

**Clothing, Kinship, and Representation:
Transnational Wardrobes in Michigan's African Diaspora Communities**

by

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Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation to Adele, Amelia, and Elliot.

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Preface

The research, in its first manifestations, was born from spending time in various West African countries over the course of several years. In 2000 I worked as an undergraduate research assistant on an archaeological excavation in Mouhoun Province, Burkina Faso. In 2003 I travelled to Dakar, Senegal during 2003 to serve as a chaperone for undergraduate students who were participating in an undergraduate research opportunity sponsored by the University of Michigan. I worked as a graduate student research assistant with my advisor in Zaria City, Nigeria in 2006. Towards the end of my stay in Zaria I realized that relationships I had established with women over the course of each of these visits to West Africa rested on conversations about and interactions with cloth.

Women from the town where I stayed in Burkina Faso brought samples of hand-dyed strip woven cloth to show me after I returned home from work: cloth they had woven from spindled cotton grown locally, dyed in various shades of indigos and light blues, and hand sewn together in long rectangular strips to create large rectangular wrapper skirts. One woman, through a translator, explained to me that colors and patterns of cloth often carried special messages for the person whom the cloth was made for. For example, she had sewn together a piece for her grown son, who lived in Ouagadougou, whom she hoped would be healthier in the following year after recovering from malaria for the past several months. The patterns of colors in the cloth expressed this message to him, and she hoped that by his wearing the cloth at home, after working as a university professor during the day, he would become healthy again.

During my first visit to Dakar in 2005 I frequented many city markets where vendors sell diverse varieties of cloth. I established my friendship with Mariama, who owns a tailoring shop in Dakar's HLM market, through our lengthy conversations about cloth. I became interested in a particular damask cloth, known as *bazin* or *bazin riche*, because of its prominence in the shops but also because I noticed so many people wearing garments made of this material, and I found its sheen, color, and woven patterns aesthetically interesting. I purchased six meters each of several different pieces of *bazin* before I departed that summer and was excited to share them with Mariama before I returned to the United States. She however greeted me with dismay when I showed her what I had bought and told her how much I had paid for them. Apparently I paid high prices for the low qualities of *bazin* available, despite my belief that I had managed my bargaining well at the market that day. After scolding me in a heartwarming way, she told me that we were going to the market the following morning to get better quality *bazin*. We did and she negotiated with vendors for hours to sell their higher quality cloth for reasonable prices.¹ Before I departed Senegal Mariama explained that *bazin* was manufactured in Europe and China, the higher qualities, and by extension the more expensive, were produced in Europe, while lower, less expensive qualities came from China. She also told me that the many hands manipulated the textile before it was worn on the body, that the best known dyed pieces came from Mali, and that the most fashion forward outfits of *bazin riche* were designed and constructed by tailors in Dakar. I brought my small collection of *bazin* and some *bazin riche*,

¹ At one point Mariama engaged in a heated exchange of words with a vendor who criticized her for demanding a price she typically receives for a tourist. He claimed she should know better because gaining extra funds from tourists is a way to generate much needed money. He believed it was not fair for her to bring me into a negotiating space that I should not be aware of. We stood there in front of the stall for an uncomfortable twenty minutes, after thirty minutes of back and forth bargaining between Mariama and the vendor, and finally, he agreed to our price.

thanks to Mariama's help, home and displayed it in my cloth closet alongside other African textiles I had accumulated over the years.

I travelled to Zaria City in 2006 to assist my dissertation advisor with a pilot study interviewing one hundred women about their understanding of malaria and their use, or non-use, of bed nets to help prevent themselves and their children from getting infected with the disease. This opportunity presented additional possibilities for me, as a graduate student, to formulate a compelling dissertation project for my future research. On my days off from interviewing and working at a local clinic, I engaged with women at home and at local markets in discussions about cloth and clothing. *Bazin* as I had known it in Senegal was also very popular in Zaria however there it was called *shedda*. There I added to my small collection of *bazin/shedda* which fostered ground for more detailed discussions about the textile, particularly when it came to the materiality of the cloth itself. Conversations surrounding pieces of *bazin* usually began with women touching, opening the folds, feeling the thickness of the cloth and commenting on its quality by richness of color and by touch. Crisp, waxy, densely colored pieces were considered higher quality while the lower qualities were the smoother less formed, less pigmented pieces.

I established relationships with women in Mouhoun Bend, Dakar, and Zaria primarily through our conversations about cloth. I learned through my interactions with women in Dakar and Zaria that *bazin/shedda* held symbolic significance as a cloth that was worn to special events, in part due to understandings about the human effort that contributes to its post-manufacture phase, where local aesthetics dominate embellishing processes. The social relevance of this textile is acknowledged in academic literature (Gardi 2000, Heath 1992, Rabine 2002, Scheld 2007), however the foundation of this dissertation provides an in-depth documentation of its accumulation of value that becomes transformed in color, texture, embellishment; and

ultimately in its embodiment as an indicator of social status when worn strategically to social and kin events throughout cities in West Africa and in African Diaspora communities transnationally.

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Abstract

This dissertation is about how shared engagements with clothing in different ways forge meaningful relationships within and between Africans living in the diasporic setting of Michigan. Members of African communities in Michigan negotiate dialogues and experiences of family through sharing similar aesthetics -- despite diverse historical, social, political, and economic life histories. The understanding of the processes by which *bazin riche* - a prominent textile worn to important family and social events - comes to life on the body is shared by many members of African Diaspora communities, even some who cannot afford it, in Michigan through embodied experiences of participating in family and social events. The initial ethnographic research for this project was carried out through interviews and participant observation with cloth vendors, tailors, and female consumers of *bazin riche* in Dakar, Senegal while the bulk of the research was conducted through interviews and extensive participant observation with members of African Diaspora communities – originally from various countries in West Africa - who reside currently in the Detroit Metropolitan area of Michigan. This research also included active membership in one of the major African Diaspora Organizations in Detroit. Inquiry into the use and wear of how people define, engage with, and embody *bazin riche* in Dakar, and in the African diasporic setting of Michigan highlights important ways in which members of the African Diaspora in Michigan negotiate representation and family. Evidence analyzed from this research suggests that formalized representations of family unity are embodied through dress at public events *and* during meetings planning those events, and that

while shared visions of one big African family in the diaspora are difficult to maintain, disunities between individuals and groups become overridden with eventual collaboration because of shared desires to maintain proper representations of the African family to the groups at large.

Introduction

This dissertation is about how shared engagements with clothing in different ways forge meaningful relationships within and between Africans living in the diasporic setting of Michigan. The research is grounded in ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Dakar that examined the production and consumption of *bazin riche*, a highly sought after, popular textile with a unique transnational trajectory of transformation from plain white cloth to bright, shiny, crisp, lavishly embellished garments. Dakar served as a particularly fitting site to learn about the symbolic relevance associated with the use and wear of this particular textile based on Senegal's unique historical relationship with Europe, French colonialism, and fashion.

The peninsula of Dakar, as the westernmost point of West Africa, has served as an important trading hub between West Africa and Europe for centuries. Beginning in the fifteenth century European traders sailed to the coast of West Africa which opened exchange possibilities between West African, Atlantic Ocean and Indian Ocean trade circuits. Cloth was an important trade item in these networks and was also used as currency from 1500-1800 (Cordwell and Schwurz 1979:471). The first European traders to arrive in what is now Dakar were the Portuguese. Both personal and business relationships emerged between influential African women living in coastal West African towns and islands and male Portuguese traders:

Termed *lançados* because they “threw themselves” among Africans, these men established relationships with the most influential women who would accept them in order to obtain commercial privileges. In pursuit of their objectives, *lançados* adopted many of the customs and practices of African societies; indeed many shed much of their Portuguese culture as to be characterized as *tangomaos*, “renegades.” Descendants of

their alliances with African women were called *filhos da terra* “children of the soil,” and, with their dual cultural background and sometimes their mothers’ social rank and prerogatives as well), were in an advantageous position to serve as brokers manipulating African and European trade networks.

The African women in the Senegambia and Upper Guinea Coast regions did enjoy social rank as prerogatives seem clear... What is certain is that African and EuroAfrican women who were wealthy traders or possessed property and influence were treated with marked respect by Africans, EuroAfricans, and Europeans alike. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, such women were customarily addressed by the titles *nhara* (in Portuguese Guinea), *senora* (in Gambia), or *signare* (in Senegal). They often possessed numerous domestic slaves, trading craft, and houses, as well as quantities of gold and silver jewelry and splendid clothing. Indisputably they knew how to acquire wealth and how to enjoy it. [Brooks1976:19-20]

The Dutch dominated cloth trading in West Africa by the early 1600s. By the 1700s the Dutch, British, and French were vying for profit through the trading of cloth while the *signares* remained socially and economically influential in Senegal. As for what exactly the *signares* wore for dress, later accounts exist mostly documented by Portuguese, Dutch, French, and English traders, such as Pruneau de Pommegorge’s description written in 1789 (as quoted in Brooks 1976:23):

The women of the island (Saint-Louis) are, in general, closely associated with white men, and are there for them when they are sick in a manner that could not be bettered. The majority live in considerable affluence, and many African women own thirty or forty slaves which they hire to the Company... The women have some of [this] gold made into jewelry, and the rest is used to purchase clothing, because they adore, as do women everywhere else, fashionable clothing. Their mode of dress, characteristically very elegant, suits them very well. They wear a very artistically arranged white handkerchief on the head, over which they affix a small narrow black ribbon, or a colored one, around their head. A shift á la française, ornamented; a bodice of taffeta or muslin; a skirt of the same and similar to the bodice; gold earrings; anklets of gold or silver, for they will wear no others; red morocco slippers on the feet.

Signares living on the islands of Gorée and Saint-Louis became wealthier and more influential in what is now Senegal during the 1800s despite many radical social and political occurrences.² For example, the region being colonized by the French had previously been divided among several Kingdoms with stratified societies made up of nobles, farmers, artisans, domestic slaves, and slaves from the Atlantic slave trade (Dilley 2004). A series of holy wars, most of which were led by *marabouts* of the Tijaniyya order, broke out throughout the region (Diouf 2000; Galvan 2001; Ross 2008:35). Also, the French colonial system instituted laws in 1848 providing French citizenship to people who resided in “Four Communes”, Saint-Louis, Góree, Rúfisque, and Dakar, the oldest colonial towns and trading posts. Citizens, *ordinaries*, had access to French education and legal representation.³ As citizens of the Four Communes, *signares* maintained French citizenship and increased their trading networks with French traders. Unlike many other African women of the time, their social, political, and economic power through the acts of exchanging goods and ideas between traders in Dakar (the largest city and port on the coast of West Africa) and Paris (the fashion capital of the world) set influential precedents for women who strived to be like them through dressing well, in daily life and at kin and social events (Allman 2004).

The *signares*’ historical influences can still be seen through the ways many women in Senegal continue to dress well. Though this process is time-consuming and costly people continue to invest substantial energy and resources into looking stylish in Senegal, a country that

² Most of the *signares* in what is now Senegal were of Wolof descent.

³ The colonial policy of assimilation, only carried out in these cities, was strikingly different than their policy in rural areas of Senegal which was implemented in a manner similar to that of the British system of indirect rule. For example, those born and living outside the Communes maintained a status of *sujet*, with compromised rights that included paying head taxes, forced labor and military enrollment (Harney 2004:36).

has encountered decades of economic decline since the early 1970s (Boone 1992; Buggenhagen 2012; Cooper 2002; Diouf 1996; Rabine 1997, 2002; Ross 2008), as well as in the Diaspora. The importance of this situation has led several anthropologists to examine the significance of “looking good” as it relates to modesty, morality, sociality, display, and generation in Dakar and beyond where dressing well is one way of coping with economic adversity in a “dignified manner” (Mustafa 2002: 190 fn.7). In her frequently cited ethnographic case study on dressing up in urban Senegal, Deborah Heath (1992:20) examines *sañse*:⁴ “The elegant sartorial style of Senegalese women – the well starched, copious folds of their colorful garments, accompanied by matching headdresses and abundant qualities – draws praise, when well executed, from women and men alike” (see Mustafa 1995; see also Masquelier 1996:75 on Mawri men and women concerned with dressing well) Drawing from Simmel’s (1950) essay on adornment where he proposes that the value of an adornment (a shiny jewel, for example) is transferred onto the individual when placed on the body, in turn prompting bedazzling affects on observers, Heath suggests that as an act of adornment *sañse(v)* constructs and maintains social relationships through the embodiment of jewels and high quality cloth (20). *Sañse(n)* -actual materials or ideas – from other places are highly valued (see Renne 1995:100 on red thread unraveled from imported red blankets used to weave funeral and masquerade). According to Heath the *boubou*; “a voluminous unfitted garment” is the most preferred form of dress worn for *sañse*, the style of which was influenced by a post-independence Senegalese nationalist ideology which framed it as ‘traditional’ African dress (see Schulz 2007 on dress and Muslim identity; Rovine 2001 on *bogolan* cloth in Mali) The two most common types of cloth worn for *sañse* are 1) strip woven

⁴ Heath clarifies that the word *sañse* as a noun means ‘finery’ or ‘the act of dressing up. As a verb *sañse* means ‘to dress up’ (31 f.1).

cloth, woven by male Manjak weavers living in southern Senegal ⁵ and 2) *bazin riche*: a high quality damask cotton cloth imported from Europe that receives what Heath (1992:21) describes as an “overlay of tradition” when it is subsequently dyed in Africa. ⁶

Damask, a textile that features a weft pattern on one side and a warp on the other, has historically been a cloth worn and enjoyed by the wealthy, perhaps due to its complex weaving process and the fine quality fibers used for its production. Early block damasks woven with twill on drawloom weaves date back to the Roman Empire. By the fourteenth century this technique was used in East Asia, France, Spain and Italy, where silk and linen were used for tablecloths, napkins, and robes worn by elite nobles. Elaborately woven damask worn in clothing became a status symbol for centuries throughout Europe beginning in the early Christian centuries (Goody 1982:32; Morgan 2003:1-8; Schneider 1987:421). The Dutch East India company first brought damask as a fine trading textile to West Africa in 1597 (Cordwell and Schwurz 1979). Due to its high quality texture and shine, it can be assumed that damask was sought after and worn by *signares* during this time. Damask became popular again in West Africa during the 1980s, and remains a favored cloth for wear to family and social events. ⁷

While many women do not have the resources to buy this high quality cloth, Heath (1992) suggests that they can accumulate the means to do so through careful maintenance of reciprocal exchanges between kin members and social networks (Mustafa 1998, 2002; Schulz 2007). Other women participating in *sañse* are members of tontines, or revolving credit unions,

⁵ *Manjak* cloth is still a popular option to wear for *sañse* in Senegal , mostly by women of older generations in Senegal (Buggenhagen 2012: 27-29).

⁶ See Steiner 1986 on the history of European cloth marketed and produced for West Africa.

⁷ Research participants in both Dakar and Michigan explained that damask became a textile of choice when wax print textiles were at their height of saturating the textile market.

which enable them to have cyclical access to funds for purchasing cloth. In a deeper historical context *sañse* is linked to Wolof notions of honor (*kersa*) and discretion (*sutra*) and service. For example, one's reputation is not only contingent upon what they have, but more so on what they have to give others (Buggenhagen 2012:191; Heath 1992:21-23).

The ethnographic inquiry into the relevance of *bazin riche* in the lives of African Diaspora community members in Michigan begins in Dakar given its unique position as an important West African hub of fashion, and its important influence as *the* place to have customized outfits made by tailors in West Africa. What began as my goal to interview primarily members of the Senegalese Diaspora communities in Michigan about the prominence of *bazin riche* in the diaspora transformed into a larger study once I learned its relevance spanned West African national boundaries and ethnic identities to symbolize African unity when worn to social events in the diaspora. It made sense at to modify the project to include Africans from other countries, which triggered a series of new questions that aimed to examine the complex social phenomenon of “family” in diaspora settings through inquiry into wardrobes and dress. My involvement with the non-profit African Organizations based in Michigan, with other African social planners, and with owners of hair braiding salons in Detroit enabled me to meet with willing interview participants significantly, allowing me to work with people whom I know well and had earned trust from over the last year of fieldwork.

Chapter One introduces a foundational discussion about theoretical approaches to cloth, dress, and fashion from an anthropological perspective, where I provide a definition of how I approach the term “dress” in the dissertation. While the act of embodying clothing and adornment is a symbolic communication between wearer and observer, I argue that intent - the thought processes by which artisans transform *bazin riche* from plain white damask cloth to art

as well as the intent of the wearer - must be considered to understand the complex nature of the communication. I then address my usage of the idea of Africa and African in accordance with the ways in which research participants described themselves as Africans. The chapter concludes with a description of the methodological approaches employed to conduct the ethnographic research in both Dakar and in Michigan.

Chapter Two begins with an ethnographic examination, based on fieldwork in Dakar, of social interconnections between aesthetics, style and political economy through inquiry into a series of key sequences of production and consumption of *bazin riche* where I consider the processes by which this textile comes to life. I explain the successions of this textile's trajectory in which I take into account the origins of its growth and production, the processing, the merchandising and selling, the construction of the textile into wearable garments, as well as the embodied practices and social perceptions of its use. In this chapter I pay particular attention to how social perceptions transform or are transformed by producers, designers and those selling *bazin* in the marketplace, and focus on intentions of both creators and wearers. Drawing from Alfred Gell's (1998) theory of artistic labor I suggest that augmentations of value in the process of creating shiny, crispy, embellished *bazin riche* transfers to its wearer when worn and lived in on the body. The chapter then shifts focus to examine the value of *bazin riche* in African Diaspora communities in Michigan through a description of the phenomena *La Nuit du Bazin*, a night to celebrate unity through wearing *bazin riche*, which took place in Detroit in 2011. In particular, this segment of the chapter sets the grounding by which to explain the socially unifying roles garments constructed of *bazin riche* play when worn to special events.

Chapter Three looks at how members of the African Diaspora communities in Detroit share a phenomenology of togetherness and a discourse of unity through experiencing wearing

bazin riche at certain events, most especially through the ways in which many of them talk about it. The ethnographic examples draw from the happenings of everyday life -hair salons, non-profit organization fundraisers, along with an unexpected funeral to provide evidence for both official and practical narratives about unity and family –depending upon whether the conversations take place in public or private forums. I suggest that public embodiments of cloth and conversations about unity serve as what Pierre Bourdieu (1977:35) describes as “theoretical representations” in the sense that official representations of family are enacted through clothing in these settings because participants feel an obligation to participate in these events. Feelings of obligation to attend and participate in events override intense anxieties, dislikes, and differences participants feel towards one another as shared and expressed through private conversations. The stress of maintaining these relationships and the feeling of obligation to participate in the events, I conclude, reside in a shared desire to maintain the representation of a cohesive yet diverse African family in Michigan.

Chapter Four delves further into private discourses through conversations about and in front of closets. A focus on three interviews reflects the sentiment of the fifty women I interviewed who either participated regularly in social events or not, and why. The synopsis from this chapter is that women who have social and financial resources do so because they travelled to the United States as single women with intentions to become financially independent before getting married. Likewise these women maintain social wealth through accumulating and circulating clothing (Buggenhagen 2012; Weiner 1976, 1985) with the understanding that in order to participate they must have social and financial wealth, and that without these connections they will be alone. On the other hand, women who do not possess this wealth and cloth, and who do not place a large significance on the relevance of cloth and clothing in their

lives are those who work two or more jobs to survive and who do not participate often in social events. In turn, these women have few support systems in the diaspora settings and feel alone. I conclude the chapter by suggesting a connection exists between the value of *bazin riche* and the social value of women who are able to maintain social relations through proper dress, attendance, and exchange at various social functions.

Chapter Five demonstrates yet another way to approach the issue of family in an African diaspora setting. This chapter focuses on events associated with UAA, United African Association, the umbrella organization for all African national organizations in Michigan, the yearly African picnic, which attracts between 8,000-10,000 Africans who convene in Detroit on July 4 every year, and planning meetings for a proposed “African House” in Michigan. Details gleaned from the planning and attendance of the picnic, along with the many meetings planning for the African House produce layers of complexity when considering a collective vision for African unity in Michigan. Members who participate in the planning process for both the event and the dream are there because they want to be there. They all work one or two jobs in various professions, and while they are secure on some level financially, they take time out of their busy lives to strive for a better future for their children. I suggest the very act of showing up in clothing, mostly clothing that had been worn to work all day, symbolizes the core of the collective intent for UAA members – to try and find a way to make and maintain their African family for the well-being of the younger generations. The chapter concludes with telling disappointments and fears of UAA members regarding younger generations of Africans, the children of members, who symbolically and proactively removal themselves from identifying as African in diaspora settings. Despite problematic issues involving extortion of funds and different histories of who founded the organization, UAA members are willing to fight for issues

involving disunity and money, arguing that the larger goal is to find a way to make their African heritage matter to their children. They want their children to appreciate their heritage and are desperately seeking ways for them to do so. They find respite, despite disliking one another for whatever reason, in coming together to talk about ways to foster a representation of an African family that their children will embrace.

Reoccurring and concurring themes that emerge in each chapter of the dissertation concern the various ranges of culturally symbolic meanings associated with both clothing and money and how relationships between things, meaning accumulated wealth or lack of such in cloth, influence the desire and need to maintain social relationships in African Diaspora communities in Michigan *or* in some cases foster a disposition for some to frame these relationships as superfluous. The evidence presents how tenuously accumulated coils of wealth, established and maintained through access to collections of money and clothing, are enmeshed with realities, renderings and experiences of togetherness or loneliness . Ultimately wealth in finances for female members of African Diaspora communities in Michigan is indicative of wealth and support in social networks. Money and the ability to dress well for social events provide women with a status in their community. Money and wealth, even on small scales, also enable members of non-profit organizations, male and female, to continue their participation in striving to establish a diverse yet cohesive African community in Michigan.

In the conclusion, I suggest that inquiry into the ways in which people engage with, talk about, and embody clothing made of *bazin riche*, and the overarching theme of unity that accompanies these narratives reveals the ways in which members of African Diaspora communities in imagine and strive to maintain representational families. This maintenance is manifested through possessing material, financial, and social wealth and requires an active give-

and-take of obligation and reciprocity (Mauss 1925). Obligations, while sometimes described as too burdensome, are however often met as the goal of keeping the experience, and the dream of keeping self-represented unified African families alive in Michigan.

Chapter 1: Studying Cloth and Social Relations: Research and Methods

Theoretical approaches to cloth and dress

Anthropological accounts from the early 20th century approached the production, use, and wear of cloth (and other various forms of art) as marginal, yet necessary functions integral to maintaining social systems (Boas 1927; Malinowski 1922; Radcliffe Brown 1922). Beginning a few decades later shifts in theoretical paradigms led to anthropologists, mostly women, examining gender roles as they relate to social processes (Douglas 1965, 1967, Gittinger 1979, March 1983, Messick 1987, Roach and Eicher 1965; Weiner 1976). From here “tradition” emerged as a way to frame inquiry into this topic (Picton and Mack 1979, Heath 1992, Rovine 2001, 2004) and distinctions were developed as to what could be considered “art” in relation to the production, use, and wear of clothing, and what was not (Picton 1995, 2009; Taylor 2002). Schneider and Weiner’s (1989) seminal book, *Cloth and the Human Experience* containing a collection of chapters written by various anthropologists, focused on gender and the social, spiritual, economic, and political meaning and role of cloth, cloth production and clothing in small scale societies, large scale societies, and in industrialist capitalist societies. Their work generated significant transformations in anthropological approaches to cloth and clothing and consequentially fashion, (the use and wear of cloth and dress) developed as an important topic of anthropological examination. The literature on this topic is expansive, and recently published

overviews are helpful in situating the trajectory of ideas and topics of inquiry (Eicher 2000; Schneider 1987; Taylor 2002; Tranberg Hansen 2004).⁸

I believe the first step in approaching a discussion about clothing requires clarification of how I define “dress”. I will build on Barnes and Eichers definition of dress as “an assemblage of body modifications and/or supplements displayed by a person in communicating with other human beings” (1992:15, see also Tranberg Hansen 2004; Schulz 2007) to establish a foundational perspective for this dissertation; one that clearly what particular approach I take to how cloth, dress, and adornment are defined in relation to how they are produced and worn. Explicit in this definition is the essential notion that dress is individual and social; that it is “imbued with meaning understood by wearer and viewer” (Barnes and Eicher:15), however the definition does not include human thought processes, intentions, and executions that contribute to influencing and creating body modifications. Following this line of thought I draw upon the work of Georg Simmel, who suggests that fashion is, “a form of imitation and so of social equalization...The elite initiates a fashion and, when the mass imitates in an effort to obliterate the external distinctions of class, abandons it for a newer mode” (1957:541).⁹ This broad definition of fashion, while acknowledging the exchange of ideas as a process, still does not

⁸ Likewise, the ethnographic query into cloth and dress in an African context is extensive and focuses on a wide range of topics. Certain topics and seminal studies have informed my approach to the research concerning this dissertation. Such topics and studies are: the great diversity in African dress (Eicher 1970, 1985), clothing as art form and process (Picton 1995, 2009), dress and ethnic and religious identity (Masquelier 1996; Renne 2000, 2004; Rovine 2001; Schulz 2007), dress in politically charged contexts: as forms of resistance and markers of social status (Allman 2004; Byfield 2004; Comaroff and Comaroff 1997; Heath 1992; Martin 1994; Mustafa2002, 2006), relationships with aesthetics, color, value, and cloth based on transnational connections (Buggenhagen2001, 2003, 2012; Friedman 1994; Kirby 2013; Nuttall 2006; Rabine 2002; Renne 1994, 1995) dress, empowerment and display (Tranberg Hansen and Madison 2013).

⁹ See Bourdieu (1984) for a similar approach that equates education, exposure, and particular life histories as determining factors influencing distinctions made by people concerning the qualities of art and food.

make room for intent. Simmel does, however, consider intent in his discussion of adornment. Intent, as a preconceived process that motivates a person to adorn oneself lies in what Simmel suggests are “two contradictory tendencies, in whose play and counter play in general, the relations among individuals take their course” (1950:338). Therefore, the individual is motivated by wishing to please another, however simultaneously longs for reciprocation through acknowledgment of his or her adornment. This intent, however, is not always so obvious to the viewer, and according to Simmel (1950:330), “the secret offers the possibility of a second world alongside the manifest world,” and therefore “what is denied is appealing and must have value” (Simmel 1950:332). Secrets, in this context, then, can exist as a barrier or a bond between individuals and others (334). In synthesizing and building on these ideas, I approach “dress” (dress here includes clothing and adornments) in this dissertation as including four necessary components: first, the premise that dress has meaning for both ‘wearer and viewer’, second that fashion (use and wear of dress), while often a process by which people emulate other people’s ideas should also include acknowledgement that ideas must come from somewhere, and therefore, the third component of the definition should consider ‘intent’, not just of the wearer but also of the creator (this definition, then, also incorporates both production and consumption as part of the process). The fourth component ties the broader ideas with a particular context; that of *bazin riche* in a West African and a West African diasporic setting where the textile is viewed and embodied as art (Picton 1995:11) by those who wear it.

Methodology

The fieldwork for this study was divided into two periods in two locations. Research was carried out at the first site in Dakar during the summer 2008. Research in the Detroit metropolitan area

was conducted over the course of two years from July 2011 – July 2013. The main source of data for both sites was participant observation, structured and unstructured interviews, written materials – including detailed minutes and notes from attendance to all UAA and other national African Organization meetings and for interviewees who did not want interviews to be recorded. The names of the people who participated in and who agreed to be interviewed for this research have been placed with pseudonyms to protect their identity.

In Dakar I interviewed cloth vendors, tailors, and women buyers about their specific relationship with *bazin riche*. Interviews were carried out with the assistance of a translator, who spoke with research participants in French or Wolof. While my fluency in French and Wolof at the time was elementary, I was fluent in both Spanish and English. The translator I worked with was fluent in French, Wolof, and Spanish, and she spoke English at an elementary level. We primarily spoke Spanish while working together however made time to speak in French, Wolof, and English with the hopes of increasing fluency on languages we held minimal proficiency in. I spent several weeks as a participant observer in a tailor shop in the HLM market in Dakar, examining the shop manager's interactions with customers as well as watching closely how the tailors constructed the garments. In this context, the shop owner and I communicated primarily in English. I used the small collection of *bazin riche* samples I had accumulated over time as a conversation starter for interviews with women about the varying costs of *bazin riche* and the relevance of the textile to them in their personal and social lives.¹⁰

¹⁰ It is important to note here that the prices vendors' shared were slightly higher than the prices reported by women. I assess this is likely because, as discussed briefly in the preface, vendors did not want to lose any potential profit from me. Since I realized that vendors were busy and were not interested in wasting time talking and not making sales, I agreed to purchase one piece of a medium quality cloth from each vendor who was willing to talk with me. I interviewed ten vendors total for this component of the research.

My research goal upon returning to Michigan was to interview members of the Senegalese Diaspora community in Michigan about their engagement with *bazin riche* in a diasporic setting.¹¹ I spent several months asking potential participants (primarily women) if they would agree to be interviewed about the contents of their closets. Members of local Senegalese Associations initially expressed interest in being interviewed however after conducting only four interviews in two months of networking, and receiving very few return calls from women who initially expressed interest in talking with me, I realized I needed to employ different strategies to solicit research participants.¹²

To find participants I drove around the city of Detroit day after day trying to figure out how to connect with what I have been told by many is a large population of Africans living in Detroit. I made flyers and walked into every African Hair Braiding Salon I stumbled upon. The responses I received were very diverse. Some women were willing for me to leave some flyers and agreed to be interviewed. Others told me they weren't interested. I left flyers at African grocery stores and African clothing stores. Still, I received little interest in participating in my project until I met Dibor and Fatou, two hair braiders who became my closet respondents. When I learned from Dibor - from Senegal- and Fatou - from Guinea- that women from several West African countries considered wearing *bazin riche* to social events as evoking and sharing a unified feeling of home with other members of the diverse African Diaspora communities in

¹¹ All interviews and interactions during participant observation during my fieldwork in Michigan were spoken in English.

¹² The ethnographic fieldwork in Dakar, which I conducted from June 2008 - August 2008 was different from the lengthier fieldwork I conducted in Michigan in that my goal in Dakar was to learn about the processes by which value is imbued in each stage of the finishing processes of *bazin riche*. This information was essential because I was able to share this knowledge with research participants in Michigan who in turn expressed further interest in talking with me once they realized I understood the details of this process.

Michigan, I then decided to expand the pool of research participants to include members of the community from across the vast region of West Africa.¹³

I then reached out to the Executive Director of UAA (United African Association), the sole organization representing all Africans in Michigan, in the hopes of finding more research participants. UAA's foundational vision, as the parent organization for all African Organizations in Michigan, was to provide cultural, social, emotional, and economic resources for all African Diaspora community members in Michigan. UAA was established to serve as an "umbrella" organization for existing nationally organized African 5013C non-profit associations in Michigan. Currently there are associations representing the Gambia, Niger, Senegal, Mali, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Tanzania, Kenya, and Uganda, and many Nigerian associations (at least six). Constitutions and laws vary from association to association however the Executive Committees of each consist of a President, a Vice-President, a Secretary, a Treasurer, and a Cultural Secretary. Some associations allow anyone to become a member while others require members to share a common African descent based on nationally. All associations require yearly membership fees ranging from \$50-\$100 and hold monthly meetings either in office headquarters (if the association has an office space), in member's homes, or sometimes at the UAA office. UAA's yearly membership fee is \$100 for individuals. There is an additional \$200 annual membership fee for any organization wishing to be affiliated with UAA.

I attended my first UAA meeting in November of 2011. I was asked by the Executive Director to introduce myself after the opening prayer. I talked about my dissertation topic, offered my assistance to volunteer for the organization, and requested participation in my

¹³ Through my involvement with UAA (United African Association) I also worked with Africans from Kenya and Tanzania however my interviews about closets were limited to women from West Africa.

dissertation research (participant observation and soliciting interviewees). Over the next few months my active involvement in the planning of July 4th picnics and the brainstorming for an African House helped to build trust and rapport between myself and other UAA members.

I worked with the Executive Director and other members of UAA for two years. My duties included attending all meetings, writing grant proposals for the organization, helping to plan the annual African picnic and other fund-raising events. I also sat on the planning committee for a new project, what is being called “African Cultural House Project”; a community center in Detroit that will help in bringing all Africans and people of African descent together across cultural boundaries and bridges.¹⁴

To establish trust I maintained active involvement with UAA and spent much time with Dibor and Fatou at their shops and their homes during the first year of fieldwork.¹⁵

I was able to eventually find women who were willing to be interviewed about the contents of their closets. Clothing was not an unusual topic of conversation however it was certainly not the topic many of the research participants cared to talk about until, in most cases, women learned that I had some knowledge about the artistic processes that contribute to *bazin riche's* particularly unique trans-national trajectory. Several women were flattered that I wanted to learn more about this process and that my intentions were to share this information with a wider audience. I eventually interviewed fifty women total about the contents of their closets.

¹⁴ The vision for center includes academic enrichment programs for youth of all ages, office space for all local African Organizations, a day care center for children, a reception rental hall, a museum, immigration services, legal assistance, substance abuse services, community health services, promotion of African business and tourism, a networking community center, and an embassy and information center.

¹⁵ As far as my involvement with UAA I learned when and where members found it acceptable to carry on with particular conversations. I rarely mentioned my research at UAA meetings because it was not the place to talk about that however my dedicated participation built trust with members who were happy to meet with me outside of meetings to discuss my research.

Engaging with women who trusted me enough to agree to an interview took considerable time. Additionally, I sought relationships with women who might serve as liaisons between me and other prospective participants. Consequently, I began interviews after one year of fieldwork. I initiated and organized both formal and informal interviews with fifty women from various countries in West Africa, including Senegal, Guinea, Côte d'Ivoire, Niger, and Liberia about the contents of their closets in the transnational setting of Detroit.¹⁶ The majority of these women were Muslims; only two women from Liberia were Christians. I conducted interviews in a number of locations, which included hair braiding salons, coffee shops or restaurants, participants' homes, and at various social events. Nine of twelve home visits resulted in opportunities to talk with women in front of their closets. The majority of women interviewed were married, all of whom had children ranging in age from newborn babies to mid-twenties.¹⁷ Almost all women worked in professions reflecting a broad spectrum of skills - salon work, social work, and or health- related fields (such as nursing home aides, medical technician assistants, and medical office receptionists). From the start, I was prepared for the challenge of finding willing participants, specifically those who would agree to talk with me in front of their closets. I anticipated that respondents with whom I had established consistent, trusting relationships would be more open to sharing their stories in an intimate setting. For example, four women said their closets were too messy and they were embarrassed to reveal them to me, while two women explained that their husbands did not approve of the interviews taking place in the bedroom but talking in the common living space was acceptable. Almost all of the women

¹⁶ I interviewed thirteen women from Senegal, fourteen women from Guinea, ten women from Côte d'Ivoire, eleven women from Niger, and two women from Liberia. The two women from Liberia are Christian while the remaining forty eight women are Muslim.

¹⁷ Two of the women were divorced and two, in their mid-twenties, were not married.

work one, two, or even three jobs while also caring for their families. Such demanding schedules made it difficult to find time for non-work related activities such as interviews. It was women with whom I had established trusting relationships who allowed me to interview them in their homes or in front of their closets, whereas those whom I had not yet met preferred to meet in public spaces, such as coffee shops, restaurants, and various social events.

While interviews in front of closets engendered intimate conversations regarding intentions and actions as they relate to dress choice for specific occasions, discussions that occurred in public places also produced information that at once echoed and complicated issues surrounding the relevance of dressing up in diasporic settings. The starting point for interviews was based on what role garments constructed of *bazin riche* play in the contents of the wardrobe. Our discussions about clothing led to additional conversations— women became much more interested in talking with me when I expressed an understanding of the multiple processes involved in preparing *bazin riche* materials for dress. My goal was to discuss how women acquired the garments, who made them, how much they paid for them, where they wore them, and what it meant to wear them, as African women attending events in Michigan. Interview questions about closets were intentionally framed broadly to elicit a wide possibility of responses and to allow interviewees to engage with the conversations as each saw fit. While the interviews in front of closets produced more details, the interviews in coffee shops, restaurants and other social venues also produced informative responses about the diverse socio-economic factors affecting people's lives which determine how frequently they participate in social events.¹⁸

¹⁸ I had not met approximately one third of the interviewees prior to their interviews. Some of these women, while willing to participate, were reserved in their responses seemingly feeling most comfortable answering questions with short answers while others provided more details in response to questions.

African Diaspora Families in Michigan

While W.E.B. DuBois considered the diaspora as a model for African and African American dynamics, earlier conceptions defined the African diaspora as a cultural aggregate of sorts, one in which was comprised of individuals of African descent living outside of Africa due to transatlantic slavery, resulting in a collective experience of oppression (Drake 1982; DuBois 1999; Padmore 1956; Shepperson 1993). The African Diaspora, an expansive topic of interdisciplinary inquiry, is deeply complex when considering large populations of Africans living outside of Africa today, who have experienced diverse individual, social political, ethnic and national histories. Isidore Okpewho (2009:5-8) suggests making a distinction between “precolonial” (forced diaspora movements due to the Atlantic slave trade) and “postcolonial” (movements influenced by political, social, and economic stability as a consequence of colonialism). Judith Byfield (2006:6) proposes “overlapping diasporas” as a way to approach large and diverse groups of Africans who regardless of individual histories and ethnic identities, maintain both relationships with one another and political and ideological connections with the peoples and places from where they were born:

All can be claimed as part of the African Diaspora but their relationality to Africa, to each other, and to Black Americans is mediated by national and ethnic identities, gender, and class. Together they have forged multi-national, multi-ethnic urban black communities of overlapping diasporas with both shared and competing interests.

Others suggest that cultural and political connections between diaspora communities and Africa can be best understood through inquiries into the differences of experiences, as they relate to gender, socio-economic status, legal status, generational issues, among African derived populations (Edwards 2001; Koser 2003; Wright 2004). Considering diaspora across difference can shed light on cultural and difference, “but, more broadly, the trace, or the residue, perhaps,

of what resists translation or what sometimes cannot help refusing translation across the boundaries of language, class, gender, sexuality, religion, the nation-state (Edwards 2001: 64).”

Paul Tiyambe Zeleza (2009:32) suggests approaching “Diaspora” as an experiential process:

“Diaspora,” I would suggest, simultaneously refers to a process, a condition, a space, and a discourse: the continuous processes by which a diaspora is made, unmade, and remade; the changing conditions in which it lives and expresses itself; the places where it is molded and imagined; and the contentious ways in which it is studied and discussed. It entails a culture and a conscientious, sometimes diffuse and sometimes concentrated in a “here” separate from a “there”, a “here” that is often characterized by a regime of marginalization and a “there” that is invoked as a rhetoric of self-affirmation, of belonging to “here” differently. The emotional and experiential investment in “here” and “there” are the points in between, indeed the very configurations and imaginings of “here” and “there” and their complex intersections, obviously changes in response to the shifting materialities, mentalities, and moralities of social existence.

These ideas, conceptualizations and descriptions of the African Diaspora as historically defined, overlapping, experiential processes beckon the questions: Who are the African Diaspora, and how do they define themselves in the complex matrix of time, space, and movement (Zeleza 2009: 33)?

In her ethnographic study with members of The Cultural Wellness Center (CWC) in Minneapolis, a non-profit organization seeking to serve social and emotional well being of its African and African-American members, Jacqueline Copeland-Carson asks the question, “Who is African in a global ecumene?” (2004:53). Answers to this question were not simply ‘factual’ evidence about historical, biological, or geographic origins of the participants in her ethnography. As she explains, answers were influenced by, “unpredictable convergences in broader sociopolitical and economic factors and the actions of various historical agents.” And further, “The notion of who was African was extended across continental or national boundaries into a creative, transnational discourse on African diasporan identity (2004: 53-4).” Following G

Sanchez' use of the term 'African diasporan identity' she applies the idea of 'African diaspora' to a group of people who are linked by a collective social memory of similar historical experiences as well as some form of common African ancestry, whether it be imagined, acknowledged, or denied (2004:20). She explores how conventional approaches to the study of the African diaspora in North America can be reformed.¹⁹ The CWC story about creating and promoting a transnational sense of African identity through a different way of conceptualizing what organization leaders call the mind/body/spirit divide provides ethnographic insights into how people are creating notions of culture, identity, and place in the context of the global interchanges that characterize contemporary urban America (Copeland-Carson 2004: 8-9). While at times many of the CWC participants' theories of African identity conflicted, the leadership often attempted to reorganize them into coherent theories and practices of African healing and culture.²⁰ Copeland-Carson (2004:xiv) argues that some scholars might not agree with the dialogue of "Africa" as presented by the CWC members, and while disagrees with some of it, her job as an anthropologist is not to critique it:

The CWC's work is by definition worthy of study, even if its views may be disagreeable to some scholars. As an individual, I do not necessarily agree with all CWC doctrines and to write an unbiased case study does not require that I do so. However, as a cultural anthropologist I recognize one of the field's basic tenets: people's beliefs are culturally true for them, and we are charged to study them regardless of our own beliefs – personal or scholarly.

I draw from the previous examples to contextualize my approach to the African Diaspora in this dissertation as one that considers post-colonial historical dimensions (Okpewho (2009:5-8),

¹⁹ For example, she suggests that American born people of African descent (such as African Americans and Afro-Caribbeans) should be included in studies of the African diaspora. Based on evidence from her case study, she argues that a sense of community and identity can emerge in the local based on conditions in the global.

²⁰ Members of the CWC were self defined as Africans and African Americans, and as such, the issue of who are African, and what is Africa varied significantly for many of the members, based on personal experiential histories.

overlapping similarities and differences in experiences (Byfield 2006:6; Edwards 2001; Wright 2004) as processes that shift over space and time. I consider the opinions and ideas of African Diaspora community members in Michigan according to how they define and position themselves, enacted between tensions and ideals of unity and distinctive practices through the wearing of and discussing clothing, in their experiences of being African and striving to create a cohesive and diverse African family in the Michigan diaspora (Copeland-Carson 2004; Zeleza 2009). As such, African, to research participants, represents acknowledgement of common experiences and hopes shared by members of the diverse populations of African Diaspora community members in Michigan.²¹

²¹ Africans who participated in my fieldwork were from Senegal, Guinea, Gambia, Ghana, Niger, Nigeria, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Tanzania, and Kenya.

Chapter 2

Acquisitions of things, expressions of creativity

Magic haunts technical activity like a shadow; or rather, magic is the negative contour of work
~Alfred Gell 2006[1992]

Fatou tells me that she plans her dress very carefully for scheduled family or social events. She first contacts her sister in Dakar to learn about what popular colors of *bazin riche* are being displayed in glass encased market shelves. She then requests a color, a quality, and a cut, along with specific embellishments to adorn the dress. Her sister follows her instructions by purchasing the cloth, paying a tailor to make the dress, and shipping it in the mail or sending it along in the suitcase of a relative or friend who may be travelling to Detroit. Fatou might show the ensemble to her husband (if they are dressing in matching outfits), a sister, or a close friend, but then again chances are higher that she will not because *what someone wears* to an event is meant to be a highly coveted secret until that moment in which he or she walks into the affair. Furthermore, arrival to important events in the latest style at once indicates for an individual or couple a wealth of transcontinental connections *and* abundant proficiency in high fashion trends in major West African cities. All interviewees, including key informants Fatou and Dibor, articulated at some point in our conversations that clothing made of *bazin riche* is rarely purchased and sewn here in Michigan for this reason. While there are some cloth vendors and tailors in the Detroit metro area, their goods and services are highly expensive and they do not necessarily, according to Fatou, have access to the latest fads. Those who do have these direct connections, like Dibor

for example, return from travel to Dubai with highly sought after garments, jewelry, and shoes coming from a far-away place that is even less accessible than West Africa.

This chapter is about acquiring things, in one context specific types of clothing made of *bazin riche*, mostly constructed in West African cities but sometimes acquired elsewhere overseas, meant to be worn for special occasions such as baby naming ceremonies, weddings, and other family and social events. I have chosen this particular textile as my case study because it is extremely popular and the most prominent choice of dress for special events for Africans in West Africa and in the West African Diaspora across the globe.²² In investigating the “cultural biography” (Hoskins 1998; Kopytoff 1986; Miller 2005; Rovine 2001, 2004) of *bazin*’s trajectory and distribution, as well as the phenomenology of embodied practices, habits, and social perceptions of its use, I suggest that each step of the process increases not only the value of the cloth itself, but also the value of the person who dons the finished product. This chapter is also about the invention and expression of creativity during the process of construction and coming into a specified purposeful existence. *Bazin riche* is particularly appropriate as a fertile ground for creative invention because it serves as a means for which establishing identity, in West Africa, and especially in the Diaspora, in this case to large groups of West Africans living in Michigan. What people do with this textile in West African cities during each step of its trajectory from raw material to finished product augments its value: the highest quality of undyed cloth comes from Austria and Germany; the best colors of cloth are dyed in Mali; and the most fashionable clothing made out of it is created by ateliers in Dakar (Mustafa 2006). By focusing on the creative energy dedicated to each step of this process, I argue that the

²² It is important to note here that nothing stays the same and this trend, while still heavily popular, will too fade perhaps to a shift in preference to particular styles of clothing sold in Dubai.

phenomenology of embodied practices, habits, and social perceptions associated rests collectively in the intent and labor invested by artist, wearer, and admirer (Gell 1998; Meriam 1976; Price 2001). What unites these two trajectories of acquisition is *intent*: intent of creator, wearer and observer are crucial to consider together through the processes by which *bazin riche* is transformed through multiple permutations of human artistic investment, contact, and performance. The production process of *bazin riche* garments is a collaborative effort, where the technical and creative skills, born out of the producers' intents and consumers' desires, contribute to its ultimate transformation. Value emanates from the garment in this context because of the thoughts, intentions, and actions that went into creating it and on the basis of a series of exchanges. Eliminating one step of the process would totally change the lived in, moving, embodied experience of wearing.

Fieldwork in Dakar provides the foundation for my argument about creativity and value. I investigate these innovative progressions and the steps of value creation as they relate to the production and consumption of *bazin riche*, and of fashion in Dakar and in the Diaspora. As discussed in the previous introduction, Dakar, the “Paris of West Africa” (Mustafa 2002), served as the ideal location to initiate research on this topic because of Senegal’s unique history with French colonialism and French citizenship for people living in the Four Communes. It was not until I began working with Africans from across West Africa in Michigan that I learned how important this textile is – *bazin riche* provides a way to frame and display identity *and* a way to engage with discourses of unity in diasporic settings - for West Africans living in African Diaspora communities throughout the world.

The chapter begins with a discussion synthesizing theoretical underpinnings about sources of creativity introduced by Bronislaw Malinowski (1922) and Alfred Gell (1998) with

processes relating to the creation of *bazin riche*. I then describe this process based on fieldwork in Dakar to answer the question, “why *bazin riche*?”, and I argue that this textile is notably appropriate since it is particularly well-suited for the display of creative invention. I then shift continents by discussing how meaning is transferred overseas through an examination of the trans-national event *La Nuit du Bazin*, which took place in November of 2011 in Detroit. These events are often described by Africans in the diaspora with discourses revolving around unity through dress. I conclude the chapter by introducing complexities involving morality and identity through this narrative of unity.

The Case Study

The main social interests, ambition in gardening, ambition in successful Kula, vanity and display of personal charms in dancing – all find their expression in magic. There is a form of beauty magic, performed ceremonially over the dancers, and there is also a kind of safety magic at dances, whose object is to prevent the evil magic which he casts on the gardens of his rivals, express the private ambitions in gardening, as contrasted with the interests of the whole village, which are catered for by communal garden magic [Malinowski 1922].

Magic unfolds in Malinowski’s seminal ethnography *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (1922) as what connects everyday life experiences (such as gardening) and ritual events (such as Kula exchange) – it is that ephemeral yet permanent *thing* that merges individual and collective meaning with practice. Canoe building, and the artistic ingenuity that goes into building and decorating the prows, according to Malinowski, is a skill that only certain men possess. He argued that the intent invested in this process lies in imagining the enticement of a potential Kula exchange. This intent is cradled in an unspoken knowledge about ability to lure someone by the magnificence of color, cut, and style of the prow board – a sparkly vestibule of color in the

distance that can only attract others through the display of brilliance, and can only be made through magic associated with creativity and the ritualistic processes by which the prows are mounted to the canoes (Malinowski 1922: 106, 134-135).

Gell (1998) drew from Malinowski's synopsis to form a theory of artistic labor as it relates to creativity, art, and intent. In his influential essay *The Technology of Enchantment and the Enchantment of Technology*, the art object can be theorized both from the perspective of the artist or creator as well as from the admirer or customer. Gell suggests that artists often possess certain talents that not everyone shares. This ability to create things that have a magical presences which captivate those who do not possess the skill, contributing to the object's value because people become bedazzled when they see something they know they cannot do. "It is the way in which an art object is construed as having come into the world which is the source of such power objects have over us—their becoming rather than their being," says Gell (1998: 166). Gell reports that the intent of the carver in the making of the prow board is to create something that will mesmerize onlookers and will cause them to "take leave of their senses and offer more valuable shells or necklaces to the members of the expedition than they would otherwise be inclined to do" (Gell 1998: 164–165). The magnificent prow board as a "psychological weapon" with magical powers exists as a product of the carvers/artists intent. In turn, it's very ambience not only generates a more productive gift exchange through its captivating powers, but it also demonstrates that the canoe owner has access to the services of a skilled carver/artist (Gell 1998: 166).

My research shows a strong parallel between Malinowski's (1922) theory of "artistic skill and magic" and Gell's (1998) theory of "artistic labor" as it relates to "enchantment". I propose in the case of the production of *bazin riche* and fashionable dress, that embedded in this process

are human intentions which contribute to the creation of these garments and to the enhancement of their value. These actions ultimately influence how individuals imagine themselves communicating with others. Gell's approaches an object of art as something that radiates "enchantment", because of the artistic labor that goes into its creation which subsequently affects how the object is viewed and engaged with thereafter. Drawing from this perspective I have chosen clothing made of *bazin riche* as a foundation for discussions and analyses about aesthetics as they relate to morality and identity in African diasporic settings in Michigan. The issue of accessibility to these fine goods is particularly significant. Those who strive to acquire these special works of art understand that there will be others who share their aesthetic standard at these events, and that this will in turn create a social, almost obligatory bond for future social interactions. Having the privilege of understanding this process of coming to be (which I discuss in the next section), and the resources with which it takes to gain access to these material things brings with it a further obligation to maneuver and engage oneself so as to be accepted in certain spheres of "society" with others who also find value in manipulating the use and wearing of things to maintain family and social relations.

Why bazin riche?

Since the 1980s brilliantly colored, starched, and embroidered garments made of *bazin riche* have become outfits of choice for special social and family events in Senegal as well as in many other cities and towns across West Africa and in African Diaspora communities worldwide. Several scholars (Grabski 2009; Heath 1992; Mustafa 1998, 2002; Rabine 2002) have analyzed the social significance in displays of wealth and performances of *sañse* wearing this textile. Large quantities of *bazin riche* flow across national boundaries, feeding formal and informal

economies of dress and fashion. Because wearing elaborate outfits made with this textile is at once predicated in intent to be seen in public *and* as a means of reifying constructions of self and social relations, inquiry into the behaviors and practices that surround this particular textile illuminate the many ways in which people enact, embody and negotiate identity. Ultimately, practices and performances involving *bazin riche* enable sophisticated and cosmopolitan Africans living in Michigan across the socioeconomic continuum to show their status and transcontinental connections through the way they dress.

Like the carefully crafted and decorated prow boards, garments made of *bazin riche* have not just travelled a long distance to meet their wearer; they have gone through extreme transformation from raw material to finished product. Beginning with plain white damask cloth these processes include dyeing, smearing with wax, cutting, sewing, fitting, and finally embellishing with a wide range of options including embroidery, buttons, jewels, ribbons, and lace. Dressing up has become a way of maintaining kin relations with those afar and those left behind – in Senegal and worldwide in African diaspora settings. I have found that this is also the case for West Africans, not only from Senegal but also from Guinea, Ghana, Niger, Nigeria, Ghana, Gambia, and Cote d'Ivoire, living in Michigan.²³ Urban identities in social settings where particular styles of dress are worn (in this case *bazin riche* at social and family events), in Dakar and in the African diasporic settings in Michigan continue to be fueled and maintained through local kin networks, transnational circuits of exchange, and the innovative use, wear, and trade of clothing and accessories from other places (Buggenhagen 2001, 2003, 2012; Scheld 2003, 2007).

²³ As I understand it, the prominence of this textile is also strong in other West African countries however I can only safely speak for the countries I mentioned about above because it is with people from these particular countries with whom I have discussed this topic with.

Transforming Plain White Cotton Damask Cloth: Dyeing and Waxing

It is important to first lay out how peoples' engagements with this textile, in most cases artists, transform it, from an un-dyed piece of white damask (Fig. 1) to an ornately embellished garment that is created with an intention – that of the tailor and what I call the “wearer” ultimately have the eye as to what they want the finished piece to look like.²⁴ The un-dyed *bazin riche*, while occasionally worn as is, has many steps to go before its ultimate transformation—every subsequent step in this finishing process augments its value, and thus the desirability of *bazin riche*. While both the high-quality commercially dyed cloth and the locally hand-dyed cloth are very expensive, the hand-dyed cloth is considered by many to be the most beautiful because of the dyers' artistic abilities to create multiple layers of rich resist-dyed colors and motifs in intricate compositions. The informal trade of dyeing in Senegal, once primarily women's work, has expanded significantly in Dakar since the 1980s to include both women and men in informal and commercial settings (Ndione 1993: 60; Rabine 2002: 48). While the work of male and female *bazin* dyers in Dakar is greatly valued, most vendors, tailors, and designers I talked with in Dakar in 2008 agreed that the highest quality of dyed *bazin riche* comes from both informal and commercial dyeing enterprises in Mali. A common explanation was that the tap water in Dakar is not good for dyeing because it does not allow complete pigment saturation, and laws in Senegal prohibit people from using river water for dyeing. By contrast, the tap water and river water in Mali is believed to be better for this. In Mali, dyeing in or close to the Niger River is not yet forbidden by law; however, there is increasing awareness that dyeing as currently practiced is extremely polluting.

Gagny Lah, Boubacar Yara for Top Etoile, and Super Soleil are the three major commercial dyers in Bamako. Gagny Lah, a family-run business, produces the largest quantity of commercially dyed bazin riche in West Africa. Gagny Lah *bazin riche* (Fig. 2) is especially luminescent; its colors are solid yet deeply rich, complex, and brilliant. According to one male tailor I interviewed, “There is something special about the Gagny Lah, and you know it when you see it.” It is considered by many to be the best quality available, and many high-profile Senegalese entertainers and politicians are customers. Not surprising, it is also the most expensive: one meter of the cheapest Gagny Lah costs between 7,500 – 8,000 francs (approximately sixteen US dollars).²⁵ Top Etoile and Super Soleil also produce high-quality solid colored bazin riche, and prices are likewise relatively expensive (7,000 CFA francs per meter or \$14US). There is one commercial dyeing enterprise in Dakar known as Bazin Gestner. Guelewar Couture, a design house with two boutiques in posh locations of the city, claims exclusive rights to the Bazin Gestner label. Prices per meter start at approximately 7,000 CFA francs. The commercial dyeing enterprises in both Bamako and Dakar are run and maintained primarily by men.

While large quantities of *bazin riche* are dyed by men in a commercial capacity, women also participate actively in dyeing *bazin riche* in the informal economy. Women in Senegal and Mali have historically been associated with particular types of dyeing. Despite the rising popularity of commercially dyed bazin riche, women continue to run and organize successful dyeing businesses out of their homes. Prices per meter are equivalent to those mentioned above.

²⁵ The CFA franc to US dollar exchange rate, as of March 27, 2014, was 478.24 CFA franc to one US dollar. Prices for textiles and clothing have increased between fifteen and twenty five percent since 2008. All prices discussed in this chapter are current, based on conversations with Senegalese women in Michigan who had recently returned from Dakar.

These women are admired for their keen aptitude in creating rich colors and beautiful compositions on cloth and for their extraordinary execution of skills that have been passed down from mother to daughter. Many women dyers rely on their social and extended family networks to build clientele and maintain sales. Most of what is produced in this context is *thioup*, a Wolof term for hand-dyed *bazin riche* (Rabine 2002: 48). Certain vendors at Sandaga Market and other markets in Dakar described the Mali *thioup* as “more traditional” than the *bazin riche* because of the value attributed to women dyer’s magical skills and the sacredness of this knowledge to be shared only with their daughters. Unlike the solid colors of *bazin riche* dyed commercially, the Mali *thioup* is typically resist dyed by hand to create multiple layers of colors and motifs. (Fig. 3). According to Leslie Rabine, “Like tailoring, dyeing is a performance, which includes, if appropriate, techniques of fabric design (2002:59). Schulz also suggests that in Mali choosing colors entails a commitment of time, however women enjoy taking their time to choose the right color (2007:255).

After dyeing is complete, the *bazin riche* must be starched and beaten. First, it is soaked in starch and left to dry in the sun. Then, the beating process, *la tappe*, done mostly by men, begins by placing the *bazin riche* on wooden planks, smearing it with wax or gum arabic, and beating it with wooden mallets until it becomes luminous (Mbow 1998: 146; Rabine 2002: 51). Once the desired look and consistency are achieved, the *bazin riche* is folded and prepared for sale.

Grading and Tailoring Bazin Riche

While one can purchase various qualities of *bazin* in the market, acquisition is most often contingent upon price or socioeconomic circumstances. People who lack economic resources yet

have strong desires to attain some of the *bazin riche* for special occasions often depend on social or kin networks to get it (Mustafa 1998, 2002; Rabine 2002). Others, in turn, settle for a lower quality because after all, they are still wearing *bazin* (Heath 1992; Scheld 2007).

Bazin riche is available for sale in specialty fabric stores, boutiques, couture houses, and at the various market stalls in Dakar. Unlike most of the other textiles, like wax prints and *bazin ordinaire*, which are laid out in piles or hung on walls at open air markets, *bazin riche* is carefully displayed by vendors in glass cabinets (Fig. 4). In general, the highest qualities with the most fashionable motifs and colors are stacked meticulously on eye-level shelves. It is important to note that when it comes to the use and wear of *bazin riche*, it is not the silhouette that changes very much from season to season, but rather color and embroidery motif that stand out as indices of innovative style and what is considered in fashion. Popular colors from previous years are located either at the tops or bottoms of shelves and sold for a discounted price. The “second quality” will also sometimes be displayed in a cabinet if the vendor has more than one, and if not, it is folded, placed in plastic covering, and displayed elsewhere in the stall. Often the *bazin ordinaire* is displayed in stacks with no protective covering. Vendors always attempted to sell me the *bazin riche* first and would move on to trying to sell “number one of number two” only after I convinced them that I could not afford the *bazin riche*. Most also said they refused to sell *bazin ordinaire* because it was not good. During my market outings in Dakar when bargaining enterprises were not progressing to a vendor’s advantage, I was told often that my offering was good enough only to buy *ordinaire*, and shown some to highlight its lack of quality in comparison to more expensive cloths.

Just as there are hierarchies of display, there are also hierarchies of price and style when it comes to clothing made with *bazin riche*. The cloth alone may cost anywhere from 30,000 to

75,000 CFA francs (\$60–160US) before it is constructed into a garment. A client must find a tailor or couturier after purchasing the textile. Price tags of finished garments can vary anywhere between 30,000 to more than 300,000 CFA francs (\$60–600US). At least four to six meters of cloth are needed to make *boubous*, *ndokets*, or *taille basse/pagne* outfit ensembles, and up to ten meters are needed to make *grande boubous*. Most people take their cloth to tailors since only the wealthy can afford the couturier prices.

There are thousands of ateliers and tailors in Dakar, who are mostly men. Successful tailors are those who are technically skilled and who can create original and beautifully embroidered outfits (Grabski 2009) *and* those who have become experts in copying original designs. The first male Senegalese tailors were trained to sew in French military hospitals and subsequently taught their male relatives through apprenticeship. Historically a male profession in Senegal, tailoring as a profession expanded enormously in the 1970s when large migrations of men traveled to Dakar in search for work from rural settings ravaged by drought. Female involvement in tailoring increased during the 1980s as unemployment rates rose markedly due to deflated global prices for exported peanuts, and failing IMF and World Bank funded structural adjustment programs, which also generated growth in the informal economy and fashion-related professions. Some young middle-class entrepreneurial women, according to Mustafa, “hired male tailors and relied on their social networks for financial support and clientele” (1998: 30), and eventually became increasingly active in the trading of cloth and the tailoring of clothing (Rabine 2002: 48, Scheld 2007: 241).

Many of these women have become very successful. Mariama, my key informant during fieldwork in Dakar, is one of them. Mariama, an upper-middle-class, university-educated woman who is married with three children, embarked on this enterprise ten years ago by borrowing start-

up funds from her husband. Her best option was to seek out a profession that started off in the informal economy since the employment opportunities for educated men and women were scarce at the time in Dakar. She was determined to pursue this goal, first, because she grew weary of having to maintain family relations by constantly housing, hosting, entertaining, and accommodating continuous requests for things by extended family members. Because of her husband's success as a university professor and a government official, many of his family members from rural areas in Senegal would visit and stay for long periods of time. By working during the day, she would have less time to interact with them, and less pressure to buy things for them. Still a more pressing reason, according to Mariama, was that she wanted to be sure she could take care of herself and her children in the event "that something bad happened in her marriage."²⁶

Mariama owns and runs two shops. The first one, nestled amongst several other furniture stores on a busy Dakar city street, features furniture and home décor goods. Mariama travels to Beijing, China twice yearly to choose and order merchandise for this shop. She purchases large pieces of furniture—sofas, tables, and armoires—along with smaller home decorating items such as paintings, artificial flowers, and vases. She also buys stocks of shoes and purses to sell in her

²⁶ Mariama was referring to her financial fate and independence in the event her husband marries a second wife or dies before she does. Married Muslim women in Senegal who experience the death of a husband are expected by extended family members to share his assets generously. Ramatoulaye, the main character in Mariama Bâ's novel *So Long a Letter* describes how this felt for her: "This is the moment dreaded by every Senegalese woman, the moment when she sacrifices her possessions as gifts to her family-in-law; and worse still, beyond her possessions she gives up her personality, her dignity, becoming a thing in the service of the man who has married her, his grandfather, his grandmother, his father, his mother, his brother, his sister, his uncle, his aunt, his male and female cousins, his friends. Her behavior is conditioned: no sister-in-law will touch the head of any wife who has been stingy, unfaithful, or inhospitable (1980:4). While Mariama's husband promised he would not take a second wife, she had concerns about what would happen if he died. His family members, according to her, took advantage of her husband's financial success through constant requests for money and gifts.

tailor shop. She does not buy any *bazin* in China because she refuses to sell it or allow her tailors to sew with it. Her tailor shop, located in a major market in Dakar, employs a female supervisor and ten male tailors who construct clothing made exclusively from *bazin riche*, specializing in women's clothing. Mariama describes her clientele as well-dressed, middle-age, upper-middle-class women and men. More than twelve *mariniere/pagne* combinations are displayed on the shop walls as samples for women to choose from, presenting the least expensive to most expensive from left to right. Prices of these outfits are contingent upon the quality of the *bazin riche* and the quantity and intensity of the embroidery and embellishment. Silhouettes of *boubous* made for men are most often modestly adorned with embroidery, and as such, there are no samples on the walls in the room of the shop where tailors construct clothing for men. Mariama almost never has clients bring her *bazin ordinaire* and the lowest quality her tailors work with is "number one of number two." Even so, the least expensive outfit combination that she sells is 40,000 CFA francs (\$80US), and the most expensive can be between 80,000 and 90,000 CFA francs (\$180-200US).

Clients typically make choices either from the samples on the wall, images in local highly circulated Senegalese fashion magazines (Fig. 5), programs and performances on television, their own ideas, or through consultation with the manager. Mariama buys the most current Senegalese fashion magazines so that customers can see the latest colors and styles local couturiers are working with, and she makes sure to emboss each one with her signature in permanent marker to decrease the possibility of mysterious loss. Mariama's team of tailors is superb at "knocking off" styles and embroidery design motifs.²⁷ A typical interaction between a client and the manager in

²⁷ Knocking off is a term frequently used in the fashion industry in the United States to describe the act of copying precisely the construction, cut, style, and color of a garment.

Mariama's shop proceeds as follows. After making her decision based on one of the wall samples or from a magazine image, a woman's measurements will be taken, and then she, along with Mariama and the shop manager, will decide on the shape of the shirt and the skirt, or dress.²⁸ While the pattern pieces are being cut from the *bazin riche*, one tailor will draw the desired embroidery design freehand on a piece of tracing paper. From there, the tracing paper is pinned on the front center bodice, and subsequently, a sewing machine without thread is used to poke miniscule needle holes through it. Another tailor uses the small-hole pattern as a template and works the machine to complete the embroidery. (Fig. 6) Finally, pattern pieces are sewn together, and the finished garment is ironed before the client returns to pick it up. A great deal of energy and ingenuity is put forth in the making of these garments, and depending on the intricacy of the embroidery, the entire construction process in this shop can take anywhere from two to four hours. When it comes to choice of dress, clients are in many ways bound by obligations to choose styles in accordance with collective aesthetics, but they are also free from having to make these decisions on their own. Intent has many implications here, as it is through the client's description that the tailor must integrate his vision and technique in conjunction with replication.

A hierarchy of tailoring shops exists in the markets of Dakar. Many, like Mariama's, are located inside buildings, though they are open for passersby to look in and see the samples and to watch what the tailors are doing. Some shops, however, are enclosed behind glass doors in the back of market stalls that sell *bazin riche*. While these shops have some samples on display, they are not visible from the outside, and tailors do not allow anyone to see what they have unless they are confident that the potential client is serious about buying. This is due to the high

²⁸ Some women had already purchased the *bazin riche* while others, inspired by colors on walls or pages, would leave and return promptly after having gone to buy some in the market.

prevalence of people appropriating the ideas of others and commissioning tailors, such as those employed by Mariama, who can make copies for less money. According to Grabski, “The emphasis on developing original designs also fosters intense competition among tailors, resulting in the need to “hide” designs before they make their public appearance (2009: 226).” Managers and tailors in some of these shops allowed me to look at the samples on display but only very briefly, and they were not interested in talking about the garments once they realized I was not there to buy. In other words, they would not give me time without recompense. The samples in these particular shops, often made of Gagny Lah, had exquisite embroidery, fine tailoring, and price tags starting at 325,000 CFA francs (\$675US).

Like the tailors working in Mariama’s shop, however, those who hide their designs behind closed doors must learn to strike a balance between intent, innovation, and locally established ideas about fashion and aesthetics. While the final product must be innovative enough for it to enchant potential buyers, it cannot expand too far outside from accepted tastes. Intent, as a process of negotiation, then comes to fruition once the garment is worn and displayed on the body.

Bazin riche embodied

Garments constructed of *bazin riche* are imbued with life when worn on the dressed body. The ultimate display of *bazin* is attained when it covers the skin of its wearer and turns into what Terence Turner refers to as social skin (1993 [1980]). Demeanor (Andrewes 2005) through the embodiment of display shapes both individual and social identities at once, influences what it means to the self and what it means to everyone else. *Sañise*, as an enacted public display of wealth, has been described by Heath to have a double meaning: that the woman “on display” is

provided with the means, most often by a husband or a male suitor, to dress up, and also that she is independent enough to be able to present herself to others with confidence and class (Heath 1992: 24). *Sañse*, and the ways in which women use and present their bodies in the process, Mustafa suggests, is “the creation of an elegant and refined presentation of self” (2002: 175). During a performance commemorating Senegalese tradition at a prominent theater in Dakar, Mariama, some of her friends, and I discussed this negotiating of self to which Mustafa refers. Several musicians performed that evening and the event lasted for more than five hours. Attendees, who were mostly middle-aged men and women, dressed in the finest *bazin riche* for the event, forming seas of splendid color and aromatic waves of incense and perfume, in a large space that never stopped bustling with movement. Men, wearing *boubous* and *grand boubous* touted clean shaven heads, some topped with *kufi* caps.²⁹ Women donned in *taille basse/pagne* combinations and *ndokets* of shiny, crinkly, heavily embellished *bazin riche* adorned their bodies with shining gold jewels, shimmery painted eyebrows, eyes, and lips, and wore combinations of ornately styled braids, wigs, or head wraps.

Audience members, both men and women, recognized their favorite performers by rising from their seats, walking slowly down the aisle, and giving gifts of money. Enactments of display were particularly dynamic in that the saunter to the stage and the handing over of the bills were mini-performances in their own rights (Askew 2002). Some people, handing over at times more than 40,000 - 50,000 CFA francs (\$85 - 100US) to performers, seemed to be assessing the social situation by crafting a setting conducive to impressing people in particular ways (Goffman 1971: 14). In this context, the distance from the stage and the intentional time it took to reach the performer enabled gift-giving audience members to exercise the power of their

²⁹ A *kufi* cap is a short brimmed, round, pill-box shaped hat.

impressions through the ways in which they embodied the materiality of their clothing (Munn 1986). This power entails both reactions of admiration – from onlookers who are dazzled by the embodiment of beauty and wealth – and disdain – from others who view their displays as acts of overindulgence only to gain notoriety. Mariama and her friends told me that the gift givers might or might not have the means to hand over the cash; however, it is the satisfaction experienced by individuals through this act of display, my companions suggested, that affirms their sense of self to others, while simultaneously conveying their social status and wealth to everyone else.

Mariama explained to me what several others told me subsequently: “Many people buy these outfits when they can’t afford them. They borrow money from family and friends just to have the best. And then, they hand over money they do not have to performers. They give it all away, and will not even have enough to buy bread for their kids in the morning.”³⁰

Such embodiments and social displays of *bazin riche* at social events, in circulated images, and in television performances are influential in distributing ideas about popular culture and fashion in Dakar (Mustafa 1998, 2002). People will sometimes explore and pursue a variety of means in order to obtain garments made with this highly sought-after textile. When I asked Faatu, a married Senegalese school teacher, about this she replied: “Some women will do crazy stuff to have a very expensive *bazin* or other kind of cloth for a social event. They might borrow money, do ‘*mbaraan*’ [it is a kind of covert prostitution] or borrow the outfit from a friend or cousin.” An unmarried school teacher, Fary, also suggested, “Many women, young and old, spend a lot of money on clothing be it on *bazin riche* or other fashionable clothes. They borrow a

³⁰ This sentiment was shared by several women whom I talked with in Dakar, and later in Michigan, which prompted the question, “What will they do then, if they can’t pay for bread in the morning”? The general consensus was that these people who they were referring to would then either borrow money from a neighbor or family member for the bread money, or ask the baker for a credit.

lot of money to buy cloth for ceremonies even when they know they will not be able to pay it back.” Comments similar to these in reference to the fashion scene in Dakar emerged from young and middle-aged adults in almost every interview, thereby warranting further inquiry into the diversity of intent and implementation as it relates to young-adult dress in Dakar.

Sañse - which is practiced in Senegal and abroad in Michigan - *by guests of honor and attendees* - then, could not be what it is without the contributions of all those involved in its inception: the dyers who are skilled at making vibrant colors, the *tappeurs* who pound the luminosity and crispness into the cloth, and the tailors who negotiate their own innovative skills in conjunction with locally established ideas about style. Like the Trobriand prow board carver, the dyer, the *tappeur*, and the tailor build upon each other’s talents to collaborate in a process that fosters something magical; something magical that only plays out once the wearer embodies, lives in, and displays oneself in the piece. These very processes, then, become the crucial components of enabling people in Dakar and abroad to perform *sañse* on both an individual and collective level. The production process of *bazin riche* is a collaborative effort, where the technical and creative skills, born out of the producers’ intents, contribute to its ultimate transformation. Value emanates from the garment in this context because of the thoughts, intentions, and executions that went into creating it. Eliminating one step of the process would totally change the lived in, moving, embodied experience of wearing.

However, the wearer’s intent, buried in imagining self in the future, is also an essential element of the experience. How to self-define and self-identify oneself prior to an event, a time and energy consuming feat, can lead to considerable anxiety as demonstrated through Sophie Woodward’s (2005) ethnographic case study in London, which examines how women negotiate ‘self’ through interactions with their wardrobes when choosing outfits to wear. Woodward,

building on Alfred Gell's (1998) notion of a distributed personhood where selfhood and agency are extended onto material things thereby impacting others, suggests that for women in her study, creating a 'personal aesthetic' is a multileveled process whereby wardrobes and outfits become an "externalization of selfhood" (22).

The examples discussed above demonstrate the importance of intent in the processes of creating art and in the act of choosing what one will wear for special occasions and even in everyday life. Similarly, members of African Diaspora communities in Michigan who attend highly advertised events such as *La Nuit du Bazin*, or the annual 4th of July picnic in Detroit for example, who don ornately treated and embellished garments made of *bazin riche* are aware of these trajectories as well. How one chooses to display self in front of others at these events through *sañse* becomes an intentional and moral decision.

Detroit: La Nuit du Bazin

While hanging out one cold winter afternoon in her hair braiding shop at the very beginning of my fieldwork in Michigan Fatou showed me the advertisement post card for *La Nuit du Bazin*. I knew about *La Nuit du Bazin* in Bamako and in Dakar but I did not imagine this phenomenon had become so popular trans-nationally. I was deeply disappointed when I realized I had missed the event by one week. Still, I thought, I must connect with the organizers to learn more about the event. I spent several weeks phoning the contact number on the flyer and each time Dabor answered. Luckily for me she would pick up the phone when I called but I always noticed a sense of annoyance when she realized it was me. I would ask her if she could meet within the next few days and she would always say, "Call me Tuesday and I'll let you know when I can meet." I finally managed to arrange a meeting with her, and like Fatou she invited me into her

home, probably because she was at her home waiting for a satellite technician to fix a problem with her television, and not at work. Dibor lives in a large immaculately clean home located in a middle-class neighborhood of Detroit. Her auntie was cooking delicious smelling food in the kitchen and her four year old son was napping on the sofa. She encouraged me to have a seat and sat down next to me. I explained my dissertation research to her while showing her my collection of *bazin riche* samples. At first she would respond with “okay” or “hmm” in response to my pauses. She touched every piece of every sample, feeling the thickness and observing the sheen. I sensed suddenly her interest peak as I described my knowledge of the different qualities of *bazin riche* and all of the finishing processes that go into making it, especially when she confirmed I was correct in my assessments.

Dibor had recently returned from a trip to Dubai, a place she travels to three or four times yearly. While unwrapping plastic bags containing ornately embellished dresses, purses, and shoes she said to me “I am a very, very busy woman.” Dibor owns a hair braiding salon in Detroit, but she also travels extensively, to various countries in West Africa, and to India and China, as well as Dubai and returns with items which she later sells to other Africans living in Michigan. She told me that Africans from all over the continent buy from her. Dibor organizes Africa- related events in partnership with her brother Max as well. She asked if she could show me some of the items from the boxes. She pulled out a dress made of a chartreuse organza embellished with jewels and brightly colored machine embroidery, another in the color yellow, and yet another in violet. “I will sell these for a lot of money”, she told me³¹. The next box had shoes, high heeled bright colorful shoes – about twenty pairs. And the last box was full of

³¹ Dibor will sell these dresses for between 100-300 US dollars each, a considerable mark-up from what she paid for them originally, although she did not disclose what that amount was.

brightly colored and embellished purses. This showing was interrupted at least ten times because her phone rang incessantly, and she answered it every time. During some phone calls she spoke in English, at other times she spoke in French, explaining to customers that she had just returned from her trip and that they could stop by the shop tomorrow to see what she brought back.

Before finally departing we discussed our children. Something clicked between us when I told her that my goal in my research is to raise awareness about the diversity of Africa and Africans, particularly to kids growing up in the United States. She understood and explained to me that her children (two teenage nieces from Guinea who live with her in her home and three young boys from her marriage to her African American husband) are often asked questions by their schoolmates about wild animals, famine, disease, and war in Africa. She herself has had several people ask her if she lived in a hut when she was in Africa. She thanked me for the research I was doing, told me she wanted to help me and that I could spend time in her shop. As I walked out the front door she said, “My brother will help you a lot. Please come to the shop next week. Thank you.” She hugged me and we said goodbye for the time being.

Dibor and her brother are from Guinea, and *bazin riche* is just as popular there as it is in Senegal, as it is in many countries across West Africa. Dibor told me that the African social events she plans in Detroit, especially *La Nuit du Bazin*, are attended by Africans from many countries and that the premise for these gatherings is to encourage African unity in the United States. *La Nuit du Bazin* is an event with roots in Mali, where this annual event began in 1999. The initial premise behind the event was threefold. First, to celebrate the artistry that goes into the creating elaborate garments made of *bazin*, especially the dyeing and the tailoring. The special skills of dyers and tailors are passed down generation by generation and considered to be a sacred gift. Second, it was founded as a cultural heritage issue. *Bazin* is a textile that is

produced in Europe in its raw state, and manipulated from pliable cloth to tailored and embellished garments fashioned according to local aesthetics, becoming “Africanized” (Heath 1992). This art form has survived and thrived through pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial periods. And third, *La Nuit du Bazin* was an event to see and to be seen, which means that audience members have an active role in the celebration by participating in honoring performers through the act of presenting monetary gifts to them through acts of donning elegantly their ensembles through the crowds, walking up to the stage, and delivering these presents. These performers were initially all griots, messengers of praise and knowledge. So while at once it was meant to honor the performers it was also a moment in time where the giver gained prestige (to himself or herself) by being on display through this presentation of thanks, through this social moment where the giver indicates to the crowd that he or she has the resources to honor the performer. At the end of the evening, performers honored a “King” and a “Queen” audience member with cash presents for being best dressed in *bazin riche*, and also gave additional cash rewards to several others for standing out dressed well in their outfits of *bazin riche*.

The phenomenon of *La Nuit du Bazin* has now travelled far and wide on a global scale.³² It was first introduced in Dakar by a famous performer and griot from Mali, Djiby Drame. In an interview published on senegalweb.com he responded to the question: Where does the Night of Bazin come from? “It comes from Mali currently”, he said, “where there is the 11th edition³³. So I thought it had to relocate to Senegal where people dress very well. And that’s the importance of

³² For example, *La Nuit du Bazin* has been held in Atlanta (2009, 2010, 2011, and 2012), Chicago (2011), New Jersey (2012), Montreal (2012), Oakland (2010, 2011, 2012, and 2013) in the United States alone. The popularity of the event in Oakland is most likely due to the work and promotion of two Senegalese male twins, Assane and Ousmane Kouyate, who attend the events as paid performers. Assane resides in Oakland and Assane lives in Atlanta.

³³ Here he means that the event has occurred annually in Bamako for eleven years in a row.

the evening. So this is where I have implemented the concept in Senegal. Since then, it works very well for me. God Thank you.”³⁴ *La Nuit du Bazin* has spread significantly on a transnational scale since 2008 when Djiby Drame performed for the first time in Dakar, and has become an important tool for African unity for members of African diaspora communities. (Figs. 7 and 8) The post card, for example, advertising the event in Detroit last year reads, “Bringing Peace, Love, and Unity”. Assane and Housseynou Kouyate, twin singers and dancers from Senegal, devote a bulk of their livelihood for performing these events yearly across the United States. They have created a website devoted to the cause, and describe their mission as, “La Nuit du Bazin is the union of all Africans working together to create our future as ONE. This is a celebration for all Africans and friends of Africa to gather together, in the spirit of Peace, Love, and Unity”.³⁵ Assane Kouyate echoed this sentiment to me during a phone interview in January of 2012 when he said, “We do this for everyone, for Africans and even for non-Africans. Everyone is invited to attend and participate, because we are all one anyway.” Likewise, Max (Dibor’s brother and co-organizer for *La Nuit du Bazin* in Detroit) described the event with a similar sentiment during a December 2011 interview, telling me:

It doesn’t matter if you are from Guinea, Senegal, Nigeria, Cot d’Ivoire, wherever, this is a celebration for all Africans. Ya know we don’t care about national distinctions when it comes to these events, we don’t care in our daily lives. We are Americans but we all come from Africa, and that’s what keeps us together.

Max is a dancer and a musician, and he travels extensively performing in the United States, Canada, France, and West Africa. He spent hours with me one frigid January afternoon describing his involvement with *La Nuit du Bazin* in Detroit. First, he explained in detail the

³⁴ Accessed from www.seneweb.com , 9 February 2010.

³⁵ Cited from www.nuitdubazin.com, accessed on 1 May 2012.

significance vested in the finishing process of *bazin riche*, confirming that the most highly sought after garments made with this material is dyed in Mali and constructed in Dakar. He highlighted the issue of cost, bearing emphasis on the fact that most people cannot afford garments made of *bazin riche* however the social obligation of “being seen” at social events like *La Nuit du Bazin*, and looking good while doing it all the while, overrides peoples’ financial realities at times. The very act of looking good in this context then, resides on the acknowledgement from others of the intentional skills required to create a piece that emanates an attraction which honors these talents and evokes a response of awe, of magic, experienced by the lure of eyes being attracted to the beauty of the outfit, almost forgetting about the cost and the socio-economic constraints which many face in order to participate in this exchange. Some people, he disclosed, will not pay bills or have enough money for food in order to dress themselves in something smashing. Others, he suggested, will go to great lengths to borrow money.

“Why is this so important?” I then asked him. He began by explaining that Africans bond here in Michigan (and elsewhere in the US) because there is little significant integration with other Americans and a need to express solidarity through unity. His opinion echoed what several people have emphasized repeatedly in my interviews; that many Americans have misunderstandings about Africans perhaps due to lack of education about Africa in their schooling, negative depictions of Africa and Africans in the media, and the complicated relationship Americans have with history and slavery. He suggested that a social event such as *La Nuit du Bazin* provides Africans in the diaspora a venue to celebrate their diverse cultural beliefs and practices together.

“It is the competition that makes it so much fun, though”, he told me smiling. Most people, especially women, do not discuss what they will be wearing because it is meant to be kept a secret: one that fuels anticipation and excitement prior to the event. While there are some African tailors in Detroit most people prefer to have their outfits custom-made in Africa. And this happens through family connections. There are some women and men who bring *bazin* back from Africa in their suitcases to sell to African customers in the US, but this is a costly endeavor, and people will end up paying twice the price here than they would have paid back in Africa. Therefore, according to Max, women can either rely on a relative who is coming for a visit to bring the highly coveted outfit, or send the money to a relative who will then buy the fabric, go to the tailor, request a certain style, and then send it to the US once it is complete. “The important issue here”, Max said, “is to choose someone you trust for this because you don’t want them to tell anyone else what it looks like”. The stakes are high because not only does one stand out if he or she is donned in something extraordinary, but they might also leave that evening with a cash gift for being the best dressed and a boost in social capital through the notoriety from others in attendance.

La Nuit du Bazin on November 19, 2011 was a great success, with several hundred Africans from all over West Africa in attendance. Max and Dibor charged fifteen dollars at the door. From this they paid the performers and any fees relating to venue rental, they put aside certain amounts for cash prizes, and the rest was their profit for the evening. The event began at 10:30 PM and lasted until about 5:30 am, with local dancers and musicians performing earlier and the featured performers going on stage hours later. The whole night, according to Max, was a give and take between performers being honored by the audience, and certain audience members being honored for what they had on, and how they wore it. In a diaspora context, Max

said, “This particular event is an important way for Africans to celebrate our cultural heritage. We encourage all to attend, even non-Africans, because we love to share with them and to teach them about our diversity.” For Max and Dibor their involvement in planning this event is a way of fostering their vision of unity. It is also a way however for both of them to advertise their additional entrepreneurial endeavors on top of working full time in the braiding shop in Detroit.

The narrative of unity serves as the overarching theme of *La Nuit du Bazin*, which comes to fruition through the wearing and displaying of *bazin riche*. This is a way, according to Dibor and Max, to celebrate at once the similarities and great diversities in being African. Reiterations of *La Nuit du Bazin* are occurring across the globe. Assane and Housseynou Kouyate, whose mission is to unify Africans in diasporic settings *and* to invite anyone who wishes to attend, have made this a very popular and highly attended social event in the United States. There are however multiple levels of complexity when it comes to this phenomenon. On one hand, most Africans I spoke with said they feel good to be united in one place because they are not in Africa, and they do sometimes struggle with feeling unable to integrate in Midwestern United States – mostly because they feel cannot represent themselves and be understood by others through dress outside of events such as this. An occasion such as *La Nuit du Bazin* enables them to represent themselves in a positive light despite planning and implementation arguments, and the way people “really” behave, testing the unity argument. There were hints of this in what Mariama and her friends said about the compromised integrity of some women donning gifts at the Baaba Maal concert, suggesting that “dressing up” for special events becomes a deeply moral act.³⁶

³⁶ In this context, Mariama and her friends did not know for certain who had the resources to display themselves as they did and present large quantities of money to the performers, and who did not, however two issues are worth mentioning here. First, there was an implication in their assumption that it was okay for people to invest heavily in clothing, accessories, and gifts if they possessed the resources to do so. The moral judgment was

Furthermore, dressing up at events in the diaspora is also grounded deeply in identity - of oneself, to other Africans, and to anyone else in attendance. The give and take in this identity-forming process between individuals rests on the technical and transformative work –*the enchantment of technology* - that goes into producing fashionable dress made of *bazin riche* and on the ways in which those embodying the clothing engage and attract the eyes of others - *the technology of enchantment* (Gell 1998). This chapter has demonstrated the relevance imagining oneself and the representations of intent through the processes of creating highly sought after goods, and also the complexities associated with identity and morality when it comes to discourses of unity through dress. In Chapter Three, I examine this tension between the ideals and practice of morality and identity through ethnographic descriptions of other highly attended events and daily life.

directed at people who did not really have the resources to participate at these events. Second, the very act of Mariama and her friends pointing women out at the concert exemplifies that the value of the shiny, embellished *bazin riche* transferred to its wearer – regardless of anyone’s moral disposition.

Chapter 3

African Diaspora Communities in Detroit: Making Kin through Official and Practical Relationships

There are several thousand people living in Michigan who were born in Africa, most residing in the metropolitan Detroit area and its outlying municipalities.³⁷ As with much ethnographic research, the theoretical focus of my project shifted significantly after the first few months of fieldwork, partly a result of my increased experience and establishment of trust with research participants, but also because I learned that *bazin riche* was symbolically relevant for many Africans across West Africa, not only in Senegal. This enlarged my pool of willing research participants substantially leading to my observation that the use and wear of this textile acquired meanings grounded in discourses and practices about unity and connections, in diasporic settings. Through extensive participant observation in two hair braiding salons, active participation with the nationally organized group, the Nigerien Association of Michigan, UAA (United African Association), the umbrella organization serving all African national groups in Michigan, and through everyday life and interactions and conversations I realized that issues concerning identity for Africans residing in Michigan are very complex. As discussed in Chapter Two, a prevailing discourse of unity expressed through dress includes underlying and sometimes blatant discussions about disunity despite common aesthetic standards and outward intentions

³⁷Olumide Bamidele, Executive Director of UAA, told me there as many as 75,000 Africans living in Michigan. While this estimate cannot be qualified, the latest 2010-2012 Census classifies only “Non-Hispanic Black” as a category, which in turn means that there is no way of tracking an exact population of African Diaspora community numbers in Michigan (<http://www.michigan.gov/cgi/0,4548,7-158-54534-305736--,00.html>).

concerning dress and fashion. This chapter addresses both ideal narratives of unity in transnational Diaspora communities in Michigan and what happens in practice – what people really say about one another, mostly in private conversations, although sometimes in public forums - and examines why people need to participate in the maintenance of these relationships. While an overwhelming desire for unity between members of these communities exists in public social settings, this ideal is belied by distrust and dislike in private conversations. Despite this secret disconnect, people feel constrained to continue participating in these webs of relations – relations that are sometimes based on kin relations, others on long term social networks, common geographic or ethnic origins, or similar religious backgrounds - out of necessity, in order to receive different types of assistance and support.

The nature of this obligation can be better understood by considering Bourdieu's (1977:34) distinction between official kinship and practical kinship:

As soon as we ask explicitly about the functions of kin relationships, or more bluntly, about the usefulness of kinsmen, a question which kinship theorists prefer to treat as resolved, we cannot fail to notice that those uses of kinship which may be called genealogical are reserved for official situations in which they serve the function of ordering the social world and of legitimating that order. In this respect they differ from the other kinds of practical use made of kin relationships, which are a particular case of the utilization of connections.

In this context the official (formal) kinship relationships exist in public spheres, in conversations at organization meetings, at fundraising events, and at social events, following a “this is the way we are” dialogue. Alternatively the practical (informal) kin relations are carried out in private, in order to utilize a range of kinship connections. In this chapter I draw from and develop this idea by synthesizing Bourdieu's theory in relation to ethnographic material carried out with Africans

living in Michigan as a way to conceptualize and understand how and why the categories of official and practical kinship emerge in the African Diaspora setting in 21st century Michigan. I suggest that Africans in this context must create an ideology of family through an official description and through representation of themselves as a unified group through their shared presence in Michigan. Together they face many of the same experiences of isolation, assimilation, and loneliness to help downplay the emotional expense of experiencing distance from those whom they consider to be their real families. My intention here is to highlight how research participants navigated socially acceptable ways of managing and maintaining relationships in formal and informal settings.

What follows are vignettes about transnational associations in an African Diaspora in Michigan context – represented here by four types of settings and events: baby naming ceremonies, every day hair salon life, association special events, and a funeral. Ultimately self identity and how one imagines being seen by the eyes of others are important when considering these four venues. Looking at these different types of social associations provides comparative material to consider how narratives for unity in a diasporic setting are complicated by distinctions based on and depending on the social arena. I consider this particular set of dynamics as follows. First, the wearing of and conversations about clothing can tell us much about visions of unity and how it is constituted, both in everyday and social events, for members of African Diaspora communities of Michigan. Second, these discussions provide insights into broader issues – political, social, economic, and historical – about whom people feel emotionally attached to and obliged to talk about in relation to discussions about clothing. Third, I consider how the ideals of unity expressed by members of African Diaspora communities are contested in practice, and how the consequences of this disjunction still fosters an obligation to “make” kin

through dress – as well as time and money exchanged which support practical relationships, despite the hardships surrounding this effort.

Baby Naming Ceremonies

Fatou phoned me in a state of panic one Sunday morning. She was invited to a baby naming ceremony that day and had no one to stay with her one month old baby. Her husband works at night and she told me that everyone she knew was going to be there. “This woman helped me so much when I was pregnant”, she said, “and she helped me so much when my baby was born. I have to go or I will never live this down. She won’t be my friend anymore and everyone will know about it. Will you please help me?” she asked. So I did. I arrived to her house at 6:00pm. She was dressed in an ornately embellished dress of starchy and shiny peach *bazin riche* with light blue embroidery. She donned a wig of long straight hair pulled back in a pony tail, had make up on, and she smelled of Senegalese incense. She expressed gratitude and bolted out the door.

She arrived home six hours later exhausted, explaining that she must return at 3:00 am for the announcement of the baby’s name. “This is how these events are,” she said through a yawn. “They begin in the afternoon and end sometimes by 6:00-7:00 am the following morning. This is what we do,” she said. She proceeded to explain the elaborate sequence of events associated with celebrating the birth and naming of a baby on his or her 7th day of life, which include song and dance, praise from a griot, extensive gift giving, an official presentation of the baby’s name, a great deal of socializing, and a lot of talk about who was wearing what. The mother and father of the baby typically wear matching outfits, mostly of *bazin riche*, and change several times throughout the event. She was able to take a break to feed her baby and get some rest before

returning when a braider from the shop would come to sit with the baby and her sister would return to pick her up.

Fatou's description of the naming ceremony events echoes Lisa McNee's study of *taasu* in *Selfish Gifts: Senegalese Women's Biographical Discourses*. *Taasu* is a form of praise poetry, a "symbolic gift" performed mostly by women at family events (baptisms, naming ceremonies, religious ceremonies, and ceremonies associated with marriages, and other social events) in Senegal (2000:33).³⁸ There are professional and amateur *taasukat*³⁹, caste plays an important role in who becomes a *taasukat*,⁴⁰ mostly because it is commonly believed to be the profession of *gëwël* (griots) and Laobé (woodworkers and traders). According to McNee, "The obligations towards family members and friends that determine formal gift exchanges at events, as well as the underlying conflicts or alliances among women, often form the basis for the content of praise poems that are performed during celebrations" (2000:34). Aside from formal gift exchange at the events, gifts of money are also exchanged to the *taasu* as are gifts of honor. Praise poetry offers a public space to express experiences, issues, sentiments, etc., and because they occur in a public space it becomes a useful way to moderate relationships between a professional and non-professional self, between self and others, between kin members and extended family and

³⁸ Lisa McNee's discipline is French Studies, however her approach to fieldwork methodology is ethnographic, and she draws heavily from many anthropologists in theorizing her data.

³⁹ *Taasukat* is the plural form of *taasu*. According to McNee, while age and gender of the *taasukat* vary to some extent, the profession is considered mostly to be one of women since the performances take place at primarily women's events. Also, most *taasukat* are between the ages of 30-50 and McNee suggests this is so because younger women who are recently married are often concerned about behaving in ways in which their in-laws find acceptable (2000:43).

⁴⁰ "Caste" or "endogamous groups" are contested concepts. McNee's take on cast is that it is "primarily a system for assigning social and professional roles according to descent", however she also emphasizes that the meaning of caste transforms over time (2000:43).

friends. The *taasu* performer, as an individual, negotiates her social relations by the ways in which she praises her audience members. Audience members, in turn offer gifts to the performer for her praise thereby negotiating their own individuality in a public setting. For the event a *taasu* must “assess the social situation and engineer a setting conducive to impressing people in a given way” (Goffman 1971:14). Since each event takes place at a different historical moment with different combinations of audience members, the *taasu* realizes that she must strategize the timing and styling of her praising as she gets ready for the “playing of the game” (Bourdieu 1977:13, Thomas 1991). While social relations are mediated through the exchange of praise poetry, this example also demonstrates the ways in which meaning making and outcome often depend on timing, intent, and aesthetic values. The performer’s body and her appearance, along with the audience members’ bodies and their appearances, are also of considerable significance, since it is often at events such as these where *sañse* (an enacted display of public wealth) is practiced (Buggenhagen 2012; Heath 1992). For the *taasu*, intent coupled with the way she looks and the way she carries herself or what she plans to say and when she says it also plays an important part in the process. For Fatou, her social well being rested on the acknowledgement from the mother along with other guests of her presence and the praise she received from the *taasu* (McNee 2000).

Awa and Absa, two Senegalese women who I interviewed, echoed a similar sentiment in our discussion about baby naming ceremonies, explaining however that the social obligation to attend these ceremonies in the US is often times almost overwhelming. Both agreed that they have started to refuse help from friends during pregnancy and after giving birth to babies, for the sole purpose of not being obliged to attend the event. “Anyone can call herself a griot now,” Awa said, “and these women are richer than anyone, wearing the most expensive clothes and

jewels: they have so much gold on their bodies. And they expect too much money. You know it is much worse here in the US than it is in Senegal. It is just too expensive to go[to naming ceremonies].” They explained an elaborately established system of gift giving that includes one respectable sized (at least six meters) of high quality *bazin riche*. And both agreed it was imperative to plan this with relatives who were coming to visit, to ensure that they could afford the finest piece and the most reasonable price, for if they scrambled to find something from a local vendor in Michigan they would be forced to pay a ridiculously inflated amount for the cloth. I then asked what a proper monetary gift would be for the *taasu*, suggesting twenty five dollars with a questionable tone. Both Awa and Absa broke out in laughter at that point, saying in conjunction, “No way, no way...she will be so offended and say bad things to you...she expects at least one hundred and if you don’t then not only she, but everyone else will also know that you have not given enough.” I then understood why Fatou was so concerned - how she was valued by others and how she was determined to maintain that value - and what would happen to her reputation and social ties had she not attended the baby naming ceremony.

The location of a baby naming ceremony, specifically in the diaspora context, corresponds with the financial and social wealth of the new parents and extended family members. A married couple can display this wealth if they hold the event in a larger space, where more guests can be accommodated, and by extension celebrating this rite of passage for mother, father, and baby *together* creates a greater sense of unity, whereby participants bond socially and emotionally, therefore forging webs of ongoing obligatory relationships.

Videos have become a popular way of documenting baby naming ceremonies – where the event took place, who attended, what were they wearing, what special prayers were made for the mother, father, and baby, what food was served, and how many gifts did guests give to the new

parents? Videos, like photographs displayed on a wall, shelf or table, commemorate this special event as a snap shot of history. While hiring a production company to film events such as baby naming ceremonies is another way to remember special occasions, it is costly. For example, Amdy, owner of a film and picture production company in Michigan requests an initial consultation with potential clients at his studio, where they talk about their vision for documenting an event. He hears ideas and then makes suggestions. “You see” he told me,” I like to tell a story in my films, almost like a documentary, and that’s why it’s important to learn a bit about the family first. I want to be sure we share the same vision for the final product (personal communication 28 October 2013)”. The cost of this documentation ranges from \$1000 - \$3000 depending on the level of technological elaboration and editing requested by clients. Videos are an important gift given by the hosts as a gesture of thanks to attendees, and circulated extensively transnationally as a way to revive and maintain kin relations in both diasporic and international settings.

While garments made of *bazin riche* are still favored over outfits made in other materials, some women have started wearing ensembles purchased from Dubai. In some cases it is cheaper to buy a ticket to Dubai, and buy clothes there, than it is to order six to seven outfits made with *bazin riche*. Also, wearing something from Dubai also indicates far-reaching trans-national access. In a conversation with Maxime, a Jamaican woman married to a Gambian man, explained to me that she is travelling to Dubai for a second time in two months. “Wow”, I said, “This is your second time in two months. Are you going for fun again”? She said, “No, I am going with my friend, a Guinean woman, to help her find outfits for her baby-naming ceremony”. She then explained in depth to me why this was so important. “For African women this is their most valued moment in life – by their husband, their extended family, and their

friends – because children are so valued and the wife has given her husband a baby. Because this is special moment in their lives,” said Maxime, “choosing the right outfits for each moment becomes an important part of the planning process, an important part of how a woman sees herself through others”. This sentiment as it was conveyed by Maxime during our conversation speaks to the social significance embedded in women both having access to certain types of clothing and the opportunity to express this privilege through displaying themselves as socially and economically established at important events.

Financial and social wealth is displayed through what people choose to wear at baby naming ceremonies. This is the case particularly for the new mother – all eyes are on her – guests want to see what she is wearing and how many times she changes her outfit. People invest so much in looking good for these events to foster ongoing relationships in the diaspora setting, and almost everyone I interviewed and talked with expressed that a feeling of unity *is* experienced through dress. “Listen” Fatou said one day, “I am here with very few family members so I’ve gotta reach out to other Africans I meet. Some I like and trust and some I do not like or trust. But once we are connected this way (meaning invited to special events) you have to keep it up or you are out – out”. What this means is that if you are invited to one of these events it is expected then that you will invite that person to the events you host. On one level, this helps to build community connection, however, as expressed often by many of my research participants, it is a timely, financial and emotional obligation to maintain ties through this type of reciprocal participation.

A baby naming ceremony is an important rite of passage (Van Gennep 1960) for both parents and a baby for West African Muslims in West Africa and in the Diaspora. The ceremony serves as a transition for mother and father, one in which they become parents to a highly valued

and loved child. And for baby, it is when he or she becomes a socially recognized person in the world. While dressing up together at baby naming events in Michigan generates an experience of unity for hosts and attendees, participation rests on maintaining one's value or esteem with the community, earning respect through presence, and exhibiting an ability to contribute to the expected gift load. If these expectations are not met, offenders will face much criticism, which then leads to talk among extended kin and acquaintance communities. In African Diaspora communities in Michigan, where people often face loneliness because their families are far away, acquaintances become family in their own right, and jeopardizing that social connection by not participating and maintaining value within and between relationships renders the possibility of isolation. The complexities of how social value is navigated through attendance and participation at events such as baby naming ceremonies, can be further understood through what is – *and what is not* - talked about at hair braiding salons.

Hair braiding salons and everyday life

Hair braiding salons, owned primarily by married African women, may be found on many streets of Detroit.⁴¹ I spoke with two hair salon owners, Fatou and Dibor, day after day in their shops over the course of eighteen months while they worked for hours. Adding hair extensions and braiding them can sometimes take up to seven or eight hours, depending on the complexity of the hair style, how big or small the braids are, and how many braid extensions there are to weave into hair. I sought out salons as sites of participant observation with the intention of

⁴¹ It is not common for a single woman to own or rent a salon in Michigan. This statement is based on conversations with salon owners, renters, and friends of owners and renters. I'm not sure exactly why this is so (one of those questions I wish I had asked) yet I presume it is because single unmarried African women who come to the Detroit often reside with family members (and many times are not legal residents of the US), learn the layout of the area and once married to someone who is already established there, can then consider running a shop.

having the opportunity to spend extended periods of time together with shop owners, other shop employees, and clients. While I managed to foster longstanding relationships with owners of several shops the majority of my participant observation was carried out in two shops - the first owned by Fatou who is from Senegal, and the second owned by Dibor who is from Guinea.

Rufisque Hair Salon

I walked into the Rufisque Hair Salon feeling like I had been transported to Dakar. The inside walls of the long rectangular building were painted a bright peach color and hung with large photographs of women with different hair braiding styles and various wall sculptures from Senegal. Incense burned in the back corner, next to the large flat screen television blaring RTO, a Senegalese television station. Four braiders (two each) worked on two clients' hair. I walked into the open door and was greeted by a very pregnant Fatou, the shop owner. "Can I help you?" she asked. I said yes and that I was there for two reasons, and wondering if she had a few minutes to talk. I could sense her apprehension but said okay anyway. I told her I was studying textiles from Senegal and curious to talk with her about *bazin riche*. I also asked her if I could make an appointment to have my daughter's hair braided. She was more interested in making the appointment than sitting around talking about textiles. She said when we come back for the appointment we will make arrangements for us to talk about the other things. On one level I felt I had just used my daughter as a pawn to get connected in the field, on the other it was absolutely necessary that this young child had her hair braided because she did not take care of her hair and it became too much for me to manage. My daughter and I returned a few days later for the appointment. Fatou was welcoming when we walked into the shop. My daughter sat in the chair and Fatou and another braider inspected her hair. I could hear them talking in Wolof and she said

something along the lines that this white woman does not know how to take care of African hair. At that moment I tapped her on the shoulder, told her I understood Wolof, and I know what she just said. She repeated what I said to the braider and we all broke out in laughter. I acknowledged she was correct in her assumption.⁴²

Once the braiding began I asked if they might be interested in seeing my sample collections of *bazin riche*. They agreed, I showed them what I had, and we talked at length about the different qualities and also about when and where they wore garments made of this textile. They seemed impressed on some level that I understood the meanings of this fabric and they engaged distantly but courteously in conversations confirming my assumptions about the use and wear of *bazin riche*. They were more curious about my time spent in Dakar and asked many questions about where I had stayed, what I had seen, and what I thought about Senegal. Both expressed how much they missed their family and friends and could not wait to save the money to go back for a visit.

Fatou became exhausted after a few hours and had to take a rest on the sofa in the salon. She was due to give birth in the next week. She told me this was her first baby, and then when the other shop braiders weren't looking she said, "Shh, I will tell you later, I don't want them to know anything about me." Once the braiding was done, a long eight hours and a lot of tears produced by my poor daughter, I helped Fatou, exhausted and in need of rest, close the shop. She said she was interested in meeting with me and talking with me more when she wasn't so tired. I felt I had earned her respect that day because she gave both my daughter and me a huge hug, told us she loved us, and bid our farewell saying, "You better come back on Saturday to see me".

⁴² I also then helped both of them comb the matted dreadlocks out of the back of my daughter's hair.

So, I went back to the shop on Saturday to visit by myself. I walked in and from the back of the shop she looked up, stood up, and walked over to wearing her wax print *ndoket* – such a graceful pregnant woman. No one else was at the shop so she was able to tell me that she hires cousins from Senegal to braid for her, but she does not trust them. She told me that the other day she did not want them to know that this is actually her fifth baby, and this is why she insisted on saying she was about to give birth to her first baby. I asked her why, and she said, “You can’t trust anybody around here, not even people from Senegal.” She then told me that she provided housing for a cousin from Senegal, allowed her to work in her shop, paid her well, and still, “this woman has not given me a penny to live in my house for the last four months”. She was disgusted and angry, wanting to kick her out however knowing that extended family members would judge her if she threw her out on the streets. She was stuck and her cousin knew it.

I spent many more Saturdays at Fatou’s shop, especially once she accepted me as a trusted friend. We talked about travelling to Senegal together, and she opened her house to me. She told me I was the first white friend she ever had in her life, the first time she ever trusted a white person. Her house was “my house” too according to her. All of the extra income she made at the shop was sent to her mother in Senegal to build her house, a beautiful house in Dakar. Her dream was to someday move there permanently. In the meantime her mother was caring for two of her children, because she did not want them to grow up in Detroit (she felt strongly about her children maintaining their Senegalese heritage), and eventually the baby she was about to birth would also move to Senegal.

Our communication was limited in the shop, depending on who was there. Fatou’s sister Absa and cousin Awa also worked in the shop, and during the busy season, Fatou would call around to other Senegalese women she knew when there were an abundance of clients waiting to

have their hair braided⁴³. She never wanted to turn down a client. Fatou was usually on the phone or skyping with relatives in Dakar or her two older sons in Italy. Employees were also talking on their phones often while braiding. Typically there was not a lot of interaction between clients and braiders, or even between the braiders themselves, although we did watch television, Nigerian soap operas, or videos of baby naming ceremonies together which triggered conversation. Without my prodding, Fatou and other braiders talked about clothing most often while watching videos of baby naming ceremonies, our conversations focusing primarily on where the ceremony took place, how many times the new mother changed outfits during the ceremony, who the guests were, what the female guests wore, and the pressures of dressing up for these events.

While Absa and Awa, who spoke little English, welcomed my presence in the shop, even engaging in communication with me through Fatou's translations of Wolof and English, other braiders showed little interest in talking to me. Fatou introduced me to them as someone who has travelled and lived in Dakar, and who is familiar with Wolof language and culture. Yet these women engaged only briefly with me about clothing, particularly clothing made with *bazin riche*, agreeing that it was symbolically relevant and symbolic of unity and tradition when worn to special events in Michigan.

Communication decreased at Fatou's shop when more braiders were working, and conversations were guarded so as to not share details about anyone's lives. Watching television, talking on the phone, or skyping with relatives were ways of maintaining a formalized and tolerable atmosphere during long hours together. Talk was markedly different when only Fatou,

⁴³ The salons are busiest during tax return season, which is when clients receive their tax refund and can afford \$150-\$200 to get their hair braided. Shop owners and employees work up to twenty hours daily sometimes during the months between March and June.

Absa, and I were in the shop, even in the presence of clients. Fatou enjoyed most sharing updates and details about the house she was having built in Dakar, an expansive five bedroom home with white tile floors, a spiral staircase, and three bathrooms.⁴⁴

Yet talking about clothing was not a priority in either setting at the shop. The depth and content of our communication in the shop, while less guarded when only Fatou and Absa were working, was still guarded in maintaining a sense of social acceptance when compared to the types of conversations Fatou and I shared either when we were alone at the shop or at her house sipping tea together. Over time she shared some of her worries and concerns with me, especially when it came to her daily struggles living away from her family, surviving in the diaspora setting through the exchange of managing relationships. She felt stuck in her situation and felt alone in the diaspora, attempting to maintain family and social relations as well as trying to keep her marriage together. Her husband, also Senegalese, worked nights in a gas station and she worked almost every day during the day. One night she told me she discovered recently that her husband was cheating on her, the reason why she works so relentlessly to make money is to get back to Senegal, where she can finally be close to her extended family and raise her children. While she makes a good salary braiding hair in the US she would not make as much money in Dakar, and would not be able to provide for her family financially. She was certain her husband would give her nothing to help raise the kids if she left him. I was the first, and according to Fatou, the only person she shared this information with – she couldn't tell anyone else because of the potential consequences. I believe our conversation talking about the meaning of clothing in her life in front of her closet weeks after she shared this news with me would have been significantly less detailed had we not established this rapport in the shop.

⁴⁴ We had fun dreaming up our trip to Dakar together, something which has yet to materialize.

Dibor's Salon

Dibor's salon was just a few city blocks away from Fatou's, although it was located in a neighborhood considered more dangerous. The front door was always locked. Another oblong, rectangular building, the brightly orange painted walls were also lined with large photographs of women with different braid styles. A television bolted to the back corner ceiling mostly played game shows or talk shows. Dibor's shop had a completely different feel to it – it was filled with sound, joking, ongoing conversations and a lot of laughter, even when there weren't clients. Perhaps this is because Dibor's employees, Max, her brother and Eshe, got along very well, and all three are prominent figures in the diaspora social scene in Detroit (Dibor and Max are event planners, Dibor sells clothing from Dubai, India and China, Max is a popular musician, and Eshe attends social events frequently). Likewise family and friends often stopped by to visit during the work day.

My time at Dibor's shop was filled with chatter about clothing, African identity in Detroit, cold weather, and food. Importantly, conversations surrounding the issue of identity were grounded in ideas about the importance of unity. Max, Dibor, and Eshe celebrated connectedness with other Africans in the diaspora setting unlike Fatou who held a strong distrust for Africans and Americans outside her small circle of family and friends. Food actually became a centerpiece of conversation for us because we would sit around for hours snacking on tortilla chips and sampling different types of salsa. I have spent many Sunday afternoons with Dibor's family – most of the time she has cooked for me – and a couple of times I have cooked for her. In some ways at the beginning of our relationship it was as if I accepted her food, I accepted her. And she in return trusted me because I understood better who she is by watching her cook the

food, explaining the ingredients, describing how the recipes are slightly varied here in the US because of meat quality and not having access to exactly the same type of hot pepper as she would in Guineau. I also attended birthday parties and graduation parties at her house and have got to know members of her nuclear and extended family in Michigan very well. During these events we talked about kids, food, clothes, gardening, and traveling, topics that were not discussed during more formalized events, for example *La Nuit du Bazin* or baby naming ceremonies, where people are expected (and expect themselves) to represent and displayed themselves in particular ways .

After our initial meeting, Dibour always welcomed my presence in her shop and she encouraged me to be there any time I could. An experienced multi-tasker, Dibor not only owned and worked in her salon, she also sold clothing and accessories, *and* she planned many of the major Africa related social events in Detroit. Her phone rang constantly concerning business relating to these endeavors. Fatou knew who she was because of her role as event planner and told me she was jealous that I had another African friend in the area. She didn't like it when she knew I was leaving her shop to spend time with Dibor. Dibor, on the other hand, never expressed dissatisfaction with my involvement with other Africans, in fact she supported and encouraged it. Our interactions in the shop were intermittent because she was often so busy taking phone calls, however there were always Max and Eshe who, even while braiding and taking phone calls themselves, enjoyed talking about anything.

Max, Dibor's brother and co-owner of the shop, hair braider, travelling musician, storyteller, big event planner in Michigan, and Eshe were always more than willing to talk about clothing and identity in African Diaspora communities in Michigan. Max, more than anyone I interviewed throughout my fieldwork, initiated this topic of conversation time and again when I

visited the shop. Embracing an optimistic philosophy and vision about African unity through dress, he expressed ways in which he thought it important to foster unexplored ways to create unity in African Diaspora communities in Michigan. His “baby” as he called it, *La Nuit du Bazin* in Detroit, held in November of 2011 was one of these events. He is well connected socially with African elders, his peers, and African youth in the community primarily through his music performances and event planning. Max’s optimistic discourse on unity through dress and identity reflects his social position in the community. His livelihood depends on this disposition towards unity, examined in more detail in the following section.

United African Association (UAA), and other prominent social evens

The United African Association (UAA) provides an important social venue for African engagement in Michigan. While UAA’s constitution and the discourse of UAA members echoes what Max explained about the relevance for Africans in Michigan to experience unity through *La Nuit du Bazin*, my extensive participation and two year-long membership with the organization also generated unforeseen complexities with ideas about unification in the transnational African diasporic setting of Michigan. I first met with Executive Director Olumide Bamidele in December of 2011. I explained my research project to him. Like Dibor and Max, he was pleased with my goal to focus on diverse social and cultural aspects of diaspora life to raise awareness on the diversity of Africa and Africans. He invited me to present my research at a UAA Board Meeting where Presidents from the Ghanaian Association, the Nigerian Association, the Nigerien, the Cote d’Ivorian Association, and the Ugandan Associations were present. The main purpose of this meeting was to bring together members to discuss current events in Mali and in Senegal, and also to begin planning for the annual UAA picnic that takes place in Detroit

on July 4th. An overall concern expressed by board members in their responses rested on Bamidele's comment about establishing and maintaining better relations with Americans, particularly African Americans, and the quest for a deeper understanding of the diversity of Africa and Africans. In many ways their responses acknowledged a desire to learn more about American life.

One ongoing question involves the idea of African "unity" in the Michigan Diaspora communities. Unity is approached and discussed by members of the African Diaspora through conversations about collaboration in fostering a more cohesive African community in Michigan. The fundamental motivation behind this goal lies in a common desire to celebrate and maintain pride in Africans and African culture in Michigan through dress and participation in Africa related events and/or other types of social/kin events (marriages, baby naming ceremonies, and funerals).

Another strong message expressed by members is that the UAA provides a forum for African unity which speaks to transnational associations between Africans living in Michigan, not just in a context that forges meaningful relationships between Africans in diaspora contexts but, as Bamidele mentioned above also, in the quest to work together to actively raise awareness in the community about humanitarian issues. For example, the Nigerien Association of Michigan held their 2nd Annual Fundraising Auction in June of 2012, which included an auction of Tuareg jewelry, a fashion show, food prepared by female members of the Nigerien Association, an art exposition which featured paintings and drawings of two male Nigerien artists who lived locally, and acoustic guitar music played by one of the Association's members. Profits from the twenty five dollar per person donation assisted malnutrition as a consequence in the food crisis in Niger. UAA board members agreed to attend, and also to advertise this event to members of their

organizations. In an interview with Aissa, the event organizer, she said that *bazin riche* is the favored textile worn for the fashion shows at fundraisers. “Fashion” and the cultural and familial relevance associated with dress, in particular *bazin riche*, worn to fundraisers helps to serve as “an engine for collaboration” as she described it; a way for members to experience togetherness and familiarity through processes of dressing up, eating together, enjoying time together, while raising money for important causes. The fashion show was scheduled at the end of the event. All attendees sat down once it began and applauded enthusiastically when models, male and female, walked across the stage in garments constructed of *bazin riche* (Fig. 9). Likewise, the many Nigerien women with whom I talked with that day, who were also dressed in clothing of *bazin riche*, expressed a sense of unification with one another through what they were wearing, because they felt they were “at home”, the word several described, when they can spend time with Nigeriens and other members of the African Diaspora in Michigan.

Similar to the baby naming ceremonies and fundraiser discussed above, clothing at UAA sponsored events serves as a strong symbol for unification for Africans in the Michigan African diaporic setting however after attending all meetings and most of these events I have discovered complexities concerning African identity and representation when it comes to events co-sponsored with US based organizations. For example, members of UAA were asked to participate recently in a Wayne County sponsored “Passport to Africa” day at the downtown campus of a local community college, where school children ages K-12 could learn more about Africa and their African cultural heritage.⁴⁵

⁴⁵ According the United States Census Bureau in 2011, 82.7% of the population in Detroit is African American. State-wide the population of African Americans is 14.2%, meaning the majority of African Americans in Michigan live in Detroit (<http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/26/2622000.html>).

Bamidele encouraged me strongly to attend. I brought my children along with a few of their friends. Similar to the African World Festival held in Detroit each July, vendors sold “African”⁴⁶ clothing, art, and memorabilia alongside the hallways. Subway sandwich shop sponsored the event and gave out free food boxes while audience members watched young African American students and African drummers perform on the stage. I looked around the venue to finally spot my UAA colleagues standing by a staircase on the second floor – Bamidele from Nigeria, Dr. Ogwu from Nigeria, Mrs. Keino from Kenya, amongst others - dressed in garb representing their countries of origin. I saw no integration with anyone but themselves and wondered what that meant. Minutes later they were gone.

I addressed this situation at our next UAA meeting which was held one week later, asking for attendees’ impressions of the event. Members who attended said they felt co-opted to participate under the co-sponsors terms, and that they were not fairly represented, they almost felt foolish representing themselves as themselves because the core theme of the event, Africa, they suggested, was mis-interpreted by organizers to portray an imagined Africa and Africans in the eyes of African Americans.

While there is unification in feeling misrepresented by non-Africans by UAA members, the discourse about unity itself is marred with distrust and dislike, and what I would argue to be dis-unity. For example, we planned a last minute fundraiser during the winter of 2013 for UAA. Funds in the organization’s account were low and we needed money to pay the \$500 monthly rent. The spirit of the fundraiser was grounded in getting as many members of the National

⁴⁶ I quote the word “African” here because products advertised as African – meaning most of the clothing, jewelry, and art (including paintings and sculptures) - for sale, were not interpreted as African by UAA members. They defined the items as tourist art that lacked any meaningful authenticity to what there were attempting to portray. For example, many vendors were selling *boubous* made in inexpensive textiles that imitated such cloths as *kente*, *mudcloth*, and *wax print* cloth.

Organizations to attend so that we could spread the word about the African House and gain some excitement for the Fourth of July picnic. Tickets were \$25 per person and the event included food and dance. We rented a hall for \$500, Queen Mother (from Nigeria) and Pastor Amina (from Liberia) cooked the food, several members (including myself) committed to bringing beverages, another member brought the music and agreed to be the DJ for the evening.

The event was scheduled to begin at 6 pm. I arrived, three kids in tow, to an almost empty hall. Moses from Tanzania was there with coolers, ice, and drinks. UAA's secretary, Mrs. Keino (from Kenya) and Banny, the Vice President of UAA (from the Gambia) were also there because they were sitting at the table by the front door collecting the \$25 donation.

The food, scheduled to be served at 7pm, did not arrive until 8pm. Both the Queen Mother and Pastor Amina arrived close to 8pm and together we scurried to get things set up. I was in charge of displaying flowers in vases on the buffet. Queen Mother asked me to bring a bouquet over to the front table. The Secretary and Vice President both said, "We don't want flowers on our table because then we can't see the people." I said, "Okay then." When I reported back to Queen Mother she said, "They are so stupid. They are so stupid. They know nothing about decorating for an event like this". She grabbed the flowers and walked back to the table. After a few minutes of what appeared to banter back and forth, the flowers made it to the table, but pushed to the very side. Queen Mother came back to me and said, "They make me so mad".

The food was set up by 8:30 and attendees were hungry. The problem, however, was that there was no cutlery from which to eat. This triggered another altercation between Queen Mother and Pastor Amina because both thought the other would be supplied the forks, knives, and spoons. Amina grabbed my arm and said, "C'mon, come with me to get some". What followed was a wild ride to get the supplies as soon as possible, along with an earful of nonstop

complaining about how terrible some of the leaders of the organization were. She accused one male member of stealing from the organization, and elaborated on how men from this particular country in Africa were power hungry liars and cheaters. With great disdain in her voice she told me it was her goal to, “bring this guy down”, and expose him to all of the members.

We got what we needed and rushed back to the party. Dinner was finally served to the seventy five attendees and harmony hovered in the hall. Ufan, the President of UAA, from Tanzania, gave a speech towards the end of dinner. He focused primarily on how UAA’s mission, as the umbrella organization for all African affiliated organizations in Michigan, is to unify Africans in the diaspora. He also spoke on how important it is to raise funds to make the African House become a reality, primarily for the children so that they still have understandings and connections with their African heritage. Everyone listened, clapping enthusiastically in agreement however based on my interactions with all of the organizers that night I wondered what people were thinking to themselves as he spoke. While dressing up together and applauding a speech masked the façade of disunity in public, distrust and conflict lingered in private.

The funeral

The text said, “On behalf of the African Community the United African Association (UAA) wishes to announce the sudden death of the President of the Nigerien Association of Michigan (NIAM), Mr. Amadou Laouan, age 42, on June 10, and to express our heartfelt condolence to the Laouan family and the entire Nigerien community in Michigan”. I read the text over and over again. I phoned Marie, his wife. She was weeping and confirmed the bad news. Amadou had suffered recently from a sickle cell crisis but was able to return back to his job of eight years a few days earlier. His heart surgery at the beginning of the year was a success, and aside from the

recent episode, he had recovered and felt healthy. On June 10th he came home from work and told Marie he would like to go for a walk before taking their son to soccer practice. He never came back, and after about thirty minutes Marie decided to go look for him. She found him dead on the sidewalk in the park behind their home. He had suffered from a heart attack.

Amadou was well-loved and respected by the members of the Nigerien community and members of UAA. He maintained a reputation of being an honest man who followed through in his work for not only for his organization, but also for UAA. I had been working with him and other members of NIAM closely for a year, assisting with fundraising and grant writing. I was deeply saddened by his death not only his wife and two small children were left behind, but also because of his genuine interest in fostering change in the Diaspora community. He challenged the discourse on unity through his active participation at UAA from a realistic perspective - that was not grounded in distrust and hatred but consistently referred to the organization's mission and visions.

I went to see Marie the next morning. There were more than one hundred people at the house. The men congregated in the garage while the women sat together in the main floor of the home. Marie was mourning in her bedroom upstairs. The room was blacked out as she sat, crying, holding her prayer beads, surrounded by women. I hugged her, expressing my sincere sadness for her loss, and then sat by her for a couple of hours. Women and men came in one by one to pay their condolences, with a hug or a handshake. Close female family and friends found a spot to sit, either on the bed or the floor, and spent time with Marie in the room as I did. I returned on the next day to spend time with her again, and even more people were at the house.

The funeral took place three days after his death. According to Muslim rite men accompanied Amadou to the burial while women stayed with Marie at her home.⁴⁷ The men, numbering at least one hundred, returned and once again gathered together in the garage, where at least two hundred family members and friends waited for their arrival. I was struck by the experience of collective grief. Almost everyone I knew from the Diaspora community attended the funeral. I didn't realize that Dibor, Max, and Eshe knew Amadou until I saw them there that day. For hours we sat together listening to what each man had to say about Amadou's life and his pending passageway. We then listened to the final prayer, as the men read the Qu'ran. Almost all of the men and women were dressed in *boubous* made of *bazin riche* for the funeral. Unity and grief was experienced at the funeral through clothing and collaboration – a common sense of belonging and a common sense of losing a beloved community member.

Synthesis

I have introduced four settings – baby naming ceremonies, hair salons, meetings and social events involving organized groups, and a funeral– to highlight how the presence of, and the obligation to wear, certain types of clothing can shape identity in African diasporic settings. There is a great deal of pressure and an overwhelming sense of obligation for Africans to present themselves in social settings as one big family. Accepted collectively by participating individuals is this understanding of family representation, a *making* of formal kin ties and a dominant narrative of unity (Bourdieu 1977:37). The “hidden opposition between the official and the unofficial” (Bourdieu 1977:40) emerges however in discourses of unity outside events being held

⁴⁷ Marie would have remained in her bedroom for forty days mourning the loss of her husband however she had to go back to work, especially because she was now the sole financial provider for her children.

for the sole purpose of celebrating dress (for example *La Nuit du Bazin*) where the practicality of relationships - meaning the reasons why individuals feel obliged to participate in these events and make and navigate practical relationships - take on important meanings for the maintenance of existence in everyday life.

Cultivating practical kin relations sometimes involves significant strategizing. Fatou for example displayed herself at her best for the baby naming ceremony however she did not want to be there, and did not want to spend time and money she really didn't have. Her choices of whom to interact with daily were impacted significantly by her lack of support from her husband at home, her absence of trust for immediate family members and employees residing in Michigan (meaning her biologically related kin) along with extended family (meaning other non-biologically related Senegalese living in Michigan), and her overarching goal of returning to Senegal where she did have a large network of kin support. She reached out to certain individuals and severed relations with others, navigating and "playing the game" (Bourdieu 1977:40) in order to foster the making and maintenance of a kinship system based on practicality (Bourdieu 1977:35). Dabor's making of kin through practical relationships was influenced by her extensive network of kin and social relations and support in Michigan. She and her brother Max maintained these connections through active planning and involvement in public events. The more they engaged on this level the greater their networks became. Making and maintaining these practical relationships in this context, then, meant that they were also increasing their notoriety in the larger diaspora community *and* expanding the pool of potential clients.

The nature of these particular relationships become formal in public however where the official narrative about unity serves as representational kinship (Bourdieu 1977:35-40). The official discourse of unity is shared and experienced through dress, as demonstrated through

examples of *La Nuit du Bazin*, a fundraising event, and a funeral. This representational kinship becomes, “nothing other than the group’s self representation and the almost theoretical presentation it gives itself when acting in accordance with that self image (Bourdieu 1977”35).” This discourse is complicated and challenged when people are not confined in these particular social settings. For example, what was said behind the scenes at politically and socially organized events, with the exception of the funeral, reflected strained relations grounded in distrust and dislike. While it cannot be assumed that outside of funerals for loved and respected community members, people from diverse regions, with particular political, socio-economic histories *should* get along, I suggest this deeply moral topic lies in issues surrounding representation – representation of self and how self is seen and considered through the eyes of others.

Chapter 4

Closets: Insides and Outsides of Wealth

Believing in the danger which sprang from objects as well as people, which dress, which shoes, which coat demanded less of her panicked heart and body? For a costume was a challenge too, a discipline, a trap which once adopted could influence the actor.

~Anais Nin

The setting is New York City during the early 1950s. Sabina, the main character in Anais Nin's novel, *A Spy in the House of Love* (1959), lives a double life. She is married to Alan whom she loves and feels she cannot live without, yet Sabina becomes obsessed with the desire to experience privileges enjoyed mostly by men. Embarking into a secret life of extramarital affairs she becomes fixated with lying, masquerading herself as travelling actress to Alan, while laying her plan to balance the exuberance of sexual liberation with the maintenance of her marriage. The anxiety she experiences as a result of her charade is tempered through her relationship with make-up and clothing, both of which enable her to confidently embody the disparate selves she has become. Washing her face and re-applying make-up allows her to forget who she was and what she is doing. Beautifying her face is not the sole purpose of make-up for Sabina, it also serves "to smooth out the sharp furrows designed by nightmares...to erase the contradictions and conflicts which strained the clarity of the face's lines (Nin 1959:6)." The very materiality of the clothing she chooses with which to drape her body completes this transformation (Weiner and Schneider 1989; Colchester 2003; Küechler and Miller 2005). Once transformed she is an

empowered mistress ready for adventure with one of her many lovers. Her cape, “which seemed more protective, more enveloping...and held within its folds something of what she imagined was a quality possessed exclusively by a man: some dash, some audacity, some swagger of freedom denied to women” (1959:7), remains an importantly symbolic article of clothing throughout the novel. The abundance of heavy weighted fabric that covers, conforms, and hides, her body along with the forgiving structure of the cape as it flows in the air to the gate of Sabina’s hurried walk decriminalizes her intentions.⁴⁸ The core of this inhabited power is born during those moments when Sabina stands in front of her collection of clothing and begins her negotiations to avoid any “traps” or “danger” during her outings (Nin 1959:7).

Sabina makes her clothing choices based on a selection of possibilities displayed in the intimate space of her closet. Her closet conceivably contains clothing for both everyday wear and special events; clothing she purchased herself, clothing gifted to her by Alan, friends, family, or perhaps even clothing she kept with no intention of wearing again – the reader is not privy to these designations. The point here is that the range of people’s clothing, when displayed in the space of a closet, is diverse and offers fertile ground for ethnographic inquiry into the intricacies of processes by which people decide what to wear (Woodward 2007:9). As such, this chapter focuses on the insides of closets, in some cases literally but the mainly metaphorically.

Inquiry into relationships between people and the spaces they inhabit emerged as an important anthropological topic, framing the house - as a material creation - to describe kin systems in relation to social evolution (Morgan 1881), social structure and organization (Lévi-Strauss 1983, 1987), gendered divisions of space Bourdieu (1970, 1990), and as extensions of self and personhood (Carsten and Hugh Jones 1995). Drawing from and building on Lévi-Strauss’s

⁴⁸ While Nin describes the quality of Sabina’s cape she does not divulge what textile the cape is made up, perhaps leaving it up to the reader to decide. Based on her descriptions I envision the cape as a dark hued velvet or wool.

concept of house societies Carsten and Hugh Jones (1995:2) develop an “alternative language of the house” suggesting:

The house and body are intimately linked. The house is an extension of the person; like an extra skin, carapace or second layer of clothes, it serves as much to reveal and display as it does to hide and protect. House, body, and mind are in continuous interaction, the physical structure, furnishing, social conventions and mental images of the house at once enabling, moulding, informing and constraining the activities and ideas which unfold within its bounds.

Using Carsten and Hugh Jones’s concept of the house as “an extension of the person,” a house’s exterior reveals materials and aesthetic propensities used to build it as it shelters its inhabitants – not unlike Sabina’s cape that was an exterior shelter to protect her own body and mind. Actions and engagements between people and things – eating, sleeping, cleaning, and cooking – take place daily in the commonplaces of houses and therein- make, maintain, and sometimes severe kinship ties (Carsten 2004: 35).

In this chapter I expand on Carsten and Hughes (1995) perspective on the house by considering closets the inside of insides; as hidden collections displayed within structural confines when doors are closed, and therefore and exposed when doors are open. The inner workings of closets - those intimate spaces organized through intentional acts – not only influence the ways in which one decides what to wear but also how self embodiment is imagined through negotiations concerning potential clothing options (Woodward 2007). I approach the wardrobe as a curated space, situating the “closet” not only as a form of display in an architectural sense, but in a metaphorical sense as well. Closets provide the site for discussions about the meaning of particular garments, how individuals came to acquire them, and also where/when/why particular clothing is purposefully worn for specific occasions speak to

representational framings of self.⁴⁹ As such, the multi-tiered process of arranging, displaying, talking about, and trying on clothing are the processes by which “personhood in aesthetic form” can be enacted (Gell 1998: 157). The inner-workings of closets, as inside components of the house also represent moral ambiguities associated with how women describe the nature of their social relations *and* existing obligations to maintain those relations (Feeley-Harnik 1980).

Closets as personalized spaces of exhibition – to be seen or *not* to be seen by others - can also be considered as vessels that house collections. Acquisitions and modes of collecting garments in this context warrant further inquiry into how individual’s intentions influence the ever-changing life trajectories of clothing. Clothing collections displayed in closets, when displays are shared and meanings imbued in particular pieces are discussed willingly with an interested observer, reveal the identity of the collector – how she sees herself in the world and how she imagines others see her - to help explain the how and why existing selections of clothing serve as memorial pieces that divulge personal life histories and identity formation in diasporic settings (Akhtar 2007, Bal 1985, Clifford 1988, Elsner and Cardinal 1994).

This chapter examines and analyzes the results of interviews conducted with women members of African Diaspora communities in Detroit. These interviews center around the contents of their closets, and suggest that combinations of displayed clothing tell tales about collections of life experiences and memories in transnational settings. In the following pages, I first summarize the variations and similarities of nine closets by providing a visual description of the structural details of the closets, the types of clothing observed, and the unique organization within the respective closets. My findings, both expected and unexpected, reveal discourses

⁴⁹ Although architectural structures of living spaces cross-culturally are not always built to incorporate the storing of clothing in a designated area separate from living space, all fifty research respondents stored their clothing in the space of a closet or wardrobe.

centered around unity, loneliness and the symbolic relevance imbued in *bazin riche* - when it is talked about, when it is held and discussed, and when it is worn to social and kin events. The next two sections draw heavily from two in-depth interviews both of which suggest that discussion of clothing in a private setting in relation to closets can serve as a gateway to *secrets*, as I frame them - concerning gender and the socio-economic status of women living in the African Diaspora in Michigan. The chapter closes with details gleaned from an interview that took place in public about closets, the findings of which reflect sentiments shared by several participants who explained versions of kin realities that were not grounded in unity through clothing, but more-so on socio-economic challenges they faced. Talking about clothing produced three overarching themes which frame my argument. First, conversations brought issues of loneliness to light where Africans experienced unity through dress as a means to connect with a sense of settlement in community where they felt isolated outside of their African friends and family. Second, women who cared more about clothing were those who came to the US as single women, established themselves financially, and then married at some point thereafter. Thirdly, women who work two or more jobs to support children cannot attend such events because the time and costs are beyond their means. In summary, women who possess wealth in cloth have access to experiencing wealth in socially supportive relations.

Nine Closets: structures and types of clothing within

All nine participants who agreed to be interviewed next their closets stored clothing in what Woodward (2007:30) describes as a “conventional wardrobe”, a structured space built into the architecture of their homes specifically for the storage of clothing. These closets were enclosed by doors, five with hinged wooden doors, three wooden sliding doors, and two with mirrored

sliding doors. All closets contained wooden or metal rods for clothing to be hung from, and shelves above the rod for additional storage. Three of the closets also contained shelving units on the side, stacked from the top to the bottom on either side of the closet space. The floor space on the bottom of the closets, underneath where clothing was hung, was either wooden or carpeted, and offered additional storage space.

During my first interview with Sarata, a married woman from Côte d' Ivoire who had three young children and worked as a receptionist in a doctor's office, I observed that all of the folded clothing she pulled down to show me from the top shelf was either made of *bazin riche*, wax print, cotton lace, or dresses made of a polyester mix, interchangeably called *kaftan*, *fancy kaftan*, or *khaleeji*, from Dubai.⁵⁰ I didn't see any clothing of this type hanging from the rod. When I asked her why she said, "Honey, we do not hang our African clothing. We fold it to keep it crisp. It will stretch if we hang it." The eight additional closet interviewees also stored their clothing from Africa on shelves either above or alongside their closets, and all interviewees in total suggested they often did not hang their African clothes for the same reasons expressed by Sarata.

⁵⁰ Dubai has notably become a "global fashion city" (Breward and Gilbery 2006) where able individuals travel to purchase diverse fashion options. Interchangeable names for dresses constructed in the *kaftan* style – a flowing dress constructed from one large piece of folded fabric with long or mid-length sleeves attached, often heavily embellished with jewels, sequins, or ribbons along the neckline and midriff areas – reflect transnational connections and diffusions of ideas in a city such as Dubai.

On another note, Dubai's location in the world, like Dakar, places it as a major trade and commodity port for commerce exchange for major manufacturing countries because of low import duties and also due to the wide varieties of desired goods available from many different places. Most especially for clothing in this context, the old city souqs (market passageways, two of which cater to clients looking for cloth and clothing) offer transnational goods at competitive prices (www.africa-business.com/features/dubai.1.html).

Closet contents were diverse as far as quantities of clothing; some women possessed an abundance of clothing compared to others.⁵¹ Women were less interested in talking about what hung on the rods.⁵² This clothing, in most cases as far as I observed consisted of what would be described as “western”, ready-made clothing that was worn either to work, to attend work related events or outings, or clothing to be worn for social events that were not frequented by other Africans. The silhouettes of this type of clothing hanging in the closets of women who were married and had children fit the description of the Euro-American category “Missy”, a term used in the US fashion industry to indicate flowing cuts and drapes that are appropriate for mature bodies.⁵³ Both African garments folded on the shelves and “western” clothing hanging from the rod in Aissa’s closet mimicked the style of the married women discussed above. Aissa, an unmarried community college student from Niger, described herself as modest in her approach to dressing. The storage shelf in her closet contained ten outfits made with *bazin riche* in many colors, four colorful wax printed outfits, and three pastel colored cotton lace outfits while her “western” clothing consisted of button down collared shirts, draped long and short sleeved shirts, oversized sweaters, along with jeans and dark colored strait leg pants. As a Muslim, she

⁵¹ Women who preferred to dress in African clothing and frequented African related events possessed more clothing from Africa. For example, Dibor, whose closet interview I describe in detail later in the chapter, owned so much clothing that she stored it in two closets within her home and in a large pile on top of a table in her basement.

⁵² Interviewees understood that my primary interest was in discussing clothing they would describe as African, in particular *bazin riche* and, as expressed earlier, the open-endedness of my interview questions encouraged women to share with me what they wished. In this context, work clothing and other types of apparel were mostly referenced to in passing during the interviews, with the exception of two of the unmarried participants, who enjoyed showing outfits they wore out with friends in their age groups.

⁵³ This category of clothing applies to women in the United States from the ages of twenty five to sixty, and in contrast to more trendy clothing is described as “conservative and classic” (Harder 2000:93). In this context the clothing is for women who seek a more draped construction over a form fitting look.

explained that she wished to maintain the embodiment of modesty through her choice of clothing whether it is from Africa or from here in the United States.⁵⁴ Clothing varied significantly in the closets of two unmarried hair braiders - Khady, from Senegal and Eshe, from Guinea. These young women possess an abundance of clothing categorized by each as African and “western” considering they both enjoy attending Africa related events and meeting up with friends in their age groups at birthday parties and other social occasions. While Khady and Eshe possess diverse quantities of “western” clothing such as tight fitting dresses and skirts that are knee length, and sometimes even above the knee, and lower cut shirts that show cleavage, both women admire greatly their collections of folded *bazin riche* and other clothing categorized by them as African.

Bazin – unity juxtaposed with feeling alone

Women’s discussions about the contents of their closets, with a focus on clothing made from *bazin riche*, yielded some interesting results worthy of documentation. All women, regardless of age, employment, religion, and marital status agreed that the use and wear of *bazin riche* was important at weddings, naming ceremonies, and other Africa- related events in both their countries of origin and in the Michigan Diaspora. They all suggested that the highest quality *bazin riche* is Gaghny Lah from Mali, and that the most extravagant and fashionable outfits constructed of *bazin riche* are from Dakar. Likewise all women agreed that the act of wearing *bazin riche* created a sense of unity with other Africans, regardless of national origins, when worn together with other Africans at events. *Bazin riche* however is not the only symbolically

⁵⁴ Aissa is an active member in the Nigerien Association of Michigan in addition to attending college full time. She has little time to socialize, and when she does it is usually at events associated with NAM or UAA, and it is at these events where clothing from Africa is typically worn. She hopes to get married one day however only after she completes her degree in nursing. Her goal is to return to Niger and work as a nurse.

important textile worn to special events and all respondents agreed that people wear diverse textiles to events and that the prominence of *bazin riche* is slowly being challenged by the presence of brightly colored embellished *kaftan* style dresses purchased in Dubai.⁵⁵

All of the women suggested that attendance at important events was socially important and a costly financial obligation to maintain networks of kin and social relationships – both within the African Diaspora community in the US and with family in their respective countries of origin. Women avoided purchasing fabric for presents and outfits sold in the United States because the cost of such things are often twice as high than obtaining these items either through travel to Africa or through friends and relatives who visit from Africa. A number of women claimed to have avoided attending to certain events, such as naming ceremonies and weddings because time and financial obligations had become too burdensome.

However, many women suggested they attended Africa- related events when they could, such as fundraisers, events held by nationally recognized African Organizations in Michigan, and UAA sponsored events (such as the African picnic) – that did not require a significant amount of money - to temper the loneliness they experienced as Africans in a diaspora. In Michigan they missed their families and support systems in Africa and faced challenges in integrating with non-Africans.⁵⁶ For example, the ten women who worked as braiders at salons claimed that their clients rarely solicited conversations with them. Some explained that their clients were

⁵⁵ For example, according to twenty six interviewees more women are buying outfits for their baby naming ceremonies in Dubai because despite the lofty prices paid for plane tickets, the outfits themselves are significantly less costly than outfits made from *bazin riche*.

⁵⁶ While outside the scope of this research study, the issue of loneliness expressed by interviewees and several research respondents over the course of the study was a prominent topic of discussion. This is an issue that warrants further ethnographic research in considering relationships between Africans and the predominately African American population in the Detroit area.

repetitively rude to them, complained about the length of time it took to finish their braids, and demanded that the braider find someone to help her make the process quicker. Others complained about braiders speaking in French and requested that braiders change African television stations.⁵⁷

The data analyzed from these interviews suggests that through wearing *bazin riche*, a symbolically important textile worn to special events cross-culturally throughout West Africa, which maintains its cultural relevance in diaspora settings where Africans from many different ethnicities and nations congregate to celebrate unity, that its wearers experience a sense of being at home in their bodies. Conversations about *bazin riche*, and clothing in general, also highlighted vulnerabilities and realities that more than likely would not have been discussed without basing conversations on the stories of particular garments.

Ice cream with Fatou, Absa, and Khady

Fatou, sister Absa, cousin Khady and I closed up the salon on a quiet Friday evening after tax season was over and drove in separate cars to Fatou's home. Khady and I arrived at the house first while Fatou and Absa went to the grocery store for ice cream.⁵⁸ Fatou and her husband had

⁵⁷ For example, Assi, a hair braider from Senegal, shared stories about three recent clients who yelled and, according to her, "cussed her out" when they became impatient with the length of time it took to add all of the braided extensions to their heads. One customer demanded that she call in another braider to help her "get this done quicker," while another kept saying, "hurry, hurry up!" In another example, Miriam from Côte d'Ivoire, another hair braider said that her client complained about her and other braiders at her shop speaking French because she couldn't understand what they were saying, and assumed they were criticizing her. The client requested that the braiders speak English only or she would leave and not pay for the services. And finally, Fatou shared stories about some her clients frustrations about having to watch Senegalese television at the shop, suggesting she should let them watch what they want because they had to spend hours sitting there with nothing to do.

⁵⁸ My interview with Fatou, Absa, and Khady was the most revealing and intricately detailed of all the interviews as a result of the trusting rapport Fatou and I had established through spending ample time together over the course

purchased the three bedroom brick colonial style home in 2010 on a tree lined street in a middle class neighborhood of northwestern Detroit. We smelled fragrant incense as we unlocked and opened the front door of Fatou's immaculately clean home. All of the walls are painted in a neutral cream color- and the floors in the living room, dining area, and kitchen are covered in light brown tile. The front living room contains two long brown leather sofas with a coffee table in between them. A large flat screen television, which when turned on airs the Senegalese TV station RTS, sits perpendicular to the sofas on a long glass table. Six oak chairs surround a rectangular oak table in the dining area. A large open space, the kitchen and dining area are sparsely decorated except for various Islamic paintings from Dakar that have been hung on the walls. All of the windows were draped in shiny mahogany colored curtain panels with black-out blinds that were most often left closed. Fatou's incense – seeds and crushed wood saturated in perfumes – were burning on a piece of aluminum foil on back burner of the electrical stove. The medium brown carpeted staircase led to three bedrooms and one bathroom upstairs. Khady was living with Fatou at the time and stayed in the third bedroom.⁵⁹

Fatou and Absa returned home with vanilla ice cream and mango sorbet. We each enjoyed a scoop of both and then headed upstairs to Fatou's room for the interview. Fatou's bedroom furniture was constructed of dark mahogany wood. Her king sized bed had a curved backboard with rounded pillars on each end as did the front board of the bed. The matching furniture in the room included two bed side tables and a large dresser with a mirror, framed in

of one year. This information however did not come without her expectations of reciprocation (Mauss 1925) which intensified over my last year of fieldwork.

⁵⁹Fatou and her husband stayed in the master bedroom, and the second bedroom was left for guests however Fatou's expansive wardrobe left no room for her husband's clothing and he stored his belongings in the closet of the second bedroom.

wood, the shape of which mimicked the headboard of the bed. Fatou had worked all day and was tired however she seemed genuinely excited to show me her clothing; having Absa and Khady there seemed to make it more fun for her. Her closet space measured approximately six feet wide by eight feet in length (Fig. 10). She opened the simple stained wooden hinged doors and said, “Okay, what do you want to see first? You are here to see and hear about my African clothes, right? So, let me start with this one.” As she pulled down a the first *mariniere/pagne* outfit made of bright teal Ghany Lah, covered in fuchsia pink embroidery I said, “Wait,wait...can you please tell me about the layout of your closet first.” She responded:

This is my closet. You can see that all of my African clothes are folded on the top shelf. Anything else I wear is hanging here...my winter jackets, some sweaters I wear over my dresses at the shop when it is cold during the winter...these (pointing to approximately five long sleeved button down shirts) are nice shirts I wear with pants sometimes (again, gesturing to three pairs of straight legged pants, two black and one dark blue) that I wear when I meet friends like you for lunch, or go shopping at the mall. Now look on the floor to see all of my shoes. I have many shoes here. I like little heels because I am tall (as she referred to ten pairs of three to four inch heels that varied in color and style), and I also like easy shoes for working (pointing to at least five pairs of flip flops in many different colors). Oh, and look, here in the corner is the can where I burn my incense a few hours before getting dressed when I go to parties. Now can I show you my African clothes?

Fatou opened up the teal folded *mariniere* and *pagne* to show me the details. The short capped sleeves were pleated, nestled into an arm band embroidered into a whimsical pattern of fuchsia twists. The entire bodice was also embroidered with gold beads machine woven intricately into the pattern (Figs.11, 12, and 13). The back was also adorned with embroidery on the bottom border and alongside the zipper that trailed up the center of the piece. The *pagne* was simple, vibrant, waxy Gahny Lah bazin riche with a geometric pattern. A thin line of embroidery followed the hem and side of the *pagne*. Fatou told me she purchased the bazin riche at HLM market the previous summer when she visited Dakar. She paid about \$300 total for fabric, the

tailoring and embroidery. She wore the outfit to a cousin's wedding and brought it back with the intention of wearing it to an upcoming event in Michigan.

I asked her whether or not she felt social pressure to be seen in an outfit like this just once. "Oh yes" she replied, "Oh yes, I wore this to my cousin's wedding and also attended a naming ceremony for another cousin a few weeks later in Kaolack. Many of my cousins came to both so I had to get another dress made for the ceremony. If I wore this again people would talk." I asked for further clarification and she said, "I would lose respect if seen by others in the same outfit twice because it shows that I don't care as much for my niece and cousins who just became parents. Some people don't care about wearing something twice, but I do." Fatou's sentiment regarding the danger of re-wearing an outfit echoes Bugenhagen's (2012) and Heath's (1992) argument about the necessary emotional and social investment that participation in the *sañse* fashion system requires in order for certain people to maintain social and kin relations honorably.

However, the next piece Fatou shared with me – the outfit she wore to a naming ceremony in Kaolack told another side of the story. The bodice of her *mariniere* was very similar to the previous one she had shown me. While this outfit was made from Gagny Lah *bazin riche* cloth, it was dyed in dark violet, so dusky that the subtle pattern of the damask could only be seen in movement with shifting light. The capped sleeves were also pleated although the arm band embroidery was thin. The bodice featured intricate patterns of winding gold embroidery on the top, creating an a-line affect for the bottom of the bodice which folded into pleats (Fig. 14).

The *pagne*, a princess seam cut,⁶⁰ was embroidered in elaborate floral leaf designs from top to

⁶⁰ A princess seam cut consists of once centered price in the front and the back of a shirt or skirt, stitched vertically to two smaller pieces on either side, creating three separate pieces that enable to fabric to drape closely to the shape of the body. The top of Fatou's *pagne* was form fitting however the distance between vertical seams widened towards the bottom of the skirt, creating a flared affect.

bottom as showcased in (Fig. 15). This piece was exceptional compared to others she showed me that night because it was lined inside with purple cotton (Fig. 16). She paid approximately \$400 for the outfit in Dakar. Fatou told me that she wore this ensemble – for a second time - to a distant Senegalese friend’s naming ceremony in Detroit a few weeks prior to our interview.⁶¹ She strategized when she had this outfit made in Dakar, knowing that she would wear it once in Senegal and again in Michigan *without anyone knowing*. “What will you do with this outfit now that you have already worn it here?” I asked her. “I have a few outfits like this that I can’t wear anymore. I’m gonna take them back to Africa with me and give them to my cousins, and my cousins will give me some dresses too,” she replied. Instead of sitting folded in Fatou’s closet – left unworn and symbolically dead, life will be restored in this cloth when it is worn by someone else and admired by others, for the first time once *again*, in a new place (Renne 1995).

Fatou modeled the *pagne* to Absa, Khady, and me, recalling how glamorous she felt in this outfit both times she wore it (Banim and Guy 2001). When I asked her if it was just the heavily embellished high quality Gagny Lah that made her feel that way she said “Oh, no!” as she shook her head and waved her right index finger back and forth in the air. Both Absa and Khady nodded in agreement. Becoming glamorous required a lot of work according to the three women. First, the dress needs to smell good so incense is burned in the closet, or in the bedroom with the closet doors open, several hours before getting dressed. Proper makeup on the face is also important. The process begins with what Fatou, Absa, and Khady described as daily face

⁶¹ Fatou brought two pieces of bazin riche (6 meters each) to the first ceremony and gave approximately one hundred dollars in total cash gifts to the parents and the griot in Dakar. For the second ceremony in Detroit, she brought one 6 meter piece of bazin riche, one 6 meter piece of shiny polyester fabric from China, and gave approximately two hundred dollars in total cash gifts to the parents and the griot.

wash to maintain healthy skin.⁶² The make-up itself consists of highly defined eyes, through the application of eye shadows to match colors of outfits, eyeliner to create contrast around the eyes, thick mascara (even sometimes fake eyelashes), and painted eyebrows. Cheeks are adorned with colors of pink or peach, and lips are defined with lip liner and lipstick. Jewels, preferably gold, must adorn the ears, arms, and sometimes necks of bodies. And finally, hair must be styled, a wig can be worn, or a head wrap made of the same cloth used to construct the outfit. The beauty regime does not end there; painted fingernails and toes, along with a matching pair of shoes complete the process.

For Fatou, Absa, and Khady, the time consuming process of making up for important social occasions, along with choosing specific articles of clothing, helps to explain why they choose to participate and attend particular events in the first place. Their concerns speak directly to issues relating to the complexities associated with maintaining or severing kin relations in diasporic settings. Fatou, Khady, and Absa invest in themselves through the process of getting ready, which requires time spent at events and the financial burden of giving money and gifts, for specific and important reasons (Weiner 1976). For example, when Fatou pulled down the next piece from the shelf, her peach *ndoket*, loose fitting dresses with flounced sleeves that are often embroidered in the front, made with a high quality shiny *bazin riche* embellished with delicately light blue embroidery, she looked at me and asked, “Do you remember, I wore this to the naming ceremony when you came to help me with my baby?” She told the others the story. Fatou would have been seen as severing ties with several members of her representational family had she not attended the event. She made an active choice to participate in this exchange, for the benefits of

⁶² These facial washes are whitening creams and lightening parfais to help lighten dark skin tones.

maintaining social networks within this group of extended kin and friends far outweighed the costs for her (Mauss 1925).

Despite the sense of obligation to maintain these ties, Fatou enjoyed dressing up. For her, getting ready for events also meant that she was going to spend time she felt comfortable with, even if she did not know many of them well. Not so different from the women, discussed above who expressed a sense of feeling and embodying home when they attended events, she described the experience as “comforting” and “unifying”. While she believed that collective wear of *bazin riche* contributed to this sense of *communitas* (Turner 1969:160-161) she also suggested that *khaftans* and *fancy khaftans*, particularly those purchased from Dubai, carried with them the same symbolic relevance. This feeling of togetherness, according to Dibor also existed as a result of feeling isolated from non-Africans as a member of an African immigrant community in Michigan.

Fatou showed me an additional ten *bazin riche* outfits, each one stunning its rich color base and unique embroidery and embellishments, five different wax print outfit combinations, and six heavily embellished polyester *khaftans* from Dubai.⁶³ She buys the dresses from Dubai from local African vendors, like Dibor, who travel there to purchase large quantities of clothing, shoes, and purses to be sold in the United States. These dresses are affordable,⁶⁴ their silhouettes match those of *ndokets* and *mariniere/pagne* combinations, and they are shiny and heavily

⁶³ All of the *bazin riche* outfits were constructed and purchased in Dakar, prices ranging from \$200 for simple pieces and up to \$400 for elaborate ones. Wax prints were also all from Dakar, and Fatou said that she spent anywhere from \$25-\$50 depending on the quality of the cloth and the complexity of the pattern. Fatou refuses to buy African clothing from vendors in Michigan because the prices double. She does however buy *khaftans* from Dubai from African vendors.

⁶⁴ These dresses cost between \$80-\$120 US dollars when purchased in Detroit from African vendors. Vendors with whom I spoke with during my fieldwork were not willing to share what they paid for the dresses in Dubai.

embellished with jewels, crystals, and sequins. For example, Fatou pulled down a long turquoise dress, with a high neckline, and flared sleeves. The front was decorated with multi-colored beads and sequins in a pattern that followed the line of her body from her shoulders to the floor (Fig. 17). She loved this dress, and only paid \$80 for it. I asked her about the dress's lack of waxy crispness, and how she felt differently when she wore dresses like this to events. She explained that while the dress lacked the crispness of *bazin riche*, the heaviness of the embellishments weighted the dress in a way that matched her steps as she walked, and the sounds it made created a similar bodily experience when she moved in this dress. In all, Fatou's closet housed three dresses comparable to the turquoise dress, and two additional dresses that consisted of a similar silhouette, however contained no jewels and had short capped sleeves (Fig. 18).⁶⁵

I thought at that point that we had seen and discussed Fatou's wardrobe. Until, that is, she explained that she stores more clothing in her husband's closet *and* a large pile on top of a table downstairs in her basement. Much of the clothing in the basement was set to be packed in her suitcase and brought back with her to Dakar, to be traded with sisters and cousins. When I asked her why she had so many clothes, Absa and Khady both responded with, "That is because she is a self made and successful woman." Fatou smiled at them and then she smiled at me. What ensued was an unexpected conversation about their perspective on gender relations in the African diasporic setting of Detroit and outlying areas. The ladies suggested we get more ice cream. We brought the bowls back up to Fatou's room, sat on her bed, and carried on with our conversation. Fatou explained first:

⁶⁵ Fatou said that she liked to wear these dresses to barbecues in the summer. Also, she suggested there was no stigma attached to wearing this simple type of dress more than once. These dresses were less memorable because they were not embellished.

If you bring yourself here it is no problem, especially if you have a job. Me, I came to work in my cousin's shop. I braided hair for two years and saved as much money as I could. After Mustafa and I got married I had enough money to rent my own shop. I was already independent before I met Mustafa and he married me knowing that my plan was to have a shop, so there was no problem then.

Absa then added her thoughts:

Yes, so if a man sends for a woman to come here and marry him she is taking a big risk. This is a problem. Some men will try to marry women from rural areas who think they are getting a good opportunity to come to the United States. So they come here and then guess what? Their husbands make them get jobs, sometimes even two jobs, to pay the bills while the men hardly work and contribute little financially.

Absa and Khady were not married, and both agreed that they would not consider marriage until they were financially established, in case the marriage did not work out.⁶⁶ This problem was of particular concern to Absa because she, at the time, had three friends who were working as nursing home aides, in two different nursing homes, up to sixty hours weekly, paying all of the household bills, cooking, and caring for their children, while their husbands did not work. She was interested in starting a support group to help women in these situations.⁶⁷ Fatou then returned to her abundant wardrobe and said, "I would not have all this (as her hands gestured towards the outfits we had laid out all over the bed) had I not been smart about my money.

The interview with Fatou, and by extension Absa and Khady, in the enclosed space of her bedroom, in front of the inside of her closet divulged several intimate details I suggest would not have emerged in the conversation had we not shared that time and place together. While hearing more about the power of *bazin riche* to unite Africans during special events was not new

⁶⁶ And in fact, that was exactly what was happening in Fatou's marriage at the time however she shared this information only with me. I knew that Absa and Khady were not entirely aware of Fatou's situation.

⁶⁷ Absa, Fatou, and Khady referred to these women as "ATM" or "double shift" wives. These terms to describe women in particular marital situations were mentioned by women in five additional interviews, by one whom was not married, and by four who were married but not until they had established themselves financially. Twenty of the women I interviewed worked more than one job, usually as nursing home aides. This interesting and important topic however is outside the scope of this dissertation and can perhaps be explored in future research.

information, I learned that for Fatou, getting ready for an event serves as a time when she negotiates and justifies with whom she willing to maintain relationships. Also, she cares about not being seen in the same outfit for ceremonies and events, yet plans her purchases strategically knowing that there are ways to wear something more than once without anyone knowing. Finally, Fatou described the excitement she feels when anticipating spending time with others at events, despite the financial costs and time constraints. I wondered if her attendance at events helped to fill voids in her failing marriage, and the isolation she experienced through that process. We could not discuss this during the interview although in a later conversation she confirmed that this was the case. Talking about clothing in this context, then, brought up complicated issues relating to gender dynamics and marriage.

Lunch break with Eshe and her two closets

Eshe, a young, successful Guinean woman who works in Dibor's shop as a hair braider, maintains an active social life through her extensive family and friend networks within the Guinean and Nigerien communities in Michigan. She enjoys talking about clothing and was enthusiastic about me visiting her at home to see her closet and discuss its contents. We planned our interview during her lunch break one day at the shop. When I arrived to pick her up I knocked on the shop's locked door and Max let me in. Max and Dibor both were busy with clients and Maxime, their friend, had stopped by the shop for a visit. We all greeted one another with hugs and smiles, then Eshe told them we'd be back in an hour or so.

Eshe lived in a two story brick apartment complex a few blocks away from the shop on the corner of a busy intersection close to downtown Detroit. Her small two bedroom apartment was on the second floor of the building. Eshe unlocked the door and the apartment smelled of

incense. She asked me if I could smell it. I nodded and then she said “It is the Nag Champa you brought me for a present. It is my favorite and I burn it every day. I don’t want my clothes smelling like the food I cook in my kitchen. Look how small this place is!”⁶⁸ She quickly showed me the kitchen and living area, one open space hard wood floors, with minimal furniture, and led me right into her bedroom to show me her closet. She asked “Which one do you want to see first?” Eshe had enough clothing to fill two closets.⁶⁹

The first closet in her bedroom, a small room with beige walls and a light brown carpet, has white, shingled, hinged doors. As expected, her African clothing was folded on a shelf about the main curtain rod, and the rod itself was jammed with hanging clothes. The second closet in the other bedroom looked very similar to the first, though not as cluttered. Together Eshe and I counted the number of outfits on shelves, how many outfits were hanging and how many pairs of shoes she owned between both of closets. We counted 56 pairs of shoes and boots, 47 party dresses, 10 pairs of jeans, 12 pairs of dress pants, 20 long sleeved shirts, 15 short sleeved shirts, 20 outfits made of bazin riche, 12 heavily decorated *fancy khaftan* from Dubai, and three outfits made of wax print. We did not have time to look at discuss every piece because she had to get back to work. I asked Eshe to show me three of her favorite pieces.

Her favorite party dress, as she described it, was one she wore recently to her twenty sixth birthday party with friends. The long, tight fitting spaghetti strapped black dress had a triangular cut out revealing part of her right waist and midriff. The border of the cutout, along with the border of the top of the dress was decorated with small, flat, silver studs. The shoes she

⁶⁸ Eshe burned incense in both bedrooms on wooden incense holders that she placed on tables close to the closets. On nights when she was going out she would either hang or drape her outfit over the door of the closet and place the incense holder underneath it.

⁶⁹ Eshe requested I did not photograph the insides of her closets or clothing.

wore with the outfit were seven inch high white platform open toed heels. She kept her jewelry to a minimum that evening, wearing simple pearl earrings and a silver watch on her right wrist. She said, “I love this dress because it is beautiful. It is sexy but elegant, and not too revealing. I also love this dress because I had such fun at my birthday party. Me and my friends danced until 4am in the morning at the club.”

She then pulled down an outfit made *mariniere/pagne* combination made of dark burgundy bazin riche. The short capped sleeves were pleated and puffed up approximately six inches. The front of the v-necked *mariniere* was machine embroidered in swirls of light blue, pink, and yellow. She requested the v-neck so that she could wear it with her favorite necklace, an elaborate series of gold chains that hang in a “v” shape. The *pagne* had machine embroidered squares of light blue bordering the damask’s geometric shapes. She had this outfit made for her by her favorite tailor in Conakry to wear to a friend’s wedding in Michigan. Dibor chose the fabric for her on one of her trips to Guinea and brought it back to Eshe just in time for the wedding.

The final favorite piece she chose was another long black dress, this time the dress was v-necked with an a-line waist band embellished with a yellow, green, and red striped ribbon, the colors in the Guinean flag. She wore this dress to the African Picnic the prior July 4th, an event she says she never misses because she always has so much fun. That year’s picnic was especially enjoyable for her because relatives from Guinea were visiting and were able to join her. Also, many of the musicians who performed that evening were from Guinea. Eshe said she felt at home that night during the picnic and will always remember it as a special day.

Eshe’s lunch hour was almost over and she had to get back to the shop. We talked in the car on the way back and she invited me to stay with her at the shop while she braided a client’s

hair. I asked her if she owned large quantities of clothing because she felt pressure to wear items only once to social events:

Oh yes, definitely I feel that pressure, especially when I am invited to weddings or naming ceremonies. I will wear my bazin once and then send it back to one of my sister's in Guinea. Or, I will save them to wear if I am planning a trip to Guinea soon. When I go to birthday parties or go out with younger people my age I try to wear new outfits mostly because I like to dress up. But it is okay if I wear my other clothing more than once – because I can switch it up a lot by wearing a different shirt with the same pair of pants, or by changing my jewelry, hair, or make-up.

Eshe enjoys being a young, successful, unmarried Guinean woman in Michigan. She maintains an active social life with people her age from several African countries, extended family members and people of older generations. She likes dressing up and going out with her friends frequently. Her views about marriage concur with those expressed by Absa and Khady – she wants to be financially and emotionally secure before she finds a marriage partner. Eshe feels fortunate to have a professional career where she makes a decent living. She is thankful for the opportunity to embody her youth while at the same time she shows respect and deference for her Guinean heritage by ensuring that she attends and participates in important kin and social events.⁷⁰

Coffee with Nousseiba at McDonalds

Nousseiba and I met one Saturday morning for an interview lasting about 45 minutes at McDonalds in a suburb of Detroit. She had finished her night shift at the nursing home where she worked as an aide. She said she was tired and ordered a cup of coffee. Nousseiba was from Côte d'Ivoire and had been living in Michigan for seven years. She was married and had two small

⁷⁰ Expectations for contributions at events in the form of money or cloth are minimized (for example, she plans on spending about \$50 in monetary gifts and giving one piece of bazin riche for weddings and naming ceremonies versus expectations of \$100 and two pieces minimum for women whom are married.

children. I showed her my samples of *bazin riche* to get the conversation started. She unfolded each piece to observe and feel its color and texture. She explained that while this textile is important for baby showers, weddings, and special events – to be worn and to be given as presents – it is expensive and not everyone can afford it.

While I did not actually see her clothing, she described her closet as being modest in its content. She works two jobs, as an aide at two different nursing homes, between 50-60 hours weekly. Her closet consists mostly of work uniforms and what she described as casual clothing. She owns four outfits made of *bazin riche* which are folded on a shelf inside her closet. She explained that she must get her outfits made by a certain tailor in Abidjan, who is familiar with her measurements, and that her family will send outfits to her when she really needs one.⁷¹

Nousseiba believes it is wasteful for mothers or brides to change several times, as was described in Chapter Three, during weddings and naming ceremonies:

There is so much money that goes into only one day. I know a lady travelling to Dubai to buy clothes because stuff is cheaper but a lot of people still want the *bazin riche*. I really don't believe in changing five to seven times. I think people should use the money to buy other things - use the money for the kids. My point of view is that it is not worth it.

Nousseiba also described herself as feeling lonely. While she enjoyed being married and raising her children, she worked too much and still couldn't afford to have her hair braided.⁷² She didn't have time or money to attend special events however she has attended the African picnic twice.

⁷¹ Nousseiba has large breasts and therefore has to have her clothing made according to her particular measurements. Because of this she cannot exchange clothes with sisters or cousins. Also, she wears extra-large ready-made shirts for both work and at home.

⁷² Most informants I talked with had relatives or friends who were willing to braid their hair for either free or for a minimal price.

Describing her experience at the picnic she said, “It made me feel like I was back home again. I felt united with other Africans from all over the continent and more relaxed than I usually am.” The time and money constraints faced by Nousseiba affected her limited use and wear of cloth, and by extension compromised her accessibility to meeting other African women at social events. In turn, she lacked a network of social support, so much so that she could not find someone to help her with her hair.

Conclusion

Stories told in front of closets generated detailed discussions about meanings imbued in embodied cloth. As insides of insides, certain pieces of clothing evoked memories – initiating reveals of further intimate topics – secrets, that more than likely would not have been shared had the closet not been the starting point of conversation. Women explained their collections⁷³, their extended selves, in particular their ideas about how they maintained their independence and why accessing and circulating clothing served to maintain social relations to avoid loneliness. In this context the accumulation of specific types of clothing that could be worn to events expanded the possibilities of creating and maintaining social ties and supportive relationships. Conversations with women at restaurants and shops like Nousseiba, for example, whom I had not met prior to their interview, revealed alternative relationships with cloth and clothing. While most of them attended very few social events they all agreed that they experienced feelings of unity *when they could* attend them. Most of these women said they did not frequent events regularly because they

⁷³ I expand upon the topic of how individualized, personal stories about the process of collecting and de-accessioning clothing not only help to frame and maintain African diasporic identities in Michigan but also relate to issues associated with museum collecting more generally in a *Working Papers* article for the University of Michigan Museum Studies Program online journal.

did not have the time, money, or the inclination. As expressed by Nousseiba above, these women focused primarily on working to ensure that their children were clothed and fed, and many suggested that mothers who cared about clothing too much were being wasteful with their money and not tending to their children properly.

These interviews at coffee chops and restaurants, while more structured and less detailed than interviews that took place in front of closets, yielded insightful comparisons regarding women's access to support systems for members of African Diaspora communities in Michigan. Women who had wealth in cloth also had established wealth within social circles whereas women who possessed little wealth in cloth remained isolated as expressed by one woman, Fatima from Guinea who said, "There are so many Africans here but I don't see them because I have to work." Collectively these insights provide important testimony relating to issues of constraint for women who lack clothing, financial, kin, and social resources. On the other hand, securing supportive kin and social networks required wealth in cloth and in financial resources.

Chapter 5

Picnics and Houses

We are all we've got

~Max, Guinean born, January 2012

In an African diasporic context people's experiences with wearing certain types of clothing for family and social events support official discourses of unity while conversations carried out about the private, in particular concerning the contents of closets, reinforce negotiations of secrets and moral grounds established through everyday life experiences. In this chapter I discuss representational kinship and formal settings, relating particularly to my involvement with UAA and the complexities surrounding the making of and maintenance of these relationships. What emerged after having had some understanding of these complexities is how seemingly nondescript clothing worn to UAA meetings symbolized a collective commitment to unity through a different lens.

This chapter focuses on one major event and one large-scale hope. The event is the annual African picnic held in Detroit on July 4th sponsored and hosted by UAA. Attracting between 8,000-10,000 attendees yearly, UAA members consider it the most important yearly affair in the African Diaspora community in Michigan. The second example – a future hope - relates to planning associated with an African Community Center, of the African House as UAA members referred to it, in Detroit. Creating a structural space for all members of African Diaspora communities to convene for community solidarity and cultural cohesion, a place where

young African children in the diaspora could learn and maintain pride in their African heritage, where Africans newly relocated to Michigan could come for support, and where Africans can represent and help themselves has been a longstanding goal for UAA since the organization's beginnings as a not-for-profit organization. The African House is a longstanding dream shared by many UAA members.

Narratives about unity and representational family – one big African family regardless of national origins - dominated both picnic planning and African House committee meetings. While unity *was* experienced through the embodiment of dress at high profile social events such as the picnic, *La Nuit du Bazin*, naming ceremonies, fundraising events and funerals this chapter's discussion examines the intentions of members who sacrifice time and energy to attend planning meetings, which are often lengthy and take place during inconvenient times. What did UAA members wear to these meetings? I suggest that clothing worn by committee members to these meetings became equally, if not more relevant in the ethnographic descriptions that follow, where unity through clothing took on a second dimension, one that embodies a strong yearning and loyalty to sponsor an important yearly event and to transform a collective dream into something concrete regardless of how someone performs in his or her clothing. Meetings for both the picnic and the African House were held at UAA headquarters in the evenings. This meant that willing members volunteered their time in many cases to be present after working all day, and more importantly sacrificed time away from their families. Meetings often started later than scheduled, ran much later than expected, and in many cases due in part to arguments between longstanding and new members, which significantly diverged from meeting agendas.

UAA members attended planning meetings donning clothing they wore when they dressed themselves in the morning in preparation for a day of work. My observations of and

participation in documenting what people wore to all of the picnic and African House meetings led me to question the vast opposition between how people present themselves in highly publicized events versus “meetings”; in this context I consider the extended hours spent by dedicated members who committed and followed through with their duties by attending planning meetings that created an element of sacrifice when it came to the reality of being separated from family members for extended periods of time. I argue that dressing up – but also dressing down - became a powerful act of loyalty where the intent of imagining oneself in a supportive and understanding environment dominated , most specifically in the context of UAA members expressing concern for their children.

In the conclusion I suggest that fighting to make and maintain representational relationships, expressed visually in unity through clothing, is *worth it* for the sake of experiencing togetherness at important social events. UAA members participate in the organization because they want to be there. Planning the African Picnic and debating and imagining what the African House can be are voluntary endeavors that are time consuming and emotionally exhausting. I argue therefore that clothing worn to meetings, and the intentional act of not dressing up, becomes deeply representational in a collective quest for well-being. I conclude the chapter by suggesting that people continue to participate in the organization – despite strong waves of disagreement and disunity – because they want to be there - and because they want a better future for their children in this diasporic setting.

Background: UAA’S Headquarters

UAA’s office is located in a small strip mall close to downtown Detroit. Couched between a video shop where customers can rent or buy African produced films and a vacant African hair

braiding salon, the office itself consists of three main rooms, a kitchen, and a bathroom with some storage space. The monthly rent for this space is \$500. The building, built in the 1970's, has not been maintained properly by the owner and is in some places literally falling apart. Many of the ceiling panels in UAA's office are missing, the sink in the bathroom doesn't work, the heating system is inconsistent, and there is no air conditioning in the summer. Still, the walls of the conference room are covered with a lively combination of memories. One entire wall features images of UAA's leaders which include an Executive Director, a President, a Vice-President, a Secretary General, Chairman of July 4th Picnic Committee, a Public Relations Officer, a Publicity Officer, a Programs Director, a Cultural Officer, Community Affairs Officer, a Health Officer, a Sports Officer, a Media Director, an Entertainment Officer, a Chairman for the African House Committee, and a Chairman for the annual July 4th Picnic Committee (Fig. 19). Another wall contains hundreds of pictures of community members, many smiling faces and bodies dressed in bazin riche, at UAA sponsored events (Fig. 20). The third wall features flags from several African countries and a map of Africa. The fourth wall is a window that looks into the general office space.

UAA's office is used for monthly general meetings, any other organization related meetings, and for fundraisers. General meetings take place in UAA's conference room during the third Friday of each month at 6:00pm.⁷⁴ All UAA members are invited to the meetings they were typically attended by UAA's Executive Director, President, Vice-President, Secretary General, Publicity Officer, Community Affairs Officer, Programs Director, and Cultural Officer. Some Presidents from nationally recognized organizations attended meetings regularly while others never attended. Meeting attendance increased significantly each year in March when the

⁷⁴ Meetings generally did not officially begin however until after 7pm and lasted usually until 10-11pm.

planning of the July 4th picnic began. Each meeting begins with a prayer sometimes a Christian prayer other times a Muslim prayer to respect diversity in belief with thanks for having the space in which to gather together, for the health and well being of one another, and for our children. Meetings would begin with the Executive Director presenting the agenda while the Secretary General took notes. Everyone around the table was given the opportunity to share opinions about issues on the agenda however it was important to recognize and honor when to defer to the elder members of the organization. I attended all of UAA's general meetings from November of 2011 until August of 2013.

UAA's constitution calls for elections to be held every two years for leadership positions. Leaders may stay in their positions if no one is interested in running against them however the organization discourages leaders remaining in position longer than six years. All members are allowed to participate in voting. All financial transactions associated with UAA are supposed to be accessible to members and transparency is expected.

Picnics

The members and Board of Directors of the United African Association wish to welcome the community to our 13th Annual July 4 African Festival. As customarily done in the past, this year is no exception, in providing the tools to make the event joyous and worthwhile for all. Each year, UAA prides itself with the participation of the various African National Organizations, who bring a tremendous and diverse cultural flavor to the July 4 event, an experience we cherish year after year. This event is the only event that brings all Africans together, under one umbrella. Regardless of different national and ethnic origins, we are all one big happy family on this day. Let us maintain this tradition of peace and tranquility in our midst and have a great sense of decorum amongst ourselves.

~Bany, UAA member and Chairman for July 4th Committee

For more than twenty five years the All-African Unity Festival, or the African Picnic as it is referred to by UAA members, has been held on the 4th of July at a large Detroit city park. The

event, which includes food, soccer, music, entertainment, dance, and socializing, attracts thousands of representatives from the nationally recognized African Organizations in Michigan and members of the African Diaspora communities at large living in Michigan and beyond. Olumide Bamidele, UAA's founder and Executive Director, shared the picnic's history with us at our December 2011 all member meeting. During the late 1990's the Nigerian community in Michigan was organized into twelve political and/or social organizations. These groups decided to collaborate and plan a large picnic that would take place annually on July 4th in Detroit. At the beginning of our first picnic planning meeting in March 2012 while waiting for all committee members to arrive I asked the Director:

I'm curious, why was the 4th of July initially chosen as the day to hold the annual picnic?" He explained, "We are all immigrants and July 4th is a common denominator that unites us. The fact that we are all here in the US is what unites us, and why not celebrate this country's independence together in light of that? So, that is what we decided to do.

The picnics were successful year after year, bringing together Nigerian communities across Michigan for the special occasion. By the year 2000 members from other African Organizations were invited by the organizers. However according to Bamidele, the Nigerian groups began fighting over the logistics of picnic planning and subsequently certain individuals, he being one of them, broke away from already established Nigerian groups in Michigan to form the United African Communities Organization. UAA began sponsoring and organizing the picnic in 2001 although apparently animosity still exists between certain groups and individuals because of this rift. According to the Executive Director, "It was so difficult to wrestle July 4th back from the Nigerians." In response Dr. Ogwu, who is Nigeria said, "And many of them remain your enemy because of this." Members in the room chuckled at this comment as did the Executive Director who concurred, "Yes, this is true. Our people like to fight yet sponsoring the picnic was

something worth wrangling for – it’s the most important gathering of the year for all Africans in Michigan and beyond. Africans living all across the Midwest, even as far as New York travel here each year to celebrate together.” His sentiment was upheld through a unanimous nodding of heads from all committee members who were seated around the planning table.

As quoted by Bany above, the picnic provides an opportunity for members of African Diaspora communities – from all over the continent - to experience being “one big happy family” collectively, in Detroit. Like *La Nuit du Bazin*, this day enables attendees to share this unity through dress yet on a much larger scale. The picnic is an important day for dressing up mostly for elders, married couples, and young children who display nationality through wearing clothing specific to one’s country of origin but also to celebrate the experiential aspect of sharing and embodying similar aesthetics with other Africans. As will be discussed this day is especially important for African elders to celebrate their heritage with their age mates. It is a unique opportunity for their children to be exposed to this on a grand level – to live it, to feel it, and to hopefully embrace and accept it. Before considering the event itself, something must be said about the months of planning that are required to make this event happen.

Picnic Planning

Planning the picnic begins in the UAA office in March, five months prior to the event. The Chairman for the July 4th Committee is a UAA member who either volunteers or is appointed by the President or Executive Director. The Chairman designates duties for UAA members who are willing to serve on the committee. These duties include keeping track of all funds associated with the event, arranging entertainment, organizing the soccer tournament, inviting special guests to speak at the event, and organizing issues pertaining to park maintenance. The committee meets

monthly during March, April and May and weekly during the month of June. Most committee members have served on the committee loyally for the past several years.⁷⁵

Hosting a picnic for 8-10,000 people is costly. For example, major expenditures include: \$1000⁷⁶ for lawn mowing, \$600 to rent portable toilets, \$600 for a dumpster service to pick up the trash on July 5th, and \$400 for insurance in case anyone gets hurt. Additional expenses include renting a dance floor and a stage and pay workers to assemble and disassemble it (\$200-\$300), trophies for soccer champions (\$250), referees for the soccer tournament (\$300), money to pay musical performers (approximately \$500), security guards (\$250), printing costs for advertisement post cards and also programs to be sold at the event (\$200), and food and drink for the UAA tent (\$300) Overall the event costs anywhere between \$6,000 - \$8,000 for UAA to host.

UAA must seek outside funding and donations to make it happen. First, any Africa affiliated or African National Organization must pay \$500 to secure space for a rented tent.⁷⁷ UAA also solicits funds from individuals or organizations wishing to advertise in the event program. The color printed program features messages from UAA's President, Vice-President, Executive Director, Secretary General, and Program Director. Many local professionals advertise their services in the program. For example, the 2014 program included advertisements for local pharmacies, Mary Kay cosmetics, automobile insurance, health clinics, and several local services

⁷⁵ I served on the committee in 2012 and in 2013.

⁷⁶ The picnic is held at a Detroit Metro park that is essentially closed because the city is bankrupt and cannot afford the upkeep of keeping the lawn maintained. UAA has permission from the city to use the park for the day however UAA must pay to have the lawn mowed.

⁷⁷ The tent rental is not included in this fee however because UAA rents tents, tables, and chairs for the event, organizations can receive a discounted price if orders are placed through UAA. The average tent rental fee for a 600 square foot tent is \$100.

including printing, legal, travel, and drug and alcohol abuse. Several families paid to honor loved ones who had passed away during the year with in memoriam photographs. Other families donated by writing well wishes for UAA and picnic attendees.⁷⁸ A front cover or back cover page costs \$400, one full page is \$300, a half page is \$200, and the cost for a quarter page is \$100. All UAA members are expected to seek out as many donations as possible for the event programs as funds from this endeavor fund most of the picnic expenses. For example, in 2014, UAA members raised more than \$6000 in program advertisements. UAA also welcomes donations from individuals or organizations who do not wish to advertise in the program. Likewise, many UAA Board members make donations for the event. And finally, UAA also requests a voluntary \$1 from each car parking in the lot on picnic day.

July 4th 2012

I attended all picnic planning meetings from March 2012 until the event in July. My role was assisting the Olumide Bamidele, UAA's Executive Director, in planning our approach for introducing picnic attendees and organization leaders to the idea of the African House Project (which I discuss later in the chapter) and to cultivate enthusiasm for potential funding. Our plan was to visit each tent over the course of the day, discussing the project and distributing informational and funding commitment sheets to individuals interested in the possibility of getting involved.⁷⁹ I was enthusiastic about attending and participating however I was concerned about how my role in promoting the project – as a white female from the United States - might

⁷⁹ I was responsible for editing the African House information document and the African House Commitment to Donate document. I also committed to making 500 copies of each document in preparation for passing them out at the picnic.

be questioned by people who had not met me or understood that I had been a member of UAA for eight months. I felt I had secured respect and trust from most members over the last several months although there were still a few who openly expressed skepticism regarding my involvement in the group. As such, I wondered how perfect strangers would react to my involvement with the project. When I breached this topic with the Executive Director on July 3 he assured that my manner of interacting with UAA members was transparent and sincere, that I had proven my genuine interest to be part of the group, and that my commitment to collaborate on the African House Project was recognized by UAA members. I felt ready for the long, exciting day ahead.⁸⁰

The park's long driveway leads into and encircles the 250 acres which include a football field, a couple of playgrounds with rusted play structures, and a newly refurbished nature trail. I drove through the front entrance, said hello to Miss Ellen, a forty seven year old unmarried social worker, who was soliciting donations at the front gate, and then proceeded to the park's central parking lot where there significant preparations were in progress. Vendors were assembling a large the rented stage in the center of the park and setting up tents, tables, and chairs around the periphery. Soccer referees were prepping the fields for a full day of competitions. Mobile toilets were delivered and set up towards the back of the park. People were transporting grills, stereos and speakers, and large quantities of food and drink from cars and trucks to their respective tent areas. Bamidele, in full planning mode when I met him at 8:30am, suggested I help the rental

⁸⁰ Of course I had to think through very carefully about what I would wear for the picnic. I wanted to dress conservatively, yet fashion forward, and I also wanted to be sure I dressed in something lightweight because the weather forecast called for a very hot day. I chose a white lightweight cotton tunic with three quarter length sleeves and a mandarin neckline, amaranth red ponte style capris, and a simple pair of black open toe sandals with small heels.

company employees set up tables and chairs under the UAA tent. I looked for Bamidele when we finished however decided to check on Miss Ellen when I couldn't find him.⁸¹

Miss Ellen, who joined UAA only a few months prior to the picnic, was from Liberia and had been living in Detroit for the last seventeen years. She was dressed in a multi-colored floral patterned a-line skirt with a royal blue button down short cap sleeve shirt. Together we approached drivers and passengers of each car soliciting voluntary \$1 donations. We told donors that the funds would be used to support UAA in the implementation of an African House. Car traffic was sporadic between 9 am and 1 pm and we had time to talk when the traffic slowed down temporarily.⁸² I asked her about her wardrobe and she explained to me that her father never allowed her to wear what she called “traditional African” clothing while she was growing up in Liberia. Her father, a government official, believed that the act of having to readjust a skirt created the distinct possibility of the legs being exposed, which to him translated as indecency. Miss Ellen remembered her parents ordering her clothing from Sears as a child and commissioning local tailors to construct short sleeved button down shirts and a-line skirts for her and her sisters. She never wore anything other than the shirts and skirts her parents dressed her in as a child and she felt comfortable only in this type of clothing. Her choice of dress style was also an intentional disassociation with Africans in the diaspora setting. Miss Ellen maintained a strong position of distrust for most Africans, particularly African men, believing that despite historical particularities and diversities, common experiences with colonialism, independence,

⁸¹ UAA members had emphasized just the day before during our final planning meeting that no one should work the front gate alone. This is a safety issue because the crime rate is high in that particular neighborhood and UAA members were carrying around buckets full of cash.

⁸² There was a flow of traffic in the early morning due to the many set-up activities taking place. Many people who set up returned home to change clothing, returning later in the afternoon.

patriarchy, poor leadership, and greediness have influenced many African men to behave dishonestly. She explained that she had been working in social services, both in the United States and Canada, over the past seventeen years and has endured many problematic encounters with African male colleagues.⁸³ She was hesitant to join UAA but decided to give it a chance, her hope was to participate in implementing change instead of complaining while watching it happen.

The traffic intensified shortly after noon when Miss Ellen and I found ourselves overwhelmed with rows of cars wrapping from the park entrance down and around the street sometimes as far as a quarter of a mile. Most visitors were happy to donate one dollar, even at times giving more. Others drove in exclaiming that their respective organizations had already paid \$500 for their spot and they saw no reason to donate more. Miss Ellen and I had not expected to be stuck in this role all day, had not planned for this, and did not have any water to drink. Thankfully someone eventually gave us water from a cooler in their car. We could not leave one another to seek relief, and could not walk away from the opportunity to make much needed money for UAA. No one from UAA came to check on or to relieve us until the President from the Gambian Association of Michigan, who was dressed in a cobalt blue bazin riche boubou, topped by around 2:00pm. We asked him to find volunteers to take over for us and I told him I needed to find Bamidele so that we could follow through with our plan. He left and never returned with a message. UAAs Secretary General Mrs. Keino, wearing a multi-colored wax

⁸³ Miss Ellen was not interested in elaborating further about this strong sentiment. When I asked her if she could share an example or situation she held her right palm up to the sky and said, "Trust me, just trust me, watch out for those African men."

print *kitenge* sarong with a matching shirt, came to help us around 3:00 pm. We worked with Miss Ellen in the blazing 100°F sun until 5:00pm when I realized I had sun stroke.⁸⁴

After resting and rehydrating at home for two hours I returned to the picnic. I felt ill and out of sorts however I was concerned that we were not able to share African House materials with picnic attendees. Also, experiencing the picnic, talking with people, observing what people were wearing, and networking for additional research participants were all crucial for my future ethnographic research in Michigan. I waited for months to attend this important event and I had to overcome my sickness and my disappointment for not having the opportunity to observe and participate in it. After finally finding a parking spot blocks away from the picnic I anxiously walked in the dark to the park.

Upon entering the celebration I felt I was transported immediately from Detroit to Africa suddenly embodying the “complex hybridity of transnational settings” (Stoller 1997: xvii) through sound, sight, smell, even touch. Musicians from Guinea were performing on the stage to hundreds of people dancing joyously in the center of the park. A flurry of musical sound emanated from stereos set up at most tents. The air everywhere smelled of incense and grilled meat. People were cooking alongside tents and serving food to anyone who wished to eat. Men and women sat around tables socializing and celebrating together. The final match of the soccer competition appeared to be well underway with fans screaming on the sidelines. Some vendors close to the main entrance sold food, mostly sweet treats such as popsicles and ice cream for the kids.

⁸⁴ Until this time, Mrs. Keino had reluctantly accepted my membership in UAA until this day. She respected that Miss Ellen and I worked alone for several hours on the hottest day of the year. Her demeanor towards me transformed that day – she smiled and engaged in conversation with me for the first time.

As far as I could see certain groups displayed African national solidarity through wearing nationally recognized clothing; *bazin riche*, *kente cloth*, *kangas*, even soccer shirts, however I was not present long enough to observe any firm distinctions. In my brief observational encounter I recognized that most middle aged and older attendees (meaning those more than likely married and older) dressed up for the event – either in a textile that identified them as a person from a specific country or region from Africa, or a universally recognized textile such as *bazin riche*. Many men, women, and young children dressed in *bazin riche* for the event yet most young adult females and males wore tank tops and skirts or pants or shorts. I also observed some people selling clothing under tents however was not able to see what type exactly or to learn countries of origin.

I made my way to the UAA tent located in the center of the park parallel to the dance floor and diagonal to the stage and discovered that my copies were all still in a box under the table where I left them. I eventually found Bamidele, who was happy to see me and thanked me for my work. There were too many people around and therefore I could not inquire about why our plan had failed. Suddenly a wild thunderstorm broke out and many people, including myself, rushed to leave because of the rain. I ran to my car, discouraged I had missed out on a lot that day.

Bamidele phoned to tell me the next morning that that Miss Ellen and I earned \$735 for the organization through donation solicitations at the park entrance. I felt disappointed and conflicted after hearing this news, thinking we must have collected more money than that after working for seven hours and interacting with thousands of people who willingly paid donations. Miss Ellen was furious and left the organization. I had initiated a presence with members of this organization, had met hundreds of Africans in Michigan, and decided it important to maintain

our professional relationship regardless of this uncomfortable situation. It was not until I attended and worked at the following year's picnic that I was able to witness the relevance of clothing as an indicator representational family in a diaspora setting.

The African House

First Meeting

In August 2012, I was invited by UAA to be on the planning committee and to attend the first meeting for planning the "African House" Project – a house that would provide a space for African community and family in Michigan.⁸⁵ UAA members have strived to transform the idea into something concrete since 2001 however conflicts among members about *when*, *where*, and *how* have halted the process. The current committee is made up of the Committee President, born in Côte d'Ivoire, several other African leaders in the community - seven men and two women – born in Kenya, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Niger, the Gambia, Tanzania, Ghana, Liberia, and myself. We all agreed to serve on this committee in addition to our UAA commitments. These meetings took place monthly on a Friday evening at 6:00pm the UAA office.⁸⁶

Our first meeting did not begin smoothly. Sarah, an African American female committee member entered the office and greeted other members by shaking their hands and taking a seat. She was dressed in jeans and a polyester, pastel floral patterned long sleeved, button down shirt. Minutes later Maxine, a committee member from Guinea wearing jeans and kelly green woolen

⁸⁵ I, like most UAA members on the African House Committee, came to meetings in work clothing. My work clothing consisted of dark solid colored pants, jeans, or knee length skirts with long sleeved shirts or sweaters, boots fit for Michigan winter, and wool scarves.

⁸⁶ The meetings never began earlier than 7:00pm. While those who were on time were able to engage in conversation with one another many expressed frustration with the late start because they had already worked all day, were tired, and wanted to be home with their families.

sweater, walked in and did the same, except Sarah refused to shake her hand. The Executive Director,⁸⁷ in a black suit and white button down shirt, said this was not acceptable yet she still refused to shake. He said we would discuss this at the beginning of the meeting.

The Director opened the meeting by telling everyone we were gathering that night to discuss our “first ideas” regarding the “African House.” He said however we had to clear up some business first. Since several members had arrived after the incident he retold the story to the group, about how this woman refused to shake her fellow committee member’s hand. He suggested we hear both sides of the story and then the elders should respond. Sarah explained that she volunteered to work with Maxine two weeks earlier at the African World Festival parade in downtown Detroit and that she was told to do one task by the Executive Director and another completely different one by Maxine. She expressed her frustration with Maxine, who happens to be older than she, by scolding her in front of other volunteers that day, and ignoring her request. Sarah explained to us that she was following orders of the person in charge, the Director, and since he didn’t inform her of the changed plans himself, she was sticking to the plan. She felt her volunteer work was not appreciated and that she had been treated disrespectfully by Maxine. Maxine then made her case, arguing that she had the authority to modify the plans (given her political position in UAA), and Sarah shouting at her and ignoring her was not acceptable. The elders responded.⁸⁸ The first said that sure, there might be differences in agreement about “how” the chain of command fluctuated however it is never appropriate to treat an elder with disrespect. He said, “As Africans we are a diverse group, however an important continuity

⁸⁷ Bamidele was a medical doctor and also taught classes at a local university therefore he often attended meetings in suits.

⁸⁸ I began taking rigorous notes of the meeting’s conversations at this point and therefore reported less on exactly what attendees were wearing.

between all of us is respecting our elders, who are wiser.” Another elder suggested that Sarah had requested a discussion during the meeting about the conflict before acting out with disrespect. Another elder emphasized a difference in understanding of culture in this context. He asked Sarah if she had ever travelled to Africa. She said no. He suggested to the group that perhaps because of this Sarah was not aware of social nuances concerning respect, and that this opportunity was a good way to address it. The Director then asked me to respond as an elder. This was a joyous moment for me – feeling I had now indeed earned the committee’s respect as a member– but also harrowing in the sense that I needed to say something compelling that added to the argument and discussion. I said that I could understand why there might have been a glitch in the communication and that perhaps it should have been addressed at the time in a transparent fashion, paying attention to the cultural nuances and respect on both parts. I mentioned that this incident might also be viewed through a lens of identity and a good opportunity to discuss different ideas about how we see ourselves and how others see us. Thankfully my remarks were received well, although not entirely as Sarah resigned from the committee after the meeting that evening.

Once this issue was resolved, Abdoulaye,⁸⁹ the Chairman of the African House Committee, who is from Côte d’Ivoire and owns a taxi cab company in Detroit, started the meeting with inspiring words of goodwill and thanks for everyone there who was invested in helping to build the African House. The discussions that night were framed along the lines of visualizing the group as one big family in the US yet recognizing at the same time the geographic, historical, social, and practical kin diversity in these families. This first meeting

⁸⁹ Abdoulaye consistently wore bazin riche boubous to all UAA monthly, picnic planning, and African House planning meetings. I have never seen him wear anything but bazin riche.

served as a brainstorming session where we discussed some of the major issues in need of address. We talked about the house in a metaphorical sense that evening with the hope of capturing all we hoped it would offer members of African Diaspora communities in Michigan. As enthusiastic participants we engaged in a lively, open discussion. This hopeful and optimistic conversation rested on four major themes – children, unity, self-representation, and money - as conveyed in the following three statements made by the Chairman of the African House Committee, the President of UAA, and the Executive Director of the UAA during meeting's opening remarks:

Abdoulaye, Chairman of the African House Committee: Why do we need an African House? It's our time to make a change and we can do it. It's our time to make an African Town in Detroit. It's time to stop talking and start doing. This is for our children.

Bamidele, Executive Director of UAA: Yes, implementing a plan and finding a way to get the money to buy a house is a crucial first step. How do we build mosques and churches back home? We have to do it our way. What we have here at UAA is a legacy of transparency and a story of our accomplishments...we're gonna tell our own story. It is left on this group to start the movement. What we need is to raise the money and figure out how we are going to go about it.

Ufan, President of UAA: The most critical issue at this stage is financing and getting a place. We can do this through collaboration by focusing on the diverse expertise surrounding us here in Detroit. The Arab-Americans have done it, the Liberians have done it – and there are a lot of Africans here. This is all about unity. We need to put our heads, our hearts, and our minds to it.

Ufan, President of UAA, was from Tanzania and worked as a manager at a local Burger King. He attended meetings either dressed in casual clothing of sweatshirts and jeans, or wearing his work uniform covered with a sweatshirt. Ufan's mention of funding predicated money as the main topic of conversation that evening. Members shared individual visions of what the house might look like based on how much money we could raise. Perhaps it would be a small family home, or an abandoned school, maybe it could be an entire city block of houses. Imagining was

fun however committee member Geoffrey reminded us that we were moving too fast in this discussion and that we should focus on concrete issues to place the plan in action.

We dedicated the remainder of the meeting to deciding whether we should approach people in the community by asking them for a one-time commitment fee of \$300-\$500, or ask people to commit to monthly payments of \$100. The idea behind this was that if we could get approximately 200 people to commit to monthly payments for one year we could raise the funds to buy *something*. We also discussed options for how donors would be honored, some suggesting engraving their names on the walkway into the house while others discussed a wall of plaques in the house. Finally, the President of the Committee thanked everyone for their ideas and called the meeting to a close.

UACO meeting September 2012

Sometimes it's hard for our people to be together

~UAA Chairmain for the African Community House project

Abdoulaye spoke these words in the midst of a heated, emotional moment during a UAA committee meeting at the end of September 2012. The meeting, scheduled to begin at 6pm, began at 7:15 with a Christian prayer by Pastor Amina. The opening address was given by Chief Ogwu, born in Nigeria:

Our objective today is to talk about the African House. We have been working hard to make this a reality and with your help we can make it happen. We have demonstrated over the last ten years that we can come together as a community. Now it is up to the Presidents of African Organizations to reach out to all of their people. This is a big umbrella – an African House. We will have complete transparency when it comes to raising funds for this house.

Abdoulaye shared Ogwu's sentiment:

Why do we need an African House? It's our time to make a change and we can do it. It's our time to make an African town and we can do it. It's time to stop talking and to start doing. This is for our children.

Queen Mother backed him up:

It's embarrassing when Queen Mothers come to visit and we have no house to host them in. Instead we bring them here, to this dirty office that is falling apart...my goodness, there isn't even any toilet paper in the bathroom. We can do better than this! Marcus Garvey said this eighty years ago, "Where is my Africa?" It's time to do something positive for our community.

These opening quotes reflect a general sentiment shared by several UAA members, one that rested on addressing problems associated with the mismanagement of money. The purpose of this meeting was for African House committee members to inform UAA members of our progress, to share our particular duties and responsibilities, and to plan the fundraising meeting for November.

I served as a grant writer for the committee. My duties were to seek funding for and to curate what would be the African House Cultural Center's first museum exhibition. The idea for this exhibition was to confront the issue of representation through showcasing geographies of transnational closets of African Diaspora communities in Michigan. The goal was to collaborate with participants, giving them a more active role in representing themselves instead of me interpreting what they said and representing them solely through my lens. In alignment with the vision for the African House, this project would connect African families and build community through focusing on a topic that would at once emphasize both the unity and diversity within African immigrant communities in the United States.

Our Second African House Planning Meeting, October 2012

The Committee for the African House met for a second time at the end of October 2012. We recognized that the first meeting was inspirational however the focus on discussing finances overshadowed the need for addressing important foundational issues. This meeting's agenda was to discuss tactics for cultivating a united front philosophy in collaborating with the diverse African community in Detroit for further developing, implementing, and building the African House, defining the house, and coming up with a vision for the house. The house we defined as: a community center in Detroit that will help in bringing all Africans and people of African descent together across cultural boundaries and bridges. The vision for the center included academic enrichment programs for youth of all ages, office space for all local African Organizations, a day care center for children, a reception rental hall, a museum, immigration services, legal assistance, substance abuse services, community health services, promotion of African business and tourism, a networking community center, and an embassy and information center. The "house" was about building community and melding African diaspora families in the Detroit landscape. All committee members agreed that it was crucial to create this house for four equally important reasons.

First this was for the children. Elder members agreed that most of their children will not reside permanently in Africa but feel strongly about their children still being connected to Africans and Africa – to understand the value embedded in family, respect, and tradition. It was essential, according to UAA elder members, that their children understand their heritage, and the moral underpinnings of the ways in which their parents raised them. During our meeting Mariama, a Senegalese UAA member, said,

This is a story about African parents and their kids. We still need our roots implanted. That's the only reason why I came to the United States; it was the only place in the world where I knew I could still feel myself while raising my children –as a Senegalese

women – I knew I would have the freedom to raise my kids as Senegalese in America...
If you go one by one to a battle you will be dead – you need to come together.

Mariama was suggesting that the only way to make this happen is for members of African Diaspora communities in Michigan to “come together”, for the sake of their children, to create a safe, nurturing, and resourceful space where they feel free and proud to live and celebrate their identity.

This sentiment fed directly into the second reason why the house was crucial for the African community at large. It was necessary for Africans to have the opportunity to represent themselves as a cohesive family, having the resources to help themselves, and in doing so instilling a measure of pride for their children and for themselves in a city where they often felt alienated and misrepresented. The vision was to educate, on a mainstream society level, about Africa and Africans. During the meeting the President of UAA stated, “It’s time to represent ourselves versus how the news media in this country represents Africa. This causes distress for Africans. There used to be a 5 minute time slot for Africans on the local news on Friday nights, featuring the diversity of Africans living in Detroit. Why not anymore? Why is the media not coming to UAA? We must make this change.” He said further, “This is about putting our political and social differences aside and working together. The problem is that UAA has been talking about the house for years – and it is precisely this divisiveness that has prevented the idea from moving forward.” That was why the draft of the mission for the house states, “The African Cultural House will bring all Africans and people of African descent together across cultural boundaries and bridges between communities.” The President said in this diasporic context “African” becomes very symbolic to us. It at once stands for diversity - in political, economic, and social history, and in beliefs and practices as they relate to daily life – *and* similarity through

the commonality of being from Africa, and being “African” in the United States. The Chairman responded with, “Nobody is gonna show ourselves if we can’t show ourselves. Who do you want to tell them the truth?” Another member spoke emotionally about negative images of Africa, citing the film *Hotel Rwanda* – he said, “Look at the film *Hotel Rwanda*, which will cast us forever in a particular mindset. It is good to be here together. Together we can make Africans human.”

Finally, committee members wanted the house to be the “come to place” when African immigrants arrive in Michigan. During one of our committee meetings, Amina, born in Sierra Leone and living in Detroit for twenty years now said, “We need a place to help African newcomers learn about how to look for a place to live, how to create resumes to apply for jobs, how to choose neighborhoods where their children can go to good schools, where to go to buy food to feed their families. We need a place to welcome them.” These four goals served as a common, agreed upon inspiration to catapult the vision to the next level.

This resolve did not mean that past hurdles had been overcome. Abdoulaye spoke openly during the committee meeting about the challenges facing unity within the larger African community in Michigan; the lack of trust between Africans from different countries, the lack of trust between Africans hailing from the same countries. It was one thing when UAA members, from Nigeria, Senegal, Côte d’Ivoire, Niger, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Guinea, Ghana, Tanzania, Kenya, who regularly attended committee meetings discussed and debated different ideas in an open setting, a setting which framed all Africans living in Michigan as part of a big family. It was another thing when conversations taking place outside of the public forum became candid and accusatory about others, according to Abdoulaye and several other UAA members.

Raising and managing money again became a key issue of concern during the meeting. Similar to the problems associated with fundraising at picnics, the discussions about money generated comments about a lack of trust and transparency when it came to fundraising and the UAA bank account. One member spoke blatantly saying, “We Africans cannot trust one another when it comes to money.” Everyone laughed and agreed. The treasurer of the African House Committee created a bank account specifically for the house and shared the bank paperwork with all of us that evening. The next step was to hold a meeting, open to everyone in the community, to start raising funds.

Fundraising meeting November 2012

Presidents of many African Organizations in Michigan were invited by African House Committee members as were all UAA members along with other community members who might be interested in donating to the African House. UAA sent invitations to many African community leaders, friends, families, and organizations. Queen Mother, Pastor Amina, and Secretary General Mrs. Keino prepared large amounts of food to be served at the event which took place at UAA headquarters. The Executive Director and other organization leaders brought beverages. The meeting, scheduled for 6:00 pm began at 7:00. Thirty people were in attendance, almost three times the amount of members who typically attend UAA meetings. Another distinct difference about this meeting was that almost everyone was dressed up. For example Abdoulaye, the African House Chair wore an expansive turquoise colored and embroidered *bazin riche* boubou. Bamidele was wearing an intricately laced ivory boubou and a white cap on his head. Pastor Amina, in pink *bazin riche*, wore a tight fitting long-sleeved shirt embroidered with circular yellow machine embroidery and a long skirt with a border of yellow embroidery on the

bottom and the side. She was adorned with an abundance of clanging and colorful jewelry around her wrists, a thick gold necklace, and large round gold ear rings, and pink high heels to top the outfit off. Mrs. Keino even dressed in *bazin riche* for the occasion, wearing a light blue boubou with matching head wrap both decorated with magenta embroidery. Eight additional male attendees were wearing boobos made of *bazin riche* in hues of blue, brown, black, and white. All other males were dressed either in suits and button down shirts, or in solid colored pants and button down shirts. The clothing people chose for this meeting indexed that this was an important night for the organization.⁹⁰

Queen Mother opened the meeting with a prayer, thanking God for allowing us all to be together as one big family that night. She also thanked God for our health and our common desire to create something that keeps us unified – our children. Finally, she thanked God for the food we would all be sharing after the meeting. The Executive Director echoed Queen Mother's prayers and then the Chairman of the House gave an animated an emotional speech eliciting emotional responses.

The pledging began with individuals standing up, sharing opinions and speeches about how much the center will mean to the community and to their children. The first person to pledge was Bamidele, Executive Director of UAA, who promised a \$2000 contribution to the African House Project. He wrote a check for \$1000, placed it in a basket, and passed the basket to Chief Ogwu, who sat beside him. Chief Ogwu gave a similar speech, pledged \$1000, wrote a check for \$100, and placed it in the basket. Their enthusiasm and commitment triggered a climate of obligation for others around the room and therefore each person thereafter, when it was their turn, stood up to profess their commitment to the cause along with their financial pledge. Some

⁹⁰ Twenty five attendees were male and five were female.

members pledged several thousand dollars which prompted great applause from the audience. Two people refused to pledge a donation, claiming that while they were committed to participating in the project they did not have the financial means at the time to make any monetary contributions. As the only person present who was born in the United States, and because I had been asked to be on the committee, I felt obliged to pledge, committing what I could afford as a graduate student. In total we raised \$11,600.00 in pledges that night (Fig. 21).

The importance of this event was expressed through performing representational kinship. On one hand each person present had the opportunity to stand up and share why the African House was important to them, to other Africans in the community, and to everyone's children.⁹¹ Each person in this public forum however was also obliged to participate in the family narrative. To not stand up and say something would send a strong message to the others. The high spirit and infectious energy generated greater expectations of commitment and almost everyone pledged with the understanding that future funding was contingent upon action and evidence.

UAA December 2012 meeting

News about the successful fundraising meeting for the African House spread in the community and our December 2012 UAA meeting welcomed many additional members whom had not attended monthly meetings in quite some time. These members came with questions about the African House. Ufan and Abdoulaye passed out written information about the proposed house and also shared the roles of committee members with the group. Some elder members, four men in particular, expressed concern that two committee members (myself being one of them) had

⁹¹ I did not write notes at this event due to the energy circulating in the room. Speakers were passionate about what they were saying and audience members listened intently.

been UAA members for less than two years and questioned whether or not we should be allowed to serve on the committee and especially to handle the money. Pastor Amina, treasurer for the African House and UAA member for one year, argued in our defense. She said, “With all due respect gentlemen we do deserve to work on this committee because we are the ones who are committed. We are the ones who attend every UAA meeting and Africa House committee meeting.” The Chairman of the committee, slightly irritated and angry by this, told them we were committed and sincerely invested in the project. He shared with them the bank documents for the African House to prove Amina was excelling in her role as treasurer. They examined the documents, confirming this process was transparent and acceptable. The Chairman then explained to them that I had applied for a grant for the house’s museum. Three of the men said they did not want money from outside institutions because they refused for anyone to tell them how to spend the money. I was asked about the grant’s worth and told them it was for \$8,000. One member blurted out, “What, you got us here for \$8000? That’s a joke.” Another said, “Okay we’ll take that money for a down payment on a house.” I then reminded everyone that I was *applying* for the grant, *not receiving* the grant.

The meeting continued with the four elder members maintaining dispositions of distrust with new members and longstanding UAA members. The climate went from uncomfortable to hostile and the discussions about stealing, dishonesty, disunity, and longstanding rivalries turned into shouting matches between members. Finally the Director called the meeting to a close and asked everyone to return to next month’s meeting with renewed attitudes.⁹²

⁹² At the end of the meeting a UAA member pulled me aside and told me that if UAA did not want the grant money he knew of another organization that would be happy to have it. I subsequently decided to withdraw my grant application for fear of having my professionalism compromised believing, based on these experiences, that the existing factionalism in UAA would not be resolved for some time.

Emergency Meeting, Abduls house, February 2013

On February 21, 2013 at 1:33 am UAA members received the following email with the word “URGENT” in the subject line:

Dear all African Leaders and Board Members of UAA,
It is with great pleasure that I extend this invitation to join me and my leadership team on this Critical meeting that was long overdue. First, I would like to thank you for your support and the commitment you have shown and continue to show in rebuilding our African community in general. When I took office sometimes in Ma last year, my goal and mission were to have this organization to be a strong force that will deeply root wisdom and dignity to unite all African Organizations under one umbrella. Also to emerge and be dedicated to sensitizing all African communities on social, political and economic integration for our communities here and back home. I also recognize the great power that we have when united as one with greatness and indestructible unity that is founded in Hope, Trust, Friendship and directed to the good of all mankind.

The objectives of this meeting are:

1. To establish a good communication among all African leaders of different organizations by consolidating and strengthening our relationship in the effort of building our communities on a common vision of a united, strong and prosperous Africa.
2. Review the Constitution based on integrity and consider whether its structural organization meets the challenging of the present time and the progress of UAA.
3. Review the financial statements, banking information, members information, profit and loss statement, office rental agreement, receipts and monthly banking deposits for the last 4 years possessed by the previous administration. This includes all copies of grant writing with signatures of the person who wrote the grant and if was constitutional with the organization By-laws.⁹³

What followed in the email was a list of nineteen names under the heading “This meeting consists of the following board members.” Ufan had chosen those whom he had expected to attend this meeting in his email that was sent out during the early hours of Thursday, February

⁹³ Grammatical errors were left purposefully so as to convey, through word usage and choice, what the President’s agenda was for the emergency meeting.

21, one day before the scheduled meeting. Our presence was requested at 7:00pm sharp. UAA member Abdul offered his home for the meeting, providing food and beverages.

Friday night was one of those cold, dark, Michigan wintery nights when the roads were slick with ice. Amadou, the President of the Nigerien Association of Michigan, and I arrived at the same time and we walked in together. We were welcomed by Abdul's wife at the door and she escorted us to the large furnished basement that was set up with extra tables and chairs. Several members, including Bamidele, Pastor Amina, and Mrs. Keino were already present. Everyone was dressed in their work clothes. Amadou worked for Ford in the car leasing department and was dressed in his uniform. Ufan wore his Burger King uniform with a sweatshirt over it. Bamidele was in a casual workout suit. Pastor Amina was in jeans and a black sweater. Mrs. Keino, exhausted because her daughter had recently given birth and she was a new grandmother, wore jeans and a white cotton sweater. She showed me pictures of the newborn baby as we waited for everyone to arrive.

Everyone arrived by 8:00pm. Nineteen people were present, Ufan and eighteen of the invitees.⁹⁴ Several attendees brought their children who played together upstairs in the family room during the meeting. Seven men were UAA members who had not attended meetings for quite some time and two men had never attended UAA meetings.⁹⁵ Pastor Amina gave the welcoming prayer saying, "Dear Lord, guide our tongues and give us respect for one another. Let's be progressive, not digressive tonight." Ufan then thanked everyone for being there on such short notice, expressed gratitude to Abdul for hosting the meeting and providing us with food

⁹⁴ Sixteen attendees were male, and three were women including myself, Mrs. Keino, and Pastor Amina.

⁹⁵ Some claimed to have not attended meeting for a couple of years while two in particular were members of Nigerian Associations who refused to participate in UAA because of conflicts associated with the transition of UAA sponsoring and planning the African Picnic.

and drink, and echoed Pastor Amina's wish for attendees to engage in productive dialogue as he emphasized that were all present because we shared the same goal of unity. He encouraged us to ask ourselves, "What is this organization doing for me? What am I doing for this organization?" He shared a story about how a local non-profit organization serving African refugees generated \$36,000 in funding in two weeks so that two young boys from Sierra Leone who were murdered in Detroit could be sent back to their families for a proper burial. He asked, "Why can't UAA do something like this?" He suggested that historically UAA talked more than instituting action.

Pastor Amina contributed to his thoughts by saying:

Charity begins at home before it goes abroad. UAA needs strong leadership – once that foundation is laid – even if UAA has less money than other organizations – it would have more to feed the children. Business is business. We need strong leadership. When you do that you become a role model. There are a lot of people who do not like to come to meetings because we do not stick to the agenda. We have to stick to the agenda. We cannot reach out when we've got dirt that we've gotta clean up. We've got to do this by following UAAs by-laws.

Bany, UAA's 2013 Picnic Chairman and President of the Gambian Association of Michigan responded to Amina's comment by stating that while UAA has problems, it also has "shimmering moments" and that UAA "has the right people in the right places." He claimed that members who show up sporadically to "shove their feet up our ass" because they criticize our activities and plans without full acknowledgement of the extensive time and energy dedicated members devote to fostering and implementing our ideas. He beseeched all present attendees to engage in this issue with transparency:

I have a mountain sitting on my head right now. There is a Gambian woman who is pregnant. Her husband got deported. She has no money and nowhere to stay. What am I going to do? The only time people come to us is when there is a problem. UAA and the Gambian Association of Michigan share a common problem: A & B come to a meeting today while C & D will show up next time. We must be leaders. We Africans talk too much. Nobody has time in America. We are not here because we have extra time.

Many heads nodded in agreement. We moved to the next issue on the agenda to discuss strategies to increase UAA membership and meeting attendance. Suggestions included: conference call meetings as an alternative to members having to UAA headquarters, for UAA's President to engage more actively with National African Associations in Michigan, and that only individuals who are dedicated and lead with trust and integrity should be allowed to hold and maintain leadership positions in UAA. Abdoulaye, African House Committee Chairman, emphasized the importance of good leadership as positive influence on our children's lives. Holding his hand to the basement ceiling he said, "Our kids are growing. They are upstairs making noise. We need to be there for them, need to show them how to become happy, successful adults." The children played and made noise above while the positivity surrounding our discussion about unity transformed abruptly as we addressed the meeting's third agenda, UAA's finances.

Ufan opened his briefcase and pulled out copies of UAA's revenue and expense statements over the past four years, claiming that there is an approximate \$23,000 discrepancy due to, according to him, total mismanagement of funds by UAA's previous treasurer, the only invitee who did not show up for the meeting. The room was silent as Ufan turned to Bamidele, requesting a response to these findings as the organization's Director. "I am not the treasurer. I don't sign checks," said Bamidele which solicited numerous negative responses by meeting attendees. Ufan then asked Bamidele, "How about the funding UAA received for helping substance abusers in African immigrant communities? What happened to that? Everything in this grant is lies." Bamidele defended himself:

I wrote it and UAA got it. You are putting my organization as lying? Yes, I used some of the funds for UAA's rent – I admit it. We have to do what we have to do. I have given \$100 of my own for the last three months in order to pay the rent. Whatever I have to do is in the interest of this organization. I want to make clear right now that I am not the treasurer.

Bamidele's statement solicited several strong reactions. Many men were shouting at him arguing that as Director he should have been aware of all UAA expenses and revenues.

Everyone wanted to know why the treasurer was not present, interpreting his absence as an act of admitting guilt. When Bamidele said he was unaware of why the treasurer was not present for the meeting he was accused of defending the treasurer. He maintained that he was defending the organization, not the treasurer. An angry former UAA member, Swako, extended strong words to Bamidele:

As one of the founding members of UAA, I have seen some of those things over the years. There have been a lot of discrepancies. Speak in the name of God. If you're not capable of running this organization then get out. I left, but I've come back, and I'm staying!

Swako was so enraged he stood up and lunged himself towards Bamidele, trying to punch him. Several men jumped in and held him back. Ufan called for peace in the room, pleading with everyone to calm down however the verbal fighting continued for two hours. Finally, Abdoulaye spoke the words that shifted the conversation to a potential resolution, "Bamidele has to accept the blame and we need to move on. Bamidele, you are the leader and the treasurer is accountable to you. Three quarters of the people in this room are against you." The Director, again, claimed that the only mistake he made was to pay the rent with funds from the substance abuse grant.

Three motions were voted on over the next two hours. In the first motion the President would write a letter to the treasurer giving him thirty days to provide receipts and all missing financial documents from 2006 – present. For the second motion, five UAA members were appointed to audit UAA and produce a report within sixty days. Bamidele, calling this motion a “witchhunt” requested to be on this committee. No one agreed and his request was not honored. The third motion was to review and amend any outdated UAA by-laws. The motions were passed yet the heated conversations continued. It was 1:00am.

I had to leave. Amadou and I both walked out quietly at the same time. We talked for a few minutes in the cold, both expressing our disappointment with UAA’s constant problems. Amadou had been a loyal UAA member for three years, attending all monthly meetings in addition to serving as the President of the Nigerien Association of Michigan. He believed that Bamidele was a strong leader however had become tired of dedicating his time to UAA when meetings were so consistently ineffective and poorly run. It was 1:15 am Saturday and he had been awake since 5:30 am Friday. He stood there, still in his Ford uniform, explaining that he had not seen his wife and children since the day before. He was dedicated, but frustrated and very tired.

July 4th 2013

We began to plan next year’s picnic in March 2013. While issues associated with the previously approved motions had not been resolved the dust had settled and it was time to start planning another picnic. I had earned most UAA member’s respect through my consistent participation at UAA General Meetings and picnic planning meetings along with African House committee meetings. I attended all African picnic monthly planning meetings from March until May,

weekly during June and meetings held during the first few days of July. I had decided that I would not commit to fundraising at the gate this year, that is until the organization's treasurer, Pastor Amina, approached me on July 3 and said, "We need your help tomorrow at the gate. You are one of the only people we trust to do this." I reluctantly agreed to work the front gate from 9:00am – 3:00pm however I explained to members it was important that I had the opportunity to observe and experience the unity of Africans on this big day. Also, I wanted to spend time with the many individuals I had become friends with over the past two years.

I arrived at 9:00 am in a pair of lightweight jeans, a pink cotton button down, capped short sleeve shirt, and comfortable brown sandal wedges. Pastor Amina was out there already asking for donations, dressed in jeans, a pastel colored floral short sleeved shirt, and six inch pink high heels, and a long blond wig wrapped in a high pony tail. She hugged me, said "Thanks to God" and we started. She said she didn't care how long she had to stand out there. She was determined to break records that day and raise as much money as possible.⁹⁶ I reminded her that I was leaving at 3:00pm. I was not going to miss another African picnic – there were a lot of people I promised to visit and my fieldwork was coming to an end.

Amina and I worked well together that day. We would hold our hands up to cars driving in to the lot, partially waving and beckoning them to stop. With cheery demeanor we would say, "Hello! Welcome to the African picnic. How are you today?" We'd wait for a response and smiling would go on to say, "UAA is asking for a \$1 donation per car today." As with the year before most people were happy to donate \$1 while others said they didn't have any cash on them or that their organizations had already paid their fees to participate. One driver, the angriest I

⁹⁶ Amina told me that UAA's accounting book from last year reported that Miss Ellen and I had earned only \$337 on July 4. She was convinced that someone was stealing money and believed that what we raised that day in comparison would serve as evidence of such.

encountered yelled, “This is bullshit! Tell your leaders to stop pulling this shit. We are tired of giving you our money. What are you doing for the community?” I tried to talk about the plans for the African House but she skid away before I finished my sentence. Some drivers tried to get away and drive by us quickly which did not fare well with Amina. She was not afraid to chase them down by standing in front of the cars so they couldn’t get by her. She’d then shame them for ignoring her and more often than not was successful in retrieving a donation. A few drivers, most notably many of whom were driving expensive cars and SUVs, ignored us completely. This made Amina so mad and she would scream, “The rich ones are the cheapest. I hope you are proud of yourself”, and then we she and I would laugh. We had fun that day. I left at 3:00pm as promised. Fortunately UAA members Moses and Banny, both in white bazin riche boubous, came to assist Amina until 4:00pm however she continued to work until 6:00pm.⁹⁷

Seventeen African national organizations participated in the 2014 July 4th picnic, each one attracting hundreds of visitors.⁹⁸ On a collective scale this yearly event serves as a massive display of unity with dress as an important factor. For example, garments made in bazin riche, wax print, laced cotton, and national soccer shirts are prominent and can be seen on bodies

⁹⁷ Typically by 4:00pm the parking lot is full and attendees must seek parking on the street. Safety also becomes an issue because there are thousands of people at the park by this time of day. At 6:05pm to Amina phoned me asking, “Hey honey, where are you? I need someone to count this money with me. I can’t do it by myself. I need a witness. You can find me in my friend’s car under the tree at the park’s entrance. I’ve got the buckets in the car.” I said goodbye to my friends from the Nigerien Association of Michigan and walked to the front of the park where Amina and I spent ninety minutes counting the money. First we arranged the dollars, placing twenty, ten, five, and one dollar bills in piles. Then we dealt with the piles of change in the buckets employing the same organizing strategy. Together we counted \$2,132.28. Amina was screaming incessantly with happiness. Her goal was that we would hit the \$2000 mark and we succeeded in doing so. She also had the proof she was hoping for.

⁹⁸ These were: Nigerian Foundation, Uganda Community, Ghana Association, Gambian Association, United Beninese of Michigan, Malian Association of Michigan, Sierra Leone Association of Michigan, Senegalese Association of Michigan, Cameroon Association, Guinea Association, Ivory Coast Association, Zimbabwe Together, Malawi Association, Tanzania Association, Nigerien Association of Michigan, and Liberian Association.

across the park.⁹⁹ As observed during the prior picnic most married individuals were dressed up, as were many of their children. Most young adults were dressed in shorts or pants and in tank tops or short sleeves. UAA elders considered this type of dress provocative and inappropriate for the picnic. I spent the majority of my time at the picnic under UAA's tent and the Nigerien Association of Michigan's tent, and walking around.

UAA's tent was strategically set up in the middle of the park. As the official sponsor of the picnic, July 4th is an extremely important day for UAA to promote itself to potential members. Anyone attending the picnic is free to, and encouraged to visit UAA's tent; to meet UAA leaders, to learn more about the organization, or to enjoy food and beverage. UAA members expressed their solidarity through presentations of dress. In this context many members chose to wear clothing that either represented their individual national heritage *or* represented similarities in aesthetics cross culturally (clothing made with bazin riche for example). Still, others opted to wear non-African clothing. Collectively, regardless of style choice, UAA members displayed themselves as unified through a collective modesty. Members who don't typically get along during meetings were laughing and dancing together throughout the day.

The atmosphere was somber under both the Nigerien Association of Michigan's and the Guinean Association of Michigan's tents.¹⁰⁰ Amadou Laowan, the organization's President had recently passed away and friends and family were still grieving his death. Amadou's older sister from Niger sat dressed in a slate blue cotton and lace skirt and shirt with matching head wrapper.

⁹⁹ There are so many people whom attend the picnic and describing with words the wide array of similar types of clothing worn in solidarity (along with the diverse palettes of vibrant color) cannot effectively explain the experience of being there observing and participating.

¹⁰⁰ Several members from both groups maintain close friendships with one another and attend events planned by both organizations.

She brought some similar outfits with her from Niger and was selling them at the corner table. Most of the men were dressed in bazin riche or soccer shirts and most women wore either bazin riche or cotton and lace shirts and skirts.¹⁰¹ Many of us sat together for hours that afternoon, watching Amadou's children play without engaging in much conversation. Amadou was a well loved and respected man and his death and family and friends were shocked by his death.

The stage music got louder as the sun began to set. Amara (one of UAAs youngest members) dressed in cut-off jean shorts and a tank top addressed the crowd before a new DJ came on the stage, encouraging everyone to vote for a local democratic candidate in an upcoming election. This did not fare well with elders who were standing on the periphery of the large grass dance floor however young adult males and females, who had taken over the dance floor screamed approval in unison. The DJ began playing music as many young adults began to dance. Several young women, clad in tight fitting clothing, and men, many of which wore tank tops and saggy shorts or pants, took over the stage and also danced. The evening's final performance of dance, music, and rap was markedly different from Hussane Boukary's live musical performance last year.

This incident was met with great disappointment by members who attended the picnic committee debriefing meeting on July 19, 2014. Members expressed dismay over the manner by which young adults took over the stage, the music and the dancing.¹⁰² Ufan stated emphatically:

We spent so much on that stage. It made me sick. Did you see grown-ups attracted to that stage? Did you see all of the baggy pants and tight clothing? Did you hear all of the swearing? Did you see how they were dancing? It was ridiculous. Where were we?

¹⁰¹ These observations were based on large quantities of people coming in and out of the tent.

¹⁰² The hired DJ was expected to play genres of African music for the event and while he did at the beginning he later played cross-cultural samples of pop and rap music.

We did great as far as everything else concerning the picnic but we need to talk so much about this. We can't let this happen again.

Members agreed that this unacceptable scene was not representative of UAA's vision of African unity – it was embarrassing for the elders to witness it as it was shameful for young adults to behave this way in front of elders and young children. Advocating for a political candidate is against non-profit laws, and members shared deep concern that a young woman told thousands of young adults to vote for a particular candidate. UAA did not have any political affiliations with that particular candidate. In fact, one of UAA's members was running against this candidate. This was a complete embarrassment for UAA members. Queen Mother, UAA's Cultural Officer became emotional and extremely upset:

I have been with UAA since the beginning. I was disappointed when five youth came up to me and said that the elders are not doing a good job and that we are not doing a good job of leading UAA. What is happening? [Crying] And then Amara encouraging people to vote for a politician who voted against an African Town in Detroit. I'm fed up and ready to walk out that door. My people who I represent in my community should know who they are voting for.

Many people in the community, according to Queen Mother, were very upset. Ufan agreed and also added that these issues created great problems for UAA members and ultimately for younger generations and children. Before adjourning the meeting he said, "Our continent is going down and we have to rise above,¹⁰³" calling for UAA's vision and mission to be revisited as the topic of the next monthly meeting.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰³ This comment was made in a metaphorical sense referring to UAA.

¹⁰⁴ This was the last UAA meeting I attended as my fieldwork came to a close in July 2013. I am still on the UAA email list and receive notifications of UAA monthly meetings. It appears, through the content shared in email messages, that members are attempting to solidify the core mission and vision of UAA before embarking once again on the hope to build an African House in Detroit.

Synthesis

This chapter provides evidence for why wearing certain types of clothing to social events is an important way to display family. UAA members who served on the African Picnic committee and the African House committee paid attention to key events where what they wore mattered, specifically in contexts where how they represented themselves reflected the mission and vision of UAA, in the hopes of gaining membership and funding opportunities. In other words, UAA members knew when it was important to dress up. On the other hand, devoted members also spent significant amounts of time preparing for important social events such as the picnic along with meetings and a fundraiser for the African House. In these settings members were less concerned with how their clothing identified or represented themselves, and focused predominately on their adherence to a unified vision for creating and establishing an African family under the guises of UAA's mission and vision – through the eventual permutation of a concrete place, a house. I suggest that these acts were profoundly representational yet practical. Showing up to meetings in clothing worn to work all day, and being present for hours on Friday evenings after working all week indicated that members were more concerned with contextualizing, confirming, and instituting overarching goals – working through UAA's historical conflictions concerning money and core ideologies - to transform the idea, the dream, of an African House where they would someday live in a space of self-representation and well-being, primarily for their children.

UAA members participate in pursuing the goals of the organization because they want to be there, even if that means they are sacrificing time away from immediate family and work, because as expressed in Max's introductory quote, "We're all we've got." Their concern rides especially in transferring knowledge regarding subtleties of morality, honor, respect, and

understanding of what it means to be African to their children while at the same time recognizing it is not easy for their kids to embrace their African heritage in a place where they feel marginalized and pressured to conform. Many members feel that they have failed in this quest, as expressed by Queen Mother about the ways in which younger generations dressed and behaved at the African picnic.

Conclusion

I have argued in this dissertation that the use and wear of *bazin riche*, a prominent textile cherished for its social relevance in West Africa and in the Diaspora, has a unique trans-national trajectory that augments its symbolic value when worn on bodies to social events in West African cities and in Michigan. The particular history of how this textile comes to life - through initial manufacture in Europe, finishing processes such as dyeing and beating with wax (mostly in Dakar and Bamako), hierarchies of display in selling (specifically in Dakar based on fieldwork), and sewing it into a wearable garment, transform it to an African textile (Heath 1992). The understanding of the processes by which this textile comes to life on the body – through the intentions of both the artists who create it and the people who wear it (Gell 1998; Schneider 2006:4) - is embraced by many members of African Diaspora communities, even some who cannot afford it, in Michigan through embodied experiences of participating in family and social events. Themes of money and clothing, articulated further, highlight important social, economic, and gender distinctions.

Knowledge and access to the social import vested in this textile solicited connections that are at once symbolic of social wealth but also entail obligations to participate in local social events by wearing outfits made of *bazin riche*, spending time at the events, and giving gifts – all potential investments in securing ongoing social support systems in the African Diaspora communities . Attending social events such as *La Nuit du Bazin* forges opportunities for Africans in Michigan to experience a sense of unity, and to celebrate similar life experiences

living in the diaspora. Ethnographic examples drawn from participant observation and interviews at hair salons, non-profit fundraisers, and a funeral provide evidence to suggest that there are formalized representations of family unity embodied through dress at public events *and* during meetings planning those events. On the other hand, practical realities about the difficulties maintaining visions of one big African family, and communicating with individuals whom do not get along, were overridden with eventual collaboration because of shared desires to maintain proper representations of African family to the groups at large. Also, the fear of loneliness overpowers personal difference in favor for shared senses of belonging in a community where many Africans feel isolated.

Private conversations about the contents of women's closets, particularly regarding clothing made of *bazin riche*, reveal more details about desires to maintain, or the obstacles in attaining a representational family in the diaspora because of a lack of wealth in cloth and money. Acknowledgement of this relevance however rests heavily upon whether African women living in Michigan have access to this cloth through extended kin networks abroad, and by extension financial and social wealth to revive and maintain kin relations in the diaspora. Some women claim to disqualify its social significance because they argue that consuming large quantities of cloth is wasteful and money can be better spent for on their children. The discrepancies in these opinions however reflect particular positionalities of independence and abilities to promote and maintain social networks through participating in practices that require accumulation of cloth wealth do not have financial resources to pay for it. Women, on the other hand, who do not possess a significant amount of clothing or financial wealth, have more or less very little support when it comes to working and taking care of their children, and rarely attend Africa related events.

Narratives of unity in public and talk of disunity in certain public (the emergency meeting at Abdul's house for example) and private settings (car rides and phone calls) highlight the complicated issues that arise in institutionalized settings such as the UAA where members come from diverse individual, social, political, historical, and linguistic backgrounds in Africa. Despite disagreements about money, about the history of the organization, or about whether or not a vase of flowers should be displayed on the welcome table at a fundraiser, devoted members continue to be present at all UAA monthly meetings.¹⁰⁵ Unity and investment in self and group representation is expressed through clothing at events like the fundraiser for the African House, other fundraising events for national organizations, the funeral, the Passport to Africa event, the African picnic, and even at meetings when most members *were not* dressed up. UAA members are willing to fight, and do their best to work together to pursue their collective goal of creating a special day for thousands of Africans in the Midwestern United States and making the imagination of a home into a reality. This commitment is shared and expressed on a more intimate level by members' deep concerns about the well-being of their children in the diaspora setting of metropolitan Detroit. The way many of the youth dressed for the picnic, for example, caused alarm to UAA members, who felt the young adults were taking over their vision of the African picnic and misrepresenting the African family they have been working so hard to maintain. Likewise, the young adults, through their active choice of dress were also making important statements about their own struggles with representing themselves, and how their parents and elders represent themselves.

¹⁰⁵ It should be noted here also that UAA members on the picnic planning committee and the African House planning committee also loyally attend those meetings.

Inquiry into the use and wear of how people define, engage with, and embody *bazin riche* in Dakar, and in the African diasporic setting of Michigan highlights important ways in which members of the African Diaspora in Michigan negotiate representation and family, creating fertile ground for a series of new research quests and questions that will assist in understanding more about connections between clothing, representation, and family. One important topic is to consider the opinions of young African adults who have chosen to change their African names, change the way they dress to Africa-related events, and who struggle with pleasing their parents yet disassociate themselves with their African heritage because they feel misunderstood by the majority of the people they engage with on a daily basis. This leads to another important issue; that of existing social, political, and economic divides between members of African and African-American communities in a city like Detroit. How does engagement with clothing and outward representations of self reflect the ways in which others interpret these acts? Finally, further research is warranted concerning the ways in which wealth is maintained through transnational connections and access to “new” modes of clothing, particularly from Dubai, as it seems that , with all style trends *bazin riche* will fade and something new will become the preferred textile to wear to important social events. These questions are key foundations to begin further understandings of narratives and embodiments of unity and disunity - through engagements with clothing - in African Diaspora communities in Detroit.

Figures

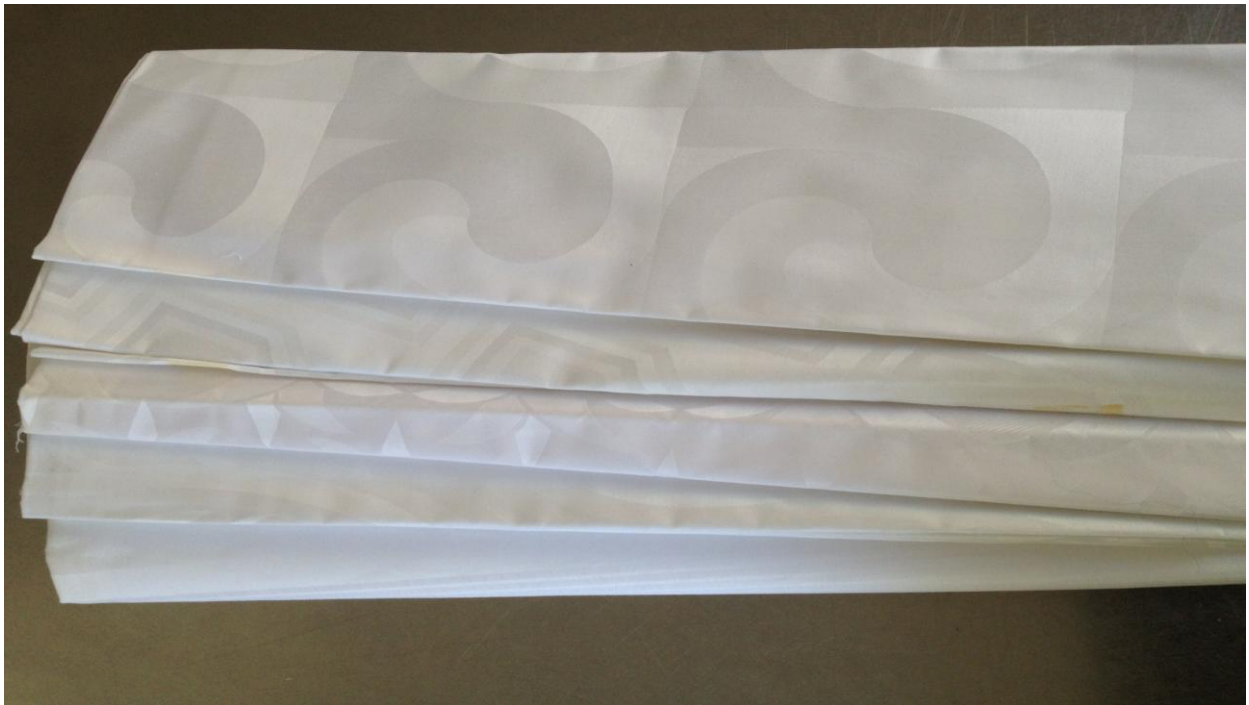


Figure 1 Plain white *bazin riche*



Figure 2 Gagny Lah *bazin riche*



Figure 3 Mali *thiop*



Figure 4 *Bazin riche* for sale in glass cabinets at Sandaga Market, Dakar



Figure 5 Front cover of Lifa magazine, published in Dakar, sold and circulated across West Africa



Figure 6 mariniere embroidered with small pin hole embroidery



Figure 7 La Nuit du Bazin 2008, Dakar

This spread was featured in *Lifa* magazine during September 2009 to advertise the event for the following month.



Figure 8 Close up of gift giving image featured on top of the previous right page. The performer, Djibi Dramé, in his expansive *Mali thiop boubou* can be seen on the left while audience members wait in line to share their gifts of money with him. Also, notice the helper who is collecting the overflows of money that fall to the ground.



Figure 9 Fashion show models at the Nigerien Association of Michigan's fundraising event



Figure 10 Fatou's closet



Figure 11 Embroidered and embellished bodice of *bazin riche mariniere*



Figure 12 Pleated cap sleeve with embroidered arm band



Figure 13 Embroidered back bodice of *bazin riche mariniere*



Figure 14 Embroidered and embellished front bodice of *bazin riche mariniere*



Figure 15 Embroidered and embellished princess seam *bazin riche pagne*

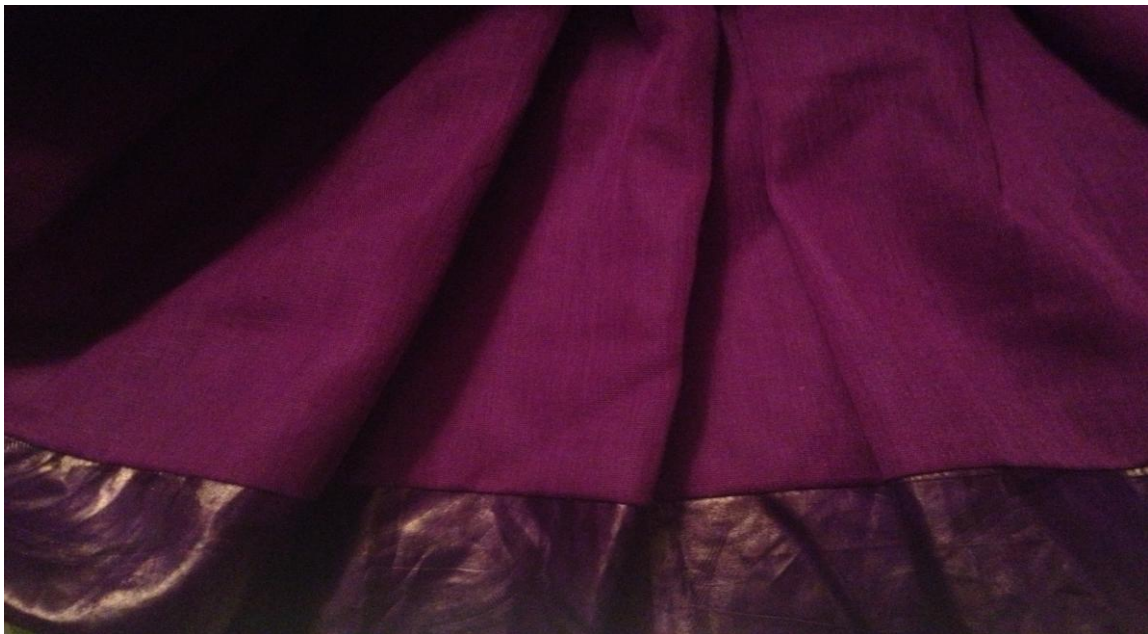


Figure 16 Lining of *mariniere*



Figure 17 *Fancy Khaftan*



Figure 18 Barbecue dress



Figure 19 Wall featuring UAA Leaders



Figure 20 UAA Wall of photographs

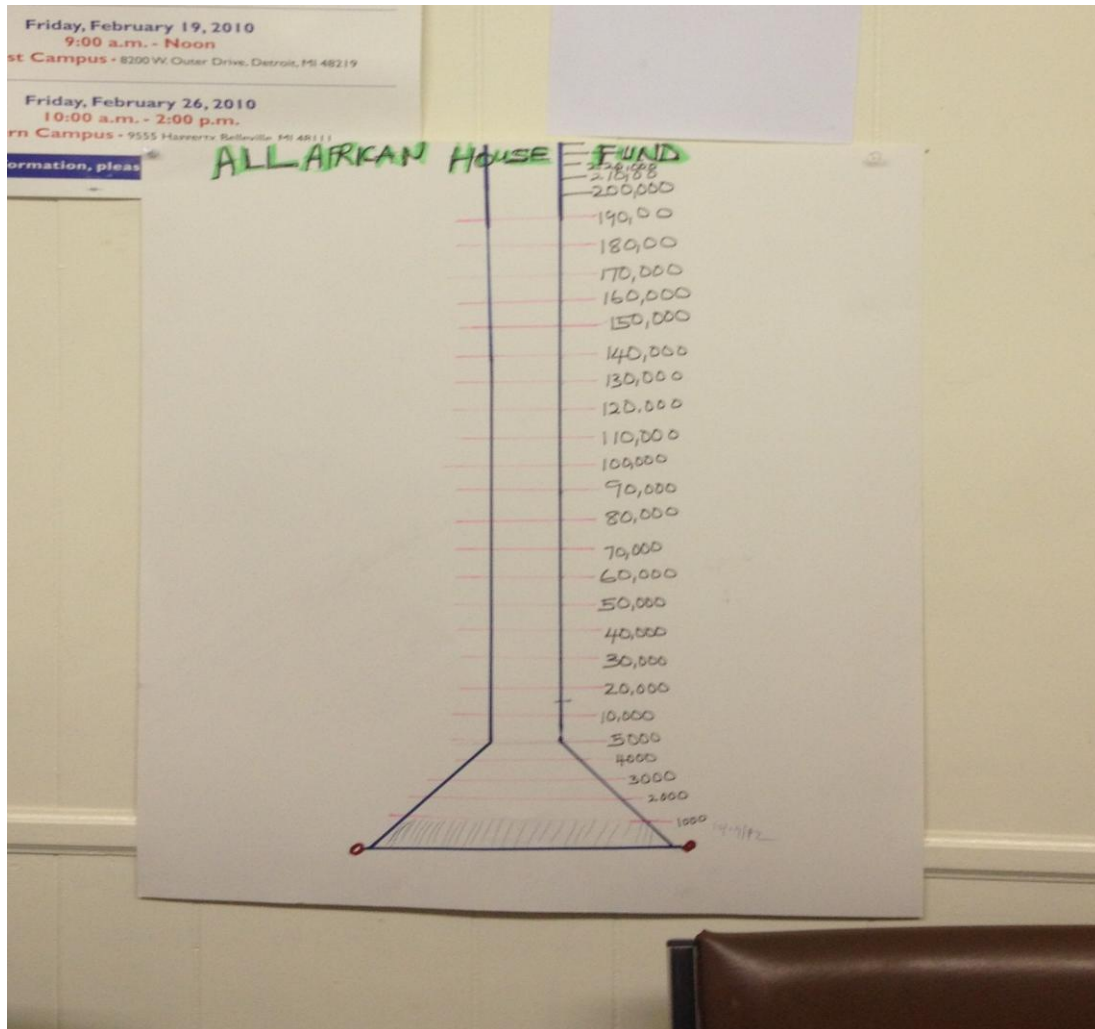


Figure 21 African House pledges. While we raised \$11,600 in pledges during our fundraising meeting, the actual balance in the bank account as of July 31, 2014 was \$1,000.

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