

Beyond the Slave Ship: Theorizing the Limbo Imagination and Black Atlantic Performance Geographies

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RESÜMEE

Black Music und ihre Performanzen sind Praktiken, der weitreichende kulturelle und historische Kontinuitäten vorgewiesen werden können. Der Artikel untersucht drei Ausdrucksformen und ihre nationenübergreifenden Interdependenzen. Dabei werden verschiedene geographische und performative Räume mit einander verknüpft. Vom Middle Passage Slave Ship Limbo führt der Artikel zum US-amerikanischen Blues und Jamaikanischen Dancehall bis hin zu den Südafrikanischen Shebens und zeigt auf, wie sich diese kulturellen Praktiken und Räume in Ausformungen gegenseitig bedingen und verändern.

It's my brother, my sister.

*At the bottom of the Atlantic Ocean there's a
railroad made of human bones.*

Black ivory

Black ivory

Amiri Baraka

[A repressive society produces]... some kind of gangrene within you... that eats your soul, that forces you to save your soul. I couldn't really say that a repressive society would result in creative art, but somehow it does help, it is an ingredient; it acts as a catalyst to a man who is committed.

John Kani, South African Actor, cited in Coplan

1. Introduction

The epigraph at the beginning of this article says something about the people who made the musics discussed, performance practices around them and the conditions of repression and exploitation under which they lived. Both are linked. I would like to acknowl-

edge the role of all our forebears who were a part of those struggles to create, live, and name their place in the world, and importantly, those who died trying to record the cultural history of some of these performance practices.

Black musics and their corresponding performance practices have deeper continuities than slave history, movement, musical and celebratory patterns. Crucially, these deeper continuities have not been fully explored by such disciplines as ethno-musicology, geography, cultural studies, or history. Based on data gathered over twelve years' participation in Jamaica's Dancehall performance and over six years of research, I wish to expand my reading of New World performance practices to other Black performance genres. Essentially, by analyzing Dancehall's macro and micro-spatialities, spatial categories, philosophies and systems were revealed, thereby delineating what is best captured by the term performance geography. It is the delineation and application of performance geography to black performance practices from the Middle Passage slave ship dance Limbo, to ghettos where the Blues, Kingston's Dancehall and South African Kwaito emerged, that is the subject of this article. Out of such marginal spaces as the ghetto, performance cultures have consistently emerged and challenged the very contexts that militate against their emergence.

What is Performance geography? By performance, I mean physical, mental, emotional and spiritual performance for the task of enacting one's being in the Black Atlantic space between violation, ruptured roots and self (re)construction; it is a requirement for life. Like the enslaved who arrived at Kingston Harbour after the ordeal of the Middle Passage in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, inner-city youth survive the challenges of the urban experience through their strategies of performance (voluntarily or not). Further, with renewed interest in space and its implied discourse of spatiality spawned by the works of Michel Foucault, Edward Soja, and others, I see performance geography as developing on the work of Catherine Nash and Nigel Thrift on the role of performance, specifically embodied practices, in cultural geography.¹ This work looks at the way people living in particular locations give those locations identity through performance. Bearing in mind that this is work in progress, I see it as a mapping of the locations used, types and systems of use, politics of their location in relation to other sites and other practices, the character of events/rituals in particular locations, and the manner in which different performances/performers relate to each other within and across different cultures.

My analysis of performance geography in the context of blackness, the New World and its Middle Passage history invokes Paul Gilroy's Black Atlantic as a counter-culture of modernity. But there are ways in which I depart from that reading even as my work continues that tradition. Albeit the criticisms from Don Robotham, on the lack of attention to material forces, Peter Sutherland on the virtual absence of examples from Latin America, Africa and the Wider Caribbean in the formation of the trans-Atlantic black

1 Catherine Nash, *Performativity in Practice: Some Recent Work in Cultural Geography*, in: *Progress in Human Geography*, 24 (2000) 4, pp. 653-664; Nigel Thrift, *The Still Point: Resistance, Expressive Embodiment and Dance*, in: Steve Pile/Michael Keith (eds.), *Geographies of Resistance*, London 1997, pp. 124-152.

culture, and Norman Corr Jr. and Rachel Corr on the absence of the Middle Passage history of suffering as a lost reference in the construction of black Atlantic scholarship,² I concur with Gilroy who states that

*[T]he expressive cultures of the black Atlantic world have been dominated by a special mood of restlessness. These songs ... evoke and affirm a condition in which the negative meanings given to the enforced movement of blacks are somehow transposed. What was initially [...] a curse – the curse of homelessness or ... enforced exile – gets repossessed. It becomes affirmed and is reconstructed as the basis of a privileged standpoint from which certain useful and critical perceptions about the modern world become more likely I want to suggest that it ... represents a response to successive displacements, migrations, journeys ... which have come to constitute these black cultures' special conditions of existence.*³

Geographically themed, Gilroy speaks to a spatial imperative in the black experience in terms of restlessness, homelessness, displacement, migration and other journeys. I would like, on a point of convergence with Gilroy, to continue the unearthing of New World performance, indeed popular culture and space in the tradition of Kamau Brathwaite, Wilson Harris and Genevieve Fabre who have etched clear images of the slave ship dance Limbo in black Atlantic scholarship. Space is an important element in New World Performance.

The Limbo dance highlights the importance of not only the historical but also the spatial imagination. Emerging out of the lack of space available on the slave ships, the slaves bent themselves like spiders. Incidentally, the lack of space is also obvious to the visitor of slave castles such as Elmina Castle with low thresholds that the enslaved navigated to move from dungeon to holding room to the 'door of no return' before boarding the slavers.⁴ In the dance, consistent with certain African beliefs, the whole cycle of life is reflected. The dancers move under a pole that is consistently lowered from chest level and they emerge as in the triumph of life over death as their heads clear the pole.⁵ The slave ships, like the plantation and the city reveal(ed) particular spaces that produce(d) magical forms of entertainment and ritual.

This historical continuity is evidenced in the way movement patterns like the Limbo were preserved throughout the last three centuries emerging among the Jamaican Maroons, 20th century Jamaican tourist entertainment, and within Trinidad as a wake dance.⁶ Cru-

2 Don Robotham, *Culture, Society and Economy: Bringing Production Back In*, London/Thousand Oaks 2005; Peter Sutherland, *In Memory of the Slaves: An African View of the Diaspora in the Americas*, in: Jean Rahier (ed.), *Representations of Blackness and the Performance of Identities*, Westport (Conn.)/London 1999, pp. 195-212; Norman Corr, Jr./Rachel Corr, 'Imagery of Blackness' in *Indigenous Myth, Discourse, and Ritual*, in: *Ibid.*, pp. 213-234.

3 Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, Cambridge (Mass.) 1993, p. 111.

4 Personal observation, Elmina Castle, Cape Coast, Ghana, November 9, 2003.

5 Molly Ahye, *In Search of the Limbo: An Imagination into its Folklore as a Wake Dance*, in: Susanna Sloat (ed.), *Caribbean Dance From Abakuá to Zouk: How Movement Shapes Identity*, Florida 2002, pp. 247-261.

6 *Ibid.*

cially, Limbo also appears in Jamaica's popular Dancehall culture in 1994 as one of the popular dance moves of that year. Limbo holds memory and marks continuity among performance practices of the New World. First, Limbo calls our attention to the dance movement and the space (its limits and potential) in which the movement was (and still is) performed. Secondly, it is a "ritual of rebirth,"⁷ beyond the slave ship during the Middle Passage; it has also been linked to puberty and war rituals within Africa, to Kongolesé cosmology in particular, as well as funereal rites.⁸ Similarly, the plantation dances and urban Dancehall events evoke memories of celebratory events held within spatially restricted, heavily policed, and marginal settings. What I have done in previous work is to set up a conversation between Limbo as dance, space, system and symbol to look at the parallels, common genealogy, spatially and performatively, with Dancehall performance in order to develop my case for the use of a spatial argument.⁹ I extend that work in this article.

A look at the scholarship on and common genealogy among the Blues, Dancehall and Kwaito would reveal that some of the same comments have been made about the performers, lyrics, role, performance practices, *raison d'être* and aesthetics. What else can be said of the link between Dancehall, the Blues and Kwaito? I will not historicize the main elements of these forms; rather I wish to give a brief description of them focussing on analyzing their spaces of performance, venues, and the stories they tell about the meaning of celebration. The analysis is based on data collected in Jamaica and South Africa where interviews, case studies and participant observation were employed in addition to the analysis of posters, tickets, flyers, maps, internet sources and television broadcasts.

2. The Politics of Space in Dancehall/Dance-hall Culture

The name Dancehall has a spatial nuance. It first flourished in the 1950s around the consumption of the emerging popular music especially in Kingston Metropolitan Area, and its name derives from the exclusive yards/halls/lawns in which dance events were mainly held. It is first to be understood as the space in which adults meet to consume, celebrate, entertain and affirm group identity.¹⁰

Using space as a holistic category for analysing Dancehall performance in my early research led to an examination of the venues, events that occurred in those venues, and the culture of celebration in Jamaica, as well as the dance movement as an under-explored

7 Geneveve Fabre, *The Slave Ship Dance*, in: Maria Diedrich et al. (eds.), *Black Imagination and the Middle Passage*, New York/Oxford 1999, pp. 33-46.

8 Maureen Warner-Lewis, *Central Africa in the Caribbean: Transcending Time, Transforming Cultures*, Mona 2003, pp. 242-243; M. Ahye, *In Search of the Limbo* (footnote 5), pp. 250-254.

9 See Sonjah Stanley Niaah, *A Common Genealogy: Dancehall, Limbo and the Sacred Performance Space*, in *Discourses in Dance*, 2 (2004) 1, pp. 9-26, for a first look at this in context of new world Dancehall culture and the slave ship dance.

10 See id., *Kingston's Dancehall: A Story of Space and Celebration*, in: *Space and Culture*, 7 (2004) 1, pp. 102-118; and id., *Kingston's Dancehall Spaces*, in: *Jamaica Journal*, 29 (2006) 3, pp. 14-21.

aspect of Dancehall culture since the 1950s. I developed a classification scheme based on characteristic features, degree of commercialization, permanence and hierarchy, and associated with that, analytical categories, recurring metaphors, spatial descriptors and philosophies that characterize the evolution of popular Dancehall culture in Jamaica.¹¹ There are important stories about space in Dancehall culture. Most notable is the fact Dancehall occupies multiple spatial dimensions (eg. urban, street, policed, marginal, gendered, performative, liminal, memorializing, communal space) revealed through the nature and type of events, venues, their use and function. Also, Dancehall occupies liminal space between what is celebrated and at the same time denigrated in Jamaica, and moved from private community to public and commercial enterprise. Further, the way in which the urban gendered body creates space and status through performance in spite of the odds characteristic of life at the edge of survival is indicative of the role and importance of celebratory performance cultures. Beyond the multiple spatial dimensions there are spatial philosophies such as that of boundarylessness revealed in the way 'boundedness' translates into 'unboundedness', freedom, journey, contest and transformation. Are the characteristics of spatial use, the philosophy and transformatory nature of Dancehall culture and its evolution similar for the Blues or Kwaito? What do they have in common in terms of performance space? From the Saturday night slave dance, to Blues, Dancehall and Kwaito, music and dance performances have been central to Black life. Following from Gilroy's statements on the kind of mental, physical, philosophical journeying and displacement across the Black Atlantic, I now turn to the spatial dimensions of the Blues and Kwaito to illustrate a common genealogy among slave ship (Limbo), plantation (slave dance; Blues), and ghetto (Dancehall; Kwaito) performance spaces.

3. The Space and Ethos of the Blues

Why the Blues? Blues Busters, Blues Dance (popular entertainment for the youth based on the sound system culture), Blue Beat (what Ska came to be called), and Clue J and the Blues Blasters are just some of the indications of the obvious influence the Blues had on Jamaican culture.¹² There were many copies of American big bands¹³ with accompanying 'fake books' that contained the musical repertoire, a sign of heavy American popular musical influence on Jamaica between the 1930's to 50's. Blues was played in the Dancehall before Rhythm & Blues, then by the 1960s Ska developed as a combination of Rhythm & Blues and Jamaican forms such as Mento. There is also the lingering influence of the

11 See: id., *Kingston's Dancehall* (footnote 10), and id., *Making Space: Dancehall Performance and its Philosophy of Boundarylessness*, in: *African Identities*, 2 (2004) 2, pp.117-132.

12 The Blues Busters was a vocal group popularly in the top ten musical charts in Jamaica with regular bookings at musical showcases at the Majestic and Carib Theatres.

13 American big bands refer to the blues and jazz bands that emerged around the 1930s. Some twenty to thirty bands that played Mento and jazz existed in Kingston by the 1940s and were all modeled on American big bands. Rhythm & Blues refers to a popular Black American musical genre that found favour with Jamaicans around the 1950s in the sound system dances.

Blues in Rhythm & Blues which was dominant in the 1950s and continues today in the staple of American artists that rotate on the Jamaican airwaves.

But outside of the historical links, are there any common features through musical flows? What is the Blues and how did it move from place to place in the early 20th Century? Around the late 19th Century thousands of black migrants experienced and took advantage of their ‘out-of-placeness’¹⁴ to travel from place to place through the US-South, in search of work or a sense of new self. In the context of troubles and problems of the everyday, blacks in the United States Delta region created their music. Some think of the Blues as “ain’t nothing but a good man feeling bad.”¹⁵ The Blues is about no crime, just of being human, and is seen as an “anodyne for suffering that leaves the musician or listener feeling good again.”¹⁶ The experience of American blacks is bound up in the Blues – poverty, political disenfranchisement and legal segregation, the violence of lynchings, beatings and shootings are articulated in the musical and intellectual writings of performers. The Blues as a form of expression highlighted such issues as frustration, lack of love, loneliness, anger, life in the slums, rejection – many of them universal themes. Blues is also used to mean a way of playing Jazz and sometimes Blues is synonymous with Jazz.¹⁷ Most importantly, Blues culture is defined as the “various forms of communication and the creation of community that occurred in such recreational environments as saloons, vaudeville houses, tent shows, juke joints, and street corners. In these spaces, Blues music became more than just entertainment, but music of self-definition and personal liberation”¹⁸

I am interested in the space of the Blues. The context in which Blues and Jazz emerged gives some indication of the space and conditions in which enslaved Africans had their entertainment. Based on the New Orleans Black Codes the enslaved had Sundays off and many used the day to dance, sing and play instruments in Congo Square. Hundreds of enslaved performers were escorted to the Square where their performances were supervised by local authorities. Policed spaces of performance were legitimized by the segregation laws. Formerly privileged creoles lost their jobs as performers due to these laws while blacks gained employment to play music in the saloons and dance-halls at which older

14 I prefer to use the term out-of-placeness to highlight the sense of being out of place, out of a place to be and becoming.

15 Jimmie Rodgers, cited in Peter Puterbaugh, *Pain for Gain: The Blues is Purely American Music*, Attache (December 2005), pp. 39-43.

16 Jimmie Rodgers, cited in P. Puterbaugh, *Pain for Gain*, pp. 39-43.

17 I use the Blues as an umbrella term with the recognition that there are various sub-genres – country Blues, electric Blues (which is credited to Muddy Waters who electrified Delta Blues in urban Chicago, c. 1947–55), Delta Blues, soul Blues, and so on. The distinction between urban and country Blues is of course their spaces of operation. Country Blues is played and consumed in Juke Joints (also jook) and roadhouses around which Blues culture developed and was expressed. Bessie Smith for example moved from being a street performer to a theatre headliner as part of the transition from country Blues to urban Blues. Muddy Waters moved from rural Mississippi to Chicago in 1943, see: Peter Rutkuff/Will Scott, *Preaching the Blues: The Mississippi Delta of Muddy Waters*, in: *Kenyan Review*, 27 (2005) 2, pp. 129-147. See also Clyde Woods’ essay in this collection for an elaboration on the political economy of blues geographies.

18 Michelle Scott, *The Realm of a Blues Empress: Blues Culture and Bessie Smith in Black Chattanooga, Tennessee, 1880–1923*, PhD Dissertation, Cornell University 2002.

brass bands were the staple. Black performers were also to be found playing in Minstrel shows, circuses, travelling roadshows, medicine shows, vaudeville shows, and carnivals. The restrictions on black subjects in the Blues era¹⁹ stimulated innovative ways of maintaining the culture and ritual of the dance-hall. Since licences for operating dance classes were relatively easy to get, venues like 'Drake's Dancing Class' by day were transformed into New York's 'Jungle's Casino' by night. This Casino was a cellar, without fixtures or furnishing; liquor was stashed behind the unconcealed coal bin in the event that the venue was raided. Under the guise of dance classes patrons danced up a storm doing the two-steps, waltzes, schoostiches, the metropolitan glide, mule walk and gut stomp dances.²⁰

The Blues brings interesting locational /situational elements by virtue of its point of origin in the Delta region.²¹ Alan Lomax, David Grazian and Amiri Baraka explicitly acknowledge that space and place are critical to an understanding of the Blues as its origins in slavery.²² The Delta, the swamps of New Orleans, and Chicago's Southside are some regional key points that illustrate how the Blues has a home with authentic symbols and icons. It originates from the field hollers, chain gang chants, choruses of road builders, clearers of swamps, lifters and toters, and the anger of work songs rooted in African singing tradition. Beale Street in Memphis is an important site for popular Blues. The Mississippi Delta region is home to many Blues giants including Muddy Waters, Howlin' Wolf, and B. B. King.²³ Song titles attest to the importance of place. For example, a significant number of popular recordings highlight important sites of Blues memory, from St. Louis to the jail house. While lyrical analysis reveals that location was not always a strong reference point in the songs, the use of place as an important signifier (for an imprisoned lover from St. Louis or escape from the condition of the US-South, for example²⁴) highlights the different ways in which place is inscribed in selfhood and a sense of community.

Places of locational importance include highways and streets, certain yards, and verandas. It was thought that Blues music came from the back alleys, the equivalent of the lanes of early Kingston, and portrayed the ways of the alley, its lifestyle.²⁵ There are memories and myths of the Blues bound up in certain locations. The street is an important site onto which music and dance activity spilled. It is much like in Dancehall culture where the streets are overtaken when events at a particular venue spill onto the street and also when the street is the actual site at the corner of Pink Lane and Charles Streets in Kingston, for

19 By Blues era, I mean the time between 1930–1950 during which Blues music emerged and proliferated.

20 Amiri Baraka (Leroi Jones), *Blues People: Negro Experience in White America and the Music that Developed From it*, New York 1968 [1963], p. 108.

21 See: Alan Lomax, *I Got the Blues*, in: *Common Ground*, 8 (1943) 4, pp. 38–52.

22 David Grazian, *Blue Chicago: The Search for Authenticity in Urban Blues Clubs*, Chicago/London 2003; A. Baraka, *Blues People* (footnote 20).

23 Stephen King, *Blues Tourism in the Mississippi Delta: The Functions of Blues Festivals*, in: *Popular Music and Society*, 27 (2004) 4, pp. 455–475.

24 Albert Murray, *Stomping the Blues*, New York 2000 [1976], p. 66.

25 *Ibid.*, p. 50.

example, common throughout the 1950s to present. Beale Street is described by Violin player Jim Turner as “a song from dawn to dawn”²⁶.

What is distinct about the Blues is that its emergence is in displacement, ‘out-of-place-ness’, transport and travel, touring and migration, flows and networks. The concept of travelling roadside Blues encapsulates the nomadism in Blues performance. Like the movement of Jamaican Mento bands in the 1940s and 1950s, itinerant Delta Blues men traversed the Delta region up to the 1930s using trains, trucks and carts. Ma Rainey for example, “toured the South for years with a company called the Rabbit Foot Minstrels and became widely known in Negro communities everywhere in America”²⁷. It is important to note that modes and symbols of travel in the Delta Region were racialized: “in many Delta towns, a railroad track serve[d] as an obvious physical symbol of racial demarcation”²⁸ and crossing it was regulated. Another important feature of the displacement was the nomadic street corner performers, including the visually impaired Lemon Jefferson moving characteristically with guitar in hand. Travel induced professionalism, experience on the road, a geography of learning that predates distance education. The best known musicians were wanderers and migratory farm workers. In a way restless feet produced ‘placefulness’ in the music.

As a popular site, juke joints (or honky tonks) were commonly associated with juke boxes that supplied the music where there were no live bands.²⁹ Juke boxes were usually located in the middle of the joint’s floor. This is not the main source of its meaning however. The Gullah word *jook* or *jog*, meaning disorderly or wicked derived from the Banbara or Wolof of the Niger-Congo West African region.³⁰ *Jook house* meant disorderly house – combining a brothel, gaming parlour and dance hall, a roadhouse or tavern providing music and drinks. Jukeboxes, invented in the 1930s, began to provide music in the houses that did not have their own bands. Juke joints were also on the plantations, occupying a policed space. For example, McKinnley ‘Muddy Waters’ Morganfield, a tractor driver (credited with being one of the key originators of urban Blues music) who supplemented his income by operating a juke joint³¹ that was located on the plantation.

26 Quoted in Shane White/Graham White, *Strolling, Jooking and Fixy Clothes*, in: Gena D. Caponi (ed.), *Signifyin(g), Sanctifyin’, & Slam Dunking: A Reader in African American Expressive Culture*, Amherst 1999, pp. 434-452, p. 435.

27 A. Baraka, *Blues People* (footnote 20), p. 89.

28 S. King, *Blues Tourism* (footnote 23), p. 472.

29 During the 1890s recordings became popular primarily through coin-in-slot phonographs in public spaces and by 1910–1920 had become the mass medium for popular music, but it was orchestral and classical instrumental music that was most recorded at that time and could therefore be played by these phonographs. By the 1930s jukeboxes emerged to satisfy the dwindling phonograph market and could be found in roadhouses and taverns or juke joints. Every American innovation finds its way to Jamaica and the juke box is no different. My own grandfather purchased a jukebox in the 1960s which provided the music for various weekend dances organized by my aunts and uncles.

30 See: Juliet Gorman’s work on the etymology of the word *jook* at <http://www.oberlin.edu/library/papers/honorshistory/2001-Gorman/jookjoints/allaboutjooks/etymology.html> (accessed on 27 August 2011).

31 P. Rutkuff/W. Scott, *Preaching the Blues* (footnote 17), p. 140.

Juke joints were constantly raided by the county sheriff and deputies or the city police. There were often fights, knife wounds or fatalities left behind.

According to Baraka (1963) you had to go to the 'gutbucket cabarets' to hear real Blues. These were the lower class venues where tripe or chitterlings, the delicacy of pig guts was served. These chitterlings (chitlins) appear under a different name in the South African context and I discuss this below.

While the Blues developed and was consumed in a more commercialized setting, it also maintained a strong presence in the more marginal/informal lounges and shacks (including many impromptu jam sessions), the street corner, at barbecues (family or public picnic events), roadhouses, and private and semi-private parties.

Chicago was the northern point of the Illinois Central Railroad which covered the Delta's North/South route. Migrants to Chicago came from Mississippi, Louisiana, Alabama, Arkansas, and Tennessee.³² Constant movement of bodies, music and performers within these multiple, informal, organic spaces (jook joints, streets, city) was an imperative produced by the condition of oppression. Even as the spaces were policed, performers defied the legal restrictions and new ways to maintain Black cultural identity were continually produced.

Urban Blues came to be more strongly associated with the formal setting of clubs and ballrooms such as the House of Blues, a modern replica of southern juke joints. In 1926, The Pelican (on Gravier and South Rampart Streets) was opened becoming New Orleans' newest and largest state-of-the-art dance hall. Being equipped with fe/male sanitary conveniences with attendants in waiting, free telephone, lounges, dance floor and smoking room made the Pelican a superior facility. Kansas City, like Clarksdale and Memphis, had its own ballrooms such as the Pla-Mar, Fairyland Park, and Frog Hop. Southside Chicago's Grand Terrace was also a popular ballroom.

Ballrooms like the Savoy which was first opened in March 1926 on Lenox Avenue and 140 & 141 Streets in Harlem were among the most prestigious venues. The Savoy, whose dance floor was the length of a block, with double band stands to house two orchestras, occupied a two-story pink building sporting mirrored walls, marble staircase, 10,000 square foot wooden floor that had to be replaced every three years due to excessive wear and hosted regular dance contests. This was one of the highest expressions of the Blues making and taking space. The ballroom was open to the public (black and white) for a minimal cover charge. Large Christmas events were popular and consistent with the proliferation of various dance events around holidays such as Christmas dances on the plantations. Weekends were popular with Saturdays often packed from corner to corner with strutting, swinging, shouting, shifting, rolling, hopping, dragging, bouncing, shouting, bumping, shaking, grinding, stomping, twisting, shuffling patrons. Blues dancing was at its highest level of execution and improvisation at such venues where old and new moves were on display. In the words of Duke Ellington from the recording containing the same

32 See: Ralph Eastman, Country Blues Performance and the Oral Tradition, in: *Black Music Research Journal*, 8 (1988) 2, pp. 161-176.

line: “It don’t mean a thing if it ain’t got that swing”³³. Blues people are “dance-beat-oriented people”³⁴. As spaces of dance there were famous moves such as the Lindy Hop (“a creative, energetic, free-spirited partner dance executed with bent knees including various kicks”), the Charleston³⁵, Mambo, Slow Drag, Jitterbug, Carolina Shag, with West Coast Swing and Jive evolving from the Lindy Hop.

A high degree of spectator involvement, revelry, celebration around dance made the ballroom into a temple, according to Albert Murray: a sort of ritual space. The Blues musical pandemic that swept America from 1926 to 1960 ensured viability of venues like the Savoy that served as a “comprehensive elaboration and refinement of communal dancing”³⁶. New modes of community have been built through dance and rituals have been performed. Blues musicians were simultaneously (as they played) “fulfilling a central role in a ceremony that was at once a purification rite and a celebration, the festive earthiness of which was tantamount to a fertility ritual”³⁷, “a ritual of purification and affirmation”³⁸, A ritual of resistance and resilience:³⁹ Though the dance-hall does not appear to conventional ritual workers/preachers as the locale for a purification ritual⁴⁰, Murray acknowledged that the rituals of voodoo/vodun are integral to the ceremony. Dance-hall proprietors are aware of the purging atmosphere that dance floors provide for what Murray calls “the baleful spirits”⁴¹. Of course early perceptions of Blues music mirrors perceptions held of Dancehall by purists who hold Judeo-Christian moral ethic as the high water mark of spirituality. It was thought to be devil music, not of the church or of God. The church as a space and religious aesthetic has a relationship with the Blues in the history of those Blues stars that had to go to church and were not even permitted to go to the weekend Blues. Ma Rainey, W.C. Handy and Jelly Roll Morton among numerous others have blended the conventions of the Protestant church musicians with their own practice.

Blues events always celebrated a specific occasion, such as a victory or an achievement, birthdays, marriages, or graduations:⁴² This mirrors the celebratory ethos of Dancehall as well as Kwaito which is discussed below.

At the highest commercial level there are Blues clubs that are not seasonal or ephemeral, and contemporary Blues festivals (since the 1960s) along the order of Jamaica’s Sunsplash or Sumfest⁴³, receiving funds from corporate sponsors and boosting the tourism industry

33 A. Murray, *Stomping the Blues* (footnote 24), p. 148.

34 *Ibid.*, p. 189.

35 Thought to have been an Ashanti dance, the Charleston emerges in America around the blues dancing era and bears similarities with Jamaica’s Butterfly dance.

36 *Ibid.*, p. 17.

37 *Ibid.*

38 *Ibid.*, p. 38.

39 *Ibid.*, p. 42.

40 *Ibid.*, p. 23.

41 *Ibid.*, p. 24.

42 *Ibid.*, p. 17.

43 Sunsplash and Sumfest are the premiere summer reggae festivals in Jamaica today.

of especially Tennessee and Mississippi. In looking at the events, celebratory spaces such as those housing Blues festivals serve three purposes: homecoming (a sort of pilgrimage to home) or honouring musicians (dedicated to the memory of performers), preservation of Blues culture, and integration/racial harmony⁴⁴. But even commercial activity was not exempt from state intervention. Though they were small scale festivals in the 1980's and were not well attended, law-enforcement officers seemed to plague them. As festivals proliferated throughout the 1990s with high levels of corporate sponsorship, civic and state support, they began to represent high levels of commodification by capitalizing on the resurgence of Blues in the 1960s. Just how organic community events in mostly marginal spaces become viable commercial activity is an important dimension of the transformation of space achieved through Black Atlantic performance culture.

An examination of Blues performance through the lens of space shifts the focus from linear, musical, lyrical or celebrity analyses to incorporate other perspectives, theoretical orientations, histories and national contexts. Without referencing fixed points of origin, I have shown that a common spatial imagination is referenced by the Blues and Dancehall: they reference the production and consumption of culture within policed, marginalized, ritual spaces, in the context of displacement, disenfranchisement and State intervention. This relationship between place, performance and identity extends beyond national contexts to a wider Diasporic space of musical trajectories. It is in this context that I look at Kwaito in the next section.

4. Shebeens, Kwaito Street Bashes and Politics

Why Kwaito? What is Kwaito? The influence of South African music on the Jamaican Calypso / Mento fusion is highlighted by Timothy White in *Catch a Fire* as cross-fertilization “producing around the late 1940s and early 1950s an aggressive amalgam that also contained South African elements and a percussive tack similar to the Highlife music of Nigeria.”⁴⁵ It is a symbiotic process of cross-fertilization, however, and the influence of Jamaican music on Kwaito has hardly been probed. Jimmy Cliff, Bob Marley and Peter Tosh have significantly influenced the African musical landscape, Zimbabwe and South Africa in particular. Of course Africa's look to the Diaspora has seen the influence of early tours by vaudeville and ragtime performers which spawned a whole new culture of music production culminating in distinct South African Jazz and the colloquial renaming of townships like Sophiatown as ‘little Harlem’. It is important to note that American Jazz is more popular in South Africa than any other African country, due; according to David Coplan, to the existential parallels:⁴⁶ It is also notable, that my focus on Kwaito does not privilege the musical hegemony which obtains in the flow of music from the American

44 S. King, *Blues Tourism* (footnote 23), p. 457.

45 Timothy White, *Catch a Fire: The Life of Bob Marley*, London 1991 [1983], p. 17.

46 David Coplan, *Born to Win: Music of the 'Black Atlantic' Revisited*, paper presented at the National Art Festival, Grahamstown, South Africa (July 6, 2005), p. 11.

musical empire to the rest of the world. Instead I focus on the way Kwaito speaks to and about the Dancehall, an African Diasporic community of music creators and their influence, and the broader Black Atlantic spaces of performance.

Kwaito's similarities with Dancehall are political, musical, social and cultural. Dancehall emerged around the 1950s and 60s as an activity pioneered by the lower classes, a generation seeking political independence from Britain. Kwaito emerged in the era of a democratized South Africa, a new freedom era. As with the 1980s dispensation of accusations about Dancehall's 'slackness'⁴⁷ character (mostly from international critics) juxtaposed with the neo-liberal approach of the Jamaica Labour Party government, Kwaito has been branded with the same empty lyrics thought to flourish under neo-liberal macro-economic rule. Both are seen to have taken cues from the trends of new governments that supposedly gave rise to the advancement of personal wealth, and glamorized gangster lifestyles. Themes in Kwaito and Dancehall music are also similar: social commentary about crime and violence, anti-politics, sexuality/sexual prowess, socially conscious songs about AIDS awareness, and violence against women in an era of increased gang rapes of women especially in South Africa.

In order to illustrate the space of Kwaito and its similarities with Dancehall, I would first like to locate the musical history of South Africa. A genealogy⁴⁸ of Kwaito reveals antecedents such as Marabi nights (1950s), *Mbaqanga* or jive (a musical experience around traditional songs heard in the shebeens), Kwela (1950s), *Mapantsula* (1980's, lower-class culture characterized by large groups of male dancers in synchronized movements very much resembling the 2002 rise of male dancing crews in Jamaica), Bubblegum (1980s), township Jazz, Afro-pop and western musics such as R&B, jungle, hip hop, house, ragga (the name Dancehall is known especially in the European context) and rap: a musical potpourri if there ever was one. The cross-cultural dimensions of Kwaito, specifically the focus on a reading of the Atlantic as a musical space of exchange, have been recently explored by David Coplan. This article extends that reading.

Kwaito is significant for forging new identities beyond apartheid South Africa burdened by a history of isolation. It has distinct styles of dancing, performance, fashion, and language (mostly township slang and indigenous languages). Unlike the protest music of Hugh Masekela, Miriam Makeba, Dolly Rathebe, among others, Kwaito like the 1980s

47 'Slackness' in Jamaica refers here to lyrics about women's body parts, display of women's sexuality whether through lyrics or dance moves. It is also used interchangeably with vulgarity to reference licentious behaviour especially among women.

48 For an ethnomusicological history of South Africa see David B. Coplan, *God Rock Africa: Thoughts on Politics in Popular Black Performance in South Africa*, in: *African Studies*, 64 (2005) 1, pp. 9-27; and Lara Allen, *Kwaito versus Crossed-Over: Music and Identity During South Africa's Rainbow Years, 1994 – 99*, in: *Social Dynamics*, 30 (2004) 2, pp. 82-111. For a review of the scholarship on Kwaito to date, see: Gavin Steingo, *South African Music After Apartheid: Kwaito, the "Party Politic" and the Appropriation of Gold as a Sign of Success*, in: *Popular Music and Society*, 28 (2005) 3, pp. 333-357. This article details pre-Kwaito, stars of Kwaito, the break with and similarities with earlier music genres, the role of legislation in the promotion of Kwaito in the media, Mandela's presidency as the defining period, development of the industry and its successful takeover by the youth culture, and the meaning and metaphor of gold in the new politics of acquisition, subversion, critique and appropriation.

emergence of Dancehall music is thought to be apolitical⁴⁹, with often misogynist content focussed on girls, cars and partying, and sexually explicit dance moves. The general opinion is that its arbiters seek to dissociate themselves from agony, struggle, conflict and exploitation, “[...] a cultured degree of estrangement”⁵⁰ from the generation X that fought for the end of apartheid. As Thandiswe of Bongo Maffin fame stated in an interview - “Kwaito [is] about the energy of the time, post-independence youth expressing their freedom and excitement about everything being so brand new”⁵¹. This signals a movement into a new iteration of youth culture, ghetto youth culture, one linked to city life and not the rural backward and seemingly unprogressive life of grandparents:⁵² Siswe Satyo says the performative language and ethos of Kwaito is “about throwing off the shackles of archaic rules imposed by some village schoolmaster or mistress. It is a benchmark of ‘sophistication and creativity’ within the peer group.”⁵³ Kwaito stars are a new generation. They include M’du, Arthur, Oskido, Lebo, Mzekezeke, Mafikizolo, Mandoza, Mzambi, Chicco, Zola; groups like Boom Shaka, Bongo Maffin, Trompies, Aba Shante, and Genesis.

Kwaito is seen as the “true music of the new South Africa[n]”⁵⁴ rainbow nation, born when Nelson Mandela was released, defining a generation, popular television programmes and advertisements, films, websites, magazines, radio waves, fashion, a signifier for today’s freedoms. Considered the music of township youth, it is a black dance music genre blending various musical cultures, and it signifies ‘age and locale’ at once:⁵⁵ Between 1999 and 2004, 30 percent of all hit songs were Kwaito tunes and an analysis of the industry suggests that 31 percent of all adults are part of the “Kwaito nation”.

Kwaito is ubiquitous within South Africa as Dancehall music is in Jamaica. The music pumps out of minibus taxis, clubs, radio bashes, shebeens, and parties. Technology has reordered the spaces of production and consumption of Kwaito, making it possible to produce a Kwaito recording from start to finish by one or two persons often in one location, and consumed in another. Distance is inconsequential and space is about flows, the local/global influences all feeding each other. Kwaito is beyond the sound economies,

49 This criticism has also been leveled at Dancehall. However Kwaito’s, like Dancehall’s politics are seen in the discourses about safe sex, the AIDS pandemic etc. Steingo warns that Kwaito’s rejection of politics as a stance is political, and that there is a new politics of wealth beyond struggle realized through opportunities made available through music.

50 See: Sarah Nuttall, *Stylizing the Self: The Y Generation in Rosebank, Johannesburg*, in: *Public Culture*, 16 (2004) 3, pp. 430-452, here p. 451.

51 Maria McCloy, *Mama Africa Meets the Kwaito Generation: Interview with Musicians Miriam Makeba and Thandiswe*, in: *UNESCO Courier* (July 2000), http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m1310/is_2000_July/ai_63845103/ (accessed on 27 August 2011).

52 Cf. Simon Stephens, *Kwaito*, in: Sarah Nuttall/Cheryl-Ann Michael (eds.), *Senses of Culture: South African Culture Studies*, Oxford 2000, pp. 256-273; L. Allen, *Kwaito versus Crossed-Over* (footnote 49), 140 and Siswe Satyo, *Kwaito-speak: A Language Variety created by the Youth for the Youth*, in: *Freedom and Discipline*, 2001.

53 S. Satyo, *Kwaito-speak* (footnote 53), p. 141.

54 See: World Economic Forum, *South Africa at Ten: Perspectives by Political, Business and Civil Leaders*, Cape Town/Pretoria 2004, p. 156.

55 L. Allen, *Kwaito versus Crossed-Over* (footnote 49), p. 86.

racialized “spatialities and temporalities of apartheid”⁵⁶ and allows, like Dancehall and the Blues, for the circulation of another ‘version’ of local text, space and the everyday, a sort of ‘transnational/cosmopolitan performance’.

While its appeal is to the youth, its purchase is clearly understood by the older generation, evidenced by its incorporation into political campaigns to mobilize voters. This is similar to the incorporation of the popular Rastafari symbolism and Rastafari-inspired music, as well as Dancehall music, into election campaigns of political parties in Jamaica.

Johannesburg and its surrounding townships, in particular Soweto, hold important sites of memory for Kwaito. The township is associated with high levels of danger for the average black South African youth: high murder rates, police harassment, hardship and squalid conditions. Visual representation of Soweto’s poor neighbourhoods will feature horse-drawn carts, dirt surface roads, mud brick homes, barefoot children, and intense overcrowding. Since the 1930s for example, there were few services in townships like Soweto and Sophiatown. Roads, lighting, and water were non-existent. Families survived on low wages earned in mines and illegal brewing of beer by women.

This system of deprivation induced a whole culture of survival of which music was only one form of expression. By the 1950s, beer, music, and dancing came together especially on weekends around the shebeens. The Shebeen Queen’s house was cleared of furniture and, for a modest entrance fee, patrons were treated to live music, beer and stew. As in the Blues juke joints where Chitterlings were served and in Dancehalls in Jamaica where ‘mannish water’ made from goat innards was an important part of the fare, so in Soweto, the lowly tripe was elevated to a delicacy in the social sessions referred to as ‘Tripe parties’. Tripe is sold during the sessions because it is understood as “useful for overcoming hangovers and recovering from Sunday drinking”⁵⁷.

Shebeens are to be understood as sites of control, spaces of surveillance and closure, especially under Apartheid. However dance and music performance constructs an alternative political, spatial, and cultural narrative for the shebeen, an identity inconsistent with dominant political interests. While invoking and expanding work by James Scott, Allen⁵⁸ clarifies that music inherently has ‘hidden transcripts’ that have private meanings made public by the medium of transmission. By virtue of the transmission to various audiences musical messages transgress and rebut hegemonic discourses, a sharp departure from Modernist conceptions of leisure (including the consumption of music) which see pleasure as its only utility.

One glaring opposition to such constructions is the way dance halls, shebeens, and juke joints construct a politics of enjoyment even as the everyday militates against it. The existence of such enjoyment assaults and mocks the oppressive everyday and those who construct and maintain it. Enjoyment can reduce the potential to incite violence against the self and community because it channels energies in a pleasurable way. Where planta-

56 See: Achille Mbembe et al., *Soweto Now*, in: *Public Culture*, 16 (2004) 3, pp. 499-506, here p. 500.

57 Cf. *ibid.*

58 L. Allen, *Music and Politics in South Africa*, in: *Social Dynamics*, 30 (2004) 2, pp. 1-19.

tion, township and ghetto folk are left to self-destruct in the quagmire of oppression, they mock that oppression by surviving in its face. Thus the very spaces created for consumption and production of cultural forms and access to pleasure constitute sites of political power for that practice and the people who create them.

It is important to note that shebeens were also meeting places for activists during apartheid. There is a parallel there with the fact that rude boys, gang members and dons who sometimes met in Jamaica's Dancehall sessions to (symbolically) taunt/rival other gangs and police officials by their very presence in the dance, though not necessarily to plan insurrection. Many of them are wanted men and numerous raids on dance sessions were thought to be as a result of gunmen, rude boys or dons hiding in the dance hall.

Different types of shebeens attracted different audiences: the 'respectable' versus the very 'low-class'. Sometimes Shebeen parties went on all night. Shebeens still form an important part of today's social scene. Haile Stone in her research on shebeens noted the function that they play in contemporary South Africa comparing them to juke joints: they "serve a function similar to jook joints for African-Americans in the rural South".⁵⁹ They are a social institution building a sense of community and group identity. Shebeens shaped the city's cultural geography cutting across class, but shaped by blacks. They are also called taverns and today are legally operated by mostly men instead of women. They now host young adults in the 18-20 age cohort typically having facilities such as tables, chairs and decorated dance floors.

"Kwaito is steeped in the ghetto"⁶⁰, draws its sustenance from it, and generates dialogue with other ghettos around the world. With Kwaito, urban youth could now spend their nights in clubs rather than under curfew. This is the context in which Kwaito emerged. Youth gangs are a real part of the everyday life of the ghetto and they are also role models for youth who aspire to gain material wealth quickly:⁶¹ But wealth achieved from the music has fostered upward mobility and stimulated out migration from South African ghettos. Kwaito, like the Blues and Dancehall provides a way out of the township / ghetto even as it forms the source from which the music has its sustenance. One artist named himself Zola after the area in Soweto from which he came.

In the ghetto, the street is an important site: On weekends, streets are taken over by jams or bashes where aspiring actors try to woo audiences and attract the attention of producers. The street is the first stage for many aspirants.

There is much more to Kwaito though and I want to focus on its connections with Jamaican reggae / Dancehall style. Simon Stephens for example, argues that "Kwaito's appropriation of the ragga vocal style and aspects of modern European dance music is a direct result of black South African exposure to these", and a strategy employing "symbols of a black cultural ecumene and resistance"⁶². But this is a simple way of stating

59 See Haile Stone's seminar paper on Shebeens at http://scnc.ukzn.ac.za/doc/ARTS/Music/Stone-H_2001_Dance_and_Music.pdf (accessed 27 August 2011).

60 M. McCloy, Kwaito, in: UNESCO Courier (July 2000), p. 1.

61 David Coplan, in unpublished personal interview with author, July 2005.

62 S. Stephens, Kwaito (footnote 53), p. 257.

what is a deeper relationship and conversations between Africa and its Diaspora on the one hand, the Black Atlantic and the relationship between Jamaican reggae musicians and the South African liberation struggle.

The first Kwaito group was Boom Shaka, and it is no coincidence that its leader Junior Dread (Junior Sokhela a street boy from the Hillbrow area) had a long relationship with Jamaican music through his uncle. According to Junior,

I've been a reggae fan since I was young because I had an uncle, and my uncle was an MK soldier. So what he did, he used to play Bob Marley but he loved Winston Rodney (Burning Spear). They loved Burning Spear, Culture (Joseph Hill), and he had like Mutabaruka, I-Roy and U-Roy... I used to hear all of them when I was young and I didn't know, but I got so interested, because he used to play them loud and they couldn't allow us to play any music which we want, so because it was his radio we had to listen to his music. So he'd put on a Prince Fari album and play it like non-stop everyday. So we'd be singing to that and I got used to it, I started imitating it. By that time as a youth I was still confused: I used to do break dancing, Ragga, and do football everything [but] I just loved music.⁶³

Similarly, a telling statement by the Kwaito artist Stoaan explained the kind of conversation taking place across the Atlantic musicscape about aspiration, transformation, the politics of progress and freedom. He states: “when kwaito started, we had aspirations. We wanted to be like hip hop and ragga, like all the other forms of urban music that also came out of the ghetto and became huge.”⁶⁴ Elaborating, Stoaan added:

If we had to look at any other example of Black people off the continent who have found their essence, it's Jamaicans. For us, for South Africans after the curtain was lifted, after we could see other things besides what was presented to us on television which was blackploitation movies and stuff like that, buffoons, you know the picture of us. Any other successful picture of a black man was him behaving like a caricature of himself. So Jamaicans brought another element to a picture we had of us as an out of body experience. Yeah, so I think you'll find that a lot of people, you know, have been touched by the culture, in South Africa, within ten years.⁶⁵

Stoaan's invocation of the ghetto as the space of creation and identity can be viewed against the backdrop of its use within sociology and anthropology. Ulf Hannerz contextualizes ghetto as an “anti-euphemism” for innercity or slum indicating the poor run-down conditions but also the “nature of community and its relationship to the outside world”, ethnicity, family ties and other factors that keep people living in the same space, ultimately producing a ghetto lifestyle:⁶⁶ What is different about early ghettos like the

63 Personal interview with author, July 2005

64 M. McCloy, The Kwaito Story, in: Rage. South African Street Culture Online, 43 (2004).

65 Personal interview with author, July 2005

66 Ulf Hannerz, *Soul Side: Inquiries into Ghetto Culture and Community*, Chicago 2004 [1969], p. 11.

one Hannerz studied and contemporary ones, particularly in Jamaica, is that their 'status as communities' is not necessarily determined by strong dependency on relationships with outsiders who dominate and jobs that are found on the outside for example. Fundamentally, economic and political self-sufficiency is low relative to non-ghetto communities. What exists, in addition to high unemployment and economic support maintained sometimes through illicit activities around the trade in illegal substances, weapons, and certain entertainment ventures, and little movement inwards or outwards on a daily basis by the majority of its citizens, is the proliferation of bonds of internal solidarity around music and dance. There is a transnational news and migratory network that they operate in, a sort of World Wide Web on the one hand distributing news of struggles and victories of daily life through music and the tangible links through travel among ghetto citizenry via Brixton, Bronx, Lagos and Soweto.

The spaces of Kwaito are varied and can be viewed, like Dancehall and Blues venues, on a continuum from community to commercial, based on the nature and type of events they host. Kwaito music is heard in refurbished warehouses, university stadia, clubs, parks, semi-private and private parties, festivals, stage shows and street bashes, train stations and free concerts hosted by record companies that attract sponsorship from multinational cooperations like Pepsi-cola. Events are most common in the summer and are used to celebrate public holidays, commemorative occasions, birthdays, anniversaries, victory after a soccer match, marriage, and to conclude interment rites.

The street bash was the most ubiquitous in the early period and still exists today. They have always been held in contravention of state laws, and during Apartheid they were raided. The street is transformed into an event when the sound system is set up and people gather for the evening. These are the common weekend township bashes which don't attract a cover charge. Clubs on the other hand attract cover charges and range in the class of their clientele and location. Clubs such as Tandor and Rockefellers in Yeoville, Horror Café, Enigma and Sanyaki in Rosebank, and the Stage in Randburg, are all in the greater Johannesburg area. Major centres such as Cape Town, Durban, and Pretoria have numerous clubs spotting the nightscape.

In a sense, Kwaito has achieved in ten years what the Blues didn't and Dancehall has recently achieved: there are solid artists that own recording studios, are producers, DJs and own record labels and video production companies, travel the world on tours, occupy soundscapes that are simultaneously local, national, regional and transnational. Oskido, who is a DJ and a producer with his own record label and video production company has played regionally within Africa, Europe, and the United States. Another good example of this is the recent travel itinerary of Bongo Maffin: they have toured the United States twice, played at 'Reggae on the River' in California, opened for Basement Jaxx in Central Park at 'Summer Stage', opened for Yellow Man at Sounds of Brazil in New York, played at the peace concert at the Coliseum (a stage which was shared by Ray Charles, Khalid and others some three years ago), opened for Femi Kuti at Hollywood Ball in California, played at small clubs in Germany and other European and United Kingdom destinations.

Like Dancehall, dancing has given Kwaito increased appeal. Dance moves were popularized by the first group Boom Shaka and they continue the creation of dances with recent moves like ‘Chop di grass’⁶⁷ done to honour the men who cut grass when highways are being constructed. Dancing girls are a motivation for men to go to Kwaito parties and stage shows. Boom Shaka explains that their dancing is African and comes from the *Kwasa Kwasa* urban dance from Zaire which is popular among South African youth and performed mostly in the Shebeens to Kwaito music. Dance moves are sexy and included the ‘Butterfly’⁶⁸, the ‘*Squga*’ (get down) dance named after Mzekezeke’s recent ‘song of the year’, Madiba jive (after one of Mandela’s famous moves on his release from prison), Chicken (from 1980s, mimicking moves of the chicken), Copetsa, Sekele (a circle dance from the traditional), CODESA (literally the Convention for a Democratic South Africa, the name given to the negotiations around the reconstruction period), Basson (named after the whites thought to be involved in the killing of Blacks with the HIV virus), and Tobela (Boom Shaka’s song of the same Sotho name meaning ‘thank you’, a greeting which was fashioned into a dance resembling Dancehall’s Signal the Plane). Like Jamaican dance moves, they offer a window to the everyday life of South Africans while adding to the global conversation about meaning/representation and embodiment. DJs and producers have suggested that over fifty dance moves have been created since Kwaito’s emergence building on traditional as well as regional dance influences.

With a healthy dance culture, there are contestations over the display, size and form of the female body as a site onto which many inscriptions about propriety, work, ethics and morality have been written. And, it is a site in which gender relations are being revised. In an interview David Coplan explained the point he made in his 2005 article about the complex renegotiations in gender relations which cannot be oversimplified in discussions about sexualized performance in Kwaito. In reference to a music video by his favourite Kwaito group – Trompies, David Coplan described the story depicted:

...there’s a beauty contest at the bar and the contestants, some of them ‘fohloza’ [a word coined to mimic the sound fat moving on a woman’s body makes] and some of them are spaghetti, very thin, and we know that society favours spaghetti nowadays, you have to be thin. But the band is not having it. As the girls are introduced across the stage, every time there’s a biggish one they’re all going ‘wow look at her!’, or ‘look at that one’, ‘look at her’ only for the big ones and they are ignoring the slender ones. So they have their beauty contest: first second and third prize are taken by the big ones and the spaghettis loose out. And then these girls who won the contest they leave the club with members of the band who are admiring them... Of course it was hugely popular because first of all, a lot of our ladies do tend to be on the larger side and they can’t manage the spaghetti look. Second of

67 Junior Dread says he is the first person in South Africa to do ragga music.

68 Most likely the Jamaican one, I have not yet verified this.

*all it was just reversing the social stereotype that, you know, to be beautiful you must be thin, so the band was turning that upside down.*⁶⁹

These discourses are of course not unique to Kwaito. Hip Hop and Dancehall have mature conversations about the place, nature, beauty and power of woman, woman as whore, wife, sweetheart, diseased, virtuous, as well as the conniving woman.

5. Millennial Indaba my Children! – The Atlantic as Drum

What is the significance of this trajectory, these similarities, the links, the common genealogy? Why performance geography versus cultural history? What I have shared with you is an alternative way of looking at performance through space, particularly, the Black Atlantic as space, a musical and performance space. Dancehall, Kwaito, and the Blues are racialized performance sites of contestation, travel and transience, transcendence and boundarylessness, pleasure and ritual, innovation, hybridity and social integration that have fed each other and continue to do so. Their citizenry simultaneously enact, reclaim, reconnect and renew self and diasporic cultural identity. Like Dancehall and the Blues, Kwaito constitutes a more recent site of “psychic relocation”⁷⁰, embodying questions and paths toward making space, a new self and nation, also taking place within various sites in the Black Atlantic world.

Putting this into language closer to home, Braithwaite’s notion of nation language helps us understand what happens out of the affirmation that Jamaican Patois speaks through us, of us and for us to the world of growing converts who especially in Japan learn patois before/instead of English propelled by the distance education provided by Reggae and Dancehall music. In the case of music it is diasporic language transmitted through performance. Performance, like spirituality, can be seen as a network linking us to the source of existence through ritual, our inner selves, and each other across different terrains, nations and identities. It tells stories about deep connections. I wish to echo Wole Soyinka’s plea for a millennial indaba on United States soil as a point on which to conclude my arguments. Soyinka, as an exiled citizen of Africa and a citizen of the Diaspora, actively contemplated the relationship between the children of the Diaspora and those on the continent. Soyinka spoke of the “oceans of ignorance still separate[ing] the general black population from the mother continent...”⁷¹ He believes a “percussive impact is required, a mammoth-scale, extended event that celebrates and contextualizes both the African past & contemporary reality”. A millennial indaba is what Soyinka posits as the way to achieve this through conferences, exhibitions, film, performing arts, celebration, to promote exchange. This was his vision for bringing in the new era and closing the past.

69 Personal interview with author, July 2005

70 L. Allen, Kwaito versus Crossed-Over (footnote 49).

71 Wole Soyinka, A Millennial Indaba?, <http://www.edofolks.com/html/pub34.htm> (accessed 27 August 2011).

The terrain I have covered, especially Kwaito, suggests an alternative way to view the millennial indaba. The sounds of the Caribbean, especially of Jamaica travelled to the United States (depending on your chronology or depth of research) and influenced the emergence of the Blues which in turn influenced the music of Jamaica and South Africa. South, as the rest of Africa, has been influenced both by the Diasporans in the United States and Jamaica. There is a large network of travel and cross-fertilisation through which exchange and learning helped wash away the ‘oceans of ignorance’ Soyinka discusses. The millennial indaba, albeit the indabas that have occurred in South Africa and other countries, has been achieved using what ordinary people have always had – the common impulse to create, to perform in spite of the odds in marginal/ized circumstances.

Therefore, I start where I began; at the bottom of the Atlantic are the tracks of black ivory laid down throughout the years of the Middle Passage slave trade. The ivory is moving to the beat of a triangular trade in reverse, bones flowing with the rhythms back to Africa. As our ancestors had little space in which to perform so did their offspring evidenced in the Blues, Dancehall and Kwaito. In instances where performers have had to create space to meet their need to celebrate in the face of oppression and repression, the adoption of a philosophy of limitless space and boundarylessness, allows for the reclamation, multiplication, and transcendence of space. This is what performers in the contexts where repression propels struggle achieved.