Intro: Tracking the Cross-Cultural Field – The Journey to Jamaican Dance

Cultures are most fully expressed in and made conscious of themselves in their ritual and theatrical performances. [...] A performance is a dialectic of "flow," that is, spontaneous movement in which action and awareness are one, and "reflexivity," in which the central meanings, values and goals of a culture are seen "in action," as they shape and explain behavior. A performance is declarative of our shared humanity, yet it utters the uniqueness of particular cultures. We will know one another better by entering one another's performances and learning their grammars and vocabularies.

(VictorTurner)

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The first time I see the National Dance Theatre Company of Jamaica perform is on a research trip to London. Newspaper clippings, photographs, poetry, and drama as well as some postcolonial discourse inform much of my understanding of the Caribbean at this point. I might have a vague notion of the geography from looking at maps, but entering Queen Elizabeth Hall at the Southbank Center – only a foot-walk away from "Shakespeare's Globe" – the Caribbean is all of a sudden astonishingly real. While multi-cultural London I find myself quite familiar with, the cross-culture in here moves to a rather different vibe. Performative gestures, a different tone of voice and music to the language, which I cannot yet place, but do quite enjoy. The atmosphere in the lobby is already part of my journey into Jamaica's dance. As I watch people move, my body, too, takes in of their energy, and what I have read about comes fantastically into being. I'm engulfed by the presentness of situation, as I discern the group of dancers on the other side of the room. Sort of desperately I wish to walk over. But they are safe-guarded away from me and I also would have felt far too embarrassed to step up and converse with them. Standing in that crowd, I have entered my own dream-world, which is a fiction of discursive fragments, suddenly blurred with what feels somewhat more real, as it appears directly in front of me. And then, the next thing I even more vaguely recall is not even much, as I struggle to find the words for the sort of sensation that still feels very dear to me. For what remained of their dance, is only an imprint of color, its beauty, and maze – fantastic imaginary of an unknown vigor and elegance ...[1]

Pondering upon the meaning of "crossing" in the context of my journal/ey towards an academic understanding of Jamaican dance theatre, I have come to realize that it is actually far easier today to cross the borders of countries than that of their cultural communities and practices. While I can easily hop on an airplane and fly from Germany to London or Jamaica, what I see first hand is seldom what I get.[2] Enticed by the exotics of a faraway place – Jamaica, for example – I remain a

1 Entry from my personal research journal.

2 James Clifford pointedly addressed the twentieth century's ethnographic-crisis of authority. Compare James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture. Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard UP, 1988). See also Clifford's more recent *Routes. Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard UP, 1997), where he proposes the notion of "travel" and "translation" as alternative paradigms to the hegemonic claims of traditional ethnographic field work.

tourist wherever I go. Walking in the shadow of those who went before me, I cannot escape the "classic quest – exoticist, anthropological, orientalist," whichever way I venture (Clifford 1997: 5). Traveling to Jamaica, I become an exotic 'whitey,' all too aware of her European ancestry and its troublesome burden, which though no longer that of presumptuous 'civilization,' is still one of colonialist guilt and economic privilege. Yet, against all odds, why would I choose not to write about Jamaican dance theatre, if that is actually what I find myself most interested in? So, this researcher enthusiastically packed her suitcase to set out in Victor Turner's best sense, precisely to get to "know one another better by entering one another's performances" (Schechner 1990: 1). Yet, as I traveled along, the journey itself turned into an ever more curious performance that appeared after all at least as fascinating as Jamaican dance theatre itself. For example, I remember how estranged I found 'duty free' London Heathrow on my first return: the cleanliness of the airport's glass lounge glitter – something I had formerly not really paid attention to. Suddenly, my own role transformations, their unexpected twists and turns, became as much part of the present analysis as the dance itself which ultimately cannot be separated from each other to begin with.

Contemporary performance studies, in the wake of Richard Schechner's and Victor Turner's pioneering collaboration between theatre studies and anthropology since the mid-1960s, examine precisely such limits of life and theatre within the intercultural context. Performance studies' interdisciplinary approach appeared therefore particularly rewarding for this research project, as the discipline addresses the increasingly complex "questions of embodiment, action, behavior and agency" in the global context (Schechner 2002: 2). Starting from Turner's intercultural studies of theatre and ritual, performance studies have bridged the discursive divide between so-called cultural as opposed to more traditionally speaking theatrical performances. According to Schechner, studying performances involves analyzing as much as doing performance. "Performing fieldwork," hence proposes an alternative theatre-anthropological paradigm to locate Otherness within oneself, rather than to confine it to an outside object of inquiry (Schechner 2002: 2). Acknowledging that there can never be a neutral much less objective perspective, performance studies finally investigate the interrelated politics of research's analytic propositions in order to critically interrogate their hegemonic foundations.

While such meta-critical awareness of analytic bias has certainly become indispensable, it may, however, set up its own discursive entrapment, as I have come to experience. In fact, constant questioning can lead to some degree of intellectual paralysis, especially, when working in the so-called cross-cultural field of ever more difficult class, gender, and "race" divides.[3] Thus, throughout this project's journey, the research process was haunted by several interrogative suspicions and torn between their manifold implications. When in Jamaica, for example, I found myself representing quite unwillingly the colonizer/tourist self, whereas people in Germany would suspect me of pursuing the age-old exotic/erotic desire enticed by the presumed pleasure of spending quality time in tropical environs. Certainly, there were many more dubious roles and research-performances to be played: amateur dancer, scholarly critic, interviewer, observer and participant. The dull old stereotypes abounded on both sides and posed several crossings that research obviously still has to face. Dance research has since become much more of a methodologically experimenting quest than expected: in-between disciplines, I found myself analyzing and performing in rather distinct cultural and theatrical spaces, and yet discovering that somehow all of them were hardly separate, but curiously intertwined. In this respect, methodology and style of this scholarly investigation will vary throughout the three larger sections in order to reflect at least to some extent this discursive cross-disciplinary mediation between performance studies, postcolonial theory, and dance historiography and analysis.

Historically, Jamaican dance theatre emerged as a highly complex art form, which blends ritual-based African Caribbean folk dance movement with German expressionist and U.S. modern dance techniques. Consequently, Jamaican dance theatre has evolved as a cultural hybrid with social, political, and aesthetic implications. Certainly, Jamaica's performative hybridity does not only apply to dance theatre, but presents rather another variant of the Caribbean islands' exuberant cultural creolization processes (see Shepherd/Richards 2002). Moreover, the region's confusing texture of modernity and ancestral tradi-

3 Despite the recent deconstruction of "race," academic discourse and political correctness in their attempt to do away with the concept, have too often overlooked the political impact of contemporary raci(ali)sm still at work. However historically constructed "race" appears, its historicity proves unfortunately still real enough to be critically acknowledged for (Gilroy 2000: 286-287; Mills 1998: 14).

tions makes it difficult to place Caribbean culture within either one of the two paradigms (Mintz 1974: 37-38). The Caribbean's alleged sameness is oftentimes misleading, because it may allow for an easy surface consumption at the cost of missing the better half of it.[4] In order to acknowledge Jamaican dance theatre's complexity, one therefore needs to investigate as much of the region's socio-political history as well as the evolution of Jamaican dance forms in terms of their aesthetic transformation and theatrical meaning from ritual setting onto the theatre stage. Emerging from dance traditions under plantation slavery, Jamaican folk dances inform not only the recreational dance sphere, but have also significantly shaped the artistic dance theatre vocabulary. Conventional distinctions between popular and high art performances do consequently not apply, since both forms have mutually inspired and enriched each other.

Due to the Caribbean's history of colonization, Jamaican dance theatre thus falls into the broader category of what Jacqueline Lo and Helen Gilbert have termed "cross-cultural theatre" (see Lo/Gilbert 2002). According to their definition, cross-cultural theatre is "characterized by the conjunction of specific cultural resources at the level of narrative content, performance aesthetics, production processes, and/or reception by an interpretive community" (Lo/Gilbert 2002: 31). This umbrella definition for the wide range of theatrical practices to be encountered in the global arts market of today is further divided into subbranches, of which "postcolonial theatre" engages in "both a historical and discursive relation to imperialism, whether that phenomenon is treated critically or ambivalently" (Lo/Gilbert 2002: 35). As such it is often also cross-cultural, since it involves processes of inter-/intracultural negotiation in terms of dramaturgy, aesthetics, and interpretation according to oftentimes varying audiences. Caribbean postcolonial theatre performances fit into this model, since they not only present cross-cultural aesthetics, but have also continuously been involved in the emancipation and decolonization struggles of the region's multicultural populations (see Balme 1999; Gilbert/Tompkins 1996). Whether one thinks of the renowned Trinidad Carnival, Bob Marley's Reggae or contemporary Dancehall, the performative aspects of Caribbean popular culture have been widely discussed (see Hill 1972; Mason

4 Awam Amkpa in his study of Nigerian and English postcolonial theatre has referred to this phenomenon as "overlapping modernities," i.e. postcolonial identity formation conceived as the "site of perpetual hybridity and translations of subjectivity" (2004: 1-18).

1998; Cooper 2004). However, as Caribbean dance theatre somehow falls in-between the performative popular and traditional modern dance theatre conventions, it appears to have been slightly neglected by recent academic discourse.

Yet, Gilbert and Tompkins have stressed that an analysis of dance and dance theatre in the postcolonial context appears most urgent, for dance's embodied body politics (1996: 237-242). According to their analysis, the postcolonial body emerges as "locus of struggle," which speaks its "own forms of corporeality" as opposed to the Western practice of logo centric expression (1996: 242). More generally, the dancing body not only functions as one of the most charged sites of theatrical representation, but it can also be regarded as a marker of cultural identity (Albright 1997: xxvi). Dance theatre thus oscillates between representational and embodied performances of cultural self-definition. Moreover, dance theatre also speaks of cultural sameness within difference, since each dance presents an individual and simultaneously shared history.[5] The controversial question of an alleged universality of dance movement is thus raised against the apparent individuality of movement created by different enculturation processes. While everybody does indeed move, the particular style and significance of such movement may vary considerably.[6] As opposed to the much contested and yet still prevalent Cartesian separation of body and mind in Western discourse, an understanding of cultural expression as primarily embodied interrelates both entities in the conceptualization of self-identity.

In comparison to lay people, trained dancers, athletes and actors achieve heightened body awareness as they constantly mediate between an experiential consciousness of the interconnectedness of body movement and self-enactment. As J. L. Lewis argues, the artist's body finds itself in continuous moments of "ecstatic action," i.e. "using the body as an instrument for action on and in the world" (1995: 225).

5 Balme points out that dance plays a significant part in most syncretic theatre forms, for indigenous dance traditions may simultaneously function as an "almost universal form of performative expression" as well as "an index of historical and cultural authenticity" (1999: 202-213).

6 J. Lowell Lewis has thus argued that "bodies are culturally co-constructed" in so far as "people name, divide, understand, and imagine bodies differently in different societies," thus arguing "that there are real constraints as to the possible ways bodies can be enculturated; in fact, the similarities between cultural systems in this regard are just as striking as the differences, if not more so" (1995: 225).

Dance thus performs identity in an "intermediate mode" by constantly "monitoring" between self/body, i.e. awareness/practice (1995: 229-230).[7] Focusing on embodiment rather than representation, phenomenological dance analysis therefore seeks to liberate the body from the constraints of ideological objectification. By evidencing that in fact our bodies constantly mediate between the objective and the pre-objective, Thomas J. Csordas stresses that it is rather through "perceptual processes" than essentialist givens that we "end in objectification" of our body/selves (1994: 7). Phenomenology therefore posits our bodies not as the object, but rather "the source of subjectivity, and mind [vice versa] as the locus of objectification" (Csordas 1994: 8-9). As opposed to the Cartesian immanent claim of 'I think, therefore I am,' phenomenology refers to enacted "interpersonal engagement" as the source of self-knowledge (Csordas 1994: 10). However, simply identifying bodily practice as non-representational does not suffice. Csordas consequently suggests to methodologically juxtapose semiotics and phenomenology as "dialectical partners" rather than exclusive concepts (1994: 12).

Such a partnering of approach is particularly crucial for a discussion of dance theatre, because dance theatre presents both the actively empowering activity of embodied self-knowledge as well as the more passive conveyance of a representational stage image.[8] Especially, since much of the NDTC (**N**ational **D**ance **T**heatre **C**ompany of Jamaica) vocabulary derives from an African Caribbean ritualistic source, the experiential element of empowerment appears stronger in Jamaican dance theatre than, for example, in more visual-based forms of theatrical dancing, such as classical ballet.[9] Religion as an expression of the Caribbean's cosmological world view is essential to an understanding of the region's dance theatre in this context. Caribbean dance cannot be separated from its religious roots, since much of the NDTC's distinct modern dance style derives directly from African Caribbean religions

7 Similarly, Richard Schechner has argued for "imitation as a way of acquiring performance knowledge" in the sense that expert performers apprehend "the body on its own terms, as movement, gesture, tone of voice" (2002: 198).

8 In his phenomenological study of theatre Bert O. States pursues a similar argument, where he critiques semiotics as a "useful, if incomplete discipline" in regard of performance analysis (1998: 6-8).

9 For a phenomenological analysis of different dance cultures compare Bull 1997: 269-287.

and their embodiment of ancestral spirits in dance performance.[10] Rex Nettleford, artistic director of the NDTC, has therefore argued "that viewers of African dance need to understand Africa's cultural heritage if they are to understand and critically appreciate in any depth the true meaning and aesthetic authority of what is being seen" (1996: xiv). Considering the prevalence of Western epistemic hegemony, he furthermore urges a re-assessment of the aesthetic value and meaning of these dance forms, of which many must still be fully acknowledged of, particularly in the New World African diaspora. As Nettleford points out:

> The acknowledgement of such logic and consistency in African dance still presents difficulties to many in the diaspora where the creolization process, through the cross-fertilization of cultures, defines the existence of all inhabitants and pushes a great number of the cross-fertilized beings and their cultural expressions to stations of confusion as to what, of the ingredients in the plurality are proper and what not, what are superior and what are inferior, what are aesthetically acceptable, and what forbidden and so on. Needless to say, in the world of colonizer-colonized the dance and all other artistic expressions of the overlord take precedence over those of the subjugated which have been frozen at the base of some rigid and arbitrary cultural pyramid (1996: xv).

Hence, the present study not only suggests to question such cultural pyramids per se, but also to propose an alternative analytic paradigm of critical assessment.

Facing these rather complex discursive challenges, an accounting for the Caribbean's kinaesthetic performativity in dance theatre will hence be pursued via the interdisciplinary approach suggested above. As Jane C. Desmond has explained: "dancing bodies are performative in every sense of the word, [since they] enact a conception of self and social community mediated by the particular historical aesthetic dimensions of the dance forms and their precise conditions of reception" (1997: 16). Only by looking through the multi-faceted perspective of juxtaposing a socio-historical with a dance aesthetic reading, can Caribbean dance more adequately be circumscribed. As also Cynthia J. Novack asserts, dance as a "complicated, multivocalic" cultural prac-

10 For further entries primarily on dance anthropological research of Caribbean dance forms compare Adamczyk 1989: 61-63; 88-89. See also Emery 1989: 61-63; 88-89.

tice becomes performatively speaking particularly significant, because the "same dance form may generate different meanings as its setting, participants, and institutional frameworks change" (1995: 181). Yet, to complicate matters further, dance not only alternates its meaning depending on the representational frame, but also presents alternation in terms of its constant disappearance as Peggy Phelan has pointed out (1995: 204-205). An apprehension of dance theatre can therefore only be assumed by a writing, which resists closure as it merely "traces the motivations, technologies, and discursive possibilities" of the dance at hand. Consequently, dance writing becomes necessarily a "mediating discourse," which in the case of Caribbean dance theatre not only translates between movements and language, i.e. the kinaesthetic and the written, but also has to examine a complex web of different cultural (con)texts. However, incomplete, contested and reviled as such descriptive and analytic discourse will undoubtedly stand; the study insists that – considering dance theatre's impact and importance in the Caribbean – such research remains an absolute necessity to further intercultural communication.

To summarize these preliminary remarks then, the book begins its cross-cultural journey from the author's first observations of the NDTC's 2001 UK Tour to investigate, which elements exactly distinguished Jamaican dance theatre from other modern dance companies throughout the world. Source data is based on historical, as well as sociological, religious, political, aesthetic and dance related information as they enable more comprehensive analysis and interpretation of the NDTC's dance vocabulary and repertoire. However, as has already been stated, such literary-based reading about dance will hardly suffice, for as one of the arts' most ephemeral genres, dance can only if ever be traced in direct performance.[11] Therefore, the present analysis of NDTC choreography seeks to methodologically balance the discursive and experiential impact of Jamaican dance theatre by providing 1.)

11 For an introduction to dance analysis compare Susan Leigh Foster, *Reading Dancing. Bodies and Subjects in Contemporary American Dance* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986) and Janet Adshead, *Dance Analysis* (London: Dance Books, 1988), Janet Adsheard-Landsdale and June Layson, eds., *Dance History: An Introduction* (London: Routledge, 1994), and Sondra Horton Fraleigh, *Researching Dance* (1999). See also Judith Lynne Hanna, *To Dance is Human: A Theory of Nonverbal Communication* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1987) for an ethnographic approach to dance and movement analysis.

a postcolonial theory frame, 2.) the historical background, as well as 3.) a close reading of selected examples of the NDTC repertoire.[12]

Hence, the book proposes an in-depth study of Jamaican dance theatre in terms of its Caribbean cultural aesthetics, socio-political impact, and significance in the postcolonial theoretical context. Since dance criticism has only recently started to investigate the complex socio-cultural implications of certain dance vocabularies, I suggest that Jamaican dance theatre actually performs subversively from within western modern dance rather than presenting a mere adaptation of it. Whereas "colonial mimicry" has traditionally been defined as "a performance of everyday life in which colonized persons adopt in part or wholesale the culture of their colonizers", more recent critical reassessment by postcolonial theory has pointed to the inherent ambivalence of these performances (Schechner 2002: 233). In the wake of Homi K. Bhabha's seminal analysis therefore, so-called 'colonials' may perform under the guise of apparent likeness, however, as they do so, their imitative performances accomplish quite revolutionary performative effects. As Bhabha defines:

> Mimicry is, thus the sign of a double articulation; a complex strategy of reform, regulation and discipline, which 'appropriates' the Other as it visualizes power. Mimicry is also the sign of the inappropriate, however, a difference or recalcitrance which coheres the dominant strategic function of colonial power, intensifies surveillance, and poses an immanent threat to both 'normalized' knowledges and disciplinary powers (1994: 86).

Presenting "at once resemblance and menace," colonial mimicry may therefore evolve as the site of an anti-essentialist articulation of identity, which dismantles colonialist racism as much as it defies pre-

12 Selections in terms of the NDTC repertoire have naturally been privileging those works, which I have seen in live-performance in London 2001, as well as in Kingston in January 2003, and during the NDTC's 41st dance season from June to August that same year. However, by accessing the NDTC's Kingston archive, I was also able to include video-taped performances of the NDTC's earlier works in order to historically contextualize the company's artistic development. That such a selection can of course hardly acknowledge in full for a repertoire, which encompasses close to 200 choreographies over a time-span of forty years, is self-understood. Focusing on the artistic director Rex Nettleford's work as well as the company's major contemporary choreographers though, certain aesthetic and thematic tendencies and trends can still be ascertained.

colonialist nostalgia for an imaginary homeland. Postcolonialism, consequently, addresses precisely these ambivalent metonymic presences, which strategically perform coherence – whether that be in terms of a subject, nation or state – to access political agency and start off their performers' emancipatory projects (McLeod 2000: 74-75; see also Rajchman 1995).

The first chapter of this book will thus introduce and to some extent reiterate the problematic discourse on Caribbean identity as it has been theorized under the politico-aesthetic creolization paradigm. While Caribbean creolization shares discursive overlap with postcolonial discourse on hybridity, this chapter, however, proposes to rather reassess creolization discourse than to abandon it in favor of a somewhat generalized notion of cultural hybridity.[13] For despite of its ongoing contestment, creolization discourse has historically emerged and survived in the Caribbean, where its contradictory rhetoric has continuously expressed and to some extent also mirrored the political struggle of the islands' diverse populations for postcolonial self-definition. In this respect, creolization discourse oscillates precisely between degrees of cultural imitation and reinvention, which will become useful for my later discussion of Caribbean dance theatre aesthetics and their postcolonial political dynamic in terms of identity formation and nation-building.

The second chapter confronts these discursive debates with the socio-historical background of Jamaica's emancipation and independence movement. Creolization, Afrocentrism and Marronage have been the ongoing rhetorical paradigms of Jamaica's quest for national independence. Yet, while the degree of Creole integration as opposed to an Africanist-oriented resistance will vary, all of these have traditionally built their foundational claim on embodied folk cultural and religious practices, which have survived the hardships of the Middle Passage,

13 Hybridity discourse has been frequently attacked for its derogative association with 19th century biopolitics of social Darwinism and its racist concerns over 'racial purity' and miscegenation. Despite this contested etymological legacy though, hybridity discourse has become a trope of postcolonial theory to articulate an oftentimes conflated notion of cross-cultural synthesis, which lacks historicity and a theorizing of the exact institutional frameworks through which such discourse and its propagated 'hybrid identities' actually come into being (see Brah/Coombes 2000). I therefore consider and somehow reintroduce 'creolization' discourse as the more historicized – if no less contested – concept to articulate anti-essentialist identity discourse and postcolonial national affiliation in the Caribbean.

slavery and plantation economy. Dance as the Caribbean's "weapon of self-defence" (Rex Nettleford) and "cultural guerilla resistance" (Sylvia Wynter) has hence played a not to be underestimated political function throughout the region's ongoing decolonization struggle. As Rex Nettleford proclaims:

> Reaching beyond mere survival, the dance in Jamaica long ago refused to get stuck in genres of light-hearted entertainment despite the ring games, lancers, schottische, and quadrille suitably adapted from the court and country dance of Europe. Instead the dance preserved its force through integrated links with religion in the worship of forbidden but persistent gods, divination rituals, and the configurations of a nether world beyond the master's laws (1995: 99).

This section therefore traces the politico-aesthetic creolization process of Jamaican dance theatre's ongoing abstraction from African Jamaican folk ritualistic roots in order to first contextualize and then highlight Jamaican dance theatre's genesis of a unique modern dance vocabulary.

Far from mere imitation of a Western modern dance idiom, Jamaican dance theatre pioneers of the pre-Independence years have – as will be shown – developed highly original dance works, which were and continue to be deeply rooted in the region's folk and religious dance practices. In fact, Caribbean dance pioneers Beryl McBurnie (Trinidad) and Ivy Baxter (Jamaica) developed a creolist aesthetic from African Caribbean dance religions, which appears highly deceptive in its metonymic resemblance to U.S. modern and also German expressionist dance. Caribbean dance theatre thus emerged from an autochthonous source, which was later on incorporated into Jamaica's postcolonial education system, the annual arts festival, and the foundation of the National Dance Theatre Company. This section surveys the nationalist-emancipatory dance agenda behind and at the heart of the New Jamaica's claim to postcolonial nationalism, folk cultural affiliation and legitimacy.

Part three finally, provides a close reading and aesthetic analysis of selected examples of the Jamaica National Dance Theatre Company's repertoire in performance and on video. Analysis will focus on the NDTC's evolving tradition, Caribbean dance theatre vocabulary and modern innovative explorations. Supporting my previous theoretical and historical argument, these analyses of the repertoire build on the NDTC's claim to postcolonial nationhood. My reading thus seeks to introduce a new dance analytical paradigm in order to more adequately

address Jamaican dance theatre's cross-cultural complexity. Introducing a praxis-informed – at times rather poetic-translational than dance notational – approach, I juxtapose semiotics with phenomenological accounts, as well as several excerpts from interviews with National Dance Theatre Company members and affiliated choreographers.