Staging "Afrotopias": Performative Collaborations between Old and New African Diasporans in Detroit [title slide]

Harlem 1929 [slide 2], Asadata Dafora arrives in America from Sierra Leone. After growing up in an elite family in West Africa and attempting to make a career as an opera singer in Europe, Dafora made a lasting impact with his African theatre troupe based in NYC. His company was comprised of West African immigrants, including those of the Hausa, Kru, Igbo, Yoruba, Calaba, and Bini ethnic groups. Their performances marked the first significant stagings of Africa by new African immigrants in America, setting a powerful precedent, and opening up possibilities for subsequent similar endeavors. For instance, noted choreographers **Pearl Primus and Katherine Dunham [slide 3]** both danced in Dafora's ensemble. Many African, African-American, and Afro-caribbean drummers also performed with Dafora, most significantly, Nigerian **Babatunde Olatunji [slide 4]** who went on to catapult African drumming into the American mainstream during the 1950s and 60s, particularly with his well-known recording Drums of Passion. Acting as an ambassador for African music and culture, Olatunji was the first African performer widely accessible to African Americans, particularly through his center for African culture established in Harlem in 1967. If Olatunji is credited with introducing the notion that African music could be a concert art, the Guinean-born Ladji Camara solidified and expanded it, creating a djembe boom that still reverberates to this day. After several tours with the renowned Ballet Africains, Camara settled in NYC in 1960, and began teaching djembe traditions, which quickly overshadowed Dafora's and Olatunji's work, shifting the focus from Anglophone to Francophone drumming and dance in America. Reinforcing this emphasis on francophone repertoire, Senegalese drummer Mor Thiam immigrated to the U.S. in the late 1960s, after meeting Katherine Dunham in Dakar in 1966. Perhaps best known for his later work

with Afro-pop superstars Youssou N-dour, Salif Keita, and Baba Maal, Thiam's success in America, encouraged two other Senegalese drummers to relocate to the U.S. in the 1970s - **Khatab Cissokho and Ibrahima Camara [slide 5]**; although lesser known, these two men will be important to our story later. In all, Dafora, Olatunji, Ladji Camara, Mor Thiam, and other members of the so-called new African diaspora, interacted extensively with African Americans, or the 'old' African diaspora. Notable among these artists are: Melvin Deal, Robert Crowder, and Arthur Hall. But, arguably the most influential African-American drummer of this generation was **James Hawthorne "Chief" Bey [slide 6]**. Born in South Carolina, he grew up in Harlem, initially learning drumming from Dafora's student, Isamae Andrews, and later working with Olatunji in the 1950s, performing along with two other African American drummers on Drums of Passion. He also worked with Katherine Dunham and Pearl Primus before studying with Ladji Camara and performing with Guy Warren (from Ghana). He taught countless African-American drummers, including, most notably, Olukose Wiles and Sule Greg Wilson. As African-American drummer Osubi Craig remarked, "most African-American drummers were taught by [Chief] Bey himself or can trace their drum teacher's genealogy back to [him]". As such, Chief Bey was a vital link between generations of new and old diasporic African musicians in America.

Further exploring interactions between old and new African diasporans, this paper focuses on the Detroit-based **Ngoma Za Amen-Ra New Afrikan Dance Theatre [slide 7]**, its repertoire, and its founder Kamaal Amen-Ra to illustrate the development of diasporic consciousness, including the ways in which African-American performers engaged with a network of new African immigrants to co-create a revolutionary transnational space – "Afrika" (with a k) – in which to forge meaningful iterations and understandings of self, place, politics, and history through cultural hybridity. Overall, I show that 'Afrika' is a liminal, aspirational, and

subjunctive performative space that offers artistic freedom for musicians and dancers to explore the ideal – the way things might have been, or the way things could be. In other words, Afrika is a kind of utopia, or, rather, Afrotopia – a pan-African performative and speculative place which reinterprets the past and imagines an African-conscious future.

Harlem 1950 [slide 8], Richard Arliss Martin, (later known as Kamaal Amen-Ra) is born into the heart of the new African diaspora in America; however, he did not directly encounter this aforementioned lineage until much later in his life. Kamaal descends from a family of musicians and activists. His maternal grandmother, Beatrice J. Robinson, from Brooklyn, was a classically trained pianist, vocalist, and dancer, who was one of the first black graduates of Julliard and danced with Katherine Dunham. His mother, "Ann" (Robinson) Martin, was a cellist and bassist, who attended the Boston Conservatory of Music, where she met Kamaal's father, James Alfred Martin, a jazz musician and composer. In the early 1950s, James Martin gave up his musical career, however, when he joined the Nation of Islam's security force known as the Fruit of Islam. Kamaal only learned about his father's activism in his late teens, but noted that this revelation had a profound impact on his subsequent life and work.

During Kamaal's later childhood, interests in drumming as well as African music and culture were sparked as he was surrounded by both new and old diasporans in New York. He recalled a neighborhood full of music and food made by Haitians, Puerto Ricans, Dominicans and the like as well as vivid memories of drum parades of Harlem's Yoruba Temple. He studied piano with his grandmother, and was active in the school music program through high school on percussion. As did many African Americans in the mid 1960s, he started to re-discover Africa, particularly noting the influence of the well-known book - *The Negro and the Making of America*. But, as he told me, "the thing that really got me into African music was when I saw a

video of the national ballet from Guinea playing at the United Nations in 1966." However, at the time, Kamaal's primary musical endeavor was as lead singer of an R&B cover band in Atlantic City. In terms of ideological grounding, Kamaal explained, "there were all these little incidents and stories of racial injustice that I lived or were told to me throughout my youth. Like, one of my uncles was a Freedom rider. They all formed my political mindset". After completing high school, Kamaal attended Quincy College in Illinois. There he read everything from Garvey, Malcolm X, and Elijah Muhammed, to Ralph Ellison, James Baldwin, and Richard Wright. Around this time, Kamaal was also introduced to the ideologies of the Republic of New Afrika (RNA) along with the Black Panther Party. Later, when he returned to Atlantic City, in 1971, he began to work for the Panthers as a community organizer, particularly involved in the free breakfast program there.

In 1973, at the request of a fellow Panther and friend, Kamaal relocated to Detroit. After eventually finding a job at the local public television station, he started to jam with local musicians, eventually meeting **Sundiata Keita [slide 9]**, a kindred soul in drumming and political activism. Kamaal was invited to perform with Sundiata's group: United Spirit, a Detroit-based African theatre company that performed rumbas, sambas, and plays dramatizing African-American experiences. Kamaal and Sundiata bonded over their mutual passions for African music and culture as well as political activism; they traveled extensively together, and lived together for years. In 1977, they took a trip to see the Chicago-based Muntu Dance Theatre perform. As Kamaal recalls "when they came out with those jembes and a stilt walker, that was it. My life changed from that day on". Through Muntu, Kamaal and Sundiata met Moshe Milan, Baba Atiba, and other members of this ensemble who were also part of a secret society known as The Sundrummer. According to Kahil El'Zabar, a former chairman of this group, Sundrummer

was founded on the South Side of Chicago in 1968 by a student of Chief Bey's: Harold AtuQue Murray; it was as El Zabar recalls, "one of the first organizations of African-American musicians committed to the study and performance of traditional African music [and] philosophy. It helped develop Afrocentric…consciousness" Kamaal and Sundiata, over the next year (1977-1978) became initiated into this group. Spurred by his experiences with Sundrummer, in 1977, Kamaal established his own ensemble in Detroit, which eventually became known as the Ngoma Za Amen-Ra New Afrikan Dance Theatre. This group initially consisted of roughly ten Detroit-area African-American drummers and dancers; it was both an outgrowth of the United Spirit group and an amalgamation of the members' political, social, and spiritual philosophies.

The name itself [slide 10] is indicative of a transnational, diasporic, pan-African consciousness merged with revolutionary black politics. For example, "Amen-ra" is the name of a god in ancient Kemet (Egyptian). Using Kemet connected this group to other black political activists and Afro-centrists who often glorified ancient Egypt in their expressions of African diasporic identity. Later, Kamaal adopted the Swahili phrase 'Ngoma za', meaning the drums of, or the music and dance of. The "New Afrikan," portion of the ensemble's name was inspired by Kamaal's (and other members') alignment with the ideology of the Republic of New Afrika (RNA), a political activist group who agitated for a sovereign black territory within America's south. When asked about this portion of the ensemble's name Kamaal explained: "we were coming out of that whole consciousness, the African liberation concept - self-identity, trying to find out who we are, celebrating ourselves as Africans. And we are new Africans. We don't have African names. We don't speak African languages. We are a result of slavery. Because we were lost, but then we rediscovered all these things, it was like we were being reborn. It was a type of renewal." Similarly, as Co-artistic Director "Shashu" Amen-Ra, added, "[New Afrikan] was a

way of identifying ourselves more with the African continent, but we were still Americans…The 'k' spoke to a new rebirthing, a new level of consciousness." As Kamaal acknowledged: "The Republic of New Afrika never happened of course, but that's ok; it was more of a *psychological place* for us to be, as a way to heal our minds to get rid of some of the wrong ways of thinking that African Americans might have by living in this country". Although the RNA never achieved its ultimate goal of acquiring a physical territory within the US, its ideologies were transformed into a psychological place made manifest through the performances of Ngoma Za. Through this process, he continued, "we are trying to *build a new nation within ourselves*. We are not just doing this as a show. This is something that we are doing to reclaim our lost identity and culture." In all, the ensemble's name reflected a revolutionary diasporic pan-Africanism, combining terminology from North and East Africa as well as references to black political activism.

After founding the ensemble, Kamaal, Sundiata, and other members of this group continued to work with Sundrummer in Chicago while studying directly with new and old diasporic Africans, including: Mor Thiam, Chief Bey, Babatunde Olatunji, and Ladji Camara as well as Ibrahima Camara and Khatab Cissokho both of whom stayed with Kamaal for several months in the late 1970s and early 80s, helping Ngoma Za build its repertoire and sensibilities. As Kamaal remarked, "Cissokho and Ibrahima solidified some of the things we were doing. Before them, we were just rebels, just doing drumming and making up stories. But these guys came and showed us some of the real traditions from their villages". These new African diasporic drummers, in other words, leant to the perceived authenticity of the Ngoma Za ensemble. Together, artists in this troupe from both sides of the Atlantic contributed to the creation of Afrika on stage through a diverse, eclectic, hybridized, and transnational repertoire.

As is customary [slide 11] in many parts of Africa, at the start of each Ngoma Za performance there is the ritual pouring of libation accompanied by the singing and reciting of praises to the ancestors. At many of their performances, the ensemble begins with an Ifa song in Yoruba for Ogun, which Kamaal noted he learned from Baba Atiba in the Sundrummer. While pouring libations, Kamaal or Sundiata would also often recite praises, announcing in Swahili "*sifa yoto zinde* [all praises to]…" followed by the name of an ancestor or respected elder in the black community, ranging from Malcolm X to Steve Biko, and then closing each phrase with "nsa" (Twi/Akan for "drink") or "ashe" (Yoruba for life/spiritual force). This blend of East and West African traditions and languages with African-American and African ancestral names set the tone for a New Afrikan performance that is both diasporic and diachronic in nature.

A core part of many African-American dance ensembles to this day is ***Fanga*** **[slide 12];** it is one of the first African music/dances that Kamaal learned, and it remains a cornerstone of Ngoma Za's contemporary repertoire. Fanga's history and development allude to the connection and tension between new and old African diasporans. Although there is some debate, Fanga is largely understood to be a Liberian (Vai) welcome dance, first performed in America by Asadata Dafora in the 1930s. It then became adapted and popularized by Pearl Primus, and later by Olatunji and his ensemble, each making their own controversial alterations to it. Subsequently, African-American drummer LaRoque Bey added the now widely-used lyrics "*Fanga alafiyah, ashe, ashe*" and set this merger of Yoruba and Vai languages to the melody of an old African-American slave song "Little Liza Jane." In the 1990s, Fanga was further changed and simplified for school children as it became a staple in the American multicultural movement in primary education. In sum, Fanga is a product of the African diasporic imagination, a co-creation of both new and old African diasporans, fostering diasporic consciousness as its performance helps to

construct a transnational 'Afrikan' space.

Like many African American drumming and dance ensembles, Ngoma Za includes several pieces directly drawn from the repertoire of Les Ballet Africains (LBA). Its master drummer, Ladji Camara, was primarily responsible for disseminating this repertoire in NYC in the 1960s, which later became altered and infused with new meanings. For instance, with the popular Guinean piece dundunba, Kamaal noted that he first learned it from Sundrummer, who learned it from Chief Bey, who learned it from Ladji. Ngoma Za later added a Wolof song learned from Mor Thiam, some variations from Cissokho and Ibrahima, and choreography which featured African martial arts from several regions of the continent. Similarly, Ngoma Za augmented several other dances featured in the LBA repertoire (in the 1960s), for instance, adding gospel and hymnal singing to the all-female puberty rites dance Mandiani, and augmenting the Lamba dance with a Zimbabwean mbira.

Ngoma Za also created and adapted theatrical works that did not explicitly reference the names of African dances. Considered by its members to be the troupe's signature choreography, **"Market Dance," [slide 13]** [(aka "Abulo") is a black Atlantic cultural hybrid. While the core of its music is drawn from a Congolese rhythm called *bouche*, adapted from Muntu in the 1970s, it also includes Cuban *guaguanco*, Brazilian samba, a Malian log drum called *ekongkong*, dunduns, and a Senegalese/Wolof song learned from Cissokho. The dance has been refined and expanded over the years with the help of Karen Prall, an African-American dance professor at Wayne State University, and Jean-Claude Biza Somba, a member of the new African diaspora from Congo who performed in its National Dance Company and toured extensively in Europe before settling in Ann Arbor, Michigan in the late 1970s. In all, as Kamaal noted, "Because it has all these elements from Africa, the United States and the Caribbean, I feel that [Market Dance] really

represents me and Africans in America." This choreography also prompted Kamaal to reflect on cultural hybridity, authenticity, ownership, and artistic license, stating that, "We African Americans, or Africans in America, are really the only people that *have the right* to mix African cultural traditions like this, because of our mixture of blood from the different tribes. People were married in this country who might not have ever met if they were in Africa. So, *all of Africa is in our DNA*. I've got Senegalese, Ghanaian, Congolese in me. It's all mixed up. Because we [African Americans] don't really know where exactly we came from, and we don't know who jumped the broom with who, we feel free to mix the different cultures together." In other words, an absence of definitive genealogical links to a single African ethnic group created an expanded sense of authority for Kamaal, lending to the ease with which he adopted and adapted cultural practices and symbols from many parts of the continent. In sum, Market Dance's pan-African musical soundscape along with choreographic depictions of a busy cosmopolitan marketplace expresses the multiple streams of cultural histories – from both new and old African diasporas – that have converged to create the work itself and diasporic consciousness more broadly.

In total, various members of Ngoma Za estimate that the group has about 30-40 pieces in its repertoire, most from the Mande complex, but a fair amount from Nigeria, Ghana, Congo, and other African regions as well as the diaspora. Ngoma Za's repertoire also consists of pieces derived from multiple disparate African and diasporic traditions creatively combined into singular artistic works. Examples include: "Zulu," "Drum Talk," and "Shakere." Occasionally, Ngoma Za also performs reggae songs, such as Burning Spear's "Slavery Days," and spirituals such as "Oh Freedom," using only African percussion and voice. This inclusion reflects Kamaal's deep passion for reggae and its congruencies with his overall political project. As he

told me: “To this day, with my reggae band, or with Amen-Ra, I use these groups to promote the ideas of the RNA, Black Panthers, and the whole black revolutionary spirit”. Since its founding, Ngoma Za has performed in a wide variety of contexts, which reflect its political agenda; these include: African-centered public schools, Kwanzaa celebrations, Marcus Garvey commemorations, Black Panther events, African Liberation Day celebrations, and so forth. Ngoma Za has also continued its association with the RNA, performing, most recently, at a 2015 Detroit-based commemoration for Chokwe Lumumba, a seminal figure in this organization.

In conclusion [slide 14], refracting a wide-ranging pan-African hybrid of music and dance through the prism of black revolutionary politics, Ngoma Za performances create a singular universalizing place from which new forms of consciousness and possibilities of being emerge. Although referencing the motherland, this place remains distinctly diasporic while being redressive, aspirational, and subjunctive; it is utopian, or Afrotopian, imagining a realm where “all” the nations of Africa and its diaspora dance together in unified harmony as broken histories of migration, loss, oppression, and triumph are bridged through performance. Such stagings in Detroit perpetuate the revolutionary work of the RNA, Panthers, and other activists, serving local communities by creating a new African consciousness which, in turn, encourages social change. As Kamaal noted, “if we as African Americans know who we are and where we came from, we can better move forward in a positive and productive way”. Co-created by direct and indirect interactions between new and old African diasporans, Ngoma Za’s renderings of ‘Afrika’ (with a k) in Detroit are both products of, and generative forces for, a politically-charged black Atlantic diasporic consciousness. Deeply dwelling in this performative domain encourages participants to re-imagine and transform senses of home, place, self, and ontology.