Title: **Dancing Through Differences: West African Dance in Italy**

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PROLOGUE

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For the first time in eight years studying West African dance in New York, I was not rushing out of the studio after class. Still sweaty from the Sabar dance lesson I had just taken, standing in the busy corridor of Djoniba's Dance Centre I caught a glimpse of the next dance class while waiting for Giulia.[1] I had met Giulia a couple of years earlier at an Ivorian dance course in Florence during one of my attempts to relocate back to Italy. It was my long-time friend and dance colleague, Cristina, who introduced me to the Ivorian dancers' course. Years earlier Cristina and I had met in New York where both of us were pursuing contemporary dance training and taking African dance classes.[2] Every Monday night we would momentarily escape the downtown postmodern dance scene and venture into Fareta, a dance studio nestled in the basement of Broadway and Houston Street, to take a class with Marie Basse, a former dancer member of the Ballet National of Senegal.[3] Back in Italy, we were struggling to find classes that would challenge us like the ones in New York. The dance course offered by a group of Ivorian artists that Cristina had found in Florence was a real treat for us. Unlike New York's African dance classes, which were predominantly populated by experienced Black dancers, this course drew in white Italian women who were mostly university students with no previous dance training. Giulia, the woman I was meeting at Djoniba's today, was also just out of university when she began training with the Ivorian artists in Florence. Giulia and Cristina soon became deeply involved with the Ivorian traditional dances; together with the Ivorian artists they formed a dance company, and both became romantically involved with two of the dancers-

teachers. With plans to pursue graduate studies, I, instead, returned to New York, where months later I was to meet with Giulia.

Giulia arrived up on the 8th floor of Djoniba's Studio with a group of African drummers, although new to the city and the school, Giulia moved around the space with the confidence of somebody familiar with the context. I was impressed with her assurance given that I was always tentative about my own presence in the studio.[4] A few minutes into our conversation, Giulia commented that the "African-American" women in the studio seemed hostile and finished up saying that she was "more African than they were." I suddenly tensed up. Caught off-guard by Giulia's claim of authenticity, I did not inquire whether it was her relationship with an African man or Italy's geographical proximity to the African continent and its history of internal "othering" that allowed her to imagine herself as African while dismissing the importance of African heritage for Black women in the U.S. At the same time, Giulia's comment sounded somewhat familiar in the way it played on the tale of Italians' long history of Mediterranean intermixing.

Ten years later I met once more a perplexing racial remark with another Italian dancer. It was a summer night in the main square of Trento, a small Italian town nestling in the Dolomite mountains of northern Italy, when I ran into Sara and Amadou at a Malian concert. I had moved to the area a few months earlier and had become acquainted with Sara through Amadou's Senegalese dance classes. At the end of the concert, following a short conversation about the skills of the players, Sara candidly exclaimed to Amadou, "I so would like to be a Black woman!" The obliviousness to the meanings of inhabiting a Black body, the race-power relation, and white

> *privilege of Sara's announcement brought back Giulia's claim of authenticity ten years earlier. Since that night, Sara's and Giulia's words echoed whenever I found myself negotiating Italian and US racial politics.*

In the preceding paragraphs, I have retrieved fragments of old conversations with two white Italian women. I am especially interested in their self-identification with Africa (aspired in Sara's case). Giulia's self-identification is complicated by fantasized notion of Mediterranean otherness which is ultimately used to dismiss the diaspora's connection to Africa and the significance of African heritage for American Blacks. These conversations introduce the contextual development and rationale of my research on the diffusion of West African dance in Italy and its reception in relation to the country's history of racial formation and racial ambiguity.

Around the turn of the 21st century, traditional dancing and drumming associated with ethnic groups and practices from West Africa became increasingly widespread in Italy, growing in tandem with local West African diasporic communities and the corresponding national fear and anxiety over migration. The circulation of West African dancing and drumming created a distinct economy of classes, workshops, concerts, festivals, and cultural trips to Africa engaging practitioners and audiences across diverse demography in terms of class, age, profession, and ability. At the same time, it created a substantial network of artists with transnational connections to other African artists in Europe and the African continent. Dance and music provided African artists in Italy with some form of subsistence and, in some cases, a means of legitimately staying in the country. Equally important, it offered visibility and a form of self-identification to the growing West African diasporic communities in Italy. By engendering personal connections, intimacies, and experiences between African artists and, primarily white, Italian students and audiences, it also provided opportunities for encounters

across racial, cultural, and geographical distances. However, as the comments of Giulia and Sara highlight, the reception of West African dances was embedded in problematic discourses that drew upon colonialist racialized imaginaries. In the dominant narratives of Italian students, African dance and drumming became the means for an inner quest of emotional expressivity, spirituality, and connection to nature that was located in an ancestral notion of "Mother Africa." Alongside the problematic reduction of the continent to a single reified category, these narratives often associated African dance with notions of authenticity rooted in romanticized representations of the "primitive" Other.

Part of a larger study based on my participant observation and fieldwork conducted in northern and central Italy in 2009-13 and 2015, this article analyses the ways African dance has been received, engaged with, and framed in Italy.[5] In order to trace the spread of African dance in Italy, I briefly present the work of Black American dancer Bob Curtis and white Italian dancer Katina Genero, two pioneers who first introduced an African-derived movement vocabulary in the Italian dance scene. I then explore the more recent circulation of traditional West African dance forms introduced predominantly by migrating African artists. I analyze the discourses framing African dance and music in relation to the country's colonial and migratory history and its present position as a site of the new African diaspora.[6] In this article, I am focusing on a specific historical moment and recording the trajectory of research that continues to grow as more recent theories on postcolonial Italy and a new generation of Black Italian scholars provide crucial insights on how questions of difference are framed and understood in Italy (see Hawthorne and Pesarini, 2021).

In the prologue, I thread Giulia's, Cristina's, and Sara's stories with my own transnational trajectory as a way to situate my position as a participant-researcher and lay the foundation for the framing of this study in relation to the wider African dance network that has developed in the United States in the last thirty years.[7] Although sharing similarities with its

diffusion in North America, African dance in Italy has moved through different socio-political and economic landscapes, carving distinct processes of diffusion and reception. Giulia's and Sara's comments help me point at the particularities of this context and address the racialization processes underpinning the practices, understandings, and narratives of African dances in Italy. Thinking through the tensions that first fed my transnational engagement with West African dances is also an attempt to carry out what Kamala Visweswaran refers to as an "anthropology in reverse" that speaks about the positionality of the author and deconstructs the distinction between fieldwork and homework (1994, 104). More specifically, I am trying to address questions of legitimacy, voice, representation, and purpose which I have been grappling with since the outset of this research project. If classic colonial discourse analysis initially offered a lens to examine Giulia's and Sara's comments, it also distanced me from what was going on. Therefore, pondering the contradictory nature of these comments is a way to reflect on *my own* entanglement in an Anglophone postcolonial paradigm and how it might not fit all contexts in the same way (Ponzanesi 2012), or might not help fully comprehend how questions of difference, race, and Blackness are framed and understood in different geographical contexts (Hawthorne 2017; 2020).

In the section that follows, I introduce the colonial and migratory history of Italy and its present position as a destination in and of itself, as well as a gateway into Europe for contemporary migrants from the global South, in particular African countries — a migration that has inscribed Italy as a site of the new African diaspora (Riccio 2008, 2011; King and Black 1997).[8] This sweeping account is intended to introduce the processes of racialization of internal and external "Others" that occurred in the country, such as the internal "whitening up of Italians," which had a deep impact on the construction of Italian national identity and, in turn, on current resurgences of racialized nationalism (Lombardi-Diop 2012). My contention here is that discourses about African dance in Italy should be considered in relation to the

history of racialization of the country and its own internal and external diaspora as well as to its semi-peripheral geopolitical position at the rim of an economically declining center. In arguing this, I do not attempt to justify Giulia's romanticized notion of Italians' hybridity through a tale of "Italian exceptionalism" that, as Hawthorne explains, is often invoked in the country to deny the existence of any racism (2017:164). But rather, I seek to point at how racial distinctions play out in different geographical contexts and, consequently, how new analytical lenses are needed to examine how Blackness is reproduced in Italy today.[9]

COLONIALISM, MIGRATION, AND OTHERING IN MODERN ITALY

Modern Italy came into being after a complex historical process that unified all the states of the Italian peninsula. Following its constitutional unification in 1861, the newly formed nation experienced a mass exodus of both international and intra-national migration.[10] Internal migration—the outcome of a historic North-South economic divide—saw people from economically deprived areas of the South move into the industrial centers of the North-West. When southern Italians began to emigrate north they were discriminated against and othered through a colonialist discourse that associated them with Africans—a discourse which was later adopted by the U.S. Immigration Commission at the turn of the 20th century to racialize and question the whiteness of southern Italians (Guglielmo and Salerno 2003, 34).[11] Anthropologist Jane Schneider (1998) pointed out how this political and cultural discourse essentialized and racialized the Italian South through mechanisms that recall Edward Said's Orientalist disciplinary and discursive practices which reduced the South to a homogeneous and inferior Other. Said's own theorization of Orientalism (1978) drew from the lessons that Italian, Marxist thinker Antonio Gramsci developed regarding the subaltern condition of the Italian South. In his essay on the *Southern Question*, Gramsci argued that the unification of Italy involved the construction of southerners as biologically inferior beings and the

dispossession of their lands and political autonomy (2015 [1995]). In other words, Italian national identity was crafted upon the presumed racial diversity of southerners and the geographical marking of the South as an extension of the African territory at the edge of Europe.

Many of the contradictions of this uneven national identity were partially reconciled during Italy's colonization of Africa, the effect of which was to homogenize and whiten Italian national identity through the othering of its colonies (Giuliani and Lombardi-Diop, 2013; Hawthorne 2017; Lombardi-Diop 2012; Pesarini 2021). Shifting the axes of difference from southern Italy to the colonies, colonialism secured the unity of the country and its whiteness. Despite Italy's belated and peripheral participation in the imperial conquest of the African continent and its limited duration and geographical scope, colonialism has had a deep impact on the development of conceptions of race, national identity, and geopolitical imaginary in Italy (Ben-Ghiat and Fuller 2005).[12] Its imperial peak was reached under Mussolini and its downfall began with the weakening and, eventually, the defeat of the fascist regime in 1943. As Cristina Lombardi-Diop and Caterina Romeo explain in their anthology *Postcolonial Italy* (2012), the end of Italy's imperialism did not coincide with the beginning of the postcolonial era. And, unlike the downfall of other European empires, it was not the outcome of colonial wars of independence followed by migratory flows from former colonies. The lack of a clear moment and process of decolonization together with the post-World War II Republican national construction of the myth of *Italiani brava gente* (Italian good people) contributed to a colonial amnesia—in other words, the removal from public memory of the racism produced by fascism and its colonial legacy and the denial of colonial crimes (ibid.).

During the post-war period, when European countries like Britain, France, the Netherlands, and Belgium were receiving migratory flows from former colonies, Italians were still leaving the country. This situation reversed in the early 1990s when new migration inflows

turned Italy from a country of mass emigration into one of mass immigration. Unprepared by this sudden change of roles, governments were unable to respond promptly and effectively. The situation was aggravated by an economic recession and increasing fears of shrinking financial resources for health and social services which resulted in the rise of xenophobic sentiments and an anti-immigrant political environment. Since early 2000, the emergency landings on the shores of Sicily and Lampedusa of migrants and refugees fleeing to Europe through the central Mediterranean route exacerbated these tensions and caused a resurgence of racialized and racist nationalism. Right-wing political parties such as the secessionist *Lega Nord* and neofascist *Alleanza Nazionale* exploited and fueled popular fears reviving the rhetorical tropes of older racial discourses.[13]

During the first migratory flows into Italy, intolerance was directed towards all migrants, not just Africans. In the 1990s, for instance, Albanians and Roma were the most stigmatized groups. However, more recently, the media images of black bodies trafficked across the Mediterranean have had a deeply regressive impact upon public perceptions of Black African migrants. In addition, political and public debates have increasingly framed social tensions and conflicts in racist terms. Despite the increasing racialization of asylum and labor mobility, race and racism are often unnamed and silenced both in public and theoretical discourses either through the minimization of episodes of racism or their assimilation into discourses about illegal immigration, citizenship, class, and religion (Romeo 2014, 222-223). The uneasiness of using racial categories has turned into an inability to speak about racism and consider affirmative actions as means of seeking reparatory justice (Magazzini 2021).[14]