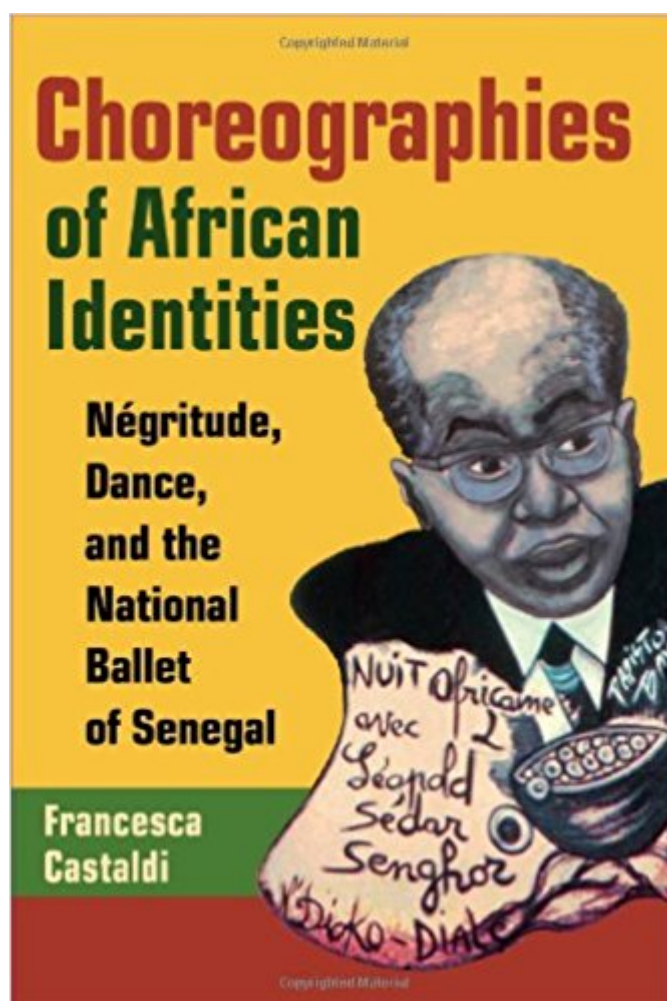


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Choreographies Of African Identities: Negritude, Dance, And The National Ballet Of Senegal



Synopsis

Choreographies of African Identities traces interconnected interpretative frameworks around and about the National Ballet of Senegal. Using the metaphor of a dancing circle Castaldi's arguments cover the full spectrum of performance, from production to circulation and reception. Castaldi first situates the reader in a North American theatre, focusing on the relationship between dancers and audiences as that between black performers and white spectators. She then examines the work of the National Ballet in relation to Leopold Sedar Senghor's Negritude ideology and cultural politics. Finally, the author addresses the circulation of dances in the streets, discotheques, and courtyards of Dakar, drawing attention to women dancers' occupation of the urban landscape.

Book Information

Paperback: 264 pages

Publisher: University of Illinois Press (February 13, 2006)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0252072685

ISBN-13: 978-0252072680

Product Dimensions: 6 x 0.7 x 9 inches

Shipping Weight: 14.4 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.0 out of 5 stars 1 customer review

Best Sellers Rank: #1,784,766 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #112 in [Books > Arts & Photography > Performing Arts > Dance > Ballet](#) #132 in [Books > Arts & Photography > Performing Arts > Dance > Folk](#) #171 in [Books > Arts & Photography > Music > Musical Genres > Dance](#)

Customer Reviews

"Castaldi was the first to publish an in-depth study of dance in Dakar, and hers is a very valuable contribution to a much neglected yet growing field. . . . I would highly recommend it to any reader concerned with the significance of performance in social life and the circulation of the performing arts within and out of Africa."--*African Arts*

Francesca Castaldi is an independent dance scholar and ethnographer.

Like the author, I saw the National Ballet of Senegal perform in 1995 and again at the Irvine Barclay Theater in 1998. In between, I traveled to Senegal to study with musicians of the Ballet, but my stay

was not as long-term or in-depth as that of the author. This book provided a lot of details about the historical and social context of the Ballet, and Senegalese dance in general, that really supplemented the knowledge I got from my time over there. There are good discussions about the relationship between the Ballet and traditional dance, about the contrast between professional groups like the Ballet and "street" dance like sabar gatherings, about the interface between Senegalese performers and Western audiences, and about the role of Senegalese dance in establishing African cultural identity. Interestingly, she concludes that continued adherence to the ideas of Senghor, who established the Ballet, would be counterproductive to the development and vitality of Senegalese dance and culture in general. The book is generally well-written and engaging, particularly when the author is describing her field research, but I found it tough to stay interested through a lot of the anthropological/sociological/ethnographic jargon-filled discussions. It often seemed to be an exercise in stuffing simple notions into technical categories to be plugged into some over-arching conceptual machinery--rather than just discussing the matter at hand. For instance, when Bouly Sonko, director of the Ballet, describes how his passion for dance developed in his youth, saying it was like a "virus" that just took him over, the author finds this "quite telling", saying that "the biomedical conceptualization of disease contrasts with indigenous conceptualizations, which tend to stress the somatic element in any sickness and the links between the physical body and the social body." This seems to overwork what is a fairly innocent remark made by Mr. Sonko. And I'm not sure what the chapter "Tales of Betrayal" adds to the discussion. The author's explanation doesn't help: "These 'Tales of Betrayal' are configured as the staging of a series of antagonisms intending to rupture essentialist assumptions of gender." Well, for all I know the author may be making contributions to ethnography and anthropology that are missed on me but appreciated by professionals in the field. In any event, interest in African dance seems to have continued to grow in the U.S., and this book would be of value to anyone interested in African music, dance, and culture in general.

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