

## ПРОСТРАНСТВО КУЛЬТУРЫ

### **CREATIVE EXPRESSIONS FROM THE TRANS-ATLANTIC ERA: AFRICAN WOMEN ARTISTES IN DIASPORA**

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***Abstract.** The culture of singing and dancing is peculiar to Africa. Before the Trans-Atlantic trade, the culture was a creative expression in everyday life. From a historical perspective, this work examines the movement of African culture into the Trans-Atlantic world through the artistic performances of women in Diaspora. The African Diaspora is a diverse world outside Africa. Hence, this work analyses the experiences across the societies of the African Americans, Afro-Brazilians, the Yoruba Diaspora, Afro-Caribbean, within Africa among others. Women in this spaces have encountered various dynamics of being African descent in al long duree. It examines the historical process that influenced the contemporary practices in the work of female artistes in Diaspora. The work complicates the experiences of female artistes as a manifestation of the characteristics of racial and gender inequalities driven by the struggles for self-worth and determination in the Diaspora. Invariably, this work analysed how cultural ideas from Africa transferred to the diaspora. Significantly, the African female artistes in Diaspora use their work to re-enact and revolve culture by which entrepreneurial tendencies featured. The historical method is adopted.*

***Keywords:** African female artistes, Diaspora, Trans-Atlantic, African culture*

DOI: 10.31132/2412-5717-2021-56-3-86-95

### **Introduction**

Globalisation is a long historical process, but real connections to Africa were profoundly encountered during the Trans-Atlantic trade experience from the sixteenth century. Mingling of people across the Atlantic reshaped the cultural dimensions of each society along the divide. Africans were exposed to European, Asian and other cultures in the Caribbean and American societies. This chapter explains the factors that influence the work of female artistes in Diaspora. The geographies of the Diaspora entail Afro-Brazilian, African American, African and global African experiences. Akyeampong (2000) analysed the nexus between African culture and its movement into diaspora. While there are new ways of understanding diaspora due to new experiences of migration and globalisation, the movement of Africans during the trans-Atlantic trade shaped the ways of life of African diaspora, especially women. The artistry displayed across the spaces is influenced by the long historical process profound in the Trans-Atlantic trade. Therefore, this chapter examines the historical underpinning that accounts for the actions and roles of women

artistes in Africa and Diaspora. The starting point chosen is hinged on Trevor Roper's assertion about Africans in the 1950s which states that:

Perhaps in the future, there will be some African history to teach but at present there is none. There is only the history of Europeans in Africa. The rest is darkness and darkness is not the subject of history. Africans are unrewarding generations of barbarous tribes who know nothing other than singing, dancing and drumming; they have nothing to contribute to development.

So far as the Africans are concerned, there are only unrewarding gyrations of barbarous tribes in picturesque but irrelevant corners of the globe. (Trevor-Roper, 1963)

Also, G.W.F Hegel stated that:

At this point we leave Africa, not to mention it again. For it is no historical part of the World: it has no movement and development to exhibit.

Africa is diverse and composed of various ethnic affiliations. Several African societies constitute the diaspora, the long historical process of the Trans-Atlantic movements made the diaspora an embodiment of Africans from various ethnic groups lumped up in the experiences of global slavery. The Yoruba example as substantiated in Falola's chapter "Mapping and conceptualising the Yoruba Atlantic" explains a type of African society and community in diaspora. It analyses the way Yoruba homeland and diaspora connects in historical perspective. His viewpoints cannot be taken away in the discourses that elucidate the way African female artistes exist and work in diaspora. For the work of artistes, Falola said: "studies on music have indicated the use of Yoruba drums, words and mythologies in Afoxes and Axe music." (Falola 2017;76) This statement serves as the point of reference to interrogate how diaspora cultures have sufficed into globalising level. Thus, the Yoruba resettlement in the post-abolition era evidenced the role of culture and religion which subsequently served as a fulcrum of globalising African culture.

While European accounts of Africa vividly showed how Africans displayed their culture in the village style, they failed to see how African life is interpreted through singing, dancing and drumming as it were. Yet, the actions of Africans in diaspora, even during the era of Trans-Atlantic trade already showed connections with African culture, religion, politics and economy. It is undeniable that the slave world has had in it the features of singing, dancing and drumming which ultimately transformed to women's work and profession in the twentieth century.

Hence, this is justified as the culture of singing and dancing manifest continuously in the psyche of African diaspora. In American history of the 1920s, African Americans converged at Harlem to discuss renaissance and create self-consciousness as embodied in the philosophy of Marcus Garvey that it was possible to emigrate to Africa. As a way out of national depression, Africans in diaspora were enjoined to socialise and party. Harlem accommodated the performances of artistes as well as journalist and playwrights. In the acts of demonstration, the description given of women's performance portrays performances embedded in the protests. A description of the experience of Young Women Nationalist Organisation gives a journalistic description of women's protest in the Harlem Renaissance (Moore-Turner, 2005). It is contended that the work of artistes at the Harlem Renaissance depicts the ideas that resist racism and project black struggles for equality. Thus the African Americans used the arts as a form of expression of radical politics.

Basically, literature on the portrayal of female artistes as sexual objects in videos contrasts with the way woman were viewed as performers for spiritual healing and preservers of African culture in the early era of slavery in diaspora. The sexual objectification comes in the way of body exposure with little cloth covering (Aubrey *et al.* 2009). The new attribute of female dancing in music video contrasts the purpose of professionalism in the past, but suit the ways women are understood in contemporary times. The notion of African female

sexuality is explicitly profound in the representations in music videos (Aubrey and Frisby, 2012), and that their bodies exist for the pleasure of consumers. However, such notion negates the Pan-Africanist position of black women's convergence in the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s. Be that as it may, sexuality and the representations in contemporary times are tied to objectification of bodies which further imply inequality to professional women.

### **African Spirituality and Creative Performances in Diaspora**

While creative performances of African women in diaspora exist, the ways of participation are latent in private spaces. Evidently, Bridget Chinouriri *et al.* (2018) analyses these realities, in which there were marginal visibility of female artistes. In spite of this, women emerged in the performance industry to form an entrepreneurial class in the musical arts. The articulation of women's experiences and challenges in Zimbabwean society replicates in the diasporic experiences, thus female based agencies were used as an opportunity to advance women's professionalism in the creative industry.

Performances of spirituality for healing were part of the evidences that African historical traditions were sustainable. Even in slave societies, the culture of singing, drumming and dancing was embedded in the theatrical performance of spirituality. For example, in the 1690s, a female slave named Luzia in Rio Real performed theoretical spirituality by using her assistants to play *canzas* and sing in Angolan language (Sweet, 2003). There is no doubt that the acts of spirituality are connected to singing and performances. This intertwines the role of religion in the manifestations.

The inspirations for engaging in music and drumming were drawn from the process of invoking the spirits of ancestors as part of spiritual practices in diaspora and for example the black farmers in Guinea practised this act in Bahia in the early seventeenth century (Sweet, 2003). The philosophies behind the use of musical instruments for divination ceremonies also imply that entertainment is part of African culture. As Sweet pointed out, the Central African slaves in Portuguese enclave made use of musical instruments for singing and dancing while healing process was carried out. The case of a blind Portuguese woman revealed this:

Felicia was accompanied by a young mulatta, who guided her by the hand to the house of Pedro de Sequeira. When they arrived at the house, they were greeted by a large group of slaves. Some of the gathered slaves began playing instruments – *canzas* and *tabaques* to dance and sing in the language of Angola (Sweet, 2003).

The songs were used to invoke spirits into the body for healing. African spirituality of *calundu* was a performance of spirituality that involved singing and dancing among the African diaspora in Brazil. Invariably, Africans captured as slaves already carved an identity of diaspora affiliated to cultural practices around the eighteenth century. An eye-witness narrative of spirituality in singing and dancing goes thus:

A *Calundu* in northeast Brazil, seventeenth century. Dancing to the sounds of *tabaques* and *canzas*, several of the Africans appear to have already been possessed by ancestral spirits. In particular, note the man with the crest of feathers on his head and the woman at the center of the painting. The feathers indicated possession of a powerful ancestral figure (Sweet, 2003).

For religious purposes, the *calundu* was used for healing and the Portuguese masters found it worthy to purchase slaves that can utilize it effectively. For the masters, *calundu* performing women were specifically useful to render healing services. And the social aspect of it, depict in the performance of dance and music were expressly evidence of African values of entertainment, especially among the slaves drawn from Central Africa. The practice of Afro-Brazilian candomble religion attests to the thoughts of Africans on dance practices of *Calundu*. James Matory inclusively affirmed that it is a transnational platform to connect the

diaspora. Thus the candomble religion, is of spirituality expressed by dance (Matory 2005), which has been taken from religious realm to commercial space.

### **Dancehall and African Trans-Atlantic Experience**

The Dancehall is the practice of African Artistry in diaspora and it typifies commercialisation. Dance and music are inseparable. The Dancehall was a way of life in Jamaica which historically is a hybrid of different African cultures rooted in African religious practices imported through the slave trade. Dancehall practices evolved from a global historical process rooted in Trans-Atlantic movements and profound in contemporary times.

By the early 1920s, the African diaspora in America were engaged in unorganised jobs in the industrial cities of New York, Chicago, Pittsburgh, Detroit and Buffalo. Therefore, it was obvious that women were more disadvantaged because their trades were unorganised (Moore-Turner, 2005). The Dancehall is a modernised model of artistic performances that drew from spiritual practices transmitted from Trans-Atlantic trade. The words of Canace Morgan capture the realities of Dancehall as thus:

The term dancehall in its broadest sense refers to the physical space in which dances are held, but also to the music created for and played within those spaces, to the fashion and very importantly to the dance styles emerging from the music and performed within the physical arena (Morgan, 2012).

Continued globalisation of Dancehall signifies connection to its historical roots; its practitioners have globalised its performances. In the process of globalisation, a gendered perspective was the introduction of International Dancehall Queen Competition. In Jamaica the challenges of practicing Dancehall in the late twentieth century were linked to the way the church perceived it in Barbados, thus it was discouraged (Niaah, 2010). While it signified the African way of expression of freedom from slavery, post-abolition twentieth century rejected the Dancehall phenomenon which involved exposure of female body through singing and dancing. The essence of Dancehall criticisms had implication for female practitioners because it was an obvious limitation to express actions. It was regarded as a misinterpretation, failing to contextualise the Dancehall to its historical roots that encompasses the challenges of slavery and its implication on the hybridized identities (Cooper, 1995).

The Dancehall had notions of being sexually vulgar and the church as at the 1970s rejected its practice. In the works of Carolyn Cooper, commentaries on Dancehall went thus:

Anisha P. explained for examples that the commentary on over sexuality is actually in reference to only one part of the Dancehall. In fact she says sex only takes up about one quarter of dancehall events (Cooper, 1995).

The ban on Dancehall had religious undertone rooted in the understanding of Christianity which informed an opinion:

Brizelle T. stated that she no longer identified with Dancehall because of its homophobic and sexually demeaning lyrics towards women. She however, sees no problem with dancing to it because she knows it is purely fun for her and her friends (Cooper, 1995).

Though there were criticisms against performers of Dancehall, the residuality to African history of slavery, thus hybridized in Jamaican society, creates a meaning to discern the notion of sexuality and gender in creative performances of contemporary times. Comments from women regard its globalisation as an opportunity for expression of historical legacies.

The diaspora practices of singing, dancing and performing in the African way was a result of the way African slaves engaged religious practices to preserve their culture. In the words of James Sweet, the material aspects of using *canza* and *tabaque* sustained African culture and

implied dynamics of resistance to slavery. By implication, the sustenance is a postulation that African beliefs and culture were resistant to external impositions.

### **African Female Artistes in Diaspora and Global Experiences**

African women have contributed to build the African Canadian Theatre. In a way, the traditions of Africa reflected in the kind of performances introduced. In a summation by Ric Knowles:

These women have constituted a Toronto within the city that functions as a transformative space operating in the intersection of nations, sexualities and performance forms together with the largely masculinist ethos of much Caribbean performance and the narrow chronopolitics of modernist colonial development (Knowles, 2012).

The way Afro-Caribbean women displayed African culture in Canada was quite informative as specifically, the Yoruba culture was manifest. D'bi Young Anitafrika, a female artiste in Canada in the performance of *Sankofa trilogy* at the Terragon Theatre Extra Space in Toronto in November 2011 expressed the elements of folklore, myth and magic in feminine forms. The way of African spirituality occurred as she showed gratitude to gods in a blood-red train and made offerings to the ancestors and to the goddess of *Osun* for the purpose of childbirth, while *Oya* was recognised for the role of a safe passage to the ancestors (Knowles, 2012). Reference to the Yoruba traditional religion is indicative of the fact that the diaspora artistes possessed a deep sense of African past before being captured as slaves centuries ago.

Women making sense of African culture as professional artistes evolved in the twenty-first century to pattern their performances in such a way that it is historically connected to Africa. For instance, Rhoma Spencer's Theatre Archipelago was interested in expressing the aesthetics of Afro-Caribbean Diaspora. This is in the context that the Caribbean culture is almost African and globally portrays its hybridity. And more importantly, the diaspora space was an opportunity for women to lead film production in Toronto when compared to the masculinised Caribbean space. The representation of black affairs and culture is based on a long duree of African historical consciousness that defines their contemporary identities. The presentation of *Marcus Garvey* in Theatre Archipelago explains the resonance of Pan-Africanism in the thoughts of the diaspora. Freedom and nationalism in the representation of Marcus Garvey indicates the generational cause of historical process and the identity of once having ties to Africa remains constant. Knowles described Mandela's works in her company and placed a commentary thus:

For black people/peoples of African descent; our experiences and the way we deal with them are rooted in our blackness / our afrikanness – the ways we talk / celebrate / fight / desecrate / consecrate / rejuvenate – these are elements which determine what our art looks and feel like (Knowles, 2012).

The works of the female artistes are much significant to the African understandings of life. The performances in Sankofa trilogy in itself was a derivative of African nature. Sankofa is a mythical bird of West African origin that flies forward while looking back and taking an egg off of its back. The bird as pictured in Knowles' work showed that African thoughts still persist in the consciousness of the diaspora.

Knowles indicates a relationship of the African past and present. Various terminologies in the field of dramatic arts used suffice to create a meaning of the works of the female artistes. But, more profoundly the consequences of the historical transformation to the diaspora are evidently manifest. For instance, in Sankofa a woman as depicted in the trilogy is the powerful Obeah woman who led the slave rebellion in Jamaica of the 1730s. The plays depict the life of slaves and their experiences in the struggle for fundamental human rights in diaspora.

Altogether, the work of female artistes in the display of African culture in diaspora creates a pattern to understand the consequences of movement and language and the conduct of black women in diaspora of Canadian-Caribbean space. Like the narratives of gender inequality in other spheres, the experiences of female artistes in diaspora indicate the nuances of restrictions to women. From the biography of Spencer it is evident that she found studies and experiences in Canada empowering to apply it in the founding of Theatre Archipelago and not only was it owned by a black woman, it was also the first to own a performance space in Toronto.

Apart from Theatre Archipelago, women's involvement in creative performances profoundly mainstreams from the 1990s. Modernisation and education define the direction of contemporary practices. New spaces for professionalism that evolved from Ric Knowles end notes are indicated thus:

In addition to current Theatre Archipelago, African Theatre ensemble, founded in 1998 by Modupe Olaogun, and dedicated to making African Theatre accessible to Canadians through performance, education, research and professional development of classics and new work originating from or inspired by Africa (Knowles, 2012).

The Canadian space was effectively utilized by women to counter male domination in artistry. It altered the gendered notions and connected historical links Africa inherited centuries ago.

The experiences of African female artistes in Diaspora transverse societies within and outside Africa. The professions of the women narrated below attest to the milieus of opportunities and advantages that sustained. The examples of Taiwo and Kehinde Lijadu and Aretha Franklin articulate the narratives of global experiences.

### **Life History Narratives of Taiwo and Kehinde Lijadu and Aretha Franklin**

Taiwo and Kehinde Lijadu are popularly known as Lijadu sisters from Nigeria. They are musicians whose performances reflect transnational influences, even though they were born and grew up in Nigeria. They were born on October 22, 1948 in Jos, Nigeria. They were branded as the West African version of the Pointer Sisters who mixed Afrobeat sounds with jazz and disco. The early influences they had with music being due to their mother's interest in purchasing records of Aretha Franklin, Miriam Makeba, Ray Charles and so on. Listening to such music and singings from church influenced their career and they signed the first contract with Decca Records in 1969 which was titled 'Iya Mi Jowo' (Mother please) and they continued, with the last produced in 1997, titled; 'Orere Elejigbo'. The perspective of transnational culture in their performances influenced their career as international female artistes. (DAWN Commission Homeland Alert December 8, 2018)

Aretha Franklin, an African American, was born on March 5, 1942 in Memphis, Tennessee. She was born at a time when African descents in America found meaning in the society through politics and spirituality. Martin Luther King was associated with her family, because of the political sermons of Liberation evolving from the church, while she was part of the singers since the age of 10 years and New Bethel church. She signed for her first album with JVB Records in 1956. Subsequently, she mixed the church-based songs with pop culture which of course reflected the culture that Africans had expressed in diaspora. She received the Lifetime Grammy Awards in 1994. Her family's close ties with Martin Luther King reflected in the performance of memorial service in 1968. The objectives of civil rights and feminist movement reflected in her songs. This is typical of the desires of Africans in diaspora, which was well expressed during Harlem Renaissance. (Laura Snapes Ben Beaumont – Thomas in *The Guardian* August 16, 2018)

### **Transnational Connections and Reinventions in the African (Yoruba) Experience**

While it is difficult for some returnees to trace back specific locations due to loss of memories and oral histories, Yoruba returnee settlements are prominent along the coastlines. In the settlement, Afro-Brazilian cultures resonate and there are hybrids of cultures, but the African (Yoruba) experience remains fundamental. (Aleoine Meira Amos's *Os Que Voltaram* (Those who returned 2007) Diaspora displays of songs and dance are common in the cultures, and annually, the Afro-Brazilian carnival importantly rejuvenates these practices. Continuities to the culture of dance and singing, mostly intertwined with religious practices, imply the kind of society that was in the era preceding the Trans-Atlantic trade.

Central to this, is the reinventions of Candomble religious practices into expressive traditions (singing, dancing, theatrical performance). Among the Yoruba in Brazil, the Candomble culture was expressed richly in its integration to Christianity which created new impressions that artistes adopted to make career pursuits. Beyond the search for new lives in the twentieth century, it was formidably a means of inventing the past in the public domain. In the political economy, the Candomble was of essence, (Matory 2005) because it was a rallying point to gather political aspirants.

The reinvention was entrenched with the way Catholicism was deployed to modernise Candomble practices into organised Christian doctrines to win converts. The practices of performance in the Yoruba societies of Brazil and Afro-Brazilian settlements in Yorubaland presents women as the occupiers of Candomble literary space from the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Suarez (2017) analyses how women played important roles in the temples. In the description given by Suarez, artistes' performance emerged from the Candomble and its narrative in modern trends goes thus:

Some of the most famous "orisha flatterers" in Cuban ritual history have been women, and there are talented female Olorishas all over Cuba and North America in places such as New York City, Washington DC, Chicago and San Francisco Bay areas (Suarez 2017, 344).

This kind of experiences transformed into work of creative expressions of singing and dancing given the fact that these women led performances of annual festivals of the Candomble over the years. Feminisation of Candomble leadership in Brazil, especially of the twentieth century, had lots of implication entangled in the political economy. But more importantly the high percentage of female involvement influenced the cultures of performances of women in diaspora. Invariably the Candomble femininity is a rallying point of socialisation that creates space for relearning culture for the advancement of creative economies. Therefore, if women had not been strong in leading the Candomble, the narratives of creativity would not perpetually resonate in the cultures of singing, dancing and drumming as it evolved from Africa.

### **Female Artistes in Africa and Cultural Diplomacy**

Within Africa, international relations are also consolidated by the work of artistes, cultural movements and events. Mostly, cultural diversity is expressed through events that show such performances. Government of nations in Africa rely on cultural festivals to maintain diplomatic ties. The definitions and meaning the performances add to nationalist interest in international affairs affirms the transnational significance African culture implied in historical perspectives. The act of performances intertwines international diplomacy in Nigerian-Benin Republic relations as described thus:

Nigerian pavilion at the fair stood out as one of the very best. It was spacious and attractively decorated with Nigerian work of arts and handicraft. And the Dahomeans were quite pleased and happy at Nigeria's participation (NAI Nigeria Magazine PX/08).

The new postcolonial order that emerged from the 1960s manifested in the trend of cultural international relations. Modernisation of culture and the politics of international diplomacy project the work of female *Obitun* dancers and *Ute-Okpu* dancers featured prominently in the World Exposition at Osaka, Japan in 1970 and at Cotonou, Benin Republic. Mostly, the promotion of nationalistic ideology through this means affirms the fact that singing and dancing is fundamental to African culture and of course it constantly renders the tradition as a continuum, which is universal.

Within Africa, artistes' performance to entertain Europeans on visit to Africa also fostered the idea of diplomatic relations and expressed the universal practices of cross-cultural shows. This shows how hybridity in European-African relations interface within Africa. The Third Festival of Arts in Ife (1970) was an example that expressed this universality (NAI Nigeria magazine 1970). Accounts of the festival rarely indicate the exclusion of women, and particularly it was inclusive such that it was reported of a performance of Martha Ulaeto and Peggy Harper whose zeal was apparent but who still were studying in the University of Ife. Specifically, Peggy Harper performed Dance Drama, *Alatwgana* – The coming of Life and Death. The performance of *Alatwgana* was a new version of the play 'Creation' presented in 1964 at the University of Ibadan (NAI Nigeria Magazine 1965 and 1967). An infusion of African and European culture reflects in Peggy Harper's performance, such that she used African dance steps to express an African version of European culture. Ladies involved in the *Alatwgana* dance play were dressed in African *Adire* costumes which clearly reflect infusion of cultures. Specifically, this typifies in how Achille Mbembe (2007) described the blurred boundaries of national differences and informed by the production of African modernity globally, the cultural exchange between African and European performances feature the idea of cosmopolitanism. Historically, the ideas in Afropolitanism have proven to exist since the 1960s. The ideas around afropolitanism appears as a manifestation.

### Conclusion

The diaspora practice of singing, dancing and performing in the African way was a result of the way African culture subsists over the centuries. African slaves engaged in religious practices to preserve their culture centuries ago. The long historical process synthesized into modernised African diaspora movements in the twentieth century. It is obvious that while African culture moved into diaspora over the centuries, the movement as assumed a cosmopolitan dimension where Europeans also perform these cultures in Africa. At the centre of performances were African women in diaspora who re-enacted and interpreted the culture of performances for resistance and economic empowerment. The material aspects of using *canza* and *tabaque* sustained African culture and implied dynamics of resistance to slavery. By implication, the sustenance is a postulation that African beliefs and culture were resistant to external imposition. In spite of the tendency to encounter cultural domination, African culture in diaspora feature stability through re-enactment. For example, in the case of the Nigerian/African (and Yoruba) female in diaspora, it is pertinent to emphasise the meaning of artistes' performance to integrate practices in contemporary Africa to create a synergy. For example, the growing influences of Nollywood seem to transcend within African cultures to a global level, as it encompasses the characteristics of African diaspora in presentation and performance. Though it is complicated to stick to a resettlement in or define Africans as a homogenous group in diaspora, but the philosophy of Nollywood as it advocates tradition and modernity matters in the global performances. Jonathan Haynes's (2016) narrative of Nollywood unfolds the meaning and relevance to ascribe to an industry reshaping Africa's modernity in creative expressions of contemporary times.



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## КРЕАТИВНОСТЬ И САМОВЫРАЖЕНИЕ, НАЧИНАЯ ОТ ЭПОХИ ТРАНСАТЛАНТИЧЕСКОЙ РАБОТОРГОВЛИ: РОЛЬ ЖЕНЩИН-АРТИСТОК В АФРИКАНСКОЙ ДИАСПОРЕ

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*Аннотация.* Статья посвящена исследованию роли африканских женщин как носительниц и хранительниц национальной идентичности и культурного знания, заключенного в музыкальной и танцевальной традиции, и их вкладу в сохранение этих традиций в африканских диаспорах за пределами Африки. Автор рассматривает обширный период времени, начиная от эпохи трансатлантической работорговли и заканчивая нашими днями, и подчеркивает важность традиционных музыки и танца в сакральных практиках выходцев с Африканского континента, а также то значение, которое имеет в современном мире творчество африканок и афро-американок для освобождения женщин от гнета патриархальной культуры и для развития межкультурных коммуникаций, для борьбы с расовым и гендерным неравенством.

*Ключевые слова:* африканские артистки, диаспора, трансатлантическая работорговля, африканская культура

DOI: 10.31132/2412-5717-2021-56-3-86-95