

THE SOUL OF A PEOPLE IS FOUND IN THEIR ART: A CRITICAL
EXAMINATION OF AFRICAN/BLACK CREATIVE EXPRESSIONS

A Thesis

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by

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ABSTRACT

What is the highest responsibility of African artists? Is it to the work of art itself—to pursue an object perceived as an island of form or symbol with little or no reference to other life experiences that lends itself to urgent, relevant social interpretation; is it to identify and promote one's self as an individual seeking recognition and/or commendation, to prove humanity and/or worthiness to others, or to advance the total liberation of all African/Black people? This profound, yet volatile question shapes and adds intellectual ballast to my thesis entitled, *The Soul of a People Is Found In Their Art: A Critical Examination of African/Black Creative Expressions*. This decidedly theoretical endeavor primarily concerns itself with African/Black artistic expressions (literary art, performance art, visual art) within white-dominated North American society, focusing on African/Black descendants born or living in the United States. The goal of this study is to contribute to the ever-evolving conversation regarding the creative works of Africans/Blacks in North America that includes not only a historical overview of the earliest extant "African American" cultural productions, but also an evaluation of the socio-historical and political context in which African/Black artists—with distinctive attention on musicians—flourished within the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, including those contemporary artists who continue to thrive in the twenty-first century.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Jimmy Kirby, Jr. is a devoted husband, loving father, and dedicated advocate for the discipline of Africana Studies. Mr. Kirby has shown his commitment throughout his academic career attaining a Bachelor's degree in Africana Studies from California State University, Dominguez Hills in 2005, and a Master's degree in Africana Studies from the Africana Studies and Research Center at Cornell University in 2009. Mr. Kirby is currently engaged in his endeavor towards a Doctoral degree as a student in the Department of African American Studies at Temple University. His research interests include African world history, Africana cultural aesthetics, and African cultural production with a particular emphasis on Hiphop culture.

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Chapter One

Introduction

Though dead in flesh, our spirits live on. We come to festivals by invocation to direct the lives of the living. We intervene for peace in their lives; we intervene for plentitude in their lives. Colonizers came; they took away the muscle of our race, enshackled men and women by subterfuge, deceit, and cunning. They converted our royal scepter to kitchen knives and trampled our sacred groves with leprous feet and stole away the metaphor that was our art, which supported the cohesion of our race. By subterfuge, deceit, and cunning, they keep recurring and recurring. Greedily, they blackmail, maim, and kill to get the best in our art as showcase in their pallid museums. But they said it was not art, they said it was primitive, they said it was crude they said it was fetish. Yet they continued to maim and kill for it.¹

Ladi Ladebo, Prologue to *Heritage*

To combat this mother of all blues, captives were brought on deck and forced to dance and sing, and sometimes had to be beaten to comply. An early form of minstrelsy, this feigned animation in the midst of such sorrow demonstrates the deep and complicated history of black performance, its relationship to coercion both disturbing and instructive.²

–Michael A. Gomez

What is the highest responsibility of African³ artists? Is it to the work of art itself—to pursue an object perceived as an island of form or symbol with little or no reference to other life experiences that lends itself to urgent, relevant social interpretation; is it to identify and promote one’s self as an individual seeking recognition and/or commendation, to prove humanity and/or

¹ The epigraph to this chapter is drawn from the Prologue to *Heritage*, DVD, directed by Ladi Ladebo (Nigeria: Ladi Ladebo Productions, 2003).

² Michael A. Gomez, *Reversing Sail: A History of the African Diaspora* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 79.

³ African is used as a collective concept that refers to all people of African ancestry living both on the African continent and in various parts of the world. It is used to refer to a global African family.

worthiness to others, or to advance the total liberation of all African/Black⁴ people? This profound, yet volatile question shapes and adds intellectual ballast to my thesis entitled, *The Soul of a People Is Found In Their Art: A Critical Examination of African/Black Creative Expressions*. This decidedly theoretical endeavor primarily concerns itself with African/Black artistic expressions (literary art, performance art, visual art) within white-dominated North American society, focusing on African/Black descendants born or living in the United States. The goal of this study is to contribute to the ever-evolving conversation regarding the creative works of Africans/Blacks in North America that includes not only a historical overview of the earliest extant “African American” cultural productions, but also an evaluation of the socio-historical and political context in which African/Black artists—with distinctive attention on musicians—flourished within the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, including those contemporary artists who continue to thrive in the twenty-first century.

Few students, professors, or writers post-emancipation considered the role of the African/Black artist in American society a study of enlightened pedagogy worthy of investigation and examination. It was not until the 1920s and 1930s that this subject was nurtured and published as a scholarly theme of cultural analysis within the context of Black America. During this period known as the *New Negro Movement*, the shared philosophy of Drs. W. E. B. Du Bois and Alain Locke communicated principled ideals regarding African art; they

⁴ The use of the compound or interlocking terms African/Black used throughout the study is a cognitive concept borrowed from preeminent African-centered Psychologist Kobi Kambon. Although my application of the interlocking compound African/Black functions predominately as a socio-cultural ethnic identity phrase, Baba Kobi employs the “cognitive conditioning procedure” in an effort to “seal” the “natural-logical connection” in the minds of the “Eurocentrically educated” Africans in America who were/are conditioned to make a “forced” separation-distinction between peoples of African descent.

championed, accentuated, and fortified that through artistic expression, a higher sense of group and social cohesiveness can be achieved. Both scholars agreed that African/Black artists should draw from the roots of their African heritage. Locke referred to this as “their own racial milieu as a special province.”⁵ Those artists who explored their African/Black heritage were defined by Locke as “Africanists”: artists who derived their inspiration from the principles of African/Black cultural production. “He strongly believed that knowledge of an African past [and an appreciation for and return to the ‘ancestral arts’] would enhance the Afro-American’s cultural literacy and awaken in him a sense of pride for his own cultural heritage.”⁶ In his own works, Locke espouses “African Art, therefore, presents to the Negro artist in the New World a challenge to recapture this heritage of creative originality, and carry it to distinctive new achievement in a vital, new and racially expressive art.”⁷ Although Du Bois and Locke at the time were speaking primarily to visual artists, their approach was not only limited to the visual arts, they emphasized that these elements also pertained to all forms of artistic expression, and to which I include musicians/lyricists, dancers, poets, writers, and actors.

Contrary to popular belief, the ‘Art v. Propaganda’ debate did not begin with W. E. B. Du Bois, who in his day vehemently argued that African/Black artists have an obligation to their community to create art that gains wholeness

⁵ Alain Locke, “The American Negro Artist,” *The American Magazine of Art* 23, no. 3 (September 1931): 214.

⁶ David C. Driskell, introduction to *Black Dimensions in Contemporary American Art*, by J. Edward Atkinson, ed. (New York: The New American Library, 1971), 13.

⁷ Alain L. Locke, *The African Legacy and the Negro Artist* (exhibition of works of Negro artists) (New York: The Harmon Foundation, 1931), 11-12.

or respectability worldwide for African/Black people, nor did it end with Langston Hughes who openly wrestled with the issue in *The Negro Artist and The Racial Mountain*, as evident in the following excerpt:

Oh be respectable, write about nice people, show how good we are, say the Negroes. [Whereas the whites said:] Be stereotyped, don't go too far, don't shatter our illusions about you, and don't amuse us too seriously . . . We will pay you.⁸

Hughes, publicly agonizing over this dilemma, passionately proclaimed, "An artist must be free to choose what he [or she] does, certainly, but [she or] he must also never be afraid of what he [or she] might choose."⁹ Indeed, each artist has to make a choice. Hughes's article no doubt caught the watchful eyes of W. E. B. Du Bois, who wrote *Criteria of Negro Art*, obviously in direct response to *The Negro Artist and The Racial Mountain*. He states:

. . . all art is propaganda and ever must be, despite the wailing of the purists. I stand in utter shamelessness and say that whatever art I have for writing has been used always for propaganda for gaining the right of [B]lack folk to love and enjoy. I do not care a damn for any art that is not used for propaganda.¹⁰

Echoes of this quandary for African/Black artists reverberate through the "Black Arts" movement of the 1960's where leading figures Larry Neal, Sonia Sanchez, Ademola Olugebefola, Nikki Giovanni, Ben Jones, Haki Madhubuti, Gwendolyn Brooks, Jeff Donaldson, Wadsworth Jarrell, Elizabeth Catlett, Lois Marilou Jones, Aaron Douglass and a multitude of others, engaged the question of purpose and utility of African/Black cultural creations. Amiri

⁸ Langston Hughes, "The Negro Artists and the Racial Mountain" in *Voices of the Harlem Renaissance*, ed. Nathan Irvin Huggins (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), 313.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ W. E. B. Du Bois, "Criteria of Negro Art," *The Crisis* 32 (October 1926): 290-297.

Baraka, who was yet another dynamic voice in the Black Arts movement, had this to say:

Art must serve to illuminate and educate

Enlighten by delightin [sic]

Stimulate: the image must carry and carry us to the goal the place desired. Each aspect of [B]lack life must be analyzed must make the pain of recognizing the exact place of our crucifixion, the exact sloth and cowardliness, the precise ugliness and ignorance. But also, let the [B]lack beauty glow through, whether attained or desired what we are and what we all can be. Stress evolution, what the world can be in strong beautiful hands.¹¹

Indeed, the question of African/Black artists' responsibility—to their people or solely to themselves and their art—still troubles many African/Black artists and entertainers today.

I became interested in this subject matter—the role and responsibility of African/Black artists—following the discovery through texts written by African/Black scholar-artists, such as Ngugi wa Thiong'o; Okot p'Bitek; Aime Cesaire and Malidoma Patrice Somé, that traditionally African/Black artists were/are firmly committed to the promotion of customary African/Black values within African world communities. African/Black artists “respond deeply and intuitively to what is happening, what has happened and what will happen.”¹² Adding further emphasis to this claim, Munashe Furusa asserts that African/Black artists “explain the various ways through which people of African descent challenge and critique Western hegemonic power in all its social,

¹¹ Imamu Amiri Baraka [LeRoi Jones], “Work Notes-'66,” *Raise Race Rays Raze: Essays Since 1965* (New York: Random House, 1971), 14-15.

¹² Okot p'Bitek, “Artist, the Ruler,” *Artist, the Ruler: Essays on Art, Culture and Values*, (Nairobi, Kenya: Heinemann Kenya, 1986), 39.

political and economic sites and forms.”¹³ Okot p’Bitek sees artists as “the most powerful, sensitive, and imaginative minds society has ever produced.”¹⁴

The idea that African/Black artists have a responsibility to their community and, in turn, their community has a responsibility to them is captured within this profound African proverbial phrase, “I am because we are; and since we are, therefore I am.”¹⁵ This tradition crosses all boundaries and encompasses the sacred and secular modes of African/Black art, which plays a positive role vis-à-vis social change and uplifting African world communities.

Social Aspects of Art

Ngugi wa Thiong’o informs us that, “art is a way of seeing the world of man and nature through visual, sound or mental images.”¹⁶ He positions the African/Black artist as a leader in her or his community. The artist is personified as the pulse of the community. The health of the community is embodied in the beauty of the art. Malidoma Patrice Somé likens the artist to a sacred healer.¹⁷ He describes the artist as a priest or priestess through whom the spirit world finds an entrance into this world.¹⁸ It is Somé’s belief, along with the belief of the Dagara society of Burkina Faso, of whom he is a

¹³ Munashe Furusa, “African Writers and the Art of Remembering Dismembered Communities” in *The Borders in All of Us: New Approaches to Global Diasporic Societies*, ed. William A. Little and Selase W. Williams (Northridge, CA: New World African Press, 2006), 265.

¹⁴ Okot p’Bitek, *Artist*, 39.

¹⁵ This is an often-cited proverbial phrase formulated by John Mbiti. See John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Heinemann, 1989), 141.

¹⁶ Ngugi wa Thiong’o, “Freedom of the Artist: Peoples Artists Versus Peoples Ruler” in *Barrel of A Pen: Resistance to Repression in Neo-Colonial Kenya* (Trenton, NJ: African World Press, 1983), 55.

¹⁷ Malidoma Patrice Some, *The Healing Wisdom of Africa: Finding Life Purpose Through Nature, Ritual, and Community* (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1994), 96.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 95.

member, that an individual having artistic ability is a sign validation of approval from the spiritual world. David C. Driskell, African American (Georgian) painter-scholar, describes his role as artist this way:

I feel that I have a calling, a priestly mission so to speak, to tell the true story of my people for the struggle of their artistry from the time my forbears left the continent of Africa, not of their own will, but because they were forced migrants. I feel that this mission is so strong that I have to go into other parts of the world to tell that, yes, African Americans have a glorious past and a past which goes all the way back to the days of Ife in Benin and that we are the descendents of such stock that our people have come through much to be where they are and what they are today and this means that with that kind of tradition, African Americans have a glorious future. It is all up to them.¹⁹

Both Somé and p'Bitek attest that in traditional African cultures, artists do not seek to produce art solely for the purpose of being sold [monetary gain] or to gain public stature. In p'Bitek's own words, "it has never occurred to traditional African peoples, that they had a separate commodity . . . which could be acquired by people made superior to others by access to a lot of money and plenty of leisure time."²⁰ The idea of art as

something which can be put in books of museums and art galleries, something which can be taught in schools and universities for examination purposes, or enjoyed during leisure time in theatres and in cinema halls—the Western tradition which regards [art] as something which could be bought or sold, where the artist is...paid with money for his works—is entirely alien to African thought.²¹

This idea is not only indigenous to traditional African/Black people, but to the "African American" also, as David P. Bradford, Chicago-born painter, asserts:

¹⁹ David Driskell, *Hidden Heritage: The Roots of Black American Painting*, Videocassette (Falls Church, VA: Landmark Films, 1990).

²⁰ Okot p'Bitek, *Artist*, 14.

²¹ *Ibid.*

We must make statements to and for [B]lack people. It is foolish for [B]lack artists to think in terms of “art for art’s sake,” for the experiences of [B]lack people (and any art produced by [B]lack people must derive from the [B]lack experience) in America has been and continues to be a struggle against racism, injustice and induced cultural defecation.

Only when we omit the desire to make it in the white man’s art world, only when we omit the desire to place the making of money first with our art, can we produce a popular art, a [B]lack art, an art that speaks to and for [B]lack people. Until we as [B]lack artists realize these things, we shall continue to lay in the dark of the white man’s shadow.²²

In other words the responsibility of the artist is likened to that of true love as described in I Corinthians 13:4-5: “. . . love does not parade itself, is not puffed up . . . does not seek its own.” The focus on materialism is the greatest destroyer of art.

This notion of the role and responsibility of African/Black artists as presented by the previously mentioned scholar-artists, juxtaposed with the viewpoints of prominent figures in “African American” history, notably W. E. B. Du Bois, Alain Locke, Margaret Just Butcher, James Herring, James Porter, and Cedric Dover; we find obvious parallels in their conception of the role and function of African/Black artists in North America. For it was Du Bois, who in his early writings insisted that the “African American” was primarily an artist; that the “sorrow songs”²³ of enslaved Africans constituted the only true American music, and that Black folk’s “gift of ‘story and song’”²⁴ had enriched an otherwise artistically bankrupt, materialistic Euro-American culture.

Similarly, Paul Robeson appreciated that artists have the power, and more importantly, the responsibility to positively change and advance the society in

²² David P. Bradford, *Black Artists on Art*, vol. 1, by Samella S. Lewis and Ruth G. Waddy (Los Angeles: Contemporary Crafts Publishers, 1969), 71.

²³ W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 1994), v.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 163.

which they live. Robeson recognized that art and culture are powerful weapons in African/Black people's continuing quest to reposition the image(s) of African/Black world communities from the margins of society by illuminating African/Black cultural and spiritual truths, thus affirming the value of African/Black lives. Likewise, speaking on behalf of the visual artist, Mikelle Fletcher states:

Our role as African American artists is to provide that direction needed by our people through art . . . We cannot afford to relegate ourselves to art for art's sake. Throughout our history, from Egypt, the great empires of Benin, Ife, and Nok, to traditional African art, our art has been functional and created by our people for a purpose: for ceremonies, for celebration of birth, to mourn death. . . .

In our struggle for liberation, African American artists play a very crucial role. Because of our ability to express, in a picture, a thousand words, those words should be in some way functional, words relevant to educating our people to the need for liberation. Our art can begin to educate, to teach the three R's, but the three R's that are relevant to us now: Redefine, Reeducate, Redirect."²⁵

One of the most important goals that I have for this thesis is to present a view of Africa and African/Black world communities in all their diversity. It is not my intent to put forward some messianic conception of African/Black artists. This is more than simply an exercise romanticizing African/Black cultures. With a clear understanding of the obvious—that there are many differences that exist among the individual persons who constitute African/Black world communities—I intend to draw from the commonalities that form the collective ethos of African/Black people and evince how these cultural factors became reproduced throughout the African/Black world. The diversity of artistic styles/forms and cultural products presented in this thesis does not

²⁵ Mikelle Fletcher, *African American Art and Artists*, 2nd ed., by Samella Lewis, ed. (1978; Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1990), 156.

dictate a homogeneous grouping; however, there is a unifying bond, a common thread running through all of the works, through all the social/political movements illustrating a continuous ideology and consciousness—a continual purpose. The bond is formed by the emotional tone of many of the works presented as well as the common articulation of experiences relating to the need to be expressive within each medium. The aim is to carry on the mission of African/Black liberation set in motion by scholar-ancestors such as Martin R. Delany, Edward Wilmont Blyden, Drusilla Dunjee Houston, Chancellor Williams, Amy Jacques Garvey, Maria Stewart, Paul Robeson, and John Henrik Clarke. Their life's work was absorbed with our connection to our African past and focused on our present condition. Understanding that our future emerges from our past (the challenge that burdens my generation, particularly those of us living in the African Diaspora) is housed in the profound question, "to be African or not to be?" Frantz Fanon tells us that "each generation must out of relative obscurity discover its mission, fulfill it, or betray it."²⁶ "To be African or not to be?" is much more than a rhetorical question, it is a call to action, a quest for survival and freedom that simply says our choice is to either exist as part of the global African/Black family or cease to exist altogether. The Black American experience is defined by special qualities unique to its suppression, struggle, passion, and soul force of revival and existence. Although Fanon was specifically referring to the African/Black mass's role in the struggle for liberation, this question is also very applicable and succinct for the African/Black artist to ponder and to determine his or her role, using their art, in the struggle for liberation. "The [B]lack man's/[woman's]

²⁶ Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, 1968), 206.

art in America, like his [or her] music, cannot be separated from his [or her] life. His [or her] art has evolved from his [or her] life-style and his [or her] will to survive.”²⁷

Those artists who have utilized these intrinsically special qualities and directed their work towards themes which echo an African/Black heritage are responding to the sounds of cultural history. I plan to elucidate that the artist, in order to consciously respond to these sounds, must have a defined role as participant in their culture. Perhaps the following quote often uttered by scholar-ancestor John Henrik Clarke provides the best summation of our ominous state of affairs, “Pan-Africanism or perish!”

To insist that African/Black art be solely socially purposeful and responsible is to a certain extent controversial. To suggest that recurring forms and styles of utilitarian African/Black cultural creations—discernable through time and space—reflect a synthesis of African/Black consciousness or rather a cultural permanence that exists among the numerous limbs of the African baobab tree,²⁸ is bound to be greeted with some skepticism. Nevertheless, I offer in these ensuing chapters, the vigilantly scrutinized cultural products of African/Black artists who, I believe, provide enough evidence to draw certain plausible conclusions to the question that is the crux of this study.

The diversity of artistic styles/forms and cultural products in this thesis is unified by one factor, and it is this which further defends bringing all of the

²⁷ Driskell, introduction to *Black Dimensions in Contemporary American Art*, 17.

²⁸ The baobab tree is native to Africa. It has an enormous trunk with many tapering branches and is one of the longest-lived trees in the world. The baobab tree is known throughout Africa as the “Tree of Life” and is held in high regard due to its multiple uses that range from food, clothing, and shelter to soap, glue, rubber and medicine.

works together here in this thesis: all of the artists are Black, descendents of Africa, living in America, possess and exhibit emotional, deliberate, and conscious content; yield to the 'sounds of cultural heritage and history', and choose to be positive, liberating creative contributors to their society.

This examination is structured around a single query—the role and responsibility of African/Black artists—that is based on a set of questions concerning consciousness and ideology. Both primary and secondary sources have been carefully scrutinized, along with lyrical analysis, personal interviews, and other forms of media.

This study is comprised of four chapters. Following this introduction, chapter two, “Excavating Memory, Transcending Boundaries, Restoring African Humanity, and Assuming the Counterhegemonic Position” begins with a discourse on African/Black identity, world view, culture, and the elements that constitute the African Diaspora. In this same chapter, I will also explore some common ideological objections raised to the notion of cultural continuity in an effort to help move the Africana Studies project forward. It is my hope that removing the smoke and mirror paradigms will allow the next generation to see clear enough to develop new theories and innovative paradigms that educe action plans and implement concrete strategies in the pursuit of true sovereignty for African people everywhere. Chapter three, “The Main Ingredient: Art for Life’s Sake,” deals with the question, *what is art?* and uses the answers to properly interrogate several African artists and art forms throughout the following time periods: Pre-emancipation (prior to the 1920s), Harlem Arts Movement (1920s-30s), Black Arts Movement (1960s), and Hiphop Era (1970s-current). Chapter four, Refuse to Forget!, functions as a synthesis of chapters two and three, identifying material beyond the scope of

this thesis, and offers suggestions for further exploration. In conclusion, this thesis is attempting to answer and explore the overwhelming question upon which this inquiry is predicated. If indeed the soul of a people is found in their art, what does African/Black art say about the souls of African/Black folk?

Chapter Two

Excavating Memory, Transcending Boundaries, Restoring African Humanity, and Assuming the Counterhegemonic Position

*No matter how far a stream flows, it never cuts off from its source.*¹

–Yoruba Proverb

*We carry these memories inside a we. Do you believe that those hundreds and hundreds of Africans brought here on this side would forget everything they once knew? We don't know where the recollections come from. Sometimes we dream them. But we carry these memories inside a we.*²

Nana Peazant, *Daughters of the Dust*

*We are not Africans because we are born in Africa; we are Africans because Africa is born in us.*³

–Chester Higgins, Jr.

African World Communities/Diaspora

As a preliminary matter, it is important to note that the phrase *world communities* and the term *Diaspora* are used interchangeably throughout the text. Both expressions are employed in recounting the community that is formed consequently when a particular people, albeit geographically separated and/or culturally distinct; however, who originally enjoyed a mutually respected, contemporaneous and interrelated entity and identity, have been dispersed both voluntarily and involuntarily outside of their traditional homeland, over long periods of time, to throughout much of the world.

¹From *My People- 400 Years of African American Folklore*, ed. Daryl Cumber Dance (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2002).

² The epigraph to this chapter is drawn from a passage spoken by the film's family matriarch, Nana, in *Daughters of the Dust*, DVD, directed by Julie Dash (New York: Kino Video, 1991).

³ Chester Higgins, Jr., *Feeling the Spirit: Searching the World for People of Africa* (New York: Bantam Books, 1994), 233.

With Africa identified as the traditional homeland, the African Diaspora consists of such communities scattered amidst the Americas, the Caribbean, Australia, Asia, India, and throughout Europe. The legacy of colonial hegemony and internal division, and the dispersion of African ethnic groups formed the African Diaspora composed of both inter-continental and intra-continental communities.⁴

Conventionally, the designation of the African Diaspora has been limited to the Americas and the Caribbean. A more complete definition of the African Diaspora, forces one to acknowledge the presence of Africans globally in either ancient or modern times or both. With examples such as the Dalits of India, the Moors of Spain, Aborigines of Australia, Sekais of Thailand, the Black Shogun in Japan, the Raizals of San Andres and the Atlantic coastal periphery of Nicaragua, Costa Rica, Belize, Panama, Columbia, and Honduras, it is unmistakable to discount the African presence around the world.⁵ All these communities share a nexus of networks and interactions that connect us to the source of humanity –Africa – as the homeland. The Diaspora is growing in the consciousness and discourse of many scholars, thus allowing for the treatment and analysis of the African Diaspora as one unit (a sum of its parts) based on the notion that “the African Diaspora is both a process and condition whose constituent elements imply transnational and transcontinental historical and cultural ties and linkages.”⁶ It consists of people with a shared

⁴ Joseph E. Harris, “The African Diaspora in World History and Politics,” in *African Roots/American Cultures: Africa in the Creation of the Americas*, ed. Sheila S. Walker (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001).

⁵ Runako Rashidi, *The Global African Community: Travel Notes* (San Antonio: Runoko Rashidi, 2005).

⁶ Munashe Furusa, “African Writers and the Art of Remembering Dismembered African Communities,” in *The Borders in All of Us*, ed. William

consciousness of the identity of their roots. According to Joseph E. Harris, “they settled abroad voluntarily and involuntarily and maintained a consciousness of Africa and their identity while adapting and making positive contributions to their adopted homelands.”⁷

Within these new and evolving dialogues on the African Diaspora, there seems to emerge primarily two distinctly different and often conflicting viewpoints on the analysis and interpretation of the dispersion of African people, the significance of the adversities that African people have suffered throughout the centuries, the discerning of the methodology utilized for resisting ascendancy, and the approaches affirmed and utilized for reconstructing themselves. One viewpoint is that of differentiation and diversity; the other of unity and commonality.

It is argued that because the whole of Africa “do[es] not have a common traditional culture, common languages, a common religious and conceptual vocabulary,”⁸ it is futile to entertain any discussion or identification of “rallying principles by which [people of African descent] can identify themselves as members of an exclusive group with mutual obligations and responsibilities”⁹ According to some scholars such as E. Franklin Frazier, and Charles S. Johnson, African historical and cultural memories did not subsist throughout the middle passage. Others have argued that if indeed some Africanisms and elements of consistent patterns of cultural behavior did survive the middle

A. Little, Selaise W. Williams, Irene Vasquez, Munashe Furusa, Jung –Sun Park (Northridge, CA: New World African Press, 2006), 265.

⁷ Harris, “African Diaspora,” 108.

⁸ Kwame Anthony Appiah, *In My Father’s House, Africa in the Philosophy of Culture* (Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 26.

⁹ Oyekan Owemoyela, “With Friends like These... A Critique of Pervasive Anti-Africanisms in Current African Studies Epistemology and Methodology,” *African Studies Review* 37, no. 3 (December 1994): 77-102, 82.

passage, they were unsuccessful in surviving under the influence of the dominant culture, are consistently disappearing, and at present have thus been lost. This viewpoint's foundation relies on the denial and/or depreciation of the existence and survival of meaningful and unifying linkages along with the extinction of expressions of cultural affinity between African-centered communities, both inside and outside Africa. It is based on conjectures about identity, the kinship between homelands and their diasporas, and the significance of the impact of the institutions of slavery and colonization on African communities. These assumptions are outlined in following arguments:

1. that there always exist zones of differences, conflict and contradictions which undermine any genuine notions and possibilities of coherence and oneness within any "community;"
2. that identities are not fixed, but are constantly negotiated, shifting and changing under the influence of constant migrations and encounters with other international populations.
3. and that, modern realities and identities are defined by hybridity, floating referents, dislocations, and decenteredness as expressions of unbound human possibilities and freedom.¹⁰

This theoretical framework allows for the difficulty in addressing the African Diaspora as a "unit of analysis"¹¹ and to talk about the African Diaspora as a centered, connected, and homogeneous community.

In contrast, the second viewpoint acknowledges and appreciates the existence and survival of historical and cultural continuities that define the

¹⁰ Furusa, "African Writers," 266.

¹¹ Tiffany Ruby Patterson and Robin D. G. Kelley, "Unfinished Migrations: Reflections on the African Diaspora and the Making of the Modern World," special issue on the Diaspora, *African Studies Review* 43, no. 1 (April 2000): 47-68, 49.

African Diaspora as a community linked by heritage and common social condition. According to Joseph E. Harris, “cultural continuities have persisted in multiple ways throughout the Diaspora:

1. Africans arrived abroad with their languages and cultures, which they continued to speak and practice . . . in the privacy of their homes, quarters, and social groups. They continued to sing and dance as their cultures had taught them
2. Neither the Middle Passage nor the slavery system broke their awareness of their history. This is revealed in their religious practices (such as Candomblé in Brazil and Santería in Cuba) and oral traditions generally. In fact, some of the new arrivals sought their kin and friends after they had been sold into slavery. This confirms both the continuity and the consciousness of heritage, community, and common social condition.
3. Their culture and aspirations for freedom were expressed in a number of ways, often incorporated in different forms—songs, poetry, religion—and were employed to solidify mass followings in a number of resistance movements including the ninth-century revolt in Iraq, where an autonomous community replicated African traditions under the leadership of Rihan Ibn Salib; the seventeenth-century revolt led by Zumbi in Brazil, where Palmares remained autonomous for most of that century; the eighteenth-century revolt in Haiti led by African-born Boukman and Diaspora-born Christian, Toussaint L’Overture; and the unsuccessful nineteenth-century revolt led by Gullah Jack, the African, and Diaspora-born Denmark Vesey in the United States. These were all freedom movements that incorporated traditional symbols and ceremonies around which Africans and African Diasporans rallied.¹²

The premise for this viewpoint relies a great deal on the methodical research conducted by Cheikh Anta Diop and Chancellor Williams on the cultural unity of Africa in concert with the numerous studies carried out in the African

¹² Harris, “African Diaspora,” 108.

Diaspora, which provide evidence that African cultural retentions survive in the Diaspora and remain dynamic (Marimba Ani, 1980; Joseph Holloway, 1991; Abdias do Nascimento and Elisa Larkin Nascimento, 1992; Carter G. Woodson, 1936; John W. Blassingame, 1972; Richard L. Jackson, 1984; Jacob H. Carruthers, 1999; Margaret Walker, 1992; Newbell Puckett, 1926; Sheila S. Walker, 2001; Carole Boyce Davies and Molaria Ogundipe-Leslie, 1995). This position is also affirmed by Ayi Kwei Armah who states “that we the [B]lack people are one people we know. Destroyers will travel long distances in their minds and out to deny you this truth.”¹³ Wade Nobles asserts that Blacks categorize themselves as American, European, Asian, or Caribbean *only* because of the location and circumstances of their birth, and secondly due to “laws that make us of citizens. Who or what is being located and whose citizenship is ratified into law is African.”¹⁴ Nobles recently cautioned members of African diasporic communities (particularly those born in America) against confusing their citizenship with their heritage while simultaneously promoting a common African identity when he declared, “We are Africans whose birth-place locates us in America.”¹⁵ The significance of this perspective is profound in that it provides a healing framework that is rooted in shared historical experiences and cultural heritage.

This sentiment is in stark contrast to those postcolonial scholars who subscribe to conceptual frameworks that champion heterogeneity, division, disjunction, and dislocation, rather than historical and cultural continuity and

¹³ Ayi Kweyi Armah, *Two Thousand Seasons* (London: Heinemann, 1973), 3.

¹⁴ Wade Nobles, “To Be African,” in *To be Afrikans, Essays by Afrikans in the process of Sankofa: Returning to Our Source of Power*, ed. Burnett Kwadwo (USA: M.A.A.T. Inc, 2003), 22.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 23.

balance as liberative concepts. At the root of postcolonial and postmodern theories of alienated individuals, and hybridized identities is a stratagem to de-Africanize the African by abating the value of African humanity. This viewpoint suffers from the Western hegemonic locus where the denial and depreciation of African historical and cultural connectedness undermines and silences the vociferations of resistance and liberation. “This intellectual negation of *essential* elements of African humanity perpetuates the practice of demeaning, deriding, and ridiculing efforts to reconnect African people to their historical and cultural *essences*. It also continues to marginalize and silence African historical and cultural voices while privileging European essentialism.”¹⁶ In the same context, Elleke Boehmer asserts that this approach credits European imperialism for “disseminating European influences across the world, so bringing vastly different cultures into proximity.”¹⁷ This is essential to note due to the historical references of how Western hegemonic practices ridiculed and regarded African civilizations, institutions, culture, and spirituality as “primitive” and “uncivilized,” thus making it necessary for the West to “save” the African and deconstruct and redefine the African locus of subversive agency within the Western hegemonic locus.¹⁸

The Pan-African approach provides a healing framework that is ingrained in collective historical experiences and a communal cultural heritage. Bernard Makhosezwe Magubane puts forward that “Pan-Africanism . . . , owing much to the agencies of time and place. And Pan-African consciousness in our

¹⁶ Furusa, “African Writers,” 267.

¹⁷ Ellen Boehmer, *Colonial and Post colonial Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 7.

¹⁸ Stephen Slemon and Helen Tiffin, *After Europe: Critical Theory and Post-colonial Writing* (Sydney, Australia: Dangaroo Press, 1989).

definition was an historical phenomenon, unifying a number of seemingly unconnected peoples and events, both in the raw material of experience and in awareness.”¹⁹ The theories and concepts are used as vehicles for linking and strengthening African world communities while concurrently resisting Western hegemony along with European essentialism and universalism. This approach is further emboldened by Anthony Appiah’s comments, “Pan-Africanism—the project of a continental fraternity and sorority—can be a progressive force. [A] Pan-African identity, which allows African-Americans, Afro-Caribbeans, and Afro-Latins to ally with continental Africans, drawing on the cultural resources of the black Atlantic world, may serve useful purposes.”²⁰ Appiah continues by stating, “What binds . . . African-American[s] to his dark-skinned fellow citizens is not economic interest but racism and the cultural products of resistance to it that are shared across (most of) African-American culture.”²¹ To the contrary, the rhetoric of hybridity, locational disjunction, and centerlessness is what Chinwizu considers “smart phrases,” intellectual and analytical tools that rout the African and African Diasporic historical and cultural experiences.²² Postmodern scholar Anthony Appiah continues to contradict himself and common postcolonial theory (which he subscribes to) by saying, “To accept that Africa can be in these ways a useable identity is not to forget that all of us belong to multifarious communities with their local customs; it is not a dream of a single African state and to forget the complexly different trajectories of the continent’s so many

¹⁹ Bernard Makhosezwe Magubane, *The Ties That Bind: African-American Consciousness of Africa* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1987), 128.

²⁰ Appiah, *In My Father’s House*, 180.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 179.

²² Jemie O. Chinweizu, *Decolonizing the African Mind* (Lagos: Pero Press, 1987), 215.

languages and cultures. 'African solidarity' can surely be a vital and enabling rallying cry"²³

Political boundaries do not necessarily make, or conform to, cultural boundaries. The imposition of Eurocentric institutions and scholarship in the past has limited our ability to undertake comparative studies on various issues relating to colonial experiences, trans-Atlantic trade, plantation life, the challenges of transitioning to independence, the impediments to socio-economic and political development, and ethnographic patterns. This dilemma of conceptual dependency in which Africana Studies Departments employ non-African paradigms and theories to study Africa(ns) is addressed by William A. Little when he writes, "[t]hese societies must be examined from the perspective of their homeland and Diaspora cultural dynamics."²⁴ Little's statement speaks to the fundamental call for the study of "Africa(ns) being located conceptually, symbolically, and culturally in Africa."²⁵ Within this frame of reference Kwasi Konadu recommends that, "Africa . . . be viewed as a geographic, cultural, conceptual, socio-political, and spiritual entity."²⁶ Adding to his proposal, Konadu suggests, "a concept of culture . . . in which Africa is the expression of culture, that is, the physical (land and people), ideational

²³ Appiah, *In My Father's House*, 180.

²⁴ William A. Little, "Culture and Economic Development in the African World," in *Indigenous Knowledge And Technology in African and Diasporan Communities: Multi-Disciplinary Approaches*, eds. E. M. Chiwome, Z. Mguni, and Munashe Furusa (Harare, Zimbabwe: Southern African Association for Culture and Development Studies, University of Zimbabwe; Carson: CA, National Council for Black Studies Inc., California State University, Dominguez Hills, 2000), 19.

²⁵ Kwasi Konadu, "The Cultural Identity of Africa and the Global Tasks of Africana Studies," *African Studies Quarterly*, (n.d.), <http://www.africa.ufl.edu/asq/v7/v7i4a3.htm>.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

(philosophy and thought), and spiritual (temporal manifestation).²⁷ Essentially Konadu concludes, “Africa and its indigenous peoples are living entities bound in symbiotic relationships. And by extension, the African who is situated within his/her conceptual universe and is culturally oriented to proclaim and express pragmatism and philosophy of this universe without ambiguity is Africa!”²⁸

The Role and Function of Culture

The role and function of culture is considerably more important and certainly more complex than popular ideas suggest. Many scholars and artists of African descent agree that culture is the main factor that gives a people their identity and distinctiveness. They do not separate culture from people; rather they see culture as the fundamental fabric of human existence.

Sembene Ousmane sees the human being as culture. Okot p’Bitek defines culture as a philosophy of life that people live and celebrate. The Shona and Ndebele people of Zimbabwe also view the human being as being cultured. It is important to note that they do not separate the concept of culture from the human being. Their terms for human being are *munhu* and *muntu* respectively. Similarly, culture is *unhu* and *ubuntu/untu*, respectively. To be human means to have *unhu/ubuntu* (culture). It means to be properly socialized or civilized. Among the Akan, the term culture refers to upbringing or nurturing. Therefore people are what they are brought up or nurtured to be. A person reveals, affirms, and promotes their identity as a result of the way they live their lives; that is, in what manner they celebrate their philosophy of life. Theophile Obenga suggests:

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

Culture consists of all ideas about why we do things, how to do things, the language required to convey these ideas, and the tools and techniques involved in doing them.²⁹

Culture thus provides the values and principles that people use to make sense of their lives; it organizes and shapes their behavior. It is the role of culture to cultivate these images and nurture the ideas that give each person their uniqueness in the world and a distinct identity. To be African, for example, means to live and celebrate an African philosophy of life and view of the world. Therefore, one is an African or not according to one's way of life and according to the society's perception of him or her in the participation of that life. It is this understanding that leads Ngugi wa'Thiongo to conclude that:

It is culture that which enables a community to imagine and re-imagine itself in history. And that is why a culture is to a community what a flower is to a plant. A flower is very beautiful, very colorful, and often very delicate. But it is the flower which often readily defines the identity of many plants. Most important it is the flower which is the carrier of the seeds which make it possible the reproduction of roots and the trunks of the plant.³⁰

As long as African culture is strong and dynamic, African people are assured of reproducing themselves as Africans because their culture directs them on how to do so. African culture provides wisdom, lessons, guidelines, and models of what it means to be African. In her book, *Let the Circle be Unbroken*, Marimba Ani introduces two concepts that help us to understand the role of culture in defining a people: worldview and ethos. Ani defines ethos

²⁹ Theophile Obenga, "Who am I? Interpretation in African Historiography," *Black Studies Journal* 3, (Fall/Spring 2000-2001): 13.

³⁰ Ngugi wa Thiong'o, "Europhonism, Universities, and the Magic Fountain: The Future of African Literature and Scholarship," *Researches in African Literatures* 30, no. 1 (Spring 2000): 3.

as “the emotional substance of a cultural group”³¹ and explains worldview as “the way in which a people make sense of their surroundings; make sense of life and of the universe.”³²

Let us get one thing clear, a people’s identity cannot simply be defined by their skin color or other physical characteristics. Physical characteristics are metaphors of culture and worldview. Following this logic, the question then arises, what is Black? According to Charles Hamilton, “Black . . . is more than skin color.” Rather it is an “attitude, a state of mind, a way of looking at life.”³³ Similarly, Abdias do Nascimento connects being Black to African, that is, to African culture. He states that:

Blackness is not a question of skin color. The color of skin, in all its varied and sundry shades, functions only as a badge of our African origin, the root of our identity.³⁴

African is the spiritual and material foundation of Black people’s identity. Through constant interaction and cooperation, African people produced a common heritage, a common set of experiences, a common culture, and an enduring emotional bond that gives them their identity. The shared historical experiences, cultural values, and emotional tone, provide African people with a common worldview and philosophy of life. The world to which they belong is a unified cosmos and spiritual totality. It is the basis for a common angle from which to view, understand, and interpret the world. African people’s identity

³¹ Marimba Ani, *Let the Circle Be Unbroken: The Implications of African Spirituality in the Diaspora* (New York: Nkonimfo Publications, 2004), 2.

³² *Ibid.*, 4.

³³ Charles Hamilton, *The Black Revolution* (Chicago: Johnson Publishing, 1970).

³⁴ Abdias and Elisa do Nascimento, *Africans in Brazil: A Pan-African Perspective* (New Jersey: African World Press, 1992), 73.

should therefore connect them to their culture, history, and motherland. John Henrik Clarke affirms that:

The proper name of a people must always relate to land, history and culture, and anytime you address any people, if the name you call them fails to relate them to land, history and culture you have not connected them to their original geography.³⁵

Despite his being born in Brazil, Abdias do Nascimento demonstrates his unwillingness to privilege citizenship over heritage. He proudly affirms African identity when he proclaims:

Above and beyond the identity of family and history, we have in common with the peoples of the African world our civilization and culture of origin, constructed from the time of ancient Nubia and Egypt to the medieval states of Africa persisting and developing, despite colonialism's preservations, to contemporary times.³⁶

The brilliance in Nascimento's declaration deserves extra attention. His statement was not one of "puerile genealogical vanity."³⁷ No! The splendor in his remarks re-establishes history by putting things back in their proper place. He is ultimately saying: "Colonization is not our history, but merely accident; and he restores the historical 'continuum.' He reaffirms the historical continuity that was broken by the colonial intrusion."³⁸

This notion of oneness³⁹ among African people in various parts of the world is supported by significant elements of African culture and religious

³⁵ John Henrik Clarke, *My Life in Search of Africa* (Ithaca: NY, Africana Studies and Research Center, Cornell University, 1994), 72.

³⁶ Abdias and Elisa do Nascimento, *Africans in Brazil*, 72.

³⁷ Aime Cesaire, "The Responsibility of the Artist," in *The African Reader: Independent Africa*, eds. Wilfred Cartey and Martin Kilson (New York: Vintage Books, 1970), 159.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 159-160.

³⁹ Oneness, best articulated by Magubane as "The denial of social equality placed the American black in the same status position as his putative brother in colonized Africa." In *Ties That Bind*, 4.

beliefs that survive(d) in the Diaspora. In *Africanisms in American Culture*, scholar Joseph E. Holloway explains that recent studies in Diaspora experiences acknowledge the retentions of African culture and worldview in the Caribbean, Suriname, and Brazil, “where an abundance of living African culture is still apparent.”⁴⁰ Margaret Washington Creel, after studying Gullah people’s attitudes toward life and death, concluded that, “An African worldview, an African theory of being, and some African customs were significant in Gullah religious tendencies and communal existence.”⁴¹ Henry Louis Gates comes to a similar conclusion; after studying the lives of African people in America he observes that:

The Black African who survived the dreaded “Middle passage” from the west coast of Africa to the New World did not sail alone. Violently and radically abstracted from their civilizations, these Africans nevertheless carried within them to the Western hemisphere aspects of their cultures that were meaningful, that could not be obliterated, and that they chose, by acts of will not to forget.⁴²

“But for all of the horror of the transatlantic slave trade, it did not completely rupture ties to the homeland.”⁴³ Judging from the observations made by Gomez, Gates, and the abovementioned scholars, one can safely deduce that Africans in the Diaspora brought with them a worldview and a set of values that underpinned them spiritually and socially.

⁴⁰ Joseph E. Holloway, *Africanisms in American Culture* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), ix.

⁴¹ Margaret Washington Creel, “Gullah Attitudes Toward Life and Death,” in *Africanisms in American Culture* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press 1990), 71.

⁴² Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African American Literary Criticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 12.

⁴³ Michael A. Gomez, *Reversing Sail: A History of the African Diaspora* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 79.

Beyond the socio-political legacies of enslavement and oppression, Africans, and African world communities are attached by a “cultural umbilical cord,”⁴⁴ which links them through a set of historical circumstances. As such, it may be argued that African and African Diaspora cultural production is best examined and understood from the perspective of a European colonial construct and an African cultural underpinning.

The concept of the African Diaspora endorsed in this study emphasizes cultural commonalities beyond the historical-political experiences of African people, without neglecting their importance. The assumption here is that the sum of the common experiences and the understanding of those experiences of African world communities transcend the territorial differences or peculiarities.

Although many traditional African cultural patterns have been masked, adapted, transformed, and reconstructed by Africans as means to resist white hegemony, various scholars maintain that African world communities *still* retain an essential “African” character. O. R. Dathorne keenly articulates this stance:

African culture therefore managed to preserve itself by its sheer volume. Synthesis took place, first with the cultures that were more closely related to each other and, later, through the process by which Blacks tended to define themselves in terms of their similarities with one another and their differences from the overseer and slave master.⁴⁵

Raphael Chijioke Njoku accentuates Dathorne’s assessment adding that “they [Africans] quickly began to construct a new sense of common identity

⁴⁴ Little, “Culture and Economic Development,” 19.

⁴⁵ O. R. Dathorne, *Dark Ancestor: The Literature of the Blackman in the Caribbean* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1981), 16.

irrespective of the obvious problem of language barriers.”⁴⁶ These two examples not only complement, but reinforce accounts put forth by scholars such as John W. Blassingame, Robert Farris Thompson, Carter G. Woodson, Newbell Puckett, and Marimba Ani (just to name a few) whose comprehensive research unearthed African cultural retentions that continue to endure the hellacious *Maafa*,⁴⁷ remaining ubiquitous among displaced African communities comprising the African world.

While the African World is often hailed as a diverse amalgam of cultures and beliefs, one key element of African cultural continuity on the continent and throughout the diaspora is the tradition of oral communication. Africans have always placed great importance on effective communication. Until recent years this historical fact had gone virtually unrecognized and buried under myriad pronouncements by scholars claiming the trauma of slavery severed the physical and cultural ties amongst Africans in the diaspora and Africans on the continent. These scholars typically emphasize “the loss of language, dress, living patterns and other tangible and surface aspects”⁴⁸ of traditional African cultures to support their claims. In response to these claims Lawrence Levine writes,

⁴⁶ Raphael C. Njoku, “Challenging Oppression with Sacred Drums and Dance” in *Sacred Drums of Liberation: Religions and Music of Resistance in Africa and the Diaspora* (Trenton: NJ, African World Press, 2007), xxx.

⁴⁷ The *Maafa*, as noted by Marimba Ani, is a Kiswahili word for disaster. *Maafa* refers to the continual, constant, complete, and total system of human negation and nullification.

⁴⁸ Ani, *Let the Circle Be Unbroken*, 1.

What has been lost sight of too easily in these pronouncements is that culture is more than the sum total of institutions and language. It is expressed as well by something less tangible⁴⁹

Levine's comments are vital to understanding the dynamics of culture within the context of the African experience where "the ability of African people to adapt to new circumstances and conditions seems to be the hallmark of the African experience through both time and space."⁵⁰ Levine describes culture as:

not a fixed condition but a process: the product of interaction between the past and present. Its toughness and resiliency are determined not by a culture's ability to withstand change, . . . but by its ability to react creatively and responsively to the realities of a new situation.⁵¹

This description exemplifies how historical cultural interaction between various African ethnic groups has shaped what Don Ohadike considers a "Pan-African culture of resistance"⁵² that "began on European-owned slave ships during the Atlantic crossing and continued on the plantations and maroon settlements."⁵³ There is little doubt that the "Pan-African culture of resistance" model is derived from a belief that the cultural differences among Africans were minor compared to the binding quality of their communality.

Ohadike's argument that a Pan-African cultural entity was first forged on European vessels that transported African captives to the "New World" has some merit, but warrants further investigation. It is interesting to note however

⁴⁹ Lawrence W. Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 4.

⁵⁰ Little, "Culture and Economic Development," 22.

⁵¹ Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*, 5.

⁵² Dr. Ohadike defines the Pan-African culture of resistance as a "protest-based pattern of behavior—a cultural heritage—that is shared by all people of African origin." Don C. Ohadike, *Sacred Drums of Liberation: Religions and Music of Resistance in Africa and the Diaspora* (Trenton, NJ: African World Press, 2007), 1.

⁵³ Ibid.

observations made by Lawrence Levine as they help reinforce Ohadike's claim thus adding logical ballast to his theory:

Though they varied widely in language, . . . they shared a fundamental outlook toward the past, present, and future and common means of cultural expression which could well have constituted the basis of a sense of common identity and world view capable of withstanding the impact of slavery.

The social and political behavior of African diasporic communities must be examined in the context of the continuity, transformation, and reconstruction of African culture. It may be argued that a "Pan-African culture of resistance" properly functions as a socio-political paradigm that is both reflective of Africa(ns) cultural past and indicative of its changing future.

It is encouraging to see that a growing number of African scholars are interested in exploring and engaging the significance of African oral traditions. Oral literature, traditional literature, folk literature, Folklore, or *Orature*, which is a combination of the two words "oral" and "literature," most commonly refers to literature communicated by word-of-mouth.⁵⁴ "Orature" is best defined as "those utterances, whether spoken, recited or sung, whose composition and performance exhibit to an appreciable degree the artistic characteristics of accurate observation, vivid imagination and ingenious expression."⁵⁵ Proverbs, riddles, stories, folktales, and songs, are but a few examples of oral literature and according to Isidore Okpewho, there are other elements of traditional oral communication that extend beyond the verbal aspect of what people say to include what they do. Examples of this include medicinal practices, traditional methods of cooking, architecture, sewing, weaving, ritual ceremonies, art,

⁵⁴ Isidore Okpewho, *African Oral Literature: Backgrounds, Character, and Continuity* (Bloomington: Indiana University, 1992), 3.

⁵⁵ J. Nandwa and A. Bukenya, *African Oral Literature for Schools* (Nairobi: Longman, 1983), 1.

instrumental music, and dance.⁵⁶ Thus it is not a stretch of the imagination to claim that the use of effective communication is so valued among African people that their oral documents have circulated and spread from generation to generation and individual to individual to ensure the continual maintenance of their rich historical and cultural beliefs. Having examined some key issues of African identity, the role and function of culture, and the concept of the African Diaspora, let us now examine how African artists use their art to reconnect and restore their communities.

The following chapter will provide concrete examples as evidence of this common identity, and sustained cultural communities and connections throughout history to the contemporary through artists and through the medium of art.

⁵⁶ Okpewho, *African Oral Literature*, 5.

Chapter Three

The Main Ingredient: Art for Life's Sake

My approach to art is that I do not see the arts as separable or separate from life. I mean if art is a reflection of life, if it's produced by life and if art is about life, then one has to take into account that it has been produced by life which has economic, social and political aspects, and many other aspects.¹

- Ngugi wa Thiong'o

Art helps shape ideas, define social attitudes, and fix stereotypes. Prejudices, fears, hopes, and every type of moral assumption are channeled through images that serve as instruments of persuasion and control.²

- Albert Boime

When I get in front of the mic, all I want to tell is my truth. I want to be inside the songs I've written. I want to reinterpret the words and the thought between them. I always believed I could sing, but I just don't want my voice to be pretty on the ears. I wanted my voice to shape pictures whether I had words to say or not. I wanted the sound to come from my soul.³

- Jill Scott

To fully appreciate African/Black creative production we must begin with the assumption that African/Black artistic expressions are best understood within a paradigm that employs an African/Black aesthetic as its cultural frame of reference. Reference determines value and such a paradigm is useful, if not necessary, here in this thesis because it centers our working knowledge of African/Black creative works within its own cultural and historical experiences. Daphne Harrison confirms and echoes this sentiment when she states,

¹ Trayo A. Ali, "The Strength of Our People Is My Inspiration" (1995), in *Ngugi wa Thiong'o Speaks: Interviews with the Kenyan Writer*, eds. Reinhard Sander, Bernth Lindfors, and Lynette Cintron, (Trenton, NJ: African World Press, 2006), 363.

² Albert Boime, *The Art of Exclusion: Representing Blacks in the Nineteenth Century*, (Washington:, Smithsonian Institution Press, 1990), xiii.

³ Jill Scott, *Experience: Jill Scott 826*, Hidden Beach Recordings.

a dialogue on the aesthetic merit of a specific object or of a particular group's creative acts will be productive only when cultural considerations are taken into account. . . . A person's culture shapes the notions he [or she] has of beauty, of the form and mode of the creative act. Culture molds values—social, aesthetic, and philosophical—upon which [s/he] bases [their] response to the artistic object.⁴

Thus, the significance of any artistic creation is governed by the social, philosophical, and aesthetic values of the community that brought it into existence and is considered impressive and lasting *only* if it satisfies that community's social, philosophical, and aesthetic values. (Kwabena Nketia, 1979; Daphne Harrison, 1985)

Among African world communities the principles for artistic expression are best articulated by Tshombe Walker who writes, "Within the African world a high premium is placed upon creative expression grounded in the experiential reality of the people."⁵ Walker's explanation implies the existence of a reciprocal relationship among African/Black artists and their communities. This implication is best reflected in Ngugi wa Thiong'o's comments that African/Black artists "get their *energy* from their involvement with the people and this close identification with the people's struggle tends to energize their art."⁶ In sum,

⁴ Daphne D. Harrison, "Aesthetic and Social Aspects of Music in African Ritual Settings" in *More Than Drumming: Essays on African and Afro-Latin American Music and Musicians*, ed. Irene Jackson, (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1985), 49.

⁵ Tshombe R. Walker, "The Hip-Hop Worldview: An Afrocentric Discussion" in *Journal of Culture and its Transmission in the African World (JCTAW)*, Vol. 1, No. 1, Spring 2003, eds. Sessi S. Aboh, Patricia E. Canson, Vimbiana G. Chivaura, Nah Dove, Thomas O. Edwards, Sheila Mayers-Johnson, and Mwalimu J. Shujaa, (The African World Studies Institute at Fort Valley State University and The Center for Diopian Inquiry and Research on Education as Culture Transmission at Medgar Evers College/CUNY, 2003), 127.

⁶ Francis Meli, Essop Pahad, Mandla Langa, "The Role of Culture in the African Revolution: Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Mongane Wally Serote in a Round-

African/Black artists function as “a medium through which society expresses itself.”⁷

Art as a Reflection of Social Values and Preserver of Cultural Traditions

Significant to the project at this juncture is the daunting task of characterizing the early history of African/Black artistic expressions. It is well known that African/Black history is often reconstructed from an assortment of sources (mostly colonial). Writing was typically the “province of outsiders, such as travelers, merchants, and missionaries. Their descriptions of the arts, when they do exist, are often flawed by prejudgments based on religious faith, monetary goals, or cultural bias.”⁸ Art in Africa existed long before written records and was the predecessor to recorded history. Art originated in Africa as rock paintings and carvings dating as far back as the Middle Stone Age, approximately 40,000 to 77,000 years ago. From there, creative works evolved to sculptures and bronze work as well as to ivory and stone art.⁹ Many of these same traditional artistic forms are practiced throughout Africa today.

Music was, is, and always will be integral to all aspects of African/Black life. Whether performed by individuals or groups in either formal or informal settings, “the fundamental concept that governs music performance in African and African-derived cultures is that music-making is a participatory group activity that serves to unite [B]lack people into a cohesive group for a common

Table Discussion” (1988), in *Ngugi wa Thiong'o Speaks: Interviews with the Kenyan Writer*, eds. Reinhard Sander, Bernth Lindfors, and Lynette Cintron, (Trenton, NJ: African World Press, 2006), 240.

⁷ Ibid., 240.

⁸ Roy Sieber, “Traditional Arts of Black Africa” in *Africa* eds. Phyllis Martin and Patrick O'Meara, (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1977), 224.

⁹ Ibid., 237.

purpose.”¹⁰ In addition to the participatory dimension of African/Black music performance, numerous descriptions dating back centuries reveal that timbre is also a primary feature that distinguishes African/Black musical tradition from all others. This fact is highlighted by Francis Bebey in his book *African Music: A People’s Art*, where he informs us that,

The objective of African music is not necessarily to produce sounds agreeable to the ear, but to translate everyday experiences into living sound. In a musical environment whose constant purpose is to depict life, nature, or the supernatural, the musician wisely avoids using beauty as [a] criterion because no criterion could be more arbitrary.

Consequently, African voices adapt themselves to their musical contexts—a mellow tone to welcome a new bride; a husky voice to recount an indiscreet adventure; a satirical inflection for a teasing tone, with laughter bubbling up to compensate for the mockery—they may be soft or harsh as circumstances demand.¹¹

In traditional Africa and throughout the African/Black diaspora today artists continue the time-honored practice of replicating the sounds of their environment, whether it was recreating the sounds of animals or spirits or a river flowing—everything from rain drops to the boom box (expressed through the Hiphop expression known as Beatboxin’)—if the universe created it, African/Black artists emulate(d) it. Another notable distinction found among African cultures is the marriage between artist and instrument. Ruth Stone explains, “[s]ince instruments for Africans are humanlike; it is not surprising

¹⁰ Portia K. Maultsby, “Africanisms in African-American Music, in *Africanisms in American Culture*, ed. Joseph E. Holloway (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 187.

¹¹ Francis Bebey, *African Music: A People’s Art, 5th Ed.*, trans. Josephine Bennett, (Westport, CT: Lawrence Hill & Co., 1984), 115.

that the sounds of instruments are often considered ‘voices.’”¹² Again, we turn to Bebey for deeper understanding,

Western distinctions between instrumental and vocal music are evidently unthinkable in Africa where the human voice and musical instruments “speak” the same language, express the same feelings, and unanimously recreate the universe each time that thought is transformed into sound.¹³

In his seminal book, *Blues People: Negro Music in White America*, LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka) provides an excellent example that simultaneously demonstrates the African correlation between vocal and instrumental sound and how this correlation differentiates African/Black artists from their European-American counterparts. Baraka in his signature signifying style ridicules the West for measuring African/Black vocal and instrumental sound by a Western “standard of excellence,” a concept of “beauty” he considers “alien” to African cultures. To illustrate his point Baraka compares alto saxophonist Paul Desmond, who is white, to his African/Black counterpart Charlie Parker. From Baraka’s vantage point Desmond’s sound quality demonstrates the “tendency of white [J]azz musicians to play “softer” or with “cleaner, rounder tones”¹⁴ that fit pleasantly, he argues, into Western interpretations of excellence and beauty. Baraka’s understanding that cultural reference determines value emerged as a result of Desmond’s sound described as “legitimate” and “classical” by Western media, whereas Parker “produced a sound on the same instrument that was called . . . ‘raucous and

¹² Ruth M. Stone, “African Music Performed” in *Africa, 2nd Ed.*, eds. Phyllis Martin and Patrick O’Meara, (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1977), 236.

¹³ Francis Bebey, *African Music: A People’s Art, 5th Ed.*, trans. Josephine Bennett, (Westport, CT: Lawrence Hill & Co., 1984), 122.

¹⁴ LeRoi Jones, *Blues People: Negro Music in White America*, (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1963), 30.

uncultivated’,” which as Baraka exalts “was *meant* to be both those adjectives.”¹⁵ Continuing with his comparison Baraka observed,

Parker also would literally *imitate the human voice with his cries, swoops, squawks, and slurs*, while Desmond always insists he is playing an instrument, that it is an artifact separate from himself. Parker did not admit that there was any separation between himself and the agent he had chosen as his means of self expression.¹⁶

Baraka’s description of Charlie Parker’s “vocal music” style as well as Parker’s view that his instrument was an extension of himself reveals the undeniable strength and influence of African/Black cultural traditions that continues to nourish and sustain African/Black artists today. Parker was far from an anomaly, Pharoah Sanders, Don Byas, Eric Dolphy, Ornette Coleman, Rahsaan Roland Kirk, and John Coltrane (to name a few) exhibit(ed) identical convictions in their creative works. If we explore traditional African/Black music solely on the basis of their intent, we have to acknowledge “that it differed from Western in that it was a purely *functional* music.”¹⁷

Scholar Eugene L. Mendosa describes the traditional music of African societies as a “social marker for gender, ethnicity, cult membership, and nationality.”¹⁸ As such, music is central to the traditions of African societies with implications for their current cultural practices. With the growing urbanization and westernization of African societies, music may also function as an indicator of the transitions currently taking place in the “Motherland” and her diaspora as global African/Black youth build on and/or reinterpret

¹⁵ Ibid., 30.

¹⁶ Ibid., 30, 31.

¹⁷ Ibid., 28.

¹⁸ Eugene L. Mendosa, “Music & Society in West Africa,” in *West Africa: An Introduction to its History, Civilization, and Contemporary Situation*, (Durham, NC: Carolina Academic Press), 195.

traditional music styles and create contemporary musical forms combining both African and western elements such as Reggae, Afrobeats, Afro-Reggae, Reggaeton, High Life, Jazz, Urban Alternative, and Hip-hop (to name a few). It is important to note at this point that African culture(s) is/are not *static*. Keep in mind that during the pre-colonial epoch African societies interacted trans-continentially among themselves as well as with Arabs through migrations, trade, wars, and religion. Few scholars would disagree that cultural exchanges took place, musical resources being one of them, which includes the use of some Arab instruments as well as playing techniques. This demonstrates that Africans display no aversion to borrowing whatever is best from other cultures in a healthy give-and-take exchange. It is only when there is an economic, political, or spiritual imbalance and the exchange becomes one-sided that these borrowings become unnatural and unhealthy developments.

While most scholarly debates on Africa focus parochially on the regional differences that underscore the continent's vast cultural and historical diversity, Mendosa argues that "[t]he music of the African continent shares many similarities, perhaps pointing toward a past of sharing and migration."¹⁹ In Mendosa's article, J. H. Kwabena Nketia is quoted as suggesting that African/Black music is unified as a "network of overlapping styles, which share common features of structure, basic procedures and similar contextual relations."²⁰ Mendosa suggests that music throughout Africa is generally polyrhythmic, in contrast to the commonly mono-rhythmic, but polytonal music of Europe. Thus it may be argued that these underlying pan-African musical

¹⁹ Ibid., 199.

²⁰ Ibid.

characteristics culturally unify and therefore distinguish the peoples of Africa, including the African diaspora, from the rest of the world.

While it is true, as scholars argue, traditional African art should not be generalized, each society is unique and therefore produces uniquely representative art. Yet, there are some discernibly unifying themes present across all artistic products that require illumination. The first widespread conclusion that can be drawn from numerous studies of African creative works is that “African art is not produced solely for aesthetic ends—that is, it is not art for art’s sake as is so much of recent Western art; rather, it is deeply embedded in the belief patterns of society.”²¹ Another unifying theme is expressed generally through the construction of more three-dimensional cultural creations in the form of masks and sculptures than there are two-dimensional paintings. Scores of African sculptures center on human form usually depicted with an unrepresentatively large head, long torso, and short legs bent at the hip and the knee. The arms are often bent at the elbow and typically placed calmly against the belly or the side of the body and only rarely indulge in emphatic gestures. Despite the somewhat abstract and uniformed appearance of these figures certain intricacies can be seen: body ornaments, characteristic hairstyles, and scarification patterns that are clear and precise.²² No doubt the importance of these details relates to lineage affiliation and/or social conditions including local fashion. Masks and figures are consistently presented as expressionless, cool countenances. (Iris Hahner-Herzog, Maria Kecskesi, and Lazlo Vajda, 2007; Roy Sieber, 1977). “Stance, gesture, and

²¹ Roy Sieber, “Traditional Arts of Black Africa” in *Africa 2nd Ed.*, eds. Phyllis Martin and Patrick O’Meara, (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1977), 221.

²² *Ibid.*, 222.

expression combine to lend a strong sense of calm and austere power to most African figurative sculpture.”²³ While there is no easy explanation for the style characteristics of African/Black art, it does appear that the characteristics have achieved societal acceptance and once accepted these aesthetics become required and expected. The similarities present in much of traditional African/Black art culturally distinguish the continent and its people from the rest of the world. Examining African traditional cultural products helps us appreciate universal characteristics among African/Black peoples, including, but certainly not limited to, ancestor veneration, the emphasis on oral traditions (orature), along with high levels of respect for tradition, rituals, elders, and the environment.

At a recent gathering where a few colleagues and I were discussing our research, two questions were raised about my project. The first question asked was whose worldview informs the basis of moral as well as aesthetic judgment? The second question relates to the first “are these ideas permanent and unchangeable?” While the answer to the first question I feel has been adequately addressed within the text, in regards to second question, it appears that the ideas are not permanent because changes are noticeable in practically every society. History informs us that social institutions become different over a long span of time which may cause subtle or drastic changes to our philosophy of life. Let us proceed with a few salient observations extracted from the findings above for the purposes of investigating how or if the artistic traditions of the past shape the philosophical and aesthetic values of contemporary artists of African descent. Traditional African art may be characterized as “conservative, for it lay at the core of commonly held

²³ Ibid.

traditional belief patterns and strongly reflected those shared values, at the same time reinforcing and symbolizing them. It was radical in the sense that it was at the root of all beliefs and values.”²⁴ More to the point, “[i]t was and is, inconceivable in...African culture(s) to make a separation between music, dancing, song, the artifact, and a [hu]man’s life or [her/his] worship of [her/his] gods.”²⁵ For Africans, “Expression issued from life, and was beauty.”²⁶ It is from this vantage point that it is safe to say that the greatest work of art is most glorious in its simplicity and subtlety. It follows, then, that the greatest artistic expression lies in nature, which explains why for centuries African/Black artists have attempted to capture the unpretentious splendor of their environment through paintings, sculpture, dance, music and spoken word. But more, the most gifted artists possess a seemingly innate ability to create expressions that transcend the previous understanding of the spectator and enable her or him to share in the experience captured by the artist

[Only a work of art can] evoke that feeling [quite distinct from all other feelings] of joy and spiritual union with [. . .] others. . . . The peculiarity of this feeling is that the recipient of a truly artistic impression is so united to the artist that [s/he] feels as if the work were his [or her] own and not someone else’s—as if what it expresses were first what [s/he] had long been wishing to express. A real work of art destroys in the consciousness of the recipient the separation between himself and the artist, . . .and all whose minds receive this work of art.²⁷

²⁴ Ibid., 221.

²⁵ LeRoi Jones, *Blues People: Negro Music in White America*, (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1963), 29.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Leo Tolstoy, “The Religious Function of Art,” in *The Problems of Aesthetics*, eds. Eliseo Vivas and Murray Krieger, (New York: Rinehart and Co., 1953), 483-484. quoted in Daphne D. Harrison, “Aesthetic and Social Aspects of Music in African Ritual Settings” in *More Than Drumming: Essays on African and Afro-Latin American Music and Musicians*, ed. Irene Jackson, (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1985), 62-63.

Delineations and Dilemmas

In his book, *On the Real Side*, Mel Watkins opens the beginning chapter with the following declaration,

[s]omething peculiar happened on the way to the New World—or, at least very shortly afterward. Somewhere between their departure from West Africa's shores and the early stages of their arrival as human chattel in the Americas, the African/Black captives transported across the Atlantic underwent a subtle but far-reaching and remarkable psychological transformation.²⁸

While Watkins searches to identify the “something peculiar” that happened and pinpoint exactly when and where it occurred, Don Ohadike provides us with the much needed answers to Watkins' riddle. Ohadike informs us that the peculiar “psychological transformation” was the formation of a Black collective consciousness birthed from the belly of European slave ships that he fittingly termed “Pan-African culture of resistance.”²⁹ Watkins may not know what *it* is, but he recognizes that “*it* is in music, of course, that [its] impact has been most significant.”³⁰

Watkins, Ohadike, and a multitude of scholars will agree with the contention that particularly in North America, Latin America, and the Caribbean, African people, during and after their enslavement, took remnants of early African elements of culture, exhumed and revised African folklore and symbols. The elements of culture were embodied with new spiritual and political significance as demanded by liberation and resistance movements in

²⁸ Mel Watkins, *On the Real Side: A History of African American Comedy*, (Chicago, IL: Lawrence Hill Books, 1999), 46.

²⁹ Don C. Ohadike, *Sacred Drums of Liberation: Religions and Music of Resistance in Africa and the Diaspora*, (Trenton, NJ: African World Press, 2007), 1.

³⁰ Mel Watkins, *On the Real Side: A History of African American Comedy*, (Chicago, IL: Lawrence Hill Books, 1999), 47.

their new environments. Africans understood the usefulness of recreating and reinventing rallying points for social organization. Michael Thelwell argues that global African artists share a fundamental vision and intention grounded in their rich cultural heritage and bitter historical experience. Their creative works whether sung, written, sculpted, or dramatized, use resources of African “linguistic traditions and values, the poetic styles and idiom of proverbial expression, riddle, parable and song, sacred and secular myth and ritual” to forge creative works that are seamless with African people’s process of interpellation/being and becoming.³¹

Gay Wilentz contextualizes the cultural and historical dynamics that bridge the gap between uniqueness and oneness in the creative works produced by artists of African descent in different parts of the world. She states,

Black people of the African Diaspora, as a group with linguistic, ethnic, historical ties, share a common heritage, and with it, similar myths, legends and tales. [Writers/Artists] in the diaspora have often incorporated these aspects of orature in their work, as part of a cultural milieu almost effaced and certainly distorted by the dominant culture.³²

Though extensive in the area of the arts, the disruption was not complete. The presence and influence of long-established African/Black creative forms continue to surface in the artistic expressions of displaced Africans throughout the diaspora today.

Today African/Black communities face the challenges of healing psychic and social wounds inflicted on our humanity and integrity by our conquerors

³¹ Michael Thelwell, *Eagle on Iroko; Open Address*, (Nsukka: University of Nigeria, 1990), 9.

³² Gay Wilentz, “If You Surrender to the Air: Folk Legends of Flight and Resistance in African American Literature,” *MELUS* 16, no. 1, Folklore and Orature (Spring 1989 - Spring 1990): 21-32, 21, doi:10.2307/467579 <http://www.jstor.org/>.

and by selfish, corrupt Africans who willingly destroy their communities for unthinking profit. When at their best, African/Black artists perpetuate the legacy of their ancestors by performing as the leading role in our struggle to create a livable world and future. The creative works of African/Black artists provided in this chapter seek to recover African world communities from the subordinating tendencies of Western representations produced and popularized by Western explorers, anthropologists and missionaries initially, yet remain ubiquitous through the diligent efforts of existing Western media outlets. Thus, the concern of African/Black artists with reconstruction and restoration, identity issues, the quest for self-definition, material and cultural repossessions, and the need to critique and correct distortions of African humanity results from the long and dismembering imposition of European and Euro-American ideas of humanity and conceptual patterns on the African world.

Music, dance, and visual arts remain steadfast mediums through which Africans communicate with the Creator, perpetuate their sociocultural history, and harmonize with the environment.³³ For Africans in America, music and dance above all other forms of creative expressions “inherited adominant role in nurturing spiritual, intellectual, and philosophical aspects of African culture for displaced people in a hostile environment.”³⁴ Furthermore, most Africana scholars agree that people of African descent are “a people who in all things are religious.”³⁵ It is no exaggeration, therefore, to say that “the trilogy of

³³ Karlton E. Hester, *From Africa to Afrocentric Innovations Some Call Jazz: Vol.1 The Afrocentric Roots of “Jazz” and African Music in the Americas*, (Ithaca, NY: Hesteria Records & Publishing Co., 2000), xi.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, xi.

³⁵ Kofi Asare Opoku, *West African Traditional Religion*, (Accra, Ghana: FEP International Private Limited, 1978), 1.

religion, music, and dance as a mode of dialogue with their ancestors, a symbol of strength, a means of cultural expression, and an idiom of identity”³⁶ unified, mobilized, sustained, and advanced the Black struggle against white domination. The “trilogy” of religion, music, and dance construct the cornerstone of *Pan-African resistance culture*.

Though not often appearing or given the proper weight of attention in literature on liberation movements among peoples of African descent, *Pan-African resistance culture* is nonetheless worthy of serious scholarly scrutiny. In his book, *Sacred Drums of Liberation: Religions and Music of Resistance in Africa and the Diaspora*, Ohadike showed the prescience to blaze a new trail in researching African resistance to a “white culture of violence and economic exploitation.”³⁷ While it is true the African/Black captives were confronted with several obstacles including a language barrier, Ohadike reasons that,

it was religion [dance] and music that first unified the African exiles in the Americas. These Africans had come from hundreds of different nations and language groupings, where they might also have belonged to different religious affiliations. Now in the Americas they had to fall back on religion [dance], and music to help them cope with their pain and longing to return to their native Africa, where mother, father and all the ancestors were waiting. Without religion, [dance], and music the initial problem posed by language and religious differences would have been difficult to surmount. For example, [B]lacks that sang the Negro [S]pirituals in the United States must have come from different parts of Africa, where they might have been divided in tongue and worship. But singing, [dancing], and worship in America gave them a new sense of belonging to one large African family.³⁸

³⁶ Raphael C. Njoku, “Challenging Oppression with Sacred Drums and Dance” in *Sacred Drums of Liberation: Religions and Music of Resistance in Africa and the Diaspora* (Trenton: NJ, African World Press, 2007), xxx.

³⁷ Don C. Ohadike, *Sacred Drums of Liberation: Religions and Music of Resistance in Africa and the Diaspora*, (Trenton, NJ: African World Press, 2007), 2.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 5.

Spirituals: Communal Expressions of African/Black Agency

It was under the most agonizing and incomprehensible conditions of captivity that Africans arrived in the British colonies of North America during the mid-seventeenth century. The musical expressions that emerged from the lived experiences of the African captives during this period are perhaps best described as “Spirituals.” We learn from musicologist Hansonia Caldwell that “Spirituals are empowering, living communal songs originally created between c.1720 and 1865 by Africans who were enslaved in the United States.”³⁹ Caldwell additionally informs us that the term “spiritual” was seldom used to describe these “communal songs” during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Documents during this period containing early references to these musical expressions often identify them as “slave songs, slave hymns, plantation songs, plantation hymns, cabin songs, or jubilee songs.”⁴⁰ Nevertheless, “this enduring body of communal music has emerged with a name that connects them with things that are generically described as holy, divine, sacred and religious.”⁴¹ It is important here to recall the symbiotic relationship that exists between sacred and secular forces within the African worldview. It is in this context that we use “Spiritual” as an omnibus term for a rich repertoire that includes sorrow songs, shouts, signal songs, jubilees, work songs, field hollers, and children’s game songs (LeRoi Jones, 1963; Eileen Southern, 1971; James H. Cone, 1972; John Lovell, Jr., 1972; Portia K.

³⁹ Hansonia Caldwell, *African American Music Spirituals: The Fundamental Communal Music of Black Americans*, 3rd Ed., (Culver City, CA: Ikor Communications, 2003), 1.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 1.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

Maultsby, 1991; Samuel A. Floyd, Jr., 1995; Harold Courlander, 1996; Olly Wilson, 2001; Hansonia Caldwell, 2003).

Few scholars will disagree with the contention that the Spirituals created by African exiles in colonial America maintained many of their indigenous musical traditions, for instance collective participation, repetitive courses with a lead singer, call and response, improvisation, and polyrhythmic patterns are African musical traits passed on through generations and remain alive in the music practices of African descendants the world over.

Much has been written about the Spirituals primarily focusing on content and structure, with only an occasional allusion to the African roots that grounded them. Booker T. Washington professed his views on the Spirituals in the preface of Samuel Coleridge-Taylor's book entitled, *Twenty-Four Negro Melodies*,

Negro music is essentially spontaneous. In Africa it sprang into life at the war dance, at funerals and at marriage festivals. Upon this African foundation the plantation songs of the South were built. According to the testimony of African students at Tuskegee there are in the native African melodies strains that reveal the close relationship between the Negro music of America and Africa, but the imagery and sentiments to which the plantation songs give expression are the outcome of the conditions in America under which the transported children of Africa lived.⁴²

"In the circumstance of slavery, the [S]piritual was the transplanted Africans' primary means of expressing their current struggles and fulfillments while maintaining contact with the traditions and means of the past."⁴³ Repelled by slavery and attracted to freedom, the Spirituals operated as a release

⁴² Preface to Samuel Coleridge-Taylor, *Twenty-Four Negro Melodies*, Quoted in *Ibid.*, 7-8.

⁴³ Samuel A. Floyd, Jr., *The Power of Black Music: Interpreting Its History from Africa to the United States*, (New York, NY:, Oxford University Press, 1995), 40.

mechanism for the emotional tensions of daily life for enslaved Africans. It was through Spirituals, which are often mistakenly viewed as “songs of contentment or yearnings for a heavenly world,”⁴⁴ that enslaved Africans revealed their “innermost feelings: joy[s] and lamentation[s], protest[s] and resistance.”⁴⁵ This is where the richness of their oral tradition takes center stage. Enslaved Africans utilized and adapted their traditional communication patterns to develop a language of “ironic intentions.” Understanding the power dynamics of the master-slave relationship, enslaved Africans used indirection to distort the reality of their oppressor while communicating. The use of metaphors and hyperbole were extremely effective methods as was their ability to regulate cadence, intonation, and physical gestures when singing made the songs appear to have one meaning to the oppressor while conveying a totally different meaning to the African bondsperson. For example, slaveholder’s hearing the verse “O Canaan, Sweet Canaan, I am bound for the land of Canaan,” would be inclined to think the singer was longing for Heaven. However, enslaved Africans knew that Canaan was the code name for Canada for as Fredrick Douglass said, “the North was our Canaan.”⁴⁶ Similarly the verse,

I thought I heard them say / there were lions in the way / I don’t expect to stay / much longer here. / Run to Jesus / shun the danger / I don’t expect to stay / much longer here.⁴⁷

Douglass writes,

⁴⁴ William F. Cheek, *Black Resistance Before the Civil War*, (Beverly Hills, CA: Glencoe Press, 1970), 13.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 13.

⁴⁶ Frederick Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 2003), 203.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 203-204.

was a favorite air and had a double meaning. In the lips of some, it meant the expectation of a speedy summons to a world of spirits; but in the lips of *our* company, it simply meant, a speedy pilgrimage toward a free state, and deliverance from all the evils and dangers of slavery.⁴⁸

Bound for the Promised Land and *One More Soul Got Safe* are yet two more notable examples from the repertoire of Spirituals that exhibit *ironic intentions*. Both songs were reputedly used by Harriet Tubman during her missions to the South to emancipate Africans from bondage. William F. Cheeks provides the details, “when she came upon the slave cabins she would alert the residents through song that she was prepared to take them to freedom.”⁴⁹ Likewise Sarah H. Bradford presents additional details within the following verse from an untitled song presented in her biographical work on Tubman entitled *Harriet Tubman: the Moses of Her People*,

when dat ar chariot comes, / I’m gwine to lebe you, / I’m boun’ for de promised land, / and Frien’s, I’m gwine to lebe you.

I’m sorry, frien’s, to lebe you, / Farewell! oh, farewell! / but I’ll meet you in de mornin,’ / Farewell! oh farewell!

I’ll meet you in de mornin,’ / when you reach the promised land; / on de oder side of Jordan, / for I’m boun’ for de promised land.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ Ibid., 204.

⁴⁹ William F. Cheek, *Black Resistance Before the Civil War*, (Beverly Hills, CA: Glencoe Press, 1970), 60.

⁵⁰ Sarah E. H. Bradford, *Harriet Tubman: the Moses of Her People*, Introduction by Butler A. Jones. New York: G. R. Lockwood and Son, 1886. Reprint, New York: Corinth Books, 1961. A republication of the 1886 expanded version of the 1869 original book, titled “Scenes in the Life of Harriet Tubman” (Auburn NY: W. J. Moses, Printer, Introduction by Samuel Miles Hopkins 1869), 30. This is the basic source for information on Harriet Tubman’s life. Bradford interviewed Tubman and also included comments about her by a number of leading nineteenth century Americans. In many ways, this is Tubman’s autobiography. Some typographical changes and minor punctuation alterations have been made.

An analysis of *Bound for the Promised Land* and *One More Soul Got Safe* clearly reflects the coded language utilized by African/Black captives as well as their expressed faith in the inevitability of freedom.

Bound for the Promised Land

I'm on the way to Canada, / that cold and dreary land, / De sad effects of slavery, / I can't no longer stand; / I've served my Master all my days / widout a dime reward, / and now I'm forced to run away, / to flee de lash abroad; / farewell, ole Master, don't think hard of me, / I'm traveling on to Canada, where all de slaves are free.

De hounds are baying on my track, / ole Master comes behind, / resolved that he will bring me back, / before I cross the line; / I'm now embarked for yonder shore, / where a man's a *man* by law, / de iron horse will bear me o'er, / to "shake de lion's paw;" / oh righteous Father, wilt thou pity me, / and help me on to Canada, where all de slaves are free.

Oh I heard Queen Victoria say, / that if we would forsake, / our native land of slavery, / and come across de lake; / dat she was standing on de shore, / wild arms extending wide, / to give us a peaceful home, / beyond de rolling tide; / farewell ole Master, don't think hard of me, I'm traveling on to Canada, where all de slaves are free.⁵¹

One More Soul Got Safe

Glory to God and Jesus too, / one more soul got safe; / Oh, go and carry the news, / one more soul got safe. / Joe, come and look at the falls!⁵² / glory to God and Jesus too, / one more soul got safe. / Joe! It's your last chance. Come and see de falls! / Glory to God and Jesus too, / One more soul got safe.⁵³

⁵¹ Ibid., 49-52.

⁵² This clearly is a reference to Niagara Falls, which is on the boarder between New York and Ontario, Canada.

⁵³ Sarah E. H. Bradford, *Harriet Tubman: the Moses of Her People*, Introduction by Butler A. Jones. New York: G. R. Lockwood and Son, 1886. Reprint. New York: Corinth Books, 1961. A republication of the 1886 expanded version of the 1869 original book, titled "Scenes in the Life of Harriet Tubman" (Auburn NY: W. J. Moses, Printer, Introduction by Samuel Miles Hopkins 1869), 49-52. Some typographical changes and punctuation alterations have been made.

Bound for the Promised Land and *One More Soul Got Safe* were reputedly sung by Tubman and her fugitive group—the first on the way to Canada and the second once they had arrived. The parallels between the Spirituals Douglass mentions and the songs Tubman and her group sang are easily discernable. Similarly, Douglass and Tubman reference Canada as the “Promised Land,” the Lion was the slaveholder, and Freedom was the principal idea. In this context, Cheek logically concludes that the “Spiritual, in some of its forms, can be regarded as the slave’s musical declaration of independence.”⁵⁴

The Spirituals represent the quintessence of communal culture in that there are no specific dates or composers associated with the songs. They are the creative works of no one individual; they are the product of a community. In this way Spirituals are equivalent to the “City Poems” Toyin Falola speaks of in *A Mouth Sweeter Than Salt: An African Memoir*, in which he states, “no one knows who composed them; no one is interested in their authorship but only in their rendition. A city poem is collective property, to be recited by anyone who cares.”⁵⁵ The lived experiences of the community provided the themes and informed their subject matter of the Spirituals. Examining the Spirituals carefully reveals the social, moral, and theological ideas of the communities that produced them along with their prides and prejudices. African/Black captives in the “New World” tapped into their collective cultural memories to draw strength to endure their bitter conditions, find the courage to resist the

⁵⁴ William F. Cheek, *Black Resistance Before the Civil War*, (Beverly Hills, CA: Glencoe Press, 1970), 13.

⁵⁵ Toyin Falola, *A Mouth Sweeter Than Salt: An African Memoir*, (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2004), 29.

dehumanizing practices of their oppressors, and transmit the wisdom of their ancestors through their oral communicative practices.

Work songs and **field hollers** are important components of the Spirituals repertoire. Work songs/field hollers accompanied the arduous work that took place in the fields or on the water. The roots of this practice are easily traced back to African origins. As noted earlier it was through the performance of these work songs/field hollers that a sense of community was fostered among the group. Using either sacred or secular lyrics that were extemporaneously created to a rhythmically energizing melody enslaved workers performed work songs/ field hollers while hoeing, planting, harvesting, picking cotton, picking peanuts, shucking/grinding corn, cutting brush, cutting/rolling logs, rowing boats, hauling fishing nets, and laying railroad tracks (among other things). Performing Spirituals while working we are told by Dena J. Epstein and Rosita M. Sands coordinated their movements, lifted their spirits, enabled the slower workers to keep up and warded off fatigue.⁵⁶ In the typical call and response form a leader would sing a line and the remaining members of the group would respond with a refrain:

Working all day, / and part of the night, / and up before the morning
light.

Chorus: When will Jehovah hear our cry, / and free the sons of
Africa.⁵⁷

As previously mentioned the songs performed were often improvised and typically expressed their common conditions, whether it was grief, conviction,

⁵⁶ Dena J. Epstein with contributions from Rosita M. Sands, "Secular Folk Music," in *African American Music: An Introduction*, eds. Mellonee V. Burnim and Portia K. Maulsby, (New York, NY: Routledge, 2006), 44.

⁵⁷ Ortiz Walton, *Music: Black White & Blue*, (New York, NY: William Morrow & Company, 1972), 26.

and/or optimism, or anger, discontent, or some sort of covert protest that only those who shared the brutal experiences could relate to.

Field hollers are another sub-grouping of Spirituals that music scholar Hansonia Caldwell describes as “spontaneous and individualized textless vocalizing on short, highly decorated melodic fragments.”⁵⁸ As with work songs, field hollers were improvised and used to relieve emotional tensions whether loneliness, stress, or fatigue, or even to communicate a need in the fields (like the need for water). A traveler’s description of a field holler is cited by Eileen Southern in her book *The Music of Black Americans*,

Suddenly one [a slave] raised such a sound as I had never heard before, a long, loud musical shout, rising and falling, and breaking into falsetto, his voice ringing through the woods in the clear frosty night air, like a bugle call. As he finished, the melody was caught up by another, and then, another, and then, by several in chorus.⁵⁹

The work songs/field hollers eventually developed into the “**street cry**,” an improvisational musical form widely used by street merchants in northern and southern cities. We are told by Epstein and Sands that “street cries were highly functional, serving the purpose of describing what the vendor was selling in terms calculated to attract or entice buyers.”⁶⁰ Samuel A. Floyd cites an observer that in 1879 while in Charleston, South Carolina recorded the text of several street cries:

⁵⁸ Hansonia Caldwell, *African American Music Spirituals: The Fundamental Communal Music of Black Americans*, 3rd Ed., (Culver City, CA: Ikoro Communications, 2003), 22.

⁵⁹ Frederick Law Olmstead, *Journey in the Seaboard Slave States in the Years 1853-1854, with Remarks on Their Economy. . . . 1856*, (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1904, v. 2), 19, Quoted in Eileen Southern, *The Music of Black Americans*, (New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company, 1997), 157.

⁶⁰ Dena J. Epstein with contributions from Rosita M. Sands, “Secular Folk Music,” in *African American Music: An Introduction*, eds. Mellonee V. Burnim and Portia K. Maultsby, (New York, NY: Routledge, 2006), 46.

Big House, look out of de window! / Now's yer time to git snap-beans. / Okra, tomatoes, an' taters gwine by. / Don't be foolish virgins; / Hab de dinner ready / when de master he comes home. / Snap-beans gwine by.

Now's yer chance! / Now's yer chance! / Dis de last time I'se gwine by yar today. / Strawberries! / I'se willing to do widout dese yar strawberries. / Strawberries gwine by.

Taters, Irish taters! / Squash, Irish squash! / Squash, Mexican squash! / Protestant and Catholic / taters and squashes!⁶¹

The melodic aspects of the work songs/field hollers/street cries bear an undeniable resemblance to the melodic practices of the Blues.

Arguably the most notable modification in the musical performances of African/Black exiles in North America during and after the antebellum period was the conversion from drums to stringed instruments. This of course was not by choice. Drumming, which was/is at the heart of most indigenous African musical performances was banned by slave holders in the late eighteenth century due to the rising fear of insurrections. Denied their traditional percussive instruments enslaved Africans in America performed Spirituals using a complex combination of voice, hand clapping, body slapping, and foot stomping (known as "patting juba"). The limitations however quickly turned into advantages as the performers adapted their musical practices to compensate for the absence of the drum and with the conversion to stringed instruments "began to conceive of formerly collective rhythmic performance in more soloistic terms."⁶² Often overlooked is the number of Africans extruded from

⁶¹ L.E.B., *Life in Charleston*, in "Independent," September 18, 1879, Quoted in Samuel A. Floyd, Jr., *The Power of Black Music: Interpreting It's History from Africa to the United States*, (New York, NY:, Oxford University Press, 1995), 47.

⁶² Karlton E. Hester, *From Africa to Afrocentric Innovations Some Call Jazz: Vol.1 The Afrocentric Roots of "Jazz" and African Music in the Americas*, (Ithaca, NY: Hesteria Records & Publishing Co. 2000), 89.

Islamic influenced regions of West Africa and the effect that Muslim captives, (who favored stringed instruments), had on shaping the performance stylings of African derived musical forms in North America. Some scholars estimate upward of 30 percent of enslaved Africans brought to the United States was Muslim and there is no accurate accounts of how many were musicians or healers or spoke and wrote Arabic. While it is difficult to deny that African Muslims' cultural patterns had a measure of influence on the musical practices in the U.S. during the enslavement epoch, the extent of that impact is still being debated. Some scholars insist there is no connection. Yet an increasing body of evidence suggesting otherwise is beginning to surface. Sylviane Diouf's book, *Servants of Allah: African Muslims Enslaved in the Americas* (1998), and Gerhard Kubik's *Africa and the Blues* (1999), seek to uncover what they believe to be obvious Islamic influences in the shouts and field hollers performed by enslaved Africans in North America that begat the musical genre known as the Blues.

Blues – “Secular Spirituals”

It is difficult to identify precisely the date of origin of the music form called “Blues.” Music scholar David Evans surmises that the Blues as we know it probably began in the late nineteenth century based on,

The fact that [B]lues songs seem to turn up everywhere in the Deep South more or less simultaneously—in rural areas, small towns, and cities such as New Orleans and Memphis—suggests that the form had been for a few years and probably allows us to place its origins in the 1890s.⁶³

⁶³ David Evans, “Blues: Chronological Overview,” in *African American Music: An Introduction*, eds. Mellonee V. Burnim and Portia K. Maultsby, (New York, NY: Routledge, 2006), 79.

Prior to the emergence of the Blues, solo music among Blacks in America was atypical. With the exception of the griots⁶⁴ and jalis,⁶⁵ perhaps, such individualized musical performances had never been the main ingredient in the musical expressions of African/Black people (Amiri Baraka, 1963; James Cone, 1972; Gerhard Kubik, 1999; Karlton E. Hestor, 2000; David Evans, 2006). Field hollers, which functioned as a means of communication among plantation workers together with the street cries chanted by hawkers in Northern and Southern cities, are considered the immediate predecessors to the Blues. Both field hollers and street cries contained elements of personalized songs, but they, unlike the Blues, never developed into solo songs. Yet despite the individualistic and personalized nature of the Blues, Charles Keil tells us that “[t]he [B]lues artists, in telling [his/her] story, crystallizes and synthesizes not only [their] own experience but the experiences of [their] listeners.”⁶⁶ As with Spirituals, the Blues was fashioned from the same African-derived musical repertory and traditions. The call and response practice remained, but instead of incorporating a response from another participant, early Blues performers responded to him/herself by the accompaniment of a guitar (although the use of a piano or harmonica were not uncommon). Also, in contrast to the Spirituals, which dealt with the Black experience during slavery exclusively, the Blues essentially reflects the post-

⁶⁴ Griots are African musicians that specialize as custodians of cultural history.

⁶⁵ Jaliyaa’s (Jalis) are a class of musicians in Mandinka society who sing and play music for listening pleasure. Jalis perform numerous other functions including mediating between disputants, and serving as marriage brokers. For more information see *Repercussions: A Celebration of African American Music* pp. 16-17.

⁶⁶ Charles Keil, *Urban Blues 5th Ed.*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1969), 161.

Civil war consciousness of Africans in America. For more on the mind-set that informs the Blues, we turn to Amiri Baraka,

The [B]lues was conceived by freedmen and ex-slaves—if not as a result of a personal or intellectual experience, at least as an emotional confirmation of, and reaction to, the way in which most Negroes were still forced to exist in the United States.⁶⁷

Emancipation brought an abrupt shift in the hopes and aspirations of American Africans. By all accounts it “decentralized the Black population and the Reconstruction [period] gave [B]lack people a certain feeling of autonomy and self-reliance that they had not experienced during slavery.”⁶⁸ Following the Civil War, many African/Black Americans remained on plantations to work as sharecroppers. In other instances newly freed Africans fled the rural South by the thousands with expectations of improving their economic, social, and political status. Facing the ex-slaves, however, was an uncharitable and callous North, a cold and inhospitable West, and a vengeful and destitute South. No longer performing an integral function in American society the ex-slave had no “place” in the post-slave society. The precariousness of the American Africans’ situation post-emancipation led Eileen Southern to write, “In some ways they were worse off than they had been under slavery.”⁶⁹ Southern’s summation of Black deprivation is encapsulated by Blues performer Skip James in *Hard Time Killing Floor Blues*:

⁶⁷ LeRoi Jones, *Blues People: Negro Music in White America*, (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1963), 142.

⁶⁸ James H. Cone, *The Spirituals and the Blues: An Interpretation 11th Ed.*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004), 101.

⁶⁹ Eileen Southern, *The Music of Black Americans*, (New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company, 1997), 224.

Hard time here and everywhere you go / times is harder than ever been
before / and the people are driftin' from door to door / can't find no
heaven, I don't care where they go. . .⁷⁰

The hopefulness expressed in Spirituals *Don wid Driber's Dribin'* and *Many a
Thousand Die*, quickly turned to hopelessness as the promising future that
came with freedom fell far short of expectations and Blacks discovered that
opportunities for advancement in society were limited at best.

⁷⁰ Nehemiah Curtis "Skip" James, *Hard Time Killing Floor*,
HarpAmps.com, <<http://www.harptab.com/lyrics/ly4878.shtml>>, retrieved July
9, 2007.

Many a Thousand Die

No more driver call for me, / No more driver call; / no more driver call for me, / many a thousand die!

No more peck of corn for me, / no more peck of corn; / no more peck of corn for me, / many a thousand die!

No more hundred lash for me, / no more hundred lash; / no more hundred lash for me, / many a thousand die!⁷¹

Confronted with discriminatory labor and housing markets along with other segregated structures within cities, many Blacks were forced to reside and socialize in designated sections commonly referred to as urban ghettos. “These and other patterns of discrimination” writes Portia K. Maultsby, “led to the reestablishment of familiar institutions, thereby continuing southern traditions and practices in the urban metropolis.”⁷²

It was against a social backdrop of enfranchisement and hope and later against one of disenfranchisement and despair that early Blues artists, alongside preachers, emerged as catalysts through which the psychic and social wounds inflicted on the Black masses was relieved. Blues artists traveled from town to town performing musical rituals “transmut[ing] pain into beauty and giv[ing] back to the people what w[as]. . . taken away—confidence in themselves and the willingness to go on.”⁷³ The lyrics of Blues performers gave voice to Black suffering by describing both personal and collective

⁷¹ Richard Barksdale and Keneth Kinnamon, *Black Writers of America: A Comprehensive Anthology*, (New York, NY: The Macmillan Company, 1972), 313.

⁷² Portia K. Maultsby, “Africanisms in African-American Music, in *Africanisms in American Culture*, ed. Joseph E. Holloway (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 202.

⁷³ Sterling Stuckey, *Slave Culture: Nationalist Theory & the Foundations of Black America*, (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1987), 288.

afflictions. The creative works of these quasi-poet laureate's "were sagas of disaster and tragedy, including chronicles of floods, the impact of the devastating boll weevil in the south, natural calamities, migration, or other historical events that had an impact on the Blues singer or on Black life."⁷⁴ Other Blues narratives featured love, labor, revelry, romance, sex, money, humor, individual misfortune, alienation, illness, politics, and of course spirituality. In short, early Blues music depicts Black life in a very truthful and balanced way. This *fundamental relationship between art and life* inherent in Blues creations is commented on by James Cone who wrote, "[t]he [B]lues are true because they *combine art and life*, poetry and experience, the symbolic and the real. They are an artistic response to the chaos of life."⁷⁵

To most historians, Blues is directly descended from traditional African music. Both the lyrical content and musical patterns are based on traditional African models.⁷⁶ There are several scholars who make comparisons between Blues performers and jalis/griots of Africa. Their research reveals the many similarities between jalis/griots in Africa and Blues artists in the United States. For example, David Evans draws parallels between the lifestyles of Blues artists and griots/jalis,

Among the similarities . . . are the degree of professionalism of both types of performers, their often itinerant existence, their perceived low social status, their preference for stringed instruments, the use of a

⁷⁴ Yvonne P. Chireau, *Black Magic: Religion and the African American Conjuring Tradition* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2006), 146.

⁷⁵ James Cone, *The Spirituals and the Blues: An Interpretation 11th Ed.*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004), 103.

⁷⁶ Mary Ellison, *Lyrical Protest: Black Music's Struggle Against Discrimination* (New York: Praeger, 1989), 2.

declamatory and melismatic singing style, and their songs of frank social commentary.⁷⁷

Samuel A. Floyd speculates that early Blues artists may have patterned themselves after “Senegambian gewels (griots).” In addition to their similar singing styles and use of stringed instruments, Floyd compares gewels/griots and Blues artists establishing both performers as,

entertainers, who play for dances, do acrobatics, tell stories, pose riddles for members of the audience to solve, and like many African-American songsters and instrumentalists pride themselves on being able to provide the appropriate music for any situation. Also like the early bluesman, the gewels/griots had to do work outside music to make their living.⁷⁸

In addition to their masterful orature skills, performance practices, and analogous lifestyles, one remarkable commonality between jalis/griots and their Blues-poet progeny is their perceived or openly admitted connections with Conjuring traditions. Clearly the Conjuring traditions were a constant inspiration for Blues performers as evident in the Blues song *Sundown Blues*:

I'm . . . goin' . . . to see Aunt Car'line Dye / why she's a reader, and I need her / Lord, Lord, Lord / She reads your fortune, and her cards don't lie / I'll put some ashes in my sweet Papa's bed / So that he can't slip out, Hoodoo in his bread Goopher dust all about / I'll fix him!⁷⁹

Black Blues performers often referenced figures from the traditions of conjuring, divination, and root working in their songs. According to Yvonne P. Chireau, the song *Sundown Blues* is just one of several renditions written

⁷⁷ David Evans, “Blues: Chronological Overview,” in *African American Music: An Introduction*, ed. Mellonee V. Burnim and Portia K. Maultsby (New York: Routledge, 2006), 81.

⁷⁸ Samuel A. Floyd, Jr., *The Power of Black Music: Interpreting Its History from Africa to the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 75.

⁷⁹ William Christopher Handy, “Sundown Blues” (1922), lyrics and music in *Blues: An Anthology* (New York: Macmillan, 1972), 150-53.

about Aunt Caroline Dye, “a famous healer and fortune-teller in Newport, Arkansas.”⁸⁰

The 1920s was a momentous decade in Blues tradition. On February 14, 1920, Okeh Record Company released the “first documented recording[s] of a female singer.” The artist was Mamie Smith and the songs *That Thing Called Love* and *You Can't Keep a Good Man Down* were written by her manager, Perry Bradford. Smith at the time was a vaudeville and cabaret performer and though the recordings are not considered “authentic Blues,” they did generate enough interest to warrant the release of two more Bradford-penned-Smith-performed recordings later that summer. It was August 10, 1920, that *Crazy Blues* and *It's Right Here for You* made their eagerly awaited public debut. James Haskins reports “the record was hugely successful, selling ten thousand copies in its first month, predominantly in the South.”⁸¹ Eileen Southern tells us “the demand for this record in [B]lack communities was so enormous that Okeh realized for the first time the vast potential market among [B]lacks for [B]lues and [B]lues-[J]azz.”⁸² Riding the crest of their huge success Okeh formally launched its “Original Race Records” series in 1921. That same year Harry Herbert Pace pioneered the first Black-owned recording company in America, the Black Swan Company.⁸³ Together these enterprises ushered in the “race-record” era, which some have argued marked the beginning of the commodification of Black American musical traditions.

⁸⁰ Chireau, *Black Magic*, 145.

⁸¹ James Haskins, *Black Music in American: A History Through its People* (New York: HarperCollins, 1987), 70.

⁸² Eileen Southern, *The Music of Black Americans* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1997), 370.

⁸³ Pace chose the name in memory of Elizabeth Taylor Greenfield America's first Black concert singer who was dubbed “The Black Swan” by the media.

African and African-derived musical expressions hitherto maintained the social, philosophical, and aesthetic values of improvisation, contextualization, real-time, and non-ownership. Black musical expressions were not stagnant, they were not written down and were often recycled, reinvented, and rearticulated to fit the occasion, audience, and purpose. The technology to produce phonograph records and the subsequent advent of the race-record genre transformed Black musical practices in particular, and had an even bigger impact on Black cultural production overall. The technology of the recording industry was almost entirely in the hands of European-Americans and as a result Black music became confined, controlled, and “etched in the permanence of documentation and creative ownership.”⁸⁴ The appropriation, distortion, and commodification of Black musical traditions by European-American industries was nothing new, the origins of this practice dates back to the days when Thomas Rice began performing minstrel shows in blackface that were based on stereotypical caricatures of enslaved Africans he observed on plantations during the 1830s. The recording industry not only further ingrained the system of “expropriation, co-optation, distortion, and commercialization by the dominating society”⁸⁵ it produced a lucrative and thriving European-American- dominated music industry that exists and is viable to date. An important text towards developing a lucid intellectual cognizance of the socio-economics and politics of cultural production and the ramifications that occur from the absence of creative control and non-

⁸⁴ Erinn Neshae Ransome, “Third Eyes Wide Shut: The Spectrum of Consciousness in Rap Lyrics,” (master’s thesis, Cornell University, 2004), 20.

⁸⁵ Clovis E. Semmes, *Cultural Hegemony & African American Development*, (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 1995), 243.

ownership of one's own cultural products as a collective was delivered by Clovis E. Semmes. Semmes wrote,

Cultural products, particularly music, language, dance, and stylistic norms, are absorbed into the broader White-controlled commodity system, redefined and used to advance the economic dominance of mainstream institutions. The result is to exploit African American creativity and markets domestically and globally, and to solidify the subordinate economic status of the African American community. Economic equity in the cultural arena is stifled since African American creative artists perennially lose control of their cultural products, which includes their meanings, messages, images, and uses. As a further consequence, the humanizing and galvanizing dimensions of culture that serve to promote the group interests of African Americans are negated.⁸⁶

Understood properly, we must note that the music industry, like any other corporation, is a legal entity that gives sanction and anonymity to those involved in the process of protecting the ruling elite. Hence, their ability to sign (via contract), promote, disseminate, bowdlerize, or neutralize potentially empowering aspects of African/Black artistic expressions allows them to determine the direction or content of most African/Black creative works. Equally important is the assertion that not all artistic developments within African diasporic cultures have been dictated by a sense of position vis-à-vis European-American culture. African/Black musicians respond creatively in ways that have nothing to do with asymmetrical power structures. As a result of the collision that has taken place between African/Black cultural production and white-dominated industries, Jazz and Blues no longer belongs to its creators.

The early success experienced by Okeh Records along with the rapid rise of the Black Swan Record Company ignited an explosion in the race-record

⁸⁶ Ibid., 228.

industry as other companies small and large pushed into the market. Paramount (1922-32) assembled an impressive roster of Blues performers with the likes of Alberta Hunter, Ida Cox, Gertrude “Ma” Rainey, Charley Patton and “Blind” Lemon Jefferson while Columbia (1923-32) signed Bessie Smith who ironically was passed over by Black Swan owner Harry Pace because she was too “nitty-gritty” for his taste, Pace instead opted to sign Ethel Waters because as Angela Y. Davis writes, “her style seemed more compatible with that of the popular white singers of the day.”⁸⁷ While Waters achieved great success recording Black Swan’s biggest selling record *Down Home Blues*, Smith would later become legendary as the “Empress of the Blues” outselling all of her contemporaries including her elder mentor, “Ma” Rainey.

Gertrude “Ma” Rainey (1886-1939) was an early Blues innovator, performer, lyricist, and composer. Her musical contributions are documented in part through nearly one hundred songs preserved on record earning her the title “Mother of the Blues.” “Ma” Rainey’s Blues-poetry articulates the full “range of human emotions” relating to the everyday lived experiences of the Black working class. Karlton Hester elaborates,

Some songs retained humorous qualities while others were foreboding. She sang frankly and boldly about homosexuality, lesbianism, sadomasochism, woman battering, vengeance, and prostitution.⁸⁸

The lyrics to *Sweet Rough Man* is a classic representation of Hester’s observations,

⁸⁷ Angela Y. Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude “Ma” Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday*, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1998), 153.

⁸⁸ Karlton E. Hester, *From Africa to Afrocentric Innovations Some Call Jazz: Vol.1 The Afrocentric Roots of “Jazz” and African Music in the Americas*, (Ithaca, NY: Hesteria Records & Publishing Co. 2000), 232.

I woke up this mornin', my head was sore as a boil / I woke up this
mornin', my head was sore as a boil / my man beat me last night with
five feet of copper coil.

He keeps my lips split, my eyes as black as jet / he keeps my lips split,
my eyes black as jet / but the way he love me makes me soon forget.

Every night for five years, I've got a beatin' from my man / every night
for five years, I've got a beatin' from my man / people says I'm crazy, I'll
explain and you'll understand.

Lord, it ain't no maybe 'bout my man bein' rough / Lord, it ain't no
maybe 'bout my man bein' rough / but when it comes to lovin', he can
sure strut his stuff.

Commenting on graphic violence depicted in *Sweet Rough Man* Davis writes, “of all the songs recorded . . . this one is the most graphic in its evocation of domestic violence and goes farthest in revealing women’s contradictory attitudes toward violent relationships.”⁸⁹ The first two stanzas of *Sweet Rough Man* describe the injuries that the narrator has suffered at the hands of her lover. After this declaration of pain, however, she goes on to say that “the way he love me makes me soon forget.” It is obvious from Rainey’s tone and reflection that the lyrics of the song are deeply felt. Rainey tells her audience that she has stayed with her man for five years enduring this mistreatment because of the ephemeral pleasure of sex that he gives her. Both Rainey and Bessie Smith (who will be discussed shortly) possessed an oral communication proficiency that enabled them to employ music as a catalyst for dealing with such issues as violence against women, mental abuse, differing gender roles, and taboo sexual relationships publicly. The ritual practice of publicly naming our social and psychic afflictions and aspirations

⁸⁹ Angela Y. Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude “Ma” Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday*, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1998), 32.

intrinsic in Blues performance is rooted in our rich West African heritage. Davis explains,

The [B]lues preserve and transform the West African philosophical centrality of the naming process. In the Dogon, Yoruba, and other West African cultural traditions, the process of Nommo—naming things, forces, and modes—is a means of establishing magical (or in the case of the [B]lues, aesthetic) control over the object of the naming process. Through the [B]lues, menacing problems are ferreted out from isolated individual experience and reconstructed as problems shared by the community. As shared problems, threats can be met and addressed within a public and collective context.⁹⁰

There are some Blues performers that transcended their immediate situation. Bessie Smith was definitely one of them. Known as the “Empress of the Blues,” Smith dealt in song with issues that had a timeless, universal quality and her lyrics were always profound and complex enough to be relevant and disturbing for people in any setting. Smith penned and recorded a classic denunciation of poverty and exploitation with her *Poor Man’s Blues*:

Mister rich man, rich man, open up your heart and mind / Mister rich man, rich man, open up your heart and mind / give the poor man a chance, help stop these hard, hard times.

While you’re livin’ in your mansion, you don’t what hard times means / while you’re livin’ in your mansion, you don’t what hard times means / poor working man’s wife is starvin’, your wife’s livin’ like a queen.

Please, listen to my pleading, ’cause I can’t stand these hard times long / oh, listen to my pleading, can’t stand these hard times long / they’ll make an honest man do things that you know is wrong.

Poor man fought all the battles, poor man would fight again today / poor man fought all the battles, poor man would fight again today / he would do anything you ask him in the name of the U.S.A.

Now the war is over, poor man must live the same as you / now the war is over, poor man must live the same as you / if it wasn’t for the poor man, mister rich man, what would you do?

⁹⁰ Ibid., 33.

The song was recorded in 1928, a year prior to the stock market crash that preceded the Great Depression epoch. *Poor Man's Blues* is a “historical reference to the post World War I period when [B]lack people found themselves caught up in a web of painful economic circumstances that foreshadowed the Depression.”⁹¹ In her book *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism*, Angela Davis provides an excellent in-depth analysis of *Poor Man's Blues* in which I quote at length. Davis observes,

In this song there is a sophisticated combination of realism, humor, and irony, with which Smith creates a complex portrait of class and race relations. “Poor Man's Blues” openly indicts the wealthy classes for the prevailing poverty—and not only in the [B]lack community—highlighting the extent to which their luxurious lifestyle renders them blind to the economic injustice they themselves have created. When Smith sings of the desperation that inevitably accompanies “hard times,” she passionately explains the social roots of crime: “They’ll make an honest man do things that you know is wrong.” The stanza referring to the role played by men as combatants during World War I is an accurate observation on the working-class background of the frontline soldiers in virtually all wars conducted by the United States. The complexity of the statement “He would do anything you ask him in the name of the U.S.A.” points to both gullibility and serious commitment, and she sings it with appropriate irony.⁹²

This scathing social commentary will measure up to any song from the so-called “social protest genre” past, present, and future. One glaring omission from Davis’s critique is that *Poor Man's Blues* is drastically different from the typical rage-filled, venomous, narratives depicting African/Black men and African/Black women at odds or in dysfunctional relationships that tend to characterize Blues performance as it is predominantly portrayed in media today. Throughout my childhood and for most of my adult life I have been victimized by media distortions of Blues music. Prior to this project, the Blues

⁹¹ Ibid., 96-97.

⁹² Ibid., 97.

only conjured images of fractured families, ruined relations, and self-destructive behavior among Black people. To my delight “Ma” Rainey and Bessie Smith also composed and sang beautiful examples of Black sisterhood in addition to contesting patriarchal assumptions about women’s places in the dominant culture and within Black communities. My contention is that the origins of the “angry Black-woman” trope lay in early Blues performance. African/Black women were viewed as second rate citizens, lacking both power and social standing. This discrepancy in power became a fundamental issue in the creative works of women Blues performers. Sometimes debated, other times embraced, and still more often lamented, there was nothing coy about the way that controversial issues were tackled by women Blues artists—they were frank in both their language and delivery. The fact that women Blues artists even sang about topics such as domestic abuse and contrary gender roles is a testament to their bravery. When you consider that some of the themes covered in the Blues songs of that era had never been presented before; it is fair to say that Blues performances, particularly during the 1920s, were consciousness-raising events as well as entertainment. As with the Spirituals, the Africanism or functional character of the Blues distinguishes it from Western musical forms and connects it with its African heritage.⁹³

Harlem Arts Movement

Through different periods and times for African descendents in North America, the link to indigenous African cultures and arts have been reinforced by conscious or unconscious reconnection, the Harlem Arts movement of the 1920s and 1930s is arguably the first embodiment of this burgeoning collective

⁹³ James Cone, *The Spirituals and the Blues: An Interpretation 11th Ed.*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004), 98.

consciousness among displaced Africans in America post-emancipation. The Harlem Arts Movement was a cultural movement culminating from the growing “common consciousness”⁹⁴ among Africans/Blacks of their inextricable connection to their African past. The cultural production manifesting from this period is where this common consciousness was most fully expressed. It is imperative that we view the Harlem Arts movement not as a spontaneous or isolated burst of artistic expression, but as part of an evolving process in our strivings toward recovery, and rehabilitation from the devastating legacy of the systematic trade in human beings that created largely disenfranchised African/Black communities throughout the world.

The Harlem Arts movement embraced all forms of African/Black artistic expressions including music, visual and kinetic arts. Visual artists Aaron Douglas, and Meta Warrick Fuller among others played key roles in creating depictions celebrating the legacy of their African ancestry. Both Fuller and Douglas believed that African/Black artists should create a uniquely African/Black art, drawing on African/Black models rather than European ones. Thus informed by African/Black standards of creativity and beauty their creative products reflect African/Black life-experiences and life-aspirations.⁹⁵

Meta Vaux Warrick Fuller was one of the first African/Black artists to draw heavily on African themes and African folk tales for her subject matter and is often seen as a forerunner to the movement. Throughout her life Fuller produced a number of creations that affirmed African/Black Humanity. Her

⁹⁴ Alain Locke, “The New Negro”, in *I Am Because We Are: Readings in Black Philosophy*, eds., Fred Lee Hord and Jonathan Scott Lee, (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1995), 264.

⁹⁵ Maulana Karenga, *Introduction to Black Studies 3rd Ed.*, (Los Angeles, CA: University of Sankore Press, 2002), 463.

artistic expressions reflected major changes in the self-conception of African/Black people and gave rise to African/Black agency during the early twentieth century. Fuller became known for creations that celebrated African/Black history, struggle and heritage as early as 1902. In 1907 Fuller was commissioned to sculpt a tableau for the Negro pavilion at the Jamestown Tercentennial Exposition. There she won a gold medal for *Fourteen Tableau Groups* a fourteen-piece mixed-media diorama that represented the progress of Africans in America since their 1619 arrival in Jamestown, Virginia.

As the years progressed, Fuller's Pan-Africanist sensibilities continued to develop and shape her production. In 1913 at the request of W.E.B. Du Bois she created a sculpture to exhibit at the fiftieth-anniversary celebration of the Emancipation Proclamation in New York. Fuller produced an eight-foot tall sculpture entitled *Emancipation Group (or Emancipation)*. A narrative on *Emancipation* was written as follows,

[t]he group centers on a newly emancipated couple standing under a gnarled, stunted tree that takes the form of a human hand stretched threateningly above them, while a weeping woman tries to urge them forward.⁹⁶

Explaining the concept of the sculpture in a letter written to one of her contemporaries, Fuller stated her belief that African/Black people have “been emancipated from slavery but not from the curse of racial hatred and prejudice.”⁹⁷ Hence the fundamental concept of *Emancipation* was to depict “Humanity weeping over her suddenly freed children, who [stand] beneath the gnarled fingers of fate grasping at them to draw them back into the fateful

⁹⁶ Albert Boime, *The Art of Exclusion: Representing Blacks in the Nineteenth Century*, (Washington:, Smithsonian Institution Press, 1990), 179.

⁹⁷ Freeman Henry Morris Murray, *Emancipation and the Freed in Sculpture: A Study in Interpretation*, (Washington, D.C., published by the author, 1916), 56.

clutches of hatred, etc.”⁹⁸ Fuller’s *Emancipation* piece differed from other emancipation-themed creations at the time, her sculpture was not comprised of obvious slavery symbolism, such as the discarded chains and thankful slaves bowing to the image of their liberator that appeared in all other sculptures. No doubt Fuller’s creation was much to the delight of Du Bois who began calling for an emphasis on Black art as early as 1910 in *Crisis* periodicals and Freeman Henry Morris Murray, an art critic who authored *Emancipation and the Freed in Sculpture: A Study in Interpretation*⁹⁹ (1916). Murray offers his critique on the visual language of Fuller’s sculpture in his manuscript where he wrote,

The portrayal is emptied of the usual accessories as well as of the frequent claptrap—no broken shackles, no obvious parchments, no discarded whips, no crouching slave with uncertain face; no, not even a kindly, benignant Liberator appears; in short, she essays to set forth and represent, not a person, not a recipient—not the Emancipator nor one of the Emancipated—not even the Emancipation itself, as a mere formal act, but far higher, the Emancipation as an embracing theme.¹⁰⁰

In 1921, Fuller created a sculpture which anticipated the spirit and style of the Harlem Arts Movement. Entitled *Ethiopia Awakening*, it symbolizes her conscious reconnection to her ancestral heritage and reflects her “desire to awaken [B]lack people to the consciousness of nationhood and anti-colonialism.”¹⁰¹ Using an African motif for the figure, Fuller conceptualized

⁹⁸ Ibid., 57.

⁹⁹ Murray’s groundbreaking illustration of negative stereotype in visual art was an intellectual argument for Black self-determination.

¹⁰⁰ Freeman Henry Morris Murray, *Emancipation and the Freed in Sculpture: A Study in Interpretation*, (Washington, D.C., published by the author, 1916), 65.

¹⁰¹ Velma J. Hoover, “Meta Vaux Warrick Fuller: Her Life and Her Art,” *Negro History Bulletin* 40, no. 2 (1977): 681. 678-681.

Africa on the brink of self-propulsion and self-fulfillment in *Ethiopia Awakening*.

Renée Ater describes Fuller's work as,

a striking image of a pseudo-Egyptian Black woman unwrapping her swathed lower body, a mummified form slowly returning to life. Her right hand rests in the center of her chest where her crossed arms were positioned in death, and between thumb and forefinger she holds the end of her linen shroud. Her left hand breaks away at an angle from her bound legs. The figure's head, draped in *nemes* worn by Egyptian kings, is turned to her left and her eyes gaze over her left shoulder.¹⁰²

Ater continues her assessment of *Ethiopia Awakening* adding that,

Fuller treated Ethiopia's facial features with a distinctive reference to Black physiognomy. The artist created a visage with full lips, a wide nose with flared nostrils, and sharply angled cheek bones. The most unusual element of Fuller's figure is that she wears the Egyptian kingship headdress called a *nemes*. Within Egyptian tradition, artist rarely sculpted women with a *nemes*, except in the case of Queen Hatshepsut who was often represented as a male in the regalia of a pharaoh.¹⁰³

Commenting on her intentions for the creation in a letter to an acquaintance

Fuller wrote,

Here was a group [Black/African people] who had once made history and now after a long sleep was awaking, gradually unwinding the bandage of its mummied past and looking out on life again, expectant but unafraid and with at least a graceful gesture. Why you may ask the Egyptian motif? The answer, the most brilliant period, perhaps of Egyptian history was the period of the Negro kings.¹⁰⁴

Fuller's use of *Ethiopia* in the title of her work must be understood as a source of cultural pride as well as a reference to the religio-political tradition of Ethiopianism that was based, in part, on biblical prophecy of Psalm 68:31:

¹⁰² Renée Ater, "Making History: Meta Warrick Fuller's Ethiopia," *American Art* 17, no. 3 (Autumn, 2003): 13. 12-31.

¹⁰³ Renée Ater, "Making History: Meta Warrick Fuller's Ethiopia, 18.

¹⁰⁴ Velma J. Hoover, "Meta Vaux Warrick Fuller: Her Life and Her Art," *Negro History Bulletin* 40, no. 2 (1977): 679. 678-681.

“Princes shall come out of Egypt; Ethiopia shall soon stretch out her hands unto God.” Her great-grandmother reputedly was an Ethiopian princess enslaved and dispersed to the North America and according to Sharon F. Patton; in 1903 “Fuller completed a commemorative plaque in honor of Emperor Menelik II of Abyssinia.”¹⁰⁵ Ater additionally reports that Fuller was an avid reader of the *Crisis* publications which at one time featured exclusive coverage of archaeological excavations in Sudan and Ethiopia that focused on the reign Kushite kingdoms and the city of Meroe. This illustrates Fuller’s awareness of the social and political realities of her time and how symbolically *Ethiopia* was tantamount with Black liberation for Africans in North America resulting from the biblical prophecies conveyed through Christian based Spirituals and reinforced through Ethiopia’s victory over Italy at the Battle of Adwa in 1896. The sculpture reignited, for the entire Black world, the elation and pride felt from the widely publicized Ethiopian victory over Italian colonial powers during the era.

Another of Fuller’s well-known works, *Mary Turner: A Silent Protest Against Mob Violence* was created in 1919. Fuller was inspired to produce this powerful sculpture that symbolizes the brutal lynching of a African/Black woman, Mary Turner, in Georgia after she was accused along with her husband and two other African/Black men of plotting to kill a white man. This lynching led to an outpouring of protest from the African/Black community including the famous Silent Protest Parade which took place on July 28, 1917 in New York.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁵ Sharon F. Patton, *African-American Art*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 107.

¹⁰⁶ Kelly Klings Howes, *Harlem Renaissance*, ed. Christine Slovey, (Detroit: UXL, 2001), 108-109.

Fuller's culminating creation highlighted for the purpose of this study is *Talking Skull*, produced in 1937. Talking skull is a visual narrative of a African/Black male kneeling gently in front of a skull silently communicating his thoughts. *Talking Skull* alludes not to death, but to ancestral, spiritual beliefs in continuous rebirth inherent in African spirituality.

Meta V. W. Fuller recognized early in her career that of art and culture are weapons in African/Black people's struggle to exist with dignity. She continued to produce significant artistic expressions until the demise of her body in 1968, at age 90. In the last days of her earthly existence she supported the civil rights movement by donating proceeds from the sales of her work and produced *The Crucifixion*: a tribute to the four African/Black girls killed in a church bombing that occurred in Birmingham, Alabama in 1963.

Aaron Douglas (1899-1979) is the visual artist most often and most accurately associated with the Harlem Arts Movement. Described by Art historian David Driskell as "a pioneering Africanist," Douglas "accepted the legacy of ancestral arts of Africa and developed an original style, unrelated to any school that can best be described as geometric symbolism." Thus, his creative productions epitomize the practice of interpreting the unique experiences of African/Black life in North America in terms of traditional African philosophical and aesthetic values that govern creative expressions. Sharon F. Patton tells us that,

Douglas's signature styles were what he called 'Egyptian form' figures, figures silhouetted in profile with the eye rendered from a frontal viewpoint as in Egyptian tomb reliefs and frescoes, and his use of a single colour, varying in value from light to dark. The gradually enlarged

circular shapes of colour create a visual rhythm, evocative of music and spirituality.¹⁰⁷

Donald F. Davis additionally affirms that Douglas,

borrowed two ideas from African art: (1) that art should be more than just a form but should have meaning symbolically or otherwise; and (2) that mysticism should be a personal experience in art. He turned his work into a modernized version of African pattern by reaching into the Black Experience and relating it to his African heritage figuratively as well as literally.¹⁰⁸

Douglas created a number of noteworthy illustrations for the foremost African/Black artist of the day like James Weldon Johnson, Alain Lock, Countee Cullen and Langston Hughes, but his most significant works were the series of murals he painted in 1934 for the Countee Cullen Branch of the New York Public Library currently known as the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture. The theme for the murals entitled *Aspects of Negro Life* narrates the story of Africans in America from enslavement to emancipation and from rural life to urban life. Douglas describes the themes for the panels in the following quote:

The first of four murals . . . indicates the African cultural background of American Negroes. Dominant in it are the strongly rhythmic arts of music, the dance and sculpture—and so the drummers, the dancers, and the carved fetish represent the exhilaration and rhythmic pulsation of life in Africa.

Panel Two. Exultation followed the abolition of slavery in America by the Proclamation of Emancipation (1 January 1863). Many Negro leaders emerged who are symbolized by the orator standing on a box. But soon a new oppression began in the South. The “hooded terror” of the Ku Klux Klan spread as the Union Army withdrew.

¹⁰⁷ Sharon F. Patton, *African-American Art*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 119.

¹⁰⁸ Donald F. Davis, “Aaron Douglas of Fisk: Molder of Black Artists,” *The Journal of Negro History* 69 no. 2, (Spring, 1984): 96. 95-99.

Panel Three. Lynching was an ever present horror, ceaseless toil in the fields was the daily lot of the majority, but still the American Negroes laughed sang and danced.

Panel Four. A great migration, away from the clutching hand of serfdom in the South to the urban and industrial life in America, began during the First World War. And with it was born a new will to creative self-expression which quickly grew in the New Negro Movement of the twenties. At its peak, the Depression brought confusion, dejection and frustration.¹⁰⁹

Douglas whom many consider to be the leading painter and illustrator of the Harlem Arts Movement refused to compromise and see African/Black people as anything less than a proud and majestic people at a time when it was unpopular to dignify the African/Black image in white America.

Both Aaron Douglas and Meta Vaux Warrick Fuller serve as representative examples of the many men and women artists that consciously explored African themes and sought to make their cultural heritage relevant to the contemporary African/Black experience during the Harlem Arts movement. Art Historian and artists David Driskell rightly claims that “[t]hese men and women had a set of definite ideas about the role of the Black artist in the new Black society they were trying to create and about the kind of art that should be produced.”

The overall significance of the Harlem Arts movement of the 1920s and 1930s is that it: (1) encouraged ethnic pride (2) contributed to and/or inspired a growing interest in the civilizations of Africa among African/Black artists, intellectuals, and working class (3) stimulated similar cultural production activities in other urban centers across the country and (4) defined the role of

¹⁰⁹ Samella Lewis, *African American Art and Artists*, (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1990), 61-62.

African/Black artists in American society who in turn helped redefine the meaning of the African/Black experience in America.

Mindful of their obligations and responsibilities to their people, African/Black visual artists, musicians, dancers, writers, and academicians built on the ground-work laid by their predecessors.

Perhaps no one exhibited a stronger sense of obligation to their people than Paul Robeson. Paul Robeson (1898-1976) was an artist and activist who used his art and his personality to promote change in the society in which he lived. In him Sterling Stuckey writes “the dichotomy between art and politics probably never existed. . . .”¹¹⁰ Robeson’s creative energy stemmed from his love for the history, songs, and culture of his people. His long struggle against white supremacy has been sufficiently documented. He was one of the first if not the first African/Black performer to refuse to sing before a segregated audience. Robeson is perhaps more responsible than any other individual for elevating the status of the Spirituals (at least in the minds of most Black Americans of that era) from the products of a despised “shameful and humiliating past” to the “most beautiful expression of human experience born on this side the seas.”¹¹¹ Being the scholar and lover of wisdom that he was, Robeson studied African cultures seeking to procure empirical evidence to refute the claims of those that advanced the widely believed thesis that North American born African descendants had been “culturally stripped” from the traditions of their ancestors. Robeson’s interest in Africa, that began very early

¹¹⁰ Sterling Stuckey, *Slave Culture: Nationalist Theory and the Foundations of Black America*, (New York, New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 318.

¹¹¹ W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 1994), 156

in his life were constantly being fertilized through his innate artistic sensibilities, worldly travel and rigorous study as evident by Stuckey's comments,

His uncanny perception of the Africanness of the American Negro [that] resulted from growing up in the culture of his people, from associating with Africans in England, and from studying anthropology, folklore, and linguistics, all of which qualified him as few have been to compare African and Afro-American cultures—to see African influence on the American Negro as an expression of a continuing process.¹¹²

By Robeson's own admission his "pride in Africa, and it grew with the learning, impelled me to speak out against scorners."¹¹³ Robeson would often submit articles to various publications "championing the real but unknown glories of African culture[s]"¹¹⁴ and in his book *Here I Stand* he wrote,

As an artist it was most natural that my first interest in Africa was cultural. Culture? The foreign rulers of that continent insisted there was no culture worthy of the name in Africa. But already musicians and sculptors in Europe were astir with their discovery of African art. And as I plunged, with excited interest, into my studies of Africa at the London School of Oriental Languages, I came to see that African culture was indeed a treasure-store for the world. Those who scorned the African languages as so many barbarous dialects' could never know, of course, of the richness of those languages, and of the great philosophy and epics of poetry that have come down through the ages in these ancient tongues.¹¹⁵

Interestingly it was while living in London that Robeson "discovered" Africa. That discovery had a major impact on him and influenced his actions throughout his lifespan. Robeson speaks of his discovery of Africa in this way,

¹¹² Sterling Stuckey, *Slave Culture: Nationalist Theory and the Foundations of Black America*, (New York, New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 334.

¹¹³ Paul Robeson, *Here I Stand*, (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1971), 35.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 35.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 34.

Like most of Africa's children in America, I had known little about the land of our fathers, but in England I came to know many Africans. Some of their names are now known to the world—Nkrumah and Azikiwe, and Kenyatta, who is imprisoned in Kenya. Many of the Africans were students, and I spent long hours talking with them and taking part in their activities at the West African Students Union building. Somehow they came to think of me as one of them; they took pride in my successes; and they made Mrs. Robeson and me honorary members of the Union. Besides these students, who were mostly of princely origin, I also came to know another class of African—the seamen in the ports of London, Liverpool and Cardiff. They too had their organizations, and had much to teach me about their lives and their various peoples.¹¹⁶

Robeson once said of his encounters with West African cultures that it felt “like a homecoming” for him. He found many similarities among African cultures on the continent and throughout the African diaspora and made sure they were highlighted in most of his speeches, interviews, and published writings. It has been reported that during concert performances he would often comment on the African origins of the Spirituals before singing them and would then demonstrate the similarities between the songs indigenous Africans sang at their religious festivals and the Spirituals by singing them back to back each in their native languages.¹¹⁷

Paul Robeson is one of the best examples of an artist who was active in his people’s freedom struggle. He understood that culture was an instrument in a people's liberation, and affirmed his commitment to the African/Black struggle belief in this powerful statement, “in my music, my plays, my films I want to carry always this central idea: to be African. Multitudes of [wo/men] have died for less worthy ideals; it is more eminently worth living for.”¹¹⁸

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 33-34.

¹¹⁷ Sterling Stuckey, *Going Through the Storm: The Influence of African Art in History*, (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1994), 205.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 186.

Bebop: Countervailing Appropriation through Revitalization

In his book *From Africa to Afrocentric Innovations Some Call Jazz*, Karlton E. Hester argues that a “segregated society can only produce segregated music and art.” From this vantage point, any and all cultural products produced by African/Black people on North American soil prior to the passage the Civil Rights Act in 1964 cannot accurately be labeled “American.” And while some may find this opinion preposterous, it does however raise important questions for us to ponder. For example, can the music known as “Jazz” accurately be referred to as “American” music when the very people who created the musical expression were not recognized unconditionally as American? African/Black people have developed practically every single musical form created on North American soil. Spirituals, Blues, Gospel music, Ragtime, Jazz, Swing, and Bebop developed and evolved out of a group of people ostracized from mainstream America. Yet as Charles Keil observes, “It is simply incontestable that year by year, American popular music has come to sound more and more like African popular music.”¹¹⁹

Bebop or “Bop” emerged in the 1940s after Swing and Big Band styles had “crossed over” into mainstream commercialized European-American culture. Paul Whiteman (a white man) had been dubbed the “Father of Jazz” and not Duke Ellington or Count Basie or Fletcher Henderson but Benny Goodman who is also white rose to become the “King of Swing” on “Fletcher Henderson’s arrangements.”¹²⁰ The African/Black progenitors of Bop being well aware of this pattern of appropriation consciously sought to distance

¹¹⁹ Charles Keil, *Urban Blues 5th Ed.*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1969), 45.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 44. Also see LeRoi Jones, *Blues People: Negro Music in White America*, (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1963), 186.

themselves far from potential mainstream dilution through cultural revitalization. Paul Carter Harrison explains,

When the [B]lack musician finds his senses crowded by popular imitations, he constantly changes his technique by moving closer to the core of his music's traditional origin, thus creating a mode that more closely identifies the [B]lack image.¹²¹

Bebop we are told by Gerhard Kubik was a return to the tonal concepts that,

prevail in certain African areas where so-called equipheptatonic tuning systems are found, notably in the Lower Zambezi valley, around Benin City, Nigeria, in southern Ghana, and in certain areas of Côte d'Ivoire.¹²²

Thelonious Monk (1917-1982), Charlie Parker (1920-1955) and Dizzy Gillespie (1917-1993) are the credited originators of Bebop (although drummer's Max Roach, and Art Blakey, Kenny Clarke, along with pianist Bud Powell should be included with this group). Bebop's characteristics are faster tempos, complex melodies, harmonies, improvisational styles and varied rhythms. Monk leaves no doubt that Bop was a conscious attempt to reconstruct an African/Black aesthetic in music using our own cultural standards that cannot be expropriated by the white-controlled industry,

The big dance bands (white) had carried off the healthiest child of Negro music and starved it of its spirit until its parents no longer recognized it. In defiant self defense, Negro players were developing something new—something they can't play.

Gillespie reoriented us to African drumming by adding a Yoruba drummer to his band hence giving his compositions a solid African foundation.¹²³ Monk

¹²¹ Paul Carter Harrison, *The Drama of Nommo*, (New York: Grove Press, 1972), 61.

¹²² Gerhard Kubik, *Africa and the Blues*, (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 1999), 119.

¹²³ Charles Keil, *Urban Blues 5th Ed.*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1969), 45.

was a genius at extemporaneous improvisation. His musical vision deeply rooted in tradition yet still ahead of its time. Monk was reputed to frequently execute what would amount to a ring shout during performances. Stuckey explains,

Thelonious Monk, who frequently rose from his piano, cigarette in mouth, and proceeded to dance in a counterclockwise direction, his feet beating out intricate figures before he returned to the piano and joined his combo in playing music as advanced as any of his era.¹²⁴

Bop artists not only rebelled against Western concepts of beauty and art in regards to music they destroyed them as evident by the many accolades Gillespie, Monk, and Parker received posthumously.

Black Arts Movement of the 1960s

The Black Arts Movement must be considered another step in an ongoing cyclical struggle to “define, create, sustain, and institutionalize progressive cultural change.”¹²⁵ Members of the Black Arts intelligentsia sought to link Black expressive culture with Black Nationalist politics in an effort to sever Black expressive culture from European-American industry. The Black intelligentsia encouraged the rejection of mainstream American standards and values and a return to traditional African values. Many artists responded to the challenge. Jeff Donaldson was one among the many. Donaldson was an artist, and art historian who helped articulate the philosophical and aesthetic values of the Black Arts Movement. As a painter Donaldson endeavored to “translate

¹²⁴ Sterling Stuckey, *Slave Culture: Nationalist Theory & the Foundations of Black America*, (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1987), 96.

¹²⁵ Clovis E. Semmes, *Cultural Hegemony and African American Development*, (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 1995), 243.

the structures and sense of Jazz improvisation into his painting . . .”¹²⁶

Donaldson’s paintings often exploited the fact very few African/Black visual artists if any during this period were focusing on positive conceptualizations of the Black body. According to Donaldson his inspiration to do this came from the absence of positive Black images in the media. He tells the story,

If I remember clearly, not until say 1967 did you see [B]lack people featured in positive images, on billboards, magazines, in newspapers, movies, or in any visual medium. We [African descendants in America] painted and sculpted figures because we could not afford the luxury of losing the opportunity of showing our people at the height of their glory. At the height of their humanity. At the height indeed of their heroism But we saw an opportunity to step in . . . and create imagery that our own people could keep and reflect on.¹²⁷

The use of African/Black figures for Donaldson and many visual artists of the Black Arts Movement were crucial towards establishing cultural agency. They wanted to remain relevant to the needs of their people rather than create culturally bankrupt apolitical works.

Donaldson was one of the founding members of the Organization of Black American Culture (OBAC) in Chicago, Illinois. During his involvement with the OBAC; he organized the visual arts workshop that painted *The Wall of Respect* mural in 1967. The mural covered the wall of a dilapidated Southside Chicago building with portraits of Billie Holiday, W.E.B. Du Bois, Malcolm X, Thelonious Monk, Muhammad Ali, along with other celebrated significant African descendants born in America and set in motion a movement of outdoor murals painted in U.S. cities throughout the late 1960s and early 1970s. In 1968 Donaldson along with Wadsworth Jarrell, Barbara Jones-Hogu and other

¹²⁶ Michael D. Harris, *Transatlantic Dialogue: Contemporary Art In and Out of Africa*, (Chapel Hill, NC: Ackland Art Museum, 1999), 20.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 36-37.

African/Black artists formed a collective called Coalition of Black Revolutionary Artists (COBRA) which later became AfriCobra (an acronym for African Commune of Bad Relevant Artists). AfriCobra formulated a philosophy espousing social responsibility, local community involvement, and “the development of a strong African identity in the Diaspora” unencumbered by negative European-American images of Black life as the central tenets of the collective. Donaldson also coordinated the development and organization of the Conference on the Functional Aspects of Black Art (CONFABA) while teaching at Northwestern University. It was during this conference that according to Michael D. Harris the following statement was declared,

The heart of the Black Artist’s ideology is the dedication of [their] art to the cultural liberation of [their] people. It is in this sense that Black art is decidedly functional, politically, and spiritually, and is not to be confused by the alienation concept of “art for art’s sake” rather than art for people’s sake.¹²⁸

Jeff Donaldson passed away in February of 2004, but his legacy lives on through AfriCobra whose members continue to meet to this day making AfriCobra the longest standing group of artists in the history of art in America.

The intimate connection between speech, song, and instrumental performance in traditional African music is embodied in the musical expressions of alto-saxophone player John Coltrane (1927-1967). Coltrane was undoubtedly influenced by the innovators of Bop. He played with many of the leading bands during the Bop era including Thelonious Monk, Dizzy Gillespie and Art Blakey. Coltrane’s musical explorations often took him and his audience on spiritual journeys to the “Motherland.” Samuel A. Floyd describes his music as being “filled with the imagery of Africa and of the

¹²⁸ Michael D. Harris, “From Double Consciousness to Double Vision: The Africentric Artists,” *African Arts* 27 no. 2, (Apr., 1994): 45. 44-53+94-95.

African-American church, with ring imagery reflected.”¹²⁹ For an example

Floyd cites an observer’s description *Ascension*,

The thirty-eight minute *Ascension* doesn’t so much “progress” to a clear dramatic resolution as much as a complete circle. This sense of music completing a cycle speaks to the circle image in many traditional African religions. While the Christian symbol of the cross graphically illustrates the intersection of worldly time and eternity, the circle suggest that through experiencing the rhythmic cycles of worldly life consciously and repeatedly, we spin ourselves into a sense of the divinely eternal.¹³⁰

To which Floyd adds,

But this cyclical form is also symbolic of the ring—the source of the tropings used to make the music. So *Ascension*, representing transcendence, the upward impulse, itself Signified on the spirituality of the ring.¹³¹

Floyd questions whether or not the performing musicians understand or even recognize the connections but ultimately he believes “such connections reside in the cultural memory—the ‘collective unconsciousness’—from which they can be retrieved with the slightest stimulation from ring tropes.”¹³²

Africa’s indelible imprint is encoded in the creative works of Coltrane. With his instrument he would emulate the ancestral screams, moans, grunts, and hollers, reminiscent of the Field Hollers and Blues traditions. His music was rooted in the African/Black experience as evidenced by in his song and album titles such as *Africa*, *Liberia*, *Dahomey Dance*, *Spiritual*, *Song of the Underground Railroad* which pays homage to the “conductors” and the courageous Africans/Blacks who emancipated themselves. The song *Alabama*

¹²⁹ Samuel A. Floyd, Jr., *The Power of Black Music: Interpreting Its History from Africa to the United States*, (New York, NY:, Oxford University Press, 1995), 188-189.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 189.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*

¹³² *Ibid.*

was composed in memory of the four African/Black girls murdered in the 1963 Birmingham, Alabama church bombing. Coltrane's monumental creation *A Love Supreme* to which he expressed in the original liner notes that he "humbly asked [God] to be given the means and privilege to make others happy through music." He further declared,

This album is a humble offering to Him. An attempt to say 'THANK YOU GOD' through our work, even as we do in our hearts and with our tongues. *A Love Supreme* attests to the power, glory, love, and greatness of God. Coltrane felt we must all make a conscious effort to effect positive change in the world, and that his music was an instrument to create positive thought patterns in the minds of people.¹³³

USA: Underground Struggling Artists

This section is intended to introduce the thoughts and presentations of a selected number of lesser-known African/Black artists. These artists are imbued with the same spirit as their predecessors such as Frances E. W. Harper, Benjamin Clark, William Wells Brown, Paul Robeson, & John Coltrane (to name a few). All of the aforementioned artists-activists employed art as a cultural weapon in their struggle to affirm African/Black humanity, and to liberate themselves and their people from the yoke of white hegemony. The fact that the following artists are generally unrecognized is not because they are ignored, but because they are seldom observed.

Bertrand D. Phillips (b. 1938) is a visual artist who was born in Chicago, Illinois. He received his Bachelor of Fine Arts degree from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago in 1961, studied at the Arts Students League in New York City, and received a Master of Fine Arts degree in 1972 from

¹³³ John Coltrane, *A Love Supreme*, liner notes, reissue, © 2003 The Verve Music Group, a division of UMG Recordings.

Northwestern University, Professor Phillips expresses his philosophy on his role and responsibility as an African/Black artist in this personal statement:

I feel the major function of my art as being an instrument in the liberation struggle of Black people, working people, and suppressed people. A recurring thought that I have been grappling with is how my art work can play a role in helping to deal a death blow to the social and political injustices that minorities . . . are victimized by.

I am concerned with art being functional, with its utilitarian value, not only its technical and aesthetic qualities. I am concerned with a meaningful art which relates to the needs of the people, not necessarily the pleasant and the beautiful. The beauty comes when the social ill we are victims of ceases to exist—the beauty comes with victory over oppression.¹³⁴

Dana Chandler (b. 1941) views his duty as an African artist in the same manner as Phillips. Both artists profess their unwavering commitment to the liberation and development of African/Black people. In his own words, Chandler describes himself as

a [B]lack artist whose work is directed expressly toward the education of Blacks as to their true position of oppression in a White Racist Society Black art is a tremendous force for education and political development I 'ain't' subtle and I don't intend to become subtle so long as America remains the great white destroyer.¹³⁵

Chandler admits his own concern with the ideas of Pan Africanism; he considers the problems, conditions, goals, aims, and aspirations of African/Black people the world over to be inclusive and connected. During the 1960s, Chandler was so intent on presenting his message that he became

¹³⁴ *Bertrand D. Phillips*, an exhibition catalog, published in conjunction with the exhibition “Directions in Afro-American Art” shown at the Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art, Cornell University in Ithaca, NY, September 18-October 27, 1974, cosponsored by the Africana Studies & Research Center, Cornell Univ.

¹³⁵ Samella S. Lewis and Ruth G. Waddy, *Black Artists on Art* (Los Angeles: Unity Works, 1969), 39.

involved in a people's art concept and would often distribute reproduced copies of his creations free of charge. Chandler's subjects include cultural themes such as the *Black Family* (1970) and an abundance of expressions that portray racial discrimination and resulting violence. *Land of the Free*, and *Land of the Free #2* (1967) are a couple of major works created by Chandler. *Land of the Free* is described by Chandler as a major work that "depicts Uncle Sam with his foot on a Black man's head."¹³⁶ "Also," he adds, "the foot print shows how our strivings are suppressed."¹³⁷ In *Land of the Free #2* and a third piece entitled, *400 Year Old Prisoner*, "he views the symbol of the flag as one of repression and domination for Black Americans."¹³⁸ His portrayals of Black men whose movements are inhibited by the bars of the flag are dramatically moving. His themes of racism and the ills of sexism are "neither polite nor discrete, but are direct and uncompromising."¹³⁹ Chandler readily admits that his art is propaganda created to reshape the attitude and values of Africans in America toward the development of Pan-Africanism. His creations are inspired by his belief that "Africans in America are being killed mentally, physically, and economically"¹⁴⁰ and thus attempts to create works that suggest methods of self-defense. Chandler offers imaginative works that "become functional, as they depict the necessary tools for survival in a land determined to exterminate us."¹⁴¹ Quite clearly the artistic integrity, creative autonomy, communal input, and general aesthetic quality of these works and the artists that produced

¹³⁶ Ibid., 40.

¹³⁷ Ibid.

¹³⁸ "Dana Chandler, Pan-African Artist," *Black Art: an international quarterly* 1, no. 3 (Spring 1977): 14.

¹³⁹ Ibid., 16.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

them allowed the space to create expressions that are centered or grounded in the African/Black experience.

Hiphop: Holy Infinite Power Helping Oppressed People

As with the Harlem Arts and Black Arts movements, the Youth Arts Movement, known as Hiphop, is more than a mere musical form of expression. Tshombe Walker accurately describes Hiphop as a “collection of Black philosophical attitudes, experiences and values that inspire visual art, movement, fashion, music, and the totality of life.”¹⁴² Hiphop is analogous to the Harlem Arts movement and Black Arts movement in that it seeks to regenerate African cultural consciousness among African descendants, places strong emphasis on self-definition, and advocates self-determination as a principle means toward executing a more satisfying way of life. In sum, Hiphop is a contemporary cultural movement and creative lifestyle grounded in classical and traditional African philosophy and aesthetics.

People of African descent have always been accustomed to using hieroglyphs, drummers, sacred dances, and chanting as a part of our rituals to tap into the spirit realm; today we just call it Graffiti writing, DJing, B-Boyin’/B-Girlin’, and Emceeing or Femceeing (in the case of a female emcee). Hiphop is a bona fide testament to the adage that there is nothing new under the sun, only that which has been forgotten. Hiphop artists have taken remnants of ancient African symbols of culture, exhumed and revised traditional African

¹⁴² Tshombe R. Walker, “The Hip-Hop Worldview: An Afrocentric Discussion,” eds. Sessi S. Aboh, Patricia E. Canson, Vimbria G. Chivaura, Nah Dove, Thomas O. Edwards, Sheila Mayers-Johnson, and Mwalimu J. Shujaa, *Journal of Culture and its Transmission in the African World (JCTAW)* (The African World Studies Institute at Fort Valley State University and The Center for Diopian Inquiry and Research on Education as Culture Transmission at Medgar Evers College/CUNY) 1, no. 1 (Spring 2003), 108.

myths and symbols, and embodied them with renewed spiritual and political significance as demanded by resistance movements in their alternative environments.

KRS-One is the embodiment of the philosophical, sociological, and political worldviews espoused originally by those that participate in the Hip-hop movement. As a leading figure in Hip-hop for over two decades, KRS-One has been instructing his people through what he calls “musical lectures” to reach back into their primordial culture and spiritual richness, find the tools that are needed to resurrect their souls, and return toward the source of their original greatness. The “musical lecture” entitled *Ah Yeah* is a sample of KRS-One’s consistent and empowering message,

This is not the first time I came to the planet / But every time I come only a few could understand it / I came as Isis, my words they tried to ban it / I came as Moses, they couldn’t follow my commandments / I came as Solomon to a people that was lost / I came as Jesus, but they nailed me to a cross / I came as Harriet Tubman, I put the truth to Sojourner / Other times, I had to come as Nat Turner / they tried to lynch me, burn me and starve me so I had to come back as Marcus Garvey and Bob Marley / they tried to harm me, I used to be Malcolm X / they thought they had me by putting holes in my chest / Nowadays true Hip-hop I manifest / now I’m on the planet as the one called KRS / kickin’ the metaphysical, spiritual, trying to like get with you, showing you, you are invincible / the Black Panthers is the answer for real, in my spiritual form, I turn into Bobby Seale / on the wheels of steel, my spirit flies away and enters into Kwame Ture / Whether you know it or not you’re in a race against time / the finish line is control of your mind . .

¹⁴³

Aside from the fluidity of the spirit of revolt developed here, KRS-One also executes a “ritual drama” of Ancestor Communion that Marimba Ani discusses

¹⁴³ L. Parker (KRS-One), “Ah-Yeah,” *KRS-ONE*, compact disc, Zomba Enterprises Inc./BDP Music, © 1995 Zomba Recording Corporation.

thoroughly in her book *Let the Circle Be Unbroken: The Implications of African Spirituality in the Diaspora*. Ani informs us,

Universally, in ritual the African combines life with artistic expression. Ritual is, in a sense, the ultimate philosophical expression of the African worldview, for it is the modality within which the unity of the human and the divine is expressed, in which the unity of spirit and matter is perceived, and in which the Eternal Moment is achieved.¹⁴⁴

In essence, the theme of death and rebirth symbolized in our relationship to the ancestors contributes to the philosophy that presents us with the Eternal Cycle of Life. Moreover, KRS-One's lyrics bring the names of African/Black revolutionary icons to the consciousness of a demographic that might not necessarily take notice of them otherwise.

Within the feminine aspect of the youth arts movement—Hiphop, the term “Queen Mother”¹⁴⁵ has often been evoked to signify the regal and self-assured qualities of a certain category of female hiphoppas. Ethnomusicologist Cheryl L. Keyes describes the women that fit into the Hiphop category of Queen Mother as, female hiphoppas who view themselves as African-centered icons.¹⁴⁶ This image is often lyrically suggested and/or exhibited through their style of dress. Femcees lyrically refer to themselves as “Nubian queens,” “intelligent Black women,” “Goddess,” or “sistas dropping science to the people.” It is commonly believed that these pioneering female hiphoppas were well aware of the historical significance of African queens; women in this

¹⁴⁴ Marimba Ani, *Let the Circle Be Unbroken: The Implications of African Spirituality in the Diaspora 7th Ed.*, (New York: Nkonimfo Publications, 2004), 8.

¹⁴⁵ The Queen Mother is associated with African traditional court culture. For more information see Roy Sieber and Roslyn Adele Walker's work *African Art in the Cycle of Life*, (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1987).

¹⁴⁶ See Cheryl L. Keyes, “At the Crossroads: Rap Music and Its African Nexus,” *Ethnomusicology* 40, no. 2 (Spring-Summer, 1996): 223-248.

category often adorned their bodies with royal Kente cloth strips, African headdresses, goddess braid styles, and ankh-stylized jewelry. Among those female hiphoppas distinguished as “Queen Mother-types” are Queen Kenya, Sister Souljah, Nefertiti, Queen Mother Rage, Isis, and Queen Latifah (prior to 1995). Queen Kenya was the first femcee to use Queen as a stage name and is an original member of the Hiphop Zulu Nation. Queen Mother Rage and Isis were original members of the Black Nationalist Hiphop group X-Clan, a group known in the early 1990s for their Afrocentric sensibilities exhibited through their lyrics and style of dress as well as their community activism (they were members of Blackwatch).

Both women released solo albums in the 1990s. Isis released *Rebel Soul* in 1990 and on such uplifting selections as *State of Mind*, *In the Mind of One*, and *The Power of Myself is Moving*, Isis preaches a message of Black pride and self-awareness through the lens of ancient Kemetic deities. Queen Mother Rage released *Vanglorious Law* in 1991. With such notable tracks as *Key Testimony*, *Vibrations of Blackness*, and *Emphasis On A Sister*; Queen Mother Rages’ message was one of Black pride, Black Unity and clean living.

Power, Money, and Influence: “Stakes Is High”

Similar to any youth-oriented movement, what has become known as Hiphop is dynamic and full of contradictions. During its early decades, Hiphop predominantly functioned as a means of resisting segregation and social invisibility. Arguably, today these objectives are obscured as Hiphop has become packaged, international, commercial, and suburban. Although the power and joy once found in the forms originally created by teenagers is now considerably lost as the various elements of Hiphop are generally managed by broad-stream media outlets and other business interests; in fact, Hiphop

remains an expression of cultural resistance and rebellion. Artists such as Dead Prez and Mos Def exhibit both an awareness of African/Black history as well as the importance of that history as a basis of understanding and interpreting the connections between the past and the present as a means of raising social consciousness through music. In the context of quoting Sly Stone, the work chant from the *Wizard of Oz*, and a police radio alert, Mos Def in his song *Rock n Roll* raps:

My grandmamma was raised on a reservation / my great-grandmamma was from a plantation / they sang songs for inspiration / they sang songs for relaxation / they sang songs to take their minds up off that fucked up situation / I am, yes I am the descendant / of those folks / whose backs got broke / who fell down inside the gun smoke (Black people!) / chains on their ankles and feet / I am descendants of the builders of your streets / tenders to your cotton money / I am Hiphop (heavy metal for the Black people!) / I am Rock n Roll / Been here forever / They just ain't let you know / I said Elvis Presley ain't got no soul / Chuck Berry is Rock n Roll / You may dig on the Rolling Stones / but they ain't come up with that style on their own. . .¹⁴⁷

Mos Def rejects the widely held opinion that Elvis Presley and the Rolling Stones are the architects of Rock n Roll and thus represent the canon of the musical genre. In addition to setting the record straight as to who are the real pioneers of Rock n Roll, his reference to one ancestor raised on a reservation while yet another on a plantation alludes to the African and indigenous peoples mixed communities that were fairly common in America's past. This type of historical analysis and social commentary is not only displayed through his music; Mos Def once wrote an open letter to his "fellow artists" about Amadou Diallo, a Guinean immigrant with no prior criminal record, who was

¹⁴⁷ Dante Terrell Smith, Lester Fernandez, "Rock n Roll," *Black on Both Sides*, performed by Mos Def, compact disc, Rawkus/Priority, © 1999.

shot and killed by New York City police. Diallo was shot 41 times despite being unarmed, to which Mos Def lamented,

The only people in our community who have not responded to this incident are us We are the Senators and the Congressmen of our communities. We come from communities that don't have nobody to speak for them We represent them. And they need to know that we really represent them. Not when it's just a romantic notion or a paycheck attached to it. When something happens to them it matters to us, because when something happens to them it's happening to us. We must speak out against the injustices that they suffer.¹⁴⁸

The duo Dead Prez is most often aligned with the politically active Hip-hop performers from the late 1980s and early 1990s. Groups such as Boogie Down Productions (led by KRS One), Public Enemy, X-Clan, Paris, and the Coup were widely considered activists-rappers due to their high levels of community engagement. One half of the duo Mutulu Olubala, also known as M1, is president of The International People's Democratic Uhuru Movement (InPDUM), a grassroots organization committed to defending the "international democratic rights of all colonized African communities, with the understanding that the highest expression of democracy is self-determination...."¹⁴⁹ As president of InPDUM's New York City branch, M1 organizes clothing drives, community dinners, mass rallies, and political education classes in his community. The other half of Dead Prez, Khnum Olubala, also known as Stic, recently co-published a vegan health guide and cookbook along with his wife who is a certified holistic health counselor. Stic is a strong believer in the correlation between vegetarianism and self-healing. He also trains/studies and

¹⁴⁸ Mos Def, "An Open Letter From Mos Def," *Hip Hop News FNV Newsletter*, 18 June 2001, <<http://daveyd.com/openletterfrommosdef.html>> (18 July 2009), Hip Hop Commentary.

¹⁴⁹ The International People's Democratic Uhuru Movement. For more information on the organization access their website at <<http://www.inpdum.org>>.

teaches Egbe Ogun, an African system of martial arts and is the CEO of BOSSUP Inc., an entertainment company inspired by the honorable Marcus Mosiah Garvey that “offers information, music, and gear that reflects a sense of self-determination, creative consciousness, and entrepreneurship.”¹⁵⁰ In some ways, the unique and contemporary Dead Prez manages to incorporate their politically charged lyrics into their daily works. In a 2004 interview when asked about the impact that he perceives Dead Prez has on the public, Stic responded,

How much impact has the people had on us is the question. I feel that the interaction that I've had with people is what's gonna be expressed in my lyrics. I'm just thankful that I had the opportunity to reflect the view of others and get the people to interact with us because you know we're not perfect and maybe if others can relate to our music then we can all learn something.¹⁵¹

It is both a difficult and necessary struggle for anyone who tries to grapple with the effects, both positive and negative, that Hiphop currently contributes to North American and by extension global culture. Among the many extraordinary achievements of Hiphop artists, one is to have created an economic and socio-political space for a generation by creating a global movement that propelled the emergence of a multi-billion dollar music and fashion industry, but at whose expense? The emergence of some elements of Hiphop as commercial product has the Hiphop purist disoriented. Many of the progenitors and elders of the movement argue Hiphop has become irrelevant. Perhaps the commercial product has become so; but as we have witnessed since the nascent days of African/Black creative expressions in North America,

¹⁵⁰ Taken from Stic's biography located at <<http://www.bossupub.com>>.

¹⁵¹ “Dead Prez and Their Thoughts on the Revolution,” Interview, <<http://www.thetalkingdrum.com/rbg.html>> (17 July 2009).

new forms of cultural expressions continue to emerge from the seemingly eternal African/Black wellspring.

In December of 2006, Hiphop performer Nasir Jones (Nas) released his eighth studio album entitled *Hip Hop Is Dead*. Nas, a commercially successful-underground-revered veteran in the Hiphop music industry when questioned about the title replied, "Hiphop is dead because we as artists no longer have the power."¹⁵² Nas' comments evoked numerous debates and responses from scholars and Hiphoppas across the globe. In response to the ubiquitous use of their music and style by advertising agencies, many artists have organized and are creating their own companies in an effort to reclaim control of the material and content of their artistic creations. Clearly, the internet is playing a major role in their efforts to take back their power. In 2006 Talib Kweli co-founded Blacksmith Entertainment Group effectively severing his ties to corporate-owned record company Warner Music Group. On January 1, 2007 Kweli celebrated his emancipation from Warner Brothers. by dropping an album entitled *Liberation*. The album was distributed free to the public via digital download from his internet site during the first week of its release. New artists such as Janell Monae, who established Wonderland Arts Society and Jay Electronica creator of The Dogon Society (an obvious homage to the Dogon people of West Africa), are using their internet savvy to blaze new frontiers for artists to create freely and exercise total control over the distribution of their creative works. The recent emergence of Hiphop stage productions commonly referred to as Hiphop Theater flowering across the

¹⁵² Abigail Daniels, "Hip-hop and jazz: Sharing a similar destiny?," CNN.com/entertainment, 4 February 2009, <<http://edition.cnn.com/2008/SHOWBIZ/Music/08/15/hiphop.jazz/#cnnSTCText>> (18 July 2009).

United States is yet another clear indication of Hiphop's return to its communal essence. No doubt these activities are a significant part of the revitalization taking place within the Hiphop movement. Unbeknownst to many outside of Hiphop's underground landscape, Hiphop continues to inspire youth locally and globally with new music, dances, performance pieces, paintings and other creative expressions.

Chapter Four

Conclusion: Refuse to Forget!

From ancient times within African cultures the role of the artist has been one of elevating the consciousness for the people. Providing them signs and symbols of the higher forms of life and human functioning, the aesthete encouraged, educated, and reflected those aspects of being to which humanity must aspire to fulfill its purpose.¹

- Linda James Myers

The conclusion transports us back to the beginning. Do artists of African descent today think about such things as caliber and legacy? Do they feel any responsibility for those who must deal with the consequences of their creations? Can the role and responsibility of African-descendant artists and the meaning of their artistic creations be ideological for one person but not at all for another? Certainly! Though we do not typically receive from the artists' testimony explaining the ideological content of their creations, this challenge should not stop us from prying open the content of their works, either at its point of creation or at some point in its flexible movement through social fields that are highly charged with tensions of economical, political, and social disparity. Implicit in this argument is the assumption that culture, or particularly the expressive aspect of culture—art, is determined only by social political forces, to the exclusion of other possible variables, e.g., climate and geography—not to mention spirituality—but for the African/Black artist in North America, the most serious assumption is the denial of what is readily given for other groups—a sense of cultural heritage.

¹ Linda James Myers, "The African American Aesthetic as Optimal - Consciousness," in ed. Kariamu Welsh-Asante, *The African Aesthetic: Keeper of the Traditions* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1993), 21.

In the United States, African/Black artistic expressions have been created in a context of a severely asymmetrical power structure, from the slave plantations through the present day. Acculturation, cross-over, and autonomy occurred at the very beginnings of the African experience in the British North American colonies and the United States through the workings of the slave plantation, where an asymmetrical power structure existed in its virtually purest form. After emancipation, asymmetrical power structures continued (though in a more modulate form), and they continue, of course, until the present day.

The role of African-descendant artists has to a degree evolved in relation to European-American social structures and cultural values. Yet the artistic tradition of African descendants in North America also carries its own internal momentum, and this momentum may have nothing whatsoever to do with European-American artistic practices. Despite the absence of original African languages, the status of the word did not change. Orature maintained a position of great importance particularly as transplanted Africans shifted from an emphasis on vocal music toward a degree of emphasis on instrumental music.

A truly valid system of aesthetics must be derived from the culture of its inhabitants and should reflect the prevailing spirit of the times in a manner that involves all groups residing within the society. For years, if not decades, it has been a deeply held conviction among some African descendants in North America that we are a “nation within a nation.”² In a context of economic and political disenfranchisement, cultural autonomy may receive special emphasis.

² John Langston Gwaltney, *Drylongso: A Self-Portrait of Black America*, (New York, NY: The New Press, 1993), 3-23 (Originally published: New York: Random House, 1980).

The assertion of cultural autonomy may stand as a claim in the direction of—or, perhaps, as a substitute for—economic and political power. This analysis merges with the notion that Africans in America have, in response to European-American appropriations of their artistic expressions, revitalized the core values of their own traditions in gestures of cultural independence.

Typically the more aggressively the dominant culture tries to impose itself on the diasporic community, the more likely the community is to preserve, reconstruct, or reconstitute its home culture. As revealed through several examples of African-descendant artists highlighted in this text, the historical record of African enslavement and oppression in North America clearly indicates that there was a strong affinity on the part of African/Black artists to maintain their sense of humanity in the face of the most dehumanizing circumstances.

The physical detachment of African/Black artists from their homeland did not sever their social and cultural bonds to Africa. In fact, many North American Africans yearned to investigate and communicate to the world their link to Africa and responded to those impulses accordingly. Artists are communicators, who through various media, express thoughts and feelings about their inner world and their perceptions of the outer world. The nineteenth and twentieth century lives of disenfranchised Africans in America were chronicled in powerful Blues songs and sung from front porches and street corners to concert halls throughout the world.³ Shedding imposed identities and redefining self on new terms counters white supremacist discourse that had externally shaped the identities and set universal standards for the

³ Karlton E. Hester, *From Africa to Afrocentric Innovations Some Call Jazz: Vol.1 The Afrocentric Roots of “Jazz” and African Music in the Americas*, (Ithaca, NY: Hesteria Records & Publishing Co. 2000), 136.

African/Black artist. Issues of cultural identity as well as social and political tension in a segregated society gave rise to a flowering of artistic expressions centered around the Harlem Arts Movement. North American Africans developed a visual vocabulary that celebrated their African heritage, folklore and reflects their daily experiences of life in North America.

The proclamation, *We are an African people!* which gained popularity in the 1960s, signaled that many were not altogether content with an ethnic (or more correctly), racial designation based simply on phenotypic attributes—whether colored, Negro, or Black. Perceiving the significance of ethnic self-designation as a reflection of cultural and/or geographic origins, some African/Black artists created works of art as vehicles for exploring identity. With continued study, African/Black artists discovered that an often disguised, yet pervasive Africanity (or Africaness) extant in inheritance from his/her southern forebears. Moreover, wide ranging travels throughout Africa, North America, South America, and the Caribbean gave greater depth to understanding and appreciation of the cultural linkages that bond the diverse people of the ancestral continent and the people of the diaspora to each other. This is exemplified in the lyrics of internationally revered Reggae music performer, Peter Tosh, who in the song *African* proclaims,

Don't care where you come from / As long as you're a [B]lack man /
You're an African / No mind your nationality / You have got the identity
of an African/ 'Cause if you come from Clarendon / And if you come
from Portland / And if you come from Westmoreland / You're an African.

No mind your nationality / You've got the identity of an African / 'Cause
if you come from Trinidad / And if you come from Nassau / And if you
come from Cuba / You're an African.

No mind your complexion / There is no rejection / You're an African/
'Cause if your plexion / High high high / If your complexion low, low, low
And if your plexion in between / You're an African

No mind denomination / That is only segregation / You're an African /
'Cause if you go to the Catholic / And if you go to the Methodist / And if
you go to the Church of Gods / You're an African

No mind your nationality / You have got the identity of an African /
'Cause if you come from Brixton / And if you come from Weesday / And
if you come from Wingstead / And if you come from France / ...Brooklyn
/ ...Queens / ...Manhattan / ...Canada / ...Miami / ...Switzerland /
...Germany
...Russia / ...Taiwan⁴

Indeed, the African/Black artist in North American society must reestablish an educational and cultural frame of reference that is to maintain maximum productivity if he or she is to survive and grow. This is not to say that the artist must also be a conventional scholar, but it does suggest that it is necessary that the artist's direction is based on sound information.

Hiphop evolved out of the same needs as Blues— affirming that African/Black culture and humanity demand expression. In regards to impoverished conditions that gave birth to the art forms and their subsequent point of entrance into North American society, the Mississippi Delta was to the formation of Blues what the Bronx, New York, is to Hiphop.

Emceeing/femceeing is rooted in age old storytelling that seeks to teach and inspire. It achieves this goal by providing examples of conduct sanctioned by the African/Black community in America as we search for ways to alter our relationship that began as owner and slave and has made little progress since its inception.

Hiphop artists contain among their ranks some few politically and historically conscious individuals who understand the power of their medium and the need to serve their people. Some have begun to move beyond the

⁴ Winston Hubert McIntosh a.k.a. Peter Tosh, "African," *Equal Rights*, performed by Peter Tosh, compact disc, Capitol/EMI, © 1977.

selfish needs for material acquisition to a global understanding of our condition as a people, and to their major role as agents to help transform our people from dependence to independence.

Artistic expressions help us learn the beliefs, values and customs of a culture. We study traditional African cultural expressions because they are arguably one of the highest expressions of human culture and add to the artistic heritage of all humanity. The artists selected in this work were chosen because their artistic production was based upon a powerful sense of intense race consciousness and pride in African/Black heritage and community.

Traditionally, the people of Africa created works primarily, if not solely for, religious ceremonies. Masks and other creations were/are combined with dance, song, and costume. Movement is art! Masquerades were performed in rituals and ceremonies that regulated the social life of various communities, though in more recent years some would argue masquerades are performed solely for entertainment purposes. Art objects are made for rites of passage ceremonies that symbolize birth, life, and death—the cycles of life. Cultural expressions are created and performed to honor the Supreme Being, show respect for ancestors and celebrate a plentiful harvest.

The primary purpose of traditional creative works of African peoples relates to cosmogony, which is central to the African philosophy of life. Many African groups believe that spirits intercede in practically every aspect of life and that through artistic expressions they are communicated with and honored. Prime examples include, but are certainly not limited to, the Dogon who decorate the doors of their homes with Chevrons (symbols on the outside walls that are meant to keep evil spirits out), and the Akan of Ghana who construct pots and adorn them with images that symbolize hope, expectation, and aspiration and

hang them by the door. Each morning they touch the pot three times while repeating the following utterance for good luck: “Nyame, biribi wọ soro na ma ẹmmẹka me nsa,” which means “God, there is something in the heavens, let it reach me.” Another example representing the fundamental relationship between art and life in traditional Africa that appears to be transcontinental comes from the Ivory Coast region where many African communities perform(ed) ceremonies wearing masks depicting animals that represent sacred life forces. These masks operate as a conduit through which the spirit world is accessed. Traditionally, art and spirituality have always been entwined concepts within the African worldview. By investigating the customary creative works of Africans past we are able to ascertain the deepest meanings that an authentic work of art embodies.

Currently, the challenge for artists of African descent in North America is to find ways to use both the spiritual and material powers of art in such a way that their expressions become a vehicle to produce a global consciousness conducive to their community’s interests.

The dearth of information regarding caliber and legacy of African/Black artists in America is largely responsible for the indifferent or perceived negative attitude towards their artistic contributions. Some people believe that African/Black cultural expressions are merely about entertainment. It’s not. This misconception is an indication of the power of mass media and its ability to shape worldview or even worse dehumanize people. Stereotypical attitudes have led to the belief that the relatively spontaneous artistic forms—music, and dance—are better suited to scholarly analysis of African/Black expressions than the more deliberate artistic forms. This supposition ignores the many skillful designs in sculpture, painting, pottery, weaving, beadwork,

textiles, body ornamentation, and architecture that are part of the African tradition and a prevailing influence in the cultures of African descendants in the diaspora.

An extensive investigation into the aesthetics of African-derived cultural expressions along with the philosophy of the artists that create these works and their relationship to the group in which they belong is truly a life-long mission. What I have attempted to present in this study is a foretaste of the directions this work might pursue. Although the focus was primarily on music, literature, and some visual art creations, each of the various artistic forms, which include but are not limited to theater, dance, film, quilting, ceramics, architecture, clothing/textile, hair, ornamentations and body art that African descendants in the diaspora employ is worthy of individual concentration.

Through her various treatises on African/Black art, cultural critic bell hooks avers, “the function of art is to do more than tell it like it is—it’s to imagine what is possible.” Within the same train of thought, Hiphop artist Talib Kweli affirms similar aesthetic standards in his opus entitled *African Dream* where he asserts,

Yo, anybody can tell you how it is
What we putting down right here is how it is
And how it could be...⁵

It is therefore apparent from the foregoing quotes that Kweli and hooks are part of a continuum of African/Black artists⁶ who combine art with a level of

⁵ Talib Kweli Greene, Weldon Irvine, and T. Cottrell, “African Dream,” *Train of Thought*, performed by Talib Kweli, compact disc, Rawkus/Priority, © 2000.

⁶ The word artist is a combination of the terms artist and activist. The term artist is currently being popularized by a group of African descendant poets, filmmakers and visual performers who express the need for critical

activism consistent with those artists past and present that believe(d) that the arts are primary cultural tools in the struggle for progressive social change in North American society. Reflecting on the liberatory African/Black struggle while grappling with the question of how art can become a more effective empowering and revolutionary force within the African world community, a possible remedy that I keep returning to is that the artist of African descent must go through a process of *Sankofa*⁷. In other words, African/Black artists must be made familiar with the rich history of activism in African/Black cultures. An edict across Africana cultures instructs: you must know your roots to know where you are going.

The African/Black artist in the diaspora has a history and tradition that reaches back to the Djeli tradition of West Africa and beyond. Revelations and subsequent teachings of this ancestral connection can lead to the creation of critical art education programs that could stimulate a collective awareness among African-descendent artists and the communities they are accountable to. Conducting this study has reaffirmed my belief that Africana scholars have to commit to substantive projects. We cannot underestimate the power of culture in a society where entertainment is one of the biggest industries in the country if not the world. Moreover, we cannot allow others to have authority over our cultural and spiritual products. What we do now becomes the history

interventions that re-conceptualize aesthetic criteria for African/Black popular cultural expressions thus linking activism to the artistic performance.

⁷ The concept of Sankofa is derived from the Akan people of West Africa and is expressed in the Akan language as “se wo were fi na wosan kofa a yenki” which literally translated into English means “it is not taboo to go back and fetch what you forgot.” Sankofa instructs us to reach back and gather the best of what our past has to teach us, so that we can achieve our full potential as we move forward. Whatever we have lost, forgotten, foregone or been stripped of can be reclaimed, revived, preserved and perpetuated.

by which our grandchildren will judge us. We must refuse to forget the ways of our ancestors. In a moment of clarity during the performance of *African Dream*, Talib Kweli expressed this revelation,

We the reflection of our ancestors
We'd like to thank you for the building blocks you left us
Cause your spirit possessed us
Yo, you blessed us
Thank you very much.⁸

I choose to refuse to forget!

⁸ Talib Kweli Greene, Weldon Irvine, and T. Cottrell, "African Dream," *Train of Thought*, performed by Talib Kweli, compact disc, Rawkus/Priority, © 2000.

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