West African performers and the art of navigating interrupted mobilities

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Abstract

In the 1990s and early 2000s, much of the scholarship on the performing arts celebrated the new insights afforded by the transnationalism paradigm and the 'mobilities' turn. There was both enthusiasm and concern about the intensified global circulation of people, things, ideas, and capital, as well as art forms. New research questioned whether these 'mobilities' reinforced the postcolonial world order, or whether they had the potential to make more visible previously marginalized artistic forms, a case in point being the debates on who 'world music' really empowered (cf. Stokes 2004). Since then, there has been a growing recognition that a focus on mobility in its multiple forms risked obscuring important aspects of the 'social life' of art worlds. There is a need to reconsider the relationship between mobility and immobility, between moving and 'staying put' at different stages of artistic lives. How have migration regimes, which have increasingly aimed at keeping people from the Global South away from the Global North, shaped what performing artists do? How have West African dancers and choreographers in particular addressed the migration issue? Do we need to rethink the temporality of our studies? Drawing on ongoing research with performing artists in Senegal and in migration contexts since 2002, this article argues that much can be learned from the ways in which artists deploy long-term strategies to navigate a world in which their work is valued, but from which their bodies are largely excluded.

Keywords: West African dancers, immobility, migration regimes, performing arts, Senegal

Introduction

In 2019, I took a small group of students to an event organized by my colleague Jenny Mbaye at the City University in London. As an expert on musical industries in Senegal, she had invited one of Senegal's most experienced rappers, Keyti, to come and speak about an initiative he and fellow rapper Xuman had launched some years previously, namely the *Journal Rappé Télévisé* (JRT). The JRT is a televised news programme performed in rap style, alternating between Wolof, Senegal's main language, and French. To everyone's disappointment, we ended up watching Keyti virtually from Dakar: he had applied for a UK visa a month earlier, but had yet to receive a reply. In a subsequent conversation, Keyti gave me his interpretation of European immigration regimes: for him, making it difficult for even well-travelled musicians like him to obtain a visa was part of a broader strategy to maintain the illusion of Europe's dominance in the world order by staging the performance of an 'invasion' from the Global South. The reality, he explained, was that Europe was falling behind and that, when migrating, Africans were increasingly looking to other destinations, including within the continent. I was reminded once again of the many occasions when performers I knew had had their touring plans either curtailed or destroyed altogether by visa refusals or delays.

Of course, there are many other factors involved in the gradual creation of 'Fortress

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Europe' since the 1970s, with its radical tightening of travel restrictions and immigration rules from the early 2000s onwards. Migration scholars have analysed these different factors, from economic imperatives and a desire to protect welfare regimes for citizens in times of fiscal austerity to the control of borders being perceived as one of the few remaining domains through which states can exercise national sovereignty (Guiraudon and Lahav 2000; Dauvergne 2004). What became especially dramatic for West African citizens and others was the emergence of coordinated, increasingly restrictive EU-wide migration policies from the 1980s onwards, a domain soon legitimised by a growing discourse linking migration with threats to the security of European nations (Guiraudon 2003). Within this context, especially relevant are the analyses of anthropologists like De Genova (2013), who have argued that border enforcement in the contemporary period involves a strong performative dimension which then conceals the exploitation of migrants classified as 'illegal.' De Genova (2013: 1183) adds that the spectacle of border enforcement, with its multiple actors and 'choreography of images,' also serves to naturalize the idea that some foreign bodies, especially those racialized as non-white, deserve to be excluded on the grounds that they are likely to have violated the law. Artists like Keyti produce their own theorization of border regimes, which draws on a combination of lived experience, conversations with peers and their own research. Keyti may have a point, then, when he speaks of migration control as 'performed.' For performance has its own agency: as De Genova argues, it naturalizes and conceals, but it also has the power to shape reality by showing possible alternatives, as well as expand the boundaries of the possible – which is what musicians and choreographic artists do.[1]

Other scholars have written about migration regimes and the spectacles deployed by states to legitimize them. As Salzbrunn and Rodriguez Quinones suggest in the introduction to this special issue, however, much less has been written on how performers may attempt to subvert these regimes. In recent years, studies have emerged which focus precisely on artistic responses to restrictive migration regimes. In her work on Palestinian contemporary dance, for example, Rodriguez Quinones (2022) has shown how, in a global context in which artists who find themselves in the status of refugees or asylum-seekers find it almost impossible to cross borders to engage in collaborative projects, choreographers such as the Palestinian Farah Saleh have drawn on personal stories of flight and dispossession to engage audiences in the lived experience of refugeehood. The present contribution situates itself within this growing strand of work. The questions I ask are the following. How have migration policies, which have increasingly aimed to keep people from the 'Global South' away from the 'Global North,' shaped what performing artists do? How have West African choreographic artists in particular addressed the migration issue? And do we need to rethink the temporality of our studies? Drawing on ongoing research with performing artists in Senegal and in migration contexts since 2002 and on recent interviews with West African choreographers, this article argues that much can be learned from the strategies artists deploy both on- and offstage to navigate a world in which their work is valued, but from which their bodies are largely excluded. I also ask whether approaching the topic through different temporalities, rather than through a snapshot, may better illuminate the relationship between mobility and the arts.

Conceptualizing mobility, immobility and the performing arts

Following the initial boom in studies of transnational migration in the 1990s, more recently migration scholars have become concerned with barriers to mobility. This is not only because it has become increasingly difficult to cross national borders, but also because mobility is a relational

[1] In this paper, the term 'choreographic artist' refers to both dancers and choreographers. In contemporary dance in particular, performers are often, to some extent, the creators of their own movement.

category which can only be properly understood in relation to its opposite. As a result, our understanding of the relationship between migration and the arts must integrate the absence of mobility too.

As Martiniello (2022) has explained, until the 1990s artistic practices were relatively neglected in Migration Studies. For him, this gap reflected the focus on migrants as workers in Europe since WWII, when migrants' 'cultural activities and participation were almost totally ignored.' In this context, 'the idea that [migrants] could have artistic tastes or that they could be artists, in addition to being manual workers, was not taken seriously' (Martiniello 2022: 1). This began to change radically with the explosion of studies of transnationalism, globalization and mobility from the 1990s onwards.

Where music and dance are concerned, scholarship has been articulated around two key concerns. First, scholars have looked at the circulation of musical and choreographic practices, and that of the artists themselves, as the very embodiment of globalization (Toynbee and Dueck 2011; White 2012). In the 1980s and 1990s, this strand of studies was mostly focused on music, for the creation of the World Music phenomenon raised obvious questions of power, appropriation and copyright. Did the creation of globalized markets for musics from the Global South help to redress the historical inequalities caused by centuries of colonialism, or did World Music simply reproduce exploitative relationships, often inadvertently? Following heated debates on the matter, many studies found that both aspects could co-exist within the same context.[2] Studies of globalization and transnationalism in dance generally came a little later, one of the most influential being Helena Wulff's (1998) study of transnational culture in the world of classical ballet. More recently, Altaïr Despres (2016) has looked at the emergence of contemporary dance in Africa from the early 1990s onwards as an instance of cultural globalization driven by a combination of French foreign policy and the specific interests of individual African and European choreographers, performers, French state officers and festival organisers. Despres (2016: 16) rightly points out that, although contemporary dance on the continent largely owes its success to the ways in which Africans have appropriated it as a set of 'dispositions' through which social and spatial mobility can sometimes be achieved, there is also continuity with older forms of colonial domination in the ways in which French interests have driven much avant-garde choreographic work in Africa.

Secondly, and in a closely related way, this scholarship has focused on how migration shapes musical and choreographic production (Baily and Collyer 2006; Ramnarine 2007; Kiwan and Meinhof 2011; Toynbee and Dueck 2011; Reed 2016; Aterianus-Owanga, Djebbari, and Salzbrunn 2019). This body of work has built on an enduring concern with processes of transformation and continuity in migration contexts: how do cultural practices become transformed by the migration of individuals and communities throughout the entire transnational space with which they engage? Why is it that music has been 'one of the most resilient aspects of migratory and immigrant cultures' (Bohlman 2011: 156)? It has become increasingly evident that artists and their practices shed new light on the very ways in which transnational lives are created, maintained or interrupted. For example, several of the contributions in Aterianus-Owanga, Djebbari and Salzbrunn's (2019) special issue entitled 'Danses, musiques et (trans)nationalismes' show that, as choreographic genres, performers or dance participants circulate across national borders, processes of national identification and feelings of national belonging may be either reinforced or, on the contrary, undermined. In a different field, the papers in Capone and Salzbrunn's (2018) special issue on 'Sounding religious transnationalism' address a glaring gap in studies of religious transnationalism and demonstrate how music and sound have a specific agency in reconfigur-

[2] See Stokes (2004) for an excellent review of this field up to the early 2000s.

ing religious expressions and belonging in new territories.

Within these two intertwined themes, scholars have increasingly turned their attention to the critical agency of states (through migration regimes as well as arts funding), institutions and corporations in shaping both artistic production and the lives of artists. Despres's (2016) work, mentioned above, is a case in point in the anthropology of dance. My contribution situates itself within this growing strand of studies, but with a particular focus on the interplay between migration regimes and the artistic practices and personal tactics of West African dancers and choreographers. This perspective brings to the fore the question of what artists do when the kinds of mobility to which they aspire are out of reach, or when they experience periods of forced immobility in between journeys. In other words, my focus is on how performers from the Global South use their creativity to respond to the shared experience that the ability to travel, or even migrate, has become a scarce resource. Making the cruelty of Northern migration regimes visible from different angles (as though through an imperfect mirror) enables them to cope with the indignity of being treated as second-class citizens of the world.

In a broader sense, this contribution speaks to the relationship between the performing arts and the political. What kind of politics do performing artists from the Global South deploy when their work is directly shaped by personal experiences of forced immobility and racism? What does their work tell us about the current state of the postcolony? My aim here is to introduce a shift in focus from the agency of states to the agency of the performers themselves.

Migration regimes and the performing arts in Africa

The growing scholarly concern with immobility undoubtedly reflects an institutional environment for African performing artists which is best described as a paradox. On the one hand, state-controlled agencies like the French Institute, the OIF (Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie), the EU or Africalia (for Belgium) promote artistic practices which are inherently transnational and require individuals to travel and present their work outside the continent. On the other hand, these institutions operate within states which deploy increasingly restrictive travel and immigration policies. In many ways, these policies undermine the work of their own states' agencies. But perhaps this appears less surprising when considering the fact that state bureaucracies are by no means monolithic, and that different state agencies often develop competing or contradictory agendas. Patronage of artistic practices has thus been used strategically in French diplomacy since the early twentieth century at least (Piniau 1998), often to serve very different sets of objectives simultaneously. The involvement of the French state in the contemporary performing arts in Africa follows a similar heterogenous pattern and is in continuity with a long history of French soft diplomacy around the world. Other European states, such as Switzerland, Belgium or Spain, use funding of the arts strategically in similar ways. Seen in this light, French and other European support of contemporary performance is perfectly compatible with restrictive immigration policies: to promote artistic and cultural activities in Africa may be seen as part of a broader 'containment' agenda.

Since the 1980s, artists from the Global South have been among the casualties of the gradual death of labor migration programs. Senegal has long acted as a crossroads for contemporary dancers and choreographers from all over Africa thanks to the presence of Germaine Acogny's Ecole des Sables in Tubaab Jallaw, on the Atlantic Coast south of Dakar, and beyond this as the result of a long history of artistic exchanges going back to the colonial period or even earlier (cf. Neveu Kringelbach 2013). Doing fieldwork with performing artists in Senegal between 2002 and 2012 was therefore an ideal location from which to observe the paradox in which many were caught. On the one hand, they were more

likely than many other categories (e.g. work or tourist visas) to justify the need to travel, especially when selected to take part in festivals abroad or international tours. On the other hand, they were under ever-growing suspicion that they might be using performing circuits as migration routes. Group managers, who were often choreographers or musicians themselves, since few groups could afford the services of a professional administrator, spent considerable amounts of time filling in visa applications, gathering the required documentation, and making repeated visits to the relevant consulates for interviews,[3] sometimes from distant regions. They all lived with the anxiety of not knowing until the very last moment whether all the performers contracted for a tour would be able to leave. Several managers reported filling in group visa applications ahead of international festivals, only to be summoned to consulates and asked to 'remove migration candidates from the list', as one of them put it. They had no choice but to remove some names, regardless of the accuracy of the suspicion.

Decisions were felt to be opaque, inconsistent and arbitrary. Often visas were refused, not because the artists did not fulfil the criteria, but simply, it was rumoured, because previous applicants to a given destination had overstayed. Consulates were then mandated to reject anyone who applied for an artist visa to the same destination, at least for a quarantine period of several months. As one musician explained to me in the mid-2010s after two members of a band had stayed behind following a tour in Italy: 'You can be sure that no Senegalese artist will be given a visa to Italy for the remainder of this year.' Managers could also find themselves 'blacklisted' with specific consulates if some of their artists had failed to return home in the past. West African performing scenes brim with stories of dancers or musicians being interviewed for visa applications in consulates, only to face the humiliation of being asked to perform on the spot so that officers could check if they really *were* performers.

This general atmosphere of suspicion is not specific to performing artists: football players and other athletes have been viewed similarly as potential migrants. More generally, it has long been extremely difficult for any young African individual to obtain a visa for Europe or North America without having either significant savings in their bank accounts (one of the key requirements for most visa applications)[4] or a history of back-and-forth travel.

I only had the opportunity to interview one former French consular employee who worked in the region in the 2000s. From their testimony and from conversations with a large number of dancers, musicians and group managers, it seems clear that, for consulates, performing artists epitomized the figure of the deceitful, undeserving migrant. Whereas it is indeed the case that many performers have overstayed visas and 'vanished' during tours abroad since the early 1980s, this can be explained by the gradual tightening up of migration rules during the same period. According to my older research participants, in the 1960s and 1970s, when travel was freer, most artists returned home after touring. From the 1980s onwards, however, when it became more difficult to secure touring visas, performing artists and other young Africans began to see any opportunity for travel as potentially the last one.

This uncertainty about future mobility, combined with social expectations that young men from the region can only achieve social adulthood if they have proved themselves in distant destinations (Gaibazzi 2015; Hannaford 2017), has encouraged growing numbers of performers to run away during international tours. In Dakar I was told that, in the late 1990s, the National

[3] Nowadays visa applications to European destinations are mostly handled by private companies operating from locations separate from consulates. In the 2000s, however, consulates were still in charge of handling applications, including the individual interviews which were sometimes required before a visa could be issued.

[4] Given the high entry requirements to banking across Africa, few artists except the most successful have their own bank accounts to begin with.

Ballet of Senegal had collapsed following a US tour because most of the performers had run away and remained in the country. When I visited the National Ballet at the Théâtre National Daniel Sorano in Dakar in 2003, the then director, Bouly Sonko, told me that the rate of defection during tours abroad had become so high that the troupe was sometimes barely able to honour all its engagements. He had therefore taken to collecting the passports of performers on the way to the airport. Even without their passports, some chose to disappear anyway. Reports of such defections have in turn fuelled the suspicion that any young African artist applying for a visa might be a concealed 'migration candidate.'

By now, several decades of the tightening up of immigration policies across Europe, North America and increasingly Asia, Oceania and Latin America have left many African performers deeply frustrated with their marginalization on the global stage. On the one hand, their creative skills and artistic voices are in high demand, especially in contemporary arts circuits. This is evident in the global success, since the late 1990s, of African contemporary dance (Neveu Kringelbach 2013; Despres 2016) and that of the contemporary visual arts of Africa, fashion, and popular music from various parts of the continent. On the other hand, they deeply resent being excluded from the kind of mobility to which their artistic peers from the Global North have access. It might be slightly easier for some of them to obtain visas than it is for labour migrants or asylum-seekers, but this matters to them less than the difference from artists from Europe and North America, for after all, these are their peers. As I discuss in the remainder of this article, this sense of exclusion through forced immobility – or interrupted mobility, when journeys happen haphazardly – shapes what many performers do, both on- and off-stage. Most of my examples are centred on West Africa, since this is the context with which I am most familiar, but the portrait I sketch could be extended to other parts of the continent as well.

The rise of solo and duo work

Since the early 2000s, more and more of contemporary choreography on the continent has been focused on solo and duo work. To reflect this, the main contemporary dance event on the continent, the French-funded African Dance Biennale[5] – known as the Rencontres Chorégraphiques de l'Afrique et de l'Océan Indien from its inception in 1995, then Danse l'Afrique Danse from 2008, and now Biennale de la Danse en Afrique – created a solo category in 2008. That same year, Senegalese choreographer Alioune Diagne and his dance company, Diagn' Art, started a biennial festival of solos and duets, Duo Solo. Like the Rencontres, the festival is supported by the French Institute, the main driver behind the expansion of contemporary dance in Africa. The central place given to solos and duets in these major events has in turn fostered more small-scale choreographic work. Here I suggest that the success of this type of performance in Africa does not simply reflect broader global trends in contemporary dance, but that it is also linked to the fact that, given the context sketched earlier, artists are aware that small-scale work may, over time, facilitate mobility.

Solo and duo work have long been at the heart of contemporary dance around the world. This is largely linked to the history of this movement, which is not so much a genre as a set of creative processes through which artists do choreographic work. Although contemporary dance, sometimes designated as 'postmodern dance' in the US, has crystallized into different styles, and although choreographers have positioned themselves against different movement traditions in different countries, contemporary dance everywhere has followed post-WWII experiments in the US with an emphasis on experimental and individualized work happening generatively in the studio (Foster 1988). Contemporary choreographers generally insist that their work exists to make audiences think, to generate discomfort

[5] For a history of the African Dance Biennale, see Neveu Kringelbach (2013) and Despres (2016).

which can be transformative for the individual as well as on the social level, and not simply to entertain. Breaking norms and boundaries established within previous genres has been at the heart of the genre since Merce Cunningham and composer John Cage's groundbreaking pieces in the 1940s, and later the New York-based Judson Theatre's collective experiments in the 1960s. This kind of work has generally foregrounded the choreographic agency of the individual performers involved, with the choreographer doing preliminary research. In contemporary dance, the choreographer often acts more as a generator of ideas and a creative guide than as someone who creates all the moves, though their degree of creative control varies considerably depending on individual inclination. In West African dance scenes, the creative agency that performers enjoy is one of the reasons behind the attractiveness of contemporary dance, particularly the explosion in solo work (Neveu Kringelbach 2013, 2014). But there are other factors at play too, some of which pertain to the question of mobility.

Globally, one of these factors has been a move away from states subsidizing the arts from the 1980s onwards, following the neoliberal reforms imposed by major multilateral institutions such as the World Bank and the IMF (International Monetary Fund). If this has represented a radical shift in postcolonial nations where the arts had occupied a central place in nation-building projects, such as in Senegal, Guinea, Nigeria or Tanzania, similar developments have happened more discreetly around the world, where the performing arts have been pushed further into the 'gig economy.' This has been felt particularly keenly in such liberal economies as the US and the UK, where artists have been forced to reinvent themselves as mobile, nimble entrepreneurs able to work on time-limited projects. In African contexts, these neoliberal developments have combined with the impossibility for bigger groups to travel, and have fostered the emergence of solo and duo performance.

In addition to this broader political and economic context, even more significant perhaps is a factor that is more specific to African choreographic scenes: the agency of European funding institutions like the French Institute and of international presenters such as festival organizers, theatre directors and choreographers in search of fresh performing talent. These all act as gatekeepers, and one of the key venues for them to spot talent is the African Dance Biennale. It is at such events that they enjoy watching solo or duo performances, and speaking to choreographers about the creative process afterwards. In the words of a French festival organiser with whom I spoke at the 2012 Biennale in Johannesburg (then called Danse l'Afrique Danse):

> I come here because I want to see a solo, and then I want to be able to sit with the choreographer for 2-3 hours and find out what kind of person they are, what they've got in the stomach. That's what I can't do with videos, that's why I'm here.

Undoubtedly, such small-scale, intimate pieces also address a desire to express individual creativity and to comment on the state of the world; but the gaze of international presenters has also fostered the production of solo and other small-scale pieces for international audiences.

Burkinabé dancer and choreographer Serge Aimé Coulibaly, for example, created his first solo, *Minimini*, a piece on the topic of freedom of expression, in 2002. Four of the twelve pieces in his repertoire are solos, some of them among his most recent creations.[6] Congolese choreographer Andreya Ouamba, established in Senegal since 1999, where he set up dance company 1er Temps in 2001, won the first prize at the 2006 'Rencontres' in Paris with a duet called *Improvisé 2*. The piece was performed with Senegalese dancer-choreographer Fatou Cissé, now herself an established choreographer with several solos to her name. In subsequent years, Ouamba was one of several choreographers who drew my attention to the link between small-scale work

[6] An overview of Coulibaly's repertoire is available at **https://www.fasodansetheatre.com/fr/serge-aime-coulibaly/**

and the question of mobility. After an unfortunate experience during a European tour, when some of his dancers vanished along the way, Ouamba declared that he would now focus on solos and duets so as to avoid the anxiety-inducing uncertainty of being able to honor his engagements abroad.

Solo choreography has also worked as a calling card for performers aspiring to do residencies at choreographic centres in Europe or at dance departments in North American universities. Such residencies are highly desirable, not only for the income they may generate, but also because they represent some of the best opportunities to engage with global performing networks without actually settling abroad. Invitations often materialize after centre directors and university dance practitioners have witnessed someone's solo work during an event or a visit to the choreographer's home environment, where solo work showcases the kind of work an artist might perform during a residency. In North American university settings, choreographic residencies are usually structured around a principle of exchange, with the guest dancer-choreographer being given the time, facilities and payment in return for master classes, choreographic work with students, and sometimes developing a piece of their own.

The rise of solo and duo work since the early 2000s, then, was fostered by a combination of a desire to showcase individual agency on the part of choreographic artists and the power of funding bodies and the infrastructures of neoliberal capitalism to push artists into reframing their work as a kind of small-scale entrepreneurship. It is a development that is best observed by following artists over longer periods of time, rather than viewing just a snapshot of their work at any given time.

Mobile pieces

Similarly, since the mid-2000s, like their European counterparts, West African artists have developed what I call 'mobile pieces.' This is choreographic work designed to be relatively quickly adapted to different contexts. This is a strategy Daniel Reed (2016) also observed in his monograph on the trajectories of four Ivorian performers in the US, *Abidjan USA*. Some Senegal-based choreographers whose work I have followed over the years have become increasingly explicit about this.

In 2011, I returned to Dakar as I was finishing my book manuscript on dance in the city. In the mirror-clad room near the port of Dakar where they usually rehearsed, I found Jean Tamba's Dakar-based 5e Dimension, a dance company I already knew well, at work on a piece for two dancers, a female singer and a small group of drummers. Entitled *Double Je*, the piece was an exploration of the duality Tamba explained as being present in each of us: good and bad, extrovert and introvert, and more subtly, male and female. Tamba had choreographed a number of pieces since first setting up La 5e Dimension with fellow dancer Pape Sy in 1995. But unlike his earlier, full-length pieces, this work had been conceptualized from the outset as 'mobile:' *Double Je* was fairly abstract, and did not have a linear narrative structure. Rather, it was made of up shorter sections so that each performance could be expanded or retracted according to location, type of audience, and the materiality of the stage. The musical score was only loosely connected to the choreography.

The plan was that, if the company were invited to perform abroad, only Tamba and the two dancers would travel. They would then recruit musicians at their various destinations, either among the Senegalese they already knew, or by making new connections. They were open to the possibility of modifying the score and using other instruments than the *djembe* drums they had used so far, which would have radically transformed the piece. *Double Je* was performed at the French Institute in Dakar, but never abroad; and yet, it was significant that this project came after a period of several years when most of the company's members had migrated to Europe and North America. Tamba and his remaining

dancers had no desire to leave Senegal, but they still believed that success at home required that their work be appreciated abroad. Moreover, without international touring, they struggled to make ends meet.

This approach to choreographic work resonates with widespread West African cultural values according to which making one's way in the world requires adapting one's creativity to the context. In *The Generation of Plays*, for example, a very detailed, in-depth ethnography of Yoruba travelling theatre in Nigeria, Barber (2000) shows how this genre, which emerged in Lagos in the post-WWII period and went into decline in the 1980s, drew on older Yoruba principles of open-endedness, flexibility and community participation. The plays would be expanded, contracted and otherwise transformed depending on the social context, the response of audiences, the personal experiences of the performers and the success of other plays by competing troupes. Drawing on Margaret Drewal Thompson's (1992) earlier work on Yoruba ritual, Barber argues that elements of improvisation lie at the heart of all Yoruba cultural production, albeit within the aesthetic rules of specific genres.

Over time I have observed similar principles in cultural productions in Senegal, regardless of the artists' ethnic affiliation. The Senegalese contemporary dance world, which is fairly small and only really emerged in the mid-1990s, is not divided along ethnic lines; it is more of an urban phenomenon, to which artists from different cultural backgrounds and from other parts of Africa contribute their own embodied experience. There, the open-endedness and flexibility analysed by Barber, Drewal Thompson and others in different West African contexts is thriving. Within a genre that is too often mistaken for a simple imitation or appropriation of European choreographic tools (Neveu Kringelbach 2013), therefore, choreographic artists continue to mobilize regional cultural principles to develop new art forms. The experience of forced immobility feeds into creative work in multiple ways. In the next section, I suggest that, since the mid-2000s, this has also inspired West African performers to address the enduring coloniality of migration regimes as a central theme in their work.

Centering stories about migration

For a while now in their work, West African choreographers have centered the multiple consequences of the increasing exclusion of African bodies from the Global North. Despres (2019) is among the dance scholars who have documented this phenomenon. In this section, I want to build on her analysis to suggest that African choreographic work on the theme of migration may be seen as more complex than a critique of migration regimes in the Global North: this critical work also helps African choreographers to position themselves as creative subjects who both address and disrupt what international presenters and audiences have come to expect of them.

Centering global inequalities on access to mobility does more than give artists a critical voice on one of the major issues of our time: it also allows them to make sense of their experience or that of others, while at the same time taking some distance from it. Indeed, from ongoing conversations with choreographers over the years, it seems to me that they find therapeutic value in focusing creative work on a collective experience of pain. There is a risk, however, that politically engaged, critical work may restrict the creative agency of choreographers on the continent. Although many artists want to use their creativity to provide a critical commentary on global inequalities, they do not wish to be bound by the duty to act as political commentators.

In the 1990s, many French, other European and American contemporary choreographers turned to Africa for creative renewal, travelling to Francophone West Africa in search of performers trained in different techniques, as well as creative inspiration and political critique (Neveu Kringelbach 2013; Despres 2016). Together with the French-funded African Dance Biennale launched

in 1995, these early talent seekers have helped to foster 'African contemporary dance' as an artistic movement that is partly designed to help refresh a French choreographic scene whose critical power had run out of steam (Neveu Kringelbach 2005; Despres 2016). Alongside this movement of choreographers in search of fresh inspiration and black bodies, and perhaps in a related way, there was a sense in which white European audiences, and to some extent funding bodies as well, came to expect African artists to hold a mirror up to their own discomfort about the colonial past and its legacy (Sörgel 2020). As I show later, some African choreographers, like Qudus Onikeku, have been explicit about this. But how have the dancer-choreographers who were promoted in the wake of this movement responded to what was expected of them in their turn?

In their work on migration, some of these artists have drawn on their own experiences of interrupted and sometimes traumatizing journeys. In 2008, the Senegalese dancer Pape Ibrahima Ndiaye (better known as Kaolack) won the first prize in the new solo category at the 2008 *Rencontres* in Tunis. His solo, *J'accuse,* was inspired by a painful experience of racialized border control. As he explained while introducing the piece, to apply for a visa for the Czech Republic, where he had been invited to perform, he had travelled to Morocco with a newly delivered Senegalese passport. The local authorities promptly deemed the passport a fake, and he was jailed for two days before being deported back to Senegal. The anger he carried from this experience fed into the powerful, hyper-masculine movement style which characterized his dance at the time. The score was a mix of electronic music, drumming from a Senegalese talking drum (a *tama*) and Kaolack's own spoken words, as well as his heavy breathing and verbal sounds. Kaolack performed the piece at London's Dance Umbrella festival in 2009, which had this text on the programme:

> *J'Accuse*, Danse L'Afrique Danse prize-winner (2008), is a physically and emotionally charged solo which asks important questions about the condition of the African person in a global context. Based on personal experiences of prejudice, travel restrictions and ignorance, Kaolack has created a polemical response which celebrates an African identity and confident stance in the face of an unfair world. (Dance Umbrella 2009)

In 2008-2009, with the support of the French Institute (then CulturesFrance), Kaolack performed the solo at several international venues, including the prestigious Montpellier Danse Festival. For the most part, critics raved about his expressiveness as a performer, and loved his rags-to-international-success story. His narrative about racialized travel restrictions clearly aligned itself well with a desire for heavy-hitting political criticism from the continent. When I attended the Danse l'Afrique Danse Biennale in Johannesburg in 2012, I heard two French festival directors speak in glowing terms about his stage presence in the solo (one of them had previously invited him to perform at her festival) and his critique of European neo-colonialism in Africa.

However, when I saw the piece in Dakar a few months after Kaolack had won the prize, I was struck by what I saw as a more sideways critique of European migration regimes. This was also a story about personal growth and about overcoming suffering to become a fully-fledged person. He seemed to express feelings not only of anger but also of humiliation, shame and pride combined. There were *sabar*-inspired[7] movements which I took to refer to Senegalese culture, especially since Kaolack included a spoken text in which he indicated his pride about being Senegalese, but also simply African. Moreover, the critique was not exclusively levelled at European states, but also at the complicity of African regimes. Kaolack himself made this explicit in his spoken text and in some of the press interviews he gave:

> And yet African immigration is legitimate, for neocolonialism and French policy in Africa are responsible for the very difficult situation in which we

[7] Sabar is a dance and drumming genre that I usually performed at neighbourhood events and women's gatherings throughout urban Senegal. It is strongly associated with urban culture.

> find ourselves today. The French army is still here, European companies exploit our resources and put idiots as heads of [African] governments who only think about filling up their Swiss bank accounts (Ndiaye 2008).

Similarly, in a version of the solo presented at Germaine Acogny's Ecole des Sables choreographic centre in Tubaab Jallaw around 2014, Kaolack was explicit about distributing responsibility for the repeated humiliations he and other young Africans suffered not only to Northern regimes, but also to African ones:

> As soon as an African is being deported, people usually accuse white people of racism. […] But when travelling to the Czech Republic, I had to go through Morocco to get a visa. I got my visa! But I was deported because of my passport. This same passport that had travelled all over the world thanks to my dance landed me two days in jail… and deportation back to Senegal like a simple *sans-papiers*.
> […]
> I accuse Africans of being cowardly. I accuse Africans of being stupid. I accuse Africans of everything and nothing! I accuse the Africans, the Americans, the English, everybody! […] I accuse Africans because I love Africa. I am an African. […] But one isn't born African, one becomes African. (Kaolack Arts Company 2014).

Both at the French Institute and the Ecole des Sables, Kaolack interrupted his solo halfway to walk among the audience, introducing himself by his real name, shaking people's hands, and repeating that he needed a passport and a visa before returning to the stage and resuming the dance. The piece was both playful and serious. When he did his sabar moves, I saw something of the playful teenager with an excess of energy I had seen when I first watched him dance in a schoolyard in Dakar in 2002. His text was ambiguous: on the one hand he drew on a familiar critique of Europe and its exclusion of African bodies, but on the other hand he seemed to urge Africans to replace puppet governments with regimes that would actually have their best interests at heart. There was nothing radically new in Kaolack's critique, but it was certainly more complex, and his performance was more playful than its written presentation to international audiences suggested.

West African choreographic artists have deployed very different strategies and styles in centring migration in their work. Whereas Kaolack has drawn on a specific incident to reflect on the place of Africa in the world order, Nigerian choreographer Qudus Onikeku, another key figure in the African contemporary dance movement, has chosen to address the issue of migration in a kaleidoscopic way: since 2010, he has created a range of pieces which each work as a reflection on a different aspect of mobility. Onikeku's work, which is highly conceptual and emerges out of a substantial research process, reaches far beyond his own experience. In addition, one of the underlying principles in all his pieces is an attempt to decentre the agency of Europe, whether addressing the issue of migration or other themes. In his own words, his work aspires to go beyond the postcolonial nature of the critique deployed by many of his peers. In his view, postcolonial critique all too often addresses a need for Europeans to atone for the violence of colonialism, rather than focusing on addressing the future aspirations of Africans today. In an interview in the spring of 2023, and in an uncanny echo of Keyti's words, he expressed his desire to move beyond narratives that always place 'the West' at the centre of history:

> They do not understand how that kind of past [colonialism] must have a repercussion on the present. Then they look for different ways of going around the subject. Either it is postcoloniality, postmodernity, post-dadaism, there is always a kind of -ism that we are 'posting,' always, just so we continue to go against, you know… not having the real conversation. So I said to myself, the real problem that the West is having is that it's having difficulty realizing that it's no longer the centre of the world.[8]

In this interview, we discussed two pieces Onikeku had explicitly created with the theme of

[8] Interview with Qudus Onikeku, 21st March 2023 (zoom).

mobility/immobility in mind. The first was his first ever solo, 'My Exile is in My Head', in 2010. The piece was inspired by what Onikeku describes on his website as a failed attempt to return to Nigeria from France in 2009, choreographed 'when it became clear that Nigeria had become unviable for [him] after [his] first attempt at homecoming in 2009' (The Q, n.d.). he piece was also inspired by Wole Soyinka's 1971 prison notes, 'The Man Died', in which the writer exposes the effects of solitary confinement on his own mental health. Onikeku's solo, performed to the sound of a single guitar, beautifully conveys a sense of how the deep solitude of exile can bring someone to the edges of madness. Is this a reflection on the loneliness of the person in exile, or on the impossibility of return to a place which no longer exists as those who left had imagined it? Onikeku does not give his audiences a clear answer, for this is not, in his view, what choreographic work does best. But the piece does speak to the solitude and sense of dislocation that exist in the lives of many migrants.

When we discussed the creative process, Onikeku explained that he had started with the sense of dislocation he had felt when, as a very young man, he travelled to France to study performing arts. Feeling alienated in a context in which dance was viewed more as a theoretical project than a practice and a culture, he found solace in Soyinka's writings and those of other Nigerian writers. In 2009, he returned to Lagos and tried to establish himself as an artist there, but found that the real Lagos was a far cry from the place he had cherished in his memory. He went back to France and started working on the piece. 'My Exile is in My Head' won the first prize at the 2010 Rencontres in Bamako, Mali, and subsequently toured extensively. Over months of touring, Onikeku said, he realized that the solo had enabled him simultaneously to heal the wounds of his experiences of dislocation in France and Nigeria and to find his own artistic voice.

Years later, in 2018, Onikeku followed up with Yuropa, a piece for three dancers (two men and a woman) and a musician. The title was an obvious word play between 'Yoruba' and 'Europe,' but the piece was in no way playful. Much less personal than 'My Exile', it was inspired by the highly mediatized, tragic deaths of Africans trying to reach Europe by land or sea. In Yuropa, the three dancers are dressed in rags, and it is obvious that they are migrants on a journey. The woman wears trousers and a hoodie, just like the two male dancers; they all carry small backpacks, which seem to evoke the shrinking to which their very lives have been reduced. The piece opens with the three performers looking at long lists of papers under a torch, reading the names of deceased migrants (or reading 'no name') in louder and louder voices which end up overlapping, sounding increasingly shattered by tragedy. These, Onikeku revealed, were the real names of deceased migrants. Having been deeply moved by the refugee crisis of 2015-16, when millions of Syrians were forced to flee a devastating war, he felt compelled to address the migration issue in a different way from what he had done previously, but 'without being overtly political about it.' He explained that doing research to find these thousands of names, and knowing that many more deaths remained nameless, was the first step towards humanizing the tragedy of Europe's rejection of migrants from Africa and the Middle East:

> When we politicize it [the issue of migration], then we don't even see the human inside of it. So those lists they were reading at the beginning […] these are real people, these are not numbers! Because when you say, 59,000 people have died so far in the Mediterranean Sea, it's just numbers. […] So, I said, let's find a way to humanize this story, and let's embody it, and I believe that is the only thing dance can do with any subject matter.[9]

Throughout the 45-minute piece, the dancers make their way further into the unknown, trying to stick together, but each suffering in their different ways, each isolated in their own ordeal, each at risk of losing their mind and dignity. By the end, all three are covered in blankets and

[9] Interview with Qudus Onikeku, 21st March 2023 (zoom).

have arrived somewhere, but we do not know where – have they been rescued after capsizing? Is this Europe at last? We do not even know whether these are the same individuals we saw leaving their homes at the beginning, or if they are, whether their minds are still intact. But we suspect they are not, for now their gaze is empty, and their backpacks, it turns out, were filled with nothing but worthless pieces of paper (Onikeku, Q. 2019).

What I saw in the piece before my conversation with Onikeku resonated surprisingly well with his original idea. He explained that he had conceived of the narrative as a 'combination of Yoruba and European mythology.' In the distant past, he said, Yuropa was a princess who had been kidnapped in Nigeria and forcibly brought to Europe. Subsequent generations were then compelled to go on a journey to find out what had happened to her. But they knew nothing of the journey, and nor did they know where she had been taken. The reference to the transatlantic slave trade seemed evident there, but Onikeku himself did not mention this. However, he did mention being inspired by magical realism, and also by Nigerian writer Ben Okri's notion of a journey as a metaphor, of a spiritual as much as a real journey. For Onikeku, Yuropa captures the tragedy embodied in the desire of many young Africans to make a long journey to become real persons and to acquire wisdom. Ultimately, however, in today's world their quest is likely to be denied through the closure of borders. And just like the dancers in Yuropa, they may capsize and never arrive anywhere. Should they 'finish that journey,' Onikeku says, they will be 'a completely changed person for ever.' Indeed, by the end of Yuropa, the performers are so transformed that we are no longer sure whether they are the same people who left in the first place.

Less explicit than Kaolack's, and invoking both mythology and magical realism, Onikeku's migration-inspired work seems to address the fundamental loss of humanity border regimes impose on Africans attempting journeys to Europe, or even travelling back (for example, through deportation). But both have produced work that is meant to unsettle audiences and make them reflect on migration and immobility in a different way. In both cases too, the pieces are more complex and open-ended than a cursory look at printed programmes might indicate. As suggested at the start of this section, West African choreographers like Kaolack and Onikeku put forward a critique of the immobility that is forced upon many young Africans, but in their own view, at least, it does not follow the kind of straightforward postcolonial commentary which has come to be expected of them. They play with the expectations of largely white international audiences, fulfilling them while also disrupting them, and they attempt to regain creative agency by grounding their work within their own lived experience and cultural heritage.

Home returns and longer-term trajectories

The final thread I wanted to draw from the interplay between migration regimes and contemporary dance in Africa is that of the spatial trajectories artists develop to navigate a world of interrupted mobilities. Whereas some develop longer-term tactics to achieve mobility, others simply make choices on the basis of previous experiences.

When I first started fieldwork in the dance world in Dakar in 2002, I had not anticipated that my research would have much to do with migration. It soon became clear, however, that this was an outward-looking world in which most artists aspired to be free to travel and return home rather than migrate permanently. Given the difficulty of achieving this collectively, some dance groups discussed plans to make their way abroad as individuals, and to re-group when the opportunity arose (Neveu Kringelbach 2013). What I had not fully appreciated at the time was how long it would take for some of them to achieve their dream and how it would affect those who had failed.

The fate of one dance company whose work I have followed over many years is instructive in this respect. During one of the group's regu-

lar meetings in 2002, they all agreed that they would not achieve success until they had established a base abroad. In the previous two years the group had missed several opportunities to perform at festivals abroad after visas – sometimes simple transit visas through France – were refused. The solution to their growing feeling of being 'stuck,' they argued, was to make their way abroad individually; from wherever one of the members would manage to establish a stable base, they would then help the others by arranging tours and teaching opportunities, and the group would be freer to move. However, having witnessed many of his peers leave during international tours and end up unable to do serious work as artists, the choreographer discouraged them from leaving undocumented. If they were to leave, he explained, they ought to avoid 'going on an adventure' (*partir* à *l'aventure*), for this would undermine their artistic careers altogether. Twenty years later, it seems to me that the strategy laid out all those years ago has worked well for some individuals, but failed for the group as a whole. Within the ten years following the original meeting, all of the eight to ten original performers except two had settled in various European and North American countries. From there, most had managed to resume part-time careers as dancers or musicians, all the while retraining in other professions to make ends meet (painter-decorators or construction workers for the men, and childminders, cleaners or retail assistants for the women). The two members left in Dakar recruited and trained new, younger performers, some of whom eventually made their way abroad as well, but the original group never reformed. As I returned to Senegal over the years (most recently in February-March 2020, at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic), it seemed to me that the vitality of those left behind was ebbing away. Of course, we had all aged, but there was also resentment towards those who had left but had failed to help their peers be invited for artistic residencies and other engagements. Even worse, those who had chosen to stay sensed that their families and friends, as well as younger performers in Dakar, wondered why they had not left when there had still been time for a career abroad. 'People talk behind my back about how I'm stuck, how I never get anywhere,' one artist confessed with sadness.

Other groups, however, have managed to continue to work together after some of their members migrated individually. Senegalese dancer-choreographer Simone Gomis, for example, established her own dance company, Tenane, in Dakar in 2007. The company then consisted of Gomis and her three sisters, dancers Marie-Pierre, Evelyne and Marie-Agnès. Over the years, three of the four sisters moved to different European countries through marriage, but the group continued to perform together at various international festivals and art fairs such as the MASA (*Marché des Arts du Spectacle d'Abidjan*) in 2018.

In many ways, these trajectories are in continuity with historical strategies of mobility in much of West Africa, which have intensified from the 1980s onwards: in this region, migration has long been a collective project funded and facilitated by families. Where performers differ from other categories of migrants, however, is that in order to develop their artistic careers they need to do far more than simply move abroad and stay put: they need to achieve the kind of legal status and resources that will allow them to travel freely, either back 'home' or to other destinations. As Onikeku explained, had he not been able to leave Nigeria in the 2000s, 'there would be no Qudus today; [he] would have done something else.' In many cases, this precious ability to come and go is achieved through marriage with a resident abroad. That is not to say that artists marry for the exclusive purpose of moving to their spouse's country of origin, but most of the performers I have encountered in Senegal since the early 2000s and who have since settled legally outside Africa were able to do so through marriage. In the absence of alternative routes, marriage and artistic projects are often closely intertwined.

Alongside these movements away from the continent, since the early 2000s a growing num-

ber of West African performers who had left previously have moved back in ways that are somewhat different from the more permanent kind of return policy-makers usually envisage when devising return incentives. Their movement fits well with recent research on return migration, which argues that decisions to return often hinge on the possibility of remaining mobile in the future (e.g. Flahaux 2017). In other words, where the home country enjoys relative political stability, migrants are more likely to return if they know that they can leave again or continue to travel back and forth without losing their right to do so. But for them to trust that this will be possible, there must be avenues towards permanent settled status in the country to which they had migrated.

Some West African choreographic artists have managed to establish choreographic centres in their countries of origin, all the while maintaining a home abroad. Looking at individual trajectories, this movement seems to have been facilitated by the emergence of contemporary dance on the continent. In the 1980s and 1990s, those West African neo-traditional dancers and musicians who had legal status and had been travelling back on a regular basis and funding their trips by bringing groups of European students for workshops settled in Europe. This was especially popular in places like Senegal and Ghana. But a handful of contemporary choreographers have been able to perform a return of a different kind: by setting up their own artistic structure 'back home,' they have returned with a far higher status among their peers than the workshop organizers had ever managed.

In 2006, for example, Burkinabè dancer-choreographers Salia Sanou and Seydou Boro established their Centre de Développement Chorégraphique (CDC) La Termitière, in Ouagadougou. This followed a decade during which both dancers had been employed at French choreographer Mathilde Monnier's prestigious, state-funded Centre Chorégraphique de Montpellier. With the technical, administrative and financial support of Monnier's company, the CDC La Termitière soon became one of the main centres for contemporary dance in Africa (Despres 2016). The centre has organised regular professional workshops, as well as its own biennial festival, Dialogues de Corps, one of the key events in the African choreographic circuit.[10] In 2018, migration under the heading 'Territoires Imaginaires et Migration' was the festival's main theme, and the event received support from the UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees). Both Sanou and Boro share their time between Burkina Faso and France, which allows them to continue to work with French artists, administrators and funders, while at the same time training new generations of dancers in Africa (the CDC attracts performers from all over Africa, as well as from outside the continent) and enjoying the status that comes with this position of 'elders' in the profession. Other choreographic artists have taken parallel initiatives in other countries. Congolese choreographer Faustin Linyekula also returned to the DRC (Democratic Republic of Congo) in 2006 and established a choreographic centre there, the Studios Kabako in Kisangani. In 2014, Qudus Onikeku set up his own centre, QDance Center, in Lagos. Onikeku describes the centre as a 'social enterprise, an incubator, which applies artistic competence, human resources, innovation and creativity, as capacities for development solutions in a changing world.' (The Q. n.d.).

These artists are all male, reflecting the ways in which young men were given the best opportunities in the early days of contemporary dance on the continent, in the 1990s and 2000s. Moreover, they all draw on the resources and networks they have developed during prolonged stays in Europe and North America. And through the workshops they now offer, their initiatives expand the boundaries of choreography to also include music, theatre, the visual arts, pedagogy,

[10] The latest edition, the 13th of its kind, took place in December 2020 in spite of the travel restrictions caused by Covid-19: **https://www.artistesbf.org/dialogues-de-corps-13eme-edition/**. Accessed 5th June 2022.

or such practical skills as conceptualizing a project and applying for funding.

Many of these initiatives to establish structures on the continent have benefitted greatly from the artistic networks and newly gained management skills migrant dancers brought back with them. In some cases, these networks were facilitated by the additional skills of their spouses or partners. It also matters, of course, that many European festival organisers, theatre directors and other presenters, as well as funding agencies, now insist on supporting artists with a base in Africa. In conversations I had with such presenters at the 2012 'Rencontres' in Johannesburg, several of them explained that they wanted to support choreographers on the continent rather than in the diaspora. What counts as being established 'on the continent' is, of course, ambiguous, but having an active centre usually reassures presenters and funding agencies that their support will help to train future generations of artists in Africa and will therefore continue to make fresh talent available to them over the longer-term. Similarly, in a conversation in Brussels in 2015, then the then director of Africalia, Frédéric Jacquemin, explained to me that the Belgian agency's Africa programmes focused on funding the kinds of costs that arts structures on the continent found nearly impossible to fund elsewhere, thereby acting in complement to the French Institute. This kind of support of Africa-based structures also fits well with a broader agenda on the part of most European states to prevent further migration: according to the logic that is increasingly deployed across Europe, aid to Africa must now contribute to the imperatives of security and the 'containing' of migration.

From the perspective of choreographic artists, however, return is not simply about attracting funding. Setting up a permanent structure in one's place of origin is hard work, it is costly, it generates huge expectations from families and peers, and it comes with a great deal of uncertainty about future sustainability. Artists therefore invest their energy and resources in these projects because they are vital to their own sense of accomplishment and to their own creative development. In addition, many are genuinely concerned with issues of transmission to the next generations of Africans.

Conclusion

In the introduction, I asked how migration regimes in the Global North were shaping what West African choreographic artists did, both on and off-stage. I also asked whether we needed to rethink the temporality of our studies altogether.

Drawing on ongoing research with West African dancers and choreographers, in this article I have argued that much could be learned from the tactics artists deploy to navigate a world in which their work is valued, but from which their bodies are largely excluded. These tactics are relevant to other areas of life too, for artists often imagine and anticipate alternative scenarios for the future. Moreover, the kind of mobility performing artists aspire to also prefigures more general aspirations. In this case, artistic aspirations to be able to move freely between Africa, Europe and other parts of the world, and to achieve career development through mobility, are not very different from those to which many other young Africans aspire. But this kind of mobility is even more urgent for choreographic artists: to them, success means having the ability to show their work live to audiences across the world and to collaborate with their peers in other places. The emergence of contemporary dance in Africa from the 1990s onwards, largely promoted by French, Belgian and other European state agencies, as well as individual choreographers and presenters, has offered new avenues and generated new expectations in this respect, albeit in a gendered way which has largely favoured male choreographers. At the same time however, contemporary performers on the continent have found it increasingly difficult to travel legally.

In this context, choreographic artists have addressed what I call their 'interrupted mobility' in various ways. It would have been impossible to do justice to them all in a short article,

and so I have given selected examples of these responses. *Firstly*, focusing on small-scale work more generally has allowed some choreographers to showcase their individual talent and to travel more easily than they might have done with larger groups; but it may also have pushed them further into the 'gig economy.' *Secondly*, some have specifically developed 'mobile' pieces composed in modular ways with a variable number of performers that are easily adaptable to new contexts. *Thirdly*, many contemporary choreographers have created pieces which directly addressed the issue of immobility in subtle ways, often quietly subverting the role of postcolonial critics that was expected of them. And *fourthly*, some have achieved a 'return' of a different kind, using the resources and networks accumulated during their time abroad to establish arts centres in their home countries. These forms of return are especially illuminating because they undermine the instrumentalizing narrative to which the first three tactics could easily be reduced. In fact, looking at the journeys of African choreographic artists over the longer term, rather than as a snapshot, shows that the tactics they deploy to achieve mobility are also about much more than migration: they are about becoming mature artists, social adults in transnational communities, and about the art of crafting lives worth living. It is only through longstanding engagement with artists in the region that such a perspective can emerge to help us deconstruct conventional narratives about dance and music in Africa.

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