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THE WAY WE DO

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An Introductory Mapping

Spider and the Calabash of Knowledge: An Asante Story

They say that once, Spider came to possess all the world's knowledge, stuffed it into a calabash, and tried to hide it, in a treetop. Well, according to the story, the calabash fell, or was flung, from Spider's hands to the ground, where it shattered, and the bounty of story was fragmented and scattered on the four winds. Now the task of the storyteller, like that of the Spider, is to weave the broken pieces back together.

An African diaspora storytelling demands movement over a vast, complex, terrifying, and broken terrain, of old and new worlds in violent transformation, and looking at a crossroads of being, metamorphosis, and becoming. Appropriately Spider, the divine trickster and storyteller, an ancient with many names who has traveled far and wide and is always returning, weaves a web that spans these multiple locations. Among this region's indigenous first nations, Cherokee, Keres, Dine, and Pueblo traditions speak of Grandmother Spider, and of Thought Woman, the weaver, as an avatar of existential creation, complexity, and illumination. Though the ancestral peoples of this region were ravaged by the genocidal land grabbing of European occupation and settler colonialism, their story, lore, knowledge, and traditions live on in those who survived them, in the earth itself, and in any true telling of the history of this land. So it begins.

The African peoples, who came to this region in the course of close to four hundred years of forced migrations, brought their own rich cosmological and philosophical traditions to the Caribbean archipelago and the American mainlands. Many of these people were from West and Central

Africa, and among them were Akan- or Twi language-speaking people, from the area that is now the country of Ghana, and among the many traditions they brought with them to this region were their anansem, their stories of Ananse the spider, a trickster, a troublemaker, and a creative progenitor. In the cross-cultural fusions and re-articulations of the African diaspora imagination, Spider, whom the Akan sometimes call “Kwaku Ananse,” is hero and clown, creator and fool, intercessor between the small and the powerful, the Gods and mortals, and a metaphoric uncle of storytelling. In Jamaican tradition, as in that of the Akan, all folklore is often called “Ananse story,” and Spider remains an honorific kin who storytellers address with a familial name, sometimes flipping the gender frame, by calling it Brother Anansi, or Brer ’Nancy, Nancy, Sis, or Auntie Nancy. Metaphysical and morphing on the Great Turtle Island, Spider (as well as the hare and the jackal tricksters of East Africa) reappears as the fabled Brer Rabbit of African American lore. Though not a deity, like the Yoruba orisha Esu Elegba and the Fon loa Papa Legba, Spider is a divine trickster who also embodies symbolic crossroads and liminal portals in its webbing. According to the preminent folklorist Louise Bennett, “is Anansi meck it.”

Spider’s extensive web of presence in the African diaspora deftly represents the complexity, multiplicity, fragmentation, and convergence, the “something torn but new” as Kwame Braithwaite poets, embedded in an ever-emerging concept of “black” identity. Among those Akan peoples who carried their anansem across the Atlantic crossing were citizens of the Asante kingdom. Asante was a state with a deeply cosmopolitan genesis, like the Akan language itself, as well as a lavish poetic and visual art tradition, a state arising at the crossroads of centuries of intercontinental migrations, wars of empire and commerce dating back to the twelfth century, rising militarism, and the catastrophic explosion over the tragic centuries to come, of a transatlantic trade in human beings. Basil Davidson, in his *The African Past*, points out how the Asante state became, with Dahomey and the delta city states, “one of the strongest slaving nations in Africa” playing, among them, “the same leading part that Brittan, France and Holland represented on the European side.” So “it go” and so we begin.¹

Yimbala y sona: Singing and Drawing a Point

Head and shoulders baby

One, two, three

Head and shoulders baby

One, two, three

Head and shoulders head and shoulders head and shoulders baby

One, two, three

“Head and Shoulders,” African American street game, twentieth century²

When I was a child, performing the rituals of urban childhood on New York City sidewalks and streets, we played through a repertoire of ring games that, it seemed, we learned from each other or just made up and passed on. Each of these games, and there were many, inextricably paired dance and song, was ritually circular, polyphonic and responsive, syncopated and percussive, multi-metered, subtly competitive, formally improvisational, and held moments, in collective performance, for transforming individual flights. Most of these games were sung and danced to the music of hand clapping. Most of these games contained both sculpted moments and pure wildness. Many of these games had components of articulation that were bantering or derisive. Much of the language of this play was “black,” or what we, as African American children, understood as being “black” then. They were dances or plays, songs or games, full of signs, signifying, and ciphering. When we wagged the finger of one hand, put the other on our hip, and set our upper torso to swaying, we certainly knew, but probably “felt” more than understood, what we were saying. These street performances were caldrons of continuous articulation and improvisation. In each of the games we played, we rehearsed the social performance of childhood and learned something of the dance of acting like a woman. Of course, the best illustration would be to see and hear us.

I realize now the figure we were cutting, how the characteristics of our play were those of African music, dance, and visual arts, sacred and secular performances, as they had been brought together and transformed in the African diaspora. Arms raised, hands moving quickly from the head to the shoulders, breaking with a hand clap and, on the “one two three,”

beating out three alternating hand pats with our partners before bending to the concrete, which might have once been earth, touching our knees and then our ankles and then our knees again in rapid fire succession, we danced a distillation of performances of greeting and naming, of ritual identifying. We danced a fusion of traditions of historical recitation in performance. And we, the children of Birmingham, Selma, and Jamaica, the civil rights movement, Black Power and the rise of the Black Panthers, African independence, urban protest and anticolonial struggles, sang and danced in the wake and the midst of a world wrestling with and within its own historical motions.

Numerous folkloric and ethnographic studies collect the games of African American girls and examine their historic and social meaning. Pairing this energetic body of sociological and ethnographic explorations with the literature on African art, aesthetics, philosophy, and performance traditions, and dancing in the intersecting circles of our African diaspora street games and a wide spectrum of the performance practices of West and Central African girls and women, presents a powerful, and illuminating, web of connections.³

Knees and ankles baby
One, two, three
Knees and ankles baby
One, two, three
Knees and ankles knees and ankles knees and ankles baby
One, two, three
“Head and Shoulders”

In our rings of play, dance, and song, we were actually recalling a number of the formal structural requisites specific to performed African and African American articulations. Our “Head and Shoulders” was sung and danced, for instance, in traditional African antiphony or “call-and-response.” And our motion of play, using call-and-response, the three-line stanza, and the circle as a setting, is common to the expressive heritage of the African diaspora, spanning a panorama of place and time, from Rio de la Plata to the Housatonic and Hudson, from early African American burials,

community and religious celebrations, to the performance practices of Caribbean Carnival and our own street games.

The web of stories connecting these circles of generative action is both abiding and guiding. African diaspora carnival, festivals, parades, and processions, for instance, all draw from a mixture of public art, assembly, and masking traditions, the oldest of which reach back to community ritual performance and sacred practice. These performances are sites for social organization, healing, and transformation. “The organization of social life in traditional societies gives a special place to the festival,” Rex Nettleford writes in Nunley and Bettelheim’s *Caribbean Festival Arts*, “for there is a general consciousness of its potentials as a vehicle for communicating or affirming the values of a society and for strengthening the bonds that bring its members.”⁴ In his introduction to the same volume, Robert Farris Thompson fruitfully examines the relationship between African diaspora carnival and Yoruba and Kongo aesthetics.⁵ Masquerades and carnival gatherings, combining dance, music, and visual art statement in performance, are a strong thread in the lineage of African diaspora art and articulation. Our girls’ street play moves in this continuum. And when we did the number, arms akimbo, or with one hand on our hip and one hand in the air, we were formally restating the Kongo, Yaangalala, position.⁶

In terms of musical architecture, our recitations play with and within an African-derived metric structure, using the three-line stanza, the “blues form,” that underlies popular regional music and has been traced by practitioners and ethno-musicologists to West African storytelling and the historical narrative performance practices of griot traditions.⁷ Of course, the blue notes of our play are also telling. The blues is a poetic form. A lyrical lament that contains “duple rhythms,” “syncopated patterns,” an A B A arrangement, and four-measure phrasing and that moves from the repetition, the call-and-response, of its initial two lines to resolution, revelation, and “philosophical commentary” in its closing. The form both invites and represents dialog, across space and time. Musicologist Eileen Southern reminds us that the “distinctive three-line stanza” is “an apparent throwback to African origins, for the three-line stanza is uncommon in American and European folksong repertoires,” and that the formal “con-

densation” of measures in the song line creates a “break at end of each vocal line, during which the accompanying instruments (guitar, piano, or instrumental ensemble) improvises, and the singer interjects spoken asides such as “Oh, Lordy.”⁸

Round the world baby
One, two, three
Round the world baby
One, two, three
Round the world, round the world, round the world, baby
One, two, three
“Head and Shoulders”

Dance phrase and text in complement, our “Head and Shoulders” embodied the geography of historical and social identity; mapping and continuing the physical and metaphysical journey of the African American story. In words and movement we danced “apart” though together in the African tradition, not holding hands, as in a waltz, but deeply connecting as we constructed our recitation in inscription. We were poetry in motion. And yes, there was language, symbol, signifying, and storytelling in our hands. Cultural historian and educator J. D. Elder’s studies of similar plays among girls in the Caribbean point to paired hand clapping and to the articulation of the “open palms” as widely used phrases associated with mutuality and cooperation. We were learning and teaching community and communion, as well as personal responsibility and artistry, in our play in “the tradition.”

The statements of the hands, head, and shoulders are potent African echoes in our dancing, saluting, and indicating. Africanist scholars, including Robert Farris Thompson and Maureen Warner-Lewis, remind us of the Central African custom of clapping hands as an act of greeting and write that the head and shoulders are symbolic sites of power in Central African ritual performance traditions. Contemporary practitioner and performance artist Marilyn Worrell, in line with the work of Katherine Dunham, identified the West African danced tropes of self-presentation in our “sassy” dancing and recognized our restatement of female orisha in the fan-like

fluttering of our hands as derivative of Yoruba sacred performance. And as our quick hand movements embody the “inward stretch outward reach” of diasporic motion as we leap and return from a “grounded” position, our sculptural attentiveness also makes strong reference to the iconography and aesthetic values of African dance, the statements of vitality, readiness, and “flash of the spirit” that Thompson has documented extensively. Dance is a language, sound is its root, and our dance remembered African languages that, despite the diasporic dismemberment, were never quite lost. The concrete we stamped percussively had truly once been earth.⁹

The language of the body, and its conscious articulation in dance as visual culture, is an old one, and dance study draws on “vocabulary” very similarly to literary disciplines. Within this choreographic chronicling, the critical vocabulary of African dance is highly developed, and its antiquity is in alignment with those evident in sculptural traditions. Some of the breath of this critical oeuvre is highlighted in Thompson’s documentation of a range of commentary on the dance as a visual art in his *African Art in Motion*. Thompson’s practitioner informants address Pan-African compositional and aesthetic values, including the positional “attentiveness” and “readiness” with which a dancer enters into the dance.¹⁰ This concept of self-presentation is a critical one in movement aesthetics and criticism. It is also a familiar in terms of vernacular understanding. We speak, for example, of “keeping your head up,” holding “head in hand,” and of extending “welcoming arms.” Thompson finds myriad instances of tropes of self-presentation in the movement language of Yoruba dance traditions, in which the dancer makers of the body a sculptural iconography. These aesthetic dictates are deeply philosophically based. “Many traditional people in Africa believe that when they dance or strike an honorific pose they are standing in the image of the ancient divine fathers,” Thompson writes.¹¹ Here too Thompson writes about clapping as a form of salutation among the Kom of Cameroon.¹²

The use of these movement metaphors reverberates in African diaspora dance in concert performances that draw on African and African diaspora folk roots. Luminous examples of contemporary choreographic mapping for professional staging include Katherine Dunham’s extensive body of

work in Haitian traditions and Rex Nettleford's fulsome re-presentation of Jamaican folk tradition, as well as the shining oeuvre of Alvin Ailey. Nettleford uses the danced phrase of open palms with powerful effect throughout and strikingly in his danced history of the African diaspora *The Crossing* (1978) and the eloquent phrasing of open palms similarly frames the penultimate movements of Alvin Ailey's tour de force danced exploration of "Negro religious music" in *Revelations* (1960), a work in which the flutter of fans restates the ritual appearance of the orisha in Yoruba religious performance.

Ham bone ham bone where you been?
All round the world and back again
Ham bone ham bone what you do?
I got a chance and I fairly flew
Ham bone ham bone where you stay?
I met a pretty girl and I couldn't get away.

"Ham Bone," African American play song, nineteenth century¹³

In our confluence of West and Central African performance articulations, we were clapping, dancing, and singing, ancient canons of speaking, "drawing a point" of power in an amalgam of traditions. At the time, as we would have said then, we weren't "studying" that. We knew "we were saying something," but we weren't deconstructing. We were challenging each other in a dexterity of performance from which, hands on hips with a dizzying precision, would arise a communal "winning." We took flight within and against tradition, in the jazz idiom, taking the word from each other's mouths and making it our own.

Black and proud jazz—the jazz idiom in our play demands another underlining. Ralph Ellison, every bit the "jazz man," wrote of "the subtle rhythmical shaping and blending of ideas, tone and imagination demanded of group improvisation." "This tradition," wrote Ellison, "insisted that each artist achieve his creativity within its frame. He must learn the best of the past and add to it his personal vision." Jazz, what my father's generation called "the new music," arises, according to musicologist Eileen Southern, "from the fusion of blues and ragtime with brass band music and syn-

copated dance music.” And “the most salient features of jazz,” Southern writes, “derive directly from the blues. Like the blues jazz emphasizes individualism. The performer is at the same time the composer, shaping the music into style and form. A traditional melody or harmonic framework may serve as the takeoff point for improvisation, but it is the personality of the player and the way that he improvises that produces the music.” Southern also notes that jazz uses the call-and-response form of the blues by “employing an antiphonal relationship” between two voices as well as bringing attention to the etymological relationship between the word “jazz” and the Ki-Kongo term *jizz*.¹⁴

Hidden in the complex hermeneutics of our play, even (or perhaps especially) from us, were the traces to a canon of played performance that had brought us to our particular place in an old grammar of expression. Our performance had come from somewhere, had meaning there, and continued to gather meaning in our complex re-presentation. But when a new family from “down south” moved on to our block, and Cookie taught us to “pat the Juba” to the words of “Ham Bone” in 1968, we simply took it up, not for a moment caring from whence this new play had come, who this Ham Bone was, and what it was saying. Now taking up the literary and historical anthropology of that expression in performance, re-membering the fragments of the broken calabash of Asante story, is central to my own adult work.

Ham Bone, this traveler, is a metaphor for the experience of diaspora, an experience inherently in motion. Here we honor the path by beginning with a selection from the divination text of the Yoruba and an excerpt from the oral history of Kossola, Cudjoe Lewis, one of the founders of Africatown, a settlement of freed Africans in the U.S. state of Alabama, in 1866, who was reportedly among the last Africans to be brought enslaved to the U.S. mainland—both injunctions to speaking and recognition. We go on, in protracted introduction, to look at a selection of documents of African diaspora and African American performance in conversation with the practices of West and Central Africa and the hunter-gatherer legacy of the San. We then turn to the stories of other travelers and storytellers whose voices open several paths to re-cognition.

Journey Geography and Circles of Ancestry

Speak to me so that I may speak to you.

By our voices we recognize each other in the darkness.

Ifa divination verse, traditional/classical¹⁵

It bout daybreak when the folks dat sleep get wake wid de noise when de people of Dahomey breakee the Great Gate. I not woke yet. I still in bed. I hear the gate when dey break it. I hear the yell from the soldiers. . . . I jump out de bed and lookee. I see the great many soldiers wid French gun in de hand and de big knife. . . . Oh lord, lord! I see de people gittee killed so fast!

The old ones dey try run way from de house, but dey dead by de door. . . . Oh lord, lord! One gate lookee lak nobody dere so I make hate and runnee towards de bush, but de man of Dahomey dey dere too. Soon as I out de gate dey grabee me, and tie de wrist. I beg dem, please lemme go backo to my mama, but dey don't pay whut I sat no 'tenshun.

Oluale Kassola (Cudjoe Lewis), founder of Africatown, Alabama, 1866¹⁶

House a' fire.

In the violent, and exponentially gapping, rent in time between the late 1400s and late 1800s, millions of people from diverse communities on the African continent, people from remote rural villages, small towns, and family holdings, people from ancient urban centers and global ports, cosmopolitan metropolises, and powerful city-states, were caught in the vortex of the tragedy of massive proportions, the social and political upheaval, horrific displacement, forced and enforced migrations, the *Maaafa*, set into motion by a burgeoning transatlantic economy based on the buying and selling of human beings. The devastation wrought on individuals and communities, as well as on the collective consciousness, over the course of four hundred years of apocalypse, echoes still, and the physical and metaphysical journey of crossing over “the waters” of what came to be called the “Middle Passage” remains central to telling African diaspora story and American history.¹⁷

According to one telling, and much classic and contemporary testimony and scholarship, those peoples, many from West and Central Africa but hailing from the breadth and depth of a vast continent, those people who found themselves caught in the sprawling nets of trade and traffic in “slaves,” were kidnapped and stolen from their homes, taken prisoner in wars and raids, roped, chained, and incarcerated in dungeons, cells, and barracoons, traversed a continent and an ocean, plunged off the edge of the universe, and were brought face to face with chaos, terror, and death; those people began to forge a new Pan-African identity in the crossing.¹⁸ And from the Portuguese colonies in the islands of Cape Verde, Madeira, and São Tomé to Peru, Brazil, Colombia, Santa Domingo, Cuba, Barbados, Jamaica, Suriname, and Mexico, from the Caribbean islands through the continental mainlands, the story of the peoples’ journey was inscribed in nascent, and ever transforming, Pan-African identities and is remembered in the poetics of African diaspora performance and its universal embodiment of “the enduring human spirit.”

Orunmilla carry me in your bag; carry me in your purse
 So that we may go together slowly;
 So that wherever we may go we may go together.

Ifa divination verse, traditional/classical period¹⁹

The diverse peoples of the African continent carried radiant ancestral sources to those waters of mortal struggle, and the sacred and secular performances of the African diaspora arise from a dynamic amalgam of multiple streams of knowledge and ways of knowing, traditions of cosmology, language, history, voice, recognition, and reconnection. Among those ancestral sources were recognizably West and Central African cultural practices, as well as echoes of older practices, like those of the southern San, practices characterized by prodigious engagement with questions of journey, geography ancestry, witness, history, pedagogy, and social transformation.

One ancestral source of African diaspora influence flows out of the art and philosophy of the Yoruba people, of the nation now known as Nigeria, and the voice of Yoruba divination verse, which long predates the terror of

the Middle Passage, speaks potently across the physical and metaphysical distance later crossed by kidnapped African people and their descendants. The prophetic text simultaneously points to a rich past. Yorubas trace their descent, and the origin of *Ifa*, to the fabled medieval city of Ile-Ife, where terra-cotta sculpture found in archaeological sites suggest a link between Yoruba and the Nok civilization of the first century B.C.E. As an ancient urban hub, Ife can be seen as a nexus of cultural traditions and Yoruba practices as gathering the knowledge of the multiplicities of people who have migrated through that region over the millennia. The documentary work of Migene Gonzalez-Wippler and William Bascom has opened fertile terrain for engagement with the widespread presence of *Ifa* divination practice, and the philosophical tenets within it, among “related” peoples of West Africa and records of *Ifa* divination in the diaspora dating to the latter part of the seventeenth century.²⁰

Yoruba philosophy, speaking expansively of journey and historical memory, remains vital in the performance practice of West Africa and the diaspora. According to Kolawole Ositola, a seventh-generation *Ifa* priest and diviner practicing in the Ijebu Yoruba town of Imodi, Nigeria, in alignment with numerous traditional ontologies, Yoruba see “the whole life span of a person [as] a journey.” The Abenaki concept of life as an “earth walk” comes to mind. Anthropologist Margaret Thompson Drewal, in her *Yoruba Ritual*, expands on how the Yoruba understanding of journey is similarly widely embracing. “Yoruba peoples of southwestern Nigeria conceive of rituals as journeys—sometimes actual sometimes virtual,” Drewal writes of funerals and birth celebrations, professional incantation and divination, sacred possession and masking, among contemporary Yoruba. By extension Drewal makes the connection between Yoruba performance and the practices of the African diaspora. “Wherever Yoruba religion thrives—Brazil, Cuba, the United States—this practice persisted. Cast in performance in a myriad of ways—as a parade or a procession, a pilgrimage, a masking display, or possession trance—the journey evokes the reflexive, progressive, transformative experience of ritual participation.”²¹

Yoruba history and philosophy, like that of the Asante, offers a generative critical frame for interpreting the performance texts of the African diaspora

as well as for the kind of “black reading” of the African American literary canon Gates explores so brilliantly in his *Signifying Monkey*. “The Negro Spirituals,” for extraordinary example, elegantly interlace articulations of journey, physical and metaphysical geography, and historical memory in a way that recognizes the injunction of the *Ifá* as well as the flung fragments of the broken calabash of Asante story. This recognition is resplendently restated in the spiritual “You May Bury Me in the East.”

You may bury me in the east
You may bury me in the west
But I'll hear the trumpet sound
In the morning

“You May Bury Me in the East,” African American spiritual, eighteenth century²²

It's an old song with a rich history in its content and its chronicling. The early Africanist thinker, clergyman, and founder, in 1787, of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, Bishop Richard Allen included “You May Bury Me in the East” in his 1801 collection of African American sacred songs. In *The Souls of Black Folks*, the eminent scholar and public intellectual W. E. B. Du Bois called “You May Bury Me in the East” the “voice of exile” and an example of “African” music at the beginning of African American spiritual tradition. In these songs, Du Bois wrote, “the slave spoke to the world.” Echoing the trope of cultural translation provided by eighteenth-century African writers of the diaspora James Albert Okawsaw Gronomiosaw and Olaudah Equiano, Du Bois recognized the performance acts of the early spirituals as “speaking texts” or “talking books,” which represent genesis and journey even as they gather meaning in historical motion, shifting geographies, living devising, and continuous improvisation.

Presciently, the Yoruba divination text, brought to the Americas in waves of forced migrations, names the epistemological “darkness” that obscures recognition and bids the practitioner to “speak” across the narrative gulf. In response to this larger call, the song “You May Bury Me in the East” takes a speaking journey that restates the proverbial principle in another time and setting drawing on a similar impetus to represent, to speak, the journey of the diaspora in African American ritual performance. The people

who were torn from home and found themselves scattered in the cardinal directions, the ancestral “Lost Body” twentieth-century Pan-Africanist poet and statesman Aimee Ceasire grieved for and celebrated in his epic poem is remembered and resurrected by the trumpet’s voice in “You May Bury Me in the East,” and that remembering, that resurrection, is an act of creative transformation.

African American performance traditions sing insistently of place and of migrations in acts of remembering and spiritual healing. In his study *Ride Out the Wilderness: Geography and Identity in Afro-American Literature*, Melvin Dixon evokes Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s prophetic sermon, delivered in Memphis, Tennessee, on April 3, 1968, to underscore the African American performance lineage that illuminates King’s vision from the mountaintop. Dixon points out that, within that lineage of remembering, “the wilderness, the underground and the mountaintop are broad geographic metaphors for the search, discovery and achievement of self.”²³ These tropes thread throughout African American performance text, and Dixon’s contemporary critical investigation sits beautifully in the lineage of Du Bois’s praise song. Du Bois wrote of the poetry of the spirituals as wrest from “nature’s heart”—of a body of song in which “life was a ‘rough and rolling sea’ like the brown Atlantic of the Sea Islands; the Wilderness was the home of God, and the ‘lonesome valley’ led the way to life.”²⁴

Wade in the water
Wade in the water children
Wade in the water
God’s gonna trouble the water.

“Wade in the Water,” African American spiritual, nineteenth century, traditional²⁵

Visions of water and its crossing also wind throughout the performed text of Africans in the diaspora, echoing ancient waters, coalescing cosmologies, and deep histories. Du Bois wrote of the spiritual “Wade in the Water” as among the second generation of African songs and representative of the genesis of an “African American” identity.²⁶ The waters of this baptismal song are, literally and metaphorically, a threshold at which

indigenous enactments of creation are restated, marking new tributaries of human narrative.

Who's that yonder dressed in white
God's gonna trouble the water
Must be the children of the Israelite
God's gonna trouble the water

"Wade in the Water," St. Simons Island, Georgia, twentieth century

In her study, learning, and ethnographic collecting among communities in the Georgia Sea Islands, folklorist Lynda Parrish was taught to recognize the centrality of "Wade in the Water" to the performance of religious baptism and to see, in the community's sacred performance and ritual observance of motions of the tide, lunar cycles, and physical immersion, a profound connection between this artifact and the "river cults of Africa."²⁷ Notably within Yoruba, Fon, and related West African cosmologies, water is associated with the feminine and, as within central African geo-cosmologies, with the fecund liminal space between life and death. Another rich ancestral stream flows from the Mende peoples of West Africa, whose cultural connection and continuum with the Gullah people of South Carolina has been extensively and generatively documented in the cultural history and linguistic studies of Darwin Turner and others, and this fecund terrain continues to invite our attention. According to art historian Pamela McClusky, "Black' and 'wet' are both designated by the Mende word *teḷi*" and "Blackness and wetness refer to the ultimate origin of Sande knowledge—the nature spirits who dwell in rivers in the bush." These philosophical notions are abundantly reinscribed throughout the sacred performance of the diaspora. In the practice of Haitian Vodun (Vodou), for expansive example, performance of ritual in homage to the Dahomean deities Damballah and Agwe reproduces the wavelike motions of the sea in dance to announce divine presence. In spiritual alignment with these sacred performances, Yoruba-influenced representations of female deities Yemaya and Oshun utilize fans, shells, mirrors, and color symbolism to evoke the movement, bounty, and infinite reflectivity of river, sea, and ocean.²⁸ Ailey eloquently restates the confluence of these traditions in his

choreographic representation, in *Revelations*, of the sacred performance of the African American church. The antiquity, and universality, of these waters is invoked, in turn, by the healing performances of nineteenth-century /Xan San peoples whose “trance”-induced spirit travel reportedly took them underwater; practitioners understand the immersion as an expression of otherworldly journey.²⁹

The African American spirituals, within a dynamic tradition of African diaspora sacred song, are the vessel, vehicle, symbol, sign, and recording of continual historical crossings and are ever expressing a complexity of crossroads in performance. Twentieth-century scholar John Lovell, in his *Black Song: The Forge and the Flame*, writes of “Wade in the Water,” first recorded in the nineteenth century, as a song of spiritual possession, as among the body of “signal” songs used by Harriet Tubman to convey secret messages to fugitives, and as a revolutionary text. Those visions continue to resound in contemporary works, in which, in the words of poet Langston Hughes, “The Negro Speaks of Rivers.” Examples abound, flowing from the old sacred song and dance into popular movement and sound. Performer, musicologist, and cultural historian Bernice Johnson Reagon writes, in her *If You Don’t Go, Don’t Hinder Me*, about the role of this spiritual in the American civil rights movement. Over a hundred-year historical span, “Wade in the Water” sings of “God” shaking things up, troubling the stagnant waters of oppression, as well as of the longer memory of the Middle Passage and of ancestral waters of baptism, journey, and vision.

Those visions resound in “modern” and contemporary works and cultural production, in which, in the words of poet Langston Hughes, “The Negro Speaks of Rivers.” Examples abound, flowing from the old sacred song and dance into popular movement and sound. Nettleford’s “Crossings” and reggae musician and composer Jimmy Cliff’s “Many Rivers to Cross,” for two potent instances, draw powerfully on this metaphor and web of references, and building, recall Paul Robeson’s renditions of the spirituals “Deep River,” “Water Boy,” and “On My Journey.” The continental source waters also continue flowing. Novelist, critic, and theorist Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o reminds us, in his collected essays *Something Torn and New*, of the postcolonial African writers’ continual reference to the continent’s

ancient rivers and their indigenous source. The list of musical riffs on this theme from the continent is oceanic.³⁰

Witness and History

Go tell it on the mountain
Over the hills and everywhere
Go tell it on the mountain,
That Jesus Christ is born.

“Go Tell It on the Mountain,” African American spiritual, traditional³¹

Some say a new vision of African identity was forged in the holds of the slave ships, in the new political and historical reality of racially based slavery, but that is only a part of the story.³² Long before the terrible waters of the Middle Passage, there were what Mende Sande society practitioners, of Liberia and Sierra Leone, call “the radiant waters” of indigenous tradition.³³ The cultural wellsprings for a “new” Pan-African identity after the fifteenth century CE may have had everything to do with older ways of knowing, performing knowledge, and “recording” history, in cultural acts of storytelling, personal and communal witness, circles of ancestral reverence, and a worldview that incorporates concepts of metaphor, metamorphosis, duality, and transformation. Traditions of knowing and performing the self in history, and in the cosmos, that were prodigiously present among the diverse people living on the continent of Africa long before the explosion and dismembering of the transatlantic trade in humans. Those griot traditions, as we have come to know them from Malian naming, can generatively be seen as an essential source, guide, and illumination. For, in the words of griot Mamadou Kouyate, “the world is old but the future springs from the past.”³⁴

The polyphonic histories of Africa continually reveal how all peoples know themselves (and can be known, historicized, and understood) through their cultural articulation. That knowledge is embedded in performance texts, dance, song, story, formal historical recitation, as well as in the inscribed and sculpted motion of visual arts traditions.³⁵ In kinship with the sacred performances of ancestral memory and “naming” of Yoruba, Fon, and other peoples of what are now the countries of Benin and Nigeria

are the griot or bardic traditions among ancient and contemporary Wolof, Mandinga, Limba, and other West and Central African people.³⁶ The griots of Mali, poets, dancers and singers, musicians, remembering history in performance, have been keepers of political lineages and community stories that predate Timbuktu's great universities.³⁷ On other sites of ancient sacred performance, Amharic priests and their congregations, in Ethiopia and the diaspora, perform lineage in liturgical recitation, remembering their history in call-and-response in order to create peace and harmony in the universe.³⁸

Impetus for communal historicizing in performance is also present in less urbanized or hierarchal societies. The Dogon of southwestern Sudan traditionally engaged in practices of astrological observation, mark making, and ceremonial engagement fundamentally tied to the agricultural cycle and the idea of maintaining the necessary balance between the worlds of the ancestors and the living. Among the Baluba and other peoples of Zaire, small pendants representing ancestral faces are worn so that revered individuals will be remembered, and their character traits will positively influence posterity. Contemporary Rashids, in northeastern Africa, shout their own name—"Rashida"—in the dances of their annual festival gatherings.

These historicizing traditions, and within them the mnemonic, linguistic, poetic, and epistemological devices of oral literatures, all inform the performance of the African diaspora, where historical memory becomes central to black identity.³⁹ Scholars in the fields of religion, literature, language, and the arts remind us that the Yoruba priests who were enslaved in the African diaspora brought with them a sacred text of over five hundred stories held in their memories and of the continuities of West and Central African in the literary and grammatical structures as well as the sacred traditions of the diaspora. Black history in performance contains old and new ways of calling one's name, statements of tradition, and continual revision, like improvisations on a standard in the jazz tradition.⁴⁰

While discerning the Genesis and Exodus stories of human migration told in ancient footprints is, of course, a matter of speculation over deep time, and beyond the scope of this writing, what wonderful webs of connection and illumination lay within.⁴¹ The text, parable, and history of Yoruba divination, for instance, also record older cosmological visions

as well as waves of migrations, from a northeastern homeland, and point to interaction with the indigenous, click language–speaking peoples. In *The African Past*, Basil Davidson writes about the record of the Neolithic giving way to the Iron Age in Africa and what it might reveal to us about human identity rooted in long history: “In this long and complex disintegration of the Neolithic pattern and its reconstruction within an Iron Age framework we can find the origins of modern African societies, showing as these do, in a multitude of ways, the unity in diversity that is none the less rooted in a profound and ancient unity. This large theme of unity in diversity runs throughout subsequent African history. . . . Pan-African unity is a political ambition of modern times, but its roots go far back into the past.”

Though the potential cartography of lineage between founding human populations and the sprawl of subsequent West African civilization, as well as of their “meeting and parting” and reuniting over the courses of the millennia, is in fact vast, the juxtaposition of Davidson’s synthesis of historical and archeological studies of Yoruba origins pairs convincingly with Joseph Greenberg’s work on language universals and his speculations on the antiquity of proto-Yoruba culture.⁴² Much that was gathered along the way would, in turn, become a part of an African American articulation as, in new locations, received traditions of performance of memory and history would be continually infused with layers of human journey. If the Yoruba call is “speak to me,” the African American response is the impetus to tell the story.

When I was a seeker
I sought both night and day
I asked the Lord to help me,
And he showed me the way.
He made me a watchman
Upon a city wall
And if I am a Christian
I am the least of all.

“Go Tell It on the Mountain,” second stanza

For the African, the overriding collective truth to be told in the early history of these transforming nations was the story of their journey, slavery, and liberation. In thousands of work and play songs, ring shouts and sermons, lullabies and spirituals, testimony and blues songs, in a groundswell of “slave narratives,” a body of testimony like no other in history, African Americans voiced a communal desire to tell their story from the elevated moral ground of the highest mountain. African Americans sought, in the words of William L. Andrews, to “tell a free story” and to have that story passed on.⁴³ And their outpouring of witness often drew on a mytho-poetics that prefigures the formal religious witness of the Afro-Christian churches but is consistent in its passion, urgency, and sense of mission. The griot of another place and time became, as in the song, “a watchman.” The bardic performance became a spiritual, a children’s play, a lullaby, a work song recalling the sacred and the profane, the epic and the mundane.

No more drivers lash for me
No more No more
No more drivers lash for me
Many thousands gone
No more peck of corn for me
No more No more
No more peck of corn for me
Many thousands gone.

“No More Auction Block,” spiritual/work song, antebellum period⁴⁴

How many gone? How many millions?⁴⁵ Kidnapped Africans included agriculturalists, artisans, poets, musicians, priests, historians, traders, travelers, warriors, political leaders, and children. Many were very young. Many were killed or took their own lives, having been herded like animals and packed like goods, in the crossing. Those who survived worked to lay the foundations for the settler colonial nations that enslaved them. Africans brought essential skills and innovation to cultivation and production in the fields of their enslavement. Enslaved Africans brought with them technologies of metalworking and building, animal husbandry and farming, architecture and medicine. They cut the rows African style

for planting, cared for the personal needs of adults and children, and remembered seeds and cooking styles that substantially affected crop diversity and regional culinary history.⁴⁶ African women, particularly, cultivated, cared for, and nurtured others in their bondage. The nation they built, housed, and fed in turn brutalized African women and men and children and condemned the offspring of rape to perpetual enslavement. Those who lived to tell the tale, found a container for a mythic telling in cultural performance. Perhaps only a story could contain all that they had seen.

Historian Eric Foner closes his book *A Short History of Reconstruction* with the observation that, despite the twists and turns of mainstream historiography, the African American folk tradition had always contained and maintained a critical clarity on the American Civil War and the question of national identity.⁴⁷ His work, along with that of contemporary thinkers in all the humanities, suggests that it is to these folk traditions, in ritual, in story, in narrative, in material culture, in song, that those looking to tell the whole story must return. The African American work song “No More Auction Block” can be understood, in this light, as a historical documentary performance.

The song “No More Auction Block” was recorded across the U.S. South during and after the Civil War and paints a stunning picture of a communal African American recollection of slavery and of how that recollection works.⁴⁸ The song recounts the rations of slavery: the peck of corn, the pint of salt. It recounts the abuse of slavery: the hundred lash, the thousands gone. Alternate versions recount some of the particular features of nineteenth-century slavery in North America. Reference to the “driver,” in the above version of the song, reflects the hierarchy of that era’s plantation society. In another variation one stanza sings “no more mistress call for me” chronicling some of the intersections of racialized and gendered constructions of shifting identity and status in the economies of slavery over this period. In this moment of historical transformation, war, emancipation, economic and political realignments, the song recounts the many thousands left behind before it closes in an open-ended yet weary yawn into the future. A future written from the past.

“No More Auction Block” bears witness, testifies, using a pattern of call-and-response that re-members African concepts of artistic expression, community, and historical documentation and, embedded in its performance of collective autobiography, is both the process and product of formal witness. Asked, in 1862, where the people of Port Royal, South Carolina, had gotten the songs they sang, one community member told abolitionist minister and black song collector James McKim, that the people “had made them.” When McKim pressed further, asking “how” the songs were made, the man reportedly told him: “It’s this way. My master call me up and order me short one peck of corn and a hundred lash. My friends see it and is sorry for me. When they come to the praise meeting that night they sing about it. Some is very good singers and they know how, and they work it in, work it in, you know, until they get it right; and that’s the way.”⁴⁹

This Port Royal informant’s description of compositional process is strikingly similar to that of the bluesman Son House a hundred years later. Talking about the music he made, Son House gave this comment: “People keep asking me where the blues started and all I can say is that when I was a boy we always was singing in the fields. Not real singing, you know, just hollering; but we made up songs about the things that was happening to us at the time and I think that’s where the blues started.”⁵⁰

In their autobiographical recollections of antebellum life, song, and story, the first generations of African Americans “wrote” a communal text imbued with a mission urgent and holy. It is a text that documents day-to-day, backbreaking labor expressed in a field holler. It is a story, a historical drama, of individuals and community being moved to moments of revelation that swept them into actual and metaphorical wilderness and flight. It is a story of escaping the physical and spiritual clutches of slavery and surviving. It is a story deeply engaged with moral instruction, with the lessons of folktale, with values and witness moving hand in hand. And the witness, the telling of that story, is a ritual, a performance, that remembers, encodes, and perpetuates the possibility of survival, through

the valleys of slavery's inhumanity and despair, across the wilderness of reconstructing a universe, to freedom's metaphorical mountaintop.

By in large African diaspora performances are all about motion. Wading in the water. Going to the mountaintop. A soul tossed east to west but, nonetheless, hearing the trumpet sound. These performances are also sites of conversation. "Ham Bone," the song asks, "where you been?" "Round the world," we respond, "and back again." The rhetorical strategy of these performance practices calls for testimony, for alternating solo and choral bearing witness. These voices respond to the animating call of older text within the persistent contemporary question of journey and location. In the act of bearing witness the journey is transforming. In body and voice bearing witness, practitioners make of themselves a polyphonic sculptural statement, an altar or a staging, for metamorphosis.

The Altar / The Stage

Night falls and we lay our sleeping mats.

Day breaks and we roll them up.

The one who lays the warp threads must walk back and forth.

Ifa divination verse, medieval period⁵¹

In the oldest sense, performance is a conversation with the universe, an altar to the cosmos, and an engagement with staving off its imminent chaos, in the creation of sites, of theaters, that embody righteous living, accountability, and "effective utterance," like the founding sacred theaters of ancient Egypt. In this spirit, according to Ositola, ritual accompanies the Yoruba initiate in successfully achieving a predestined journey with fate, interceding and negotiating with the ancestors, as they go along on their path, by making use of the proverb, prescription, and divine writing of *Ifa* to navigate the chaos of incomplete knowledge, and as a guide on the road of life.⁵² The *Ifa* divination practice creates an altar for communication and transformation, an altar from which the human journey sets off. And as the history of the *Ifa* divination, which is practiced among Fon as *fá* and among Ewe speakers as *Afa*, "sets the stage" of life's journey, the history of

Ifa in the diaspora begins with the journey embedded in the many texts Africans brought with them into this region, texts drawn from our oldest meditations on the turning of time, the cycles of human life, the seasons, and the universe.

Nzung! N'zungi nzila. Man turns on his path.

N'zungi! N'zungi-nzila. He (merely) turns on his path.

Bamganga bam'el E ee! The priests the same.

Lemba Society ritual verse, Kongo, nineteenth century⁵³

Central African altars also resplendently shape and inform diaspora tradition. The Kongo cosmogram, or sacred ground drawing, and its constellation of diaspora relations, is one radiant example of these webs of connection. Kongo tradition identifies its own first kingdom as looking down from a mountain and the lands of the living and the dead as flipped mirror images walking the same ground. Consonant with the Kongo view of the cosmos, Kongo altars are deeply embedded in landscape and geography, and Bakongo people identify sites of power and transformation in rock, tree, root, and wood formations, in caves, rivers, and road crossings.⁵⁴ According to Thompson, the pervasive presence of Kongo altars is sometimes difficult “to pinpoint.”⁵⁵ Kongo cosmograms articulate these locations, and the existential and cosmological quest and questions presented in the above ritual song, in elaborate circles with crosses drawn within.

Parsing the Kongo inscription of the cross, art and cultural historian Fukiau Kia Bunseki reminds us, “Contrary to what many students have said, the sign of the cross was not introduced into this country and into the minds of its people by foreigners. The cross was known to the BaKongo before the arrival of the Europeans and corresponds to the understanding in their minds of their relationship to the world.” The cross is called *yowa* and is understood as divine inscription given or written by the ancestors. Thompson’s exploration of this form, in *Flash of the Spirit*, reminds us that Cuban descendants of the Bakongo call their neo-African cuneiform *la firma*, or “the signature of the spirits.” The vertical line of the *yowa* represents a path of entrance, a path that crosses into the next world and on which the practitioner symbolically gains wisdom and age. The horizontal

line represents the division between this world and the next. Together these lines mark a point of intersection between the worlds of the living and of the ancestors, a liminal space, an altar of inter-worldly conversation and resultant transformation.⁵⁶

The Bakongo *yowa* sits at the center of a cosmic circle, marks “the four moments of the sun,” as a metaphor for the endless cycle of life. It signifies “the compelling vision,” in Thompson’s words, “of the circular motion of human souls about the circumference of its intersecting lines. . . . Initiates read the cosmogram correctly respecting its allusiveness. God is imagined at the top, the dead at the bottom, and water in between.”⁵⁷ In a performance set on a continuum from ancient time to the present, Bakongo and Bakongo-influenced practitioners enact inscription while singing ritual words, singing and drawing a point, *yimbila ye sona*, according to tradition. Their performance of oath on the symbolic crossroads remembers the relationship between the living and the dead, individual and community, communion and continuity in Bakongo belief and brings divine force, creativity, power, and possibility to the point where the practitioners stand.

Discussing the rich elaboration of Bakongo-rendered stages of spiritual inscription in the diaspora’s fusions of West and Central African traditions, Thompson notes, “There are analogous ground signs, mediatory cuniformal, found among the Tu-Chokwe of northern Angola, the Ndembu of northwestern Zambia, and the Pende of western Zaire, doubtless fragments from a larger, yet to be ‘discovered’ western Bantu field of visual expression.”⁵⁸ Thompson and other scholars recognize a proliferation of related traditions in the diaspora embracing the brilliantly imagined divine inscription in the *veve* of Haitian Vodun, the *firmas* “signatures” of Cuban Abakua religion, the *pontes riscados* “drawn points” of Kongo-influenced sacred practice in Brazil, and the Afro-Christian crosses and calligraphic and liturgical inscriptions of St. Vincent, Trinidad, Tobago, and St. Kitts.⁵⁹ This lineage of practice, particularly those of Trinidad’s “Shouting” Baptists and the Garifuna rites of St. Vincent, including liturgical drawing, sacred “testifying,” and antiphonal plays of rhyme and repetition, also indicate a rich kinship to the sacred ring shout of North America as well as to the vernacular philosophical certainty that what goes around still comes around.

Members,
Plumb the line.
Members,
Plumb the line
O members
Plumb the line
Want to get to Heaven got a plumb the line.
You got to sing right
Plumb the line
You got to sing right
Plumb the line
You got to sing right
Plumb the line
Want to get to Heaven you got a plumb the line
Oh sister
Plumb the line
You got to shout right
Plumb the line

“Plumb the Line,” African American shout, traditional, twentieth century⁶⁰

The lyrics and performance of “Plumb the Line” were recorded by Lydia Parrish in the Gullah communities of the U.S. Georgia Sea Islands, communities rich in African cultural retention in language, linguistics, agriculture, and spiritual practice.⁶¹ In incandescent incidence of cultural synthesis, continuity and change, and the fusions of West and Central Africa in the African diaspora, the Gullah, whose name harks to “Ngola” or Angola, continued to sing songs in the related Mende language of West Africa into the 1930s, when Parrish was collecting.⁶² Their sacred shout performances, like “Plumb the Line,” set the cadence for religious worship in a circular ritual that involves counterclockwise motion; driving repetition; sung, hand-clapped, and stamped antiphonal voice; and lyrical improvisation that addresses each participant by name. Linguist Darwin Turner, whose early work tracing Africanisms in the language among the North and South Carolina Sea Islanders did much to define the discipline

of African American and African diaspora studies as well as to redefine the contours of American history, explored the etymological relationship between the shout and an Arabic *saut*, which means “a dance around the Kaaba.” Contemporary folklorists Jones and Hawes concur with this historical connection, which, though refuted by later scholars, seems to bear further exploration.

The African American shout and the Bakongo oath involve the communal creation of a moment of potentiality and regenerative possibility, a theater, a stage, an altar, for existential drama. Central to this creative act, and the African experience of ritual participation, is the practice and theory of antiphony, or call-and-response, the alternating voices characteristically at the heart of African and African American performance. These alternating voices are a gathering principle for African articulation of ancestry, journey, and witness in transformational articulation. The Yoruba text we began with offers this imperative: “Speak to me,” calls the divination verse, “so that I may speak to you.”

African and African-influenced music and lyrics have made the world familiar with the dynamic dialogs of antiphonal composition and the “stage” these dialogs set for transformative communal creation. The lead line sings, “Wade in the water,” the chorus sings back, and the vision of the divine arises out of the conversation. The communal creation of call-and-response is generously present in a range of African performance and wonderfully mirrored and redoubled in the rhetorical strategies of African diaspora storytelling. “Ago,” we call out in the Twi language of the Akan, calling the people to attention. “Ame,” the people respond, “we are here, we are listening.” In Haiti and Martinique, a game of call-and-response sets and maintains the “stage” for a story in a way that recalls the *ago/ame* exchange of the Akan as well as a similar Ki-Kongo, *riya/raya*, ritual opening to storytelling. “Krick!” the Haitian storyteller calls out, and the community responds, “Krack!” *E’Krii. E’Kraa. E’misticrii/e’misticraa* is the exchange in the storytelling traditions of Martinique. The *krick/krack, e’misticrii/e’misticraa, riya/raya*, and *ago/ame* exchanges all precipitate dynamic communal creation in call-and-response. Contemporary artists working with and within African diaspora traditions, like filmmaker Eulzan Palcy, in her

Sugar Cane Alley, and novelist Patrick Chamoiseau, in his exploration of the death of the oral tradition, *Solibo Magnificent*, deftly use these devices in composing and representing ever transforming identities in performance “in the tradition.”

Since the early years of the diaspora, Africans and their descendants have told the stories, the histories of their nations, through danced and chanted text arising from circles of performance. In the legacy of West and Central African reunification in the African diaspora, a radiant spectrum of sacred practices, including Brazilian Candomblé and Umbanda, Haitian Vodun, Cuban Abakua, and the ring shout of North America, remember the past and represent the cosmos on altars and stages of spiritual performance. Circling, drawing, and re-creating space in motion, embodying the living and the dead, the ancestors and the divine. “Dancing” and, as Charles Frederick writes in his study of the African American spiritual, “singing freedom into being” in vibrant call-and-response over space and time.⁶³

Up on the mountain Jehovah spoke
Out of his mouth came fire and smoke
Wade in the water
Wade in the water children
Wade in the water
God’s going to trouble the water.

“Wade in the Water,” alternative version, nineteenth century⁶⁴

Aa yea yea aa oo
Aa yea yea aa oo
Aa yea yea aa oo

Khoisan healing circle incantation, twentieth century⁶⁵

These rites of remembering and transformation may have roots in ancient migrations, art, and influence, and a storied inquiry into reimagining our mother tongues might fruitfully begin with the dream song dancing circles of Khoisan-language speakers, particularly since, according to proverbial wisdom, “the San is the teacher of us all.” In his *Face of the Gods: Art and Altars of Africa and the African Americas*, Thompson presents the San

healing trance dance, along with the altars of indigenous central Africa, as generative cultural locations.⁶⁶ While Thompson properly cautions against positing of San practices as rites frozen in time, the evidence of their widespread influence is compelling. Genetic evidence, culled from the ongoing human genome project, indicates that contemporary Khoisan speakers are descendants of humankind's oldest lines, the children of our common human beginnings. Linguistic evidence supports this locating of ancestral legacy. Khoisan (or click)–language speakers, including the groups of peoples called “San,” appear to share “genetic markers” from the starting line of human language dispersion and from the deep history of our hunter-gatherer lineage. Pan-African proverb and practice, studies of the archeological records, patterns of inter-African migration, and historical centers of the Atlantic trade—all suggest the influence of San culture in Africa and the African diaspora. Cultural characteristics that we recognize as definitively African are generatively present in their cultural performance.

Central to traditional San culture is the ritual performance of a community healing circle that “sets the stage” for “trance,” journey, and transformation. These ceremonial community circles are woven in call-and-response, using body and voice as instruments to form “a moving altar” of polyrhythmic performance, in hand clapping, foot stamping, yodeling, and singing. The practitioner who enters into trance in the vessel and the vehicle of this performance will travel through cosmic water, a liminal “baptism,” to garner the insight and power, the *N/um*, for community healing. In the multiple “rings” of the healing circle, those who will “trance,” practitioners, healers, both men and women, circle the fire and are brought into their power by the circle of incantation and movement, dance, sound and song surrounding them. The songs, the rhythms, that will carry the healer on this essential journey are drawn, traditionally, from dreams. Ancestral presences, known and unknown, form a numinous “outer” circling.

San practice may in fact present a window into the deep history of ritual performance; the reenactment of the cycles of life, stars, planets, and seasons; and the embodied reconstruction of the torn universe at the root of our theater traditions. Like the mysteries and passion plays of antiquity, from the Isis/Osiris of rituals of ancient Egypt to their restatement in the

Greek Elysian and Orphic rites, the circles of Khoisan speakers dream song dance healing performances represent an older knowing. Surely the songs of the wandering indigenous inhabitants of a wide swath of the African continent, northeast to south and notably the central African region of Angola, also echo in the diaspora in ways that can illuminate our visioning and re-visioning.⁶⁷

Hush, Hush, Somebody's Calling My Name

Hush, Hush, somebody's calling my name

Hush, Hush, somebody's calling my name

Oh lord oh lord what shall I do?

"Hush, Hush, Somebody's Calling My Name," African American spiritual, traditional⁶⁸

Among the rare early publications by writers of the African diaspora is *The Interesting Narrative of Olaudah Equiano or Gustavus Vasa the African Written by Himself*, which he first published with Leeds of London in 1789. In his narrative the abolitionist and mariner Olaudah Equiano (or Enkwuno) weaves a tapestry of story, memoir, autobiography, history, and exacting moral argument against the enslavement of the African brethren. His story and the story of his sister, whose name is never called in this writing, resound in our collective memory and call us to some fundamental questions.

Equiano begins his narrative with recollections of an African homeland, in a remote area of the current-day Benin province of Nigeria, and of its "manners and customs," including how he was named "Olaudah," meaning "one favored and having a loud voice."⁶⁹ In the course of his epic storytelling, Equiano tells of being kidnapped with his sister, as a child of eleven, and of two children bound, gagged, and marched through the woods by their abductors, then torn from each other's arms and sold to different "masters." "I cried and grieved continually; and for several days did not eat anything but what they forced in my mouth," he writes.⁷⁰ Equiano recalls being taken from town to town, sold from hand to hand, occasionally joining caravans of other bound women, men, and mostly children, while being taken ever farther from home, and seeing his sister once again, in the

household of a strange town, before they were separated once more and he was embarked on the slave ship that brought him to the North American mainland. He recalls the “pestilential air” of the slave ship, “the shrieks of the women and the groans of the dying,” and the spirits of those who escaped by drowning. He writes of persisting thoughts of suicide and of the saving grace of kinship. “In a little time after, amongst the poor chained men, I found some of my own nation, which in a small degree gave ease to my mind. I inquired of these what was to be done with us. They gave me to understand we were to be carried to these white people’s country to work for them. I was then a little revived, and I thought if it were no worse than working, my situation was not so desperate.”⁷¹

He writes of arriving in Virginia, “continually grieving and pining for death rather than anything else,” and of entering a plantation house and seeing an enslaved black woman cooking with irons around her legs and a muzzle over her head and mouth, a muzzle “locked so fast that she could scarcely speak, and could not eat or drink.”⁷² He recalls being called “Michael” on the first slave ship, then “Jacob” on the plantation, and later Gustavus Vasa “the African” after fate brought him back to the sea and the slave ships, first as an enslaved hand and subsequently as a nominally free black sailor with a growing reputation for competence at his craft. His recollections of life at sea, in Europe and the West Indies, including taking charge of a slave ship and saving the lives of the people held captive in its hold, its crew, and its incompetent captain, compose the bulk of Equiano’s narrative of an interesting life indeed, a narrative in which Equiano claims the authority of his experience and the prophetic power of his name to call for the abolition of slavery.

While contemporary historians have come to question the veracity of Equiano’s story of African origins, citing documents that indicate he was born in the U.S. state of South Carolina (not, may I say, an uncommon phenomena among migrants and immigrants in my personal experience) and the historical complexity of his claim to Ibo (Eboe) ethnicity, his travels as well as his literary prowess are well documented; so is the veracity of the collective memory he represents. His narrative, this narrative of a global citizen in an era marked by African identities in transformation

and the idea of Western “self-invention,” does in fact authentically tell the story of many.⁷³ *The Interesting Narrative of Olaudah Equiano* remains a “founding” text in the African diaspora literary tradition and a prototype for the “slave narratives” of thousands of women and men bearing witness and testifying to the humanity, and right to freedom, of the African and against the inhumanity of the institution of slavery. Henry Louis Gates points to Equiano’s narrative as “the silent second text” within *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*. Equiano and those narrators who followed in his wake wrote, and rewrote, in and against discourses on race, hegemonic narratives arising specifically from and in support of what began as European trade, raids, and incursions on the African continent and had become systems of economic, political, and historical domination that continue to bedevil us in our time.⁷⁴

Sounds like Jesus
Somebody’s calling my name
Sounds like Jesus
Somebody’s calling my name
Oh Lord, oh lord what shall I do?

I am a poor pilgrim of sorrow
I’m in this wide world alone
No hope in this world for tomorrow
I’m trying to make heaven my home.

“City Called Heaven,” African American spiritual, traditional⁷⁵

Europe and the burgeoning settler colonial nations of the Americas were writing their own narratives in the eighteenth century and creating what North American historian Nathan Huggins would call a “deforming mirror of truth” and “a holy history.” And this “conspiracy of myth, history, and chauvinism served to create an ideology as the dominant historical motif against which all history would resonate. In the United States, Huggins reminds us, “this ‘master narrative’ like the constitution itself, could find no place at its center for racial slavery or the racial caste system which followed emancipation.”⁷⁶ The canonical practice of “literature” as a sister

discipline, and in the most ancient poetic tradition, a twin practice, has certainly wrestled with the same demons. In his narrative Equiano aptly presents himself as a “poor pilgrim,” a stranger, attempting to shine a light on the strange land he has come to live in.

Didn't my Lord deliver Daniel
Deliver Daniel
Deliver Daniel
Didn't my Lord deliver Daniel
So why not every man?

“Didn't My Lord Deliver Daniel,” African American spiritual, traditional⁷⁷

The performed narratives of Africa and the diaspora propose deliverance in the chronicling.

Oh where oh where is Ma Teodora? / She's chopping sugar cane.
With her bongo and bandola? / Yes chopping sugar cane.
Ah poor Ma Teodora. / She's chopping sugar cane. / She's chopping
sugar cane.

“Ma Teodora,” work song, Cuba, sixteenth century⁷⁸

We have, of course, been speaking generally, riffing on Equiano's powerful story, but can fruitfully now listen for the specific experience and articulation of the women of the diaspora. For me, the silent text within Equiano's narrative is the story of his sister's journey, the voice of the woman whose mouth was chained shut, the haunting presence of the girls and women he encountered “in the pestilential air” of the slave ships. The Cuban song “Ma Teodora” lets us know that African women in the earliest centuries of slavery in these regions consciously held on to the instruments and identities of their home though laboring in bondage and knew themselves to be both cane cutters and musicians, both enslaved workers and the mediums of their royal ancestors. The song “Ma Teodora” sings enduring humanity and continuing virtuosity against the pernicious dehumanization of the slave system, in the antiphonal, community building, and historicizing three-line blues structure of griot recitation. In this people's herstory, we are reminded, as was the community of singing

workers at the time of the song's recording, that though, like Teodora, Africans took on the names and language of their enslavement, and were embattled and torn by its violence, they held on to, among their own people, the titles of their homelands.⁷⁹ In the "bantering" performance of "Ma Teodora" are powerful examples of African women's names for themselves and of what Angela Davis, in *Women Race and Class*, called the "standards for a new womanhood," which African women wrested from their enslavement.⁸⁰

The prodigious performance of her story in the belly of the beast of slavery is also evident in recordings of the songs of African people in eighteenth-century Jamaica, apart from work, in a circle of gathering, movement, and incantation.

If me want to go in a Ebo. Me can't go there.
Since them thief me from a Guinea. Me can't go there,
Since them thief me from my tata. Me can't go there.
If me want to go in a Kingstown. Me can't go there.
Since massa go in a England. Me can't go there.
If me want to go in a Congo. Me can't go there.
Since them thief me from my tatta. Me can't go there.
If me want to go to Kingstown. Me can't go there.
Since massa go in a England. Me can't go there.⁸¹

The first contains a chronicling, a longing, a knowing, a remembering, and layers of meaning hidden within, recalling both the multitudinous expressive languages of home and the violently renting upheaval of the journey into slavery.⁸² The second records a circular performance of a song in a woman's voice.

Hipsaw! My dear! You no do like a-me!
You no jig like a-me! You no twist like a-me.
Hipsaw! My dear! You no shake like a-me!
You no wind like a-me! Go-yondaa!
Hipsaw! My dear! You no jig like a-me.
You no work like a-me! You no sweet him like a-me!

Jamaica. Turning their words over in my mouth, I think of our street recitations, of Olaudah Equiano's missing sister, and of the particular violence against women on the slave ships and on the plantations, the forced "dancing," the woman muzzled, chained, and cooking, the unremitting psychosexual abuse of the deforming narrative he and others do bear witness to, and I find myself leaning in more closely, listening for her telling.