Gesture and Power

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In January 1701, Father Marcellino d’Atri, an Italian Capuchin missionary, made his way to the royal compound of King Pedro IV, sovereign of the Kongo Kingdom. Accompanied by Giovan de Rosa, an Aragonese soldier, Father Marcellino had already planned an audience with the king to introduce de Rosa to the royal court. Before arriving, Father Marcellino told de Rosa that “in no way should you copy any of the people’s customs such as smearing your face and eyes with dust because you are white and not black, and besides you are in my company” (Toso 1984, 260–61). The missionary was referring to the greeting practice of common people of lower status falling to their knees (fukama) in front of Kongo nobility, as they clapped their cupped hands repeatedly (bula makonko) and covered their faces in dust. The iconic gesture of throwing dust on oneself while in a prostrate position demonstrated subservience, submission, and reverence for the power and status of Kongo nobility. After Father Marcellino and de Rosa passed guards posted at several courtyards and waited for some time, King Pedro IV finally emerged from an adjoining room. Father Marcellino entered another room with the king and told him that de Rosa, being White, would have nothing to do with the greeting customs of the Kongo Kingdom. The king’s advisors immediately protested, and the king addressed the priest. “This can’t be,” he said, “for being in my kingdom he has to follow the same customs.” The two parties argued for more than two hours

Conclusion

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until the king said, “I will not be seen with this man, and furthermore I do not want him any longer in my kingdom.” Father Marcellino angrily departed the royal quarters without Giovan de Rosa being received by the king, and the disagreement continued for several days thereafter.

This incident is a prime example of a performative encounter, as it illustrates the importance of the micropolitics of gesture in interpersonal relations. Gestures, that is (usually) intentional movements of the body that are meaningful in specific sociocultural contexts, lay at the heart of this dispute over the appropriate etiquette for a lay White visitor to the Kongo Kingdom. Whichever way de Rosa eventually interacted with King Pedro IV would have political consequences—if he greeted the king in the customary Kongolese way, he would undermine the authority of the White missionaries and other Europeans living there; however, if he refused to kneel and cover his eyes with dust, he would publically insult the authority of the king. Indeed, decisions about what we do with our bodies in our encounters with others can have much larger ramifications. Therein lies the usefulness of an analytical approach that privileges performative encounters, where doing something as small as bowing, is doing something more than what seems to be such a simple, inconsequential act.

In choosing to develop my analysis around the concept of performative encounters, several themes emerge and are present to various degrees in each of the chapters in this book. I have chosen to identify these themes as body as center, body as conduit, and body as catalyst, themes I first introduced in the introduction that I will revisit here. The first theme, the body as center, refers to the study of the body in encounters as an actual method. I am advocating starting with the body (whether through a focus on gestures, dance, spirit possession, or other areas) to examine social processes both in the past and the present. If we start with the assumption that each person’s individual body is their primary means of engaging with the world (Merleau-Ponty [1962] 1981), the means and interpretation of this engagement will always be fraught with possibilities, anxieties, and politics of control. Thus, I support placing the body at the center of analysis rather than seeing it as a marginal tool of inquiry. Like scholars such as Edda Fields-Black who use “non-traditional sources and interdisciplinary methods” such as historical linguistics to explore previously unwritten histories (2008, 21), I challenge other scholars to consider actual physical bodies as sources within themselves that can yield novel insights. A focus on the politics of the body in the performative encounter between King Pedro IV and Father Marcellino d’Atri in the Kongo Kingdom illuminates the process of racialization in eighteenth-century West Central Africa. It also provides a harbinger of the discord and dissatisfac-
tion with ideas of White superiority that the general population expressed several years later with their involvement in the Antonian Movement of Dona Beatrice Kimpa Vita, the female prophet who claimed that Jesus and many saints were in fact Black (Thornton 1998). Focusing on the body also entails examining how the researcher’s body engages with the research site, as perceived race, gender, class, nationality, and marital status shape everyday experiences in a number of ways that then affect the direction and possibilities of research itself.

The second major theme, the body as conduit, interrogates the relationship between body and ideas, movement and mind. By this I am referring to the many examples we encountered throughout the book of people and groups intentionally using movement to try to shape thought processes. From the colonial administrator who tried to use forced secular dancing to distract people from prophetic movements in the Belgian Congo, to Mobutu’s use of political animation to engender nationalist sentiment, to Bundu dia Kongo’s use of bimpampa in everyday life and worship to try to recreate the Kongo Kingdom—in all these instances, regularized bodily movement was supposed to affect individual and group consciousness and subjectivity in some way. While we may question the effectiveness of any of these approaches, I would ask the readers to think about some of the ways that they move on a daily basis, and what histories, ideas, or group affiliations that these movements may reveal. I offer as an example the following narrative.

In 1666 an Italian Capuchin missionary named Michael Angelo of Gattina traveled to Pernambuco, Brazil, on the first leg of an evangelizing mission to the Kingdom of Kongo. Upon his arrival, he was struck by the curious behavior of one particular Black woman whom he encountered: “As soon as we landed in the port of Fernambuco [sic], we saw a great crowd of people, as well Blacks as Whites, about us, and among them a Black Woman, who kneel’d, beat her Breast, and clapt her hands upon the Ground. I enquir’d what the good Woman meant by all those motions with her hands; and a Portuguese answer’d me: Father, the meaning of it is, that she is of the kingdom of Congo, and was baptiz’d by a Capuchin; and being inform’d that you are going thither to baptize, she rejoices and expresses her joy by those outward tokens” (Churchill 1704, 616).

This story of the role of everyday cultural performances in a chance encounter on the other side of the Atlantic illustrates the important role that the body plays in chronicling history, in the sense that embodied cultural performances related to past institutions, social structures, and experiences, are reenacted in new contexts, across space and time, largely because they have become second nature, and are “sedimented in the body” (Connerton
Embodied cultural performances, whether consciously learned or unconsciously absorbed, are a crucial means of instilling ideologies, beliefs, and value systems in the bodies of people in all societies. So, while the woman in this story was thousands of miles away from her home in Congo and living in a foreign society based on plantation slavery and the racial subjugation of Africans, she continued to enact Kongo cultural performances such as fukama and bula makonko upon recognizing a Capuchin missionary. Her actions reference her own past experiences in the Kingdom of Kongo, while simultaneously alluding to a history of social hierarchy that went back several centuries in which political and religious authority were constituted, confirmed, and also challenged through embodied cultural performances such as these. How does a focus on bodily movement change what we think we know about what African captives and others of African descent brought with them to the New World? What can a focus on the body add to the grand debates on the development of the New World cultures of people of African descent?

A focus on the body as conduit provides a new area of inquiry that many scholars (with some exceptions in regards to dance and martial arts, for example, Desch-Obi 2008; Thornton 1991) have overlooked, both in studies of Africa and of the African diaspora. It was only after I had done extensive research on Kongo bimpampa in West Central Africa that the gestures of the woman in Brazil made sense to me. In fact, I had read that same passage before but had skipped over it as insignificant for my project. How often have other scholars failed to notice descriptions of embodied practices such as these? Enslaved Africans brought their ideologies and beliefs with them to the New World, carried in their gestures, dances, and general comportment. Recognition of the importance of embodied cultural performances in the constitution of social life and authority in Africa challenges us to look again with fresh eyes at the embodied practices of enslaved Africans in the Americas. Moreover, more attention is needed on the influence of Central African groups on cultures, religions, and practices in the Americas (R. Brown 2012; Heywood 2002; J. Young 2007). While enslaved Kongo people were unable to rebuild the Kongo Kingdom in the New World, the social hierarchy and concepts of spirituality lived on in their embodied cultural performances, which themselves may have been a source of challenging the authority of their owners and oppressors in New World societies. Yet, like their counterparts in Africa, these performances had various meanings and uses over time and in changing contexts. Attention to embodied cultural performances will renew dialogue on the development of New World cultures and bring a new focus on the everyday interactions that referenced larger social struc-
tures, institutions, and belief systems that were embedded in the bodies and gestures of enslaved Africans who were taken to the Americas. How might studies of everyday cultural performances provide a fresh take on existing scholarly questions, such as studies of identity formation in the New World or even in colonial Africa?

The last theme is that of the body as catalyst. My major point with this book is to argue the importance of performative encounters through embodied cultural performances in the active and ongoing constitution of quotidian social life. Social positions are made and unmade through everyday interactions with others that are defined by and through everyday cultural performances. For example, in the seventeenth century, when a prospective provincial governor kneeled and threw dirt on himself before the Kongo king, the king confirmed the authority of his political appointment by giving the new governor a scepter, after which the governor kissed the king’s hand. Or when Simon Kimbangu performed healing miracles through trembling, jumping, and the laying of hands, he was recognized as a powerful prophet during the colonial period. Likewise, when Mobutu Sese Seko organized national festivals of animation that were built on the everyday songs and dances of his subjects, their performances legitimized his position as the president of a one-party state. These examples demonstrate that embodied performances are not about just meaning-making, but also meaning-doing. My challenge to other scholars is to urge them to consider performances not just on the stage but also in daily situations as critical to processes of social life. The multiple uses and meanings that the same set of gestures may have underscores Margaret Drewal’s point that “indeed both subversion and legitimation can emerge in the same utterance or act” (1991, 2). Thus, any discussion of the interrelatedness of performance and power must attend to the role of everyday cultural performances in the making and unmaking of authority and status. Another striking aspect of this study in looking at the body as a catalyst of social transformation is the importance of the spiritual realm for legitimizing political claims enacted through embodied cultural performances. From the colonial era bangunza, who drew on their trembling in their challenges to missionaries and the colonial state, to Mobutu’s creation of a civil religion in Zaire, to the religion of BuKongo, which was used to support claims for an independent Kongo state by members of Bundu dia Kongo, one’s relationship to the supernatural realm has a critical role to play in staking nationalist and other political claims. What this suggests is that politics and religion cannot be seen as distinct, separate spheres of influence; rather, they are often intertwined and are both crucial elements in the constitution of social life.
In all, my hope is that seeing the body as center, conduit, and catalyst will open up new possibilities of inquiry for scholars in various fields. The concept of performative encounters offers one way of capturing all three of these themes as we seek to understand our larger social world, and the place that we make within it.