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Dialogue Participants: Maureen Mahon and Lena Sawyer

DIASPORIC HEGEMONIES: POPULAR CULTURE AND TRANSNATIONAL BLACKNESS

PO POPULAR CULTURE AND TRANSNATIONAL BLACKNESS is the second in a series of two dialogues organized by Deborah A. Thomas and Tina M. Campt as part of a project titled “Diasporic Hegemonies.” In this dialogue, Maureen Mahon and Lena Sawyer draw from their ethnographic research within the United States and Europe to discuss the role of Africa (and originary “homelands” in general) in imagining diasporic communities in various locations. They also interrogate the role of African America in cultural production throughout the African diaspora, and how it is used by other African diasporic populations. In doing so, they ask whether there are hegemonic formations within the diaspora, and if so, how they are made manifest.

KEYWORDS: diaspora, African Americans, Europe, popular culture, music

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Tina M. Campt is Associate Professor of Women’s Studies at Duke University. Trained as a historian of modern Germany and feminist oral historian, her work theorizes processes of racial and gender formation in Europe’s Black communities. She is author of Other Germans: Black Germans and the Politics of Race, Gender and Memory in the Third Reich (University of Michigan Press 2004). She also coedited a special issue of the journal Callaloo (2003) with Michelle Wright entitled “Contested Black Voices: Critical Readings of the Black German Experience.” Campt is currently working on two new projects on memory, photography, and archive in the African diaspora. The first explores Black German family photography in the early 20th century, and the second examines studio photography and practices of self-documentation among Caribbean migrants to Britain in the postwar period.

Maureen Mahon is Assistant Professor of Anthropology and Afro-American Studies at UCLA. Her scholarly interests include media and expressive culture, U.S. and African diaspora, and cultural activism. She is the author of Right to Rock: The Black Rock Coalition and the Cultural Politics of Race (Mahon 2004), an ethnographic study of the ways an organization of Black American rock musicians use music and activism to counter stereotyped notions of Black identity. She is at work on a history of Black women’s participation in rock ‘n’ roll.

Lena Sawyer is Assistant Professor of Social Work at Mid Sweden University in Ostersund, Sweden. She received her doctorate in Cultural Anthropology from the University of California, Santa Cruz in 2000. Her dissertation is entitled “Black and Swedish: Racialization and the Cultural Politics of Belonging in Stockholm,” and it explores issues of identity, racism, and diasporic community. Her research interests include gender and migration, identity, and antiracist feminist social work. In 2006 she coedited, together with Masoud Kamali, a governmental study on education and ethnic discrimination in Sweden entitled Utbildningens dilemma: Demokratiska ideal och andrafrerande praxis (Education’s Dilemma: Democratic Ideals and Othering Praxis).
With this dialogue, we continue our exploration of what it means to bring together scholarship on the transnational and on the African diaspora, begun in *Transforming Anthropology* 14(2). Here, we resume our interrogation of the tensions between diaspora studies and transnational studies by turning our attention to popular culture and expressive cultural production. What follows is an edited transcription of the dialogue between Maureen Mahon and Lena Sawyer that transpired at Duke University on April 11, 2005, as part of our graduate seminar, “Diasporic Hegemonies.” Again, three times during the semester we invited a pair of scholars to campus to respond together to a series of questions that had emerged from our reflections about their work in the classroom. Although we circulated questions in advance to the invited speakers, we encouraged the speakers not to write papers but to “think out loud,” both in relation to each other and with the audience, about the issues that motivate their research and to work through connections and differences in a public setting. The questions we circulated in advance to Maureen and Lena were as follows:

What is the role of Africa (and originary “homelands” in general) in imagining diasporic communities in various locations? What is the role of African America in cultural production throughout the African diaspora, and how is it used by other diasporas? Are there hegemonic formations within the diaspora? How are these made manifest?

Our discussion of these questions, moderated by Tina M. Campt, follows.

**THE DIALOGUE**

**Tina M. Campt:** Welcome again, everyone. We thought that this time, it might be really helpful if we asked our speakers to address the first question by way of giving us a sense of their own scholarly genealogy. In other words, we want you to tell us what brought you to do the work you do, and how this work speaks to questions of diaspora. The first question we circulated was “What is the role of Africa and the idea of original homelands in general in imagining diasporic communities in various locations?” When reading Lena and Maureen’s work, one of the things I found really striking and incredibly productive was how they both position the question of Africa, and Blackness in particular, as a really complicated site—as a site where desires are constructed. These desires speak to personal transformations, the establishment of communities, and the contestation of dominant ideologies of what kinds of expression are appropriate for particular kinds of communities. Both Maureen’s work on the Black Rock Coalition and Lena’s work on African dance classes in Sweden address these issues. So we were hoping you could chart the ways you got to these projects, and how you grapple with the significance of Africa and the Black diaspora as sites within which such desires are articulated in socially meaningful ways.

**Lena Sawyer:** Well, before starting I want to first thank Deborah and Tina for inviting me to participate in this dialogue, it is a nice way for me to try a new way of communicating my work and engage with Maureen’s work. If I think about the first question though, the story of my path into these questions about Black identity in Sweden stems from my own background and upbringing in both Sweden and the U.S. My mother is Swedish and my father is African American, and anthropology—and specifically this project—was a way for me to understand the relations I saw in both of my families’ communities, first in Princeton, New Jersey, and then in Sweden where my mother’s family lives. Our family traveled back and forth between these spaces as I grew up in the 1970s, and I was perplexed by the different stories I heard about Sweden’s relationship to race and racism. On the one hand, my grandfather told me what I would later learn was the hegemonic story of Swedish-ness, and that was that “Sweden is a place without race.” Racism was someplace else—South Africa, Germany, the United States—but not in Sweden. Sweden was presented as exceptional within Europe because it was framed as lacking a colonial history and thus also the racial ideologies that were created and reproduced through colonialism. On the other hand, my father told stories of going to Sweden and encountering racism. He told me about cold encounters with certain family members, being encouraged to “stay indoors” so the neighbors would not see his black body, and other subtle but humiliating events. So for me these two stories, reproduced within my family, was the entry point.

When I came to anthropology, I was ready to study this intellectually, especially since I took a trip to Sweden on my own at 21, when again I encountered my Swedish family and stories about Sweden as a place without race. This became an entry point into creating a research project about what it means to be Black in Sweden. I wondered whether it was similar to being Black in the United States. Of course, we know this question is very complicated and that there are lots of ways of being Black in the United States as well, but I was interested to understand what difference history and location made in how people developed racial identity. That’s how I came into my research.

**Maureen Mahon:** I was struggling to find a research topic as a graduate student, and I was very interested in race and power and how they operated in the United States and the Caribbean, though I shifted to focusing...
solely on the U.S. I have always been interested in music, and my own experience with music was listening to rock music. I was aware of that being kind of a different thing for a Black American to do, because there is a perception that certain musical genres belong to certain racial groups. Rock didn’t seem to belong to Black people anywhere, at least not at the time I was listening to it in the 1970s and 1980s. These concerns were sort of bubbling in my head, and I became aware of an organization called the Black Rock Coalition, which addressed these very issues through the formation of a group that was designed to talk about the reasons that Black people should be able to rock and to promote Black rock musicians. That’s where my research took off, which means that questions about “Africa” as the homeland are less central to the work that I’m doing, but ideas about Blackness and authenticity are absolutely critical.

Lena: As far as issues of African identity are concerned in Sweden, I think the important things to ask are: Whose perspective are we looking at? Whose Africa? And what work are notions of African identity doing in specific communities? For example, you have people who have just migrated from a specific African country and who are very involved in things and events African. Africa is a very concrete place for them. It’s a homeland to which people are sending money, traveling back to, and where emotional ties are being maintained with kin though phone calls and e-mail. People are keeping in touch with family members, and all that. It is a very nationalistic kind of notion. For some of these people, talking about “Africa” also homogenizes Africa, insofar as such a blanket notion erases many of the linguistic, political, and historical differences that have shaped specific African countries and ethnic groups. Some people I have talked to in Sweden have stressed ethnic identities and national ones over continental ones—others have stressed a more pan-African affiliation. So I think there is some difficulty talking about the role that Africa plays within specific communities because I think it’s a question of who’s doing the asking. Who’s doing the imagining? And what work is the concept doing and for whom is it important? Here my thinking is also greatly influenced by Paulla Ebron’s work Performing Africa, where she among other things argues that there are many different “Africas” being constructed and circulating in the world today by unevenly positioned actors.

For example, one aspect of my work has looked at the construction of Africa within African dance courses in Sweden. These classes provide very specific sites within which Africa is being produced. In these spaces constructions of Africa are also very much about gender, race, sexuality, and national identities. There, mostly West African men produce specific images of Africa and mostly White Swedish working- and middle-class women consume these images. Yet the images of Africa these men present, like all images of Africa, are highly mediated, and this mediation occurs within a context of power relations that includes the longing of the White Swedish women who are in the position of consumer. So by looking at how both the dance instructors and the dance students constructed Africa in these specific spaces of leisure, I have argued that Africa is deployed strategically, for different reasons by different communities, at particular moments in time, and as a way to position oneself in relation to power.

Tina Campt: This is one of the themes that I feel overlaps in your work and is one of the reasons we wanted to bring the two of you together to talk. Another is the way in which gender figures into your research. To continue from where you left off, Lena, it seems that the way in which Africa is being produced in these African dance courses is particularly gendered, and at the same time, the gendering of its production is put to work for different purposes depending on the audience. In a way, what you are tracing is how Black African men produce Africanness, and the way in which White Swedish women both consume and produce Africanness for their own purposes, and this is one of the compelling ways in which gender operates within the African diaspora. We were hoping that you could also say more about the consumption and commodification of “Africa” through gender, and specifically about how gender dynamics also operate in relation to processes of globalization. That’s another issue we’re very interested in—the connection between contemporary analyses of globalization and the work that’s being done in diaspora studies.

Lena: In connecting these two sites of scholarship, we have to think about the specific dynamics of power relations that undergird both processes—globalization and diaspora—and in the case I’m talking about, specifically migration. The people who are producing these courses mostly come from West Africa, and mostly Gambia. Historically, Gambians’ migration to Sweden has been very different from other Africans’ because it began in relation to the travel and tourism industry that Sweden started in the 1970s. Somalians and Congolese, on the other hand, migrated as refugees, and this gives status in the sense that people are given a specific kind of access to state resources. Sweden is a welfare state, and as a refugee, you get a social security number, which gives you access to an apartment, language lessons—an “in” to the Swedish society quite simply. Gambians, on the other hand, generally tended to migrate on three-month visas, traveling to further develop relationships they may
have begun with White Swedish women who had traveled to Gambia as tourists and whom they met on the beach. So, during the 1980s, there was significant migration of Gambian men to Sweden, a migration that also coincided with the economic problems in Gambia during that time. Men traveled to Sweden looking for a better life, looking for economic and educational possibilities, and one of the small economic niches that was available to them in Sweden drew on stereotypes about their musicality, sensuality, and drumming—in other words, African dance classes.

I think it’s important to look at the whole picture here. Swedish society is a society structured around particular gender norms that are also racialized, and Africans have one of the highest unemployment rates in Sweden today. Looking at it in this context, African men were quite savvy in the sense that they were able to create an economic niche through partially playing off of Swedish stereotypes of what it meant to be an African. Many of the men I interviewed admitted, “Well, I’ve never drummed before. If I came to Sweden, I can get a drum and say I’m a master and then everyone will believe that I’m a master.” On the other hand, they also stressed that African dance was a way to introduce their culture to a Swedish audience, and the men I interviewed could talk with pride about transmitting and anchoring African culture and traditions in Sweden. So it was a double-edged process in the sense that many men could acknowledge that Swedish women might be drawn to African dance because of stereotypes, but that the hope was that once in the courses, some of these stereotypes would be challenged. But if we go back to your question about gender, it is evident that this survival strategy was very much drawing on local contexts of gender relations. The kinds of masculinities that these men projected appealed to Swedish women, specifically working-class Swedish women in the late 1980s and 1990s, and coincided with the disappearance of many of the benefits of the welfare state. White Swedish women during this period were entering the workforce in large numbers, some for the first time, and soon a discourse of women on the basis of race. I think that part of this challenge, however, had to do very much with the fact that teaching African dance was one of the few economic niches available to these men and they found their “territory” being threatened, and the power dynamics were therefore unequal between the White Swedish dance instructors and the African men in terms of capital in relation to the Swedish society and its structures.

**Tina Campt:** The way that you’re talking about the African dance courses leads me to our next question, which has to do with the influence of African America on cultural production within the African diaspora. How is “America,” and specifically “African America,” used by other diasporic groups? I was wondering if both of you might speak to the question of the role of African America in diasporic cultural production, focusing especially on how masculinity becomes a site within which people explore certain kinds of desires for transformation and desires for the articulation of authenticity, and how that in turn travels throughout the diaspora.

**Maureen:** The Black Rock Coalition was a predominantly male organization, and these men were dealing with a number of questions about their identity. A primary question was, “What were they doing playing this music?” The organization was founded in 1985, and by that time, rock music was pretty solidly understood as a form associated with White people. So even though rock was developed in the late 1940s and 1950s by Black musicians and it was played to Black audiences and it was understood as a Black form, by the 1980s it was something that was perceived as White.
As a result, the musicians in the organization were dealing with a presumption that they were not behaving authentically. They were not performing Blackness properly, and they weren’t performing Black maleness properly. By engaging in a form that was perceived as ‘White, there was also sort of a questioning, implicit or explicit, about what their masculinity really was—Whiteness not being considered a site of real masculinity for a lot of Black men. So they’re engaged in a musical form that seems to bar them from performing proper Blackness, but they’re absolutely committed to this form. By forming the organization, they were trying to legitimate what they were doing for themselves and for audiences and potential audiences. I’d like to raise an example from the chapter that the class read: one of the music forms that a lot of the guys in the organization were committed to was punk rock or punk, and “punk” for African Americans is a quite negative term that you throw out at a guy when he’s not acting like a “real” man. It’s a way to call his masculinity and sexuality into question. So even to say, “I’m really into punk” is a problematic thing. For these musicians, therefore, it was really important to create a space where they could play this music and still be seen as having a certain kind of authentic Black masculinity.

I also want to piggyback on what Lena was saying about the ways Blackness and Black masculinity are read in Sweden. For many of the BRC musicians I met, Europe was almost a mythical place; it was a place where they felt they were appreciated. A lot of them were going to Europe and they were going to Japan on tour and they talked about those places as places where they were understood. By leaving the United States where they were quite familiar, and where there were certain types of expectations about what their musical production should be and how their performance of their identity should be, and going someplace else, they felt they could be read correctly. So that in western Europe, particularly in France and Germany and also in Italy, they were accepted and embraced and the music they were producing was not a problem. It was not seen as “not Black” or “not Black enough.” It was seen, on the contrary, within a historical context of Black Americans going to Europe, in particular to France, in order to pursue their art. Black American musicians were making their musical careers there and being quite warmly accepted and embraced as early as Josephine Baker and Duke Ellington and just right on through the history of 20th-century Black American music.

Traveling to Europe, they were tapping into that history. So their masculinity and their Blackness were read in different ways. They were still being read through stereotypes, but different stereotypes and ones that seemed positive in which there was an expectation, “Oh, you’re Black American? You must be really good at music, and we expect that from you and we welcome you.” The level of celebration for the performances was so different from what they often experienced in the United States. In this way, Europe became a very important place because as Black Americans, they were not Africans. They were not stereotyped as a problem group of immigrants who were a drain on the state. Instead, they were considered to be people bringing a valuable cultural production. So there is a certain type of desire that was operating there.

**Tina Campt: **With what you’re both saying, I keep wondering what would happen if we could place the Gambians Lena has been talking about and the African American musicians Maureen has been talking about in the same room to talk about traveling in that particular European space, and how their experiences have been both similar and very different. This would get us more deeply into the questions of how Blacknesses travel within the diaspora. For now, though, I want to take us to our third question, which is: Are there hegemonic formations within the African diaspora and how would they manifest? This is a question about how different representations of Blackness travel, and in what ways they are set in relation to one another. We were hoping that each of you could comment on the other person’s work and how these particular diasporic invocations might be read, what it means to produce a particular kind of authentic culture, and think about some of the ways your work is in dialogue. I know this is complicated, but for example, how might the Black Rock Coalition be interested in Sweden? How would Black rockers be understood by a Gambian immigrant in Sweden who is also attempting to represent his culture? How might these two different strategies be understood to create gendered forms of Blackness as popular sites of identification and affirmation?

**Lena:** I think that in Sweden there is a broader understanding of ways to live Blackness. My work has so far shown me that there, understandings of Blackness privilege African Americanness, and a particularly gendered form of African Americanness, and that this is the hegemonic view that also affects many of the men and women of African ancestry living in Sweden today, but of course in different ways. And of course people relate to, strategically use, these images for their own projects, in many different ways. But I would say one of the dominant images of what it means to be a (young) Black man and woman living in the world is one of urbanity, of the United States, of hip-hop music, and one of the reasons this image is so dominant is due to the media, which is powerful in disseminating it through film, TV programs, and music in Sweden. People talked about
The Caribbean is also a close runner-up to African American masculinity. So when Black Americans were trying to make connections with Francophone Blacks and they couldn’t establish a bond based on a common racial identity, because that’s an American discourse that doesn’t really operate in France, they felt frustrated. There’s not always a common ground that allows them to recognize themselves as “a people” who have shared interests and experiences.

In terms of the kind of hierarchies we’re talking about, Black Americans in Paris, whether they’re musicians or not, benefit from their Americanness. If you’re recognized as an American, then you’re sort of hailed and recognized as a person who is connected to and perceived as having a very positive history. Many of the French people they encounter have the sense that Black Americans tend to do really interesting things. They also like to probe deeply about how bad the racism is in the United States for you and, “Isn’t it terrible there?” Now, this of course comes alongside what most people would recognize as an extremely racist discourse against North Africans, but generally the French don’t acknowledge this.

**Tina Campt:** I have two more questions to ask you. The first addresses the elephant in the room, which has to do with the ways African American popular culture travels and what that means to different communities elsewhere. In both of your work, even though you’re interested in different forms of cultural production, the form that is most often tied to traveling is hip-hop, which also provides a particular representation of African American masculinity. So when we’re talking about the question of power differentials in relation to the question of gender, I’m wondering about how and to what extent people producing other kinds of Black diasporic
cultural practices are required to position themselves in relation to hip-hop. This question comes out of some of the questions that have motivated this project in the first place—the inequities and hegemonies within diaspora. So we’d be interested to hear your thoughts on the status of African America within the diaspora (and particularly within diasporic cultural production), and what it means to invoke the term hegemony here. For example, Maureen, you were talking about the privileged status of African Americans and how they travel culturally, right? So would you make an argument using the term hegemony to talk about part of this privileging process?

Maureen: I think in some ways, we can assume Black American cultural production has a particular kind of hegemony because the United States has the ability to get this stuff out into the world. And we see that in many places, though not everywhere, there is some sort of desire for American stuff and especially Black American stuff. Even though that may come with a critique of the United States and the U.S. system, there’s still an interest in and attraction to certain performances. So if you’re an American musician, you’re in a very good position because your work can circulate globally. Regarding the hegemonic Black cultural production at this moment—rap—there’s a great deal of emphasis on place and there’s an expectation or demand that it come from the U.S. Rap has been produced in England, for example, but it’s never been possible for an English rapper to really take root in the United States. It’s never seen as authentic. It’s nice that a Black British rapper like Dizzy Rascal exists, but we’re not really buying him here. One of the privileges of being at “the center” is not having to pay much attention to “the periphery.”

But I think what was interesting to me about hegemonic ideas about music, Black music specifically, at least in Europe, is the elasticity of the definitions of genres. Just to give an example, the event that I was following last summer was a tour of six Black American women that was called the “Daughters of Soul” that was presented at three different European jazz festivals. The “daughters” were Donny Hathaway’s daughter, Nina Simone’s daughter, and Chaka Khan’s daughter—these were the biological daughters. Then there were also the “spiritual daughters,” who were Sandra St. Victor, Nona Hendryx, and Joyce Kennedy. These last three are much more linked to hard rock while the first three are much more soul or R & B. In Europe, they were able to package this tour without any problem partly because there were all these Black women singing. “What more could we want?!” And they went back and forth during the performances between hard rock, heavy guitar, lots of solos, and R & B. But what was interesting at the jazz festivals was that they also included people like Jessye Norman, a Black opera singer; Femi Kuti, the Nigerian Afro-pop star; Roy Hargrove, who’s a jazz trumpeter; and Dee Dee Bridgewater, who is a jazz singer. And then, Stevie Winwood and Rickie Lee Jones, who are White performers who are heavily influenced by Black music, were also in the lineup.

So then you start to ask, “Well, what does jazz mean?” And, “Is it jazz or is it a Black music festival, or is it a festival of music played by Black people?” But it also included people from throughout the diaspora—I mean Brazilian artists, West African artists, American, Caribbean, people from France. So the genre categories that have so much meaning here were different there, in part because jazz could be linked to Blackness, and Blackness in music in Europe is seen as good. So, I think of jazz as sort of a hegemonic term that describes what the favorable form of music is—music from the United States. You don’t really expect jazz from other places.

Lena: When you talk about “hegemonies,” you’re talking about the exclusion of particular peoples’ experiences and expressions of what it means to be a Black person. This seems to be dangerous territory, in particular because many people who are in African diaspora studies have tried to highlight unity within the African diaspora in relation to global racial exploitation and the realities of racism, global apartheid in other words, and I think talking about how our relations within this African diaspora may also be fractured appears to some people to be a challenging or weakening of a critique of global racism. But I also think it’s important to bring up issues of power and specificity, and especially the domination of the specific image of Black America. I’m part of a reading group with a group of Swedes of African ancestry, and before I came here, I was talking with them a little bit about the questions you had circulated to us. These are people who were born in Sweden, and one of the things that came out was that they felt that Black America was the defining criteria of what it means to be a Black person. But for some of the people in the group, they felt that African Americanness was a kind of authentic Blackness that they did not have access to and that they therefore felt marginalized from since their own experiences of being Black often emerged as deficient or as not as legitimate. They described a sense of insecurity in identifying as Black because of this image of American Blackness that they saw on television. So in that sense, I think that we need to start talking about power relations and what Blackness means and how it can erase specific experiences of location. Negotiating not only racism but also the changing terrain of different and hierarchical meanings of Blackness to shape a positive understanding of yourself as a gendered and sexual person is the challenge.
Maureen: I was thinking also that what potentially divides us in Black organizations is gender. Something that is also troubling is the terminology Black versus African because I’m not sure how often that term is meaningful or how it’s meaningful outside of the United States. It’s a very consciously political term that now is very much associated with the United States. It would be interesting to look and see how other communities use it, when they use it, when they don’t use it, and what their use of the term means in those different contexts.

Tina Campt: I’m really interested in the two comments that you both just made because they make us focus on the double-edged sword that accompanies thinking about questions of power asymmetries. You’re talking about the privileging of particular forms of Blackness and how they travel. But at the same time, you also mentioned a way in which there is also a desire to consume these forms, which means that we can’t simply see the imposition of a particular image or form of cultural production as oppressive, but must also understand that there is a market for these images and forms. For example, Lena is saying that a Black Swedish community could be, in some ways, impressed by the proliferation of African American culture. But at the same time, they also experience this as a particular articulation of consciousness and identity that seems “natural,” yet, for them, is elusive. The same idea applies in terms of the way in which Black music is being marketed. It does in some way squeeze out other forms of cultural production, but at the same time, it also engenders attention to other forms. This makes me think of anthropologist Priti Ramamurthy’s concept of “perplexity,” a concept she mobilizes in relation to globalization as a way to understand why people seem to desire stuff that may not be “good for them” because it is exploitative or otherwise negative for their own communities. I think this also applies to our discussion here of the ambivalent ways in which U.S. Blackness is read.

Lena: What I’ve seen in the context of Sweden is that Blackness is used as a way to negotiate very specific local power relations. In Sweden, a particular notion of Blackness is forced upon a person because of racism. For example, a study that came out three weeks ago documented that Black men are not allowed into certain public places in Stockholm like discotheques and restaurants. There was an undercover video made that showed three White kids going to a club and being welcomed. Then three Black Swedes walked up to the same club and were told they needed membership cards. So this is the situation facing people of African descent in Sweden, and men in particular. I think Jackie Brown’s idea of diasporic resources is really important here in terms of understanding how these local power relations operate, and but also how they are gendered. For example, many times Black women are allowed into spaces that turn away Black men because, in a way, they are seen as objects to be consumed. In a way, then, Black America becomes one way to find alternative understandings of what it means to be a Black person, although for Swedes, ideas about Black America are very specifically mediated through television and music. I should also say that to call oneself “Black” in Sweden is not only to acknowledge African ancestry. It is also a way to talk about more general racialization as a non-White Swede. This means that in Sweden you have people of Turkish, Kurdish, and other non-African ancestries who are identifying with Black America and symbols of Black American hip-hop and who are involved in cultural production that we would identify as Black American cultural production. This means that Blackness is a more elastic category in the context of Sweden, but I would say that Black America and the masculine image of a Black American is very dominant for, specifically, youth that are growing up in suburbs of Sweden to identify with and to use to negotiate power relations. So there’s a kind of elasticity for the category of Blackness that I think is important to understand in relationship to a specific context. I think that is part of the answer to the question, “Why are people consuming it?” It’s about trying to understand alternative understandings of what it means to be a Black person living in a very specific context.

Maureen: There are certain resonances with what you’re saying in France if you look at the way hip-hop has been picked up there. At first, they were listening to American rap and then they started to actually produce rap themselves. And many of the producers were not of African descent in the way we’ve been talking, but they were North African. Still, they identified with what Black American rappers were talking about in terms of a kind of marginalization, a certain type of class position, a lack of opportunities that sounded familiar in terms of their experiences as minorities in France. They were consuming something from the outside, but that “outside” was speaking to their experiences. In France, where there is a discourse of a universal Frenchness, there is no space for the elaboration of specific ethnic cultures in the public sphere. So for North Africans, Black American music provided a way to express their reality. Now France has the second-largest market for rap music outside of the United States, and it has one of the most vibrant homegrown rap scenes in the world. It’s a good example of globalization and making the global local.

Tina: At this point, we’d like to open up for questions from the audience.
Tami Navarro (Department of Anthropology graduate student): I would like to know more about what happens through consumption—for example, of African dance. You have talked about the White Swedish women who are consuming African dance—what happens in this space? Do these stereotypes remain throughout or does something else happen?

Lena: That’s a great question. For some women I interviewed and with whom I have continued to have contact, these African dance classes are a kind of entry into a more complex understanding of relations between the global north and south as well as racial politics in Sweden. So for some women, this is an entry portal into getting to know specific African communities and becoming very interested in African culture. Some women may later go out to one of the African districts, visit a club with one of the drummers that they’ve met in class or one of the instructors. For example, usually, at the end of these dance classes, there’ll be a kind of party where the women are supposed to show their new dancing skills, and African men who drum will come to these parties as well. Some women even travel to West African countries with their instructors, maybe for two or three weeks, to live in a compound with their families and to dance every day, and I think for them this travel and encounter generates an increased awareness about the privileges of Whiteness. But on the other hand, I think for other women, many of the stereotypes remain, the dance courses are seen as a way to spend free time, to exercise, and stereotypes of nature, sensuality, are confirmed in these spaces. So these spaces are contradictory spaces in many ways. We could even say that African dance classes are also a kind of site of miscegenation, and the transgression of racial borders, because some of the women later will end up dating an African man or having children and creating families. And I think once this happens, some women lose some of the White privilege that they experienced previously, and in this sense develop a more nuanced perspective on Swedish racial politics. Of course how they react to, and make sense of, being seen as “Black men’s women” in Sweden can be very different, but I think it is important to point out that some women use these experiences to build alternative racial and gendered identities. Some become active in African immigrant and antiracist organizations, others may become “Africa enthusiasts” as Ebron terms people who construct Africa as a utopia, and still others maybe even eventually become producers of African dance (and things African) themselves, they become in some way part of the African diasporic community in Sweden. So my point is that these spaces are ambivalent spaces of power; they are spaces where meanings of Africa are under construction, debate, evaluation, and used in very different ways by differently positioned people for their own ends.

Audience Member: I was wondering about the American Black man compared with the African national in relation to the policing of borders between Black men and White women. How is it in Sweden?

Lena: There is a policing of racial and sexual borders in Sweden that is similar to the U.S., where everyone is positioned differently in relation to national and/or African diasporic criteria of belonging. For example, there are potent stories circulating in some of the tertiary spaces such as the African dance courses as well as African discotheques and clubs where mostly White Swedish women and African men meet, and that have to do with sexuality and “race.” For example, White Swedish men as well as women talk about the women who circulate in these spaces often in denigrating ways, identifying the Swedish women who have sexual relations with African men as “fat, old, horny, and unattractive.” I think that this kind of talk is an attempt to maintain specific understandings of White heterosexual femininity and respectability. On the other hand, African men I have met and talked to in such tertiary spaces are sometimes also classifying Swedish women in terms of respectability in relationship to sexuality. But what is a bit different is that I think their story making, about the women as either “loose” or “respectable,” has to do with the men’s desire for respectability in the Swedish society as men (which is tied to being a breadwinner) and is one way for them to negotiate the White Swedish women’s economic (and social) advantage over them in the Swedish society. For example, there are three different dance schools and they’re owned by White Swedish women, and drummers are brought in. As far as I know, the money is divided, but clearly there is a prickly power dynamic there. In general, White Swedish women who choose to become Africa enthusiasts have a different kind of economic and symbolic capital in the Swedish society, and this is why I think they have been so successful in creating “African” spaces. And they are, thus, also important “allies” and resources for African men interested in promoting Africa, which makes for somewhat thorny relations between them.

Lee Baker (Duke University, Department of Cultural Anthropology): I’m wondering about stereotypes of Black men, and I guess my question is, how unstable is all this? Are there scripts that people evolve to? It sounds like very standardized stuff even though it comes from way around the world.

Lena: Well, I think that there are variations in the way people are inhabiting these categories. Even if some of
the images seem standardized, I do not think this means necessarily uniformity, since when people are engaging with these scripts, and here I think of MTV images of Black masculinities, people are embedded in their local ways of knowing, local power relations, and this informs how these categories are engaged and then “made your own.” So even within agency there is ambivalence. My work suggests that the African men I interviewed use African dance and drum in a very specific way to be able to negotiate the Swedish employment market, and this also means strategically engaging stereotypes about Africa that are circulating in Sweden. They talked about African dance as a way to promote Africa, and in doing this they were engaging dominant discourses of African dystopic states as they created counter-discourses. For me, the power relations that undergird White Swedish women’s positions as cultural producers of Africa have been troubling theoretically because they raise the question of when and how one gains legitimacy as a producer of African cultural production and how “race” is a part of that. You have women who have been to Africa twenty times and who have danced in African dance companies, and often they are nevertheless seen as inauthentic African cultural producers in comparison to other Africans, even someone who might be adopted from Ethiopia and who himself or herself reproduces dystopic understandings of Africa, instead identifying with Whiteness. This leads me to wonder how “race” fits into African diasporic theorizing, into specific understandings of African diaspora. What about all the White Swedish women involved in the dance courses as students, all the White Swedish women producing understandings of Africa as dance instructors? Sometimes I think that social relations in diasporas are much messier than the categories we are using to analyze diaspora.

**Maureen:** With Black Americans in Paris, there is a lot of self-consciousness about the myth, the romantic story of Paris as this wonderful place for Black Americans. They critique this myth because there are a lot of problems with it. They critique the racism that they don’t necessarily experience but that they see other people of color experience. At the same time, they capitalize on the myth, since one of the ways some Black American residents of Paris make a living is by giving tours of Black Paris. If you’re a Black American and you come as a tourist, you can follow a guide, usually a Black American, who will take you to important sites in Paris that resonate with the history of Black Americans. So in a way, there is a need to keep that mythology alive even as it’s extremely different now. The relationship between Black Americans and France is always changing. Before the civil rights movement, France offered Black Americans a respite from American racism. But during the 1980s and 1990s, with the rise of immigration and the rise of anti-immigrant discourse, the comfort of being in Paris has lessened.

**Bianca Robinson (Department of Cultural Anthropology graduate student, Duke):** I have a question for you two around the notion of authenticity. I’m wondering if you could talk a little bit about the logic behind that paradigm. I was just wondering if you could try to explain the logic that underpins ideas about what a Black and White place should be.

**Maureen:** Well, I’m not certain that the logic is logical, and that really is the first problem. Also, there are logics that are differently imposed from different communities. On the one hand, you have White people who say, “Well, Black people, they don’t really play rock,” and that’s something that BRC members were hearing as they were going to record labels and trying to get signed. In meetings, studio heads would recognize their talent but would say, “If we really want to sell you, there’s not going to be a Black audience for you. There’s not a Black interest in you. It’s not really a Black thing that you’re doing. You need to sound more Black.” This is something that someone like Lenny Kravitz has talked about. Prince, on the other hand, behaved like a proper Black musician because his first album was an R & B album and then after that, he started to rock. So you have White industry executives deciding what’s appropriate for Black people to do. And then on the other side, there were Black audiences, peers, family members, friends, what have you, making an assumption that by playing rock, a music that they were no longer that interested in, these performers were not playing “real” Black music. One of the concerns within Black communities was that these musicians weren’t shifting quickly enough into new forms, that if black musicians were to constantly innovate, the music BRC members were playing was seen as looking backward to certain 1960s or 1970s rock-and-roll bands or punk bands. It wasn’t considered progressive enough, even though that’s not a fair characterization. So there were different logics, but both of them were rooted in a perception of what real Black music was supposed to be, and the music that BRC folk were playing wasn’t in that mix. This is something that Wynton Marsalis confronts as he tries to preserve jazz in a certain way. One of the things that is said about his efforts is that it’s a White thing to do, to try to institutionalize a musical genre.

**Audience Member:** And for me, the question was, is African dance seen as cultural?

**Lena:** I think it’s important to ask, for whom? For whom is African dance important culturally? Within
dominant Swedish society, African dance is devalued. It’s not seen as an authentic, legitimate dance form that, for example, could be done by a professional dance company. The venues for African dance are very different than those for other dance forms like ballet, modern dance, and jazz in the Swedish society. African dances are usually performed in smaller venues or on the town squares as part of a “multicultural event.” Performers are paid much less. And that’s one of the things dance instructors who talked to me raised as one of the stereotypes they have to confront, that many women who come to take courses feel that in African dance, “you just dance around freely and do whatever you want to drums.” One of their struggles seemed to be to gain recognition and legitimacy for African dance as a very intricate and diverse dance form that is just as valuable and complex as many other dance forms. I would imagine that hip-hop classes are similarly devalued, since generally, cultural production associated with African-descended people is devalued compared to other “classical” forms of performance.

Audience Member: I’d like to follow up on something you talk about in your essay, Lena, regarding the absence of contemporary avenues of constructing Africanness. Could you talk about how tradition is being constructed and why it’s instantly known as contemporary?

Lena: Yes, this is a good point. All this talk about what African dance is or is not is in fact also about creating tradition, setting the boundaries for a tradition of African dance in Sweden. I mean, it’s interesting how the people I interviewed all talked about something called African dance since we’re talking about a huge and hugely diverse continent. But somehow notions of African dance were circumscribed to a specific repertoire of meanings. On instructors’ Internet home pages, a specific expression of African dance is being constructed that is linked to an entire continent, but in fact it is a specific kind of dance that is being done, often West African, and rural dances, though some more urban dances have started to be given, for example mblax. A very specific Africa is being constructed in these African dance courses. For example, ten years ago, Africa was marketed through a particular notion of the “traditional,” which was always rural, and almost never about the dance steps you might see in discotheques and in urban settings in and out of Africa. Once again, one of the things I try to argue in my work is that this image, or in Ebron’s words “an Africa,” must be seen as produced through the specific longings of stressed-out Swedish working- and middle-class women with an expendable income in the 1980s and 1990s who saw themselves as hypermodern and as experiencing a kind of hyper-disciplining by the welfare state, as well as economic aspirations of Gambian men. The African dance tradition being taught is very much linked to an idea of old traditions, of village life, of the small and “authentic” community. So I think these longings have been very influential in regard to why a specific, and fictional, image of Africa has been marketed in the African dance classes in Sweden. But I want to point out that I’ve also seen some important shifts in the last five or ten years since I moved back to Sweden. African dance has grown in popularity and there are now dance students who have been dancing for over ten years and traveled to specific countries as well as been part of African diasporic settings in Sweden, and they are contributing to a nuancing of the ways that African dance is being today marketed. Their “tastes” have become specific as their knowledge has grown. For example, today you can see courses offered in East African dance or mblax. There are also a few modern African dance troupes that have been to Sweden and performed in concert halls, and African dance (and music) has been introduced in some of the more established music and dance schools, and thus African dance has been given some legitimacy as a “real” dance form and music in Sweden, which I think is great. And I think these changes very much have to also do with the efforts of both White and African “Africa enthusiasts.”

Lee Baker: Why Africa? I mean, why not Viking culture?

Lena: Well, I think there’s a historical component that should not be overlooked, which has to do with Sweden’s missionary involvement, specifically in the Congo, East Africa, and South Africa, and then later in the so-called development movement and projects. Africa has had a specific relationship to Sweden even if peoples of African ancestry were very few (and still are compared to other so-called immigrants groups) up until the 1990s. But even before there was a physical presence of Africans, there were images of Africa, letters, stories, you know, children’s books that were circulated in Europe that influenced the Swedish social imaginary and presented Africa. There is a long history of Africa being the available and appropriate-able site for the White imagination to produce all kinds of meanings, and now with the development boom and NGOs, there’s another way to get to Africa—through capital—and this allows you to take something back and transform it into something. Here, we’re looking at different kinds of circulations—circulations of particular forms of cultural production, circulations of U.S. capital, circulations of migrants. These are very different types of circulation. But back to your question “Why Africa?” I think we should remember that this Africa being
Audience Member: I’m interested in hearing more from Maureen about the problem of marketing within the recording industry and how specific musical forms become racialized. Does the Black Rock Coalition critique these practices?

Maureen: Yes, there is a critique of this, but the critique is more about the illogic of things and the illogic of the record industry. A classic example, especially for the BRC generation, is Tracy Chapman, whom no one predicted would be successful. Central to her audience were young, White, college-age men and no one could figure it out. For some reason, though, this example disappears in conversations about what’s possible and what’s likely. You could imagine studio execs saying, “Well, let’s try to find the next Tracy Chapman.” But that didn’t really seem to take place.

Audience Member: What about MeShell N’degeOcello?

Maureen: MeShell, yeah, we could fit her in here, but generally those kinds of efforts didn’t seem to be made. Within the BRC, there’s a lot of discussion about why, and it always comes down to racial dynamics, a sense that the record industry wouldn’t make more of an effort to market Black rock artists despite successful examples. With MeShell, though, obviously there were some people who did take a chance. In many of these cases, it has been important to have a White person speak on behalf of the Black performer. So, for example, Living Colour had been trying to get a record deal for quite a long time and the BRC actually formed to help push them forward. They were considered this great live band, and no one understood why they couldn’t get a deal. And finally, Mick Jagger steps in and says, “These are really great musicians.” He put Vernon Reid, who’s the guitarist, on one of his records. He produced some of their demos and then they were finally able to get a deal. So they had a White person speak for them. It’s like the beginning of slave narratives where a White authority says, “This is really a true narrative written by himself.” With Tracy Chapman, it was a college friend of hers, a White guy whose father was a record executive, and that’s part of the reason that she was able to get heard. And for MeShell it was Madonna who signed her to her label.

Respondent: What is going on in Sweden now in terms of positive change? Are people discussing racism?

Lena: People are so interesting and complex. There is some critique about the White Swedish women who are now running the dance courses or owning the dance centers, but the dance community is still a big mesh because many of these women are married to African men, have kids with them, and maybe some men are also dependent on job opportunities through drumming. In some ways, this is always the elephant in the room, but I think that people of African ancestry are talking among themselves about power relations, and power relations manifest themselves in talk about other topics—for example, authenticity. At the same time, because the state has given money for immigrants to organize themselves, immigrants also cooperate with the Swedish state but at the same time raise issues of discrimination and racism. One of the things that I’m part of now, and that I’m very proud of, is the very first national governmental investigation into discrimination within sectors of Swedish life like the media, employment, and education. We’re looking mostly at structural discrimination and how institutions track people in ways that reproduce particular power relations in society, and how race and ethnicity are a part of that. So I’m working on the education report and am doing a study on guidance counselors and how their understandings of ethnicity affect the work they do with students. On the basis of these reports, Masoud Kamali, the person leading the investigation, will review them and make recommendations for policy change to the government. One of the things they’re talking about is affirmative action and quotas in many different sectors. So this is historic. The study on gender that happened almost 20 years ago was very influential in developing gender equality policies. Certain numbers of professorships and parliamentary positions were given to women. This is, I think, a very exciting time for Sweden right now. Maybe I’m a bit naive in thinking that these studies can contribute to policy change and make a difference, but it feels very historic.

Maureen: I would also like to get back to the notion of fabricating the offensive and manufacturing a very narrow sort of articulation of hip-hop Blackness that then gets circulated around the world. The dynamic and the frustration have to do with access because the narrowness of what circulates wouldn’t matter if other images were also being promoted. One of the things that I’ve been tracking with some of the people whom I wrote about in ‘Right to Rock’ and some of the others connected to them is the extent to which they have taken advantage of independent music production. Because of the ways technology is changing, it’s much more possible for the musicians to produce and circulate their own recordings, using computer technology to do the mixing. It’s cheap to make a CD despite the fact that they’re usually...
sold for high prices. They’re also able to circulate their music on the web, and this is not only Black musicians, but also many others over the age of 25 because they are also being closed out of the music industry. For the most part, there’s a real focus within labels on bottom line that makes it hard to produce particular kinds of music. The problem with independent production is that it doesn’t have much reach. So you might get to some people who are really hard-core fans that are looking for you, but it’s not the kind of saturation that you get with a major label. So there have been some efforts to broaden what passes for Black music, but in the meantime, we’re sort of stuck with these dominant, limited, narrow images of what it is to be Black. You can contest them in your own way, and your knowledge of the world allows you to see that there’s more to “us” than this, but what’s constantly being reinforced and what people who aren’t Black are being taught is this other image.

Tina: I think that the point that you’re making is about how it’s not just the production of the image, it’s the production of a product, right? Because it’s then Sony Records that decides who the “right” audience for this particular product is, and whether that audience is a Black audience. And it’s in this way that notions of authenticity and appropriateness get reproduced. I think the other interesting thing about that is the way in which Sony goes out and collects things that do have original expressive functions, like hip-hop. But the way that idea is marketed and produced leads it to become in some ways alienated from that originary moment of expression, right? That’s where I find both of your work really fascinating because what you’re talking about is how each of these communities is trying to interrupt that moment of hegemony, but at the same time having to reproduce other kinds of hegemonies. Thank you so much for provoking such a lively discussion.

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