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The Sticky Subject of African Aesthetics in Black Music of the Americas

This paper explores a historiography of twentieth-century literature on the topic of African retentions in American music, arguing that no scholar has fully succeeded in celebrating the African heritage of black American music without also making simplifying and essentializing claims. Though many have sought to, scholars have rarely found their way out of this theoretical bind. The question of African retentions has become a sticky subject, both in the sense of its continual scholarly invocation and in the sense of the difficult and seemingly irreconcilable tensions that underlie such discourse.

The aim of my study is to explore the contributions and limits of this scholarship, and to suggest that perhaps it is the artists themselves, rather than their observers, who are best positioned to bridge this apparent impasse. It is in the flux of creative praxis that artists can bring focus to diasporic connections, made phenomenological immediate in the process of artistic self-fashioning. Imaginative visions of "diasporic intimacy," rendered visible amidst the circulatory systems of culture, have the power to reconfigure and intervene in essentializing historical narratives. Indeed, this kind of creative work can theorize diasporic relationships in a nuanced, complex, and multilayered fashion that tends to escape the pages of scholarly work. The felt, embodied practice of the artist is more difficult to inscribe than are the lists of stylistic traits that tend to populate the pages of scholarship on African retentions in music of the Americas. While exploring artistic interventions in this tension is beyond the scope of this paper, I'll suggest briefly that the embodied transmutability at the heart of musical culture is a fugitive impulse, one that is difficult to pin down in the broad

historical time in which scholars tend to work. However, many have worked productively within the space of this tension, carving out nuanced and complex arguments that contribute to an understanding of the relationship between Africa and black expressive culture in the diaspora.

Scholarship on this topic should surely start with WEB Du Bois. Writing in 1903, he took up the project of pronouncing the power of black culture in the Americas in part by creating links to an African heritage. He unpacks the black American spiritual song tradition in "Of the Sorrow Songs" from *The Souls of Black Folk*.[1] Du Bois champions the black spirituals as expressing the black struggle for self-determination. In a particularly moving part of this text he alludes to African retentions when Du Bois narrates the story of his grandfather's grandmother passing along a song of (presumably) West African origin to her child. Du Bois describes the song travelling between generations: "The child sang it to his children and they to their children's children, and so [for] two hundred years it has travelled down to us and we sing it to our children, knowing as little as our fathers what its words may mean, but knowing well the meaning of its music." As apocryphal as this story may be, Du Bois claimed African musical retention as a way for black Americans to connect to an African legacy. However, Du Bois didn't dwell on the African origins of these turn-of-the-century spirituals; instead, he linked this musical tradition to his desire to affirm the black American experience as central to the American story. His powerful description of the spiritual tradition presented black American music as a wellspring for hope in the face of the "whirl and chaos" of American life.

Writing nearly forty years later, and with the goal of contributing to a project of civil rights, Melville Herskovits undertook the project of describing African survivals in black

[1] WEB Du Bois, "5 of the Sorrow Songs," *Poetry and Cultural Studies: A Reader* (2009).

cultures of the Americas[2]. Herskovits offered an intervention to white supremacist intellectual discourse by proposing that black Americans were not a people without a history. Rather, they were connected to a deep cultural inheritance from Africa via the "survivals" of cultural practices. While his intervention rang out in a cultural moment in which the claim of African civilization was a radical and important one, his study also had the impact of defining black culture primarily by its ancestral link to Africa instead of by its development within the paradigm of slavery and the associated freedom struggle. In seeking to define West Africa as a unified "culture area," Herskovits's study created a falsely monolithic portrayal of the diverse cultural practices present in West Africa.

In the decade following Herskovits's *The Myth of the Negro Past*, a generation of anthropologists and ethnomusicologists took up the project of tracing African retentions in the music of the Americas. In 1952 Richard Waterman concluded that there were five primary characteristics of African music to be found in black music of the Americas: dominance of percussion, poly-meter, off-beat phrasing of melodic accents, and what he called "metronome sense," a description of the internalization of a timeline onto which accents are applied. He applied this scheme to Voudun songs from Haiti, sacred and secular music from Port Morant in Jamaica, and the religious songs of the "Shango cult" in Port of Spain, Trinidad. [3]

In an article written a few years earlier[4] Waterman argued that the question of African musical survivals in the Caribbean differed greatly from the case of North America, because of the particular characteristics of the institutions of slavery in North America. Presumably he was referencing the ways in which enslaved people we moved from place to

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[2] Melville J Herskovits, "The Myth of the Negro Past. 1941," *Boston: Beacon* (1958).
[3] Richard Alan Waterman, "African Influence on the Music of the Americas," *Write me a few of Your Lines: A Blues Reader* (1999).
[4] Richard A Waterman, "" Hot" Rhythm in Negro Music," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 1, no. 1 (1948).

place more frequently in North America and the harsh plantation policies around suppression of musical practices by blacks on US plantations. Waterman concluded that as a result, the "African characteristics" he highlighted were not retained as successfully in North America as they were in the Caribbean.

Waterman and Herskovits were both motivated by the political project of shedding light on the African heritage of black cultures in the Americas as a way of pushing back against the racist narrative of enslaved blacks as a people lacking culture or civilization. While these scholars' motivations were admirable, given the political moment in which they were writing, they also reinscribed a mythologized vision of a monolithic West Africa as the source of black cultural origins.

In his work on African retention in American blues music, *Savannah Syncopators,* Paul Oliver sought to intervene in the problematically generalizing view of West Africa taken by such thinkers as Herskovits and Waterman (as well as seminal American ethnomusicologist Alan Merriam)[5]. Like Waterman, Oliver notes that the United States seems to have the least clearly traceable survivals of African music, as compared to the Caribbean and South America.[6] However, Oliver argues that there *are* African retentions to be found in music of the United States. In seeking to understand the role of enculturation in the transference of African musical retentions into the blues, Oliver submits that it is necessary to look closely at the African cultures from which the people kidnapped into slavery came, rather than to rely on dubious, unsubstantiated claims that are built on generalizations of "African music."

Paul Oliver begins with Allan Merriam and Richard Waterman, unpacking the ways in which they generalized West African musical practices as predominantly percussive, a narrative which largely privileges the practices of the Ibo and Ashanti of Ghana, the Yoruba

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[5] Paul Oliver, *Savannah Syncopators: African Retentions in the Blues* (Studio Vista, 1970).
[6] Ibid, 25.

of Nigeria and Benin (formerly Dahmoney), and the Ewe of Togo and eastern Ghana. In each of these settings, Oliver agrees that drums are of primary importance, and that they represent a musical region, which he terms the *West African tropical rainforest belt*. Drawing on his own research in West Africa, Oliver notes that some key features of these musical traditions include a low-pitched drum carrying the burden of rhythmic complexity, while "supporting drums, graded in size, pitch and tone, set up rhythms against it and each other…. Against these may be placed handclaps, often by two or three individuals or groups of people, whose clap rhythms are also played against each other, with the 'gongs' or clapperless bells establishing a metronomic time signal."[7] Crucially, the feature of cross-rhythm most clearly distinguishes this music.

While there are clear retentions of this type of percussion music through the Caribbean and South America (most notably in Haiti, Cuba, and Brazil), Oliver argues that an erroneous claim has been made by many scholars: namely, that this music directly influenced jazz and blues from the United States. Oliver first takes on Harold Courlander, who claimed there was "no doubt that the drums were widely used in the African manner in the United States."[8] Waterman, too, claims a close link between the "hot" character of the drumming of both West African cultures and of jazz music. Oliver contests this view, however, claiming that jazz drumming does not make use of the type of elaborate cross-rhythm that allows tensions to build, as is characteristic of the drum orchestras of "the African rain forest."[9]

In considering the blues, the linkages to the West African tropical rainforest belt are even more tenuous. Oliver points out that the instrumental textures are markedly different

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[7] Ibid, 44.
[8] Oliver, 45.
[9] Ibid, page 47.

between the two traditions. Largely a vocal music, the blues (especially in its early years) was created by solo artists or by pairs of musicians playing guitar, piano, mandolin, banjo, string and tub bass, washboard, jug and harmonica. "When blues instrumentation, improvisation, rhythm and the use of vocals are compared with the music of the rain forest drum orchestras they seem even further removed than jazz from this African tradition," writes Oliver.[10]

Turning to his own ethnographic research, Oliver observes that the blues bears a close resemblance to a body of song and musical expression that extends in a great belt across the sub-Saharan savannah region. It is within this geography that Oliver's foremost contention lies: African musical retentions in the United States derive primarily from cultures of this savannah belt, rather than from the rain forest coast, as is commonly assumed. In the rain forest belt, the relatively dense vegetation allowed for the development of wooden drum ensembles, whereas in the more arid savannah belt, musical styles evolved around vocal music and instrumental traditions focused on strings, small wooden xylophone keys, and calabash gourd-derived instruments.[11]

In the savannah belt of West Africa, where Islamic influences date back to the seventh century, a prominent praise-singing tradition stems from the Mali Empire of the 15th century. There jalis (or 'griots') are musical carriers of cultural history, political actors who are expected to extemporize on "current events, chance incidents, and the passing scene."[12] Oliver believes this griot tradition bears considerable similarity to US blues musicians, who could be thought of as performing similar functions in North America, through their use of

[10] Ibid, 47.
[11] Ibid, 48.
[12] Ibid, 53.

coded messages. Such "hidden transcripts"[13] have a long tradition in black music of the Americas—from slavery's spiritual tradition, through blues and hip hop.

In his writing about the similarities between Mande jelis from West African and American blues singers, Oliver works to debunk another generalization of Africa music, namely, that it is primarily built on the use of the pentatonic mode. He provides ample evidence demonstrating that the major mode is common to instrumental performance traditions and singing across West Africa. He also explores similarities in vocal delivery found among savannah musicians from West Africa and American blues singers. He cites such similarities as the practice of embellishments and bends and (following the work of Father AM Jones[14]) a melodic contour termed 'saw tooth' that includes a steep rise (not usually exceeding a fifth) followed by a gentle sloping down before another sudden rise. Also, the use of a high-pitched singing voice, often an octave or two above the speaking voice, and a fluid movement between singing and speech tones. Oliver acknowledges significant differences in vocal approach as well, including the use of a deep "heavy" voice by some bluesmen and women, an approach uncommon in West Africa.[15]

In his concluding remarks Oliver takes on Herskovits's claim that Senegambian cultural customs were overshadowed by the Guinea Coast people's customs and were therefore lost, over time, in favor of the rainforest belt traditions. Oliver reasserts that the case for retentions in American blues should be rooted in the savannah belt of West Africa. While he offers greater specificity in his attempts to trace the roots of American blues to the savannah belt, Oliver's study is premised on linking blues to an African source rather than illuminating the specific historical forces that gave birth to the form in early twentieth-

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[13] I am using this term as Mark Anthony Neal does in *What the Music Said*, drawing on James C. Mark Anthony Neal, *What the Music Said: Black Popular Music and Black Public Culture* (Routledge, 2013); James C Scott, "Hidden Transcripts: Domination and the Arts of Resistance," *Yale UP* (1990).
[14] Arthur Morris Jones, "African Rhythm," *Africa* 24, no. 1 (1954).
[15] Oliver, 69-72.

century America. The recurrent problem of acknowledging relationships to African cultural practices while not simplifying and essentializing them as a root source haunts the work of Paul Oliver as it did virtually every scholar of his generation.

In 1976 Sidney Mintz and Richard Price entered the fray with *The Birth of African-American Culture,* originally offered as a conference paper and meant to provoke discussion rather than to be final word on the subject[16]. Despite this, their paper has become an important point of reference on the topic. Mintz and Price also critique Herskovits for his conception of West Africa as a culture area, writing that owing to increased research in West Africa, the generalizable West African cultural traits that Herskovits proposes (such as "patrilocality, hoe agriculture and corporate ownership of land") do not hold up.[17] Rather, they suggest that unconscious "grammatical" principles or "cognitive orientations" are a more productive area for research. Though Herskovits does allude to the "grammar culture" in imagining philosophical principles that might bind West Africa together as a culture area, his attention turns quickly to farming practices, seeking to propose clear and empirical ground for understanding this region as a culture area.[18] While Mintz and Price point out the shortcomings of Herskovits' work in not identifying the "philosophical principles" that may underlie West African ontologies, they confess that they are not prepared to do so either.[19] However, their attentiveness to the various philosophical underpinnings of culture, rather than the surface level practices, represents a progressive shift in scholarly analysis.

Dispensing with Herskovits's notion of West Africa as a unified culture area, Mintz and Price argue that the Africans who reached the New World are better be described as "crowds" rather than "groups," emphasizing their heterogeneity. "What the slaves

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[16] Sidney Wilfred Mintz and Richard Price, *The Birth of African-American Culture: An Anthropological Perspective* (Beacon Press, 1976).
[17] Ibid, 4.
[18] Herskovits, 4.
[19] Mintz and Price, 12.

undeniably shared at the outset," they write, "was their enslavement; all – or nearly all – else had to be *created by them*."[20] The authors are interested in the development of black cultures in the Americas as linked to the institutions that articulate them. For Mintz and Price, then, the story of the development of black cultures in the new world is the story of the development of cultural institutions, which they define as "any regular or orderly social interaction that acquires a normative character, and can hence be employed to meet recurrent needs."[21] The development of such institutions, "*within* the parameters of the masters' monopoly of power, but *separate from* the masters' institutions," constituted the emergence of new cultures in the Atlantic, quite distinct from any African forbearers.[22] These scholars further argue that the development of such institutions took place alongside interactions with white planters, noting that the notion of hermetically sealed "slave and "free" societies may have been the ideal of the planting elite but was never fully realized in practice.[23] Not only were these institutions and the emerging cultures they represented formed through an encounter of various African cultural traditions, but also through encounters with indigenous Americans and with the colonial powers.[24]

This argument marks a point of departure in the scholarly discourse linking black cultures in the Americas to an African past. Mintz and Price argue that black American cultures are best treated as truly novel cultural forms that emerged among black communities in the Americas, constituted through the construction of instructions – that is the ways in which "slaves mended their clothes, furnished their houses, cooked their meals, fell in love, courted, married, bore and socialized their children, worshiped their deities,

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[20] Ibid, 18.
[21] Ibid, 23.
[22] Ibid, 39.
[23] Ibid, 26.
[24] Ibid, 34.

organized their 'plays' and recreation, and buried their dead."[25] The musical practices that developed in this political context could be viewed as one such social institution; however, music is not the focus of the authors. Mintz and Price's framing acknowledges the possibilities of links to African musical retentions through the encounter among the African "crowd" who were first brought as captives to the new world, while placing greater emphasis on the development of alternative institutions in the Americas that defined novel cultural forms and practices in opposition to the power of the white planter elite.

Writing seven years after Mintz and Price, Robert Ferris Thompson's 1983 work *Flash of the Sprit* offered an important foray into art history in the academy of the mid-80's. It called attention to the profound significance of the visual culture of what Thompson referred to as "the black Atlantic."[26] His wide-ranging study surveys the relationship of black visual culture in the Americas to its counterparts in West Africa, focusing first on Yoruba culture survivals in the Caribbean before moving to a study of baKongo and Mande retentions in the Southern United States and Mexico.

Throughout *Flash of the Spirit* Thompson's prose exudes enthusiasm. He calls attention to black visual culture and its relationship to Africa with a sense of wonder and vigor. His study is impressive not only for its crucial intervention but also for the massive breadth of Thompson's research[27]. While a good deal of work was conducted through the middle part of the twentieth century focusing on survivals of African musical aesthetics in the Americas, Thompson's study of black visual aesthetics constitutes a major advance.

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[25] Ibid, 39.
[26] Robert Farris Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit: African & Afro-American Art & Philosophy* (Vintage, 2010).
[27] In his acknowledgements, Thompson affirms that "a person who does not work together with his colleagues and his friends will not accomplish much." (ix) He lists the authors referred to above (notably absent is Paul Oliver) in addition to the likes of Ralph Ellison, Zora Neal Hurston, Nat Hentoff, Kwabena Nketia and Fernando Ortiz as having crucially impacted his work.

Thompson has little to say about the question of musical retentions in the body of his work, but from the outset he makes clear that he sees his study of visual culture as analogous to the work on questions of music already underway. In his introduction Thompson writes that if one listens broadly to musical styles from West Africa and the Americas – from rock, jazz, blues, reggae, salsa, samba, bossa nova, juju, highlife and mambo, "one might conclude that much of the popular music of the world is informed by the flash of the spirit of a certain people specially armed with improvisatory drive and brilliance."[28] Here, on the opening page of his study, Thompson goes on to state his own broad conclusion about the question of musical retentions in the Americas, arguing that "Since the Atlantic slave trade, ancient organizing principles of song and dance crossed the seas from the Old World to the New. There they took on new momentum, intermingling with each other and with the New World or European styles of singing and dance"(ibid). Thompson then lists some of these principles, starting with "*the dominance of percussive performance style* (attack and vital aliveness in sound and motion)." His list continues:

> *A propensity for multiple meter* (competing meters sounding all at once); *overlapping call and response singing* (solo/chorus, voice/instrument – 'interlock systems' of performance); *inner pulse control* (a 'metronome sense,' keeping a beat indelibly in mind as a rhythmic common denominator in a welter of different meters); *suspended accentuation patterning* (offbeat phrasing of melodic and choreographic accents); and, at a slightly different but equally recurrent level of exposition, *songs and dances of social allusion* (music which, however danceable and 'swinging,' remorselessly contrasts social imperfections against implied criteria for perfect living).[29]

For Thompson this list of musical modalities connects "millions of European and Asian people attracted to and performing their styles, to Mother Africa."[30]

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[28] Thompson, xiii.
[29] Ibid, xiv.
[30] Ibid, xiv.

I admire Thompson's effort here – to enthusiastically call attention to the profound brilliance of black expressive cultures through their relationship to Africa. His list is rather beautiful, even poetic, and indeed describes a generalization of urban popular music in the Americas well. However, I worry that by linking these characteristics to an "African" point of origin (rather than a black American one), Thompson contributes to an essentializing view of West African musical practices of the 16th – 19th centuries. Additionally, Thompson's interpretation lends itself to the type of binary monolithic thinking that is so common in musicological literature on the origins of popular music in the Americas.

For instance, in Peter Van der Merwe's influential 1989 text, *Origins of the Popular Style,* he writes that an early American fiddler is continually presented with a stylistic choice: "European or African? The same is true of modal systems, rhythms, melodic contours, form and harmony."[31] This is this basic thesis of Van der Mewre's work: that the history of American music is all about its retentions of essentialized aspects of "European" and "African" musical practices. This view completely misses the messy and complex history in which this music emerged, one fraught with acculturative compromise.

Van der Mewre treats his examples from West Africa with especially broad stokes. In the chapter "Afro-American Rhythm," Van der Mewre turns to secondary sources for a summary of rhythmic phrasing in percussion music in Ghana. He writes about the use of hemiola and the superimposition of duple and triple pulses. While these traits are important features of Ewe drumming styles in Ghana,[32] Van der Mewre errs in describing this as "typically African."[33] Here he not only falls into the habit of constructing African music as essentially rhythmic; he also generalizes one case as representative of an entire continent.

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[31] Peter Van der Merwe, *Origins of the Popular Style: The Antecedents of Twentieth-Century Popular Music* (Oxford University Press, 1989), 215

[32] See for instance: David Locke, "Yewevu in the Metric Matrix," *Music Theory Online* 16, no. 4 (2010).

[33] Van der Merwe, 160.

In his 1995 article, *The Invention of African Rhythm*, ethnomusicologist Kofi Agawu argues against efforts to portray African music as monolithic and quintessentially rhythmic. "A continent with a population upward of 400 million distributed into over forty-two countries and speaking some thousand languages is virtually unrecognizable in the unamist construction that some researchers have used in depicting African music," writes Agawu.[34] As for portraying Africa as essentially rhythmic, Agawu contends that this view "has been so persistently thematized in writings about African music that it has by now assumed the status of commonplace, a topos…. And so it is with the related ideas that African rhythms are complex, that Africans are essentially rhythmic people, that Africans are different from 'us' – from Euro-Americans."[35] This important point underscores the danger of associating American musical styles with a unitary, mythologized vision of an African past. A few pages later Agawu strikes again, wondering why researchers resist studying Africa in its complexity, instead invoking an "all-purpose 'Africa.'" He contends that doing so would deprive such scholars of "one of their most cherished sources of fantasy and imaginative play."[36]

While it could be argued that all history is a form of "fantasy and imaginative play," Agawu's astute observation highlights the persistence with which myths of "Africa" have been inflected by colonial mentalities. Agawu is particularly attuned to the importance of noting differences, rather than similarities, in studies of African musical practice. However, the project of describing African retentions in American music is most often premised on generalizations of West African musical practices. Scholarship towards the end of the twentieth century began to offer more precise documentation of various West African

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[34] Kofi Agawu, "The Invention of African Rhythm," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 48, no. 3 (1995): 384.
[35] Ibid, 380.
[36] Ibid, 384.

cultural practices,[37] and also began to acknowledge the multi-directional movement of musical influence in the black Atlantic region.

Gerhard Kubik, in his monograph *Africa and The Blues (1999),* eventually offers the reader just such a nuanced analysis. However, the first half of his text follows the established template of seeking to trace an American musical practice to a root source on the African continent. Kubik accepts Paul Oliver's central claim that antecedents to the blues can be traced to the region Kubik calls the "West central Sudanic belt" (what Oliver called the "Savannah belt"). Kubik similarly foregrounds the bardic tradition associated with the Mande jelis, as forerunners to bluesmen. He compares these griot singers with American blues singers, pointing out along the way many key differences, among these that "The blues form is normally strophic, in contrast to many African literary forms that are either cyclic, following the cyclic structure of the instrumental accompaniment, or short themes that are developed by variation and extension."[38]

Kubik himself is conflicted in his text, seemingly aware of the theoretical bind he is writing within. On the one hand, his argument is built on making a case for African retentions in the blues; on the other hand, he qualifies his contentions at almost every step. One can see Kubik walking an uncomfortable line as he devotes nearly fifty pages to making an argument for African antecedents before stating flatly, "I am afraid the 'birthplace' of the blues is in the United States, and the 'birthdate' in the 1890s."[39] Kubik's use of the adjective "afraid" points to the significant scholarly investment in the notion of an African source of origin for black American music, and his reluctance to claim the blues as truly emergent

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[37] See again: Locke.
[38] G Kubik, "Africa and the Blues (Jackson, Ms, University Press of Mississippi)," (1999): 63.
[39] Ibid, 198.

from black cultures in the US south. To his credit, Kubik adds nuance to his argument as he explores the reciprocity of cultural exchange between Africa and the United States.

In the brief second section of *Africa and the Blues,* Kubik describes the significant *black American* influence on *African* music in the twentieth century. He writes that styles influential within the continent included nearly every style of New World music from the Caribbean, South and North America. Beginning in the 1930's with rhumba, then continuing with Latin American and Caribbean styles such as merengue, cha-cha-cha, pachanga, mambo, calypso, and finally North American styles like swing and rock n' roll, these stylistic influence were eventually superseded by Jamaican reggae, argued Kubik in 1999.[40] Today, of course, reggae music has come to be overshadowed by hip-hop, the newest sound in a lineage of global black popular culture.

Kubik goes on to describe ways in which successive waves of black American music influenced local musical practices in places as distant as South Africa and the western Sudan. By naming this dynamic Kubik offers an important corrective to narratives centering on African musical traditions as the source of the American blues. He offers an insightful treatment of the great Malian musician-composer-guitarist, Ali Farka Touré, who is often framed as an inheritor of the source tradition due to some perceived similarities between his playing and American blues. Many people falsely assumed that Farka Touré was playing a traditional style, which could offer evidence of African musical influence on American blues. Music industry forces found it expedient to repeat this story ad nauseam. Indeed, his international breakthrough was a record titled *The Source* (World Circuit Records. 1993).

As Kubik rightly points out, it was Farka Touré who incorporated sounds of the blues into *his* playing. Kubik discusses the ways that Farka Touré aimed at creating a

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[40] Ibid, 155.

synthesis, noting that he speaks or sings in 11 languages, evidence of the breadth of his influences and his singular cosmopolitanism. Such a view was strategically important for Farka Touré. The idea that the 'roots' of the blues are to be found somewhere in Mali, Guinea, or Senegal made his international career possible . I'd argue that Farka Touré's pan-African cosmopolitanism reflects an artist fashioning himself around the "diasporic intimacy" that Paul Gilroy calls attention to in his *Black Atlantic*. The "imaginative play" deployed by Farka Touré in fashioning himself as a diasporic artist is much more substantive and interesting than the "imaginative play and fantasy" involved in a musical industry narrative of Farka Touré as "The Source" of the blues.

Kubik's treatment of the routes of Farka Touré's musical influences line him up with the thinking of Paul Gilroy, a few years earlier, with his publication of *The Black Atlantic* (1993). Following Robert Farris Thompson's coinage in *Flash of the Sprit*, Paul Gilroy is credited with first developing a vision for the black Atlantic as a geography unto itself. Following trends of the mid 1990's related to social movements emerging "from below,"[41] Gilroy is concerned with thinking about the black Atlantic as a geography that transgresses national boundaries and offers a way of imagining networks of solidarity, mutual inspiration and influence across black communities/cultures of the Atlantic. Gilroy writes against the merger of race, ethnicity and nation into an essentialized identity. "In opposition to both of these nationalist or ethnically absolute approaches," he writes, "I want to develop the suggestions that cultural historians could take the Atlantic as one single, complex unit of analysis in their discussions of the modern world and use it to produce an explicitly

[41] The Zapatistas of southern Mexico launched a global movement of revolutionary strategy focused on decentralized, collective praxis. They described a politics from below, arising from the people rather than being imposed by a vanguard strategy.

transnational and intercultural perspective."[42] Gilroy variously describes the black Atlantic as "rhizomorphic," "a fractal structure," "transcultural," and "international" [43].

Gilroy argues that we should understand the black Atlantic as transgressesing both nationalism and ways of viewing the diaspora that collapse all of the Atlantic world into an essentialized African past. Gilroy proposes "new chronopoes that might fit with a theory that was less intimidated by and respectful of the boundaries and integrity of modern nation states." He introduces the image of the ship, a metaphor which he returns to as a touchstone throughout his text:

> *I have settled on the image of ships in motion across the spaces between Europe, America, Africa, and the Caribbean as a central organizing symbol for this enterprise and as my starting point…Ships immediately focus attention on the middle passage on the various projects for redemptive return to an African homeland, on the circulation of ideas and activists as well as the movement of key cultural and political artifacts: tracts, books, gramophone records, and choirs.*[44]

He later quotes Peter Linebaugh's prescient observation: "the ship remained perhaps the most important conduit of Pan-African communication before the appearance of the long-playing record."[45]

The circulation of music is a primary site for Gilroy's efforts to portray the Atlantic "as a system of cultural exchanges."[46] In one such discussion, he writes of north London's Funki Dreds mixing Caribbean and African-American influences: "The formal unity of diverse cultural elements was more than just a powerful symbol. It encapsulated the playful diasporic intimacy that has been a marked feature of the transnational black Atlantic creativity."[47] In *The Black Atlantic* Gilroy explores the routes that expressive culture have traveled through this geography, inflected with histories of colonialism and anti-colonial

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[42] Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Harvard University Press, 1993), 15.
[43] Idid, 4.
[44] Ibid.
[45] Peter Linebaugh, "All the Atlantic Mountains Shook," *Labour/Le Travail* 10 (1982).
[46] Gilroy, 14.
[47] Ibid, 16.

revolution, each time refashioned to be at once distinctly local and connected to a wider pan-African history. He connects these practices of expressive culture to the development of black utopias, via "the politics of transfiguration," which he writes, point specifically to the formation of a community of needs and solidarity which is magically made audible in the music itself and palpable in the social relations of its cultural utility and reproduction."[48]

For Gilroy, the multi-direction and multi-layered movement of music in the black Atlantic substantiates an argument against the "purist idea of one-directional flow of African culture from east to west."[49] He calls into question notions of racial authenticity vis-à-vis musical signs, citing various examples of music and musical performers who are racially or culturally ambiguous. He cites the story of Nelson Mandela, upon his release from prison, describing the solace he found in listening to Motown music while in jail on Robben Island. For Gilroy this story points to the "global dimensions of diaspora dialogue."[50] As Mandela's story of Motown music seeing him through his years in prison "lit up the black Atlantic landscape like a flash of lightening on a summer night, the value of music as the principle symbol of racial authenticity was simultaneously confirmed and placed in question."[51] Mandela's story introduced a clear diasporic arch across the Atlantic, while simultaneously questioning the narrative of Africa as a source of culture, rather than a node in a complex network.

Following on the heels of Amiri Baraka, Gilroy postulates black music as a "changing same."[52] He points out that "the syncretic complexity of black expressive cultures alone supplies powerful reasons for resisting the idea that an untouched, pristine Africanicity resides inside these forms, working a powerful magic in order to trigger repeatedly the

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[48] Ibid, 37.
[49] Ibid, 96.
[50] Ibid.
[51] Ibid.
[52] Ibid, 101.

perception of absolute identity."[53] Rejecting an essentialist notion of African retentions in black music while also acknowledging the long shadow of slavery is the task involved in disentwining the theoretical bind that plagues most, if not, all scholarship on the question of African retention in American music. Gilroy writes that untangling this tension requires "striving to comprehend the reproduction of cultural traditions not in the unproblematic transmission of a fixed essence through time but in the breaks and interruptions which suggest that the invocation of tradition may itself be a distinct, though covert, response to the destabilizing flux of the post-contemporary world.*"*[54]

Ultimately this nuanced reading can be glossed in Gilroy's "routes" vs. "roots" framing. He argues that we should deal equally with both while paying close attention to the "flows, exchanges, and in-between elements."[55] These multi-directional movements point to what Gilroy considered the "most enduring of Africanisms": the "anti-phonal social forms that underpin and enclose the plurality of black cultures in the western hemisphere."[56]

In following the thread through a historiography that lands at the feet of Paul Gilroy, I am struck by the progressive aims of nearly all of the authors I have reviewed. Each is caught between two conflicting currents: celebrating an African heritage while not either essentializing the relationship between black America and Africa, or collapsing West African practices into a simplified "All-purpose Africa." These authors built on the others' contributions, developing over the long arch a significant and deep reading of a complex history. For instance, Paul Oliver and Minzt and Prices' critiques of Herskovits's culture area assertion for West Africa was an important and necessary step. The latter reduced too many desperate musical styles and ontologies to a monolithic vision of a few traits. When

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[53] Ibid.
[54] Ibid.
[55] Ibid, 190.
[56] Ibid, 200.

one tries to generalize musical characteristics for all of West Africa, it is easy to wind up with a list so general that it could be applied to many other parts of the world where humans are making music, that is to say, everywhere.

However, it is important to recognize that some music aesthetics and philosophical orientations from Western and Central Africa collided with one another through history of enslavement and survived in various fashions in various places. As people were enslaved and stolen away to the Americas, arriving as a "crowd" (here thinking with Mintz and Price), the initial musical encounter was among people of different West African ethnic backgrounds—uprooted and encountering one another in slave societies of the Americas. I'd further argue that an acculturative process took place among these people that looked different from place to place, resulting in a huge number of syncretic musical traditions that stemmed from West Africans of various backgrounds encountering one another.

It is my perspective that from this genesis, and within probably a generation or two, new musical trajectories were born in specific local contexts, and these musical traditions all went on to develop along their own courses. These black American cultural traditions would variously take in indigenous and European influences as well as other black American and African influences as people came into contact with one another whether in person or via the circulation of recordings in the 20th century.

I think that we should be cautious about labeling all of black culture in the Americas as "African-American/Afro-America Culture," as do Mintz and Price and Thompson, for the same reason that I am reluctant to adopt Herskovits's West African culture area hypothesis: It reduces too great a variety of specific and unique musical cultures to a single designation. No doubt these divergent cultures do all share the common history of enslavement and the revolutionary struggle against it. It is for this reason that I am so

compelled by Gilroy's invocation of the "black Atlantic." It provides for a theorization of the Atlantic as a circulatory system allowing for difference and distinction among its component parts, while also confronting and chronicling the long, common shadow of slavery and colonization.

Gilroy writes that the politics of the transfiguration taking place in the crucible of the black Atlantic "exists on a lower frequency where it is played, danced, and acted, as well as sung and sung about." He stresses the artistic here because words, "even words stretched by melisma and supplemented or mutated by the screams which still index the conspicuous power of the slave sublime, will never be enough to communicate its unsayable claims to truth."[57] Here Gilroy suggests the limits of language, the medium in which scholars customarily work. Artists, however, generate a praxis that is not confined by the limits of language. They take in influences voraciously, expanding horizons, allowing themselves to be transfigured along the way. This process of transfiguration reflects the ways in which humans constitutes themselves within a culture to begin with – by learning with great interest the habits of those around them.

This is what fascinates me so deeply about expressive culture: its transmutability, its resiliency – the way in which it is always becoming something new. It is unpredictable and deeply complex, in flux, on the move, always hard to pin down. Expressive culture is an outlaw practice. Those who try to fix it as one *thing*, to define and police its boundaries, necessarily work to stem the tides of interchange and movement that are at the heart expressive culture's emergence. It is in this messy space of culture making that artists lead the way in theorizing diasporic intimacies in the black Atlantic.

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[57] Ibid, 37.

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