TAKING it to the

Lorraine O'Grady, *Art Is . . .*, photo still, public performance during the African American Day Parade, Harlem, New York, 1983. Courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York

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STREETS

African Diasporic Public Ceremonial Culture Then and Now

Claire Tancons

In this article I wonder not "How do collaboratives created by cultural practitioners of African descent provide new perceptions, understandings, and forms of practice?"—the question asked by the conference conveners—but, rather, "Why make this inquiry now?" Why should we focus on black collectivities at a time when black artists have entered the mainstream art market, having established their names and the value of their work, particularly over the last decade, which might be called "the *F* decade," one inaugurated by the Studio Museum in Harlem in 2001 with *Freestyle* and ending, maybe, with the 2012 *Fore* exhibition focused on performance?

My article will not, of course, entirely answer this question; that, to my mind, is the collective endeavor of this conference. Nor will it address black art collaboratives or black art collectives per se. Instead, "Taking It to the Streets" addresses Caribbean, African American, and, more widely, African diasporic cultural practices and their artistic corollaries that create collective representation, indeed, collectivities of and for the African diaspora. In fact, this article highlights individual artists, or at least artists who have been credited as such, but whose practices have been concerned with, or in some instances created, black collectivities.

First, the bold assertion of a black collective identity summons up the idea of the black radical tradition. According to David Scott, "Part of the attractiveness, perhaps, of the idea of a *tradition* that is 'black' and 'radical' is the way in which it offers an idiom of *belonging*, a vantage point from which to narrate a *shared* past and a perspective from which to imagine a *common* future."[1] Further, African diasporic aesthetic and political practices epitomize the notion of the collective, which is nowhere more visible and audible than in mass displays, sometimes leading to mass action in the tradition of public ceremonial culture and in the current reemergence of these forms as modes of public address among Caribbean and African American artistic practitioners, political leaders, and the common people. If, as argued by Susan G. Davis, public ceremonies are social and political modes of communication, imag-

Shani Peters, *We Promote Knowledge and Love: Parade Day in Harlem*, photo still, 2011. Street performance during the Forty-Second African American Day Parade, Harlem, New York, September 18, 2011. Courtesy the artist. © Shani Peters 2011

ine how much we might yet learn from the African diaspora by beginning to account for this fundamental form of communication.[2]

Finally, what is the purpose of the collective if not representation? What is the purpose of collective representation if not collective action serving the purposes and intents of the collectivity? And how has this been achieved historically if not through mass action? It is against this backdrop that I am interested in current forms of mass gathering even as their political goals might not seem immediately obvious and might no longer seem necessary given the context that I previously highlighted: the increasing recognition, mainstreaming, and marketability of black artists.

Historical Antecedents

If there is a genealogy of African diasporic public ceremonial culture to be written, New Orleans and Harlem would be its starting and ending, spatial and temporal, cultural and ideological points, with Chicago and Houston and a few other historical centers of the Great Migration in between.

Harlem was the paragon of African diasporic culture in the first half of the twentieth century, and it is on Harlem that I will concentrate. Much as African American artists have entered the mainstream, Harlem is seemingly becoming just another Manhattan neighborhood, no longer the Mecca of Black America. Or is it indeed, as Sharifa Rhodes-Pitts reminded us, that "Harlem is nowhere" but always on our minds?[3] The Metropolitan Museum exhibition *Harlem on My Mind* covered the period from 1900 to 1968, which saw the formation of this black diasporic cultural language that was not solely restricted to jazz clubs, where the lingua franca of America was invented, and the smoking rooms, where literature was composed, but also took to the streets and encompassed a broad public ceremonial culture.[4]

In fact, some argue that the beginning of the Harlem Renaissance was not in 1925, with the publication of Alain Locke's *New Negro*, but in 1917, with the NAACP-organized Silent Protest March against the East St. Louis riots. Following closely in this alternative genealogy would be the victory parade of the Harlem Hellfighters in 1919 on their return home from the Allied front. W. E. B. Du Bois famously lent the Hellfighters these words in his editorial for the *Crisis*: "We Return, We Return from Fighting, We Return Fighting, Make Way for Democracy!"[5]

Harlem has always been at the forefront of a rich movement culture. The civil rights movement is the most widely known product of this culture. Much less widely known is Harlem's distinct public ceremonial culture, which once comprised not just political demonstrations but also military marches, funeral processions, and carnival parades to entertain, educate, protest, pray, mourn, and celebrate, in silence and in music, in anger, sorrow, and joy. In 1927 the funeral procession of the African American entertainer Florence Mills, the Blackbird, drew crowds in unprecedented numbers to the streets of Harlem (up to 150,000, according to some estimates) to commemorate her brief but stellar career.

Coming out of the commingling of southern blacks from the Great Migration and immigrants from the West Indies within the turmoil of the last century's historical struggles, Harlem's forms of public address have antecedents in the artistic manifestations of Africa and its diasporic cultures in the Caribbean, Latin America, and the American South. Throughout the 1920s, Marcus Garvey organized elaborate pageants to provide propagandistic visual rhetoric to the Universal Negro Improvement Association, the largest black mass movement in America.

Adam Clayton Powell Jr., the former pastor of the famed Abyssinian Baptist Church and a fallen civil rights leader, had understood the commonality of these practices beyond their seemingly different functions and goals. Powell organized many

Solar Flare Arkestral Marching Band, Rich South High School, Garfield, Chicago, March 4, 2013. Photo: Cauleen Smith

marches, strikes, picket lines, and boycotts and was a notorious parade participant, crossing over Caribbean and African American processional traditions: he gave the first parade permit to the Harlem Carnival in 1947 and became the first grand marshal of the African American Day Parade in 1969.

Photographers such as James Van Der Zee and Klytus Smith took shots every step along the way, just as Harlem Renaissance and other writers cast these memories in words, creating some of the most iconic mementos of Harlem. By the mid-twentieth century, the parade had become Harlem's distinctive diasporic idiom—West Indian, Latin American, African American—and one that spoke of an African aesthetics and politics born anew in Upper Manhattan.

Contemporary Reemergences

Art Is . . . , Lorraine O'Grady's public processional performance at Harlem's 1984 African American Day parade, might be the best introduction to this practice, which asserts the aesthetic value and subjective agency of the African American community. The series of small empty gilded frames—held by hired dancers in white leotards who walked alongside a monumental frame carried on a flatbed truck turned float—formed moving tableaux vivants whose motifs and subjects moved out of the frame and into the streets, where they were reframed as worthy of artistic interest, indeed, as the art itself.

Shani Peters's 2011 performance of iconic African American antislavery and civil rights figures in *We Promote Love and Knowledge* also took place during the African American Day Parade. Participants wearing papier-mâché heads of Harriet Tubman, Frederick Douglass, Marcus Garvey, Martin Luther King Jr., and Malcolm X distributed flyers with quotes from the latter. Much as O'Grady's Harlem performance was inspired by Brooklyn's West Indian American Day Parade—whose origins lay in the Harlem Carnival of the late 1940s and the 1950s[6]—Peters's project looked to street hawkers advertising the pawnbrokers in Harlem, Brooklyn, and other low-income communities. Both O'Grady and Peters found in the parade and other street traditions, whether processional or not, the vehicle for alternative display models rooted in the African diasporic tradition.

Other such traditions, which often overlap and are constantly updated to incorporate contemporary trends, include the marching band tradition. The Chicago-based artist and filmmaker Cauleen Smith has taken up this tradition, mixed it with the flash mob fad, and layered it with Sun Ra's Arkestral acoustics.[7] More recently, the musician Daniel Bernard Roumain mixed things up further in Houston by creating what was advertised as "a cross between

Daniel Bernard Roumain with Marc Bamuthi Joseph in collaboration with Troy Bennefield (University of Houston Cougar Marching Band), *EN MASSE*, photo still, marching band parade and music performance, Discovery Green, Houston, April 20, 2013. Courtesy University of Houston Cynthia Woods Mitchell Center for the Arts. Photo: David A. Brown/dabfoto

a flash mob, a pep rally, a processional and a pop-up recital" for *En Masse Studies & Etudes*, a "deconstructed parade" powered by Haitian and African American contrapuntal musical styles such as *kompa* and soul music.[8] The centerpiece of Smith's interventions has been the Solar Flare Arkestral Marching Band; Roumain performed with the University of Houston's Spirit of Houston Marching Band.

A project organized by Sol Sax, *Masqueraders Are the Ancestors of Protestors*, encompasses the ethos of many African American public shows of strength, which have sometimes been misunderstood as mindless entertainment when they do not display an overtly political agenda. Designed to celebrate Juneteeth, the celebration of the liberation of the last American slaves in Texas, Sax's yearly jubilee was coorganized this year with fellow artists Saya Woolfalk and Firelei Báez. The latter looked to New Orleans, that other bookend for the African American performance tradition, to which New Orleans native Rashaad Newsome paid homage in the second-line-inspired performance that accompanies his current *King of Arms* solo show at the New Orleans Museum of Art.

In closing, I would like to offer a more definitive conclusion than this otherwise cursory introduction, in keeping with my long-standing critique of Eurocentric genealogies of performance art, and following Frank Guridy's assertion about the importance of performance in understanding "diasporic linkages among people of African descent across national, cultural, and linguistic borders."[9] If we are to further twist the question from forming black collectivities to performing black collectivities, and to think about black performance practices, then my essay shows that the reemergence of the mass public processional performance charts a history of performance to be found not in the European avant-garde of the beginning of the last century but in the experience of slavery and colonialism, of independence struggles and civil rights movements. As mass demonstrations continue to shake the nation and as some ponder whether Trayvon Martin might be this century's Emmett Till, the lessons learned from this historical tradition continue to provide guidance.

Rashaad Newsome, *King of Arms* (2013), video still, recorded second-line performance for the exhibition *King of Arms*, New Orleans Museum of Art, June 21–September 15, 2013. Courtesy Rashaad Newsome Studio. © Rashaad Newsome 2013

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Notes

1. David Scott, "On the Very Idea of a Black Radical Tradition," *Small Axe*, no. 40 (2013): 1.
2. See Susan G. Davis, *Parades and Power: Street Theatre in Nineteenth-Century Philadelphia* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986).
3. See Sharifa Rhodes-Pitts on parades: "We March Because . . . ," in *Harlem Is Nowhere: A Journey to the Mecca of Black America* (New York: Little, Brown, 2011), 244–62.
4. See Allon Schoener, ed., *Harlem on My Mind: Cultural Capital of Black America, 1900–1968* (1969; repr. New York: New Press, 2007).
5. W. E. B. Du Bois, "Returning Soldiers," *Crisis*, May 1919, 19.
6. About the Carnival tradition, watch out for *En Mas': Carnival Twenty-First Century Style*, a traveling performance and exhibition project curated by Claire Tancons in collaboration with Krista Thompson, slated to premiere at CAC New Orleans in fall 2015.
7. See "Cauleen Smith and Claire Tancons in Conversation about the Supernova Procession," Issue Project Room, 2012, www.academia.edu/2356883/Cauleen_Smith_and_Claire_Tancons_in_Conversation_about_the_Supernova_Procession (accessed July 24, 2013).
8. www.mitchellcenterforarts.org/events/recent/en-masse (accessed July 28, 2013).
9. Frank Guridy, "Enacting Diaspora: Gender, Performance, and Garveyism in the U.S.-Caribbean World" (paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Studies Association, May 24, 2009), www.allacademic.com/meta/p114273_index.html (accessed July 24, 2013).