
Performance, Space, and the Bittersweet Narratives of Women in the City

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Abstract

This paper reflects on the findings of two research projects focused on women, performance, and urban space: the BlackLight Project, a youth arts activism and performance group and the Body in the City, a multi-generational interview project that explores Black women's relationships to urban space. Both projects are based in Newark, New Jersey and broadly explore how performance and narrative simultaneously consecrate and destabilize notions of: 1) the physical conditions of the city, 2) popular narratives of urban life, especially how this is tied to being a young Black woman, and 3) the affective and effective aspects of collaboration between the two groups through the literal transformation of interview-based materials into artistic performances.

From a range of ethnographic and creative material, this paper forwards arguments about how personal narratives and struggles are performances of becoming in the city, as opposed to a condition or consequence of a particular urban condition. Drawing upon performance theory, anthropology of space/place, and feminist geography, this paper makes larger theoretical claims about how a place is performed by its inhabitants. It concludes by way of questioning how epistemologies of space (a particular city) are formed and how creative processes can reveal: 1) how particular ways of knowing the Black, female urban experience are known and 2) how collaborative and multi-generational performances produce new knowledges (and imaginings) about cities and their inhabitants.

In autumn 2009, BlackLight, a youth arts activism project, held its first rehearsals in the dance space of the Paul Robeson Center on the Newark campus of Rutgers University. The BlackLight Project in Newark was conceived to provide young women with an open space for self-expression through creative writing, art, and dance. This community arts-activism program is supplemented by a multi-generational, interview-based research project called “The Body and/ in the City,” with the intention of bridging work between the two groups as a way to explore, through performance and ethnography, the relationships between women’s experiences and interpretations of living in the city across generations and creative forms.

This paper reflects on the findings taken from both of these projects to consider how narration and performance continuously question and produce urban space. I examine how the “performances” in relation to their city simultaneously consecrate and destabilize notions of the material/physical conditions of their city and its connections to popular narratives about urban life. I am especially attentive to how such stories and material facts are tied to being women of color in the city. The work of the participants in the BlackLight and “Body and/in the City” projects challenges how women’s lives are a consequence of universal urban conditions of poverty in a Black city by showing the multiple and differentiated relationships they have to the city, palpably ascertained through their experiences. Their stories and performances do not simply tell, relate, or represent, but show and perform how a city and its women become in relation to one another.

Drawing upon performance theory, anthropology of space/place, and feminist geography, I broadly look at how a place is performed by its inhabitants and the political potential of theorizing cities, like their inhabitants, as emergent and becoming. This expands beyond a particular city to

larger claims about how space can be a way of interrogating how particular epistemologies are formed. What are the knowledges carried on the bodies of women and in their stories, and how can such distinct and personal knowledges come into contact with the greater city at large in situ?

Performance and the body: making urban space

Places do not have single, unique “identities”; they are full of internal conflicts.

—Doreen Massey

If places do not have “single unique identities,” but are instead “full of internal conflicts,” as feminist geographer Doreen Massey asserts, then Newark, as a place and idea, is very much about being between. For anyone familiar with the history of post-industrial cities in the United States, the historical and cultural narratives of a city like Newark are familiar. It is a predominately Black city that weathered the turnover from a Fordist, industrial-based economy in the mid-twentieth century with a significant drop in population, dramatic shifts in racial and ethnic demographics, urban rebellions, and economic disinvestment in the city, followed by an upsurge in underground drug economies and the accompanying urban violence in the 1970s, ‘80s, and ‘90s. Urban decay connotes the contemporary condition of the city. Newark is a city with a bad “rep,” as Newarkeers and non-Newarkeers often say. As an alternative imagining of social relations and time, critical theory on space enables us to understand how things, events, or experiences—and how we know them—are co-implicated, not within a distant “chain of meaning,” but as mobile, context-driven, and fluid. In this regard, to be a Newarker is to inhabit the tension, or struggle, between discursive and material: the narratives of place and its irreducible physical conditions.

One of the most generative aspects of performance studies and, moreover, the very notion of performance as a politically and culturally salient category, is its ability to incorporate multiple ways of knowing. As Diana Taylor writes, “By taking performance studies seriously as a system of learning, storing, and transmitting knowledge, performance studies allows us to expand what we understand by knowledge” (Taylor, 2003, p. 16). It is an instance and process that sees the tension between the “real” and the “constructed” as a productive, if not political, tension. It is as much about what is embodied, Taylor continues, as it is about “calling into question the very contours of the body” (Taylor, 2003, p. 4). Bodies perform and make space in repertoires or cultural

performances as Taylor notes, but those same bodies are archives as well, carrying personal and collective histories of communities and places that “stage” the performance of the body. To perform is to question. It is to make a space through the body—a body that is always intertwined and re-making the world it inhabits.

As a project that explicitly makes a space for difference, BlackLight allows young women to use creative process as a means to question and reconstitute their stories. Youth in BlackLight often perform through tension between how they perceive others’ ways of knowing their experience, how they know their experience, and the potential of transforming their experience through creative process. In a recent performance entitled, “Our Bodies, Our World,” two young women in BlackLight choreographed a piece about a mother-daughter relationship. The fact that the girls were performing such a popularly scripted familial relationship made this performance exceedingly resonant, especially since they performed the entire piece without words. Performing what anthropologist Kathleen Stewart calls “haunting” or “clashing” epistemologies, a kind of “othering” or displacement that comes from “speaking within the object spoken of” (Stewart, 1996, p. 38), dance, as a form of cultural process, is a way not just to express meaning but to reveal the violent processes through which a culture or experience becomes. It is the space through which particular narratives, such as that of a mother and daughter, are “continuously dissolved and re-constructed” in an ongoing “reversibility” and exchange played-out through a conscious manipulation of bodies and space (Stewart, 1996, p. 38).

While this performance is clearly related to troubling one particular kind of relationship, I would like to use it as a way to expand an understanding of performance into the realm of the spatial, emphasizing the political project of performance as spatial practice and process. By taking apart and re-situating their experiences, these girls cut into a fold (through performance) wherein they can practice a re-ordering of power through their experiences and bodies. They perform what Peggy Phalen terms a “perceptual transformation,” whereby the girls’ use of space, their collaboration and literal embodiment of socially “scripted” roles, becomes a means to undermine the very integrity of dominant representations of their specific relationships. The practice and process of performing is a way they use space to trouble how subjectivity represents and knows itself. It is cultural process that shows not meaning, but how meaning is made.

The “flipside”: spatial practices, processes, and flows

Theorizing performance as actively creating space, by questioning, re-imagining, or creating outside of concretized spatial and temporal boundaries, focuses on what and how performances do. In other words, performance is the terms upon which bodies articulate, form, and create themselves and the places they inhabit. My ways of understanding and interpreting women’s experiences of the city are derived from the set of “codes” that come out of their stories and performances, as well as the environments their performances create. For example, the notion of “flipside,” used by several of the participants, invokes a mutually constitutive double-meaning that does not resolve but inhabits tensions between contradictory phenomena, a Janus-faced way of knowing life that is specifically of Newark. One interviewee describes Newark thus:

I would describe Newark as a bustling city . . . a multicultural city . . . a place where you can get almost anything that you need . . . We have a Performing Arts Center, we have the park where you have live music in the summertime, and you have the street fairs, and it’s just really good. And of course, there is always the flipside of the coin. There are certain places where you probably shouldn’t go in Newark if you’re not from Newark, or hell, certain places I wouldn’t go in Newark, and I am from Newark [laughs] . . . I don’t know. It’s a wonderful city and I’m proud to be from Newark. You know like, a lot of people, when they think of Newark, they think so negatively . . . it’s always . . . they [are] always thinking about the crime and how many people were shot in the city, but it’s just a good place. Every place there’s problems. Every place has an issue. Every place has an opportunity to grow. So . . . it’s growing.

In this excerpt from a longer interview, Kiki, a 34 year-old probation officer, uses the notion of “flipside” as a way to negotiate the troubling material contradictions of the city. It is a way for her to negotiate a particular fixity about representations of the city, as well as a generative means through which pride emerges, despite the problems the city engenders. She is attentive to the slippage between generalizable urban conditions and particular differences that contradictorily emerge through them. Women and economically under-privileged groups, which Black women in Newark demographically represent, are often appropriated into dominant narratives, such as the “negative” stories about crime in the city, the places she wouldn’t go at night, that use statistics and popular representations of poverty and violence to define the city. What can potentially become a hegemonic narrative of being from Newark is re-told, through Kiki’s “flipside,” shifting power to define Newark in her terms.

This is not to say that the violence, poverty, and “negative” connotations that characterize descriptions of Newark are purely rhetorical and unsubstantiated. Kiki does not deny this. The tropes of the city come from very real situations: Newark is a city of overwhelming poverty, unemployment, high dropout rates, and what many women indicate as “senseless violence.” But fact has an uncanny ability to take on the power of producing undifferentiated truth about the city where one particular story of Newark easily becomes synecdochical for every body in the city. The power of this truth is met by Kiki’s insistence that these kinds of things happen “everywhere” and that there is always a “flipside.” Newark, through her rendering, is a dynamic place that contains multiple narratives within it. The apprehension Kiki has about “places she wouldn’t go” is met with a sense of pride that she has for the city as a way to negotiate multiple narratives. That Newark is “a bustling, up and coming city” that also has its “flipside” undercuts the power of a particular narrative’s specificity to Newark by questioning its singularity as an urban phenomenon, insisting on difference in seemingly undifferentiated space.

Kiki’s attention to the doubleness of situations brings to mind questions about how space can be a means of critiquing narratives that use historical, economic, and other linear, time-based ways of knowing to organize power over particular groups in society. The dynamic nature of space that Kiki’s comments refer to echo Massey’s work on difference and the political dimensions of space. Space’s openness to the incorporation of difference renders it a political means through which alternative place-making practices emerge (Massey 1996, 2002). This approach questions binary and static interpretations of space that assimilate differential practices, counter-narratives or “flipsides,” into dominant narratives about people and space (in this case, the public reputation of Newark). Massey insists on a more nuanced reading of the practices that produce categories for analyzing society by asking how a particular object of knowledge, such as the city, is known, and how it becomes a subject of knowledge in the first place. This orients us towards the performative aspects of stories, in particular, how spaces “provide the conditions for the existence of [particular] relations which generate time” (Massey 2005, p. 54). Such approaches and practices highlight how events or experiences are co-implicated, not within a distant “chain of meaning,” but mobile, context-driven, and fluid within a present. As Massey’s work indicates, Kiki sees the city as a dynamic and yet-to-be-determined space, thus holding the political potential for difference.

Strength and vulnerability: reflexivity of space and performance

Kiki’s mediation of the differences between her knowledge of the city and popular representations of Newark draw our attention to a contradiction of how these women engage and re-interpret dissonances between variegated urban knowledges. There is a reflexivity that emerges in narratives women tell about the city that underscores how contradiction is negotiated through a performance of difference. This is echoed by ways another interviewee, Angela, describes what it means to be a woman in and from Newark. To be a woman in the city is not just to deal with contradictory forces but to be constituted through the spaces they create. As she describes when speaking about the uniqueness of women:

I think women are so strong. I think we are both vulnerable, which is an attractive quality . . . to have the ability to express both [. . .] I think it is very important to show people your vulnerability sometimes . . . which I too have a difficult time with. I just think, as a woman, it is easy to feel overwhelmed and burdened and, you know, you are the caregiver, yet you need care yourself. So I think that’s a lot. I think we can understand one another when we are open to one another.

Being a woman, according to Angela, is to be both “strong and vulnerable.” One of the principles of the BlackLight project, as well as our interviews, is to make space for these dichotomous characteristics. Performances, workshops, and open-ended interview sessions operate under the auspices of not only asking what it means to make a space for women to be “strong and vulnerable,” but to insist that narratives about this experience are a processes of re-inscribing a discourse about women in the city. Narratives, in this regard, are “bridges” between dislocated selves (in time and space) that render “possibilities of experience” tangible in literal and imaginative space (Ochs and Capps 1988, pp. 29-30).

Showing vulnerability is a performance of strength, demonstrating how women are not broken but “multifaceted” and different. As Angela elaborates:

For myself, I love it. People see me and they think that I am this real together sister and sophisticated sister. They ask, “where are you from?” And I say “Newark, born and raised.” Yeah. You know, just to show we’re multifaceted in Newark. We’re not just this picture of a woman walking down the street with a wife-beater and shorts on, with her hair tied-up, being nasty and, you know, screaming with a foul mouth. No. We are all types of women. We’re good people.

The ease with which Angela moves between what she knows of perceptions of her as a woman and a Newarker to what she knows through her experiences being raised in a “family of women,” and the process of “knowing struggle,” informs her narrative of the city. As such, multiplicity in narration is not a condition of the “performing self,” a context-specific occurrence that can be coded for distinction between the “authentic” and the “performed” (Goffman, 1959). Instead, being “born and bred” in Newark gives her authorship. Said authority does not translate into hard and fast definitions of the city but rather draws its force from a kind of contradictory situatedness. Her story brings our attention to content and form, specifically how one is used and/or produced in response to, and/or in service of, the other. Her narration of women resonates with that of the city: the former enables her to produce the latter within the framework of her own experience.

When invoking the term narration I am referring to a specific *connaissance/savior* relationship that the speaker performs. Narration, in my use, is a performative act that is expressive as well as interpretive, constituting a world-making all its own. Thus it can be rhetorical in a traditional expository sense, but it also encompasses space-making/narrative-making practices. Henri Lefebvre makes a distinction between *connaissance*, a reflexive and more philosophically oriented way of knowing, and *savior*, what he terms a “political practice” that “colludes with power” maintaining ideological resolve (Lefebvre 1972, p. 368). While I do not ascribe a fixity to these two types of “knowing,” they open up a theoretical space for discussing how someone, like Angela, can at once have a relational understanding of women as well as a more “political” knowledge of women. She recognizes that a definition of Black women as “screaming with a foul mouth” is one she cannot identify with, yet she does not deny or attempt to change this particular image of Black women. She gets her “revenge,” rather, on representations, as she puts it, through her relative knowledge of what it means to be a Black woman:

I think the best revenge is success. [. . .] showing people that you can make something out of yourself when they think that you have no way out. That this is your situation and that this is all you were destined to be, you know, to show them. And success on your level. Success could mean maintaining a job, and that’s a big obstacle for some people, some people can’t do that. Or . . . hell they can’t, or don’t do it.

The measure of “success,” as she knows it, is conditional and reflexive, based on one’s “level.”

Such a relational way of knowing becomes political in the sense that it is a practice of difference, but not in the sense that it maintains an ideological stance (Massey, 2005). It is political as it makes a space for different practices or ways of knowing an experience and, more generally, an urban condition. This re-arrangement of power away from pervasive and fixed representations of “success” in the city and towards specific practices of Newarkers gives Angela’s narrative its particular political salience.

Leaving and returning

If you think about it, fear is stronger than love because, if you love something you fear to lose it. So if you fear to lose it, the fear overpowers the love. You can’t love to fear something, but you can fear to love something.

—Jasmine, BlackLight participant

Because Newark is a city so discursively implicated by statistics, it is important to question what such ways of knowing reveal and obscure. In a rather unnerving moment during a workshop in late 2009, Jasmine, a 16 year-old BlackLight participant, responded to the prompt, “which is stronger, love or fear,” with the above excerpt. The rhetoric of love and fear has an entangled existence in the city of Newark. To love the city is a “bittersweet” experience because fear can easily “overpower love,” as Jasmine explains.

Through the theoretical lens of space, Newark becomes dynamic, multiple, and fluid. Massey’s work is complemented by that of Manuel Castells, who introduces the notion of “space of flows” as the means through which knowledge and meaning are produced in the modern (urban) world. Arjun Appadurai extends this thread into anthropological inquiry in *Modernity At Large* (1996), articulating specific flows, “-scapes,” as he terms them, that carry with them mutable, spatial, and social forms that produce meaning through their displacement. The notion of “armchair nostalgia” or “communities of sentiment” re-reads displacement as a stage through which identities are made (Appadurai, 1996, p. 31). Building upon the work of Benedict Anderson (1982), Appadurai’s “imagination as social practice” is his way of arguing that, in an increasingly mobile world, imagination is a practice of place-making, a form of “agency [within] globally defined fields of possibility” (Appadurai, 1996, p. 31).

While it is difficult to code for “imagination,” several interviewees described how being away from Newark influenced how and why they came back to Newark, which indicated a mobile way of asserting their identity and values as they moved between other places and Newark. When recounting what it was like being in South Carolina for college, Kiki describes her experience away from the city as one that “softened her up.” Shedding her “northern chip,” as she calls it, happened as she was walking down the street and talking to people in the South:

People will be sitting at their porch, out driving a car, you don't know these people from nowhere and everyone speaks. Everyone speaks no matter what. So, I like to speak to people. I'm really into the “good mornings,” and “how are yous” because, you know, it makes people let down their guard. You know, you don't have to go around all mean with your face twisted-up for what? Right? You're breathing, it's not a bad thing [. . .] It was very comforting. I think the south is very comforting, very homely. Even though I wasn't at home, now I had friends who were like family. So it was excellent. I loved it down there but I wouldn't live down there. I wouldn't go down there to, like live or start a family. I'm a northern girl. But it's good. I think a lot of people from the city need to experience country life. You know, it softens you up and lets you know the world is much bigger.

Understanding that the world is much bigger than Newark does not necessarily translate into a comparison between Newark and other places for Kiki, nor does it result in leaving Newark permanently. There is a sense of return that is grounded, literally, in a notion of responsibility that comes with the loyalty that is indicative of being from Newark and witnessing how the city has changed. As Kiki notes, seeing Newark from a different perspective, as a young girl to an experienced woman, gives her a reason to stay, or, as she puts it, “to come back to Newark.” She explains: “people say ‘why would you move to Newark, there are other places in the world to live.’ Yeah I get that, but why not? Why not go back to a community that has nurtured you? That has made you the person who you are, especially if you are happy with that person.”

Migrating between places accompanies the process of growth for Kiki as well as the other women. To leave and come back to Newark, a changing and evolving city, compliments their process for developing a strong, and deeply emplaced, sense of self. When reflecting on her time in boarding school, Angela describes how, despite a turbulent experience coming to terms with being a Black woman from Newark in a northeast, predominately wealthy and white high school,

she became a stronger Black woman. “I know people who haven't even left Newark or New Jersey,” she explains, “and to me that is sad. But it is a reality. But boarding school has really made me a stronger person and more aware of who I am as a person, being a female and an African-American.” Her experiences away from home compelled her to make concrete changes in her community, such as beginning a tutoring program for youth. They also compelled her to address the less tangible aspects of helping others experience what she did during her time away from Newark: “When I do my tutoring program I take them to places outside of Newark. I take them to the museum or we'll go wherever their parents will let me take them. My whole thing is, if they never get to experience anything other than what they are accustomed to, they'll never know any better.” As a city that continues to struggle with public education, such work is desperately needed.

To be able to “know better,” or to know differently, there is a physical migration that must happen. Seeing Newark from outside, and the memory of that, influences the decisions these women have made to return to Newark. They are important frames through which these women dually see progress in themselves and in the city. Uprootedness, in this case, becomes a way of reinforcing rootedness, of substantiating and rendering more profound, a connection with their home city. Their migrations have given them a way to be open, to see the city with a fresh set of eyes that do not forget per se, but re-imagine how their (and the city's) past, present, and future converge together. There is a literal “flow,” to be sure, of images, ideas, experiences, and histories that individuals take in and exude, yet it is really the practice more than the entities that circulate which is distinct about the ways these women interpret and create their city.

Making difference different

The problem remains, then, how to imagine and re-present cultural differences that make a difference in a way that might itself begin to make a difference

—K. Stewart

e practice more than the entities that circulate which is distinct about the ways these women interpret and create their city.

Although the term difference has now taken on a vast set of associations [. . .] its main virtue is that it is a useful heuristic that can highlight points of similarity and contrast between all sorts of categories [. . .] we therefore point to a practice, a distinction, a

conception, an object, or an ideology as having a cultural dimension, we stress the idea of situated difference, that is, difference in relation to something local, embodied, and significant. (Appadurai, 1996, p.12)

s for hints of queer community, “looking for writers or at least characters in books who might share my own secret life As Appadurai stresses, culture, in a global world, becomes an increasingly important way to talk about difference (Appadurai, 1996, p. 13). Despite significant differences in method, subject, and scholarly questions, cultural ethnographers and geographers converge in their theoretical work on the potential of space to re-arrange subjectivities. The above excerpt from Stewart’s work articulates what I believe Massey is longing for, a politics of difference that emerges through different/differential practices—alternative forms that create alternative realities. It is the grounds through which new epistemologies are possible. Each troubles the space between the sign and the signifier—the “clash of epistemologies”—as the place to interrogate the theory of culture and its dynamic process. It is not to resolve the indeterminacy of meaning, but to assert that there is no correct one: that culture, like being from Newark, is struggle.

Tenuously processual and between, women’s experiences in BlackLight and “The Body and/in the City” act as counter-narratives to dominant discourses/reputations of what it means to be a woman of color in the city. The city, for these women, is both a material and metaphysical experience that produces and contests their notions of self. Their stories and performances use the raw material of Newark—facts, media representations, cultural narratives, personal experiences, memory, family stories, and the idiosyncrasies of daily life—as a means of re-organizing the city through narratives of difference and sameness. These narratives and performances are explicitly ethnographic— self-reflexive women are active participants in the telling and re-telling of their own and each other’s experiences—and situated within a larger framework of exploring issues of oppression, representation, and self-identity, a hallmark of performance studies and feminist scholarship (Carlson, 1996; Phalen, 1988; Cox, 2007; Taylor, 2003; Massey, 1994).

These women’s performances work against a reification of invisibility as just another Black body, and hyper-visibility, as a synecdoche of the Black urban experience. Emerging from within the “occupied space” of their everyday lives, a space populated by stories and images circulated about them, these women use their positioning as Newarkers, performers, and women, to re-articulate the city (Stewart, 1996, p. 28). At once deeply critical and highly personal, narrative

bodies and physical bodies become sites of convergence, performing new ways of knowing and imagining how bodies and cities inflect upon and through one another (Taylor, 2003). Through an interpretive narrative of the “other” and themselves, they perform the multi-vocal nature of urban experience of the city, transforming the meaning of being a Newarker through the literal and performative space of the city

Performance is a mode of engagement that is inclusive and continually transformative. All their work becomes in relationship to place. It becomes and transforms with and through Newark. This is the material, historical, imagined, creative, and multiple-identity space where performance becomes politics through inhabiting traces and non-distinct space. From this place, a city becomes a body and the body becomes a city as each is implicated through the other across form, time, space, and content. It is at once foreign and comfortable. It is within this uneasy space where urban identities are not understood but worked out. It is an openness that does not resist or assimilate, but relentlessly demands full attention as a living, breathing politics of possibility. Through their stories, memories, and performances this multi-generational selection of women conjures a space of difference. Their narratives provide a means through which one can ascertain what it means to be from Newark, what Newark represents, and, more importantly, how place is an incredibly nuanced yet shared performance. Moreover, the city becomes active through their narratives, a dynamic space where disparate notions like “fear” and “love” come together to foster a robust and generative performance of difference in the city.

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Note: All interviews were conducted by either Monica Barra or Dr. Aimee Cox between Fall 2009 and Spring 2011. Ethnographies were collected by Monica Barra.