

## **Kora in New York City: How West African Performers Negotiate and Navigate Racial Frameworks in the U.S.**

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**ABSTRACT:** This study examines the presentations and representations of West African kora players in New York City's public spaces. What has their experience living and performing in this city consisted of? Who consumes their music? How is their presence felt? What does this tell us about their experience of blackness in the United States? These questions lie at the intersection of studies on kora music, music and race and music and migration. In its representation of West African performers, I argue that the literature concerned with these three intertwined topics reveals a set of essentialisms that are reproduced in the intertextual modes with which kora is produced and consumed. In order to highlight how these essentialisms are revealed through an intertextual reading of kora performance in New York City, I discuss three uses of the term *griot*: first, in the academic setting; second, in black American[1] culture; and third, by kora players themselves. From this discussion, outlined in the section following the introduction, emerges a racial framework unique to the U.S. context. The kora performer, as I argue, must become acutely able to navigate and negotiate this framework in order to survive. The third section focuses on how kora performance and performers covertly challenge these frameworks, and specifically the status of their heavily contested and policed black bodies in New York City, through kora performance. In the fourth and final section, I conclude with a reflection on the significance of this reading of kora performance with regards to further inquiry.