shifting selves;[7] identities are now viewed as relational and situation-sensitive. As I chart my relationship to a political and social history in which feminism and race form central moments, both personally and institutionally, I use this history to illustrate the varied course of notions of blackness and feminism I have had to navigate. Feminism and black political movements figure critically in the kinds of questions that have emerged during this process and that now inform my professional practice as an anthropologist.

Emergent Forms

This reflexive account owes much to recent challenges by a number of constituencies that became critical of the objectifying gaze of social scientists.[8] Critics objected to a scholarship that presented itself as a transparent window of explanation that somehow magically, and apparently effortlessly, hid the conditions of knowledge production.[9] In particular, I argue, feminist anthropology, postcolonial studies, and minority discourses have been in the forefront of such critiques. They especially have been instrumental in stimulating an exploration of various literary forms that critique the objectivist stance and ethnographic authority. Without access to mainstream audiences, these discourses developed more self-consciously reflexive ways of articulating their perspectives: through autobiography, fiction, plays, poetry, and wives tales. They created counternarratives to stand alongside the accounts found in conventional anthropology. Now these forms, at one time considered of marginal status, are currently subsumed (and legitimated) under the rubric of reflexive anthropology. Minority discourses, along with feminism and postcolonial studies, are but a few of the perspectives that are influential to my framing context; their importance signifies a particular era in the history of anthropology, during a time when the discipline formed new intersections with public discourses and events that have helped to simultaneously constitute theories of "the social" and subjectivities.

Geopolitical Imaginations

Any genealogy of subaltern-oriented theories and research projects (such as this one) is compelled to take into account shifts in world political events, and, in particular, the impact of anticolonial struggles after World War II. This is the context in which many North American anthropologists found themselves rethinking the discipline in the mid-1960s.[10] For anthropologists of the Atlantic rim, early moments in Pan-Africanism and the impact of anticolonial struggles informed a diasporic sense of connections among disadvantaged peoples. This was a moment of internationalism in which solidarity was imagined in relation to communities and nations. Its specificity becomes even clearer if we juxtapose it against contemporary concerns with global networking and the erasure of communal and national boundaries.[11] Indeed, global connections in this earlier moment drew a map of connections that imagined a critique of neocolonial relations. The postwar anticolonial struggles of the Third World were about building nations. Similarly, the social movements of the 1960s, both in the United States and in other parts of the world, depended on imaginings of nations and nation-like communal units.[12] It is in this context that progressive scholars and activists turned to counter-hegemonic nation building as a context for thinking about and participating in the elimination of inequality and oppression. Nationalism invigorated a countermovement and provided a logic for political struggle.

During my first experience of college in the 1970s, like so many students at the time, I searched for a more meaningful set of options than what seemed to present itself at the small, overwhelmingly white, liberal arts college I attended. As members of the generation just

after the Civil Rights and Vietnam era, my cohorts and I were inspired by the example of those slightly older than ourselves to work for social and political transformation. My path was involvement in black cultural politics.

Black cultural political groups drew inspiration from a range of sources, but a notable inclusion in most was the selective appropriation of Pan-African cultural artifacts. From Nigeria we borrowed Yoruban religious practice; from Ghana, initiation ceremonies; from Tanzania, a political vision based on scientific socialism. These elements were fused into a cultural stew that became for many African Americans "a bit of Africa" in the New World.[13] The interest in Africa, although having long roots among Africans of the Diaspora, was in this moment inspired by the move of many African nations toward independence from colonialism.[14] This fact served to facilitate a more politically engaged appreciation of Africa's significance to the identity of African Americans.

A memory: One of the striking aspects that framed my involvement in political work during this early phase of my life was the expected place of black women in organizations focused on community development. These organizations, like their white counterparts, placed women in the position of being expected to make coffee while, of course, the men talked over important ideas. I recall protesting one day, along with other women, this bourgeois notion of women's roles. We pointed out the apparent disjuncture between worlds that marked a domestic/political divide; this forced a heated debate. Although I was much younger than the other women, I understood the significance of the moment: coming to terms over our location within these social groups offered another moment of consciousness of what it meant to be black and a woman; ours was a dual identity recognized in private but erased in public debates, where the single category of importance was race. This collective action proved that the women were no longer willing to buy the prevailing justification commonly offered up by even these progressive black men: "when the Community becomes liberated, then we can deal with women's issues."

As I became more involved with political issues, I joined the activities of groups concerned with advancing African American self-determination. Again the influence of nationalisms from the Third World was ever present in that the rhetoric of many newly liberated countries stressed political and economic sovereignty. For African Americans, our move toward self-determination took various forms, including the development of independent black schools, seen as viable alternatives to the failures we associated with public schools; political theater groups that provided ways for us to use art as social commentary and thus provided a critique that might enable transformation; and adult literacy programs, inspired by Paulo Freire's work on literacy with Brazilian peasants.[15] These were projects that powerfully shaped my sense of politics and culture.

This was also a moment when progressive U.S. domestic politics drew strength from a number of internationalist movements to formulate a plurality of visions of social change. In the United States and Europe, Third World elite students joined forces in a cosmopolitan anticolonial enterprise whereby the national fates of various colonies and ex-colonies were viewed as intertwined; some of these students, who were "citizens of the world," became important nationalist leaders.[16] U.S. movements imagined themselves, too, within this nationalist cosmopolitanism. Inspired by Third World intellectuals, many U.S. black activists understood themselves to be part of a more cosmopolitan moment.

A memory: We walked the streets of a northeastern urban community as if we were in tropical Africa, yet it was in the cold of November: women in sandals and wearing long skirts and tops – bubbas and lappas – in "African" cotton fabric designed to mimic batiked cloth. Still, these "African" clothes would mark our distinctiveness as neither Black Muslim nor ordinary resident of the neighborhood. We were in the service of a political vision: "Who are we?" we asked rhetorically. And we answered ourselves, "African people." "What must we do? Make change." And the room, again filled with cosmopolitan cultural analysis, sat divided – men on one side and women on the other.

Inspired by these internationalist commitments, I enrolled in a program in Pan-African studies. Here, the desire for connections beyond the borders of the nation helped frame my intellectual agenda. I began to learn both about Africa and about the African Diaspora. Even in these emergent years of African and African American studies programs, a sometimes-productive tension existed between African intellectuals from the continent, who stressed historical difference, and scholars of the Diaspora, who, more often than not, generated static, albeit celebratory notions of Africa. The debate rippled outward as black intellectuals from the Caribbean raised the importance of a class analysis, interrupting the privileging of race as the primary political division in U.S. discussions. These tensions pointed to the lack of an easy affinity between peoples of the Diaspora and those throughout Africa, particularly once one acknowledged Africa as a place in historic time and not simply a symbol used to further African American political desires. On the one hand, as students, we began to appreciate the fact that Africa was a diverse continent, made up of several countries and not a singular place. Colonialism affected regions differently, and class and cultural differences did matter. On the other hand, we experienced the excitement of having intellectual and political conversations across these divides.

Pan-African studies gave me new ideas about the meaning of scholarship. Notions of the Diaspora were created in the dialogue among African, African American, and Caribbean scholars and usefully de-territorialized views of culture, allowing scholars to recognize connections between Africa and those dispersed in diaspora. This idea of diasporic connection continues to inform contemporary scholarship. The creative amalgam of scholars across the lines of tension formed an imagined constituency for dialogue and debate about the culture and history of Africa and its Diaspora. This constituency stretched the academy, allowing scholarship to flower outside historic Western genealogies. Indeed, although I have become critical of many of the original concepts and frameworks we used in this early period, I continue to write into this space of multiple intersections, which invigorates me as a scholar despite the internal critical tensions, and I remain committed to merging political and intellectual questions.

Despite the radical astuteness of the political groups with which I worked at this time, none acknowledged feminism as an important social movement; nor was feminism mentioned in my academic classes. Instead, I first came to feminism through my own independent reading, a practice not uncommon among social activists who frequently formed their own eclectic reading groups to discuss certain issues. Perhaps because I first learned feminism through books, I have always been particularly appreciative of its critical force. That is, I have been captivated by feminism's ability to analyze and critique other forms of social mobilization. I also came to feminism at a time when women of color, both in the United States and around the world, were critically impacting feminist theories as well as feminist political actions. In the Third World, feminists were questioning the politics of postcolonial nationalisms.[17] In the United States, the influential women-of-color anthology *This Bridge Called My Back* was stirring up discussion of the inadequacy of white women's priorities as well as those of men of color for challenging the intersection of gender and race hierarchies.[18] Also important in this conversation was the collection *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, but Some of Us Are Brave*.[19] In this context, I came to share a critical understanding of the kinds of nationalism that informed black cultural politics and Pan-African studies, as well as so many other social movements of those times.

Nationalism, as Benedict Anderson points out, creates a horizontal community of "brothers."[20] During the late 1960s and early 1970s, excitement at building a progressive community elided questions about who was excluded. When spokespeople for the community were put forward, they invariably were men who had the power and authority to command. It took women some time to figure out how to intervene. Although African American women were critical participants in black nationalist struggles, they were often relegated to the place of support staff with the promise that

questions of gender equality would be addressed in time. With the advent of feminism, however, a powerful critique by Third World women of the limits of the nationalist political vision gradually trickled into the United States. In Africa, women who were part of national struggles in Namibia, Algeria, Mozambique, and Guinea Bissau raised questions about gender equity under postcolonial and socialist nationalisms. Women of color in North America and Europe as well began to describe their own positions within progressive social movements as problematic. Feminism intervened in African American struggles by asserting questions of gender over race; it also interrogated the place of other inequalities, such as those based on class and sexuality, within progressive contexts. All in all, feminist critique forged a new kind of scholarship composed of new ideas and frameworks, and a new constituency.

By the time I enrolled in graduate school in anthropology, feminist scholarship was an exciting, historically layered, and diverse intellectual movement. Guided by my commitments and research interests, I found myself particularly compelled by several strands in feminist scholarship: first, the sympathetic but critical analysis of oppositional nationalisms; second, the insistence on the simultaneity of multiple structures of power and difference in forging identities, both in everyday life and in social movements; and third, the importance of cultural differences in gender understandings and practices, but with tensions and disagreements characterizing the interaction of even similarly disadvantaged groups. Let me elaborate.

Given my background, I was especially excited by feminist analysis of the disjuncture between oppositional nationalism and feminism. I found myself examining the use of "Africa" in African American cultural politics, inspired by an essay by historian E. Frances White in which she analyzed the role Africa played in African American nationalist discourses and showed how imagined "African customs" were used to advocate subordinate, supportive positions for African American women.[21] So-called African ideals were assembled from a continent-wide sweep of cultural attributes, many of which, indeed, were mythic. Stressing "complementarity" between women and men, such ideals solidly reaffirmed the importance of male leadership for African American communities. White also introduced the concepts of "discourse" and "counter discourse" to interrogate the combination of progressive and conservative rhetorics that enlivened black nationalism. Her analysis allowed me to see the persuasive logics as well as the limits of oppositional discourses that develop their own regimes of truth.

These challenges posed by attention to gender by White and those critical of nationalism's exclusions and of difference were not merely confined to a re-examination of relations between men and women in the context of nationalist politics but extended beyond. Criticism was also levied against the kind of feminism that took gender as a singular, structuring principle of inequality but ignored the class and racial differences that critically shape women's relationship to each other.[22] An influential essay by Bonnie Thornton Dill incisively examined differences among women that positioned them as unequal partners in feminist struggles.[23] She highlighted the importance of race and class in the basic construction of gender differences and argued that we can only understand women's concerns if we pay attention to the multiple structures of inequality. According to Dill, these are differentially formed within certain historical contexts and impinge upon women in a myriad of ways; her analysis proved that the "feminist" concerns of black maids and their white employers were not parallel.

Cultural differences among women emerged as significant in a panoply of feminist critical discourses. By the late 1980s, feminist anthropologists had gathered a wealth of cross-cultural ethnographic data on women's roles and status. Contributions such as *Gender and Anthropology*, a compilation of feminist research results, curricula, and pedagogy edited by Sandra Morgen, marked a turning point in anthropology. This work made it obvious that anthropologists could no longer responsibly argue about culture and society without paying attention to gender as both a system of ideas and a system of inequalities that divided communities even as it sought to unite them. Similarly, the collection *Uncertain Terms:*

Negotiating Gender in American Culture, edited by Faye Ginsburg and Anna Tsing, explored the dimensions of differences among women in U.S. contexts.[24] What each of these seminal works attested to was that at the boundaries between communities, gender forms are a particularly important arena for coercion, conflict, and negotiation.

It is this concern with gender negotiation that has informed my own research into how disadvantaged groups often relate to each other – whether in solidarity or tension – through concerns about gender. For example, I have argued (together with Anna Tsing) that African American and Chinese American gender issues communicate awkwardly, forming dense misunderstandings.[25] Such "border zones," as Chicana feminists have shown, may be particularly creative and laden sites for the negotiation of gender.[26] It was precisely these feminist concerns – with critical understandings of nationalism, multiple bases of identity and difference, and complex cultural borders – that informed my research in The Gambia. My goal in this process was to locate and appreciate cultural tensions and interruptions rather than to assimilate them into a singular understanding of cultural communities or political causes. Yet, as is invariably the case, the contingencies of fieldwork brought me to new insights as well.

An Apprenticeship in Difference

Despite my immersion in feminist theory, I did not anticipate the degree to which gender would become important as I gathered data during my field research. I assumed I might draw upon the "honorary male privilege" that many Western women researchers have reported as contributing to their high status in non-Western settings. Indeed, in a preliminary, short visit to The Gambia, I had taken a male role; I had apprenticed with a Mandinka *jali* (praise-singer) to learn to play the *kora* (harp).[27]

Kora playing is restricted to Mandinka men, although women jali sing and play a metal bar called the *neo* or tap the side of the kora to keep rhythm. Like a male apprentice, I studied with a teacher six to eight hours every day. During this time, we sat in the company of his friends: men who generally went about their business and occasionally interrupted to comment on my practice. At the end of my initial visit, I traveled to my teacher's village and played for the village head and residents, who all graciously accepted the foreigner's feeble attempts to play the kora.

On a second visit to The Gambia, as a "proper" researcher, in a collaborative relation with the national Oral History and Antiquities Division of the Ministry of Youth, Sports and Culture, I wanted to abide by local understandings of the place of women. During this visit, it seemed inappropriate for me to spend hours in the company of men as I had done previously, following them to their performance events while rejecting the proper training of women. Indeed, this second visit led me to understand the centrality of gender in creating the kinds of access to knowledge that constituted the social, material, economic, and political difference between men and women. This became particularly evident as I listened to repeated stories about a previous woman researcher who had assumed male privilege to learn an instrument. I found it disconcerting to hear her described as pushy, aggressive, obnoxious, and inappropriate. It was said she would do anything to obtain her goal. To complicate matters, my work took place during a moment when foreign women were seen as having come to The Gambia to look for sexual partners.[28] People constantly spoke to me of women travelers from the North who, according to Gambian standards, had no sense of propriety and social decorum. With this input, I decided rather quickly that I could not present myself as a "male" apprentice. In actuality, to maintain my respect within the Gambian context, I chose to be a "proper" woman.

These discoveries about the politics of gender changed my research agenda. Instead of learning about jali training from the "inside," by learning how to play the kora through apprenticeship, I decided to work on jali interactions with others. I relinquished the prospects of the "intimate" portraits I had first imagined and instead focused on the rhetoric

through which *jaliya* operated. Jali are professional performers whose job it is to make others perform. They must move their patrons to action – and in return, the patrons must perform as patrons. Similarly, in relation to the tourist trade, jali see their job as moving their audiences into an appreciation of African history and culture. But their audiences also must perform properly. The inter-caste and inter-group rhetoric of jaliya is thus a key aspect of its imagined effectiveness. Words are powerful vehicles that can both give and take away. The jali's message can either create or ruin a patron's reputation. In taking up this study, then, I found I did not have to relinquish my interest in the construction of social categories and processes; rather, I approached them from a new angle that proved, I am persuaded, more informative.

A memory: An African American woman traveled to The Gambia for a brief time. During her visit to the home of an important man, accompanied by her sponsor who was considerably younger, she entered into a debate with us about polygamy. This newly arrived visitor wondered why women were not allowed to pursue whomever they wished exactly as men did. I sat frozen in my seat, unable to do more than side with the older gentleman in my silence. He seemed taken aback by her forthright ability to comment on a place in which she had lived for three days. In retrospect, I wonder: Where was my feminism then? Could I have at least offered a mediating opinion? At the time, I was struck by the woman's efforts to talk about what every woman, according to her, should be able to pursue – "her own hopes, dreams, and aspirations." Even African American women are capable of espousing the unproblematic notion that "sisterhood is global." But at that moment in The Gambia, such a universalizing concept of feminism confronted its limits. And persuaded by this line of thought, the visitor moved beyond the expected rules of the family and challenged the codes of behavior that were more restrictive for women than men.

As I listened to the stories that surrounded her, her mythical reputation far surpassed her actions. Yet, I was enlisted by her sponsor to "speak with her." As he explained, his reputation was on the line: "What if something bad were to happen to her?" But rather than "speak with her," I tried to understand the issues from the points of view of both people involved. After all, from a societal perspective, she was a woman traveling around without the protection of a man; as such, she appeared to be someone without moral scruples. Yet from her point of view, she desired to learn as much about Africa as she could in the short time she had to visit The Gambia. To accomplish this meant moving about and meeting lots of people. Although I did not take up the role of interlocutor, the incident confirmed for me that my own practices during my stay needed to conform to the conventions. And I believe it was more than an issue of cowardliness and simply reproducing power differences between men and women. It was an issue informed by historical relationships between the West and Africa – which, at the very least, led me to proceed with caution, while being carefully attuned to geopolitical power and the realization that gender and national status created layers of complexities in any position one might take.

These moments of debates over the social and global status of men, women, caste and class, and professional performers and their interlocutors raise the importance of performance as more than an enactment; how might it be viewed, rather, as an analytic category? Performance, of late, is a topic that has captured the anthropological imagination, for it challenges the idea that there are foundational moments that fix identities in an immutable state. Judith Butler's deconstruction of the sex/gender system offers a critical intervention in dominant understandings of gender through her exploration of notions of male and female as givens.[29] Indeed, Butler argues that gender is performed, learned, and enacted in relationship to a social expectation. Similarly, Patricia Williams, among others, offers a critique of essentialized notions of race by showing the discursive construction of race and gender in social/legal arenas.[30] These critiques provided the foundation for me to analyze performance in two contexts: the official contexts of the jali artists with whom I worked, and the performance of status and identity in social inter-

actions. Such key insights of feminist scholarship extend the earlier moment in the seventies, characterized as the study of the anthropology of women,[31] that analyzed the relationships between men and women but without necessarily challenging the biological basis of what is meant by male and female – that is, what these social locations might mean in themselves as performances.

My project required me to be self-conscious about my own performances of gender and status even as I was being retrained by the jali with whom I interacted. I was never able to take gender and status for granted, and I observed how gender and status were presumed givens for the jali. Many of the "intimate" insider accounts of jaliya told by male musicologists naturalize the travel and mobility of men.[32] Portraying their jali informants only as talented performers, they erase the making of insider and outsider – that is, those with access to specialized jali knowledge and those who, instead, must be moved to appropriate action. Yet this is the central premise of jaliya.

The conditions of my research also pressed me to appreciate the blurred border between formal performance and the performance of everyday life. Reminded daily of the lines that divide men and women, jali and patron, elite and commoner, young and old, and Gambian and foreigner, I did not imagine a "safe" homogeneous community in which the performance of difference became irrelevant. Instead, I saw how jali as professional performers taught their interlocutors how to perform gender, status, ethnicity, and national difference. These lessons occurred not only in formal performances and ceremonies but also in the interactions of everyday life.

One of the most striking arenas for thinking about this issue turned out to be my interviews with jali. Jali used interviews as performance spaces in which to tell not only of their professional talents but of the gender and caste considerations that gave them their status as jali. They prevailed upon me and my assistant to treat them as proper patrons should – with generosity and making opportunities. They made me self-conscious about my own performance as a researcher and, indeed, about the performative nature of describing cultural difference. This became (and continues to be) a central theme of my research.

Gambians pressed me to reflect on race as well as gender and caste as performances. They had their own ideas about African Americans, and they performed them. I became the audience for a number of performances by my Gambian friends in which they portrayed African Americans as depicted in the Hollywood movies they had seen repeatedly. In both memorized lines and scripted gestures, they could reenact scenes that portrayed African American men as tough gangsters who would kill for what they wanted. Because of my immersion in critical, reflexive anthropology, I had thought a great deal about Western stereotypes of Africans; I had thought much less about African stereotypes of Americans. Of course these images would come from the endless circulation of Hollywood action films. Just as African Americans' sense of Africa is formed within powerful media-generated images, so, too, in The Gambia, African Americans are represented in media styles. But what was particularly striking was how Gambian "performers" performed the common role allotted African Americans by using their bodies and voices to mimic violent gun-slinging thugs and criminals.[33] In another representation, they mimicked pop music icons Michael and Janet Jackson, singing their songs and copying their styles. Performance was the medium through which cultural difference was assimilated and understood.

These experiences, by calling my attention to the importance of performance in communicating about cultural difference, enabled me to formulate a new understanding of the themes that have characterized reflexive and critical anticolonial anthropology. In this regard, an important work that I see in dialogue with mine is Carolyn Martin Shaw's *Colonial Inscriptions*.[34] She is attentive to issues of representation, but then she moves to trace the material effects of the interface between white African colonial presence and the making of Kenyan culture. This work is exceptional because in most discussions of colonialism's interface, representations of cultural difference have been seen mainly as textual and communicated in books.[35] Although texts have

been important in creating stereotypes of difference, face-to-face interactions as well as formal ceremonies and scripted events are also key features of making difference. Attention to performance allows me to see how difference is negotiated and reformulated in context-specific enactments. It also makes it clear that representations need not be static and timeless.

Performance, then, is particularly relevant to my research because it is a central trope through which the continent of Africa is known in the rest of the world. Non-Africans imagine an Africa of performance. In turn, African performers, such as jali, build on this trope in presenting an "Africa" they want imagined through their performances. Everyday performances of difference augment and reformulate these understandings by making them part of personal repertoires. Thus, I came to appreciate that representations are always a performative issue. Today, performance critically informs my research not only in studying jali but also in studying the place of Africa in a global imagination.

From Research to Writing

When I returned to the United States to write about this research, I faced new challenges of navigating scholarly constituencies. One divide of particular concern for my research trajectory was the separation between African studies and African American studies. Historically these have been different worlds.[36] Until recently, African American students and scholars of African American studies have been actively discouraged from contributing to African studies. Researchers of European background have been considered more objective. Because of this history, many African American scholars have gone their own direction; indeed, they have emphasized the critique of objectivist standards of scholarship. Thus, somewhat different epistemological standards have come to characterize the two fields. African studies scholars have often imagined their challenge as impressing the European and North American historians and sociologists who still set disciplinary standards. They are particularly concerned, in this context, with "setting the record straight" using rigorous standards of scholarship. In this light, archival records and demographic data appear solid, while oral history must be used very carefully to avoid its distortions. In contrast, African American studies has stressed the knowledge that can be gained outside of dominant conventions of scholarship. African American scholars find memory, oral history, and ritual performance particularly interesting sources of alternative knowledge. It is difficult to navigate across these differences. My solution has not been to evaluate each of these approaches but rather to show how each one contributes to cosmopolitan discourses of culture and, thus, to the making of contemporary history.

A feminist approach has also figured prominently in my work; I have come to appreciate the influences of gender analysis in allowing me to critique dichotomous categories of male and female and also to raise critical questions about the ease with which we sometimes rely on "the evidence of experience."[37] But there is one critical place where these, perhaps at times, abstract notions of feminist theory are able to speak to the world about the predicament of women in the throes of the global economy – my final retrospection.

A memory: Mariama, a Gambian friend, arrived in the Bronx, New York, and lived with family members. After she had been here for a few months, we talked on the phone. She said, "It's so dangerous here in New York. People are running around with guns. I hardly ever go outside; I only go just to get food at the store. It's so dangerous. I often wish I was at home." When I spoke with her after several more months, Mariama told me of her working conditions in a factory. The doors were locked all day. The women were stuck inside without any fresh air and it was so hot in there. "But Paulla," she said, "what can we immigrants do? No one can say anything. We're all just here." This is an issue of contemporary concern: the making of a United States citizen! The conditions of being a recent part of the African Diaspora are often times obscured from view by the hegemonic presence of African American dreams of homeland. Feminism is both a theory and a practice. This memory reminds me that all of the issues

I have discussed through this auto/ethnographic approach are more than academic issues; critical stakes were and are involved in our stories about global relations.

In bringing closure, I suggest that similar to the ways form and content are linked in my presentation, our lives as feminists, anthropologists, scientists, and social scientists are positioned in cross-cutting debates wherein public responsibility and intellectual pursuits critically interface. As Donna Haraway suggests in her essay "Situated Knowledges,"[38] acknowledging the conditions under which we produce our ideas only makes for a stronger sense of the research we conduct. In this respect, it has been important for me to show how my research draws critically on my background and training as a black feminist anthropologist. However, I am not simply satisfied with identifying "the power" in an unmediated way. Instead, my sense of gender, to paraphrase Joan Scott,[39] is to find gender a useful category of analysis important for examining power and difference. This notion helps disrupt the imagined homogeneity of women and men and communities of binary opposition. It allows us to notice power-laden cultural intersections at which standards of identity and proper behavior are being actively negotiated. As an analytic category, gender points to multiple intersecting and overlapping structures of identity and inequality. In my work, it allows me to see the *performance* of all kinds of difference, not just of gender but also of caste, class, ethnicity, and the continental representations that define the set of distinctions known as "Africa."

NOTES

1 Zora Neale Hurston, *Dust Tracks on a Road* (New York: Arno, 1942).

2 James Clifford's notion that ethnographies are "partial truths" is fitting here, for one includes yet also excludes many things when writing ethnographies. James Clifford, Introduction: Partial Truths, in *Writing Culture*, ed. George Marcus and James Clifford (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), pp. 1–26.

3 Current interest in travel and displacement has contradictory effects. On the one hand, it can loosen up stable objects – places framed and situated in ethnographies; on the other hand, its presumed fluidity can leave questions about who has access and who can make claims around this imagined mobile community unattended. Theories have the same effect; they can seem to be "traveling," and yet they are also situated moments that need their location specified. See Janet Wolff, On the Road Again, in *Resident Alien* (New York: Routledge, 1997), pp. 115–34.

4 During Alex Haley's visit to The Gambia in the early seventies, he encountered a *jali*, a praise singer and oral historian, who provided a genealogy of the Kinte family. According to the jali, a distant relative of Haley's, Kunta Kinte, was reportedly captured, made a slave, and brought to the United States. Haley's account of the jali's narrative provided for many a moment of intimate (re)connection of African Americans to Africa. The village of Juffrey, where Kunta Kinte reportedly resided, has become the celebrated site in the quest for a homeland. For further discussion, see Paulla Ebron, *Performing Africa* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

5 Alex Haley, *Roots* (New York: Doubleday, 1976). Also see *Roots: The Next Generation*, written by Alex Haley and produced by Stan Margulies and David Wolper in 1977 for Warner Brothers.

6 When one traces out the history of the African Diaspora, the more common set of references are made to those whose relatives departed from Africa long ago. Much more difficult to place in the history of Diaspora is the migration of Africans at the present moment. In may ways, we in the Diaspora feel we own this history of the continent, yet at the expense of intimate engagement with the present. A notable exception is the organization TransAfrica and its activities.

7 See, for example, Gayatri Spivak, *In Other Worlds* (New York: Routledge, 1987).

8 Notable among these are Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, eds., *De/Colonizing the Subject: The Politics of Gender in Women's Autobiography* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992); Carolyn Steedman, Writing the Self: The End of the Scholarship Girl, in *Cultural Methodologies*, ed. Jim McGuigan (London: Sage, 1992), pp. 106–25; Ann Gray, Learning from Experience: Cultural Studies and Feminism, in *Cultural Methodologies*, pp. 87–105; Deborah Reed-Danahay, *Auto/ethnography* (New York: Berg, 1997); and Frances Marcia-Lees, Patricia Sharp, and Colleen Ballerino Cohen, The Postmodernist Turn in Anthropology, *Signs*, 15/1 (1989): 7–33.

9 See, for example, Renato Rosaldo, *Culture and Truth* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989).

10 Essays about these concerns have been published in two notable anthologies: Talad Asad, ed., *Anthropology and the Colonial Encounter* (New York: Humanities, 1973); and Dell Hymes, ed., *Reinventing Anthropology* (New York: Vintage, 1972).

11 I view the distinction here as one focused on the circulation of political visions and social moments in contrast to the globalism of today, which takes inspiration from the spread of corporate, primarily US culture.

12 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London: Verso, 1991).

13 Two influential texts of the period were Roger Bastide, *African Civilizations in the New World*, trans. Peter Green (New York: Harper and Row, 1971); and Julius Nyerere, *Ujamaa: Essays on Socialism* (Dar es Salaam: Oxford University Press, 1968).

14 Texts such as Amilcar Cabral, *Revolution in Guinea* (New York: Monthly Review, 1970), and the struggle in Mozambique against the US company Gulf Oil were of key interest to those involved in political struggles on the African continent during this period.

15 See Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Seabury Press, 1970).

16 One important account among many is that of Aimé Césaire, who recounts his time in France with a number of Third World and French intellectuals and philosophers, including Jean-Paul Sartre. See Aimé Césaire, *Une voix pour l'histoire* (San Francisco: California Newsreel, 1994). These students would later return to their countries to become heads of state after the colonial regime. One of the features mentioned by a tour guide in London was a plaque left at the site of a former restaurant in which Ho Chi Minh had worked as a chef, "until he changed careers."

17 Some of these works included Gloria Joseph and Jill Lewis, *Common Differences* (New York: Anchor/Doubleday, 1981); Audre Lorde, *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* (Trumansburg, NY: Crossing Press, 1983); Elly Bulkin, Minnie Bruce Pratt, and Barbara Smith, *Yours in Struggle* (Brooklyn, NY: Long Haul Press, 1984); and Michelle Cliff, *Claiming an Identity They Taught Me to Despise* (Watertown, Mass.: Persephone Press, 1980).

18 Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzuldúa, *This Bridge Called My Back* (New York: Kitchen Table Press, 1983).

19 Gloria Hull, Patricia Bell Scott, and Barbara Smith, *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, but Some of Us Are Brave* (Old Westbury, NY: Feminist Press, 1987).

20 Anderson, *Imagined Communities*.

21 E. Frances White, Africa on My Mind: Gender, Counter Discourse and African American Nationalism, *Journal of Women's History*, 2/1 (1990): 73–97. Two collections of essays on African women that were less critical of nationalism as a discourse but that addressed the place of black women in Africa and the Diaspora are Rosalyn Terborg-Penn, Sharon Harley, and Andrea Benton Rushing, eds., *Women in Africa and the Diaspora* (Washington, DC: Howard University Press, 1987); and Filomina

Steady, ed., *Black Women Cross-Culturally* (Cambridge, Mass.: Schenkman Publications, 1981).

22 Linda Gordon, in a recent essay, frames these two moves as Difference I and Difference II, the former referring to differences between men and women and the latter to differences among women. See Gordon, The Trouble with Difference, *Dissent*, 46 (spring 1999): 41–7.

23 Bonnie Thornton Dill, Dialectics of Black Womanhood, *Signs* 4 (summer 1979): 543–55.

24 Sandra Morgen, ed., *Gender and Anthropology* (Washington, DC: American Anthropological Association, 1989); Faye Ginsburg and Anna Tsing, eds., *Uncertain Terms* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1990). See also Ann Bookman and Sandra Morgen, eds., *Women and the Politics of Empowerment* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990). For a parallel analysis of gender in history in non-Western contexts, see Margaret Strobel and Cheryl Johnson-Odum, eds., *Expanding the Boundaries of Women's History* (Bloomington, Ind.: *Journal of Women's History*, 1992).

25 Paulla Ebron and Anna Tsing, In Dialogue: Reading across Minority Discourse, in *Women Writing Culture*, eds. Ruth Behar and Deborah Gordon (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 390–411.

26 Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera* (San Francisco: Spinsters/Aunt Lute Books, 1987). See also Hull, Scott, and Smith, *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, but Some of Us Are Brave*.

27 By suggesting that I could occupy male status, I mean that I was able to draw upon the privilege of status and mobility that many men can take for granted; of course class status and age-ranking systems temper some men's abilities to move about freely. This "harp" is one of the two key instruments associated with the jali tradition. The second instrument is the xylophone-like *balaphon*.

28 Paulla Ebron, Traffic in Men, in *Gendered Encounters*, eds. Maria Grosz-Ngate and Omari Kokole (New York: Routledge, 1997), 223–44.

29 Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

30 Patricia Williams, *Alchemy of Race and Rights* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1991).

31 Anthologies relevant here include Rayna R. Reiter, ed., *Towards an Anthropology of Women* (New York: Monthly Review, 1975); and Michelle Rosaldo and Louise Lamphere, eds., *Women, Culture, and Society* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1974).

32 An early work on Gambian jali by musicologist Roderick Knight is one example. See Knight, Mandinka Jaliya: Professional Music of the Gambia, PhD dissertation, University of California, Los Angeles.

33 For a penetrating look at Hollywood's creation of stereotypic roles for African Americans, see Robert Townsend, *Hollywood Shuffle* (Los Angeles: Virgin Vision, 1987).

34 Carolyn Martin Shaw, *Colonial Inscriptions* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995).

35 Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage, 1978), is a critical work in signaling the centrality of the Other in the Western imagination.

36 A thoughtful discussion of this history can be found in Deborah Amory, African Studies as an American Institution, in The Politics of Identity on Zanzibar, PhD dissertation, Stanford University, 1994.

37 Joan Wallach Scott, Evidence of Experience, *Critical Inquiry*, 17 (summer 1991): 773–97.

38 Donna Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women* (New York: Routledge, 1991).

39 Joan Wallach Scott, Use of Gender as a Category of Analysis, in *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 28–50.