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## **Dancing with the “Other:” Experiential and Reflective Learning of African Neo-Traditional Dances Through Dance Education Study Abroad Programs**

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### **Abstract**

The increase in internationalization of education has set off a proliferation of educational models. Study abroad has emerged as one of the educational approaches through which universities can support students to internationalize their experiences, hone their skills and knowledge bases, sharpen professional proficiencies, and broaden their cultural perspectives. What meanings do foreign students who participate in study abroad programs in African dances in local African communities construct? This article engages the theory of experiential learning and concept of Orientalism to provide a critical examination of the meanings that the students from the U.S who took part in dance education study abroad to Uganda constructed from participation in neo-traditional dance activities. A hermeneutic phenomenological research paradigm was applied to collect data from six students from the U.S who took part in the Dance Education study abroad

program to Uganda. The findings reveal how the study abroad programs enabled the students to negotiate, question, and conceptualize the idea of “study abroad to Uganda” as a “place” of nativism, exoticism, identity variances, and cultural differences. Critical analyses are made on how the students’ agency in neo-traditional activities cultivated embodied connections to the “other,” allowed for exploration of communalized pedagogies, facilitated holistic learning of dance through music and storytelling, and fostered immersion into “local” artistic and educational realities through collaborative and interactive lesson-planning and co-teaching. Issues of how study abroad in dance can aggravate cultural appropriation are also examined. This article offers insights into the intricate trajectories that students take to construct complex meanings through embodied and reflective participation in dance activities in local African communities, which can be beneficial to dance educators, cross-cultural and intercultural learners, and individuals who run cultural exchange programs.

### **Introduction**

In this article, I provide a critical examination of the meanings that students who participated in the New York University (NYU) dance education study abroad program to Uganda constructed from experiential and reflective participation in neo-traditional dance activities. I will identify these participants as “foreign” students throughout the article because of their position as foreigners entering into a culture that is not their own. Over the years, academic institutions in the U.S have introduced education models to prepare students to meet the ever-changing global educational demands. Consequently, some universities have introduced study abroad programs to enable students to broaden their knowledge bases and skill sets from the complex cultural encounters as learners in new cultural environments (Greatrex-White, 2008).

Study abroad programs have expanded to cover various academic subjects (Institute of International Education, 2018). However, research on the meanings that students from Western countries construct from their experiential and reflective participation in dance activities in African environments is a subject that has not been adequately studied. In this analysis, I engage Henthorne, Miller and Hudson's (2001) observation that when students take part in study abroad programs, they construct complex meanings from their immersion into local experiences.

From the viewpoint of dance, Ness (1996) has asked: “how might one best approach the task of understanding a dance (or ‘Dance’ or ‘the Dance’ in general, for that matter) that does not originate from or exist within one’s own culture?” (p. 248). In other words, what meanings can a person construct out of their immersion into new dance forms as cultural expressions, epistemological domains, and frameworks of thinking, doing, knowing, and being? To reveal

these understandings, I examined the foreign students’ study abroad experiences as active inquirers, thinkers, doers, and collaborators of neo-traditional dances in Uganda to reveal the complex meanings they constructed from this exposure. I further discuss how the notions of “travelling to Africa,” “learning from the native people,” and “experiencing the exotic art forms,” which are prevalent in Western objectification of Black dances and dancers (Gottschild, 2003) formed a backdrop against which the meanings that the foreign students constructed were engraved.

### ***Dance Education Study Abroad Program to Uganda***

In 2007, the Dance Education Program at New York University established a dance education study abroad program to Uganda as an elective two-week winter intersection course. The program sought to advance artistic, educational, and cultural competences of the students by learning neo-traditional dances in Uganda. In this article, I use neo-traditional dances to refer to ethnic cultural dances in Uganda that are appropriated, re-arranged and performed in contexts outside their ethnic communities of origin. The university offered three academic credits for the course. The program emphasized learning through a lens of neo-traditional dances and music pedagogies. Students took part in practical workshops and lectures in two neo-traditional dance forms, music and drum rhythms, which were taught by local Ugandan teachers. The material for dances and music were re-arranged into dance pieces that were staged at the end of the program in a local theatre.

Through the program, the foreign students learned diverse neo-traditional dances, namely: *Kizino* dance of the Bakiga people of southwestern Uganda, *Kitaguriro* dance and *Kimandwa* dance of the Banyankore people of western Uganda, *Naleyo* dance of the Karimojong people of north eastern Uganda, *Maggunju* dance and *Baakisimba* dance of the Baganda people of central Uganda, *Owaro* dance by the Samia people of eastern Uganda, *Agwara* dance of the Alur people of West Nile, *Ding Ding* dance and *Larakaraka* dance of the Acholi people of northern Uganda, among others. The local Ugandan teachers in collaboration with faculty at NYU selected the dances that were taught during each cycle of the program.

The program also offered teaching opportunities for foreign students who teamed up with local Ugandan dance students, teachers, and artists in groups of two to four individuals and developed a one to two-hour dance lesson plan. For four to six days, each teaching team applied its lesson plan to groups of 15-20 children aged 7 to 15 who came from different local communities. The children's workshops were developed into pieces of choreography, which were staged in Ugandan theatres at the end of the program (Kagoloby, 2014; Mabingo, 2015a).

### ***Research Question***

This inquiry started by interrogating whether there are meanings that foreign students construct from their study abroad experiences in neo-traditional dances. Thus, I formulated the following key question as a linchpin to unveil the critical insights of the foreign students: What meanings did the foreign students construct from experiential and reflective participation in neo-traditional dance activities during the study abroad programs in Uganda? This key question elicited reflections on the agency of the foreign students in study abroad neo-traditional dance activities, the dance experiences and environments in which the meanings were constructed, and the cultural, educational, and artistic backgrounds that formed and informed the meaning making processes.

### **Scholarly Perspectives on Teaching and Learning Dances Across Cultures**

There are debates within international education regarding how study abroad experiences impact the cultural, academic, and personal growth of students (Clark, Flaherty, Wright & McMillen, 2009). Greatrex-White (2008) has observed that study abroad programs act as an important educational tool for the examination of what cannot be addressed in the conventional classroom/lecture room setting.

For foreign students from the U.S, investigating their study abroad experiences in dance is necessary. This is more so since in the U.S and within the Euro-American academic, media, and political discourse, the continent of Africa is characterized and otherized (Fanon, 1986) as exotic, dangerous, and backward (Poncian, 2015). These reductionist classifications are extended into objectification and fetishization of dances and dancers from Africa as sensual, primitive, and mere physical activities valued only as products for insatiable white gaze (Gottschild, 2003; Mills, 1997). Mudimbe (1988) has referred to this characterization as invention of Africa. It is from this perspective that examination of the reflections of the foreign students on their participation in dance activities inside Africa is essential. How do dance experiences frame the meanings that foreign students nourish when they take part in learning neo-traditional dances in local African environments?

Scholars have offered insights into how dance can offer individuals perspectives on new cultural worldviews (Banks, 2014; Martin, 2013; Warburton, 2017). African dances are a domain of knowledge through which a person can learn, question, do, know, think, and become (Streets, 2011). When a person engages dances outside his or her own culture, he or she do not only acquire the practical skills of the dances, but he or she also attains an understanding of the cultural functionalities of the dance and their links to the people (Banks, 2014). This emanates from how a person internally processes movement action (soma) vis-à-vis the external occurrences. Green (2002) has observed that our “constructions of body are

influenced by the interaction of our somas with the world" (p.114). Hence, in study abroad programs, questions related to how dancing "provide students with the means to discover first hand some of the complexities of dealing with a culture which may be at times very different from their own" (Henthorne, Miller & Hudson, 2001, p. 50) can be explored.

In her article titled *Alienation and Transformation: An International Education in Contemporary Dance*, Martin (2013) unveiled the critical experiences of seven female contemporary dancers from Morocco, Egypt, Tunisia, Malta, The Occupied Territories of Palestine, Lebanon and Syria on their contemporary dance training in Western cultural environments. She explained that although these dancers experienced alienation through somatic practices, choreographic processes, and pedagogic procedures, they experienced transformative learning. They experienced new ways of embodying, thinking about, and valuing new dance knowledge through performance and education. Martin's thesis (2013) illuminates the potency of dance in nourishing cross-cultural meaning-making. This article extends Martin's analysis by investigating the nature of meanings that students from the Western world (Occidents) construct from their participation in learning neo-traditional dances in African environments (Orient).

From the perspective of African dances, Streets (2011) has explained how immersing the self in these dances through performance enables embodiment of nuanced understandings that are personal and cultural. Drawing on her reflections as a learner of dances, songs, and drum rhythms in communities in Ghana and Guinea, she discloses how participating in African dance and drumming camps enabled her to construct and cultivate transformative experiences as a foreign American citizen in Ghana and Guinea. Streets's contribution seems to advance the debate beyond the common objectification, tokenization, and exoticization of African dances. She presents a case that there is room for subjective interpretation of the dancing body, which staircases a person into complex epistemologies.

Further research in cultural exchange and study abroad programs in the arts in Africa have highlighted the potential benefits to the foreign students and other intercultural issues that arise as a result of these programs. Kagolobya (2014) has examined the intercultural dynamics and power play in the three study abroad programs operating in Uganda. His findings showed that although these programs underpinned "knowledge transfer, experiential learning, cultural transfer, intercultural dialogism, intercultural exclusivism, and symbolic cultural interaction" (p. 277), for the program where the students came from the U.S. to study in Uganda, they retained power throughout the program over local participants because the program was entirely funded by these students and New York University.

I critically distilled the aforementioned literary accounts to form a framework for interpretation of the findings. Since the question of the meanings that the foreign students construct out of study abroad programs in African environments has not been adequately enumerated in prevailing literary discourses, this article attempts to investigate these issues. The reflections of the foreign students who participated in the dance education study abroad program are critically examined to illuminate the meanings they derived from experiential and reflective neo-traditional dance encounters.

### **Orientalism, Experiential Learning, and Study Abroad in Dance**

This inquiry is situated at the intersection of the theories of experiential learning (Kolb, 1984) and Orientalism (Said, 1978). The meanings that the foreign students from countries such as the U.S. construct during study abroad programs can be framed from the perceptions that the Western world (Occident) has constructed about non-Western countries such as Uganda (Orient). Hence, the study abroad experience can then be considered as a process that begins before the students depart for their destinations. For the case of Africa, it is critical to position the foreign students in their Western locality (the U.S. for this matter) because in Western media, political, and foreign policy discourses and academic environments, African communities are generally classified as needy, diseased, insecure, hotspots, illiterate, among others. The meanings that foreign students construct from study abroad encounters in African communities can re-affirm, challenge, question and debunk the preconceived stereotypes and biases.

Thus, in study abroad programs experiences, the foreign students from Western countries assume the position of the Occident and perceive the people in the local study abroad environment as the other (Said, 1978). This is more so since as Dewey (1938) has observed, any new experiences that an individual forms is based on old experiences. The foreign students can conceptualize local African communities as essentialist (Hofstede, 1991), representing monolithic indigenous cultures and realities. In dance, this notion of “the way we see them” (Holliday, 2000) can extend into how the dancing bodies enter into these new kinesthetic spaces and the manner in which the minds process these embodied experiences. For neo-traditional dances in African cultures, the foreign students can make these meanings on the action (dance), experience (reflection on dances), place (environments of participation), and their agency (immersion in embodying the dances) vis-à-vis their complex cultural, educational, and ideological orientation. This process entails “person-situation interaction” (Schunk, 2012, p. 233) and “grasping of experience and transforming it” (Kolb, 1984, p. 41) into complex meanings.

The hermeneutic interpretations of a foreign student are sandwiched between their preconceived biases and the impulses of the new cultural milieu. This defines his or her place

in and thought about the new local environment because "one's position in the learning space defines that person's experience and thus defines their reality" (Kolb & Kolb, 2005, p. 201). They interface with and embody what they perceive as different or the other, cultivating new ways of thinking, knowing, and doing that may reveal their ethnocentric and ethnorelative predispositions (Bennett, 1993).

## **Research Methodology and Methods**

### ***The Researcher's Positionality as an Insider***

My first contact with the NYU dance education study abroad program was in 2007 when I worked as a local Ugandan teacher on the program. My initial position was of a local teacher, but it slowly morphed into as an inside inquirer, also referred to as native researcher (Mascarenhas-Keyes, 1987). I was drawn to the meanings that foreign students construct as active agents in the dance activities. Going into this inquiry, I occupied an emic perspective with a subjective standpoint (Headland, Pike, & Harris, 1990) on the topic. I possessed foundational insights into the pedagogic processes of the program and had developed a working association with some foreign students while they were in Uganda and after.

Although my positionality enabled me to develop insights into the pedagogic, artistic, and cultural configurations of the program, for example, the structuring of the dance workshops, the cultural relationships forged during the program, and the neo-traditional activities, I still had not fully grasped anecdotal and nuanced reflections of the foreign students on the meanings that they constructed from their dance experiences. This deficit motivated me to engage the foreign students to elicit the complex meanings that they cultivated as active agents in neo-traditional dance activities.

### ***Research Methods***

This qualitative inquiry is based on a hermeneutic phenomenological research paradigm (Groenwald, 2004; Heidegger, 1962; van Manen, 1997), which entailed systematic collection, organization, and interpretation of the research participants' lived experiences and my own subjective knowledge of the program. I sought "to understand these experiences from the participants' point of view" (Leedy & Ormrod, 2001, p. 157). Drawing on Heidegger's (1962) view that "the meaning of phenomenological description as a method lies in interpretation of experiences" (p. 37), I investigated "the central underlying meaning of the experiences and emphasized the intentionality of consciousness where experiences contained both the outward appearance and inward consciousness based on the memory, image, and meaning" (Creswell, 1998, p. 52) of the research participants.

The key queries centered on the complex learning experiences, memories of the study abroad phenomena, and the constructed meanings of the research participants' lived, experiential and reflective encounters. Together with the research participants, we engaged in developing meanings to the reflections as recounted by the participants. The data was contained within the perspectives of the study abroad participants (Groenewald, 2004). I sought to reveal how these students "understood the phenomena in their own terms [and] to provide a description of human experience as it is experienced by the person him or herself" (Bentz & Shapiro, 1998, p. 96)

I used semi-structured in-depth interviews to elicit data. I posed open, direct, and verbal questions to the research participants. A list of overarching questions, which McCann and Clark (2005) refer to as *memoire* or *agenda* guided the interview protocol. These questions focused on the meanings the foreign students constructed from participating in the neo-traditional dance activities. Additionally, together with the research participants, I analyzed parts of their study abroad journals they generated during their trip to Uganda to solicit in-depth memories, reflections, and stories.

### ***Research Procedure and Participants***

The research process involved applying to the University Committee on Activities Involving Human Subjects at NYU for ethical approval. After acquiring ethics approval, I used purposive sampling (Palinkas, Horwitz, Green, Wisdom, Duan, and Hoagwood, 2015) to recruit six foreign students who took part in the study abroad program from 2007 to 2010. I sent emails to each research participant seeking their willingness and acceptance to participate in the study. After the research participants accepted to participate in the study, I held one to two hour interview sessions with each research participant to collect data.

All the research participants for the study were U.S citizens and residents of diverse racial backgrounds. They included one male and six females aged 25-50. Five of the research participants were dance majors who specialized in different dance genres such as contemporary dance, modern dance, hip-hop dance, and Black Diaspora dances, among others, whereas one majored in international education. By the time I conducted this inquiry, three participants were working as dance teachers in public, private, and charter schools in New York City, one was working for a nonprofit cultural exchange organization, and the other was a dance teacher at a Community College in New York City. The limited sample size made it possible for me to exhaustively unearth the complex in-depth meanings that the foreign students constructed from their experiential and reflective experiences.

To address issues of confidentiality, I used pseudonyms during transcription, coding and presentation of the data to safeguard the identities of the research participants. I involved the



diverse research participants who had participated in various study abroad programs and learned different neo-traditional dances to elicit rich and complex reflections.

### ***Data Analysis***

I converted the interview material into transcripts and reconciled them with information from the journal entries that the research participants generated during the study abroad program. I sent the transcripts back to the students for verification. I applied inductive analysis (Dey, 1993) to make sense of the research data. Particularly, I used some of Burnard's (1991) stages of qualitative data analysis to process the data. These stages included generating transcripts for interviews and observation notes, reading through the transcripts, rereading through the transcripts, generating broader categories from the data, rereading the transcripts alongside the derived categories, reducing the categories into themes, reconciling the themes with particular quotations from the interview transcripts and observation notes, and finally align the themes and quotations as I wanted them to progress in the article. These themes form the sections of data presentation and discussion, which include; a) deciphering the “place”; connecting with the other; embodying dances through music; and navigating difference through collaborative teaching.

### ***Delimitations of the Study***

The program that I researched involved participants from local Ugandan communities. The scope of inquiry did not cover this category of participants. The fundamental focus was to disclose the complex meanings that the foreign students from the U.S construct as a result of their participation in neo-traditional dance activities in the local African environments. The inquiry also touched on how their positionalities as citizens and residents of a Western country (Occident) bear on the meanings they constructed from experiential and reflective interactions with the other (Fanon, 1986) or the Orient (Said, 1978).

## **Data Presentation and Discussion**

### ***Deciphering the “Place”***

During the research process, the idea of “place” emerged as a central theme of reflection. The foreign students imagined the notion of “study abroad” as a place – “abroad.” Statements such as “when I went to Uganda,,” “I had never been to Africa,” and “I found Uganda so different from our country—the U.S.” among others reflected this characterization. This conceptualization positioned the students outside that place and peripherized its location. Engaging in study abroad created foreignness for students from the U.S. and framed their “outsidedness” (Tuan, 1977) to the place. The location of study abroad was caricatured as

different. Hence, the deconstruction of the idea of “place” was central to the meanings that the foreign students cultivated during the study abroad encounters.

For the foreign students who participated in this inquiry, framing the “place” was revealed in expressions such as “going to Africa to experience new culture, people, dances, and practices,” the notion of “learning in the local communities,” and the feeling of having “new and different experiences.” A sense of grandeur was attached to visiting this “new place,” reflecting what Gandhi (1998) has defined as “the persisting Western interest in the classification, analysis and production of the ‘exotic cultures’” (p. 59). As well as underscoring the foreignness of the students to Uganda, their reflections show that the idea of a place was not only a geographic imagination, but it was also construction of space with “genius loci,” (the spirit of a place) (Norberg-Schulz, 1980), “sense of place,” and “placelessness” (Relph, 1976) with different cultural experiences.

In some instances, the experiences of the foreign students demonstrated continued monolithicization of Africa as a homogeneous place. When some students observed that they were going to “Africa to learn dances from the people” or “read about Africa and watch recordings on Africa to prepare for the trip,” they disclosed their underlying assumption that cultures, people, practices and experience in Africa are one in all and all in one. Whereas these students were going to undertake their studies in “Uganda,” one of the many countries in Africa, their continuous reference to “Africa” disregarded its heterogeneities. This perception portrays the prevalent Western moral, political, cultural and intellectual invention of the other (Asante, 2013; Mudimbe, 1988; Said, 1978).

Moreover, some narratives from the students such as “to go and learn authentic dances in local environments,” “experience organic dances and music with the people,” and “go to a place that has not been diluted by Western materialism” seems to paint Uganda as a locality with exotic nativeness. These reflections assumed that the location offered authenticity and naturalness through dance, a notion that is commonly associated with the African continent. By expressing such exoticizing characterizations of Africa, the students occupied a position of the Occident and the study abroad locations as the other (Orient). Gupta and Ferguson (1992) have critiqued such perceptions by observing that the fiction of cultures as discrete, object-like phenomena occupying discrete spaces such as naturally discontinuous countries is flawed since communities (including in Africa) continue to evolve due to internal and external forces of transformation.

For foreign students of color, reflection on the location of the study abroad program allowed them to rationalize the “place” as a nucleus of meanings related to their racial identity. Georgina, mentioned that reflections on Uganda made her interrogate her black racial identity

and what the location meant to the historical precedents that have contributed to the formation of the identity of the Black race:

As a woman of color, I have always wanted to visit Africa. To think that I was going there to do dance and music made me reflect on how I was going to immerse myself in the local culture and what this meant for my race as a Black woman. Much as I do not know the particular ethnic community where my ancestors came from, I know that Africa is home and I was looking forward to my first time of visiting.

For Georgina, the idea of the place offered a possibility for reconnection with “Africa” as an ancestral home. Her racial identity and experiences living in the U.S.—a country that is predominantly white—defined the kind of expectations she developed about the program. She sought to address what Dubois (1903) has explained as double selves or twoness (Salazar 2013)—an experience where Black Americans in the U.S. suffer from as a result of growing up and living in a society that has consistently segregated them (Massey & Denton, 1993). Georgina aimed to experience the place, culture and people to navigate and question the complexities of Black racial identity.

Although the foreign students emphasized the subject of place, through comments such as “authentic dances from the people” and “in the native environment with people who know the dances,” questions can be raised about the “nativeness” of Kampala as a location where the program was conducted. Kampala as the capital city of Uganda is cosmopolitan as well as geographically and culturally distanced from the native communities where the dances originate. Moreover, some local teachers who teach in the program teach dances that do not come from their indigenous communities of origin. In lieu of this, issues pertaining to context and authenticity of the dance knowledge can be posed: Whose dances are taught in the program? When the foreign students talk about “in a native environment with people who know the dances”, what kind of people are they talking about?

Kibirige (2015) has observed that dance knowledge in African communities can only be understood by the native people as cultural bearers of this knowledge and skills in their environments of practice. Kibirige’s rationalization is that the meanings of the dances and ability to construct and embody them exist within the parameter of their cultural contexts. Rani (2013) supports this viewpoint by acknowledging that African dances that are practiced outside their original places and contexts can be defined as neo-traditional dances. This “neo-traditionality” comes from the influences that the dances carry as and when they are expropriated, appropriated and practiced in new environments because in entities as big and ethnically diverse as nations, there is intraculturality—flow of cultural ideas and practices

beyond boundaries of ethnicities (Bharucha, 2003). Hall (1994) has also noted that music and dance practices move from one cultural environment to another, which causes each setting to dislocate the ways of thinking and practices surrounding these art forms.

In light of the foregrounding observations, questions emerge concerning the imagined “nativity” that the foreign students expressed about the study abroad location. Therefore, when foreign students express they learned “traditional,” “cultural,” “native” or “indigenous” dances, these conceptualizations need to be examined in view of the cross-cultural and intercultural dynamics that they experienced within the local environments.

### ***Connecting with the Other***

The reflections on how the foreign students experienced difference through learning new dances emerged as a key theme of the study. These reflections represented the underlying meanings the students constructed from experiential and reflective dance learning processes. According to Clara, the interface with new experiences happened through the pedagogies that local Ugandan dance teachers applied:

During the dance classes, Ugandan teachers would come and assist us. They took us through movements and songs in a communal way where every person was a teacher supporting us as learners. This created a community where teachers and learners were moving around the room doing the movements with us.

Clara’s reflections revealed how she created meanings from the communal approaches that the local teachers used to teach the dances. Through this pedagogy, the individual, community, dance, and music congregated to offer her new ways of experiencing and embodying the neo-traditional dances. The framework of teaching positioned the teachers and learners as a community. This experience where a person, community, dance and music are all interwoven is common in music and dance practices in African communities (Agawu, 2007).

As a Western trained dancer, Georgina, shared that the pedagogic experience was new and contrasted with her prior artistic and dance education background:

One of the most outstanding experiences of the program was the relationship between the teacher and student. Teaching and learning Ugandan dances were more inclusive of participants and circular than linear. You had all local hosts teach us by explaining and demonstrating the dances with us. This was very different from the Western education that I grew up with. As a ballet student and dancer, I have always had one teacher lead the class and all students followed.

Through the new learning experiences of neo-traditional dances, Georgina reconstructed and renegotiated her perception of the pedagogic relationship between the teacher and student. The communal and interactive pedagogic mechanisms that she encountered as a learner juxtaposed her Western orientation in dance traditions such as ballet, which followed formal, structured and analytical approach to body movement. Georgina formed the meaning of this new pedagogy against her ballet dance background. This confirmed Coorlawala’s (2012) observation that as soon “as an individual’s aesthetic [and pedagogic] canon is resituated, it has already brought its own boundaries and frames into dialogue with other local histories and geoculturally distant practices” (p. 147).

The foreign students found the local pedagogic approaches effective in aiding new forms of learning. Veronica explained that through collaborative and interactional teaching techniques, “I felt that every person was there to assist me to learn. It was new information, technique, movements, and environment. The collective attention and support that we received from Ugandan teachers helped me to grasp the new dance material”. Akin to the African adage that “it takes an entire village to raise a child,” this communal pedagogic support allowed Veronica to connect with the people, environment, and activity of dancing. These socially constructed experiences (Vygotsky, 1978) deepened the “relational interdependency of agent and the world, activity, meaning, cognition, learning, and knowing” (Lave, 1991, p. 67).

The more the foreign students immersed themselves in the communal dance learning activities, the more they embodied the dance material and pedagogic experiences. According to Clara, the absence of the mirror enabled her to learn through embodied connection to other participants in the dance classes other than relying on her images in the mirror:

While we did not have a mirror to look at, we did mirroring. You knew you were doing it right or wrong not by what they were telling you, but how you observed others dance and the nonverbal feedback that you felt and received while going through the dances with others.

The above excerpt reflected what Merleau-Ponty (1962) has referred to as intercorporeality. Clara perceived fellow dance participants and teachers as a mirror. Whereas using the mirror as a teaching and learning tool magnifies the individual centeredness of the learner (Radell, Adame, & Cole, 2002), teaching and learning neo-traditional dances in Uganda entailed valuing fellow individuals as sources of knowledge, skills and experiences. Through “communal random mirroring” (Mabingo 2015b, p. 136), Clara embodied new knowledge, material and experiences as an active agent. The kinesthetic connections were mediated by “social meaning-making process rather than just transmission activity” (Chappell as cited in Melchior 2011, p. 126) through corporeal imitations of movements of a sole teacher.

In the course of participating in experiential and reflective neo-traditional dance activities, some foreign students experienced alienation. Specifically, students of color felt unwelcomed by the way local Ugandan participants related with them. Katherine noted: “I came to Uganda with the burning desire to connect with my people and my motherland. I was curious to connect with a place that I call ancestral home. But the local people did not feel forthcoming.” For Kegan, this alienation and otherization was more vivid: “Ugandan participants always gave attention to our white colleagues. They always wanted to talk with them and not us. This diminished my eagerness to connect and belong. Honestly, I felt as if I never ‘left the U.S.’ yet I was also a new learner.” These reflections show the dilemmas involved in cross-cultural dance encounters. For Katherine and Kegan, such alienation curtails their desires to meaningfully interact with the place and people. This seems to indicate that even when collective pedagogies are applied, foreign students can still feel alienated if support is not extended to them. For foreign students of color, this alienation can stir disconnection to the place, the people, and the experiences.

### ***Embodying the Dances through Music***

The meanings that the foreign students made from leaning and embodying the dances through music was another key theme of the data. Katherine stated,

Learning dances in Uganda involved learning their songs and drum rhythms in addition to the movements. For example, while learning *Kizino* dance, we had to sing and dance at the same time. I had never done this before. This was not easy because the language and movement techniques were new.

Additionally, the foreign students also explored drumming as part of dance knowledge, as Georgina observed:

The drumming part was one of the most enriching experiences. By learning and playing drum rhythms of *Kizino* dance, I was able to link them to the movements and techniques of the dances and understand that dance is not only about knowing the movements.

Exploring music and drum rhythms as part of neo-traditional dance learning processes enabled the foreign students to understand and celebrate the convergence of music, dance, storytelling, and instrumentation, which have been reported to form the epistemological framework in African society (Agawu, 2007; Nannyonga-Tamusuza, 2015). The experiences that Georgina and Katherine nourished expanded their conceptualization of dance music as an integral component of dance pedagogy. They applied thought to their immersion into these

interwoven activities to attain firsthand experience of how the body can act as a constellation of sound, rhythm, and movement.

This practice of learning dances through music was new to some foreign students. Veronica stated that,

Ever since I started learning dance in the U.S., I have always learned dance as a separate discipline from music. I have never sung songs or played drum rhythms as part of dance. It was when I travelled to Uganda that I had this new experience.

By being an active singer of songs and executor of their attendant movements, Veronica explored music as part of embodied action. What she describes as “new experience” seems to reflect the foreignness of the knowledge and meaning that emerged from her positionality as a dance learner in a new culture. This notion of “cultural difference made visible the dynamic territory of cross-cultural experience and the process of crossing cultural divides” (Ness as cited in Craighead, 2006, p. 21). Veronica relied on her ethnocentric experience of learning dance as separate entity from music to make meaning from her agency in neo-traditional dance activities.

Linda explained that the musical experiences enabled her to access nuanced knowledge and skills of the dances. Learning the songs and their meanings divulged information about the dances and the people, which could not be acquired by mere dancing alone:

When Ugandan teachers taught the dance songs and their underlying meanings, I was able to make connection between the meanings and structures of these songs and dances and the people. Coming from a country where music is separated from dance in dance forms such as modern dance and contemporary dance, I was able to experience and appreciate the power of music and dance as two intertwined aspects of society.

Citing a specific example of *Kimandwa* dance experience, Linda further noted, “Learning the songs of *Kimandwa* dance and their meaning revealed its spiritual importance among the Banyankore people of Western Uganda. The meaning of the songs clarified the dance, its essence and its culture of origin.” The songs allowed Linda to practically explore aspects of dance knowledge through music; an experience, which was dissimilar from her experience of practicing dance in the U.S. The songs did not only provide a framework for kinesthetic exploration, but they also provided insights into the deeper meanings of the overall dances and their links to the people, places, and cultures.

For some foreign students such as Veronica, the neo-traditional dance experiences posed learning dilemmas: “It was difficult for me to learn the dances. You had to do the movement, remember the technique, sing, and listen to the drums all at the same time. I struggled to learn all this at the same time.” She added, “the songs were in new languages and drum rhythms were polyrhythmic. At times I was confused as to which rhythm to listen to”. Veronica’s reflection discloses the anxieties that learners can experience as they embody and navigate new dance experiences. This shows that deconstructing new cultural experiences through dance can be alienating to foreign students. This can ignite acculturative anxieties and deepen the learning difficulties that are associated with cross-cultural and intercultural learning encounters.

### ***Navigating Difference through Collaborative Teaching***

The findings indicate that the study abroad program involved collaborative teaching as a learning activity. The foreign students collaborated with local Ugandan dance artists, students and teachers to develop dance and music lesson plans that they co-taught to children who came from different local communities. The foreign students constructed meanings as a result of their participation in the collaborative lesson planning and co-teaching experiences.

Veronica stated:

When I was partnered with a Ugandan co-teacher to develop and apply a lesson plan for children, I asked her the things that these children liked, their day-to-day life at home, and the teaching methods that are used for their education. She said that they liked hip-hop dance and folk games and came from a mindset that considered the teacher as a sole source of teaching and learning material. So, we developed and applied a lesson plan that tapped into these ideas.

The lesson planning process enabled Veronica to make meaning from her position as a collaborator. This included understanding the local worldview that informs how children perceived education. The awareness of the local conditions show that when foreign students collaborate with local individuals to facilitate activities in environments where study abroad programs are hosted, they acquire nuanced information about the place, people and experience, which deepen their cultural understanding.

Through collaborative lesson planning and co-teaching, the foreign students broadened their abilities to develop and apply pedagogies across cultures. Clara said, “The Ugandan co-teachers that I collaborated with had pedagogical ideas that we put into the lesson plan. One of the ideas was the inclusion of live traditional music instrumentation such as “*engoma*” [local Kiganda drums] in the lesson plan.” She added, “I had never taught a dance class with live traditional music. I have always taught dance using recorded music. We discussed this idea



and agreed on how to effectively implement it during teaching.” The process of exchanging ideas with local Ugandan collaborators showed that engaging in activities such as cross-cultural co-teaching offers avenues for meaning making that emerges as a result of questioning, collaboration, experience, and agency.

The construction of meanings by the foreign students manifested itself in the practical experiences, which were cultivated through co-teaching processes. The ideas developed in the collaborative lesson plans were pedagogically applied. Katherine highlighted that:

When we were co-teaching, I experienced a challenge of language barrier. Nobody, including my co-teacher, knew the language that the children spoke because they came from a different ethnic community. My co-teacher told me to emphasize practical movement and music of the lesson plan. So we facilitated rhythm and movement-driven dance tasks and children did not have difficulties to learn the material of our lesson plan.

This narrative shows the criticality of teaching experiences in expanding the knowledge base of Katherine on the local conditions and experiences. The collaboration with the local co-teacher allowed her to develop effective means such as movement-driven tasks to scaffold the children through the teaching and learning processes (Bruner, 1986) within a new culture. For study abroad foreign students, insights from local actors provided deeper insights into the local realities. This can advance their problem-solving abilities and enhance their meaning-making from their experiential and participatory agency in negotiation and understanding new cultural realities.

The process of collaborative teaching of local children created modes of interactions that unveiled in-depth stories and reflections from the children. Georgina explained, “The children that we taught shared personal stories about their learning experiences, family backgrounds, ethnic music and dance knowledge, cultural practices, among others.” She added that “Through these conversations, I attained nuanced knowledge on how the people, their environments, and the cultures are all intertwined to form a local reality.” The interactive nature of teaching brought the perspectives of the children into the pedagogic applications and underscored the richness that learners can bring to the pedagogic processes. Georgina’s reflection demonstrates that when foreign students allow themselves to collaborate, inquire, observe and listen, it minimizes the banking system of education (Freire, 1972) and immerses them into the local realities, igniting new discoveries and thought on cross-cultural participatory education.

The foreign students who participated in this inquiry stated that the program enabled them to “become multicultural dance educator,” “acquire more dance and cultural knowledge and skills that was plowed back into professional work,” “advance professional development,” “broaden cultural competences,” “attain academic qualification informed by diverse cultural perspectives,” among others. While the study abroad experiences in neo-traditional dances advanced the professional, cultural, and pedagogic proficiencies of foreign students, questions related to appropriation of knowledge can be raised: Who benefits from study abroad programs when students from Western countries are hosted in communities that are at the periphery of global capitalism? The benefits that the foreign students alluded to can be categorized as cultural appropriation, which Rogers (2006) has defined as use of symbols, artifacts, genres and symbols by members of another culture against another culture (commonly a colonized one). Loots (2006) has observed that the power imbalance between Western countries and indigenous communities make the indigenous communities susceptible to predatory cultural appropriation.

In the case of this study, cultural appropriation can be reflected in how foreign students sourced knowledge and skills of cultural dances from local communities and used them for their professional, cultural and artistic work. According to Loots (2006), since the current trends in artistic practices are an extension of Western hegemonic capitalism, the indigenous art forms tend to be deconstructed to further the Western artistic and cultural dominance. Cultural appreciation can be insidious and generally happens when cultural and artistic forms from native communities are co-opted and commodified by Western artists and institutions under the guise of interculturalism and transculturalism.

### **Dancing (with) the “Other:” The Study Abroad Finale**

This article has weaved together the complex meanings that the foreign students constructed from experiential and reflective participation in the neo-traditional dance activities. Drawing on the ideas of experiential learning and orientalism, the article has discussed how these meanings were engraved against the cultural and artistic background of the foreign students. This bore on the ways through which they conceptualized the place, pedagogic environment, experiences, cultures, and knowledge of the local communities where the program was hosted as exotic, native, and different. The reflections of the foreign students are a testimony that study abroad programs in neo-traditional dances in African communities offers knowledge, meanings and experiences that transcend practical corporeal movements.

The participatory, experiential, and reflective neo-traditional dance, drumming, and singing activities that the foreign students immersed themselves in expanded their knowing, thinking, and doing. Through collaborative singing, dancing, drumming, lesson planning, and co-teaching nuanced knowledge, skills and experiences of the local dance practices, the people,

their cultures, and environments were revealed. The meanings that the foreign students constructed emerged from their positionality and participation in the complex dance activities in these new cultural and pedagogic realms. The dance material, music, pedagogy, culture, experience, activity, environment, and people all congregated to offer the students diverse meanings. Although foreign students revealed that learning neo-traditional dances as cultural artifacts in local communities advanced their professional, cultural, pedagogic, and personal growth and meaning-making abilities, questions related to cultural appropriation emerged.

In this article, I seek to provide a snapshot into the complexities and dilemmas entangled in meaning-making processes during dance education study abroad programs in African communities. By unveiling the complex reflections and meanings of the foreign students, I aim to expand discourses on how arts educators, researchers, and students can leverage study abroad and cultural exchange arts programs to nurture pedagogic, cultural, and artistic advancement of students and dance practitioners. I also draw attention to issues of cultural appropriation and how they may manifest themselves in these cultural and artistic exchange programs involving people from the Western world travelling to formerly colonized communities to engage in local cultural and artistic programs and activities.

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