Porous Bodies, Collective Agency: An Ethnography of Dance Possession Ceremonies in Mali

by

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“When you greet one or many spirits who live in the seven sky and earth, those from the south, west, north and east, those who are the moon, the sun, the wind, the mountains, the sea and the ocean tell them nothing can happen to you that can’t happen to me. If I made a mistake you know it better than I do. I asked you to forgive me and I asked God and his prophet, the almighty, the greatest who created this earth and also created paradise and hell to forgive me too. When you said assalamu 'alaikum there is no rejection and there is also no way to not respond. Morning and noon, assalamu 'alaikum. To north, east, west, and south spirits, if you didn’t make yourself, you know that god has created you.”

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1 Opening ballad to the ceremony, always spoken by Abu Diarra.
Abu (in hat with hand to mouth) speaking to his apprentices at the end of a ceremony. Mary is seated to his right by the truck.

The beginning of a dance possession ceremony, when everyone starts gathering.
I. Theory On/Of/And Dance Possession Ceremonies

*Les Genies au Malila*\(^2\)

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\(^2\) Spirits in Mali. I add the “la” at the end of Mali because in Bamanan, “la” is added to the end of country names when you say “in ____.” Many Malians speak a combination of French and Bamanan, refered to as “Franbara,” and calling Mali “Malila” is how I heard it spoken many times.
Opening my bag to check the time on my flimsy Nokia phone I see that it’s only 10:12 a.m. I’ve been here since 9, with six hours to go until the ceremony starts. It’s hot, and sticky, and smells like all of the wonderful smells of a Malian village: tot, the traditional Malian millet and okra cake, sewage water, and stewey tomato sauce. But as an honored guest I’ve been given the esteemed chair so I really shouldn’t be complaining.

Looking around the room as I’m writing in my journal to pass the time, I see a woman chewing some tan-colored nut-like edible in the right side of her mouth. I watch as her lips shift to the right followed by the skin on her chin. “Take this,” a younger woman orders me. I watch a young kid gnawing on the same thing so I decide it’s safe and pop a few in my mouth. It’s dry and sweet, some sort of a mixture between a nut and a dried fruit. Others around her doze off, fanning themselves to fatigue. The sound of gesticulation is loud.

Turning my head around to the back of the room I see an old woman trembling, her hands nervously grasping one another, picking her skin, scratching her legs. Her mouth droops off to one side and her eyebrow-less face makes her eyes look sunken and dry. She gets up and begins pacing and shaking her head, sighing as if she was on the verge of tears or some serious breakdown. She sits back down and tries to remain still but it’s obvious the tremors are uncontrollable. So, she stands up again, slapping and scratching her arms, shaking her head.
Mary, the translator, walks in and sees me looking at her. “Oh, her? She’s not possessed.” Mary is around sixty-five years old, petite, and speaks with animated conviction. His eyes are as piercing as they are glowing, as mysterious as they are direct. “Really?” I’d been pointing to women in the hut earlier that morning, asking Mary if they were possessed or not in some ignorant attempt to see if I could “spot” possessed people. After half a dozen failed guesses, Mary told me he himself was very possessed. “She’s sick,” he says of the older woman. “But she’s not possessed.”

Monday, April 11th, interview with Nene: “Sometimes people go to the ceremony because of an illness, or sometimes people go for help in their future...”

I continued to watch this woman despite my best efforts to turn away for the remainder of the six hours that I waited in the hut before the ceremony. Later, as the musicians set up and everyone gathered informally in a circle outside, the old woman with the burn marks jumped in the middle of the circle and rhythmically shook her hips and butt to the clapping and stomping of women around her. She laughed as she giggled and wiggled her lower half, finally seeming at peace and comfortable with her body.

Little did I know that soon I would witness women ecstatically dancing, throwing their bodies to the ground, arching their backs in what looked like pain, wildly sobbing then falling into each others arms. Yet, one of the women I remember most vividly from the ceremony was the one with the burns. She explained to me

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4 Ah elle? Elle n’est pas possédée.
5 Vraiment?
6 Elle est malade, mais elle n’est pas possédée.
7 Quelquefois on va là-bas pour la maladie, et quelquefois pour l’aide dans l’avenir.
through hand gestures and with the help of a French speaking girl that she was not possessed, yet came to the ceremony most weeks in an effort to heal.

My thesis is about dance possession ceremonies, but so much more. My thesis is about the body.

It is about the aches and pains and love and hatred and memories that are stored in the body. It is about the porousness of our skin, and the sounds of our footsteps. It is about the embodied memory of loss and the way your heart jumps when you see someone you love. It is about the sweat that pours out under the beating sun and the sobs of pain that losing a loved one brings. It’s about visceral reactions and gut intuition. My thesis is about bodies of all shapes and sizes and colors and abilities. It is about babies’ bodies and grandmothers’ bodies and your uncle’s body and someone’s neighbor’s body. My thesis is about my body.

My thesis is about your body.

Our bodies are movers and shakers. We humans are actors in a grand production called life, though we are not the only cast. Life is a play that includes the suns rays that produce sweat droplets on your forehead, and the dust which cakes onto your ankles in a country like Mali. Although as humans we are more interconnected than we could ever imagine, particular environments and material realities shape and mold us into slightly different characters. We are complete beings in our own right, yet malleable and porous in relation to our environment and others.

**Actor Network Theory & Phenomenology**

Contrary to an anthropocentric view of the world where humans regard themselves as the most central and significant beings in the world, I believe that the
environment, non-human animals, and other inanimate objects contribute equally to the shaping of our universe. This view is concurrent with Actor Network Theory, a theory that describes the interconnectedness and relationality among humans, non-human animals, and the environment. Actor Network Theory asserts that “social relations...are only ever in process, and must be performed continuously” (Case). These relationships are always being affected by and in exchange with non-human actants, too. By highlighting the process of becoming—and the agency of various actants, not just humans—Actor Network Theory is the antithesis to anthropocentrism. Dance possession ceremonies are a visible manifestation of this theory through their acknowledgement of the agency of spirits, the environment, and humans.

Additionally, it is useful to look at dance possession ceremonies from a phenomenological point of view so as to recognize the deeply embodied experience of these types of rituals. In its most basic definition, phenomenology is “the study of structures of consciousness” (Smith). The study of phenomenology values lived experience\(^8\) and bodily agency just as dance possession ceremonies do. I believe that the combination of phenomenology with Actor Network Theory leads to a particular ecological awareness, one that is inevitably evoked in dance possession ceremonies. For example, in Merleau-Ponty and Environmental Philosophy, many scholars cite Merleau-Ponty’s work on phenomenology as alluding to ecological awareness and the agency of the environment in relation to embodiment. Merleau-Ponty writes, “Our skin leaps out of itself to seek this contact with the flesh of the earth, and the world’s

\(^8\) Valuing lived experience—the everyday—is a feminist undertaking. Lived experience rests in both pivotal and mundane moments of someone’s life, moments that filter through the medium of the body and are felt viscerally. Contrary to merely taking experience as a form of or result of social constructs and institutions, lived experience recognizes our agency and embodied experience in the everyday. This will be greatly expanded on in the “Material Feminism and Sensuous Scholarship” section.
flesh comes to include my body” (Jensen 43). Here, the environment and humans are seen as inextricably intertwined, similar to what Actor Network Theory states. Merleau-Ponty also asserts that since sensuous, lived experiences evoke bodily emotions and visceral reactions, “vital values” are formed in relation to bodily experiences. John R. White, in quoting Merleau-Ponty, believes that the “vital values” Merleau-Ponty is referring to are “values associated with us as living bodies, as animals, and to objects in the world insofar as they are advantageous or disadvantageous to our animal life” (Jensen 178). In other words, Merleau-Ponty believes that “how we live our bodiliness, how we experience, for example, sex, vitality, health, bodily pleasures, and so on will tend to condition the extent and the depth of our cognition of vital values generally” (Jensen 179).

In my own analysis, I take Merleau-Ponty’s words to mean that embodied experience greatly affects cognitive processes, worldview, and sometimes even morality; the extent to which one feels comfortable in one’s body and able to express his or her desires may change one’s life outlook and interpersonal relationships. Furthermore, John R. White, in citing Merleau-Ponty, pushes Merleau-Ponty’s ideas in regards to culture in stating “For it would follow that, if one lives in a civilization where body experiences and body practices are not conducive to the experience of one’s own vital values, one will likely fail to recognize and appreciate the values of the environment” (White 179-180). An acute awareness of ones’ bodily experience—which is dependent upon the particularities of a ceremony, and affected by various actants such as other humans, sacrificial animals, and the environment—is what
allows spirits to enter into their mediums and is what ultimately drives dance possession ceremonies.

Those involved with dance possession know when they are not well because their bodies tell them. Their spirits make their presence known to them either through their dreams, through a particular bodily sensation, or sometimes through an illness. Dance possession ceremonies operate under the assumption that there are powers beyond us humans that can interfere with day-to-day life and our sanity. Those involved in dance possession ceremonies are attuned to sensations in their bodies and minds. Those who become afflicted with their spirit—possessed—feel the tension of needing to heal and/or reconcile in their bodies. In dance possession ceremonies, the body is central as it is considered the site of knowledge and change. Dance possession ceremonies also acknowledge the agency of the environment. Before every ceremony, Abu, the head master, evoked the four cardinal points—north, south, east, and west—and the spirits who inhabited particular places such as the sky. He spoke, “When you greet one or many spirits who live in the seven sky and earth, those from the south, west, north and east, those who are the moon, the sun, the wind, the mountains, the sea and the ocean tell them nothing can happen to you that can’t happen to me.”[^9] I take this as Abu paying homage to the agency of the environment, to the agency of the moon, the sun, the wind, the mountains, the sea, and the ocean. Perhaps then, dance possession ceremonies, in valuing bodily experiences and practices, could be considered a type of ecological meditation—an engagement with all actors in this world—by emphasizing the interrelation between the body and environment.

[^9]: Translation and transcription from Bambanan to English done by Youba Tandina.
In an essay from *Material Feminisms*, “Constructing the Ballast,” Susan Hekman explains how Andrew Pickering conceptualizes that “the world is filled with agency; it is continually doing things that bear on us…it is not accurate to describe this doing as observation statements upon disembodied intellects, but rather as forces upon material beings…Much of everyday life…involves coping with the material agency of the natural world” (Hekman 93-4). According to several of my interlocutors, spirits are keener on floating around where there is less “modernity” and “technology,” and instead more open space. This open space of the environment holds agency. In Mali, this space breeds spirits. Many Malians I spoke with who were either involved or not involved in dance possession ceremonies spoke to the fact that Mali is a hot bed of spirits—not to say that spirits don’t exist in other more modern countries, but in Mali, spirits are widely acknowledged. My intent in including these interviews is to explain what Malians involved in dance possession ceremonies believed to be the reason for these ceremonies occurrence and power. Namely, the fact that spirits do exist and are affected by the environment.

By recognizing the agency of the environment and nonhuman species (such as spirits) as actants who affect individuals and communities, selfhood is re-imagined through our entanglement with “others.” Merleau-Ponty writes, “their [the self and the surrounding world] landscapes interweave, their actions and passions fit together exactly” (Merleau-Ponty qtd in Jensen 141-2). In other words, the divide between “the natural world and other nonhuman species is impossible to maintain if the self is no longer singular and closed” (Jensen 197). In one of our interviews, Abu explained, “The spirit world is another universe. But spirits live like us. They’re Muslim. They
can marry. They can have children.” We are embedded in our environment, not self-contained or autonomous but multiple and porous. Because of this, healing is a collective endeavor, “never fully from ourselves but…a cogenerative touching in depth that works in the midst of the mystery and self-reticence that we are” (Bigwood 102). While some people who attend dance possession ceremonies have a serious physical ailment and others are in good health, all participants reap the benefits because of the communal energy and strength that’s created. In dance possession ceremonies, it is precisely our interconnectedness, and intertwining with the environment and “others” that is harnessed for collective healing.

**Material Feminism & ‘Sensuous Scholarship’**

Furthermore, many scholars in Material Feminisms evoke the materiality and agency of our world as part of their feminist project. Stated bluntly, both the idea of an absolute autonomous self and lack of ecological awareness stems from a patriarchal tradition. As indiviuals, rather than *individuals*, we necessarily depend on other beings and are affected by the world around us. Many feminists now recognize that valuing all the actors in our world at large—and our interdependency—is concurrent with women gaining the respect and recognition that they deserve.

In addition, as explained briefly in an earlier footnote, valuing the lived experience is inherently a feminist project. Lived experiences are comprised of both

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10 Le monde d’esprits...c’est un autre monde. Mais ils vivent comme nous. Ils sont des mousulmanes. Ils peuvent se marier, ils peuvent avoir des enfants.

11 My definition of collective healing is when a group of people all aid in each other’s healing process—through their bodily presence—which in turns heals the community as a whole. Obviously this process takes a long time, and is somewhat continuous and/or always needing to be renewed, but there are bursts of wellness in dance possession ceremonies brought on by the ceremony itself and the community presence of the people who constitute it.
pivotal and mundane moments of someone’s life, moments that are experienced in and through the body and are felt viscerally. Contrary to merely taking experience as a form of or result of social constructs and institutions, emphasizing lived experience recognizes our agency and embodied experience in the everyday. In a pithy summary, historically, women have been associated with the body and men with the mind. The fact that most women (with a “typical” women’s biology) are able to reproduce sets them up for motherhood. Reproduction and motherhood end up bound to the female body in an intertwining of biology and the cultural. Furthermore, because of women’s menstruation cycles, they are oftentimes thought of as unstable and “crazy.” Men, on the other hand, have been traditionally thought of as able to transcend their bodies and the biological, through their rationality. This duality, of course, is dependent upon the Cartesian split of body and mind that is clearly problematic. In an effort to undo these stereotypes, many feminists have made a drastic move towards the linguistic in thinking and writing about feminist issues and tragically lose sight of the body (Butler 1990 and 1993). Stacy Alaimo and Susan Hekman, editors of Material Feminisms write that “feminist theory and cultural studies have focused almost entirely on the textual, linguistic, and discursive” (Alaimo and Hekman 3). Yet, “women have bodies; these bodies have pain as well as pleasure…We need a way to talk about these bodies and the materiality they inhabit” (Alaimo and Hekman 4). Material feminists, then, come in in an effort to reclaim the material and the body, take us out of the textual realm, and push us towards thinking about the volatility and agency of our bodies, as well as the sociocultural and historical processes that have affected the shaping of our bodies (Alaimo and Hekman).
Our bodies are us, and I mean that in the most inclusive way possible. Down with Cartesian duality of mind and body, down with privileging one over the other, down with men as minds and women as bodies. In analyzing the transformative potential of dance possession ceremonies, I will break down the valuing of the discursive over the material and ask the same question Leroi-Gourhan asks, namely, if it is considered progress that “whether humans, through their development of increasingly sophisticated tools, eventually render their current form of embodied existence obsolete” (Noland 94). Are we becoming so disconnected from our bodies that lived experience is no longer considered a valid form of knowledge? The day after attending my first dance possession ceremony I wrote in my journal: Saturday, April 9th: dance of the possessed as a way of accessing your skin, reimagining your sense of self, body moving through space...

Anthropologists are often concerned with everyday experience, too. In order to shed light on the agency and volatility of our bodies, and on the everyday events that filter through our bodies, my thesis is an argument for what Paul Stoller has coined “sensuous scholarship” (Noland 12) where “the experience is by no means an abstraction but instead takes precise, if multiple forms, such as tasting hearing, and feeling the body move” (Noland 12). Instead of stifling sensuous observations and experiences for what is considered more privileged knowledge like analytics and empirical data, Paul Stoller insists that we pay attention to experiential learning as a both crucial and fundamental way of knowing. “Anthropologists who have lost their senses often write ethnographies that are disconnected from the world they seek to portray,” Stoller writes. “For these anthropologists, tasteless theories are more
important than the savory sauces of ethnographic life” (Stoller 1992: 15-16). Waiting in the mudbrick hut for the ceremony to begin, I wrote: Friday, April 8th: The ceremony starts at 14h. It is only 11h20, don’t know what I’m going to do from now till then… Tastes of Mali: avocado, overcooked pasta, mayonnaise, mango, Malian tea, white rice, tomatoes, peanuts, slightly spoiled milk, fried things, bananas, onions...Smells: pollution, burning tires, fried things, rice, dusty heat, shea butter, sewage, trash...Sounds: radio music, griots singing, random American rap, cars/motos, wind, prayer calls...Sights: markets—fish, lettuce, potatoes...random toiletries, traditional cloth, imported 2nd hand Western clothing, water tied in clear plastic bags, huge piles of trash, men praying in the middle of the market, beach chairs woven with plastic cords, women breastfeeding, cracked feet, large hands, geckos, flies... My senses were utterly overwhelmed in Mali and particularly at the dance possession ceremonies. Prior to the start of a ceremony, there is often a communal meal served, which is eaten with your hands. Stewey tomato sauce or oily riz-au-gras sticks onto your fingers, and it is entirely appropriate to lick the length of your palm to taste every last drop. Prized pieces of meat are picked apart and divvied up by the oldest diner. After a post-meal nap, the ceremony begins by drummers forming a semi-circle and beginning to play some agreed upon beat. Women of all ages start clapping their hands and rhythmically walking around the circle, singing or calling out names. As the energy intensifies, the communal walking fades out and select people, generally Abu’s female apprentices, begin to feel the presence of their spirit. Onlookers, too, can feel the emergence of this spirit as the woman begins to move jarringly, or sob, or hyperextend her back, or oddly isolate one part of her body.
The drummers follow the feel of the crowd, slowing down and speeding up with the energy of the possessed women and the community involved in the ritual.

Dance possession ceremonies directly engage the senses of both the possessed and other community participants. Spirits call to you through your body—through trembles, shivers, or sweat—and the reason these rituals continue is because of their profoundly healing effect, and because of the utterly life-affirming energy that pulsates throughout the drum circle. The spirit, the energy, the pain, and the potential for healing are all embodied and experienced sensually in both spirit mediums and other participants.

More broadly speaking, an embodied perspective enables us to see the constant fluctuations in the world—dualistic thinking is impossible with the recognition that you see, feel, and experience through your body, because the body, like everything else, is constantly shifting. In “Sensation, Perception, and Transformation: Incorporating Embodiment into Feminist Studies and Beyond,” I argued “If we fail to see our bodies as agents—if we neglect to both acknowledge and exercise the power of embodiment then academia (and feminist studies in particular) has failed. I strongly believe that before feminism—in any form—can move forward we need to ground ourselves in lived experiences, which in turn allow us to see others’ perspectives. A sense of embodiment fosters a greater sense of self and is what allows us to recognize the multiplicity of identities, and the multiple axes of both power and oppression. Most importantly, however, embodiment is what allows us to actively fluctuate with our ever-changing world” (Baker 2011). Life involves constant
negotiation and re-configuring; dance possession ceremonies are a direct engagement with this phenomenon.

**Porous Selves and Collective Agency**

By approaching dance possession ceremonies from a material feminist perspective which values the lived experience and the sentient body, and through the framework of Actor Network Theory, I argue that since dance possession ceremonies expand the boundaries of the self and explicitly explore structures of power and domination, they empower and heal both individuals and communities. Through the blurring of “self” and “other”—through the forthright acknowledgement that spirits enter through one’s body—the self is no longer “self contained” but instead shaped and molded by his or her surroundings and “others” close to him or her. As with Merleau-Ponty’s implicit renderings of the environment and embodiment as intertwined, the self as “no longer self-contained” evokes a vision of the body that is porous and allows for other forces to enter; bodies are not sealed off from their surroundings but enmeshed within them. Therefore, contrary to the Western notion of the autonomous free-willed individual, dance possession ceremonies draw on the concept of the dividual. Behrend and Luig explain, “As in other African regions, the self, the body and the person are not unitary concepts but open to a constant reformulation through mutable entanglements with others. In this context, spirit possession could be seen as one of many practices that inscribe dividuality” (Behrend and Luig xviii). With dividuality, there is no pure sense of the self as an individual because personalities are seen as divergent due to the blending of self, nature,
spirits/the spirit world, the environment, and others in the throes of possession. Identity is conceptualized as multiple, changing, and in process. Additionally, dividuality recognizes that humans necessarily depend on each other—socially, emotionally, physically, and spiritually—and are in constant negotiation and exchange with other non-human beings around them, as well.

This interplay between humans and other actants in the world can be regarded as a “test of ego in its capacity to tolerate the new, broader perspectives of the personality that it has yet to assimilate” as Huskinson explains in “Analytical Psychology and Spirit Possession: Towards a Non-Pathological Diagnosis of Spirit Possession” (Schmidt and Huskinson 88). By allowing a spirit to enter one’s body, which is somewhat uncontrollable but demands a certain level of surrender, one interacts explicitly with power, adhering to a spirit’s desires and demands and thus subverting power in the process. There is an inevitable process of letting go to becoming possessed. Once a medium becomes possessed, the spirit takes control.

After a particularly interesting day spent in Gwana talking about how exactly the spirit enters a body, I wrote: 

*Tuesday, April 12*: great interview and really interesting day... is it a question of body, or the fact that people believe spirits guide each person in general? Does the spirit take over the body, the psyche, or both?

Dance possession ceremonies destabilize, undo, and unlock aspects of our individuality. Michael Lambek explains, “Spirits by their very natures throw into question the whole moral basis of power. Spirits are potent yet parasitic, educated yet extortionist, self seeking and self motivated, vain, ungenerous, untrustworthy, querulous, and irresponsible” (Lambek 1981: 33). Following a spirit’s demands is
exhausting and unpredictable yet necessary and strangely satisfying. Spirits never reach fulfillment, their relationships with their mediums are constantly changing like human’s relationships with each other. However, relationships between spirits and their mediums are more overtly related to domination and submission; a relationship with a spirit always involves either physical suffering and/or material expense and/or “a certain apprehension for whatever may happen next” (Lambek 1981: 33) in hopes of becoming healed and more balanced. The self is no longer central. Wellbeing is prioritized, but dependent upon community and the spirit world.

Therefore, contrary to the Western, liberal conception of agency as breaking out of any pre-conscribed structure such as a religious affiliation or cultural “norm,” (Mahmood) the type of agency dance possession ceremonies draw on involves working within a cultural framework in relation to one’s community. For example, in Wombs and Alien Spirits, Janice Boddy explains, “…possession is an intrusion for which neither the sufferer nor her neighbors, kin and affines are responsible. Relationships within the realm of the village are thus preserved” (Boddy 1989: 147). In other words, those who are possessed are not seen as attention seeking, crazy, or even particularly special or unusual. In the village of Gwana where I attended dance possession ceremonies, surrounding community members made sure that during a ceremony there was no immediate danger to people who became overtaken by their spirit. Yet, there was no blame put upon members of the community for another’s possession. On the contrary, becoming possessed by your spirit is recognized as a part of life. Community members are expected to help those who are afflicted, yet they are not targeted as the central cause of possession. Therefore, because dance possession
ceremonies work within a traditional framework of community norms, they maintain the mediums’ dignity and lead to a path of communal and individual wellbeing. By submitting oneself to the throes of possession, by acting out this power dynamic with a spirit, the possessed and other community members exercise agency. Furthermore, if the individual who is visited by their spirit is able to grapple with this relationship openly with the support of the community and then move forward, the community as a whole is bettered.

Through this model of interdependency, I am arguing for a “situated embodiment,”¹² that both acknowledges our interconnectedness and shared desires as fellow actors in this world, and realizes our individual needs to heal and cope with specific pains brought on by particular environments, social relations, and material realities. Dance possession ceremonies feed off of collective energy; the healing of individuals necessitates community. Samuel writes, “this…repertoire [spirit possession ceremonies] may provide a way for the social group as a whole to mediate its relationship with its wide social and natural environment or of assisting in the healing of others” (Schmidt and Huskinson 44). For example, a young woman I spoke with named Mimi told me that she was not possessed yet she enjoyed coming to the ceremony every week. In fact, she explained her love for dance as the main reason for participating in the ceremony. She had been coming for months with various female relatives, some who were possessed and others who simply liked the community aspect. Likewise, the elderly woman mentioned earlier, who had what in the West could be defined as a severe neurological disorder attended the ceremony every week.

¹² When I talk about a “situated embodiment,” I’m referencing Donna Haraway’s famous essay “Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of the Partial Perspective.”
since dancing soothed her, though she was not possessed. Dance possession ceremonies are community endeavors that rely upon the participation of willing subjects both possessed and not possessed. As embodied beings participating in dance possession ceremonies, it is through the endless possibility of repetitive ritual that, paradoxically, we hold the power to heal and changed ourselves as well as the environment and others around us.

**Literature on Spirit Possession & My Own Trajectory**

Many anthropologists have explored what is commonly known as spirit possession ceremonies\(^\text{13}\) from a variety of approaches. Analyses range from citing nutritional deficiencies as reason for possession, \((\text{Kehoe and Giletti})\) to thinking of possession as counter-hegemonic to Islam and patriarchy \((\text{Boddy 1989})\). Many scholars take every little action and/or material good involved in spirit possession as symbolic of some larger message, \((\text{Boddy 1989})\) implicitly deemphasizing the bodily experience of spirit possession. Others position themselves as first and foremost a traditional, observational anthropologist—unable to permeate boundaries during their research or perhaps just not willing to explain their own participation in these ceremonies \((\text{Lambek 1981})\). Some consider dance possession ceremonies to be largely theatrical \((\text{Stoller 1989})\). Others emphasize the healing aspect of rituals in general \((\text{Somé 1989 and 1994})\). In my review of spirit possession scholars, I will focus primarily on those who conduct research in Africa, though I acknowledge that

\(^{13}\) Most of the literature on possession ceremonies refers to these ceremonies under the umbrella term of “spirit possession.” However, my interlocutors in Mali called these ceremonies dance possession ceremonies. In my thesis, when referring to the ceremonies I participated in, I will stick to the name that those involved used: dance possession ceremonies. If talking about another scholar’s work, I will generally use “spirit possession.”
spirit possession ceremonies occur across the world. Furthermore, I will examine how the dance possession ceremonies I was a part of involved a particular bodily experience and re-imagined the self through collective agency. I will avoid quantitative analysis and instead provide a qualitative and sensuous account of a dance possession ceremony.

Several scholars have produced important work on possession ceremonies yet do not take the approach that I am aiming for. For example, those who believe that neurological disorders are behind spirit possession and trance study the way the brain works and provide specific scientific and anatomical reasons for spirit possession. In “Conceptualizing Spirit Possession: Ethnographic and Experimental Evidence,” rather than linking body and mind, Cohen and Barret reinscribe the Cartesian mind-body duality in stating, “…possession-trance concepts frequently entail a (literal or effective) separation of mind (or agency, spirit, person, self), from the body” (Cohen and Barrett 246). Cohen and Barrett continue saying that spirit possession “entails the complete displacement of the host’s agency by another agent’s agency, such that a bodiless agent effectively acquires the body—but not the mind or self—of a living being” (Cohen and Barrett 246). Rather than viewing identity as multiple, like the concept of dividuality, Barrett and Cohen do not see the intermeshing of agencies and selves. It is this intermingling and interdependency that provides the transformative stage for dance possession ceremonies. Their analysis leaves little possibility for the generative potential of spirit and medium’s relationships. Furthermore, while Cohen’s interlocutors poetically explain possession as “the joining of the body of the medium
with the spirit of the entity,” drawing on the concept of a dividual, and hinting at possession as somewhat healing, Cohen analyzes this viewpoint coming from “panhuman features of normal human cognition,” reducing possession phenomenon to the mind (Cohen and Barrett 249-250).

Other scholars, like Janice Boddy, come from a feminist perspective in discussing spirit possession as counter hegemonic. Boddy believes in ceremonies’ ability to empower women in a male-dominated Islamic Sudanese village. As women are often excluded from the particular sect of Islam present in the northern Sudanese village she conducted fieldwork in, Boddy explains that “…women’s amplification of zar beliefs into a possession cult can be seen as a kind of counterhegemonic process” (Boddy 1989: 6). While her feminist perspective is superb in providing an alternate narrative to the predominantly masculine-centric literature on spirit possession, Boddy takes the symbolic approach as she assigns significance to nearly everything she observes and experiences in the field. For example, she writes, “Women’s bodies are both metonyms and icons of the enclosed, fertile, moral village, repositories of its salient values and more vulnerable than men to their rupture” (Boddy 1994: 416-417). Her analogy of the tenuousness of women’s bodies as representative to the village structure is fascinating, but largely unsubstantiated. I doubt that the female villagers themselves would make this comparison. Furthermore, she uses charts and quantifiable data to support her claims, inserting graphs amidst narrative writing. While Boddy’s analysis is comprehensive to an extent, I do not believe that quantifiable data is actually useful when writing about spirit possession as it hinders possibilities for deviance or less strictly definable moments. Furthermore, her
emphasis on symbols, while impressive, unintentionally neglects the significance of
the sentient body, or embodied experience in spirit possession. As Lila Abu-Lughod
elegantly states in her review of Wombs and Alien Spirits, “The treatment of
possession here is curiously disembodied. There is an aestheticization of what is often
a violently embodied experience or a hilariously funny burlesque performance” (Abu-
Lughod 426). In other words, her symbolic approach disregards much of the
embodied experience of spirit possession ceremonies, which I see as central and of
utmost importance in any analysis of spirit possession.

Other scholars such as Michael Lambek rely heavily on descriptions. Lambek
writes that his aim is to discover “what possession is about…to reduce strangeness or
other people’s symbolic constructions without thereby sacrificing their richness and
complexity” (Lambek 1981: 4-5). In doing so, Lambek avoids assigning significance
to particular symbols in spirit possession and instead analyzes the setup of the village
of Mayotte, characteristics of specific spirits, spirit possession as a mode of
communication, and negotiations involved between spirits and humans. While
Lambek’s descriptions are useful in “setting the stage” and the mood of his piece, and
while his self-reflexivity of his place as an anthropologist in this foreign village is
astute, he ends up ignoring, like Boddy, the phenomenon of the physical
manifestation of the spirit in a host and the specific embodied experience that spirits
bring. Furthermore, his extensive descriptions of Mayotte end up deterring alternative
interpretations or viewpoints. He describes Mayotte so much that it distracts the
reader from the potentiality of the village and the space that was created there. In
other words, in Lambek’s description and analysis of Mayotte, the world is presented
in a rather static way: bodies are not given the volatile agency that they inherently possess and other actors and actants are not a part of the fluctuating picture.

Some scholars emphasize the psychological aspect of spirit possession, arguing that spirit possession is largely an escape from difficult emotional situations. For example, in “The Psychodynamics of Demon Possession” Colleen A. Ward and Michael H. Beaurobn begin their article writing, “Mental illness has often been attributed to supernatural powers” (Beaubrun and Ward 201). They argue that “predisposing cultural mores, beliefs, traditions, and superstitions, coupled with highly emotional stress situations” are what triggers demon possession. Just the very word “demon” rather than “spirit” connotes a negative viewpoint of spirit possession. These theorists end up ignoring the more intangible aspects of spirit possession by relying more on data to support their claims. Without recognizing the transformative possibilities of spirit possession, these theorists turn to mental illness as a prime cause. Beaurobn and Ward write that, of a population in China possessed by their spirit, apparently 48.5% were hysterics, 24.3% schizophrenics, and 12.2% depressives. (Beaubrun and Ward 205). While focusing on pre-established diagnoses, they fail to discuss the embodied aspect of dance possession ceremonies, such as dancing and visceral responses, as central to healing. Their explanation stops with their labeling of mental illness. Why is the body notably absent in these analyses when at dance possession ceremonies the body is clearly central?

Similarly, in Human Spirits: A Cultural Account of Trance in Mayotte, Lambek does focus on some communicative possibilities of spirit possession

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15 The use of the word “demon” in and of itself connotes a (obviously) negative view of spirit possession. In my own experience, the word “spirit” was used much more frequently than “devil,” or “demon,” since spirit possession was not seen to be something inherently negative or evil.
ceremonies, such as their function as marital therapy, (Lambek: 1981), he ultimately seems to believe these relationships are negative rather than generative. Throughout his ethnography, Lambek asserts that sprits are the cause of ailments in humans that therefore need to be cured through ceremonies. In other words, while ceremonies serve to ameliorate problems by calling on spirits, the relationship between a spirit and an individual is one that involves much self-sacrifice and subservience to a spirit who holds the power of afflicting pain or good fortune. It is unclear whether this is something that Lambek was told, or something that he extracted from observation. In any case, in my fieldwork and analysis of spirit possession ceremonies, relationships between spirits and individuals are generative and somewhat cooperative—while a relationship may require some sort of sacrifice, it is never the spirit that is solely blamed for an individual’s affliction nor is it that a spirit needs to be exorcised.

Additionally, my interlocutors all made a distinction between illness and possession. For instance, Mary repeatedly told me that he was possessed but not ill, he considered himself to be in good health. The woman with the burn marks, however, who I wrote about earlier on, was ill but not possessed. Nene, though, was both ill and visited by her spirit. While illness and possession may sometimes go together, they were also seen as able to be mutually exclusive in Gwana.

Paul Stoller presents one of the most attractive analyses of spirit possession with his experimental and sensuous approach. In the introduction to *Embodying Colonial Memories: Spirit Possession, Power, and the Hauka in West Africa*, Stoller writes, “For me, recognition of multisensorial perception leads to a more embodied, radically phenomenological approach to ethnographic fieldwork, a more sensorially
evocative body of ethnographic writing, and a more rigorous framework for the analysis of culture-in-society…. I propose a sensorial alternative…an orientation that considers spirit possession as a set of embodied practices” (Stoller: 1995). Stoller insists, throughout any of his writing on spirit possession, that sensory experiences and visceral responses be regarded as central to possession ceremonies. After being a part of ceremonies that seem similar to those that Stoller participated in, I can vouch for the importance of the embodied and the visceral. Furthermore, unlike many other scholars who clearly state their position as more of an observer rather than a participant. For example, Stoller begins his article “Embodying Cultural Memory in Songhay Spirit Possession” writing, “Possession possessed me one afternoon in the town of Tillaberi, Niger when the haunting cries of the one-string violin drew me over a dune to witness my first ceremony of Songhay possession” (Stoller 1995: 16). Stoller’s writing is evocative, sensual, and bold; his writing mirrors actual spirit possession ceremonies in that it provokes a visceral response in the reader. It is clear he was—and remains—embedded, invested, and deeply involved in his project. Most importantly, he sees the body as a site of agency and recognizes embodiment as central to spirit possession.

Stoller has been hugely influential for me in writing this thesis. Though I critique their methodology, Lambek and Boddy have been greatly helpful, too. As for style, I draw heavily on Edith Turner, Paul Stoller, and Malidoma Somé. In my own approach to dance possession, I hope to emulate aspects of each of the scholars’ I’ve read. I will note the symbolic significance of some actions and material goods like Boddy, but further emphasize the visceral reactions during dance possession.
ceremonies in hopes of communicating how these ceremonies are experienced by those involved. I also will draw on Boddy’s feminist approach to spirit possession ceremonies, using a material feminist framework as foregrounding to my perspective. I will investigate the communicative aspects of spirit possession ceremonies like Lambek, yet explore the more positive outcomes of individual’s relationships with their spirit.

In terms of methodology and form, like Stoller and Turner, I will explain my role as a participant and observer. With my writing, I will attempt to emulate the larger statement I am making about “sensuous scholarship” by engaging the senses through language. To do this, I will weave sections from my field journal into my more theoretical analysis, as I have begun to do so in this introduction. I will also rely heavily on dialogue, and insert pieces of interviews and conversations I had in the field to illuminate theoretical concepts and ideas. The purpose of both these tactics is to evoke a visceral response in the reader. Furthermore, I emphasize dance possession ceremonies as deeply embodied by bringing in work from the collection *Material Feminisms* and explaining how dance possession ceremonies can be viewed through a feminist lens. My project differs from Stoller’s, Turner’s, and Somé’s in my background. As a lifelong dancer and mover, I will bring in aspects of movement analysis and embodied experience that I have felt in my body. I will ask questions about the sublime calmness of repetitive movement, and the ways that temporality and space are felt through ones’ body. I will question what I call a “situated embodiment,” meaning, how one feels in ones body dependent on location and others around them. Here, I will draw on my research on embodiment in Mali as well as
research at Wesleyan on feminist theory and embodiment. The trajectory of my thesis is as follows:

In Chapter II, I describe how I got to Mali, certain aspects about Malian culture, what I was studying there and who I met, the basic structure of a dance possession ceremony and my involvement, and finally, my host family’s reaction to all of this.

In Chapter III, I dig deep into my ethnographic experience by discussing how dance possession ceremonies provide a unique interaction with temporality, drawing on past, present, and future experiences in an effort to heal and follow ones’ calling. In other words, rituals such as dance possession ceremonies “inform the inchoate, define the indefinite, and punctuate the continuous” (Lambek 2000) by oscillating between the was, the being, and the becoming. In this chapter, I combine Nene’s story with my own to provide ethnographic evidence of this type of temporal healing. The body is inextricably tied to spatiality and temporality, since space and time are felt most profoundly through the corporeal schema, through our bodies. I believe that this temporal blending brings about a particular healing sensibility and self-awareness as ritual participants are forced to grapple with past pain while looking for ways to change destructive patterns so as to live a more balanced life in the future. In this chapter I also discuss the “Anthropology of Experience” in explaining what it is like to feel changed from doing fieldwork.

Next, in Chapter IV, I discuss how rituals such as dance possession ceremonies draw on the concept of mimesis in order to generate shared knowledge. Furthermore, I explore how these ceremonies utilize repetitive movement as a way of
changing old patterns and habits. My theoretical framing draws on Michael Taussig’s work on mimesis and how he conceptualizes the body against the backdrop of Michel Foucault’s ideas about the body. I consider the therapeutic potential of combining repetitive movement with what I call radical movement,\textsuperscript{16} or the moment of rupture in a ceremony. I ask, what is it about repetitive action that is calming and why is it necessary to strike a balance between repetition and radical movement? Additionally, I bring in my knowledge and experience as a dancer and more specifically my work as a Bharata Natyam dancer.

Finally, I conclude with a two-part conclusion, Chapters V and VI. First, I take the reader through a montage-like narrative of various moments I had in Mali that have made me genuinely question what I believe in spiritually. Then, I explore the sense of what I call “being held” and returning home that is a sentiment often spoken of in dance possession ceremonies. In order to make a larger statement about embodiment studies and the importance of focusing on lived experience, I also weave in my current bodily state—I describe various large and small happenings and how they are felt in my body as I am writing my conclusion. The ending is of a two part purpose: First, it is left relatively ambiguous so as to make the reader put together certain puzzle pieces and question what it is they believe. More importantly, however, I wish to evoke the timelessness of bodily experience in a way that is similar to how the body experiences dance possession ceremonies. Abu consistently told me that I needed to keep returning to these ceremonies in order to do my research. My research was always and only in process. Instead of answering every little detailed question I

\textsuperscript{16} “Radical movement,” for me, means un-choreographed, freely-moving movement. Oftentimes this movement is spontaneous, which is why I’m somewhat equating “radical movement” to the involuntary/spontaneous movement that comes when a spirit enters its medium.
would try to ask, he insisted I participate in these ceremonies myself to begin to understand.

Therefore, I invite you, the reader, to breath deeply and take in with all your senses what you may imagine as the experience of being immersed in a dance possession ceremony. Enjoy both the pain and the pleasure of reading about these ceremonies; go with the visceral.
II.

C’est quoi ca?17 OR: What I Mean and Where I Was, A Situating

17 “C’est quoi ça” is a French phrase meaning, “That? What’s that?” It was a very frequent utterance by my host-niece, Nana.
The start of a dance possession ceremony

A possessed participant whose spirit is making him dance
A typical street scene in Bamako

My host-niece and great friend, Nana

A huge pile of burning trash a short walk away from my Malian academic advisor’s office. Piles of burning trash were a very common sight in Bamako, but this one was particularly large and striking looking against the sky.
What we need is a reading that hovers close to the body (Desjarlais 31).


**Background**

Last spring, I studied abroad in Mali for four months through the School for International Training, otherwise known as SIT. Mali is a landlocked West African country neighbored by Senegal and Mauritania to the west, Algeria to the north, Niger to the east, and Burkina Faso, Côte D’Ivoire, and Guinea to the south. Its climate is incredibly dry and dusty for the majority of the year. There is a four-five month rainy season, from about June to October, where temperatures hover around the low 90’s during the day. Early November to early February is the “cool” seasons where daytime temperatures tend to be in the high 80’s. After comes the hot and dry season, from March to the end of May, which occurred during the majority of the time I was in Mali. Daytime temperatures during the hot season are typically around the early 100’s to 110. Unless a family had air conditioning, which was incredibly rare, most Malians slept outside under mosquito nets \(^{18}\) during this time.

Mali has been considered (until recently with the coup d’état which I mention in Chapter VI) a shining star of democracy in West Africa. \(^{19}\) Mali fell under French colonial rule in 1892 and gained independence on September 22\(^{nd}\), 1960. After a couple (mostly non-violent) coup’s in the 60’s and 80’s, Mali has been mostly democratically ruled.

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\(^{18}\) Malaria is rampant in Mali. Even during the dry season, (when I was in Mali), where rates are at their lowest, two out of the six girls on my program got Malaria (one of whom was on anti-malarials), and Maman and my host nephew Papi also came down with Malaria. It’s such a common occurrence, however, that it’s treated like a bad cold or the flu. That is, if you have the means to go get antibiotics at your local pharmacy.

\(^{19}\) Mali has by no means been an example of a perfect democracy, but for the most part, until recently, has been relatively peaceful and stable. Still, Mali suffers, as many poor African countries due, (and actually many countries in general), from horrible wealth distribution and government corruption. Mali is one of the poorest countries in Africa yet hosts some incredibly wealthy businessmen and politicians. The history and intricacies of Mali’s political and economic climate could be reserved for an entirely other thesis.
With the French having ruled for several years, French inevitably became the “official” language of Mali. In fact, one of the main reasons I chose to go to Mali was in hopes of working on my French. I realized when I got there, however, that Bamanan, a local dialect, was actually the more official language of Mali. To make matters even more confusing, as with many African countries, there were countless other dialects spoken that sounded very similar to Bamanan. My host family spoke Songhay with each other, Bamanan out in public, and French to me. I picked up a bit of Bamanan during my time in Mali, but not enough to fully converse. There were enough Malians I met who spoke French (though not so much at the ceremony) so I felt mostly able to communicate.

Malians in Bamako, the capital, are generally very welcoming and even overly friendly at times towards Americans. I never felt unsafe walking down the street by myself, only frustrated by the overwhelming amount of attention I received as a petite, white, blonde girl. Religiously, Mali is majority Muslim, so we were told by SIT to always cover our knees and shoulders when outside of the house. Hearing the five prayer calls throughout the day and evening is definitely a part of the Malian rhythm of life.

Mali has also bred several world-renowned musicians such as Amadou and Mariam and Ali Farka Touré. The vibrant music scene, dance, and fine arts scene, was embedded in the culture and very fun to be around if only for a short time.

These are the skeletal basics of the country mixed in with some tidbits; clearly it is hard to sum up an entire country’s history and textures in a couple paragraphs.
Each SIT program has a theme around which academic work centers, and the theme for my program was Health, Gender, and Community Empowerment. For the majority of my time, except for about two weeks worth of excursions, I stayed with a Malian host family in Kalaban Koura, a wealthy Malian neighborhood on the quiet side of the Niger River that divides the city in two. My host family consisted of my mother, Maman, my sister Hany, 28, my brother Dra, 25, my niece Nana, 10, and my nephew Papi, 13. These were family members that lived in the house that I lived in. We also spent much time with my sister Mimi who was 22, recently married, and recently pregnant, and my sister Fatouma, who had two young daughters, Safia and Coucou, who I would consider my nieces as well. The concept of a family in Mali is much more sprawling than the average American family. Close friends are often referred to affectionately as “sister,” “mother,” “aunt,” etc., depending on the age-relation. I grew unusually close to my family compared to the other American girls on my program, due to, I think, both my family and my openness.

The program was run by Malian program directors, primarily Modibo Coulibaly and Lamine Bagayako. For the first couple months, we took class every day in an SIT-owned school in a nearby neighborhood. Professors from the local universities and other academics and prominent community members would also come lecture from time to time. Some lecture topics included women and men’s traditional roles, modes of feminism, the health care system, Islam and other forms of spirituality, and nutrition. The topics varied greatly. We also took fieldtrips to several feminist NGO’s, clinics, arts centers, and community centers. The SIT program is
structured such that the last month is reserved for independent research. This independent research is the capstone of any SIT program.

Because of my interest and past research on material feminism and embodiment, I decided to interview Malian women and men of all ages on any and all issues related to the body. I kept my questions and topic broad so that I could piece out what about the body was most talked about or considered most important by Malians instead of projecting what I believed would be the most salient issues. More specifically, I conducted over thirty interviews with Malians formally, and many more informally, about sexuality, death, body image, eating habits, sleeping patterns, Islam, animism, spirituality, magic, spirit possession ceremonies, psychological and emotional well being, body ownership, and death, all in relation to the body and how the body experiences each of these phenomenon’s. My project was titled “Sex, Death, Spirits, and the Daily Grind: An Exploration of the Lived Experience in Bamako, Mali.” Responses to all of the questions I asked ended up being very varied, and did not follow any particular pattern in terms of what men or women or people of relative social class responded. There were some similar responses, but my “data” was by no means easy to organize into categories. To oversimplify, I took this to mean that the issue of embodiment is dispersive and complex; there is no formula or quantitative way to write up an analysis about a project on embodiment. Additionally, if you

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20 Some of my questions were as follows: What do you think of your body? Do you like your body? Do you think that your body, mind, and soul are connected? What is the most important of the three? Can you feel sadness in your body? Can you feel stress in your body? Do you judge people by their body or movements? Do you want to gain weight or lose weight and if so, why? Do you consider health important? Who does your body belong to? Do you and your husband talk about sex? What does the Koran say about the female body? How much does a Muslim woman need to cover up? How much of your body do you cover and why? Can a Malian woman show her sexual pleasure or desire? What happens to the body after death? Are you afraid of dying?
really get people to talk about their bodies, rather than retort back what they think they should be saying, responses will be all over the place and incredibly fascinating.

Because my project focused on embodiment, my academic advisor, Dr. Boubacar Mody Guindo, thought it would be a good idea for me to attend what he referred to as a “dance of the possessed” ceremony to observe how embodiment is enacted in these types of rituals. In early April, Guindo contacted the head master of the ceremony, Abu Diarra, to see if I would be able to attend an upcoming ceremony. Abu obliged, and told Guindo to tell me to bring along two chickens, one red and one white, and ten kolas\textsuperscript{21} to the ceremony. One Friday morning a week later, Guindo drove me to the village of Gwana, about forty-five minutes outside of Bamako, where I met Abu Diarra, the head master, and Mary Coulibaly, Abu’s apprentice and translator. Soon after, Guindo left to pass the day at a nearby mosque since he felt that being there was against Islam. Curiously enough, I soon found out that most attendants of the ceremony considered themselves Muslim, and Abu Diarra believed himself to be a devout Muslim.\textsuperscript{22}

The ceremony took place every Friday around four in the afternoon, and attracted Malians from Bamako, Segou, and other surrounding villages. The

\textsuperscript{21} Kola nuts are caffeine-containing nuts from evergreen trees that are used in a variety of ceremonial settings across Western Africa. Traditionally, for example, when a Malian woman gets married, guests give the bride kola nuts as a special present. In dance possession ceremonies, they are considered an offering to the marabout who is leading the ceremony.

\textsuperscript{22} The religious contradictions regarding Islam and dance possession ceremonies are incredibly fascinating but will not be fully covered in my thesis. To sum up, while many Muslim Malians I spoke with believed these ceremonies to be sacrilege, they also feared them immensely, pointing to the \textit{ultimate} proof of belief. Furthermore, most participants in the dance possession ceremonies that I was a part of identified strongly with being Muslim. The leader, in fact, Abu, worked as a marabout, which is a traditional Muslim holy man and teacher. In the end of my thesis, I return to the question of spiritual contradictions through a montage-like series of moments that made me question my own belief in gods and other deities and face my own contradictory belief system.
ceremonies were held by a group of self-identifying Muslim griots\textsuperscript{23}, translators, and various apprentices. The head master, Abu Diarra had been working as a marabout\textsuperscript{24} and génitigi\textsuperscript{25} for over thirty-eight years and is in contact with several other “head masters” throughout Europe.\textsuperscript{26} The main translator, Mary, was in charge of recording everything that Abu, the head master, said during the ceremony and any other thoughts Abu deemed important that his spirit or other spirits told him in trance or in his dreams. Mary was Abu’s translator in both a literal and more general sense. Mary especially paid attention to the last part of the ceremony where Abu would give his final parting words in trance. Mary was also Abu’s unofficial assistant and most experienced apprentice. Often Abu would refer me to Mary when I had a more specific question about the ceremony. Additionally, since Mary was fluent in French unlike many other participants, he helped me out a lot and explained aspects of the ceremony to me unprompted. In a way, he became my unofficial “guardian.”

Abu also had several apprentices, some who were also griots, and most of who were women, who participated in the ceremonies every Friday. Unlike the role of a griot or marabout, Abu and Mary continually stressed to me that one becomes a dancer. In other words, these women were serving as apprentices to Abu in order to learn how to best communicate with their spirits and develop a transformative relationship with their spirit; they were not born with this knowledge. Generally speaking, according to Abu and Mary, “being possessed” was by no means considered an illness or taboo. While sometimes sickness was considered cause of

\textsuperscript{23} A singer / storyteller in West Africa; a griot carries on the oral traditions of a family or village.  
\textsuperscript{24} A Muslim holy man, religious teacher and leader  
\textsuperscript{25} The Franbara (a colloquial term for the combination of French and Bamanan) word for “head of spirits” or “head master.”  
\textsuperscript{26} “In contact” meaning, spiritually, not necessarily physically.
possession, being sick was not a prerequisite for being possessed. Mary informed me that he was “très possédé”27 and couldn’t be happier. While the actual dance possession ceremony itself was meant to bring out spirits in apprentices and others, some people, like Mary and Abu were able to communicate with their spirits so fluidly that they were always in a bit of a trance. In other words, they considered themselves to be always somewhat possessed.

That first Friday morning, I spent the whole day in Gwana, without my advisor or anyone I had previously met. First, I waited inside a hot mud brick hut with several women. Then, I witnessed the sacrifice of the chickens I had brought. After, I waited in the hut some more before eating with members of the village and others who had come for the ceremony. Finally, I experienced the ceremony. At one point in the afternoon, Guindo came to tell me he was ready to drive back to Bamako. The ceremony had just barely started. He asked if I felt comfortable staying there alone; Abu assured him I was in good hands, and insisted I could not leave. If I left, I would break the flow of the ceremony. I stayed on one condition: As long as I could give money to someone to get me more water. Abu commissioned his son, Bourama, to drive his moto to a nearby town to buy two more Diago water bottles for me.

Early on, when I was waiting in the hut for preparations to be made for sacrificing the two chickens, Mary came to tell me that Abu believed I was a very special white woman that his spirit had been telling him about for two years. He believed, as I came to believe, that it was my calling to come to the village of Gwana. Mary confirmed that I was this special woman in his records of past ceremonies. The

27 Very possessed.
timing of when I came all made sense in relation to what Abu’s spirit had been telling him. Abu later told me in trance that our spirits were married. He would often joke about this in front of his actual wife who did not seem to care. At first I felt incredibly uncomfortable with this, thinking he was crossing a boundary or making his wife upset. However, the more I saw his wife laugh along with him, and the more I came to understand what it is for someone to be in a trance state (namely, absent, in many ways, from their day to day desires and/or habits), I slowly became less uncomfortable. That being said, Abu took a liking to me, which allowed me to come out to the village to be a part of the weekly ceremony whenever I wanted. After my first time in Gwana, Abu told me to contact his son Bourama whenever I felt the desire to come speak with someone at the ceremony or attend a ceremony. I slowly began to take advantage of this offer, and Bourama would happily come and pick me up on his moto wherever I was. Our half-hour windy rides to Gwana were often spent in informal conversation about the ceremony, life in the States, our backgrounds, spirituality, and any other questions that came up. Bourama was incredibly helpful at trying to answer any questions I had and making me feel comfortable enough to ask whatever I wanted to know.

Because of this particular relationship I formed with Abu, Mary, and Bourama, I was granted access to particular spaces considered very sacred, and was allowed to ask questions to Abu and Mary about the ceremony and dance possession.

I also met several other people through the ceremony, and became particularly close to a woman named Nene who I interviewed extensively about her involvement with dance possession ceremonies and other issues relating to the body. Nene and I
often went to Gwana together or I would stop by her house both announced and unannounced for lunch or just talking time. She was a very maternal figure for me.

My host family, particularly Hany, disapproved of my participation in these ceremonies in Gwana, as they were largely frightened by dance possession and believed it to be sacrilege. After I returned home from my first visit, Hany threatened to forbid me from attending any of these ceremonies. Maman, however, was simultaneously fascinated and frightened by dance possession, and she even alluded to her past participation in these types of ceremonies. I spent many conversations skirting around her participation in these ceremonies, and one night, she made explicit her connection to possession ceremonies.\footnote{I will expand on this fateful night when Maman told me explicitly that she had frequented dance possession ceremonies later on in my conclusion.}

Many of my Malian friends, and even one of my program directors, Lamine, began opening up to me about their own experiences with spirits, while at the same time insisting that it was wrong and I should not be going to these types of ceremonies. They were fearful, mostly, that I would become caught in a bad moment, in the throes of possession, unaware of its depth and force. Their fear was strong evidence for me of the power of these ceremonies.

**Anthropological Boundaries**

While I felt relatively comfortable in Gwana, I too, sensed a powerful force from these ceremonies and consequently felt somewhat guarded and vulnerable as an outsider. Just the mere fact that I was unable to stay hydrated without having someone ride to go get me a bottle of water left me feeling a bit uneasy. Not to
mention that the majority of the people at the ceremony did not speak French, so I did not have an immediately verbal way of communicating with many participants. I do believe that this language barrier allowed me to open my senses up to other forms of communication, and gave me a keener awareness of other sensorial aspects of the ceremony. Still, though, while I was certainly open to the transformative healing aspects of these ceremonies and participated in them, I cannot say I was entirely immersed without boundaries.

In an earlier paper titled “Counting the Days in Dinners: The Necessary Porosity of an Anthropologist and The Bodily Integrity of Her Interlocutors,” I write about this issue of immersion at length. I argue that seeing the contradictions and nuances and cracks in a group’s embodied life and then comparing and contrasting that to your own sense of embodiment adds a particular sort of richness to any other research you’re supposed to be doing. I explain, though, that even through my mimicry, as a white, upper-middle class American young woman, I obviously was having a slightly different embodied experience than the average Malian because of my background. Yet, to conduct good fieldwork, I believe that an anthropologist must let her environment and others around permeate her. It is through this softening, through this mimetic and immersive means that an anthropologist grows a certain awareness of the culture she is studying. Boundaries must be let down. The fear of “going native,” perhaps, is there, but this fear is absurd in that you are you and it is impossible to become someone else.29 Still, privilege must be acknowledged. My white, colonial body felt okay and comfortable with adopting others’ bodily patterns

29 Explained by Professor Gillian Goslinga in the class “Ritual, Health, and Healing.”
and habits even if I knew there could be consequences—like getting sick from the tap water or being caught in the throes of possession. My vantage point as a privileged college student did not give me an entirely comprehensive perspective of the gravity of what the ceremonies I was participating in. Moreover, logistically speaking, I simply did not spend enough time in Gwana to be boundary-less; I believe that takes years, if it is even possible.

Still, I hold true that the body serves as somewhat of a common denominator since we all have sentient bodies. Yes, bodily experience is both incredibly subjective and affected by sociocultural and historical processes. Yes, the history that each and every one of us inevitable holds in our bodies—both our personal histories and the histories of our ancestors—is not something that is easily relatable for people from very different backgrounds. I believe, however, that part of the mission of an anthropologist is to uncover these forms of imbalance and inequality and bring them to light. It’s impossible to let someone seep into you and seep into another so much to the point of complete and total bodily and emotional understanding—obviously. Even so, we cannot allow this inability of complete understanding to paralyze us. Our bodies are incapable of knowing everything, but are still highly important mediums for communication especially when in a foreign country. As Robert Desjarlais states early on in his ethnography, we must begin to achieve a basic understanding of the embodied everyday if we are to feel empathy for another culture so distant from our own. Despite the fact that fieldwork conducted by privileged Westerner’s is fraught with echoes of colonialism and privilege, “we must allow ourselves to be swallowed”
It is in this vain that I conducted my fieldwork (Baker 2012).

**Methodology**

When I first began research on dance possession ceremonies, I had a long list of questions to ask participants. Since I wanted to specifically focus on how the body experiences possession, some my questions were as follows:

1. How did you become a possessed dancer?
2. Why do you participate in this? What is the goal?
3. Is it tiring to dance, or does it energize you?
4. How does your spirit influence your body?
5. What do spirits like?
6. Why do some people think that ritual possession ceremonies are anti-Muslim?
7. How does your body feel while you dance?
8. Why do you participate in these ceremonies? For spiritual reasons?
9. How did you learn to dance in these ceremonies? Do you like participating or is it more of a calling/necessity?

Pretty early on, however, I realized that I would not have the time or space to ask a laundry list of specific questions. Much of my research, I learned, would come from participating and observing these ceremonies as opposed to getting in every little question. Inevitably, my questions changed over time anyway. Additionally, while some of my trips to Gwana were on Fridays for a ceremony, others were more informally planned just to give me time to talk with Abu and Mary. Luckily, I had Bourama, Nene, and Mary to ask questions to about what Abu was saying in
Bamanan or what was going on. I am hugely thankful for their time and patience in helping me understand aspects of these ceremonies that I would otherwise not be able to understand both because of the language barrier and just for the mere fact that I was a stranger.

Furthermore, as I began to explain earlier, I strongly believe that the research I conducted on a variety of embodiment issues has informed my approach to my work on dance possession ceremonies and the way that the body experiences ritual. I view this work as foundational to my research on dance possession ceremonies both in and outside of the field. I believe, as Desjarlais so eloquently stated in the introduction to his ethnography *Body and Emotion*, that understanding, as much as possible, how people live in their bodies, and what their bodies mean to them, is the first step to understanding another culture.

Nevertheless, it’s important to state early on that the work that follows is from my point of view. While I convey my interlocutor’s stories and experiences, they are told through me as an onlooker. This may seem obvious, and while I do weave in other ethnographies and theories, the bodily experience I speak of is my own. I was able to attend and experience these ceremonies, and be a part of what several people before me have been a part of, yet my uniquely embodied experience is my own, rather than a general statement about how *everyone* experiences these types of ceremonies. I speak from my own vantage point yet hope that my experience and writing can help shed light on the transformative possibilities within these types of ceremonies. I hope that others will be able to relate to some of the feelings and visceral responses I describe while sensing that they, too, are a part of something
larger, something more infinite and vast than what the eyes meets or what is easily verbalizable, something that evokes the feeling of being held.
III.

Temporal Healing, Bodily Presence, and Transformation
Nene and her daughter.

In the middle of a dance possession ceremony, a woman helping another woman who is possessed and needing bodily support.
Inside ritual and sacred space where energies are being woven, people's imagination and consciousness can be moved through time backward or forward. It is as if the awakened psyche is pulled toward those materials it was not able to recall otherwise (Somé 1998: 32).

But possession is more than a domain of philosophical reflection and academic exegesis; it is also an area of human passion in which individuals of diverse social standing are thrown together (Stoller 1989: 210-211).

We need a framework that enables us to examine what it means to be who we are, and at the same time encourages us to realize who we want to become (Bakare-Yusuf).
In this Chapter, I ask: Why does healing necessitate exploration of past, present, and future experiences? Why is it necessary to surrender to the possibility of being healed? Additionally, how does following ones’ calling relate to healing? By sharing both Nene’s story and my own, I will provide illustrative examples of how dance possession ceremonies involve what I call “temporal healing.” I consider “temporal healing” consist of two parts: First, a particular type of healing that draws on both individual and collective histories and trauma and attempts to rework, or intercede, in a negative cycle to promote greater well-being for both individuals and communities. Secondly, “temporal healing” draws on the concept of destiny—letting your present situation, which is sometimes in part inevitable, remind you of a past encounter in order to help heal you. As I will explain, Nene and I both were drawn towards dance possession ceremonies and felt healed from them.

I begin with a brief recap of the structure of the dance possession ceremonies I participated in. Then, I move on to talking about Nene’s story and her journey of coming to Abu’s ceremonies and being healed by and through them. Her story in particular relates to following ones’ calling, as she was told as a little girl she would eventually participate in dance possession ceremonies. Next, I recount my own story of how Abu interceded for me to redirect my energy towards moving forward in my life rather than dwelling on the past. Finally, I explain what Edith Turner and other

30 Individuals comprise communities. The health of particular individuals adds to the overall wellbeing (or sickness/unhappiness/etc.) of a community. Therefore, dance possession ceremonies seek to heal individuals through communal means (ceremonies) in order to ultimately help heal the community as a whole.

31 Nene herself used the word “destiny” often in speaking about how it was her destiny to come to these ceremonies, and how it was destiny that she and I met.

32 I write “in part inevitable” because I believe, like Nene and Abu, in the concept of a calling. I will expand on this later in the chapter, but Nene and I both experienced a calling towards these dance ceremonies, and towards each other.
anthropologists have called “The Anthropology of Experience.” It is here that I bring up questions of feeling changed and transformed through fieldwork, and gathering a sense and power from a ritual that is hard to put into words. I theoretically frame my ethnographic work by drawing on Somé’s work on ritual and healing, Stoller’s participatory fieldwork, and Edith Turner’s experience of being changed after she witnessed an extraordinary happening during a possession ceremony. Ultimately, I attempt to answer questions about personal and collective agency in the process of becoming, how healing necessitates community, and the feeling of being changed through a ritual. The experiences that I draw upon, Nene’s and my own, were felt viscerally, through the body, and it is from this bodily knowledge I write.

**Brief Recap of the Structure of the Ceremony**

As I explained earlier, the dance possession ceremonies I attended were held every Friday in the village of Gwana, a bumpy 11-kilometer-long ride southwest of Bamako. The ceremonies were held by a group of mostly self-identified Muslims, and led by Abu Diarra, a marabout\(^{33}\) and *genitigi*.\(^{34}\) Mary Coulibaly was Abu’s translator/transcriber, which meant he recorded every happening at each ceremony, particularly what Abu’s spirit said, and helped interpret each ceremony’s importance. When I was in Gwana, he helped me immensely by explaining what was going on, as he simultaneously furiously recorded what was happening. Other regulars at the ceremony included a handful of female apprentices, who were Abu’s disciples or students and in the process of learning how to communicate best with their spirts.

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\(^{33}\) As explained in Chapter II, a marabout is a Muslim holy man, religious teacher, and leader.

\(^{34}\) As explained in Chapter II, a génitigi is the Franbara (colloquial term for the combination of French and Bamanan) word for head of spirits/ceremony master.
Other people from surrounding villages and cities came to the ceremonies on a fairly regular basis, but oftentimes, too, there would be first timers at a ceremony.

The reasons for participating in and/or simply attending these ceremonies were not straightforward or simple. Some people clearly explained that they felt *physically* ill and Abu was their medicine man helping them to find a cure. Others explained they felt *off* or just bizarre. Some spoke about communicating with their spirit in a dream and needing to reconcile and/or further that communication, and others were just brought by family members or friends that insisted they come with them to experience the ceremony. Some people explained that they came for the dancing and the energy that these ceremonies fostered. Still, others were just attracted by the theatrical element of these ceremonies, and looked on from a distance to appreciate the commotion.

However, every reason given for participation and/or attendance at these ceremonies related back to the fact that there was inarguably something powerful about these ceremonies and the space that was created. *I don’t always know why I’m here*, one woman told me, *there’s just something I like here. I really like it.* People at the ceremony felt its pull. Whether that was “just” something like the dancing aspect, or something more like feeling each other’s presence, I believe that the healing that went on at these ceremonies depended on a community presence. Each week, a diverse group of both old comers and new comers came to Gwana. At the ceremony, differences were on display and inevitably negotiated. In *Wombs and Alien Spirits*, Janice Boddy explains, “possession performs a therapeutic function”

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35 Some of my interlocutors at the ceremony were unable to fully articulate why they were there or what their illness or discomfort was, but they were able to say they felt off or strange or bizarre.

36 Souvent, je ne sais pas pourquoi je suis ici, mais il y a quelque chose que j’aime. Je l’aime beaucoup.
While I do not want to reduce possession ceremonies to a form of therapy, they do have a deeply healing aspect to them. At the first dance possession ceremony I attended, Abu repeatedly explained to me how we all have spirits, but it is just a matter of being conscious of them and/or learning how to deal with them if they’re causing pain and trouble. The understanding that humans can be inhabited by a dead person’s spirit, or a spirit in general—another being—points to the connectivity, collectivity, and intertwined relationships among other humans and the surrounding world. We are not separate from our own histories, or the histories of people around us; learning to deal with this is innately therapeutic. At dance possession ceremonies, worlds collide as spirits are evoked and people from all backgrounds are brought together: kindergarten teachers, musicians, dancers, the unemployed, wealthy Bamako residents, and poor village dwellers. Dance possession ceremonies demand we think about the baggage we carry in our movements, in our thought, in our breath, in our step, and in our visions of each other and ourselves both literally and metaphorically.

This is all experienced through our bodies, through the visceral responses that these ceremonies evoke. Below, is ethnographic evidence of this type of collective, sensorial experience and the transformations that happen at these ceremonies.

**Nene’s story.**

“And memory allows the body to greet the world with greater physical ease the more often we have a particular sensory experience” (Mortimer-Sandilands 273).

“The woman said,” Nene unselfconsciously looked at me with her uneven eyes, one drooping far lower than the other. She paused dramatically for a moment
before continuing, “She said, ‘you’re going to have a job. You’re going to have a house. You’re going to have a car. You’re going to have a husband. But one day… One day, you’ll dance like those women.’”

I met Nene at my first dance possession ceremony. While everyone was sitting around in the drum circle, waiting for the ceremony to get going, she mumbled something to me in French, recognizing that I would feel more at ease knowing that there was at least one other French-speaker at the ceremony. “Can you watch this?”

She wanted me to watch her bag while she went to the bathroom. I was startled by her French, having only spoken with one other French speaker in the last several hours, Mary, the translator. “Yes!”

We became aware of each other’s presence throughout the ceremony, but didn’t communicate much until the music died down. Finally, she approached me again, saying something about being a kindergarten teacher. I had been wrapped up in the overwhelming experience of being a part of my first ceremony that I couldn’t quite find the words to speak French. Somehow, I told her I was doing research in Mali on issues relating to the body. She seemed friendly, and interested in my project, so we exchanged numbers and made some vague plan to meet up in the coming week.

The following Monday, on April 11th, I took a cab down to her workplace, a private kindergarten, and in a moment of role reversals found her more surprised than I was about my timeliness. Malians are notorious for being very, very late. She invited me to sit down in her classroom, and I asked if she would be comfortable being

37 Elle m’a dit… Elle m’a dit: Tu vas avoir un travail. Tu vas avoir une maison. Tu vas avoir une voiture. Tu vas avoir un mari. Mais un jour… Un jour, tu vas danser. Tu vas danser comme celles-là.
38 Tu peux regarder ça?
39 Oui!
recorded during our interview. After my initial bout of questions about sexuality, body image, body modesty, and religion, the conversation somehow began to weave towards dance possession ceremonies.

She explained to me how when she was a young girl, living in Togo, she went to a village with her mother to see a woman like Abu dance. The woman was possessed, and attracted many observers from surrounding villages. One day, the woman looked directly at Nene and told her that she, too, one day, would dance. She told her “This [these sorts of ceremonies] will be your work.” The woman told her it was her destiny dance in these ceremonies—that while she would have a job, a house, and a husband, all of the “normal” things in life—she would dance one day, she would become possessed by her spirit. If not, she would become ill. There is an interesting mirroring, here, with the fact that Abu told me I was the “important white woman” that he had been hearing about from his spirit for two and a half years. He and Mary were convinced that I was the one they had been waiting for. After participating in a few of these ceremonies, I came to believe it was my calling, too, to participate in these ceremonies.  

Back to Nene, however, about a year ago, she fell terribly ill to the point where she could barely walk, talk, eat, or hold her child. She went to several medical specialists, took many tests, and nothing came up. Finally, she visited her husband’s family to ask for advice, and her sister in law explained to her that this wasn’t an illness for the hospitals. “You have to go see a clairvoyant,” Nene’s sister in law

40 Ça va être ton travail.
41 I expand on this concept of my coming to the dance possession ceremonies as a calling in the final two chapters.
42 Il faut aller voir un voyant.
told her, “You have to go back home, you have to go back to your village, or to a place like that.” And, at the slight dismay of her husband (who eventually came to understand), she did so. When she finally arrived at Abu’s, he told her she must start her healing process right away. That very day, Abu began her treatment through sacrificing goats and chickens and prescribing her herbal medications that she began taking on a very regular basis. Ever since, Nene has attended these ceremonies nearly every Friday.

Nene’s illness reminded her of that particular interaction with the woman in the village, and the memory compelled her to go seek out a possession ceremony. Nene knew that in order to be healed, she must follow her calling. She knew that if she did not attend a possession ceremony, her illness would continue and worsen. In The Healing Wisdom of Africa Malidoma Somé explains “Ritual provides not only healing but also the recovery of memory and the reaffirmation of each individual’s life purpose... Inside ritual and sacred space where energies are being woven, people’s imagination and consciousness can be moved through time backward or forward” (Somé 1998: 32). In dance possession ceremonies, oftentimes to experience healing, one must first be reminded of one’s past, and the events that have led up to creating this somewhat inevitable present situation. While Nene has had agency in her life, it was somewhat inevitable that she would become ill as a reminder to go seek out these types of ceremonies. In other words, Nene was reminded of her experience in a village in Togo as an eleven-year-old girl through her illness. The process of becoming, therefore, can be thought of like the process of rituals themselves: within

43 Il faut retourner chez toi, il faut retourner à ton village, ou à un endroit comme ça-la.
the repetition or inevitability, there is room for transformation dependent upon the way that you take hold of your own life. There is agency in the process of becoming. Dance possession ceremonies show that if you open yourself up to what is happening to you without judgment—as Nene went to Abu’s to search for a cure for her unfamiliar illness—healing and transformation are possible. We are not stuck or static, but able to assert agency over our own lives. Nene explained that by following Abu’s instructions, by taking the herbal medicinals he prescribed, and by attending these ceremonies, she knew she would be healed. She reconnected with her past and her calling through a unique bodily experience and took hold of her own life.

That being said, bodily sensations are inextricably tied to spatiality and temporality, since space and time are felt most profoundly through the corporeal schema, through our bodies. The feeling of first falling in love is felt in the heart, the feeling of loss is experienced in the pit of the stomach, the feeling of complete and utter happiness radiates throughout the body. It is possible to access these sensations both as you’re feeling them and if they’ve already happened. Our kinesthetic awareness, our body awareness, makes it possible for us to connect the emotional and physical body. The temporal blending evoked in dance possession ceremonies brings about a particular healing sensibility and self-awareness as ritual participants are forced to grapple with past pain while looking for ways to change destructive patterns so as to live a more balanced life in the future. Nene’s sickness was not going to be

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44 The type of agency I’m referring to here (as I briefly mentioned in Chapter I, “Theory On/Of/And Spirit Possession”), is along the lines of how Saba Mahmood conceptualizes agency, rather than the stereotypically liberal, Western conception of agency. In Politics of Piety, Mahmood urges her readers to focus on the way norms are “lived and inhabited, aspired to, reached for, and consummated” (Mahmood: 23) She asks us to dismantle our knee-jerk liberal conception of the word “agency” and open ourselves up to the different forms of agency within different cultures and contexts. Agency includes consciousness, choice, and fulfillment in whatever actions one chooses to take.
helped by going to the hospital, but by attending dance possession ceremonies on a regular basis and by making the necessary sacrifices, she healed herself. “It’s not a sickness for the hospital,” Nene’s sister-in-law told her. Moreover, Nene told me in our first interview “the doctors weren’t able to do anything. They gave me all sorts of medications but nothing worked.” Nene interpreted her illness as a calling towards Abu and the dance possession ceremonies—and as proof that the woman she met as a young girl in Togo was right. “The woman told me: if you don’t become a part of a ceremony like this one, you’re going to fall ill.” Her healing process then began as she attended these ceremonies. This is not a miracle, however, but to be expected from dance possession ceremonies. Reconciliation is key to these types of healing ceremonies.

In the conclusion of my independent study project in Mali, which covered a broad range of embodiment issues including sexuality, death, religion, body image, body ownership, the relationship between mind, body, and soul, and finally, dance possession, I rhetorically asked, “How can we combine the fleeting and the eternal?” (Baker 2011). In other words, I was searching for how to reconcile with both mundane and weighty moments that resonate through the medium of your body. Not knowing how to answer directly, I launched into an explanation of recognizing the continuous renewal of our relationship with the surrounding world, and the empowerment we ought to feel because of changing historical, social, and environmental factors. Though I still believe that there is no simple answer to my

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45 Ce n’est pas une maladie pour l’hôpital.
46 Les médecins ne pouvaient pas faire rien. Ils m’ont donné des médications mais ce n’a pas marché.
47 La dame m’a dit: si non, tu vas tomber malade.
question, I would now boldly assert that dance possession ceremonies offer perhaps
the best remedy I have seen or heard of for reconciling the fleeting and the eternal,
and the finite and the infinite through their constant shift between past, present, and
future. The fleeting moment in which the woman told Nene she must participate in a
possession ceremony one day was reconciled when Nene did so and then became
healed from these ceremonies.

To reap the benefits from these ceremonies, one must participate and/or be
somewhat involved. The kind of participation, though, can vary from person to
person. Though Nene talked openly about attending the ceremonies, bringing
sacrificial animals, and taking herbal medications prescribed by Abu, I still wasn’t
sure of the extent of her participation in the actual ceremony. From what I saw when
we were both there, she did not participate in the dancing. ‘Do you think someday
you’ll dance?’ I was curious why she didn’t step into the center and dance like the
other women. ‘No,’ she answered. ‘I’m not exactly like the others who dance. It
could maybe happen someday, but for now my spirit comes to me in my dreams. He
tells me things. And when I was sick, he told me I wasn’t going to die.’ Nene’s
participation was subtle—she did not swing her arms or shake her hips like the other
women, but she showed up every week and followed through with what Abu
instructed her to do. Her spirit didn’t come to her while she was dancing, but instead
in her dreams. Still, she felt her spirit’s presence in her body.

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48 Est-ce que tu penses que tu vas danser?
49 Non.
50 Ce n’est pas comme des autres qui dansent. Ça peut venir, mais dans mes rêves. Il [her spirit] dit des choses. Et quand j’étais malade, il m’a dit que je n’allais pas mourir.
Transformation from dance possession ceremonies is dependent upon community participation and is necessarily collective, yet focuses on the wellbeing of individuals who comprise the community. The healing that Nene experienced came about through the community’s support. When she and Abu first sacrificed the goats and chickens at Nene’s initial ceremony, everybody in the surrounding area came to watch and then eat the meat from these animals to support Nene’s healing. “Everyone came,” she told me emphatically, using her arms to illustrate the amount of people who came and cared. Then, when she sacrificed a goat at her house, she invited all of her friends and family and neighbors to come and eat the meat.

Nene’s own participation was in the fact that she believed, the fact that she followed through with what Abu instructed her to do, and the fact that she consistently showed up. While these ceremonies rely on community participation, not everyone’s contribution is the same. Nene didn’t dance, but she still added greatly to the healing energy of the ceremony.

The ceremony necessitated Nene’s emotional and physical presence to help her heal. In the same vain, in speaking about the importance of bodily presence,

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51 The community aspect of these ceremonies was present at all times—not just in Nene’s case. For example, oftentimes when a woman was possessed during a ceremony, her skirt would start to slip a bit as she danced or shook or moved her body in some abrupt way. Immediately, another woman who wasn’t possessed would run up to help her with a string. At first I thought this was symbolic of something larger, but when I asked Mary and Nene, they simply explained that these women were making sure the possessed women’s clothes didn’t come off. Onlookers and participators were often sort of in a guardian type role—if a woman who was possessed began to fall backwards or seem as though she was about to seriously hurt herself, members of the community would step in. After the ceremony was over, and the women who were possessed spirits’ had left them, other women who had not undergone the rather exhausting process of dancing while being possessed would comfort the women who were “coming down” from possession by allowing them to sleep on their shoulders or legs. The environment as a whole was one of great support—while I often felt fearful of how some women embodied their spirit, or how their spirit manifested him/herself in these women, I knew that the community as a whole was invested and involved in the ceremony such that nothing so harmful would happen.

52 Tout le monde est venue.
Malidoma Somé writes, “ritual is also necessary because there are certain problems that cannot be resolved with words alone” (Somé 1998: 160-161). Rituals, and dance possession ceremonies specifically, draw on bodily experience in hopes of healing through somatic means, and in knowing that emotions are experienced through and in the body. Most of the participants in Gwana did not speak much French so I did not orally communicate with the majority of the people there. Furthermore, while there were some side conversations during a dance possession ceremony, the main focus was the dancing, drumming, and movement. In most ceremonies I was a part of, Abu came out into the center periodically displaying his traditional garb, dancing, or flaunting an animal that would be sacrificed. He did not speak in these moments, though, but instead waited until the end of the ceremony. Oral communication, while important, was less powerful than other forms of communication, such as movement and bodily presence.53

Furthermore, in relation to bodily healing and knowing, Somé explains, “The pain of abuse that someone carries within, the trauma of unfulfilled dreams, and the sorry of loss are not the kinds of feelings that go away over time. Whether we deny them or not, they remain as part of the weight that keeps our bodies tensed and our spirits constricted…When they are addressed in ritual, however, we get the chance to

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53 When I talk about “bodily presence,” I mean being fully present and attune to what is happening around you, around your body and other’s bodies. For example, at my first ceremony, Guindo, my advisor who felt uncomfortable as a Muslim being there, spent the day at a nearby mosque. Around 4pm just as the ceremony was really getting going, he came back and asked me if I wanted to leave with him right then and there. Although I really didn’t want to leave, I feared I’d have no ride back into Bamako, and that I’d be putting myself in a potentially dangerous situation by staying with strangers, most of who did not speak French. I asked Mary who asked Abu if I could leave, and Abu immediately nixed the idea. He insisted that I had to stay for this ceremony to go on. My bodily, physical, spiritual, and emotional presence was all very necessary for the functioning of the ceremony. To back up even further, Abu had made Guindo drive me to the village early on in the day so that I would spend the day soaking in the atmosphere before the ceremony started. This, too, Mary explained to me, was very important.
heal them. Ritual offers the opportunity to relieve a tension from which words can no longer release us” (Somé 1998: 160-161). For Nene, dance possession ceremonies with Abu and other community members released her from her unidentifiable illness and brought her to a healing community.⁵⁴ Nene explained that before she started attending these ceremonies, she couldn’t walk well, or see much, or eat without discomfort, or pick up her child. The Nene I met, after she started attending these ceremonies, seemed to be on the way to lifelong vitality. While one eye of hers drooped low and she limped a bit, Nene spoke with passion and sharpness. She told me she hadn’t felt so good in years, and attributed this renewed sense of vibrancy to her frequenting the ceremonies. During my first interview with her, I explained on the spot that Abu had suggested to me I bring a goat to the village to sacrifice on Monday, that very day. Of course, I wanted her help in finding a goat and somehow bringing it to Abu, but I did not expect her to oblige. However, even though it was over one hundred degrees outside and she had already worked a full day, it took her about thirty seconds to toss the idea around in her mind and then agree whole-heartedly. We walked to a market nearby her school, bought lettuce and nems⁵⁵, drove to her house to make and eat lunch, napped briefly, took a cab to a market on the way to Gwana to negotiate the price for a goat and purchase it, and finally, ventured to Gwana, goat in backseat, to deliver the goat to Abu. The Nene I knew was ruled by spontaneity.

These ceremonies opened up new passageways in her body allowing her to live a more livable life—allowing her to see, to walk, to eat, and to interact more fully with other beings.

⁵⁴ See footnote 11 for an explanation of what I mean by “collective healing.”
⁵⁵ Nems are Vietnamese fried spring rolls that were often found at food stands and tourist restaurants throughout Bamako.
Below is my own story of transformation, and how I, too, felt a renewed sense of vibrancy from participating in these ceremonies. While I was able to witness some of Nene’s healing, and certainly talk with her about the process extensively, I obviously did not have a full sense of her personal embodiment. I share my own story of healing as a way of expressing the visceral and of emphasizing the embodied knowledge I gained from participating in these ceremonies.

**My Story**

In the morning, soon after I arrived and gave the two chickens to Abu and Mary, I was summoned into the fetish room. “Come! Naima! We’re going to start.”

I followed Mary into the fetish room, and kneeled down on the dust floor next to Abu. Abu instructed me to hold the two chickens upside down by their legs, close my eyes, and pray for all that I wanted in life. Later, I wrote in my journal: *How strange of a feeling to hold two live animals in your hands, knowing they’re about to be sacrificed. Their legs were warm.* Clutching the squirmy chickens, I prayed for myself and for all the people I was close with to feel contentment and happiness in their current lives and in the future. I took my time going through each and every person, especially my immediate family members, feeling each of their holds on my heart.

A year prior, my parents had announced that they were going to get a divorce. Though my parents had been together for over twenty years, their mismatched personalities and drastically different worldviews were far too apparent to miss. My mother came from Ohio from a culturally Jewish family, went to an alternative college at age sixteen, and currently works as an author and speaker. My father grew

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56 Viens ici! Naima! On va commencer.
up in Massachusetts in a stereotypically WASPY family, majored in economics at Dartmouth, and works as a doctor. My mother often told me that she felt like they came from different “clans.” The divorce had been coming for a while and came as no shock to my sister and I, who served as two of my mother’s main confidants. Although my mother had expressed her frustrations to my father for the ten years they had been in marital therapy, the word “divorce” still stunned him. Ever since, both my parents had been over-sharing with me their difficulties with the separation process. My mother felt irritated, stifled, and unable to be left alone as my father continuously tried to rekindle their dying relationship. My dad felt abandoned and out of control from the (in his mind) abrupt decision. The whole process was incredibly painful to bear witness to and be a part of, even as I was at college miles away. It irked me and I carried it with me in my body. Some days, it consumed me.

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Throughout my time in Mali, I had been asked about my family and inevitably ended up sharing with my close friends and family members the fact that my parents were in the process of getting a divorce. Nearly everyone I spoke with, even my unmarried twenty-eight year old host sister, kept asking me why my parents couldn’t just work it out and be together. Maman insisted that divorce was bad for the family, even though she and her late husband had briefly separated after he married his second wife.\(^57\) A couple weeks before I first went to Abu’s, Maman asked me for the

\(^57\) Polygamy is legal in Mali. Maman was married to her husband for several years, (unclear how many, because Malians hate talking in specific numbers, they often consider it bad luck), at least a decade, before her husband married a second wife. The second marriage did not last long, but they did have a child together who is now around twenty-five and lives at my host family’s house. The relationship between this “second marriage” child and the children from the first marriage (my host siblings) was very complicated and tense at times. Though in some ways they welcomed him into their home like a
real reason my parents were getting a divorce if neither had cheated on each other. I went into a longwinded explanation of their clashing personalities and different temperaments and of all the years they had spent fighting in marital therapy before landing on one final, simple explanation: “They’re souls are different.”58 I told her. She nodded and never again questioned their decision. Finally, she understood.

In the hut, I placed my sweaty hands on the fetish mount and felt the chicken’s pulses throb from their scrawny legs into my small fingers. I prayed for peace and happiness in this difficult transitional time. I let deep breaths wash through me.

When I was finished, I walked outside with Abu, Mary, and a few others, and watched the slaughtering of both chickens, seeing them wince as they ran around headless and gushed blood until they surrendered to the soil. I wrote in my journal: I guess I’m not a vegetarian anymore. Mary, the interpreter, told me that the chickens both facing west was incredibly good luck. One had its head turned to the left, meaning that I should not look back on the past, and the other to the right, meaning that although I worry about the future, I should feel at peace knowing that God will be with me.

Although I have a habit of reminiscing over old times, and anticipating the future, I figured that this was a general pattern of most humans in the modern world, perpetually living either in the past or future, not quite in the present moment. I was not sure how or why I should take this as an illuminating sign of the power of the ceremony.

58 Leurs âmes sont différentes.
Later, as the ceremony got going, I was pulled into the center by dancing women, nudged and prodded to start dancing myself. I tossed one arm behind me then the other, whipping them around then bringing my hands back into my chest just as I saw the other women do. I released my head and rolled it around to the beat of the drums. I bent my knees and swayed my hips, letting the music guide me. I lost myself in the movement and in the music, relinquishing any inhibitions that would hold me back from moving.

As the ceremony began to wind down and the sun began to set, everyone huddled around Abu waiting for his predictions and evaluations from the ceremony that he had gathered from his spirit. He was still in trance at this point, though calmer. I stayed in the back of the crowd, unable to understand Bamanan anyway, thinking that I would have to ask Bourama, Abu’s son, or Mary, the interpreter, what he was saying at some later point. However, to my surprise, Mary called my name, “Naima! Come here! You have to get closer!” I did as I was told and crouched down next to Abu. Despite all the foreignness of the situation, for the moment, it all seemed to make sense. My body felt in synch with the ceremony. Abu’s spirit switched to French, which he spoke decently well to address me, a sign I later realized from Mary meant that he wanted me to hear directly from him what he was about to say.

“Why are you parents different races?” I breathed in a quick bout of air out of surprise and did not say anything, waiting for him to continue. “Why?” he
demanded again. “They’re... they’re the same race...” I was nervous, unclear if I should be responding or if his questions were rhetorical. “You. You have a little sister and an older brother. Isn’t that right?” “Ah... no,” I responded. “The opposite.” I have an older sister and a younger brother, in fact. “Yeah, okay. But, your brother, he’s...how would I say it...feminine. And your sister, she’s masculine.” This was so true that I felt taken aback, exposed. “Yes, yes,” I said. Someone interrupted Abu’s spirit, and he then started on a different track for another couple minutes before winding down his monologue type thing. I kept thinking about his first assertion, “Why are you parents different races?” when it dawned on me what he was getting at. “Wait!” I tapped him on the shoulder and bent down to make sure he could understand my French. “You said my parents are different races... That’s not exactly true, but they’re of different religious backgrounds. And they’re in the middle of a divorce because they’re completely different. They have totally different world-views and...” Abu’s spirit interrupted me mid sentence and looked me straight in the eyes. “Move on, move on.” he told me. “Naima, you have to move on. That’s in the past.”

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62 Ils sont de la même race.
63 Toi. Tu as une petite soeur et un grand frère. N’est-ce pas?
64 Ah...non.
65 Le contraire.
66 Oui, d’accords. Mais, ton frère-la, il est… comment on dit… féminine. Et ta soeur, elle est masculine.
67 Oui oui.
68 Pourquoi est ce que tes parents sont des races différentes?
69 Attends!
70 T’as dit que mes parents sont des races différentes… Ce n’est pas vrai exactement, mais ils ont des religions différentes. Et, ils sont entrain de divorcer parce que ils sont complètement différents. Ils ont des opinions du monde qui sont complètement différents et…
71 Avancez, avancez.
72 Naima, il faut avancer. C’est dans la passée.
Though his words were simple, they were hard hitting. My eyes swelled with tears and it was at that moment that I really felt it. Here I was, across the world, and somehow Abu’s spirit cut to the core of my major emotional predicament. Without any prompting from me, he spoke about what I had been praying for hours earlier. And it all lined up, chickens and everything. I walked to the other side of the compound, mouth agape, letting myself feel the resonating effect of his words, and the ceremony. I sighed a sigh of relief and vowed to myself to let go. I had to let go. Let go. Go. Avancez. Abu’s spirit interceded for me, which helped me to redirect my life towards the present and future, rather than mull over the past.

**The Anthropology of Experience**

In *Being Changed By Cross-Cultural Encounters: The Anthropology of Extraordinary Experience*, Edith Turner writes of a similar moment that she had in the field. In her case, she saw an expression of a spirit of a woman in trance, what she describes as “a large gray blob about six inches across, opaque and something between solid and smoke” (Turner 1994: 83). I quote her reflecting on this experience at length:

“Let us say that although I did not come out with any ‘words’ like the rest of them, my tears must have been obvious, and they are a kind of language. In previous rituals the wave of release had not included me. This time it did. It was something not coming from me, not coming from them, but happening to all of us together. The time sense was not that of cause and effect; these things come as wholes. Either I was in
the group or I wasn’t. Such differences from Western ways of thinking are themselves interesting. I feel that my own experience of tension and its release was probably necessary for me to have partaken in the good outcome…It had made me thirsty for more” (Turner 1994: 84-85).

I did not know Edith Turner had this experience at the time I was in Mali. In fact, I had never read any of her work until recently. Here, though, is further proof of the intangible aspect of dance possession ceremonies that makes them so powerful. The energy: everyone dancing in the center of the drum circle ecstatically, the collectivity: women and other surrounding onlookers helping to make sure possessed women didn’t seriously hurt themselves, the tension: not knowing what would come next in the ceremony, when someone beside you would begin to feel the presence of their own spirit and how that would change the dynamics, the release: a moment that comes from merely moving, and also from being a part of a communal healing rite. And finally, the profoundly healing effect that makes you “thirsty for more.”

These things don’t just “happen,” though. Although I admit to some skepticism at the beginning of the ceremony about the symbolism of the chickens, I did participate in the ceremony in other ways. I obliged in wearing the heavy and thickly painted traditional dark tan pants and long sleeve shirt which Abu and Mary insisted, despite the fact that it was over one hundred degrees out, and I danced in the center of the drumming circle when some women pulled me in, first imitating their movements then creating my own to the clapping and shouts of the community surrounding me. For Abu’s spirit to sense something from me, for his spirit to pick up
on subtleties of my family dynamics, I had to give in, I had to believe, I had to be somewhat of a participant, not just an observer. Similar to what Edith Turner says, “Either I was in the group or I wasn’t.” This intangible aspect of dance possession cannot be fully explained in words, but instead is more of a feeling. Because dance possession ceremonies are so dependent upon community participation, in order to feel their healing effect one must give oneself over, to some extent, to the ceremony.

Therefore, I agree with Edith Turner when she writes in “The Reality of Spirits,” “To reach a peak experience in ritual, sinking oneself fully in it really is necessary.” She continues, citing Jackson, “To break the habit of using a linear communicational model for understanding bodily praxis, it is necessary to adopt a methodological strategy of joining without ulterior motive and literally putting oneself in the place of other persons: inhabiting their world” (Jackson qtd. in Turner 1997). Stated bluntly, it is necessary to surrender to the experience and to the idea that you can be healed and changed through these ceremonies. This is possible through the “fusion of worlds,” (Stoller 1989) both of yours and theirs and of the spirit world and the human world. This involves being open to other cultures, other worlds, and other realities, allowing for “a space in which boundaries are blurred, in which the distinction among cultural things is fuzzy” (Stoller 1989: 210). If you let it happen, if you let go, then these ceremonies can begin to serve as a cultural bridge, the ultimate bonding moment by communally releasing and removing

73 By referencing “your world” and “their world” I realize I risk posing an “us versus them” mentality. That is not my intent. I am, however, trying to be honest and open about the fact that the place (literally the location, but also the level of wealth, the cultural environment, etc.) that I, for instance grew up in is obviously different than the environment most people at the ceremony grew up in. Generally speaking, this is the case for anthropologists and their interlocutors. With this comment, I’m trying to stress the necessary porosity of the anthropologist, as I spoke of in Chapter II, while recognizing difference.
emotional baggage that we all carry in our bodies, no matter where we come from. In *Fusion of the Worlds* Stoller writes, “My long intense participation in the Tillaberi troupe has plunged my deeply into the human dimension of possession. To grasp possession…we need to explore what Maurice Merleau-Ponty called the texture of inner space in which ‘quality, light, color, and depth…are there before us only because they awaken an echo in our body and because the body welcomes them’” (Merleau-Ponty qtd in Stoller 1989: 209). Dance possession ceremonies are not straightforward, nor are they easily explainable through words and symbols. The power of dance possession ceremonies lies in the fact that they involve bodily experiences that open up passageways in the body for dealing with emotional trauma and for connecting with both the spirit world and other human worlds or realities.

My experience at my first dance possession ceremonies evoked a visceral response in me that then allowed me to surrender to the healing power of these ceremonies. This bodily experience allowed me to allow myself to let go of what I had been holding onto about the divorce that was no longer necessary for me to be holding. It allowed me to be open to the healing potential of these types of ceremonies and to trust participants like Nene and Abu. This letting go, this release, was necessary for me to have in order to believe in these types of ceremonies, and it inevitably informed my experience of being at these ceremonies in the weeks afterward. Likewise, Nene’s experience of encountering a dance possession ceremony in Togo as a young girl and being told she would someday dance like that ignited a visceral response in *her* that was cause for her to begin attending these types of ceremonies as an adult in order to heal herself. After initially being unable to figure
out what type of illness she had, it dawned on her, *and her body*, that attending dance possession ceremonies would be the cure.

And it was.
IV.

Mimetic Performance and Moment of Rupture: Sharing Knowledge and Breaking Patterns
A possessed woman dancing during the ceremony.

Same as above. All of these women pictured were Abu’s apprentices.

Same as above.

Same as above.
By replicating an experience in gesture and art, the experience becomes known and familiar, incorporated by the individual in her society. But it is also interpreted and thereby transformed (Boddy 1994: 425).

...If the body is the ground for legitimating objective knowledge, internalizing it, and making it experientially real... objectification is the process of rendering embodied knowledge graspable by others through performance and conversation. Mimesis encompasses both (Boddy 1994: 425).
In this chapter, I consider the therapeutic and freeing combination of repetitive movement, mimetic performance and knowledge building, and radical movement. In the dance possession ceremonies I participated in, I call this “radical movement” the moment of rupture. The moment of rupture in a dance possession ceremony involves involuntary movement. I draw on Michael Taussig’s concept of “mimesis” as a form of sharing and generating knowledge and my own experience with healing and learning through movement to ground my discussion. Namely, my knowledge and experience with embodying various dance movement forms, specifically Bharata Natyam dance. By combining my background and my field experience with theoretical readings, I will ask what it is about repetitive action that is therapeutic and freeing and why it is necessary to combine repetition with free, spontaneous movement. More specifically, in regards to the actual dance possession ceremony, I ask how repetitive action calls on ones’ spirit through movement. Furthermore, in discussing patterning, I posit the question: to change a pattern, is it necessary to first acknowledge and explore that very pattern? How do dance possession ceremonies unlock parts of the body? How and why is shared experience through mimetic means a form of knowledge?

My argument for the transformative possibilities of rituals draws from the assumption that as actors in this world, we are all enacting patterns on both a minute and grand scale. On an individual level, these patterns could be patterns of posture, of walking, of judgment, of interacting with loved ones, and of speech. In a large sense, these patterns could include general rituals and/or traditions such as holidays that

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74 When I talk about “involuntary movement,” I mean when a spirit enters its medium—and makes its medium move or dance involuntarily.
have the potential to be transformative in their repetition yet oftentimes remain stuck in a lethargic, monotonous state. In an even larger sense, I believe that these patterns can be passed down generationally and from specific environmental contexts. However, rather than doing away with patterns, or seeing repetition as entirely negative, I argue that the reason why dance possession ceremonies are so healing for those involved is because during the ceremony, patterns are acknowledged, explored, and then broken out of, if need be. In other words, rituals include both patterns and the radical possibilities from patterns. By enacting these patterns through repetitive motion and the repetitive nature of ritual itself, and then moving towards radical and/or free movement and spontaneity when the spirit is evoked, individuals and communities are relieved from bad habits and released from tension, and therefore able to live a more free and fulfilling life. On both an individual and community scale dance possession ceremonies destabilize by unlocking parts of our bodies, which therefore allows us to move more freely and uninhibitedly in both our mental and physical bodies.

To draw out my argument for the radical possibilities within ritual and how the body is recognized in the ceremonies I participated in, I first explain how

75 The “constellation” idea that I’m talking about here draws from St. Just’s article “A Question of Balance.” After studying traumatic events—specifically the Columbine shootings in Littleton in this article—and writing about them, St. Just explains, “Over time, I became increasingly convinced that these patterns that I had observed in Littleton were also related to informational fields, multigenerational patterns and other phenomena that I had witnessed during Systemic Constellation seminars. According to those with experience of this modality, within a constellation format, one can work with fields of memory that contain information about overwhelming experiences, broken connections, entanglements and other forms of imbalance, on individual, and social levels, extending beyond the family” (St. Just: 85-86). I did not have time to fully investigate Nene’s familial background and other social networks, but I really do believe that this idea of a “constellation” is necessary for recognizing how healing necessitates community and individual participation. Furthermore, St. Just writes, “It has been my experience that most chronic pain has to do with unresolved trauma and this often involves an incomplete response” (St. Just: 98).
Foucault’s conception of the body helps—to some extent—to understand body disciplining in dance possession ceremonies. Then, I illustrate the bathing ritual I participated in to elucidate themes of repetition and mimesis and to explain how I felt the beginning of a transformation while also sensing that I was a part of something larger. I participated in this bathing ritual as many people have done before me in an attempt to purify myself and call upon my spirit. Through mirroring a past repetitive action, I became—in part—a part of a community of people who attended these same ceremonies and who also performed this cleansing bathing ritual. My body was an active, moving agent in this process.

**Sentient Bodies, Material Agency**

Foucault’s conception of the body in *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* helps, in some ways, to understand the relationship between the body and power in dance possession ceremonies. Early in his book, Foucault writes, “…we should admit rather that power produces knowledge, that power and knowledge directly imply one another” (Foucault: 27). As I briefly explained in my introduction, dance possession ceremonies interact explicitly with power relations. Knowledge in gained through mimetic means, through viewing other humans, yet also by following the demands of both spirits and the head master of the ceremony. The process of knowledge production in dance possession ceremonies is neither neatly horizontal nor top down, but rather diffused. The fact that human mediums become somewhat “at the mercy of” or at least *subject to* spirits demands is similar to how Foucault conceptualizes the production of knowledge. In *Discipline and Punish*, we are both
subjected to and subjects of power—and particularly through our bodies. Power, though, does not have to be thought of as intrinsically bad. In the dance possession ceremonies I participated in, there was no singular blame put on spirits or head masters for the affliction of a medium. Following a spirits’ desires, making the necessary sacrifices, and engaging in a relationship with your spirit were a generative and healing process that lead to greater wellbeing.

Furthermore, these relations were worked out through the disciplining of bodies. Each week, Abu’s apprentices would gather in Gwana and participate in the dancing and drumming and supporting of each other in an effort to allow their spirit to enter their body. This took time and cultivation. Learning to relate to their spirit, and call upon it in a ceremony rather than have it come to you at a random time was a matter of disciplining—dancing, waiting, calming the mind, dancing some more, relaxing, dancing… Oftentimes, this cultivation involved a bathing ritual that I will explain shortly. In any case, the perpetual cycle—the repetition—is what led to bodily knowledge, to *material* knowledge.

However, while Foucault certainly accounts for embodiment and sees the discursive realm (the mind) and bodily disciplining (the body) as intermeshed, his prescription of the body—comprised of learned disciplines—discounts our bodies’ volatility. It makes sense, since *Discipline and Punish* is largely about how carceral bodies became subjected to cruel and unusual forms of punishment and torture. Yet, still, his argument is farsighted in regards to the body’s potentiality. This is where material feminism comes in as an intervention. In “Post-humanist Performativity,” Karen Barad states, “For all Foucault’s emphasis on the political anatomy of
disciplinary power, he too fails to offer an account of the body’s historicity in which its very materiality plays an active role in the workings of power. This implicit reinscription of matter’s passivity is a mark of exant elements of representational that haunt his largely post-representational account” (Barad, 810). Barad’s critique of Foucault is apt particularly in regards to dance possession ceremonies because much of what these ceremonies entail lays outside the discursive realm. The body, in its sentience and strength and docility, in its materiality, is nevertheless actively involved in knowledge production and power relations.

Rituals recognize the body’s potentiality. Rituals consider the body as both the site of and means towards healing. Here below is an ethnographic illustration of this phenomenon—a bathing ritual—followed by my more theoretical analysis of this experience.

*Seven Times Bathing*

*April 29th, 4th visit to Gwana*

“Today, before we start [the ceremony], you’re going to wash yourself. We’re going to prepare the water with special herbs for you and you’ll wash yourself well. Wait in the hut. I’ll call you when everything’s ready.”

Wash myself? In a bath? A bucket shower? I sat in Abu’s hut with another visitor, waiting for Mary to prepare the soup like substance I’d be washing myself in. The man sitting next to me introduced himself as Daouda and asked if I wanted to listen to his FM radio cell phone—“It’s BBC! It’s in English! It’s the news!” I took him up on his offer, put his headphones on over my ears, and listened to the crinkly sound of the British

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76 Aujourd’hui, avant de commencer, tu vas te laver. On va préparer l’eau et tu vas te laver bien. Attends sous l’arbre. Je t’appelle quand c’est prêt.

77 C’est BBC! C’est anglais! Des nouvelles!
reporter talking about Gaddafi. His voice sounded so far away that I forgot he was speaking English; it took effort to understand what he was saying.

Eventually I gave up, and handed the headphones back to Daouda who asked me, “*Why are you here? Why did you come?*” Malians are very direct. I started in on a longwinded explanation of my study abroad program and my research project. Daouda interrupted me midway. “You’re here for another reason. You were attracted to something, I know you were. There’s something about you… I know it.” He smirked. I felt incredibly uncomfortable by his comment, and paused dumbfounded for a few moments, trying to process what he was implying. “I don’t know. I’m not sick, but who knows. I’m here because I like something that’s here. I don’t know what it is. That’s it…” He looked at me long and hard as if he knew something I didn’t. His words echoed in me for the rest of the day; they still do.

Soon, Mary came in the room. “*Naima, everything’s ready. Come. Come here. You’re going to wash yourself.*” Malians repeat words and phrases often. I followed Mary over to Hassane, one of the apprentices, who was stirring a three-foot long bowl of steaming water and herbs. In my head I heard my host niece Nana: “*That? What’s that?!*” What had I gotten myself into? “*So, Naima, here’s the water. What you’re going to do is that you’ll take this bowl, you’ll bring it over there, you’ll undress, and you’ll wash yourself. Pay attention. It’s important to follow my directions. You’re going to first wash your face, then your left arm then your right*”

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78 *Pourquoi t’es ici? Pourquoi t’es venue?*
80 *Je ne sais pas… je n’ai pas une maladie, mais, on ne sait. Je suis ici parce que j’aime quelque chose qui est ici. Je ne sais pas quoi encore. C’est tout.*
81 *Naima, c’est prêt. Viens. Viens-ici. Tu vas te laver.*
82 *C’est quoi ça?*
arm, then your left and right shoulder, then your left leg and right leg, then the backside of your body, and then you’ll splash water all over your body where you haven’t done so yet.”

Sure, why not?

I took the bowl of steamy water from Hassane and brought it into the hut. It was so dark I could hardly even see where to set my shoes down. I left the door slightly ajar to let in some light, and began undressing, unsure of what I was doing. Still, I felt somewhat obligated to follow Mary’s directions, so I kept repeating the order in which to wash myself while grabbing handfuls of steamy, herby water. Left arm, right arm, chest, left shoulder, right shoulder, legs... When I finished, I got dressed and brought the empty bowl out to Hassane. “You finished? Here.”

He handed me another bowl of steamy water and herbs that he’d been stirring. “Again?” I asked him. “Yes. Again. Many times!” He smiled a toothy grin. I went back into the hut and repeated what I had done the first time. Again. How many times did Mary say I would be doing this? And again. I started to zone out. Seven times? And again. I remembered what Abu told me last week, Spirits like clean things. Clean bodies. Perfumes. And again. Left. Right. Left. Right. Leftright. And again. Hot, hot, hot water, almost scalding water, cleansing my skin. And again, till I’d covered my entire body with seven bowfuls of the steamy water and herb mixture. I felt hazy.

Somewhere between the fourth and the fifth, I convinced myself there was a small animal in the hut. Maybe there was. At the end of the seventh bowl, I felt oddly calm.

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83 Donc, Naima, ici c’est l’eau. Ce que tu vas faire—tu vas prendre ça, et tu vas le prendre là-bas. Tu vas enlever tes vêtements, et tu vas te laver. Faites-attention. C’est important de suivre mes directions. Tu vas laver ton visage, puis ta bras gauche et droit, puis ton épaule gauche et droit, puis ton pie gauche et droit, puis la derrière de ton corps, puis tu vas mettre la reste de l’eau surtout ton corps.
84 T’es fini? Ici.
85 Encore?
86 Oui. Encore. Plusieurs fois!
When I walked out of the hut for the final time, Abu was standing next to Hassane and Mary, grinning. “Naima! You washed yourself. Great! Now you have to dance.” He spoke with both authority and playfulness, waving his arms about. At the time, I was not fully aware that this was the beginning of a long process of initiation that I didn’t have the time to finish (I only spent a month frequenting the ceremonies and talking with Abu). This bathing ritual was meant to prepare my body for the entrance of my spirit, as it had accomplished in many others before me.

Repetition and Mimesis

Through repetition on an individual and community level, dance possession ceremonies engage with human’s mimetic tendencies that allow the body and mind to let go so that a spirit can enter. In Mimesis and Alterity: A Particular History of the Senses, Michael Taussig discusses the concept of “mimesis,” in simple terms, imitation, which he sees as fundamental to human development. Mimesis is a form of knowledge building and behavior that humans are thought to engage with in order to make sense of the world. Through mimesis, actions are repeated and re-inhabited in various bodies. Taussig writes that mimesis is “a copying, or imitation, and a palpable, sensuous, connection between the very body of the perceiver and the perceived” (Taussig qtd in Boddy 1994: 425). Mimetic learning connects people with each other and builds community through a shared experience. Janice Boddy, in explaining mimesis writes that mimesis is “a pedagogical process, both embodiment of knowledge and bodying forth of knowledge…Mimetic actors do not lack agency. We are all mimetic actors” (Boddy 1994: 425). Therefore, contrary to a Western centric

87 Tu t’es lavée! Bien! Maintenant il faut danser!
view that posits the individual agency as necessary and fundamental to knowledge building, mimesis actually capitalizes on our copying tendencies. Viewing the world in these mimetic terms, one begins to see how we are all necessarily dependent upon each other, and learn from each other; we are not self-contained individuals but affecting and affected *dividuals*. Humans learn through sensing other humans, or even other non-human actors, yet each version of what is copied inevitably morphs and changes to the individual who is embodying the behavior or action. Mimesis, therefore, is a generative process of sharing knowledge that allows common behaviors, patterns, or actions to be reimagined and re-embodied by multiple beings. Even if someone does not become possessed during a dance possession ceremony, I believe the repetitive motion and mimetic learning itself in the ceremony alone is calming for those involved.

The calming and therapeutic gains from mimetic learning come from sensual engagement: Michael Lambek writes, “Mimesis, in effect, is a kind of surrender to the immediacy of sensations. It provides a ‘discourse of becoming’ that is of endless doings and of events” (Lambek 2000: 310). Mimetic learning depends on all of the senses—seeing, hearing, touching, tasting, and smelling—for its actors to pick up on behavior and actions. All of my senses were engaged in the bathing ritual. My eyes strained to see the bowl of water in front of me, searching for where to grab, and where to even set my clothes down in the dark, unfamiliar room. My sense of smell heightened to the unknown mixture of herbs—each concoction stronger and muskier than the last, seemingly brewed for hours. I was told to taste the mixture, and to Bourama and Abu and Mary I refused to, explaining how I could only ingest filtered
water. After three washings, I hesitantly licked a little out of the palm of my hand, tasting the bitter earthiness. By the fifth, I wasn’t sick, so I decided it was “filtered” enough and continued to taste. I used my sense of touch as I plunged my hands into the steamy bowl of water, nearly scalding my fingers, swirling the water around abruptly so that it wouldn’t burn the rest of my skin. My ears zoned out to the silence in the hut, occasionally picking up on chatter in the unfamiliar language Bamanan that was going on outside, seemingly miles away. At times, I frightened myself to the sounds of creaks and drips and drops in the mud brick hut. My senses were what allowed me to access what others at these ceremonies had previously accessed—to imitate and copy a ritual that had been enacted multiple times before. I did not bring a pen and paper into the hut with me. Nor did I consciously carry my knowledge of Butler or Freud or Foucault or even Taussig. Out with the mind and in to the body; my medium was my body. My knowledge came from what I felt and saw and experienced and smelled and tasted in my body.

Furthermore, as the self is formed through mimicry, through repetition of viewed acts and behavior, the ability to know oneself as a distinct being, yet informed and shaped by others around us, comes from the “presence and awareness of diverse bodies…The ability to trace the image of another back to his or her body” (Jensen, 193). It is with this recognition of our dividuality that allows for healing. The healing of communities necessitates and aids in the healing of individuals—and vice versa—as we are all inextricably intertwined. Moreover, with mimesis we are all in an endless cycle of copying each other and sharing knowledge that makes for a therapeutic and generative experience.
To bring it back to the actual act of bathing, though, I ask: what is it about the actual repetitive action that is so calming that it relaxes the body for the entrance of a spirit? How does this use of repetition work into dance possession ceremonies on both a small and large scale? In other words, how and why do dance possession ceremonies interact with repetition as a way of both knowledge building and healing through both repeated gestures and actions such as the bathing ritual, and repetitive gathering, like the ritual itself?

Through a repetitive action like bathing, or even the repetitive swinging of the arms that women involved in dance possession ceremonies all engage with, knowledge making becomes diffusive and nonhierarchical. Yes, Abu was the head master, but he shared his knowledge with his apprentices through these ceremonies so that they would learn from their own embodied experience. Knowledge is understood through experience, through the medium of the body, “through performance and conversation” (Boddy 1994: 426). Every Friday, participants and on-lookers from all around ritualistically gathered at Abu’s to experience these dance possession ceremonies. During each Friday ceremony, Abu’s apprentices became possessed—their spirit took over—and they entered an ongoing process of how to be, how to coexist, how to communicate with their spirit. These apprentices were able to move forward with their learning by first watching others around them become possessed, through mirroring, and then to feel and to experience this relationship in their own bodies. A mimetic ritual, in this sense, fosters communal healing and communal knowing.
I participated in the bathing ritual as a way of accessing what others involved in these ceremonies had previously accessed—as a way of gaining knowledge through a unique embodied experience. I went in and out of that little hut seven times, scouring and rinsing my pale skin with near-boiling water in a dark room, alone. I followed the patterning that Mary insisted on—left, right, left, right left, right. After, I felt a sublime calmness of body and mind that I hadn’t quite ever experienced. My endless grip on myself was released as I surrendered to the present moment. My body was being prepped for my spirit to take over. Through this bathing ritual, I became a part of what others involved in the ceremony were a part of. I explored a repetitive pattern that allowed me to begin to cleanse myself, to let go, and to complete the holding pattern I was stuck in. I mimetically performed a repetitive ritual and felt its effects from the superficial layers of my skin to the deep and twisty cerebellum of my brain.

By allowing oneself to be open to the concept of mimesis, knowledge making and ways of knowing become radically redefined. Knowledge, therefore, comes less from applying your individual cerebral analysis and more from embodying an experience or pattern or behavior and allowing your senses and intuition to lead you. In relation to anthropology, conducting fieldwork as not only an observer but also a participant allows anthropologists to engage with a group of people on a sensual level. Mimetic experience such as dancing in the same repetitive way as the people in the culture you’re studying, or engaging in a repetitive bathing ritual, allows anthropologists to utilize their own senses leading towards a form of radical embodied knowledge.
Brief Interlude: Dance as a Form of Embodied & Shared Knowledge

Many other movement forms—not only dance possession ceremonies—engage with mimetic learning, too. In the South Indian classical dance form Bharata Natyam, students are taught repetitive footwork and intricate hand gestures as a way of carrying on the Devadasi legacy in their own 21st century bodies. Bharata Natyam dancers mimetically engage with the form as they copy what Devadasi’s have done for years. In many cases, in Bharata Natyam performances, dancers are even embodying a particular deity, which curiously echoes the aim of a dance possession ceremony. I believe that my involvement with various dance forms and performance my whole life, and particularly Bharata Natyam over the past couple years, has given me an attunement to accessing certain embodiments. Through my bodily cultivation in various dance forms, I have become, many times, a part of a network of other people who have experienced a similar sense of embodiment. Without even consciously acknowledging this as it was happening, I now realize that I have affected and been affected by a legacy of dancers who have danced the same sequences and dance forms as I have years before me. I believe that this particular ripple effect of sharing knowledge through dance is what in part allowed me to feel comfortable with participating in the dance possession ceremonies in Mali and

88 As I’ve learned in Professor Hari Krishnan’s class, Bharata Natyam is one of six classical dance forms in South India. It was originally performed in temples and courts by Devadasi’s—women who were considered to be married to particular gods. When the British came and colonized India, however, Bharata Natyam became thought of as highly sexualized and was tragically discounted for its artistry and spirituality.

89 The Devadasi tradition is a religious and artistic legacy of chosen girls being “married” to particular deities and performing Bharata Natyam dance in the temples and courts. These women enjoyed high social status and were often touted as early feminists. During British colonial rule, however, kings of the temples became powerless and Devadasi’s were left without support or recognition. Devadasi’s were also seen as highly sexualized and deviant women by British colonizers.
connected to the other dancers and movers around me. I am familiar with communicating and learning through movement.

**Moment of Rupture**

_In possession performance, the body is compelled towards its physical limits, each extreme movement proof of the presence of an almost overwhelming force. But it is the very physicality of possession performance—the fact that it is the body that is a vehicle—that creates an anxious fascination on the part of the observer... The body becomes vulnerable to profane projections_ (Hagedorn: 159).

_April 8th, 2:22 pm: Should I be writing in my journal like this? Or maybe just taking it all in... without formal observations.... It does seem like a lot of this is monotonous, though... Watching these women walk around in circles, clapping together, stomping to the beat of the drums... Just as I thought that repetition was the sole marker of dance possession ceremonies, a woman to my right began twerking her body in this bizarre way, hunching over, and making a strange noise. She aggressively grabbed a nearby bucket of water and threw it on herself, then splashed someone else and dragged her into Abu’s hut. The woman being dragged lay limp and lifeless, perhaps passed out. The action had begun. These women, Abu’s apprentices, had reached the next stage: through their repetitive dancing, their bodies were prepared for their spirits to enter. They let go, surrendered, and allowed their spirits take control for the time being. From there on out, women in the center of the drum circle would seemingly randomly become overtaken by their spirits—possessed—breaking out into some odd dance move, sobbing uncontrollably, rolling on the floor, or arching their backs in what looked like pain. I felt fearful and confused, not sure if this was supposed to happen, not sure if it was all supposed to...
look so terrifying. Yet, amidst the tears and painful grimaces, other women would burst out laughing. *April 8th, 3:16 pm: People laughing around/at those who are possessed—weird/eerie playfulness to the situation, women helping women, ‘dancing in delight’ then great fear, trembling.* Among what I believed to be repetitive ritual behavior, women all around me began to burst into their individual embodiments of their spirit. Within the ritual dancing and drumming and walking and chanting were these radical movements, these physical manifestations of each person’s spirit who began to tremble inside of him or herself. From the repetitive nature of the ritual, possibility awakened. Through exploring a pattern—a ritual—then breaking out of it, these women’s bodies were released from their old habits. Through a radical form of surrender, brought about through repetition, these women allowed their spirits to take over.

As many movement forms such as dance and yoga have proved time and time again, letting go happens first from the body. If the body is able to let go and move freely, the mind releases its anxious grip and surrenders to the immediacy of movement. Yet, the healing nature of free and spontaneous movement must be balanced with repetition and ritual. The women dancing in the ceremony were able to surrender to their spirits only *after* repetitively swinging their arms about to call on their spirits. I was told I would be able to participate in the ceremony more fully *after* bathing myself in a ritualistic way seven times. Through the incessant exploration of a pattern, the mind and body are cleansed. Through this repetition, emotional and/or traumatic experiences are brought to life as the body is experientially reminded of its
own everyday patterns and habits. By learning through mimesis, a medium allows a spirit to enter.

Some scholars are wary of mimesis. Though Michael Lambek in part recognizes the validity of mimesis as I explained earlier, he is also rather critical. In “The Anthropology of Religion and the Quarrel between Poetry and Philosophy,” he writes “Pure mimesis is a fantasy of our hyper reflexive age—an inversion of our self-consciousness and the true Other to reflection. We seek it in therapy, attempting not to remember emotions but to relive them” (Lambek 2000: 311; my emphasis added). Lambek seems to doubt our actual ability to engage mimetically in the modern world without ulterior motives or self-absorption. Yet, in order to break free from a pattern or habit or negative emotion, it must first be explored, and re-experienced in bodily form. Maybe Lambek believes that pure mimesis is a fantasy, but then again, maybe he has never participated in a dance possession ceremony where memories are re-embodied, and without judgment. Repetition allows for the incessant re-iteration of a body holding pattern, which in turn brings to the surface emotional holding patterns. Dance possession ceremonies therefore heal and free the mind and body from past trauma.

My belief in mimesis as generative and the power of repetition comes from my experience at these ceremonies. As I elaborated on in the previous chapter, Abu’s acknowledgement of the repetitive pattern I was stuck in—all that blockage one final time and then leave it in the past as I advanced towards a more “radically moving” life. By attending these ceremonies, by listening to Abu tell me to
move forward, and by digging my feet into the dirt and dancing, I felt a renewed sense of vibrancy and spontaneity for the rest of my time in Mali that I carried with me back home. I can still feel it pulsating through me. This process of letting go was furthered through my participation in the bathing ritual. By washing myself seven times, I explored patterns and repetition that added to the final release of tension and onset of serenity and vivacity. By exploring my own emotional and physical patterns and then breaking out of them, free form, I felt a sense of fearlessness and passion, a relinquishing of my inhibitions that had been stopping me from living a full and joyful life. By sharing this moment with others at the dance possession ceremony I felt inextricably tied and connected to the others around me who both had and were experiencing their own personal transformation and healing. Our individual healing added to the collective healing, and our collective healing added to the healing of each of our constellations of social relationships. Thinking about how large these circles extend sends chills down my spine. By surrendering to movement, to repetition, and to mimesis, healing becomes possible. Mary and Abu continuously told me, “The dance gives you energy. The spirits can’t come without the dance. Even if you’ve never danced, you’ll be able to dance; the spirit makes you dance.”

90 La danse vous donne de l’énergie…les esprits ne peuvent pas venir sans la danse. Même si tu n’avais jamais dansé, tu peux danser; le génie te fait danser.
V.

L’espírit me rendre visite:
A La Prochaine, Ce Que Je Crois

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91 The spirit visits me: To The Next Time, What I Believe
“Go and allow yourself to be swallowed” (Somé 1994: 311).

“The ‘dream place’ is everywhere and nowhere, just like the ‘dream time’ is always and never. You might say that the term ‘dream place’ does not refer to any particular place and the way to get to it is to get nowhere” (Duerr 121).
A month before I went to my first dance possession ceremony, I dreamt of my friend Colin who had passed away the September prior. Within weeks of two other deaths—a close friend’s father and a student at Wesleyan—I got a call from a reporter, who had apparently found my number somewhere online, asking if he could interview me about Colin. I had no idea why I would be interviewed about Colin, but his voice sounded slightly frantic and apologetic, so I called back as soon as I heard the message. Somberly yet impersonally, the reporter told me that my friend, Colin, had killed himself the previous morning with a pipe bomb. I sat frozen in my room, suitcase to my right; I was in the middle of packing for a trip to California to be with my friend, Hannah, whose father had just passed. I called an old mutual friend of Colin and mine, talked soberly and quietly, then got off the phone and sobbed. Four months later, I boarded the plane to Mali, with the most immediate fear of death I’d ever felt.

On a night in early March, two and a half months into my stay in Mali, I dreamt I was in the living room of my host family’s house looking outside onto a playground-like area that was grey but not entirely dreary. I crouched on the top of the couch, looking through the barred windows, holding on to the columns, crying. All of a sudden, I saw Colin outside. He walked towards the window, unable to cross over to where I was, looking empathetic to my sadness, peaceful, and grounded. He came closer to the window and my tears continued, stronger this time, when finally he reached me, as close as he could get, and he looked at me long and hard with compassionate eyes. He reached out his hand through the bars, and I reached out mine,
and for a moment, we clasped hands. He gave me look that told me he was okay. Everything was *okay*. Then, he was gone.

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*L’esprit me rendre visite.*

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Two weeks before I went to my first dance possession ceremony, I had another forceful dream that I couldn’t get out of my head. I was with my American sister and her friend, Isabella, walking down a street in my host-family’s neighborhood, Kalaban Koura. Isabella told us it was her third time in Africa. We passed the fruit market and grocery store and cyber café and roadside breakfast stop that I knew so well from my walks to and from my host family’s house. Finally, we ended up in some loft inside an old apartment, dusty and dim light. Isabella sat us down and told us very seriously that she was born with a baby inside her. She was both pregnant *and* the fetus. In the dream, I knew that what she was telling us was deeply personal and almost taboo. Her voice carried a sense of intense fear and slight guilt but mostly unusual power; I woke up feeling scared and unsettled.

Three weeks later, after I’d been to a couple ceremonies, I read that a lot of people talk about being pregnant both by and with their spirit.

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*L’esprit me rendre visite.*

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I was a vegetarian before coming to Mali. Almost vegan, even, on and off for several months. Before the first ceremony, I was told to bring two chickens—one red
and one white. I was supposed to meet my advisor, Guindo, at a gas station near this Western-style restaurant at 9 a.m. with the chickens. I had no idea how to even go about buying chickens, so I arrived empty-handed to the dismay of Guindo. “Where are the chickens? Naima! You were supposed to bring the chickens. Two. Ooh lala. Now we’re going to have to get them together.”

We drove to a nearby crowded market, smelly and filled with cart upon cart of chickens of all sizes. Guindo waited in the car and told me to go get two. I got the wrong ones. Instead of fully white, mine had black speckles. Instead of red, mine merely had a red tail. Guindo yelled at me. Finally, he parked his car and walked with me to show me how it’s done.

The chickens squirmed in a dirty thrice-used plastic bag at my feet the entire half-hour ride to Gwana. Bump after bump I heard them squeal and squack, picking at the twine that held together their mouths. I felt queasy and tried to ignore the fact that these were probably their last moments of life.

A few hours later, I watched as Abu’s male apprentices sliced the necks of both chickens. Their blood gushed slower than I thought it would, and I winced and turned away in shame as they ran around nearly headless in their final breaths. It’s a sacrifice, I told myself. A sacrifice. A sacrifice.

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“Naima. Next Monday. You have to bring me a goat. A goat to sacrifice. That will help with everything.”

I was so caught up in what Abu had just told me about my parents that I almost missed this—I was to bring a goat, next Monday. But how?

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93 Naima, lundi prochaine, il faut m’amener un mouton. Un mouton pour le sacrifice. Ça va aider.
That Monday, I ended up meeting Nene at the kindergarten she worked at for an interview. She happily answered all of my questions for my project, hardly even blushing at the more intimate ones about sexuality that other Malian women had refused to answer. Eventually, our conversation drifted towards the ceremony. As she told me about her childhood and her experience with Abu and the ceremony, I felt a bubbling urge to ask her if she would help me bring a goat to Abu’s. She had already worked a full day, though, so I didn’t want to overburden her. Of course, I ended up mentioning it anyway. “Oh, Naima. Naima Naima Naima. You have to do it. We’ll do it together. Just wait a minute. Let me think...” I was surprised and elated by her reaction. Next thing I knew, we were picking up groceries for a late lunch at her house before our adventure. On the way, I stopped at an ATM, taking out 50,000 CFA, the most money by far I’d spent in Mali. “You have to get a fat goat! Naima, let me negotiate. Hide in the cab. If they see you, they’ll raise the price. Okay?” We ate and napped briefly then hopped in a cab towards Gwana, stopping at a roadside goat seller. I sat in the car and ducked my head slightly while Nene negotiated for a goat. They decided on 35,000 CFA, tied his legs together, and hoisted his squirming body into the trunk of the car as the taxi driver looked unfazed. My heart pounded. It was moments like these that I could only process in an immediate visceral way—without any other native English speakers to think aloud with, without anyone else there who found the situation entirely unfamiliar, I was forced to both be in the moment and share it in ways that didn’t involve carefully-chosen words and phrases.

95 50,000 CFA is approximately $100.
96 Il faut amener un gros mouton! Naima, laisse-moi avec des négociations. Caches-toi quand je parler avec eux. Si ils te voient, ils vont enlever le prix. D’accords?
My “schooling” failed me here. I didn’t have “witnesses” or people to bounce ideas off of that could vouch for my experience. I was just there, in my body, in Mali, with Nene or whoever else I was spending time with that day. I can’t fully articulate both the simultaneous liberation and weightiness I felt from that.

When we got to Gwana around 4:30 or 5, it was quiet and peaceful. Women fanned themselves and seemed to be in idle conversation, children poked and prodded each other in play-fight. Mary saw us immediately and went to find Abu. Abu looked confused, exhausted. He had to be reminded by Mary what exactly he said to me the previous Friday since he had been in such a deep trance. Later I found out that it often took Abu a few days to recover from a big ceremony. Mary caught him up and Abu nodded and smiled at me, thanking me for the goat. I looked at him, said a few parting words, and took a deep breath. And that was it. Nene and I hopped back into the cab, goat-less, and drove towards the sunset.

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L’espirit me rendre visite.

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...from the dust we are born, and to the dust we return is truly an unchanging claim. The corpse is material proof of this, put into action by the process of decomposition. The concept of a living body in relation to what it becomes as a corpse is fundamentally related to the notion of finitude, of Fana, of the inevitability of life and death, of birth, and of childhood. Neither the young nor the old can be jealous of their place in time. Therefore no death can be, in this eternal cycle, jealous of another...  

(Chabel, 63, translation by Abby Baker).

97 Original French : “...de la poussière nous sommes nés et qu’a la poussière nous reviendrons est véritablement un postulat immuable. Le cadavre est cette écriture, mise en scène par le processus de décomposition. La notion de corps liée au rapport qu’elle entretient avec le cadavre est fondamentalement celle qui, en corollaire à l’idée précédente, répond à la notion de finitude, de fana, de l’inexorabilité de la vie et de la mort, de la naissance, de l’enfance. De la jeunesse et de la vieillesse ainsi que de leur respective synchronisation. Aucune décesse ne peut être, dans ce cycle éternel, jalouse de l’autre.”
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The smell of goat’s skull was overwhelmingly putrid even from the back corner of Maman’s room. I had spent most of the day out of the house, giving my family the time and space to mourn the 10th anniversary of the death of their father. In the morning, Maman invited over every important imam and marabout in the area, serving up freshly sacrificed organs and intestines of the chubby goat my host brother slaughtered just hours before. Arriving home at 4 p.m., I expected everything to be over. Instead, I walked into a smoky, misty, unfamiliarly horrible smelling porch. Maman was sauntering around, tending the fire, staring off into the distance. I felt like I was encroaching on something sacred though I had no idea what that was.

“Where is Hany?” Whenever I felt uncomfortable I would always ask where Hany was. Maman looked startled, as if she had been interrupted from some conversation she was having in her head. She lazily pointed to inside the house.

I found Hany, Nana, and Mimi all on Maman’s bed, munching on 5CFA gum, half napping. Again, I knew I was entering into some other sort of space though I had no idea where or what that might be. Hany rolled over towards me and said, “You were there again, yeah? With the crazy people!” Hany often called the participants in Gwana “crazy”—probably stemming from a combination of her fear and fascination with what went on there, nailed in her head was the notion that these ceremonies were anti-modern, anti-Muslim, anti-good. “Yes…” It was true, I’d spent the morning in Abu’s hut, asking him questions, sipping tea, observing... God this

98 Où est Hany?
99 T’était la encore, n’est ce pas? Avec des folles!
bedroom was hot. “Naima. Today I have a question for you.” Mimi said, referring to the fact that I had been interviewing her and the rest of my family about their bodies, health habits, eating patterns, sexuality, thoughts on death, and religious beliefs over the past month. Intrusive, I was. “What do you believe in?” She nudged her chin upwards. “You always ask us. But you’re never the one to respond. Why’s that?” I didn’t know how to respond, it was so true what she said but… but, what was it? I realized I was drenched in sweat, not only was it just past midday, but the fire burning outside was letting in a whole lot of heat, heat and goat skull smoke. “I don’t know what I believe in. I’m still searching.” I responded as honestly as I could. “Naima. That’s not possible. Do you believe in God or not? You have to respond yes or no.” I felt overwhelmed, on display. Why couldn’t I not know? Wasn’t that always the passable answer in school, to say that you were still searching, still unsure, still deciding, still had questions? “Really, Mimi, I don’t know. I don’t want to say that I don’t believe, but I’m not totally sure if just one God truly exists.” Mimi’s face carried a combination of appall and desperation, her eyes beamed into mine looking for a full answer, wanting me to explain to her what God or which gods I believed in, what kept me going. “But Naima. If there isn’t a god…Tell me, how did we all get here? How did life on earth start?”

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100 Naima, c’est moi qui a une question aujourd’hui.
101 De quoi tu crois ? (Essentially trying to ask if I believe in a god, and if so what sort of god).
102 Tu nous demandes toujours des questions mais ce n’est jamais toi qui répondes. Comment ça?
103 Je ne sais pas de quoi je crois. Je cherche ça.
104 Naima, ce n’est pas possible. Est ce que tu crois en dieu ou non? C’est une question simple! Il faut répondre.
105 Vraiment, Mimi, je ne sais pas. Je ne dis pas que je ne crois pas, mais je ne peux pas dire vraiment que Dieu existe.
106 Mais Naima, si il n’y a pas un dieu, dis-moi, comment est ce que nous sommes ici ? Comment est ce que la vie a commencé ?
thinking high school science brain kicked in, ready to jump on this, “Well... they say that life started with bacteria, tiny bacteria... Then, there was a mixture of something, you could call it a soup. So, there was a soup full of bacteria and stuff, and then, life started. Little by little, insects came, and plants, then animals...”

107 Hany lifted her head up again from her half-nap. “Naima, tell me. If that happened, why can’t it be recreated with a science? Why’s that? You know, with experiments and all that.”

My mind was spinning. People did recreate this, right? Why hadn’t I paid attention in high school biology more? Damn Wesleyan and their non-requirements. “People do that a little, sometimes, I think.”

109 Right? “But I think that, that that was something special. You can’t really recreate it. It’s just... it’s just something that happened.”

I decided I needed some “fresh” air, and excused myself to go up to the roof, thinking maybe smells don’t rise. I realized early on in my stay at my host family’s house that the roof was the place to go to be alone. I would often find Hany up there in the late afternoon or early morning, reciting from the Koran or praying. The roof offered a magnificent view of all of Kalaban Coura—other twisty roofs where women hung laundry in the wind, kids playing soccer kicking up dust, women dressed in brightly colored wrap skirts with baskets on their heads full of succulent mangos, buzzing motos cutting sharp corners...That day, the sky looked the most amazing and horrific I’d ever seen it—while Bamako always has an enormous smog coverage, this

107 Alors... on dit que la vie a commencé avec des microbes, des petits microbes... Puis, il y avait un mélange de quelque chose, on peut l’appeler un soupe Il y avait un soupe et donc, la vie a commencé. Petit à petit... les insectes, la nature, les animaux...

108 Naima, dis-moi. Si ça c’est passé, pourquoi est-ce qu’on ne peut pas le créer avec la science? Comment ça? Avec des expériences et tout ça.

109 On fait ça un peu je pense, quelquefois.

110 Mais je suppose que, c’est quelque chose spéciale. On ne peut pas vraiment le refait. C’est juste... c’est quelque chose qui c’est passé.
was much thicker than usual. Shades of pink and purple and grey and yellow
smudged and bumped elbows making an out-of-this-world, surreal painting. The sky,
too, was mourning, bruised.

Later, that evening, on the sweaty sotrama ride downtown to see a dance show,
I couldn’t get my conversation with Hany and Mimi out of my head, my own
responses to their questions perplexed me more than theirs. I wondered what I even
meant when I said it’s something that just happens. Was that any different that Hany
and Mimi’s rationale? Was I fooling myself?

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L’espirit me rendre visite.

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The dance show was stunning and eerily familiar. A woman from Madagascar
vibrated her whole body, eyes protruding, with a look of fear and surrender. I felt
squirming and uncomfortable as I watched this woman look possessed just how I’d
seen other women in Gwana over the past month. I found myself studying her
movements in morbid fascination, feeling drawn in and expelled at the same time
from the performance. Afterwards, I asked a couple of my American friends who I
went to the performance with what they thought. No one mentioned anything about
her looking “possessed.” Was I seeing things?

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L’espirit me rendre visite.

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On a particularly hot night, just hours after I came home from Gwana and put on my pajamas, I found Maman still awake, sitting up but slouched over as usual, on one of the two mattresses we all slept on outside. The muffled sound of AM-radio hummed in the background, louder was the clanking of pots and the mostly unfamiliar conversations in Bamanan. Hany, Dra, Nana, and Papi were all fast asleep and snoring, sprawled out, limbs interlocked.

“You went there again, yeah?” She smiled a dreary smile, half asleep. I nodded and smiled back. “You went there again. Oh, Naima. Naima. You like it there.” I knew she was interested in ceremonies like the one I had been going to weeks ago after she told me about all her experiences with “feticheurs.” “Yeah… I was there. I was there.” Not that I hadn’t been honest before, but in the weeks before my departure, I found myself more uninhibited than ever. She continued. “You know… You know that I went there. One time. I was there, too. With the dancers. Oh, the dancers!” She laughed to herself, no longer dreary. “They danced and danced, they threw their limbs, they cried and cried and cried… I was there.” I was taken aback by her candidness, thinking maybe it was all coming out because of her half-dream like state. “You? You were there also?” I asked an overly clarifying question since I was still in disbelief. She ignored it and kept talking. “Do you believe, Naima?” She paused. “I know that you believe.”

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111 T’es allé là-bas, oui?
112 T’étais la encore, n’est-ce pas ? Oh Naima… Naima, tu aimes là-bas!
113 Oui, j’étais là… j’étais là.
114 Tu sais. Tu sais que moi, je suis allé là-bas. Une fois. J’étais là aussi. Chez des danseuses. Des danseuses!
115 Ils ont danse dansé dansé, ils ont jette leur jambes, ils ont crié crié crié… Moi, j’étais là.
116 Toi? T’étais, t’étais la aussi?
117 Est ce que tu crois, Naima?
answered honestly. “I don’t know what I believe in.” A few days earlier, this answer infuriated Mimi and Hany, who continued to interrogate me, “What do you believe in? You can’t say you don’t know! That doesn’t make sense!” Maman lifted her chin a little more with her voice, “Naima. I believe.” She said it. “I believe a little.” She held up her fingers, motioning how “little” she believed. She believed, but it was still there. “Naima, are you going to tell your family in the States that you were there? Are you going to explain that to all your friends?” A month earlier, after the first ceremony I went to, I sent out a tenuous email to some friends, not sure of how much I should be sharing. Ironically, this is now my thesis. “I don’t know, maybe. In some ways it seems sort of sacred, you know?” She nodded in that knowing way she always did, in that grounding way, in that way that made me feel like we had really become family, in spite of our drastically different backgrounds. “Yes. I know. Trust me, I know. You’re our American, Naima! You’re my American daughter.” She rolled over and went to sleep. I stayed up and wrote in my journal, bleary eyed and mind abuzz.

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L’esprit me rendre visite.

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118 Je sais que tu crois.
119 Moi, je ne sais pas de quoi je crois.
120 De quoi tu crois? Tu ne peut pas dire que tu ne sais pas! Ça ne fait pas de sens!
121 Naima. Moi, je crois.
122 Moi je crois un peu.
123 Naima, tu vas dire que t’es allé la bas a ta famille aux Etats-Unis? Tu vas expliquer ça à tous tes amis?
124 Je ne sais pas. Peut-être. Dans quelques façons, il semble que c’est assez sacré, tu sais?
The hot season aggressively asserted itself the couple weeks before my
departure. I slept outside to feel the breeze with my entire family—Maman, Dra,
Hany, Nana, and Papi—on two mattresses, underneath poorly tied mosquito nets. I
often stayed up till two a.m. outside the front gate with my brother and his friends,
sipping tea and talking, unable to sleep because of the heat. We were all up and on
our feet by six-thirty. By nine a.m. it was practically unbearable. Many days were
spent in idle conversation and food preparation on the porch-like part of the house,
passing around the token glass of ice water, gnawing on street food or gum… I
couldn’t quite wrap my brain around the fact that I was leaving. Even though I had
known for months that my flight was May 13th, the time between May 6th and 13th
seemed long and sweaty. Drawn out. Though usually Malians have a more lingering
sense of time than the typical American, especially compared to myself, my family
and friends and the people I met at Gwana seemed particularly aware that I was
leaving soon. At home, the topic of conversation often drifted towards if I would
actually ever come back. So many Americans promised to come back but never did.
Today, Dra chimed in. “She’s going to come back. I know it. Trust me I know it.”
I can still see the look on his face when he said this, and the feeling I had and have of
not wanting to let him down. Maman responded in the typical way that she would,
skeptical of promises that she had seen broken so many times, not wanting herself or
her family to be disappointed. “No… I’ll believe it when I see it.” I tried to
convince her I would return, I wanted to, I want to. “It’s true. I’m going to come back.

127 Non… je vais le croire quand je le vois.
I promise you." Dra backed me up, "No, Maman... I know it. Naima doesn’t lie. She’s going to come back," he smiled.

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"Naima, Naima, you have to dance!" And so, I dug my feet into the ground, barefoot, kicking up dust, letting the earth sink into the spots between my toes, my pores, my pale skin newly caked with the grimy earth. I stomped and swung and shimmied, I felt the droplets of sweat on my forehead as my straw-ed out hair clung to each other’s strands and flapped in the air. I breathed in the wide-eyed grins of people around me observing and dancing and arching their backs and surrendering. I released my head, my neck, my shoulders, smelling the burnt moto tires and the freshly made Malian tea, the faint call of prayer in the background, letting the drums’ beat wash over me, bumping hips and brushing arms with the other women surrounding me, the unverbalizable energy and intensity and mood and, auspiciousness of Gwana. I danced and I sweat and I sacrificed a goat and I kept going back until it was finally time for me to return to the States.

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"Spirits have always been more clairvoyant than humans." — Abu Diarra

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As Abu knew that my day of departure was approaching, he tried to coordinate one final visit, “the night before your departure.” where I would be wished farewell and blessed before my long journey. As my final week in Mali became

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129 Non, maman, je le sais. Naima, elle ne ment pas. Elle va retourner.
130 Naima, Naima, il faut danser!
131 Les génies étaient toujours plus prévoyants quel ‘homme
busier and busier, taken up by family gatherings and visits with friends and finishing my research paper, I wasn’t sure if I would have time to make the trip out to Gwana. I called Bourama and told him this, feeling like I had proven myself to be a letdown.

“Don’t worry.” Bourama told me. I felt relieved. “It’s okay. We’re going to see each other. He said that… that… that we’ll see each other soon.” I heard Abu shouting in the background, “Naima! She’s going to come back!” “So Naima,” Bourama said, “to the next time.”

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I can still feel it. “Its”—Mali, Gwana, Abu, Nene, Mary, and the others involved, the ceremony’s—hold on me, its engulfing all-consuming nearly-terrifying nature, its vibrancy and its depth, its soulfulness. I allowed myself “to be swallowed,” as many people have done before me.

And they know I’ll be back.

And I will.

132 N’inquiète.
133 Ce n’est pas grave. On va se voir. Il a dit que… que… qu’on va se voir bientôt.
134 Naima! Elle va retourner!
135 Donc Naima, à la prochaine.
VI.

Return to Home, On Being Held
What we need is a reading that hovers close to the body (Desjarlais: 31).
I am writing this from my desk at home at Wesleyan. 59A Home Avenue. It is uncharacteristically mild outside, and I’m welcoming in the spring breeze through my paint-chipped window. I am writing this nearly a year after I participated in my first dance possession ceremony. I am writing this nearly a year after I brought a fat goat in a bent-up taxi to Gwana to sacrifice to the Gods. I am writing this miles away from Mali, miles away from Bamako and the village of Gwana, and miles away from Abu and Nene. Not that I would be able to fly into Bamako anyway, as the borders are currently closed off due to the coup d’etat. There is no longer a constitution or a democracy, Mali has been removed from the African Union, people are only allowed outside between the hours of 8 a.m. and 6 p.m., the president is off in hiding, and gunshots and looting are now the everyday. Hany tells me through a Facebook message that she is very scared, but Dra tells me it’s not a big deal. It’s hard to tell the severity of the situation as I read headlines like “The US and al-Qaeda Watch Mali’s Phony Peace” (Cavendish).

Almost a year ago, as I wrote my conclusion for my independent research project in Mali, another momentous event had just occurred—U.S. forces had just killed Osama Bin Laden. I sat in the sweaty and stuffed cyber café a five minute walk from my host family’s house, staring at the little green numbers in the right corner of my Windows 95 computer count down till zero, clicking through Facebook status updates of “Ding dong the witch is dead!” and seeing pictures of Americans celebrating Bin Laden’s death. I wondered what the hell I was about to have for dinner on this monstrously hot day. I sat and I typed away, scared for how I would be

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136 At the time I first wrote this, the borders were completely closed off. A week later, they re-opened partially.
treated as an American in Bamako post-Osama Bin Laden, and thrilled that I had soaked up all I had of Malian culture. I sat and I mourned the death of one of the world’s biggest criminals, feeling sickened by the celebrations that I kept seeing on news sites. I sat there thirsty for ice-cold water, and hungry for fresh food, and feeling lost as to where my paper was going and where my life was headed. I sat there in my long skirt that covered my knees, frustrated that there wasn’t a bathroom in the cyber café. I sat and attempted to finish my project on embodiment, as I felt various miniscule and huge events filter through the medium of my body.

*My thesis is about our bodies.*

And now, I sit and I try to conclude and reflect upon—sum up—an experience that was so visceral to me that it feels like blasphemy to wrap it up neatly on the page. I look to Malidoma Somé for help. In the introduction to his book, Somé writes “Although I have made great strides in orally communicating in that language [English], it was still very difficult to write this book. One of my greatest problems was that the things I talk about here did not happen in English; they happened in a language that has a very different mindset about reality” (Somé 1994: 2). Throughout Somé’s book, it is clear that he struggles with putting to words certain “supernatural” experiences he has during his initiation. He struggles, perhaps, because there are not coherent words for what he felt. In writing about how he must turn off his “mental restlessness,” Somé explains that he knew he had to because “I simply felt it, a certainty that was powerful and unmistakable” (Somé 1994: 204). Without getting into *too* much of a philosophical musing about language and reality and translation (in the broadest sense of that word), I wonder, like Somé, how it is fully possible to
share or relay an experience to someone when it happened in a different language.
And when I say “a different language,” I mean, what if the experience happened nonverbally? “Human words cannot encode meaning” Somé writes, “because human language has access only to the shadow of meaning” (Somé 1994: 222). And here I am, concluding my thesis of many words.

What does it mean to be a part of such an embodied experience of a ritual? What does it mean to be a contributor—in your bodily presence—to the outcome and process of a ritual such as a dance possession ceremony? How does it feel? As I continuously try to evoke the feeling through words and phrases, I do not believe I am doing it justice. Like Somé, my experience did not happen in English. Yet still, somehow, I felt a part of something, a collective endeavor larger much than myself.

In a video clip on cosmology, Somé talks about returning home. Through his toothy, mischievous, grin, he explains that the desire to go somewhere, to migrate, or to travel, is motivated by the urge not just to go home, but instead to return home. He explains, “the whole concept of a new world is the concept of a return to the origin” (Somé 2009). In Of Water and the Spirit, he elaborates on this idea of an origin, a center. I quote at length:

Each one of us possessed a center that he had grown away from after birth. To be born was to lose contact with our center, and to grow from childhood to adulthood was to walk away from it…the center is both within and without. It is everywhere… no one’s center is like someone else’s. Find your own center, not the center of your neighbor, not the
center of your father…but the center that is yours and yours
alone…We are both the circle and its center (Somé 1994: 198-199).

When I was interviewing my friend Nene who I met at the dance possession
 ceremonies I asked her, simply, what it means to be possessed. She explained, (my
translation), “Possessed… It’s a word that’s misinterpreted. Possessed. It means a
joining of the hands, with the whole world. It’s when you return to a state of
childhood… So really it’s good to be possessed. Even in dreams, you see people who
are doing things like you… And you come into contact with your spirit.”

The bodily presence that dance possession ceremonies involve necessitates
community participation. The dancing, the drumming, the calling upon spirits—
everything—is dependent upon each being’s awareness and attunement to what is
going on around them. Mary in particular, but the others as well, focused intently on
each woman who danced in the middle of the drum circle. When a woman’s skirt slid
down, or when her back arched so much it looked like she may throw it out, another
participant was quick to offer his or her bodily support. To put it in other words, there
was a feeling of being held, of being at home.

I think I felt most held and most at home in Mali during the times I was so
uninhibited that I didn’t even realize a conversation or moment I was having was
going to be something that would linger and resonate with me for months, probably
years, after. I felt held and at home when I was so immersed that the gravity or
soulfulness or emotionality of a moment was not something I was consciously
registering as profound or mind-blowing or monumental, but instead I was just there.
To be slightly more specific, these moments rested in late night conversations with
Maman on our shared mattress about religion and death and love, in the looks and glances and body language Hany and I were able to communicate with after becoming close—after becoming sisters—just after a few months of meeting, in the claps and shouts and laughs surrounding me as I danced in the center of the drum-circle at possession ceremonies, in the claps and shouts and laughs I surrounded others with as they danced in the center of the drum-circle at possession ceremonies, and maybe more literally, in the fact that I was actually held and surrounded by my entire family each night as I fell asleep next to them all underneath our mosquito net on our shared mattress. For my first month in Mali I slept inside on my own mattress (pre deathly-hot season where we all migrated outside), and early on Hany asked me if I got scared sleeping alone. I immediately answered no, because really I don’t get scared sleeping alone, but I later realized how much falling asleep next to your entire family really does bond you in a way unlike anything else. Even if it wasn’t that I was “scared,” why not embrace the feeling of being held.

Most of these moments were not verbal.

One of the greatest lessons I learned from being in Mali, and something I was reminded of particularly during the dance possession ceremonies, is that when you really strip a person down, when you have less oral and written communication to fall back on, what you begin to see is a person’s vulnerabilities, their fears, their search for comfort and warmth, union, acceptance, and their desire to be held, too. As interactive beings we all want to be held. To feel held. It is through both insignificant and huge moments of our lives that as sentient beings we crave closeness and intimacy; we all want, to some extent, to return home. The desire to travel, to migrate,
is a desire to find ones’ center (Some). The dance possession ceremonies I participated in were an outright acknowledgement and reminder of this phenomenon.

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I am writing this from my desk at home at Wesleyan. The spring breeze tickles my bare legs and I’m reminded of last year at this time when the breeze in Mali just made me sweat. I am writing this from my desk at home at Wesleyan, with two of my closest friends writing their conclusions to their theses. I look over at them and close my eyes and think about the deep yet tenuous relationships I have cultivated in my life thus far, and especially over the past year. I take a deep breath, wonder what I’m going to have for lunch, and breath out the sweet smelling spring air, praying that Abu and Mary and Nene and Hany and the rest of my friends and family in Mali stay safe during this coup d'état.
The view from the roof of my host family’s house. Not the day the sky looked bruised, but still another spectacular looking sky.

My host family that I lived with. Nana, Dra, Maman, Hany, and Papi.
Hany and me

My host family (minus Dra who took the picture) and me

Nene (center) with her maid who she considered as a daughter (blue shirt) and her niece, who was treated as a daughter too (black shirt)
Assalamu 'alaikum\textsuperscript{137}

\textsuperscript{137} A traditional greeting in Arabic, meaning “peace be upon you.”
Bibliography


