Globalizing method: doing ethnography in transnational spaces

Globalizando o método: fazer etnografia em espaços transnacionais

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1 On a midtown Manhattan sidewalk just down the street from the Museum of Modern Art (MOMA), an exceedingly “modern” space, an African merchant from Mali sells “primitive” art. Based in West Africa, he spends several months a year in New York City. Shoppers have been buying many of his pieces during the busy 1995 Christmas season and he will soon return to Mali to buy more masks and statues. The shoppers, he remarks, who are mostly tourists, say that his pieces often remind them of what they have just seen in the museum. “This is a good space,” he says, “but sometimes the police fine me and threaten to take my goods”.

2 Several paces closer to the MOMA there is an American street merchant who also sells African masks and statues. Amid his street display of exotic wooden objects there are also placards with photographs of him buying art in Africa. As he hawks his pieces, he talks about his travel experiences.

3 The West African art merchant, who is a Muslim, refers to the statues and masks as “wood” (see Steiner 1993; Taylor Barbash and Steiner 1992). For him art is a commodity, like any other, that can bring a good return in the New York market – especially just down the street from MOMA. With his proceeds, he feeds his Malian family and buys more “wood”. The American art merchant presents his masks and statues as products of a personal journey, meaning that the objects embody narratives of travel and adventure. For some shoppers these narratives may render the “primitive” more attractive, comprehensible and interesting – if not authentic.

4 And so these objects embody multiple narratives of primitivism and modernity, objet d’art and commodity, business and romance, Islam and tourism – all in the space of 100 meters of Manhattan sidewalk, all in the shadow of one of art world’s most hallowed
institutions. This confluence of symbolic contradiction underscores the prevalence of social hybridity in North America. It is a small reminder of how the flow of money, goods and people across increasingly transnational spaces is transforming social landscapes, rendering them less bounded, and more confusingly complex. Although social worlds have never been as neat and tidy as anthropologists have described them, the sociocultural fragmentation brought on by transnationalism has compelled social theorists to rethink such fond and comforting concepts as culture and society (see Appadurai 1990, 1991; Gupta and Furguson 1992; Bhabba 1994).

Even so, many anthropologists, until recently, have been blithely unaware of or uninterested in the theoretical and methodological consequences of social hybridity. Such myopia has been all the more surprising considering the undeniable presence of social hybridity in our everyday North American lives. Consider, for example, the growing West African presence on the east coast of the United States. For more than 15 years, West Africans have immigrated to New York City, perhaps the most tangled site of sociocultural hybridity in North America. Most of the West African immigrants in New York City are not overeducated diplomats, but undereducated traders or unskilled wage laborers. Many of the traders are street vendors in Harlem, Brooklyn, and Lower Manhattan, where they share market space with African Americans, Jamaicans, Koreans, Chinese, Vietnamese, Ecuadorians, Mexicans, Pakistanis and Afghans. Some of those who are literate and have work permits drive Medallion cabs, which are licensed; others, who are also literate and perhaps undocumented aliens, drive so-called gypsy cabs which are often not regulated by City Hall. The more successful West African traders have used their profits to open restaurants or boutiques like Kaarta Textiles, a shop on West 125th Street in Harlem, that sells cloth and clothing from West Africa. Other merchants operate thriving import-export businesses.

From Spring through Fall groups of West Africans pack vans with exotic leather goods and jewelry made in Africa and baseball caps and tee-shirts – with the logo of American sports teams – made in China and Korea. They travel through what they call the bush – Indianapolis, Kansas City, Detroit – following the Black Expo trade show circuit.

Not all the Africans living in New York City, however, are merchants. One finds many of them working as stock clerks, grocery store delivery people, and security guards. On the Upper West Side of Manhattan, for example, the stock clerks in Price Wise Discount Drug Stores – along Broad-way – speak Wolof, the major Senegalese language, as they take inventory. Their boss, the manager, is also Senegalese. At Lexington and 92nd Street on the Upper East Side of Manhattan one can sometimes overhear a sidewalk conversation in Songhay, a major language in the Republic of Niger, as the several Nigeriens take a break from delivering groceries. On 110th Street and Lenox, a community of Senegalese live in what they call “Le Cent Dix,” (the 110th) a run-down, rat-and-drug-infested hotel (Nossiter 1995). Some apartments function as communal kitchens; others operate as “neighborhood” boutiques.

The American “bush”, however, has been luring more and more West Africans away from New York City – especially if they have what they call “papers,” namely an Employment Authorization Card from the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS). This card enables them to drive registered cabs; it also allows them to work for wages in factories and stores.

Several years ago a toy factory in Providence, Rhode Island, attracted a small community of Guineans and Senegalese to that community. When the toy factory
closed, workers dispersed to Boston and New York City. A woman from the Ivory Coast who chose to remain opened an African restaurant. On Saturday nights, she transforms the restaurant into an West African club – food, music, dance, and an occasional fashion show. In Philadelphia, Senegalese sell Africana at the Reading Terminal Market in Center City; Malians, Nigeriens, Senegalese sell tee-shirts, sun glasses, incense and handbags on 40th Street near the University of Pennsylvania. Like some of their brothers in New York City, West Africans drive cabs in the City of Brotherly love. When asked why he had come to Philadelphia, one cabby from Ghana told a colleague of mine: “Because there is no room in New York”.

In Washington D.C. Muslim men from Sierra Leone also drive taxi cabs. Muslim women from the same country sell hot dogs along Connecticut Avenue and "K" Street, competing directly with Ethiopian women in the kosher hot dog street trade. On Columbia Road in Washington’s Adams Morgan neighborhood, a Malian street vendor has been selling African leather goods from Mali and Niger for more than 12 years. He routinely houses his many cousins and “little brothers” who come as tourists to the Nation’s Capital.

In Greensboro, North Carolina, a small community of West Africans (Ghanians, Nigerians, Malians, Senegalese and Nigeriens) is taking root. Most of these men work in factories and restaurants. Many of them hold two jobs, work seven days a week, and sleep only three to four hours a day.

Although the West African contribution to social hybridity on the east coast of the United States may be little known, the transnationalization of North America is already well established. Immigration to the United States has intensified during the past 10 years. As transnational communities have established themselves, many urban, suburban and rural areas have become “suddenly” diverse and different. The emergence of difference, in turn, has undermined the myth of the American melting pot, which, for some Americans, has made the emergence of transnationalism a bitter political issue of national scope. By the same token, transnationalism has sparked much political debate in local contexts (see Stoller 1996; Portes and Stepick 1993; Davis 1990; Dugger 1996). Many fine studies have described both old and new patterns of immigration to and social hybridity in the United States (see Mahler 1995; Margolis 1994; Portes and Stepick 1993; Lamphere 1992 to cite only a few).

The issue in this essay is not so much to add to the elegant documentation of North American social hybridity as to understand why it is different from previous social contacts (see Glick Shiller, Basch and Szanton 1994). The point of this essay is not so much to add to an already nuanced theorization of the transnational as to consider globalizing methods that might enable social scientists to better comprehend its complexity. Accordingly, I first describe the global forces that have resulted in increased transnational flows of West Africans to North America. Second, I present a brief portrait of the community of West African traders in New York City, the subject of an ongoing legal and ethnographic study that is being conducted by myself and Rosemary J. Coombe, a legal scholar specializing in intellectual property law and cultural studies. Third, I discuss how the specter of transnationalism in North America has compelled me to reconsider some previously-held epistemological and methodological assumptions. I conclude with a brief consideration of how ethnographic confrontations in transnational spaces might affect future methods and concepts in anthropology.
Global restructuring and West African migration to New York City

The increased migration of West Africans to North America devolves directly from global restructuring. As a complex of economic, political, geographic and sociocultural phenomena global restructuring has spurred the growth of multinational corporations, imploded notions of space and time, triggered outplacement of manufacturing from the First to the Third World, prompted the outsourcing of industrial parts and the downsizing of corporate payrolls, stimulated the emergence of globalized financial markets, brought on the feminization of the workforce in rapidly proliferating export processing zones, eroded large sectors of the American middle classes, and has induced the exponential growth of informal economies (see Coombe and Stoller 1994: 251; see also Harvey 1989; Sassen 1991; Mollenkopf 1991).

This complex of relations, however, has led less to the global integration of human and economic resources than to the polarization of rich and poor (Sassen 1991, 1996; Mittleman 1996). This polarization is quite evident in sub-Saharan Africa, a region of the world in which “the number of poor will rise by 85 million to 265 million by the year 2000” (Mittleman 1996). Economic problems in West Africa, for example, have recently been exacerbated by the World Bank’s program of insisting that credit-hungry West African Governments live within their means no matter the volatility of international currency markets (Callaghy and Ravenhill 1993). One result of these policies was the devaluation of the West African franc which in one day lowered the Francophone West African standard of living by 50 percent, affecting the lives of millions of people, including traders who liquidated their inventories in West Africa and headed to New York City.

New York City, which most arriving West African traders considered a garden of economic opportunity is, of course, no stranger to social and economic polarization. Manufacturing in New York, once a center of the Fordist economy, declined substantially during the past 25 years, resulting in the loss of hundreds of thousands of stable factory jobs (Sassen 1991). Financial service industries, the key component of the post-Fordist economy, replaced the manufacturing sector, attracting to New York a managerial elite in advertising, finance, real estate and information technology. The small elite core of the service industry required a legion of mostly female clerical workers, most of whom work for low wages, little employment security, and limited health insurance (Sassen 1991, 1994). The forces that made New York what Saskia Sassen has called a global city have also provoked massive economic and spatial dislocation, creating what John Mollenkopf labels a “dual city” (Mollenkopf 1991).

The duality is between a comparatively cohesive ‘core’ group of professionals who are ‘hooked up’ to the global corporate economy and an ethnically and culturally diverse ‘periphery’ that is increasingly unable to organize politically in order to influence the ‘core’ upon which its limited forms of security depend (Coombe and Stoller 1994: 252).

The expansion of the gulf of rich and poor in New York City created space for the rapid growth of the informal economy. As Portes, Castells and Benton (1989) suggest, the worldwide growth of informal entrepreneurial activities, which are unregulated, devolved from global restructuring.
The term informal sector has come to replace more pejorative terms like the black market and the underground economy, for what makes an activity informal is not its substance, the validity of the goods or services produced, the character of the labor force or the site of production, but the fact that ‘it is unregulated by the institutions of society, in a legal and social environment in which similar activities are regulated’ (Castells and Portes 1989: 12). The parent who purchases day care service without filling out social security forms, the unlicensed gypsy cab driver who serves poor neighborhoods, the craftsperson building furniture in an area not zoned for manufacturing activity, the immigrant woman reading pap smears or sewing teddy bears in a poorly lit suburban garage, and the unlicensed African street vendor are all participating in the burgeoning informal economy that characterizes a global city like New York… (Coombe and Stoller 1994: 254).

From West African villages, New York City appears a glittering global city full of wealth and boundless economic opportunity. Ironically, such a view remains consistent with that of the “core” elite of the service industry that dominates the formal sector. From the perspective of people living in the Bronx, East New York, or Harlem, however, New York City is often a city filled with despair, disenfranchisement, drugs and crime – a place dominated by the informal sector.

**West African traders in Harlem**

Many of the West Africans attracted by the global lights of New York City expected to earn decent wages in the formal sector. They did not come to New York, according to many of them, to settle, but to make as much money as possible and then return home – a very transnational conceit. After arriving they soon found out that their lack of English, limited technological skills, and murky immigration status made working in the regulated economy almost impossible. Facing this brute reality, they entered the informal economy, many of them becoming street vendors.

Prior to 1990, the primary West African practitioners of informal street trading were Senegalese men vending from tables set up along mid-town Manhattan sidewalks. Given the regulatory difficulties of obtaining a vending license from New York City, the majority of the Senegalese conducted unlicensed operations (Ebin and Lake 1992; Coombe and Stoller 1994; Stoller 1996). By 1985 scores of Senegalese had set up tables in front of some of Manhattan’s most expensive retail space along Fifth Avenue. Such a cluttered Third-World place in a First World space soon proved intolerable to the Fifth Avenue Merchants Association. Headed by Donald Trump, the Association urged City Hall to crack down on the unlicensed vendors.

Following the clean-up, Senegalese vendors relocated to less precious spaces in midtown: Lexington Avenue, 42nd Street near Grand Central Station and 34th Street near Times Square, to name several locations. They worked in teams to protect themselves from the authorities and petty criminals. One person would sell goods at a table. His compatriot partners would post themselves on corners as lookouts. Another compatriot would serve as the bank, holding money safely away from the trade. In this way, midtown side streets became Senegalese turf.

As more Senegalese arrived in New York City, the vending territory expanded north to 86th Street on the east side and south to 14th Street in Greenwich Village and Canal Street in lower Manhattan. In some areas the Senegalese replaced vending tables with attaché cases filled with “Rolex” and other “high-end” watches.
By 1990 the Senegalese had a lock-hold on informal vending space in most of Manhattan. Backed by the considerable financial power of the Mourids, a Muslim Sufi brotherhood in Senegal to which many of the Senegalese vendors belonged, the Senegalese soon became the aristocracy of West African merchants in New York City (Ebin and Lake 1992; Coombe and Stoller 1994; Stoller 1996). When merchants from Mali and Niger immigrated to New York City in 1989 and 1990, the Senegalese had already saturated the lucrative midtown markets, compelling them to set up their tables along 125th Street, the major commercial thoroughfare in Harlem.

Although African Americans have a long history of vending on the streets of Harlem (Bluestone 1991; McCoy 1940; Osofsky 1971; Thomas 1995), the 125th Street informal market gradually took on more and more of an African character. Between 1990 and 1992 the so-called African market grew substantially. Although vendors reported the business along 125th Street to be fair during the week, on weekends the market swelled with shoppers. By 1992 the African market had become one of New York City’s tourist attractions – one of the photo opportunities for tourists on double-decker tour buses following uptown routes.

The success of the market provoked a spate of political problems. Harlem business and political leaders lobbied the Dinkins Administration to disperse the “illegal” market. Dinkins attempted to disband it, but backed down when confronted with a raucous demonstration. The beginning of the Giuliani Administration, however, meant the end of the African market on 125th Street. On October 17, 1994, Mayor Giuliani declared street vending illegal on 125th Street. Although the 125th Street Vendors Association staged a protest, the vendors did, indeed, disperse. Many of the West African vendors moved their operations to the new Harlem market on 116th Street and Lenox Avenue. Owned and managed by Malcolm X’s Masjid (mosque) Malcolm Shabazz, the majority of this market’s vendors are from West Africa. Other West African vendors set up shop along Canal Street. Still others who have obtained Employment Authorization Cards work as security guards, in low-skill factory jobs, restaurants, liquor stores, and drugstores. Some of the traders moved away from New York, seeking wage labor in more rural areas where the cost of living is less high. Several vendors returned to West Africa.

The majority of vendors from Niger and Mali live in apartments with one or two of their compatriots. Vendors who work the 116th Street market usually live in Harlem or the South Bronx. Traders who work in Lower Manhattan often live in Brooklyn in buildings where the occupants are almost exclusively West Africans. None of the vendors I’ve met live outside the New York City limits.

The population of vendors is almost completely male. Most traders, young and middle-aged alike, leave their wives and children in West Africa and wire home as much money as they can. Several of the vendors, though, have married American women and have started North American families which usually means that they support families on two continents.

In Islam, these transnational family practices present no moral or legal problems even if they sometimes increase the instability of marriages. In fact, the practice of settling in an exotic land, if for only a period of years, and starting a family extends the longstanding West African tradition of long distance trading in foreign lands (see Rouch 1956; Cohen 1968; Brenner 1993; Gregoire 1993). A generation ago, for example, large numbers of Nigeriens settled in Ghana, married Ghanaian women, and raised
families. Most of them eventually returned to their already well established families in Niger, leaving their Ghanaian families in Ghana. From Niger, they would try to send money regularly to Ghana and would periodically visit their Ghanaian families. The vast majority of traders, however, do not marry American women. Even if they have wives in West Africa, they often present themselves to local women as single men in search of companionship. There are traders who remain resolutely faithful to their wives in West Africa, but they are usually older males who tend to be rather strict Muslims.

There are also female traders, mostly Senegalese, who have sold dolls, jewelry, and cooked food at both the 125th Street and 116th Street markets in Harlem. Some of these women are single middle-aged entrepreneurs who divide their time between Senegal and New York City; others accompanied their husbands to New York. Senegalese women have also opened thriving hair salons in Harlem and Brooklyn.

The West African traders are almost all practicing Muslims. If they are able, most of them pray five times a day and follow Muslim dietary restrictions, meaning that they avoid pork products and buy lamb and beef from Muslim butchers. Traders at the 116th Street market attend Friday sabbath services at the Masjid Malcolm Shabazz on 116th and Lenox Avenue. They also observe the Ramadan rituals, fasting from sun up to sundown. During the Ramadam in 1996, the Masjid Malcolm Shabazz, the managers of the 116th Street Harlem market, prohibited the day time sale of cooked foods in their market space. Muslim clerics from West Africa, many of whom are Islamic healers who treat the traders's physical disorders with herbal medicines, routinely visit New York City. Traders also seek their advice about social and/or psychological problems.

The traders face a bevy of social and economic problems in New York City. They usually live in outrageously expensive sub-standard housing located in crime infested neighborhoods. Like all peddlers, their fortunes rise and fall with the seasons. In summer they may have much money in their pockets; in winter they often suffer from financial as well as meteorological freezes. They have little access to medical care, let alone medical insurance. Many of the traders don’t like going to public hospitals where medical staffers often have difficulty understanding their English let alone their French, Wolof, Bambara, Songhay or Hausa.

For most of the traders the defining social problem, however, is their immigration status. Traders with Green Cards, a very small minority indeed, are free to travel and work as they please. Traders with Employment Authorization Cards, which are issued to immigrants who have married American women or who have been granted political asylum, are also free to work in either the formal or informal sector. They must renew their authorizations every year. Sometimes the INS restricts travel to the work permit holder’s country of origin.

Many West African traders in New York City, however, remain undocumented immigrants. This status makes it difficult for them to travel outside of New York City, where, according to many people I’ve talked to, they are more fearful American law enforcement. Lack of documentation means they often avoid going to physicians, postpone English instruction at night schools, keep their proceeds in cash rather than bank accounts, and fail to report the theft of inventory. Although I don’t know of any West Africans who have been deported, many of them fear being placed in detention and sent home – in disgrace. Undocumented traders spend much of their time trying to obtain what they call “papers”. They hire immigration brokers to fill out forms and
immigration lawyers to represent them at the INS. As one undocumented trader from Niger put it: “Life in New York is full of uncertainties”. Like most of his compatriots, he does not plan to settle in the United States; he will remain until “the time is right” to return.

And so this community of documented and undocumented West African traders is profoundly transnational. Only a small percentage of traders have married American women and have started families. Many of these men, who are among the most successful traders, hope to raise their children both in New York City and West Africa. The vast majority of traders, however, remains single and has no plans to marry American women. As they put it almost invariably, they’ve come to exploit an economic situation and will return to West Africa as soon as they possibly can. In other words, they will leave New York when they’ve made enough money to return home with dignity and start a new enterprise.

Few of the traders aspire to American citizenship, and they feel little social connection to the communities in which they live. As a result they contribute little socially to community life in places like Harlem, where I’ve often heard shoppers grumbling about how the African traders had exploited them. The ongoing expression of this attitude has reinforced a low-grade fever of mutual resentment between West Africans traders and African American shoppers. The sociocultural, legal and political tensions of living in New York City have also hardened negative impressions that many West Africans hold of American society, which many of them see as a violent, insensitive, time-constrained place where morally depleted people (non-Muslims) haven’t enough time to visit one another. In these circumstances the West African traders create informal associations for purposes of credit or mutual assistance. Many of them are also part of larger transnational economic networks the cores of which are based in Senegal, Ivory Coast, Mali and Niger. It is to these networks that many of them owe their economic and/or social allegiance. These realities mean that the dynamic community of West African traders in New York City has little social stability and few formal institutions.

Doing fieldwork in transnational New York

Prior to beginning ethnographic fieldwork in New York City in 1992, my research experience had been in the rural western region of the Republic of Niger, where I conducted fieldwork in ethnically diverse villages. Despite the multiethnicity of these villages, I focused my attention on the majority population, the Songhay people, which had been in residence for almost 1000 years. In addition to their glorious history of empire and conquest, the Songhay regularly practiced such profoundly interesting religious rituals as spirit possession and sorcery which appealed to my sensibilities. Since the solitary ethnographer cannot describe everything in the field, I concentrated on Songhay religious practices. This decision meant that I backgrounded many significant topics: the political economy of multiethnic diversity in Western Niger; the social importance of Islam; and the impact of modernization on cultural identity and production.

Between 1977 and 1990 I periodically lived in such rural villages as Tillaberi, Mehanna, and Wanzerbe, where I listened to the stories of sorcerers, spirit possession priests and spirit mediums. As I returned to the field year after year, these priests and mediums asked me to participate in Songhay religious ceremonies. Through this participation I
came to understand that in Niger at least it was best to conduct research in an slow-paced and open-ended manner. In this way, the longer the period of research, the more implicated one became in a network of social relationships, all of which bore personal as well as professional consequences.

38 During the time of my fieldwork in Niger I also felt economically, socially and politically autonomous. The Government of Niger officially sanctioned my presence; I carried a research authorization letter signed by the President of the Republic. This autonomy also resulted from Niger’s colonial legacy. Although Niger became independent 17 years before I began my research, the cultural reality of colonialism seemed very much in tact (see Thomas 1994). Peasants used categories of race to resent and revere the French, to admire modern technology and denigrate African backwardness.

39 My colonially contoured whiteness in spaces of colonized blackness made aspects of my research frustrating, for most people categorized me as a rich white tourist seeking adventure in Africa. Accordingly, typical interactions took on mercenary dimensions. When people heard me speak the Songhay language, however, they smiled and wondered where I had learned it. Perhaps their attitude toward my whiteness had softened a bit, but it hadn’t changed, as I was to learn later on. In only a handful of relationships, in fact, did Songhay friends and I cross the racially contoured divide erected by Nigerien colonial culture.

40 The racially contoured distance between me and Songhay people had other repercussions in the field. Racial and cultural difference not only made me putatively untrustworthy, but also someone who had to be accommodated. Many of the people who listened to my endless questions probably felt that they had no choice but to answer – no matter how much charm I attempted to conjure. Several spirit possession priests did not like the fact that I attended ceremonies and had been given a minor position in the Tillaberi spirit possession troupe. And yet, between 1977 and 1990 they did little to block my research. I had, after all, a government authorization and the backing of the region’s most senior spirit possession priests and sorcerers who, for their own reasons, thought highly of my research. As for the dissenters, they probably concluded that I was too close to power to be ignored and too far away from their social experience to be trusted. Such a sociological context made me morally but not politically accountable.

41 The cultural and political realities of working among West African street vendors in Harlem changed the epistemological and existential contours of my being in the field. Soon after my initial confrontation with street traders in Harlem in 1992, I realized that I would grasp little of the traders’s ethnographic present if I didn’t understand the global forces that had compelled them to leave West Africa as well as the political and economic context in which they found themselves. I no longer had the luxury of focusing on one narrowly defined cultural element, but had to embrace sociocultural complexity. This shift meant that I needed to be more thoroughly grounded in urban and immigration studies – economics, geography, sociology, political science as well as urban anthropology.

42 Working on 125th Street in Harlem also meant that I had to learn how to do North American street ethnography among a mix of people many of whom were in violation of city regulations, trademark and copyright statutes, and immigration laws (see Bourgois 1995). The precarious situation of the traders, of course, made them
suspicious of any newcomer even if he or she spoke an African language. Rather than plunging into the field with a barrage of demographic surveys or intensive participant observation, I decided to periodically hang out at the 125th Street market. I immediately told the traders that I was an anthropologist who had spent much time in Niger and I gave them examples of my work. I told them that I wanted to continue my visits and one day write a book about their experiences in New York City. They encouraged me to come and talk and bring my friends. From that point on, we sat together behind their tables, ate lunch, traded stories, and interacted with shoppers. The traders gradually invited me into their lives, sharing with me their frustrations, loneliness, insecurities, triumphs and disappointments.

After two years of patient periodic hanging out, one of the traders invited me to his apartment. After three years of intermittent fieldwork, an older trader told me how he had treated his compatriots with herbal medicines. Another man revealed that he headed a thriving import-export enterprise that required monthly trips between Abidjan and New York. Several traders asked me to find them lawyers and doctors or to accompany them to immigration hearings. Others asked me to write letters to the INS or fill out job applications. One man introduced me to his Asian supplier. These, of course, are far from extraordinary field activities. I am convinced, however, that had I adopted a less opeended and more intensive field approach, the results would have been far more limited.

This slow, periodic approach to fieldwork also suited the political context in which I worked. Undocumented West African traders did not want to draw attention to themselves because that might engage the attention of local authorities. By simply “hanging out” for several hours during two-orthree-day field stays, I attempted to remain as unobtrusive as possible. The sense of autonomy I felt in Niger, however, never materialized in New York City. On 125th Street and Lenox, the central crossroads of African American culture, my whiteness sometimes aroused suspicion and distrust. Unlike the Nigerien context, however, my accountability in New York was legal and political as well as moral. African Americans might find it easy to perceive me as a transient white tourist seeking an afternoon’s adventure in Harlem. When some of the market regulars heard me speaking Songhay, however, they wondered how I came to learn the language. When I came to the market on two or three consecutive days, people sometimes asked the traders about me. “Who is this white man? Why is he here? What is he up to? Is he okay?” In these rare circumstances, which were uncomfortable for the traders as well as myself, they constructed me as their friend who had spent many years in Niger and who visited occasionally to talk “African” and eat good African food. Given the frenetic swirl of social and economic activity on 125th Street, most people either paid little attention to me or kept their distance. The traders told me that some people thought that I might be an undercover cop (see Bourgois 1995). Ethnographers in hybrid transnational spaces are compelled, I think, to work within the limited scope of their sociologically determined situation, which, in turn, limits their access to certain information and experience. Put another way, my experiences in and knowledge of West Africa have given me access to the dynamic but rather unstable transnational community of West African traders in Harlem. By the same token, my whiteness and cultural difference have also limited my access to that community.

Although a solitary street-level approach is central to grounding transnational studies in concrete ethnographic detail, it is methodologically insufficient. While I have
observed fascinatingly complex transnational interactions and exchanges and have listened to the life stories of more than 20 traders, the ethnographic portrait of West African traders is far from complete. More data are needed on how West African trading connects to the political economy of African American and West Indian street vending. What are the social and economic relationships between West African traders and the Asian, African and African American entrepreneurs who supply them with goods? The local political impact of transnational economies that have “taken place” in Harlem, Brooklyn and lower Manhattan should also be investigated (see Sassen 1996; Stoller 1996; Coombe and Stoller 1994). Surveys need to be administered. Archives merit thorough exploration. Describing transnational spaces, as Michael Watts (1992) put it, is a “tall order”.

Globalizing method in transnational space

Global restructuring has transformed many anthropological fields into transnational spaces. In transnational spaces the traditional concepts of culture, society, nation and citizen are as anachronistic as the solitary anthropologist salvaging pristine knowledge (see Holston and Appadurai 1996; Gupta and Furguson 1992; Watts 1992). The fundamental transformation of space, place, and time requires more broadly based research strategies or what I have called globalizing method(s).

Globalizing method requires a commitment to longterm research. Although much data have been gathered on West African street vendors during the past two years, a great deal of work remains. Indeed, the best studies of transnational urban spaces have been based upon research spanning 5 to 10 years (see Davis 1990; Portes and Stepick 1993). It is not enough, however, to be committed to longitudinal studies. The hybridity of transnational spaces demands not simply multidisciplinary approaches to ethnography, but multidisciplinary teams of researchers. The New York project is not only a consideration of the migration of West African traders to a global city, but seeks to demonstrate how global restructuring, social hybridity, and local politics affect the legal consciousness and the everyday life of law in the lives of the traders. Accordingly, the study is being coinvestigated by an anthropologist specializing in West Africa and a legal scholar specializing in intellectual property law and cultural studies. Ideally, the study would also include an urban geographer, an economist, and a political scientist.

In these times of constricted research funding is it possible to construct multidisciplinary teams to conduct longitudinal studies of transnational spaces? I think it is. And yet, there is more to the puzzle of globalizing method than a list of do and don’ts. The key to doing research in complex transnational spaces, I think, devolves less from methods, multidisciplinary teams or theoretical frameworks, though these are, of course, important, than from the suppleness of imagination. Transnational migrants are exceedingly creative in finding regulatory loopholes, resolving daunting financial problems, or more globally, making their way through tough transnational spaces that require imaginative and decisive solutions to ongoing economic, political, social and legal problems. If we can appropriate some of that epistemological suppleness, we will understand what it means to adopt a globalizing method, a method, I am convinced, which will change the way we do anthropology.


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APPENDIXES

FILMS CITED


NOTES

1. Acknowledgements: I am grateful to the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research, and the National Science Foundation (Law and Social Behavior Program) for funding ongoing research on West African street vendors in New York City. I thank Edith Turner, Sandra Bamford and Joel Robbins for inviting me to write this piece for Anthropology and Humanism. Conversations with Alan Feldman, John Chernoff, Rosemary Coombe, and Sarah Castle have helped to shape the argument taken here. Feedback from presentations on the New York project at Brown University and Columbia University have been quite helpful. I thank Sarah Castle and Rosalind Morris for their invitations to speak at Brown and Columbia. Jasmin Tahmaseb McConatha comments on the manuscript have improved its quality.

2. In a recent essay Thomas (1996, 9) has suggested that the concept of hybridity is too general. He argues... "that some of the enthusiasm around hybridity reproduces cultural hierarchies that anthropologists have disputed in the past and might continue to oppose. In the art world especially, I find that the interest in hybridity enables critics and curators to celebrate their own capacity for acknowledging cultural difference, while refraining from engaging with the stories and works that emerge from ground remote from their own".

3. Black Expo is a travelling trade show that highlights and promotes African American business enterprises.

4. Sarah Castle, personal communication.

5. JoAnne D’Alisera, personal communication.


7. Large corporations like General Motors outsource to save money and streamline their workforce. Instead of having GM workers manufacture the parts that go into GM cars, the corporation contracts with small firms to supply the parts. The result is an increase in corporate profits and a reduction of the corporate workforce. GM’s policy sparked a strike in 1996.

8. Export processing zones are usually found in Third World countries under debt pressure from the International Monetary Fund or the World Bank. In the hope of raising capital, these countries declare special zones where multinational corporations can manufacture goods cheaply and profitably through the sanctioned, beyond-the-local law exploitation of a mostly feminine work force. Most of the shirts, trousers and dresses one buys in North American store are manufactured in export processing zones.
9. One of the Nigerien traders on 125th Street arrived in February 1994, two weeks after the World Bank orchestrated the devaluation of the West African franc by 50 percent. The devaluation, he said, ruined his business in Niger. With 12 children to feed, he took action by liquidating his inventory in Niger buying a round-trip ticket between Niamey and New York City and obtaining an American tourist visa. On arrival in New York City, he sold the return portion of his ticket and used the money to buy new inventory. After several days in New York, he was in business on 125th Street.

10. Although the informal economy has grown significantly in North America, its pervasiveness and importance has grown exponentially in Europe, Africa and South America. In the face of stifling regulation, informal activities have flourished in Peru (de Sota 1989). In the wake of the State’s decay in Africa, informal economies have become structures of survival in exceedingly depressed and lawless contexts (Mbembe and Roitman 1995; Devisch 1995).

11. Philip Bourgois’s magnificent *In Search of Respect* demonstrates how the globally restructured political economy of New York City fuels a major enterprise of the informal economy, the selling of crack cocaine. Bourgois’s ethnography describes the political economy and social realities of selling crack cocaine in the predominantly Puerto Rican neighborhood of East Harlem.

12. A Senegalese trader in Lower Manhattan who possesses a Work Authorization Card told me of how the INS turned down his request to visit his ailing mother in Senegal. They required official documentation of her illness.

13. There is a trader ethos that is well depicted in Jean Rouch’s wonderful film *Jaguar*. Although Rouch may have romanticized the adventurous aspects of long distance trading in West Africa, he is quite right about the traders expectations of respect. After a long sojourn in foreign lands traders are accorded local reverence if and only if they return home with goods and perhaps enough money to “retire” to the village as a respected elder.

14. The Mourids, a Senegalese-based Sufi brotherhood, is well organized in New York City. Many Senegalese street vendors are members of the brotherhood and owe their allegiance to their sheik in Touba City Senegal. The Mourid order was founded by Amadou Bamba in 1898 and is a major political force in contemporary Senegal. Bamba believed that the way to salvation was through hard work and profit. There are, I believe, less organized purely economic networks among non-Senegalese traders. I met one older Nigerien man, based in Abidjan, who told me how he had arranged to get visas for “the children” – his economic clients – so that they could travel to and work in New York City. He regularly flies from Abidjan to New York City to check in on “the children”.

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**ABSTRACTS**

The thrust of this article is to consider how globalizing methods might enable social scientists to better comprehend the complexity of transnational/transcultural spaces. Accordingly, I first describe the global forces that have resulted in increased transnational flows of West Africans to North America. I then present a brief portrait of the community of West African traders in New York City. This sociological portrait is followed by a discussion of how the specter of transnationalism in North America has compelled me to reconsider some previously-held epistemological and methodological assumptions. The article concludes with a brief consideration of how ethnographic confrontations in transnational spaces like New York City might affect future methods and concepts in anthropology.
O objectivo deste artigo é o de considerar o modo como métodos globalizadores permitem aos cientistas sociais compreender a complexidade dos espaços transnacionais/transculturais. Em primeiro lugar, procedo à descrição das forças globais que se encontram na base dos fluxos transnacionais de comerciantes “vendedores de rua” originários da África ocidental para a América do Norte. Seguidamente, apresento um breve retrato desta comunidade de vendedores de rua da África ocidental na cidade de Nova Iorque. Este retrato sociológico é secundado por uma discussão acerca do modo como o espectro do transnacionalismo na América do Norte me conduziu à reconsideração de algumas assumpções epistemológicas e metodológicas previamente aceites. O artigo termina com uma breve consideração sobre o modo como o confronto etnográfico com espaços transnacionais como a cidade de Nova Iorque poderá afectar os métodos e os conceitos futuros da antropologia.

AUTHOR

PAUL STOLLER

West Chester University (EUA)
pstoller@wcupa.edu