

COMPOSING THE AFRICAN ATLANTIC: SUN RA, FELA ANIKULAPO-KUTI,
AND THE POETICS OF AFRICAN DIASPORIC COMPOSITION

A Dissertation Presented

by

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DEDICATION

VJ & ZB, ke a lo rata mo go maswe. Lo a itse tota.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Following from Walter Rodney's contention that all historical work is part of a collective, discursive endeavor (1981: vii-viii), I will not claim that all errors contained within this dissertation are mine alone. I will offer, though, my apologies if I have unintentionally misrepresented or misunderstood someone's actions, or if my analysis has not yet achieved the clarity of thought my subject deserves. All interpretive historical work is part of the larger discourse which helps us to define who we are in the world.

Many people helped me in ways big and small, and I wish I had the forum to properly thank them individually. First my dissertation committee: Steve Tracy, Olabode Omojola, John Bracey, and Jim Smethurst. Singling out my advisor only for the sake of brevity, Steve Tracy encouraged me from beginning to end – in truth, before I was even accepted to this graduate program – and truly showed me what a depthful scholar coupled with a wicked musician looked like. *Merci bien*.

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bands uncommon; Grace Hampton shared her experience of visiting the Africa Shrine in Lagos, Nigeria in 1977 during FESTAC. Speaking with her reminded me of Fela's relatively un-checked attitudes toward women, causing me to delve a bit deeper into the gender dynamics of Fela's music, family, and politics; The people at Ade's Dream in Hillsborough, Carriacou made me feel comfortable and welcome when I needed an affordable hotel room to get away from my life and pump out some writing. I certainly felt comfortable, only itching to finish my writing and leave because I missed my wife and daughter. Hit it and quit it, I always say; Alan Chase spent a very helpful few hours with me, answering questions and sharing his personal memories of Sun Ra as well as his concerns for the maintenance of Sun Ra's legacy. I met Alan at a tribute concert at the Berklee College of Music for a mutual acquaintance of ours, Rich Ehrman, who passed away much too soon (Rich was also a friend of Michael Veal's and is mentioned in the acknowledgements for Veal's biography of Fela). The brief concert, for which Alan played Baritone sax, included a multimedia performance of slides depicting the rules and strategies of chess (Rich's favorite game) accompanied by a large group performance of Sun Ra's "El is a sound of joy." The performance captured much of the interest and dignity Sun Ra's music holds for me. In addition to the standard rhythm section, brass, and woodwinds, the band included: Rich's wife Liz (my friend and former bandmate) playing cello; a second bassist playing the electric bass with a bottleneck slide; a kora player; and an nguni player. The eclectic experience of this particular ten minutes of music and visual presentation was powerfully touching.

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brothers-in-law (brothers, really) Michael, Martin and Mark and their respective families for all of their love; My parents, Brian and Lois Carroll, helped my family and I in many ways big and small as they always have. My mother's maiden name (no kidding) is Lois Lane. Does that make my dad Superman?; I thank my incomparable brothers Brian and Dave, our radiant sister Lane, and our departed brother Andy – the true butt-kicker of the family – for their past, present, and future presence in my life. Even when they are not with me, they are with me.

My beautiful and brilliant daughter Zanaya did not care that I was writing my dissertation. For that I will always be grateful. My beautiful and brilliant wife Valerie cared very much that I was writing my dissertation, encouraging and supporting my work in every way possible. For that I will also always be grateful.

ABSTRACT

COMPOSING THE AFRICAN ATLANTIC: SUN RA, FELA ANIKULAPO-KUTI, AND THE POETICS OF AFRICAN DIASPORIC COMPOSITION

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This dissertation undertakes a comparative analysis of the musical, written, and spoken production of Sun Ra and Fela Anikulapo-Kuti with respect to the larger African Atlantic intellectual environment, situating the two artists as both shapers of an Atlantic intellectual culture as well as artists who were, in turn, shaped by that culture. Through a reading of their creative work, the dissertation argues that, even given the obvious cultural, temporal, and temperamental differences between Sun Ra and Fela, both artists' orientations toward musical composition and performance share similar preoccupations with the recitation of cultural memory and the dialogic creation of historical narratives which is called Composing the African Atlantic. In the dissertation the concept Composing the African Atlantic is proposed as a means of describing an African diasporic version of musical composition which includes many of the so-called extramusical elements of text and performance – audience participation and dialogue being key – as constitutive elements of composition such that, in their absence, the music is not fully realized. Stated in the active present tense (Composing), identified as

culturally rooted (African), and formed within a broad and discursively contested space (Atlantic), *Composing the African Atlantic* describes the means by which composers such as Sun Ra and Fela Anikulapo-Kuti conceive of performance as an essential part of composition, enabling the musicians and audience to craft the true Text of the music through the activation of communal memory and the dialogic contestation of history. The result, in the case of both artists, is the creation of a singular compositional and performative style which maintains its connection to its core audience through the use of ritualized concert performance, the challenging of historical myths, and the performance of historical narratives which refute the Hegelian contention that Africa is “no historical part of the world.” In the process, both artists assert that there is a common African cultural memory which exists throughout the African diaspora as a result, fundamentally, of the Atlantic slave trade, but which is also a living, contemporary, cosmopolitan dialectic of representation and re-presentation.

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CHAPTER 1 – COMPOSING THE AFRICAN ATLANTIC: AN INTRODUCTION

Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly found, given and transmitted from the past. The tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living. And just when they seem engaged in revolutionizing themselves and things, in creating something entirely new, precisely in such epochs of revolutionary crisis they anxiously conjure up the spirits of the past to their service and borrow from them names, battle slogans and costumes in order to present the new scene of world history in this time-honored disguise and this borrowed language.

Karl Marx, “The eighteenth brumaire of Louis Bonaparte” (1978: 595)

We make up stories about the past, and our own social and political positions have everything to do with what stories we choose to tell. History as a genre is a powerful language of political justification, but it has no power to lead us to an understanding of what really happened.

Ellen Somekawa and Elisabeth A. Smith, “Theorizing the writing of history” (1988: 154)

Overview of the dissertation:

Composing the African Atlantic is a means of describing an African diasporic version of musical composition that includes, out of cultural necessity, many of the so-called extramusical elements of text and performance – audience participation and dialogue being key – as constitutive elements of composition such that, in their absence, the music is not fully realized. Stated in the active present tense (composing), identified as culturally rooted (African), and formed within a broad and discursively contested space (Atlantic), composing the African Atlantic describes the means by which composers such as Sun Ra and Fela Anikulapo-Kuti conceive of performance as an essential part of composition, enabling the musicians and audience to craft the true Text of the music through the activation of communal memory and the dialogic contestation of history. Though this dissertation does not argue that composing the African Atlantic

characterizes all of African diasporic musical composition, the narrow focus on two artists allows one to begin to grasp just how, in some cases, the message certainly exceeds the medium.¹

In the wording of the dissertation title I have purposefully left out the word *music*. I had written *musical composition*, and then tried *composition of music* and *composition with music*, all of which seem awkward and ugly. Though I would like for someone to know that this is a dissertation about music when they look at the title – a quick-scan technique I would imagine many people use – the central point of this dissertation is that *composing the African Atlantic* is meant to be a multifaceted complex of artistic procedures and practices such that the word *composition* should stand unqualified in all of its various meanings:² ontological (**composition**), epistemological (**composition**), temporal (**composition**), artistic and associative (**compos(e)ition**), verbal (**composition**), musical (**Composition**),³ spatial (**composition**), social and orchestral (**composition**), reactive and choreographic (**composition**), chemical and regenerative (**composition**), attitudinal and stylistic (**compos(e)ition**).... In any event, the purpose of this quasi-etymological riff on composition is that it highlights one of the more important facets of this idea (not theory) of composing the African Atlantic: the music is always there, but it is not all there is. Composing the African Atlantic is certainly about composing music in all of the various ways that are associated with what I will call formal composition –

¹ This is, of course, an inversion of Marshall McLuhan's famous phrase "the medium is the message" (McLuhan 1964: 7-21).

² Here I am thinking of Derrida's description of the de/constructive loosening of the center in the Sign which leaves the signifier open to multiple signified meanings (Derrida 1978: 278-93).

³ A little nod here to Edouard Glissant who differentiates between history and the other thing that Hegel wrote – "History with a capital H" – in his friendly disagreement with Derek Walcott's statement that "History is irrelevant in the Caribbean" (Glissant 1989: 61-67; Walcott 1998: 36-64).

songwriting, improvising, listening, writing, singing, playing, inscribing, and orchestrating music – but is also, and more importantly, a broader matrix of socially determined and enacted creative procedures that include, but are not restricted to: the communal activation of collective memory; the deconstruction and reconstruction of history; the dialogically mediated discourses of historical and political consciousness; the imaginative enactment of alternative futures and alternative Orders built on a foundation of history; the communal assertion of identity and genealogy; the celebration of escape from the work week; the mediation of new social contacts, love interests, rivalries, and disputes;....

All of this is to say that formal musical composition, as such, is the mere tip of the iceberg of sound, signified meaning, and feeling that is created when composers such as Sun Ra and Fela compose and perform music, live and on record. Certainly formal composition is a fascinating aspect of music that thrills composers and musicians to no end as they pick apart musical compositions to better understand how a composer whose works they love has crafted a particular passage or structured a section of a composition. But if one only approaches the sounding⁴ and reading of music in such a narrowly defined and reductive manner one misses all of the culturally determined nuances of sound, sight, smoke, alcohol, temperature, touch, or what have you which are not only to be expected when one encounters the music but which are, arguably, constitutive parts of

⁴ Fred Moten uses the word “sounding” as a means of rejecting the ocularcentrism associated with the word “reading” when it is applied either to sound or to poetry that is intended to be heard. In a comment on Cecil Taylor’s music and poetry Moten writes that certain ideas and images “are improvised in/ his sounding of them that I won’t read and can’t transcribe” (Moten 2003: 46). Sounding, then, is not used here in the same sense that Henry Louis Gates and Geneva Smitherman assign to the black vernacular rhetorical strategy called *sounding*, which employs insults in a manner that are several shades less subtle than Signifyin(g) (Gates 1988: 80, 81, 94; Smitherman 1977: 119-20).

the music's composition. Without these added – for want of a better term – extramusical dimensions of composition, the music may seem abstract, one-dimensional, and sometimes merely polemic for polemic's sake; the music would be stripped of much of its meaning, being relegated to the status of aestheticized object which merely exists as a commodity and a distraction from the true business of life. Paul Gilroy observes that much of black musical performance is conceived as a means of overcoming the performer-audience divide which is a central feature of European performance aesthetics but which is inconsistent with an African diasporic sensibility. In this reconstituted sense of performance, the “relationship between the performer and the crowd is transformed in dialogic rituals so that spectators acquire the active role of participants in collective processes which are sometimes cathartic and which may symbolize or even create community” (1991: 214). Gilroy writes that more than any one formal aspect of music, the fundamental “Africanism” of African diasporic musics lies in,

...the ubiquity of antiphonal social forms that underpin and enclose the plurality of black cultures in the Western hemisphere. A relationship of identity is enacted in the way that the performer dissolves into the crowd. Together, they collaborate in a creative process governed by formal and informal democratic rules (1993: 200).⁵

More than the simple formation of a sense of community, though, black musical performance often becomes a means by which the performers and the audience create stories together through the collective adoption of a discursive stance that closely resembles Walter Benjamin's description of the archetypical storyteller: one who steps outside a culture, fashions narratives of that culture, collects the “news” from abroad, and

⁵ By “antiphonal social forms” Gilroy is referring to Sterling Stuckey's discussion of the central importance of ring shout, with its characteristic call-and-response (antiphony), to the overall formation of African American cultural identity (Stuckey 1987: 3-97).

presents a newly constructed narrative that flies in the face of cultural conservatism (1968: 83-109). In the performance of music, the multiplicity of narratives are dramatized, presented in such a way that the “simple *content* of the stories is dominated by the ritual act of story-telling itself” (Gilroy 1993: 200) [emphasis in the original]. The stories of origins, of escape, of community morality, of social negotiation, and so on, that were vital to the formation of African diasporic communities are often constructed and contested, to varying degrees, within the dialogic, antiphonal processes of performance.

Both story-telling and music-making contributed to an alternative public sphere, and this in turn produced the context in which the particular styles of autobiographical self-dramatization and public self-construction have been formed and circulated as an integral component of insubordinate racial countercultures (200).

The purpose of this dissertation is to begin to articulate how this dialogic process exists as a constitutive part of the act of musical composition such that merely describing it as musical composition strips away several layers of expressive meaning and substance, relegating the composition (the noun, the thing) to the status of something less than a fully realized Text. Defined in its living, action-oriented state, composing the African Atlantic (the verb, the action) is a performance-oriented process which composes the Text of the music in its communally negotiated, dialogic form.⁶ The individual “composer,” as such, is certainly a significant person in this process, without whom the composition would not exist; but the final process of composing is one that is socially mediated rather than solitary, dialogic rather than contemplative, active and changing rather than monumental and iconic.

⁶ I should note a rhetorical similarity between the title of this dissertation and the title of Kelly Askew’s book on Swahili *taarab* music *Performing the nation: Swahili music and cultural politics in Tanzania* (2002), though Askew’s work is concerned with the role of musical performance in creating a sense of Tanzanian nationalism.

In its articulation of composing the African Atlantic, this dissertation proposes an analysis of the musical, written, and spoken production of Fela Anikulapo-Kuti and Sun Ra. Identifying and locating these two composers within the larger African Atlantic intellectual environment, they are broadly situated within the larger cultural field as both shapers of an Atlantic intellectual culture as well as artists who were shaped by that culture. Despite the cultural, geographical, and generational differences between the two artists – Fela was a Nigerian artist whose professional career began in the 1960s while Sun Ra was an African American artist whose career began in the 1930s – both artists exhibit, in their musical and extramusical production, a similar orientation toward the creation of music as a means of political and artistic expression, offering a template from which one might re-define one’s life in opposition to the societal status quo. Through a sounding and reading of these artists’ sources within the context of the broader political and artistic production of the African Atlantic, this dissertation will analyze the work of these two artists – most often discussed within Western academic discourses as being distinct and separate from the work of their cultural peers – as having been created with the conscious intent of engaging their audiences in a discursive process that transcends the sale of concert tickets and musical recordings. As with many of their contemporaries who sought to innovate the literature and music of their time through reference to their cultural past, both Fela and Sun Ra clearly drew upon the vernacular cultures of their communities, absorbing and re-presenting them in ways that were, at the same time, artistically and politically innovative while maintaining firm connections to their core vernacular communities. But more importantly perhaps, the music that Fela and Sun Ra created was not composed in the fixed and iconic sense that one understands when

considering a musical composition by Mozart or Wagner – the formal elements are present and remain roughly the same from performance to performance, but the true text of the composition is only realized in the socially and dialogically determined moment of its performance.

In choosing two artists who are separated both temporally and geographically, it is one of the aims of this dissertation to address the issue of politicized musical production across Africa and the African diaspora.⁷ While much has been written within musicology about the historical transmission of African musical materials and practices to the Americas and the Caribbean (Kubik 1999; Oliver 1970; Waterman 1967), less has been written about the modern multi-directional exchange of musical and other cultural artifacts between Africa, Europe, and North America, facilitated by the exchange of musical recordings, books, and trans-Atlantic travel. Since the publication of Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic* (1993), in particular, authors have begun to explore the idea that cultures often conceived of and portrayed as being separated along racially-determined national lines (e.g., African American culture as purely distinct from other American cultures) actually exist in fluid conversation with others – communities that have maintained historical connections with one another across the African diaspora, aided by

⁷ In this dissertation I will be focusing on the Atlantic side of the African Diaspora as a means of limiting the geographical scope. Though there has been some call for a widening of the area to include, for instance, the British imperial diasporas of the Pacific (Pocock 1975), the primary geographical conduit that connects Nigeria with North America is the Atlantic. There is some ethnomusicological literature that notes the cultural exchanges of the Indian ocean (Askew 2002) as well as exchanges across the Sahara desert (Charry 2000), though these influences are not central to the current project.

the improved lines of communication that are a broad result of a developing and increasingly interdependent global economy.⁸

Given such fluidity of communication, modern artists such as Fela and Sun Ra were able to develop their innovative musical practices with the benefits of travel, the global distribution of musical recordings, and the expanded acquisitions of modern libraries and bookstores. As intellectuals in an increasingly heterogeneous intellectual environment, both artists contributed to, and were shaped by, the multiple and often conflicting discourses that have shaped modern aesthetics and politics, creating music and contributing to the extramusical discourses that challenged the state of the world around them, while also providing their audiences with a reassuring connection to their vernacular artistic traditions. While the music of these two artists is unique, personal, and grounded in their individual communities, both artists were clearly able to benefit from the exchange of ideas which were current among a wide community of intellectuals across the African Atlantic. As such, Fela's music is at once grounded in traditional Yoruba musical materials while drawing freely upon late 1950s modal jazz, 1960s James Brown funk, and 1960s Black Power and Pan-African ideologies; Sun Ra's music is grounded in spirituals, ragtime, and swing-era jazz while also anticipating the free jazz movement of the 1960s and drawing upon the early Afrocentric and Egyptocentric writers and theosophists as sources of historical information and cultural inspiration.

⁸ Though Gilroy's work is influential, generating much scholarly interest in the broad creative dynamics of African diasporic cultures, it is certainly not the first work to emphasize the cultural hybridity of people of African descent in Europe, the Caribbean and the Americas. Perhaps one of the more prescient works is Edouard Glissant's *Caribbean discourse* (1989), a collection of essays written in the 1960s and 1970s which was first published in French in 1981.

Importantly, both Fela and Sun Ra exhibited conscious engagement in political and historical discourses. This is not to say that other musicians did not express political or historical consciousness in their music (e.g., Franco, James Brown, Los Van Van, etc.), but the fact that Fela and Sun Ra were prolific and explicit with their thoughts allows me the luxury of being able to formulate my ideas with the benefit of a vast and easily available corpus of cultural production. Both artists were also, for want of a better term, Afrocentric intellectuals. Though Afrocentrism is an often contended and contentious discourse with regard to the history of African diasporic peoples,⁹ its consciously formed set of ideological positions allows for an audience to either instantly buy in, wonder in puzzlement, or reject outright. In other words, Afrocentrism is an intellectual position from which it is hard to remain neutral. This lack of neutrality aids one's ability to discuss the dialogic relationship between performers and audience, making it difficult to fall back on the insistently false axiom that music is an apolitical art form which makes for an easy distraction from life. One would be hard pressed, and in some way possibly incapacitated, to experience the music of composers such as Fela and Sun Ra in an entirely passive manner.

In choosing these two musicians one of my intentions is to highlight the ways in which both Fela and Sun Ra not only facilitated extensive and uncompromising critiques of their respective societies – Fela's critique of the neo-colonial regime of modern Nigeria and Sun Ra's critique of the ideological hegemony of Eurocentrism – but also to

⁹ Critiques of modern Afrocentrism run from the thoughtful (Moses 1998) to the repulsive (Lefkowitz 1996). While there is no space in this dissertation to run down the gamut of writings on Afrocentrism and Afrocentric history, I do share Wilson Moses's contention that popular cultural versions of history are important means of understanding the totality of a culture and the ways in which people fashion stories about themselves (17).

highlight the ways in which these artists lived their lives as unconventional examples within and without these systems, proposing social and epistemological alternatives to the dominant ideologies of their respective societies. While both musicians were known to have fashioned their lives in ways that have been dismissively labeled as utopian by some commentators, a closer consideration of their lives reveals that both artists lived within carefully constructed alternative communities of fellow musicians, family, and friends in an attempt to move beyond simple textual critique toward a material representation of their critique. Graham Lock, in his book titled *Blutopia*, proposes that the work of Sun Ra, Anthony Braxton, and Duke Ellington can be read as counter-discourses which fly in the face of Eurocentric history and historical thought.¹⁰ Defining Blutopia as a “blues-tinged utopia,” Lock suggests that these musicians’ conceptions of performance and composition were such that they viewed music as a form of historical remembrance and revision as well as a means for realizing an epistemological alternative to European hegemonic dominance (Lock 1999: 2).¹¹

And in the fashioning of their communities, both Fela and Sun Ra, in a manner similar to that of Ellington, acted not only as musical and intellectual leaders but as the principal loci of larger collective ensembles. These ensembles were long standing groups, even given the frequent comings and goings of personnel. But in both cases, despite the fact that their groups were collectives of individuals (some of whom, as with the case of

¹⁰ “Blutopia” is also the title of a short composition by Ellington, recorded at his 1944 concerts at Carnegie Hall (1991).

¹¹ While I am paraphrasing Lock, I am also extending his analysis by my word choice. In place of the word *epistemology* Lock uses the unfortunate phrase “gateway to ‘another reality’” (2). I choose, instead, to use the word *epistemology* in place of this phrase not as a standard Kantian construction, but more in line with Maghan Keita’s term *alternative epistemology*, which he deploys as a means of describing the primary philosophical impulse of Afrocentrism (2000: 7). This idea will be developed in more detail later in this chapter and in chapter 5.

Tony Allen, may have contributed more to the rehearsal and repertoire of the band than is usually admitted (Fairfax 1993: 358)), the sound and form of these collectives were primarily shaped by the singular creative vision – a creative insistence – of the band leaders Sun Ra and Fela. This leadership took many forms, both inspiring (e.g., Sun Ra’s expressed role of teacher rather than musician (Primack 1978: 14)) and problematic (e.g., frequent grumbling about Fela’s dictatorial style (Olaniyan 2004: 108-12)), but in both instances it is the cohesive, defining element of the music, situated in the locus of the composer. In the process of creating this narrative I do not mean to perpetuate a common dynamic within jazz historiography that Krin Gabbard calls “auteurism”: the focusing of attention on a heroic individual musician which tends to discount the contributions of the musicians around them and which diminishes the broader social, cultural, and intellectual contexts of the music (1995: 5). Though it remains to be seen if I can successfully avoid this common trap, the purpose of this dissertation is to situate the work of these composers within their intellectual environment and historical moment, identifying them as individuals only insofar as they are the musical loci of their respective groups.

Fela and Sun Ra were self-proclaimed composers, both having received formal training in European art music musicianship and composition, and both having developed their musical skills through jazz and jazz-influenced performance.¹² Both composers are clearly jazz composers in the sense that they composed melodies, harmonies, rhythms,

¹² Throughout this dissertation I will use the awkward term *European art music* where others may use the term *classical* in order to describe the European musical tradition, which has come to rely, primarily, on score-based composition. The word *classical* more precisely refers to an era of this tradition that is most often represented by the works of Mozart, Haydn, and early Beethoven. As I do occasionally refer to different eras of the European art music tradition as a kind of aesthetic shorthand, the avoidance of the over-arching term *classical music* ultimately saves some confusion. In addition, the word *classical* imparts a canonic status to the music which often excludes the musical traditions of non-European cultures, whereas the term *European art music* indicates an aestheticized musical tradition that originated, broadly, in Europe.

and words in a manner that left space for both personal expression and improvisation. And yet, labeling Fela and Sun Ra as jazz composers – composers in the same sense as Charles Mingus and Duke Ellington – is somehow not a sufficient descriptor of how they composed music: both artists created distinctive, personal styles which, to one degree or another, qualified them as outlying members of what Salim Washington calls the “perpetual avant garde” of jazz (2004: 28). But where Washington’s perpetual avant-garde is applied to the entirety of jazz as a result of its searching, creative impulse, Fela and Sun Ra fall into a category of musicians and composers who are often not viewed as members of their core communities (an avant-garde of the perpetual avant-garde?). While one can certainly parse the many strands of music and ideology embedded in their music, though, both Fela and Sun Ra were indisputable composers; one can argue as to whether they were good composers or whether they had composerly skills, but these arguments usually fail in the face of such large oeuvres of work – Fela alone recorded and released more than 80 LP-length recordings of music (Veal 2000: 12) – as well as the volume of critical praise for their work by musicians, musicologists, and audience members alike. Presented with such evidence it is not necessary to present an argument for their status as composers – the argument is already convincingly made.

But one of the reasons why I felt it was important to write about composers who are often identified as such is to guard against the idea that, given my overall focus on the extramusical elements of composition, I was either denying that Fela and Sun Ra were truly composers – that their real creativity lay elsewhere – or that I was attempting to justify their status as composers by adding layers of activity and meaning to their works in order to compensate for weak compositional skills. Neither of these things is true. Nor

do I care to argue as to whether Fela and Sun Ra are composers given that they often did not rely upon the use of written scores (though they sometimes did, Sun Ra more so than Fela); this seems to me to be a vestige of a visual and logocentric bias in musicology that values written proof that a composer did or did not intend for musicians to play particular passages – that the composer had some sort of reasoned and fully realized conception of what the music should be before the musicians played it.¹³ My intention with this dissertation is to argue that formal composition is certainly an important aspect of composing the African Atlantic, but it is not the *sine qua non*. Rather, formal composition is one facet of a multifaceted creative practice that seeks to create opportunities to engage musicians and audience in a socially-structured dialogic and discursive experience: an opportunity for musicians and audience to commune and discuss history, culture, memory, the present, and the future.

Also, I have to admit that I chose to write about these two artists because I love their music and wanted to understand it better. I have found it to be a fascinating exercise to hold the examples of these two composers side by side, thinking about their collective musical and extramusical works in a comparative and critical manner. My intent has not been to arrive at some universal and unifying theory about what is and is not musical composition in the African diaspora, but rather to play out an improvisational, ensemblic sounding and reading of the work of these two artists that simultaneously draws them together, identifies them as individuals, and situates them within the broader context of

¹³ Philip Bohlman notes the visual bias of musicology that emphasizes the transcription of music in place of hearing (1993: 420). In a critique of visual bias in ethnographic description, Stephen Tyler writes that the hegemonic nature of this bias creates a sense that the Western conflation of thinking with seeing is a seemingly natural phenomenon: it “promotes the notions that structure and process are fundamentally different and that the latter, which is only sequentiality, can always be reduced to the former, which is simultaneity, so that being dominates becoming, actuality dominates possibility” (1984: 23).

African diasporic expressivity – to articulate a musical practice that exists as an integral, corporate part of a larger cultural matrix which also includes poetry, prose, dance, drama, two-dimensional and three-dimensional visual arts, story telling, spiritual expression, political expression, historical re/vision.... In other words, music is an aspect of the cultural matrix that is much more inclusive than exclusive, hearing and experiencing music as part of the larger Text of stories people tell about themselves. This is not to say that the music is not, sometimes, simply a diversion from everyday life – everyone deserves a break from the daily grind. But even in this seemingly apolitical escapism, as will be discussed in chapter two, there is a political dimension in the escape from the demands of an industrially-defined work week and the prescriptive rules of place. My intention here is not to describe what all people experience all the time when they encounter this music and musics that are similarly composed, but rather to describe some of the layers of meaning and expressiveness that are constitutive elements of the musical experience such that one must broaden the conception of musical composition to include them.

Finally,¹⁴ in placing the work of Sun Ra and Fela within the larger Atlantic intellectual environment this project will situate the two artists within an intellectual field that is characterized by both the multi-directional exchanges of ideas and artistic materials and practices as well as a politicized discourse which ties the aesthetic to issues

¹⁴ In all honesty I also have to admit that, *finally* finally, I chose only two artists so as to limit the scope of the dissertation: an eminently practical decision. When expanding the dissertation into a book manuscript I will likely choose only one or two more composers as loci, but I will bring in much more musical, literary, and historical evidence in order to broaden and deepen my analysis. But in addition to the merely practical considerations of writing an extended text, the continued limitation of historical subjects helps to define the text as something more akin to Foucault's "history of problems" than to a work of cultural history – locating "specific intellectual[s]" within a discipline rather than attempting the monumental task of defining the discipline or era or some such other label (2000b: 223-38).

of identity, nationality, and trans-nationality. Though not much has been written about the direct connections among these musicians and specific writers and politicians – excepting, for the moment, examples such as the inspiration Fela drew from reading *The autobiography of Malcolm X*, which will be discussed in chapter 4 – it is not the intention of this project to either unearth connections that may have existed or speculate about connections that may have been. Instead, this project will place Sun Ra and Fela within the context of their contemporaries, commenting upon the continuities and discontinuities between their work and the work of other musicians, writers and politicians of the time. In his biography of Fela, Michael Veal quotes Larry Neal’s speculation about what one might gain if “James Brown read Franz Fanon” (Neal 1987: 18; Veal 2000: 241). The aim of this project is not to prove that there did exist a musician who fit this description so much as to observe that Fela was a musician who, like his contemporaries across the African diaspora, was greatly moved and motivated by listening to James Brown and reading Franz Fanon – he was truly a product of his contemporary intellectual environment. Given the creatively hybrid nature of both Sun Ra’s and Fela’s work and biographies, both artists can be viewed as exemplars of intellectuals who operate within the broader culturally negotiated rules of an African Atlantic expressive culture.

Dissertation chapters:

The remainder of this introductory chapter will review the relevant theoretical literature which informs much of the analytical framework of this dissertation, focusing on three main areas: the critical musicological literature which addresses issues of representation of African and African American musics; the literature of Atlantic

historiography as it bears upon the multi-faceted and multi-directional sharing and borrowing of ideas and procedures; and an overview of the means by which Sun Ra and Fela will be situated within the larger intellectual environment through a choreographic description of their works and lives within the space of the African Atlantic. While there is significant and natural overlap between these three intellectual realms – it is difficult to separate the discussion of aesthetics from that of musicological theory, for instance – they will be separated here only as a means to articulate the various theoretical concepts with some clarity. For the remainder of the dissertation these artificially separated theoretical realms will be integrated into the fabric of the discussion, allowing for a more integrated text.

Chapter 2, “‘This ain’t no sideshow’: Musical composition and the mythic space of performance,” discusses a number of the multiple forms of expression which constitute the musical and performative poetics of composing the African Atlantic. After a brief review of the literature addressing the aesthetic and epistemological challenges African Atlantic cultural expressions pose to hegemonic European aesthetic and intellectual values, three sections broadly outline the musical and performative aspects of composing the African Atlantic: a discussion of modal harmony as it bears upon the long-form musical structures which enable the dialogic engagement of performers and audience; an overview of the procedures of musical composition as they bear upon African diasporic musics and cultural values; and a summary of the poetics of composing the African Atlantic which outlines the performative creation of liminal, “mythic” space through the dialogic engagement of performers, audience, collective memory, and environment. Drawing upon the shared cultural memories of their core audiences – and speaking past

those who do not share these same cultural memories – both Sun Ra and Fela engaged their audiences in a ritualized enactment of political ideas and a performance of historical narratives that drew their audience in with entertainment, kept them engaged through musical performance, and challenged them to imagine alternatives to the present through a consideration of the nonsense of neo-colonialism (Fela) and the liberatory possibilities of outer space (Sun Ra). This broad outline of composing the African Atlantic sets the stage for a more detailed discussion of the work of both Sun Ra and Fela and for the later discussion of the broader intellectual environment as well as the specific historical narratives that are created, contested, and otherwise activated through their performance.

Chapter 3, titled “Astro-blues and cosmo-spirituals: Sun Ra the traditionalist,” discusses Sun Ra’s grounding in the more traditional sources of African American music which can be found in even the most futuristic and Afrocentric of his works. Through an analysis of select compositions and writings this chapter will explicate the ways in which the more traditional forms of spirituals and ragtime are presented within the context of Sun Ra’s historical, philosophical and etymological explorations. Music, for Sun Ra, was a means of expression more akin to the spiritual practices of the church than the secular, good-time entertainment which often stands as the dominant characterization of jazz performance and culture. Sun Ra’s audience, viewed as those who may receive his new truth, are consistently challenged to reconsider the moral implications of modern life from within the framework of an Atlantic culture dominated by its moral bankruptcy and by the historical legacy of the slave trade. Considered from this perspective, the future orientation which runs throughout Sun Ra’s narratives – “Space is the place” – can be seen as a revision of history, enacted through the use of oral historical practices common

to the African Atlantic and activated through the discursive performance of music as well as through Sun Ra's rich, voluminous writing and teaching.

Chapter 4, "'Teacher don't teach me nonsense': Fela and the discourses of Afrobeat," discusses Fela's sense of musical practice as both a personal vision of composition as well as a reclamation of an essential African character. In developing the style of music which he named Afrobeat, Fela freely combined highlife, modal jazz, and soul with more "traditional" Yoruba, Ewe, and other African musical forms, creating a genre of music that is both distinctly and essentially African as well as clearly cosmopolitan and singular. But while the music alone is greatly compelling, Fela infused his musical text with a direct and idiosyncratic political voice that addressed the political concerns of, primarily, urban West Africans, presented in an engagingly satirical voice that drew his audiences into a dialogue. This chapter will outline the process by which Fela found his version of a distinctly African musical and political voice through his contact with African American music and political thought as well as a reconnection with his Nigerian and Pan-African intellectual heritage. As an extension of his well-known political transformation this chapter will emphasize the ways in which Fela's music remained essentially, if not traditionally, African – an African identity that is more closely related to hybrid modernity than to the traditions of place.

Chapter 5, titled "The African Atlantic intellectual environment: Composing a new historical narrative," builds on the discussions of the poetics of composing the African Atlantic as well as the explicated work of Sun Ra and Fela in order to better situate both composers within the larger intellectual community. While their artistic visions seem, at times, to be so personal as to be merely singular or even culturally

isolated, both Fela and Sun Ra worked in constant dialogue with their musical and political contemporaries while also following from and building upon the accomplishments of their predecessors. By way of background, this chapter will consider the diverse and often competing political ideologies of Pan-Africanism and Black Power through a brief overview of the broadly internationalist orientation of Pan-African intellectuals in the wake of the 1955 Bandung Asia-Africa Conference and the artistically influential Second World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture (FESTAC) held in Lagos, Nigeria in 1977. Following this overview is a brief discussion of the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s and 1970s – a movement which was contemporary with the most artistically productive period for both Sun Ra and Fela, and which was temperamentally and thematically similar to the overall aesthetic vision of both artists. Finally, this chapter will begin to address the question of just how these artists, along with their contemporaries, proposed and enabled a distinct counter-narrative in opposition to the hegemonic norms of the West – a counter-narrative that is, nonetheless, more normative than is usually admitted within the discourses of the Western canon. This communal creation of new historical narratives, fashioned through the engagement of musicians and audiences within the liminal space of performance, articulates a revised sense of history that challenges the dominant epistemological framework – a framework that shapes how we know what we know – as well as the ontological conclusions resulting from that dominant epistemology. As Sun Ra succinctly phrased it, “History is His story. You haven’t heard my story” (Mugge 1980).

Musicological framework: The problematic of cultural studies:

Composing the African Atlantic ties the composition of music to the dialogic creation and dialectic synthesis of African diasporic culture that is at the core of Amiri Baraka's 1963 book *Blues people*.¹⁵ Much of Baraka's approach to music scholarship in *Blues people* exhibits a multi-disciplinary approach to the study of music in its cultural context. In contrast to the often formalistic study of music common in musicology at the time, Baraka's work interprets the history of African American music "as the struggle of African expressiveness to assert itself in ever-changing musical forms" (Benston 1976: 83), necessitating a historiographical approach to his subject that highlights the expressiveness and overall consciousness of the people through the contextual study of the music.

...if the music of the Negro in America, in all its permutations, is subjected to a socio-anthropological as well as musical scrutiny, something about the essential nature of the Negro's existence in this country ought to be revealed, as well as something about the essential nature of this country.... I cite the beginning of the blues as one beginning of American Negroes. Or, let me say, the reaction and subsequent relation of the Negro's experience in this country in his English is one beginning of the Negro's conscious appearance on the American scene (Baraka 1963: ix-xii).

Ingrid Monson paraphrases the central thesis Baraka's *Blues people*, stating that "music reveals something of deep cultural significance about the nature of African American existence in America, and, by extension, the nature of American society as a whole" (2007: 22). As such, this book is more than a simple "artifact of cultural nationalism" but, rather, stands as an important early work of cultural studies in general as well as a model for an approach to music scholarship particular to the field of African American studies – a model that "analyze[s] the role of music in shaping and affirming various kinds of

¹⁵ Though *Blues people* was published under his birth name, LeRoi Jones, I refer to the author by his chosen name Amiri Baraka in the same manner that I refer to Sun Ra as Sun Ra, not Herman Blount (or as, in the case of Szwed's biography, Sonny), and Fela as Fela Anikulapo-Kuti, not Fela Ransome-Kuti.

social identities and its role in political and cultural resistance” (22). African American studies has become a “paradigm-shifting” discipline that acts as “a resource for rethinking the questions that are asked of jazz history, music criticism, and cultural criticism” (20). She notes the importance of scholarly revision and recontextualization as well as the central importance of an interdisciplinary approach to analysis and interpretation (21). The example of African American studies has sparked a much broader interdisciplinary approach to jazz scholarship, focusing critical attention on the previously underserved “issues of race, power, and internationalism” (21).¹⁶

Monson characterizes Baraka’s writings on music as early texts in the cultural studies movement that began in the 1960s but didn’t, for the most part, begin to flourish in wider academic circles until the 1980s and 1990s; his work is a prime example of an approach to the study of expressive culture that explicates the varied roles that music, literature, film, etc. play in the “shaping and affirming various kinds of social identities and its role in political and cultural resistance” (Monson 2007: 22). But while Baraka’s writings on music – particularly with *Blues people* – may have been an important step in the introduction of cultural studies concerns and procedures to the study of music, Monson also notes that African American studies as a whole has remained a largely unacknowledged predecessor to “contemporary cultural studies, anthropology, poststructuralism, and postcolonialism” (21). This argument, Monson notes, has previously been made by Mae Henderson (1996) and Wahneema Lubiano (1996) from within the discipline of African American studies, following a long line of writers and

¹⁶ Monson cites the prime example of this new interdisciplinary jazz scholarship that grew out of the Columbia University jazz study group, of which she was a member (Monson 2007: 334 n.32). See (O’Meally 1998; O’Meally, Edwards, and Griffin 2004).

scholars such as W.E.B. Du Bois, Zora Neale Hurston, and St. Clair Drake who drew upon anthropological and sociological theory as a means of fleshing out the scope of African American history and literature. The overall point, of course, is to create an approach to the study of African diasporic cultures which is appropriate to the diversity of values of African diasporic peoples and which is not, therefore, bound by the core assumptions of a field such as musicology – a field which developed as a means of studying European music as an expression of European cultures.

Such an approach to music scholarship is more than a merely essential statement about what in the music is or is not black, nor is it a nostalgic argument about what is truly creative and innovative about a particular musical culture – both of these being a sort of reductive characterization often attached to things that are too easily labeled cultural nationalist (for example, Ralph Ellison famously dismissed much of Baraka's intent in *Blues people* by stating that “nothing succeeds like rebellion” (1964: 253)). As Baraka observed a few years after *Blues people* with regard to the study of black music, European musicology often fails to consider the social, intellectual, and cultural context in which black music is composed and performed, treating it as if all musics were the same.

Coltrane's cries are not “musical,” but they *are* music and quite moving music. Ornette Coleman's screams and rants are only musical once one understands the music his emotional attitude seeks to create.... The notes *mean something*; and the something is, regardless of its stylistic considerations, part of the black psyche as it dictates the various forms of Negro culture (1967a: 15).¹⁷

¹⁷ This observation regarding Coltrane's cries is similar to a number of other authors' observations on African American and Caribbean music and literature. Fred Moten grounds his argument concerning black music's historical memory in Frederick Douglass's memory of Aunt Hester's scream (2003: 1-24 and passim). Edouard Glissant also asserts that a natural poetics of the Caribbean began with the scream of the slave, no longer stifled upon being freed (1989: 123-24). Sidney Bechet writes of his musical commitment to the memory of his grandfather Omar's song which contained “a kind of melody that had a crying inside

A man can speak of the “heresy of bebop,” for instance, only if he is completely unaware of the psychological catalysts that made that music the exact registration of the social and cultural thinking of a whole generation of black Americans. The blues and jazz aesthetic, to be fully understood, must be seen in as nearly its complete human context as possible. People made bebop. The question the critics must ask is: *why?* (16)

In Baraka’s interdisciplinary construction of a newer, more culturally appropriate model of musicology – a fleshing-out of musicology with information and ideas from sociology, anthropology, history, folklore, literature, and music journalism – one could say that he engages in a form of aesthetic analysis somewhat akin to the contextualist approach of European philosophical aesthetics. Differentiating itself from a formalist aesthetics, which concerns itself only with the formal features of a musical work and derives meaning from the music based solely on the sound and its inscribed representation, contextualism allows for the identity and musical meaning of a musical work to be judged by cultural and historical criteria, as well as the identity of the composer, in addition to the work’s sonic qualities (Davies 2003: 492-93).

And yet, Baraka’s construction of a method is radically different from the contextualist approach in the sense of the word *radical* as being concerned with roots.¹⁸ Where the contextualist approach, as defined by Davies and others,¹⁹ seeks to consider a musical work with relation to its social and historical context, often concerning itself with how a musical work was heard within its originary historical period, Baraka seeks to

itself” (1960: 6-7). Finally, Kamau Brathwaite likens the expressive voice of Caribbean writers to the sounds of New Orleans jazz: “He is expressing in his work of words that joy, that protest, that paradox of community and aloneness, that controlled mixture of chaos and order, hope and disillusionment, based on his New World experience, which is at the heart of jazz” (1967: 279).

¹⁸ The Oxford English Dictionary states that the etymological origin of the word radical comes from the Latin word *radicalis*: “relating to or forming the root, original, primary..., radical, fundamental” (*OED* 2007).

¹⁹ Davies lists works by Jerrold Levinson (2011), Kendall Walton (1990), and R.A. Sharpe (2000) as being among the better works on aesthetic contextualism in philosophical musicology.

broaden and deepen the understanding of both the culture and the music within the context of history – an epistemological position that rejects the post-Enlightenment reduction of music to the status of object and phenomenon, seeking to regain an integrated sense of culture that does not divide art from life, thought from feeling, believing from knowing. In this sense, then, Baraka acts more within the tradition that is exemplified by Du Bois in that his integrated, interdisciplinary approach to scholarship also carries within it a sense of ethical purpose and an unapologetic commitment to scholarship as both historical revision and cultural valorization. In a similar vein, Edward Said responded to critics of his book *Orientalism* who claimed that Said's lack of objectivity weakened the book: "*Orientalism* is a partisan book, not a theoretical machine" (1994: 339). One could certainly say that *Blues people* is also a partisan work.

The history of musicology – and the historiography of music in general – has had a long-standing reputation as a means of promoting European aesthetic values and of maintaining European dominance within the power dynamics of music academia (Bohlman 1993: 418). While on the one hand musicology has often portrayed itself as an apolitical discipline devoted to the formal study of music, contemporary criticism of musicology from within its own ranks has highlighted the fundamentally political effect of musicological practice as an academic discipline that shapes and presents the history of music through the dominant ideological lens of white male European society.²⁰ Among the more glaring examples of the use of musicology for such a purpose, for example, was

²⁰ For the purposes of this essay I will adopt the definition of musicology proposed by Philip Bohlman as including the disciplines of traditional historical musicology, ethnomusicology, music theory and music criticism (1993: 418). In addition, I would amplify Bohlman's definition of music criticism – conceived as an aspect of the academic study of music – by adding the field of music journalism as defined by Amiri Baraka (Baraka 1991).

the role German musicology played in the 1930s in providing material and ideological support for the Nazi Party; a few studies from the early 1990s highlight the role of musicologists in writing a history of music that allowed for the quick dismissal of anyone who did not share in the dominant aesthetic-musical values approved by the Nazi Party (Lenneberg 1991; Potter 1991; Riethmuller 1991).

But the project of cultural hegemony with which musicology most often involves itself is more subtle and pervasive than a simple recounting of the most extreme examples can demonstrate. Among the main political issues involved in writing about musical culture is the problem of representation, but with regard to African and African-descendant musical forms the issue of representation becomes two-fold. First, one must consider the politics of how one represents the cultural Other in order to avoid, as best one can, the perpetuation of the discourses of dominance that have plagued the historical relationships between Europeans and non-Europeans. In addition, one must also consider the aesthetic and musicological question of whether music is a representational art form – an art form that communicates cognitive as well as affective information. The first of these two issues will be addressed in the current section on musicological theory, particularly as it relates to the anthropological literature that impacts the study of music as culture. The second issue, that of music as a representational art, will be discussed primarily with regard to an aesthetic and epistemological re-consideration and re-valuation of African and African diasporic musics, although it is an issue that runs throughout musicological discourses.

With regard to the study of musics that are outside the purview of one's own culture – as both mid- to late-twentieth century jazz as well as Nigerian afrobeat are for

me – much of the musicological discourse falls within the specific purview of ethnomusicology, originally conceived as being a combination of the fields of historical musicology and anthropology (Merriam 1964: vii). Departing from this early paradigm, the modern critique of ethnomusicology and anthropology has focused much of its attention on the creation of cultural-political discourses of difference through the production of ethnographic fieldwork and writing, forming multi-disciplinary historiographical critiques of the disciplines that begin to more closely resemble works of cultural studies (Agawu 2003: 151; Fabian 1983: cf). Though the broader field of cultural studies is diverse and eclectic – modern musicology often draws from the fields of comparative and post-colonial literature as well as from the more established musicological theory²¹ – any sense of commonality among the diverse interests of cultural studies may likely be found in the post-colonial undermining of “the story of straight, white, Judeo-Christian, heterosexual men of property as [composing] the ethical universe” (Spivak and Rooney 1989: 146). Cultural studies, then, becomes a counter-discourse that concerns itself with illuminating the ideologies of power and dominance as they manifest themselves in music and musical discourses, interrogating the positionality of the ethnographer as well as the institutional structures that create and perpetuate these discourses. This, fundamentally, is the position of this dissertation.

But much of the critique of ethnomusicology, following from the larger debates surrounding cultural studies, identifies the discipline’s foundation in the study and the perpetuation of musical difference. This dynamic can be clearly seen in an example from

²¹ Stokes (2008: IV.1) surveys the uses of experimental ethnography and literary theory in contemporary ethnomusicological practice as a means of creating a visible and fully articulated subject within the ethnographic text.

the Harvard University music department's website that divides musicology into "historical musicology, with an emphasis on the history, theory, and literature of Western music in its contexts from antiquity to the present; and ethnomusicology, which concentrates on the ethnographic study of any musical tradition in relationship to its cultural setting" (Harvard University Department of Music 2008). Thus ethnomusicology is part of the discourse surrounding the Othering of non-European cultures, providing an Other which needs to be studied from an anthropological perspective in order to both understand what it is (*it is not part of us*) as well as to define it on *our* terms so that it is useful to *us*. "Western music," as stated here, can be studied in its historical context because its cultural context is assumed. Another (negative) way of stating the difference between these two branches of musicology is that one concerns itself with musical cultures that have History while the other concerns itself with the ahistorical, echoing Hegel's pronouncement on Africa that "it is no historical part of the World" (1991 [1822]: 99).²² But it is this articulated split between historical musicology and ethnomusicology – the historical and the ahistorical parts of the world – that creates what Kofi Agawu calls the "ethnomusicological epistemology," characterized as an "epistemology of difference" (2003: 153).

This epistemology of difference directly impacts much of what has been written about both Fela and Sun Ra by commentators both inside and outside the artists' cultural groups. Much of the writing about Fela – even the most thoughtful – prefaces any consideration of his politically innovative art with a recounting of the excesses of his life such as the openness and frequency with which he smoked "turnip-size joints" (Shaxson

²² Hegel's *Philosophy of history* will be discussed in some detail later in this chapter as well as in chapter 5.

2007: 10) – Bootsie Collins recounted his experience of visiting Fela’s club in Lagos: “Man, we walked in the room, and the smoke knocked us down” (Babcock 2000: 35) – or his prolific sex life, with several writers noting that he conducted interviews in his underwear and one journalist noting that Fela still had semen visible on his leg (Waidor-Pregbagha 1997).²³ Sun Ra’s sanity was often called into question throughout his career as a result of his highly personal approach to life, and was even cruelly eulogized in a similarly dismissive fashion, referred to as a purveyor of “galactic gobbledygook” (Green 1993) as well as a “nutter [who]...had only one joke” (Voce 1993). The impact of these characterizations, filtered through the representational lens of the epistemology of difference, allows commentators to maintain distance from the artists in question and thereby rationalize or explain-away any so-called deviant behaviors that may not fit the commentator’s worldview. Secondly, when Fela and Sun Ra are characterized as such they become exoticized characters rather than multi-dimensional, flawed human beings, perpetuating a romanticized biography that causes the reader to associate the artist with the extreme, decontextualized aspects of his personality rather than the mundane or the transcendent aspects of life and art. A similar dynamic exists within the broader field of jazz historiography, emphasizing the seamier side of the jazz community to the point where Charlie Parker is often remembered as a drug addict who played the saxophone – as with the film *Bird* (Eastwood 2001) – rather than as a virtuosic saxophonist and composer who also had personal problems. When considering Fela or Sun Ra from this

²³ Derek Stanovsky argues that the preoccupation with Fela’s sexuality and misogyny in most Western news stories about him has created an image of an artist whose politics is prefaced and diluted by his “deviance,” confining his popularly understood biography to a “pre-existing script of Western expectations for black African men” that is central to dominant Western discourses of race and gender (Stanovsky 1998).

perspective it is easy to be dismissive of their politics, as President Obasanjo was of Fela, basing his criticism on the example he set for young Nigerians (Veal 2000: 249).

Obasanjo was one of Fela's favorite targets in his campaign against neo-colonial Nigerian corruption, and so the dismissal or discrediting of Fela are part of an overall strategy that allows the neo-colonial elite to maintain a position of power.²⁴

Agawu notes that the epistemology of difference is clearly outlined within the historical development of the field of ethnomusicology, present in the background assumptions and attitudes of some of the field's principal writers (2003: 153-54). Klaus Wachsmann, cited in Helen Myers's overview of the development of ethnomusicology, is considered to be one of the originators of the study of music from an ethno-relative perspective – Myers characterizes him as one of the “great egalitarians of musicology” (1992: 15-16). According to the paradigm of ethno-relativity, the musicologist would, as much as is possible, reject the notion that any one form of music is superior to another, adopting a relativistic attitude that places all on an equal plane. But this equal plane of existence, as applied by Wachsmann, is still marked by difference when he notes that the discipline of ethnomusicology “is concerned with the music of other peoples,” adding that ethnomusicology “operates essentially across boundaries of one sort or another.... [The] observer does not share directly the musical tradition that he studies” (1969: 165). The language of this definition, though, exhibits what Agawu, borrowing from Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, refers to as “Eurocentric cross-culturalism” (Agawu 2003: 154; Spivak and Rooney 1989: 133), a manner of cross-cultural analysis which maintains the dominant hegemonic status of the Euro-American subject by ignoring the asymmetries of

²⁴ Fela's critique of Gen. Obasanjo, and Obasanjo's response, will be discussed in chapter 4.

power that exist between the writer of ethnography who creates and controls the discourse and the musicians who are portrayed as being in need of a translator. In this case, ethnomusicology shares a similar historical function to that of anthropology, defining the Other in the colonial process of cataloging and defining “reality”: placing itself in a dominant position of power to the objects of their study; naming the object and its phenomena; “representing others in our language and notational systems”; and creating the terms for any future discourse regarding the object of study.

Ethnomusicology, then, is knowledge written by “scholars from the metropolis (Europe or America) about the musical practices of less-privileged others (in Africa, Asia, or Australia) often (but not always) on the basis of (brief) periods of so-called fieldwork” (Agawu 2003: 155).

As a further example of this Othering process, Agawu notes a number of similarities between Erich von Hornbostel’s language in his article “African Negro music” and Hegel’s language in his discussion of African history (2003: 156).

Hornbostel’s article is meant to address two questions: “What is African music like as compared to ours?... How can it be made use of in church and school?” By way of answering, Hornbostel states that, “African and (modern) European music are constructed on entirely different principles.... They cannot be fused into one, but only the one or the other can be used without compromise” (1928: 30). Hornbostel notes the difficulties inherent in overcoming the differences between “native” and “European” musics.

The main difference is this: our music (since about A.D. 1600) is built on harmony, all other music on pure melody.... Pure melody – unlike ours – is not conceived harmonically; and as long as we cannot divest ourselves of the idea – so natural to our way of thinking – that it is based on harmony and interpret it in this sense, we arbitrarily change its meaning and cannot arrive at a proper understanding of it (34).

This contention that African music is purely melodic, and that, as such, is not harmonic has been thoroughly discredited in the current musicological literature (Kubik 1975, 1994, 2007). But by claiming that African music does not have harmony – the aspect of European music most often cited as evidence of the evolved state of European music – Hornbostel perpetuates the illusion of the less developed Other while also maintaining the idea that aesthetic value is judged according to the degree to which music is heard to exhibit harmonic complexity – a musicological twist on the Hegelian history/ahistory argument. What is left out of the equation, then, are those elements of African and African-descendant musics that are more appropriately evaluated upon criteria other than the standard Western categories of melody, harmony, and rhythm: the cognitive-affective qualities of performance (Stewart 1968); the Signifyin(g) on musical materials (Floyd 1995);²⁵ the “talking” and “story-telling” of instrumental performance (Monson 1996); and so on.

The net effect of this musicological epistemology of difference can be seen clearly in the process of musical canon formation: a discourse of power that reinforces and naturalizes the ethical and aesthetic values of the canonizers. Barbara Herrnstein Smith describes canon formation as a process whereby individuals and groups assign value to aesthetic works by re-defining of the contingent use-value of a work as non-contingent – a process whereby the value of a work is characterized as “‘intrinsic,’

²⁵ Floyd adopts the neologistic spelling *Signifyin(g)/Signification* in place of *signifying/signification* from Gates (1988: xxiv, 46), who differentiates the African-descendant rhetorical strategy of “repetition and revision, . . . repetition with a signal difference” (Signifyin(g)) from the system of semiotic analysis (signification=signifier+signified) represented by the work of Saussure (1983 [1916]) and developed by writers such as Barthes (Barthes 1972). Throughout this dissertation I will use these neologistic and semiotic spellings when referring to either Gatesian Signification or semiotic signification.

‘objective,’ ‘absolute,’ ‘universal,’ and ‘transcendent’” (Smith 1988: 31).²⁶ Following a process whereby an aestheticized work or category of works is first deemed valuable to a particular group and then perceived as valuable by many groups over time through the process of hegemony, this work or category of works becomes a seemingly naturalized part of the ideological system of these groups and therefore becomes a representation of the assumed aesthetic values of the groups (47-48). Once the work has been canonized it is no longer open to critique since the guardians of the canon – usually academics – will find reasons to explain why any objectionable features such as racist or sexist representations should be overlooked in favor of the aesthetic features that support the dominant ideology. In addition, those subaltern groups within the larger society for whom the dominant groups have little regard are depicted as uncultured, backward, primitive, and culturally deprived (49). The discourse of the Western canon, then, becomes a normative discourse, all others simply knocking on the door of true greatness.

Referring specifically to place of African American fiction within the canon of American literature, Toni Morrison notes that there is a set of basic assumptions among literary critics and historians as to what can be accepted as “knowledge” of American literature.

This knowledge holds that traditional, canonical American literature is free of, uninformed, and unshaped by the four-hundred-year-old presence of, first, Africans and then African Americans in the United States.... It assumes that this presence...has had no significant place or consequence in the origin and

²⁶ “All value is radically contingent, being neither a fixed attribute, an inherent quality, or an objective property of things but, rather, an effect of multiple, continuously changing, and continuously interacting variables or, to put this another way, the product of the dynamics of a system, specifically an *economic* system” (Smith 1988: 30). Smith is not, in this passage, reducing the discussion of value to a simple consideration of Marxian exchange-value and use-value (Marx 1990: 125-29), but, rather, is adding an economic dimension, and therefore a dimension of power, to her later consideration of the claims often made regarding the *intrinsic* value of some aesthetic works.

development of that culture's literature.... Moreover, such knowledge assumes that the characteristics of our national literature emanate from a particular "Americanness" that is separate from and unaccountable to this presence.... There seems to be a more or less tacit agreement among literary scholars that, because American literature has been clearly the preserve of white male views, genius, and power, those views, genius, and power are without relationship to and removed from the overwhelming presence of black people in the United States (Morrison 1993: 4-5).

The ideological lens of those in charge of determining that which is in and that which is not has both material and psychological effects then: it physically excludes writers from the discourses of American literature and culture while telling an entire class of people that their cultural production is somehow less substantial and less significant. This process of canon formation is not peculiar to American literary academia, though, cutting across many disciplines, including musicology.

In response to the critique of the musicological canon, historical musicology has formed the sub-category of "world music" as that discipline's attempt to spice up the canon, though essentially such a sub-categorization only further propagates the distancing of European from non-European musics (Agawu 2003: 154; Erlmann 1996a; Feld 1994). In order to illustrate the workings of the "world music" phenomenon in academia, I offer here an example from my own experience. During one semester of graduate school I had the opportunity to teach a four and a half week section of jazz history classes to the students of a course titled "Music History – 20th Century/Jazz/World Music" in a university music department, the final semester in a four semester sequence of music history classes which is required of all music majors in the music department. The curriculum for these four semesters is such that three semesters are devoted to the European art music traditions of the medieval, renaissance, baroque, classical, and romantic periods. In the fourth semester, the first third of the semester is devoted to the

history of 20th century European art music, leaving one third of the semester to be devoted to the history of jazz, and the final third of the semester to be devoted to the music of anyone other than Europeans and African Americans – so called world music. One can see by a cursory overview of this sequence of music history classes that the music emphasized in the curriculum of this department is a history heavily weighted toward the representation of Europe with only a cursory examination of the Other. Even more troubling is the fact that the largest number of undergraduate students in this department concentrate in music education: they are future music teachers, literally trained to accept the aesthetic centrality and dominance of European music.

One of the primary aspects of this skewed representation is a perpetuation of the Other as the exotic Other – the one who is not us, making clear what we are not. As a result, the foregrounding of European art music history can be justified through this process of defining what we are and emphasizing what we are not (or, rather, what we think we are and are not). But in placing the histories of jazz and world music within a standardized curriculum there is also a dynamic of normalizing the Other that takes place. Valentin Mudimbe writes about the double representational effects of early European painting of African themes, simultaneously assimilating “exotic bodies” into the artistic language in a way that “reduces and neutralizes all differences into the sameness signified by the *white* norm,” creating “signs of an epistemological order which, silently but imperatively, indicate the processes of integrating and differentiating figures within the normative sameness” while also creating a representation “that unites through similitude and eventually articulates distinctions and separations, thus classifying types of identities.” The viewer of the painting, then, has an experience of the representation of

Africa as a strange and perplexing Other, moved by “the excellence of an exotic picture that creates a cultural distance, thanks to an accumulation of accidental differences, namely, nakedness, blackness, curly hair, bracelets, and strings of pearls” (1988: 8-9). Significantly, Mudimbe’s primary example of Burgkmair’s series of paintings titled *Exotic tribe* illustrates the didactic effects of historical representation: Burgkmair had never visited Africa, and Mudimbe speculates that he may have never met an African. Burgkmair’s image of Africa and of Africans was constructed entirely from having read 15th century European travelogue accounts of Africa – an early popular genre of writing about the Other that is only separated from contemporary ethnography by matter of degree (Mudimbe 1988: 9).

But one must be mindful of the material effects of this discourse exemplified by Burgkmair, Hornbostel, and Wachsmann. Rosaldo notes the common dynamics of colonialism and post-colonialism in which the agents of the colonial project “display nostalgia for the colonized culture as it was ‘traditionally,’” never honestly accounting for the fact that it is their work to destroy the thing that they claim to yearn for (1989: 107-08).²⁷ With regard to African and African diasporic musics, this dynamic is displayed most often in the nostalgic rhetoric often employed by critics, musicians, and music fans who characterize the changes in the music they love as being indicative of decline rather

²⁷ To digress for a moment, the Western discourse surrounding African wildlife resources acts in a similarly nostalgic and destructive manner, forcing Southern African governments to adopt conservation policies based on the desires of Westerners as a means to maintain a “pristine” African wilderness rather than on the needs of the citizens of these countries who must live in close proximity to wildlife populations. As an example, in the 1980s the governments of Botswana, Zimbabwe, and Zambia implemented a ban on the culling of elephants in the Chobe River area, largely as a result of pressure from international conservation groups such as the World Wildlife Fund and Conservation International. By the early 1990s the culling ban had caused the elephant population to expand to such a size that the local people sustained frequent, devastating damage to crops and property, while the density of the elephant population had caused massive over-browsing that placed it in imminent danger of collapse due to starvation or catastrophic disease (Adams 1992; Associated Press 2008; Koenig 2007).

than innovation or mere change. Wynton Marsalis is well known for his forceful opinions with regard to the aesthetics of jazz, once noting that “jazz is an art form that expresses the Negroid point of view about life in the 20th century” and claiming that the “Negro methodology of swing” is the creative impulse that signifies the essence of jazz particularity (1986: 131). The jazz of the 1980s, by contrast, was full of “aesthetic skullduggery,” driven by market forces and by a black middle-class who “are so gullible and worried about being accused of not identifying with the man in the street that they refuse to discern with the interest in quality that makes for a true elite” (134). He later identifies what is not jazz – “rock isn’t jazz and new age isn’t jazz, and neither are pop or third stream” (1988: 21) – and then states that his aesthetic opinions have helped to drive his efforts to clearly define the genre.

Feeling as I do that the greatness of jazz lies not only in its emotion but also in its deliberate artifice, I have tried, in helping to shape Lincoln Center’s Classical Jazz series, to convey some of the conscious struggle that has gone into the great jazz of the past and to show how it impinges on the present (21).

The effects of Marsalis’s aesthetic opinions being adapted to the programming of Jazz at Lincoln Center have been characterized by Salim Washington as acting to suppress the “perpetual avant-garde” of jazz who have always sought to press against the boundaries of traditions through the creation of a high-profile repertoire-defining group that sets normative parameters around “what jazz is – and isn’t” (2004: 27-28). Clearly, then, neither Sun Ra nor Fela would fit into this canon of jazz, and neither would many of the other artists whose work broadens the category and troubles the borders of jazz; the programming of Jazz at Lincoln Center performances becomes an authoritative exercise in canon formation.

But the phenomenon most often deployed in this capturing and defining of the Other within the field of musicology has been the promotion of a historiographical model that is inextricably tied to the use of music notational technology. Notation was adapted to the practice of musicology as an early recording technology, allowing musicologists and amateur musicians alike to transfer musical information from one place to another with some semblance of an original performance. But used as such, readers are dependent upon a number of factors in order to re-create a performance: the skill of the musical observer in recording the performance, the ideology of the musical observer in interpreting the performance, the skill of the musical reader in deciphering the notational record, and the ideology of the musical reader all play into the relative accuracy of the recreated musical performance. This has led to an uneven record of re-constructed musical performance prior to the advent of electronic recording technology in the 1880s. While it is true that literacy in musical notation was more common prior to the wide distribution of electronic recordings, the musicological description of musics from non-European cultures was considered to be the province of amateur musicians, making for an uneven record with regard to the accuracy of these notational recordings. Prior to the 20th century, for instance, the entire written record regarding African music consisted of brief and often general comments written in the travelogues of white European and American sailors, traders, and missionaries involved in various aspects of the African slave trade (Southern 1997: 4).

But the larger question with regard to cultural representation is the power dynamic inherent in the very use of notation. While musical transcription is, by definition, a subjective experience – one notates on paper what one hears – the field of

musicology uses notational examples from transcription in order to create a semblance of objectivity in its musical analysis, undertaking an “objectification of subjectivity” (Marian-Balasa 2005: 6). As any musical experience is a subjective experience – and doubly so in the case of experiencing music from outside of one’s own culture – the process of transcription is most often guided by one’s musical preferences and current mood as well as by one’s musical training. In addition, a musicologist, in writing a paper or a book, chooses examples of musical transcription that best fit her purposes, thereby compounding the subjective nature of the experience. On the other end of the equation, the reader of the musicological book or article is affected not only by his ability to read notation, but also by his particular interests, preferences, and moods. And one can further complicate the notions of musical transmission and reception by considering that any written musical representation is a text which, following from Derrida, has no fixed meaning, bound to be a representation of an endless chain of signifiers vaguely reminiscent of but never representative of the original musical event (Derrida 1967: 7-9).²⁸ Considering these issues one can conclude that the process of transcription is entirely a process of musical de-contextualization and hegemonic appropriation.

The issue of musical notation, though, is not a simplistic binary that places “literate” European art musicians on one end of the spectrum and “oral” jazz musicians on the other: jazz musicians are very often very fluent readers of notation, and European art musicians often have excellent aural skills. The issue at hand, with regard to the ways in which the different musicians work, is which paradigm – literacy or orality – is more

²⁸ This is my own application of Derrida’s theory to a discussion of musical notation as text. Derrida discusses the problems of representation inherent in the transcription of spoken language to written language. As I see a significant correspondence between the processes of transcribing language and music into notational symbols I believe it is an acceptable borrowing of theory from one modality to another.

integral and valued as a central part of the musician's performance practice. For jazz musicians, memorizing melodies, chord progressions, and improvisatory phrases and being able to reproduce these musical elements rapidly and fluidly in performance without the aid of notation is an essential part of being able to play jazz. For European art musicians these skills in aural perception and memorization are not as important as being able to read notation rapidly and fluently, allowing a musician to play in concert with other members of an orchestra, for instance. And yet, even given these different aesthetic values, the ideology of most musical educational institutions assume the practice of reading and writing notation is the true key to advancement within the field of music. A crucial question to ask here is, what does one gain in supporting the ideological assertion that notation is the key to the higher levels of music appreciation and performance? An answer to this question is found in the signal associations made between jazz and European art music – signal associations that are articulated along racial lines. Radano and Bohlman contend that music, in general, is a key signifier of historicized racial meaning (2000: 1), making the practice of consciously listening to European music from a social and racial point of view a radical process of de-centering European music and questioning the social construction of the center (3). When one undertakes this process of de-centering European music, what is then let loose are the “unsung voices” that are intertextually present in European music (Abbate 1991) – the voices of the subaltern populations that do not reap the benefits of the values placed on the study of music by musicologists and their institutions. The very process of undertaking this discursive de-centering threatens the supremacy of European musicology in that it is an implicit proposal of social structures that form alternatives to the dominant ideologies of

musicology. If one were to truly believe that Charlie Parker exists on the same plane of aesthetic value as Richard Wagner one would have to accept that musical notation may not be the key to advancement within the music establishment, and that the accomplishments of a white 19th century German artist are not intrinsically more valuable than the accomplishments of a black 20th century American artist.²⁹ Instead, in the case of Wagner we are presented with an image of an artistic genius with occasional allegations of anti-Semitism that are quickly dismissed by the protectors of the canon (Smith 1988: 49), while with Parker we are presented with an image of artistic genius which is qualified by the fact that he was not a composer in the sense implied by the use of that word in European art music – he did not compose in isolation, writing his musical thoughts on score paper before they were performed – and by the tragic fact of his addictions to drugs and alcohol. In the process of defending the canon and explaining away the imperfections of the canonical composer, then, the non-canonical composer-performer is subjected to an open scrutiny of his human frailties and is portrayed as being a member of a debased and unsophisticated cultural group. This act of supporting the canonical and debasing the non-canonical is a crucial function of dominant canon formation, ensuring the place and gate-keeping function of musicology within academic discourses about music.

In response to these issues of representation of African musical cultures, Agawu names two major concerns that need to be addressed in order to produce an improved and appropriate analysis. First, one must allow for the fact that music and culture as systems

²⁹ It is important to note that Charlie Parker read and wrote music notation quite well. The point here is that his genius was embodied in his ability to improvise, which is not a written form of music.

of knowledge are directly tied to the cognitive structures of languages.³⁰ The academic discourse regarding African musics, even when written by African scholars, is most often written and mediated in European languages despite the fact that most of the daily discourses surrounding African musics take place in African languages. Agawu notes that his own work, written in English, is both informed and impeded by the fact that it is not his first or second language: his “first language, Siwu...is not a written language; [his] first written language, Ewe, has no currency as a medium of scholarly exchange in Europe or America; and [his] schooling facilitated familiarity with French as well as two other Ghanaian languages, Twi and Ga” (2003: 20). In addition, Agawu argues for the importance of studying African musics from the perspectives of specific African languages based on the volume and relative positionality of the discourses of music in African languages (38-39). Despite the fact that there are over two thousand languages in Africa, the archive of information on African music that is thought and expressed in African languages is predominantly oral historical material, inaccessible to those who do not speak the relevant languages.

In addition to the oral historical information that is missed when one does not understand a language, most languages have their own rhetorical devices and strategies that constitute critical aesthetic meta-languages that are tied to the particularity of the language. Despite the fact that Henry Louis Gates’s theory of Signifyin(g) is widely used and accepted as an analytical tool, it is a broadly conceived system of analysis developed for the explication of African American literature and cannot be applied equally to all cultures. Stone has identified a similar meta-linguistic device in the Kpelle language

³⁰ Though it is not cited in Agawu, the idea that language shapes one’s cognitive processes is commonly known as the Whorf-Sapir hypothesis, a foundational theory of linguistic anthropology (Whorf 1956).

known as *sân*, a performance practice that communicates “a quality of experience that is characteristically multi-faceted, multi-interpretable, subtle, indirect, aesthetically pleasing, and created in the conjunction of elements from diverse orders” (1982: 3). *Sân* reflects and interprets the world through performance in a manner similar to Richard Harvey Brown’s conception of metaphor, “convey[ing] an impact and connotative richness not achievable by conventional description” (Brown 1977: 78). The multi-interpretable nature of *sân* adds depth of meaning for the Kpelle-speaking listeners: “*Sân* in performance implies that a small, knowledgeable in-group will understand the communication and often express this delight in extensive verbalization about its qualities” (Stone 1982: 4). The study of musical culture through the lens of specific languages, then, is crucial to gaining insight into the epistemological alternatives exemplified by and manifested in the music.

Finally, Agawu argues for the comparative study of African musics as a means of allowing for the reality of inter-ethnic contact as well as external influences on musical and extra-musical cultures (2003: 21). European academic discourses have long separated and atomized phenomena, splitting things into binary, either-this-or-that objects of discourse. In response, Agawu proposes that a more inclusive system would allow for the discussion of phenomena across cultures, placing them in a historical context which recognizes the dynamic nature of cultures and that acknowledges and foregrounds questions of “what thoughts are possible (in African languages) rather than... what is recorded as having been thought on some occasion” (21). To this end, the analytic lens of Atlantic historiography will help to contextualize the field in which Fela, Sun Ra, and their contemporaries expressed their thoughts in their respective languages while also

noting the hybrid, interdependent nature of modern culture. Far from the near cultural relativism of Kwasi Wiredu, who argues for the use of universalism as an analytical strategy based on the biological similarities of people (1996: 20), Atlantic historiography allows for the fact that modern cultural particularity is not an idealized, bounded particularity, but rather a construction of various cultural influences, some more prominent than others, some more destructive than others, but all present.

Atlantic history and The black Atlantic: An Atlantic consciousness of Africa:

As is the case with Paul Gilroy's project in *The black Atlantic*, the use of the word *Atlantic* provides a geographic space broad enough to highlight the multicultural, multidimensional, and multidirectional aspects of African diasporic cultures while also remaining specific enough that one cannot escape the historical reality and presence of the Atlantic slave trade. My use of the word *Atlantic* in this dissertation is not meant to imply a reductive unit of measurement as Gilroy unfortunately called it in a momentary lapse (1993: 15), nor is it meant as a mere metaphor – an invented, mythical term – that acts as a rhetorical device I can use to simplistically draw together two distinct musicians. The Atlantic is the scene of the crime, the tabletop (*episteme*) of the foundational historical moment for African diasporic cultures and communities in the Americas and the Caribbean: the Atlantic slave trade. As I expand this dissertation into a book the Caribbean will take on more significance as a site of cultural contestation, *créolité*, and *métissage*.³¹ As Edouard Glissant put it, “The Caribbean sea is not an American lake. It is

³¹ *Créolité* is a word adopted and adapted by Edouard Glissant and Kamau Brathwaite as a means of describing how Caribbean people have fashioned their own cultures through conscious and creative borrowing (Glissant 1989; Brathwaite 1984). *Métissage*, adopted by Valentin Mudimbe from Jean-Loup Amselle, refers to the process of cultural creation often forced upon people as a result of Colonial administration (Mudimbe 1994: 52-55; Amselle 1990).

the estuary of the Americas” (1989: 139). Except for an arbitrary geographical line drawn along the Eastern Caribbean archipelago, though, the Caribbean is contiguous with the Atlantic and has certainly been drawn into the historical realities that have grown from the phenomenon of the Atlantic slave trade; it certainly is not an estuary of the Americas, but neither is it separate from the larger body of water that lies between Europe, Africa, and the Americas.

In order to more clearly define the broad intellectual environment in which both Fela and Sun Ra operated it is necessary to provide a brief survey of the literature concerned with the field of Atlantic history. Though there is much of *The black Atlantic* which is ground-breaking and directly applicable to my analysis, some of Gilroy’s ideas are inappropriate to my larger analysis, while others are open to critique. This section will first critically review Gilroy’s work, and then flesh out an Atlantic historical framework based on a reading of the broader literature, drawing from the Atlantic historical framework articulated by Bernard Bailyn (1996, 2005) and David Eltis (1999) and tempered by Peter Linebaugh’s metaphor of the Atlantic mountains, which “suggest[s] profound and hemispheric events that originate beneath the surface of things and which are not confined to any particular nation but arise from all four corners of the Atlantic” (1982: 87). Where I depart from these writers – and where my conception of the Atlantic differs from Gilroy – is that, though Gilroy uses the word *black* as a qualifier for his conception of the Atlantic, the foundational geographical area of Africa is sometimes missing from his narrative. While I am mindful that Gilroy’s intention was to provide a counter-narrative to what he identifies as the ontological essentialist perspective of African diasporic discourse which imposes an unnecessary limit on modern black

identities (1993: 31), I believe the effect of Gilroy's narrative sometimes results in an over-determination of the European intellectual heritage that informs black identities at the expense of both the African character that distinguishes black identities from those of Europeans as well as the African intellectual heritage that, while often placed in a subordinate position to that of Europe, nevertheless infuses itself throughout the Atlantic. As such, this essay will presuppose that the inter-cultural dimensions of economic and cultural exchange between Africa and North America have been clearly dominated by the historical reality of the Atlantic slave trade and the fundamental racial attitudes which allowed for the creation of a globalized system of trade based on the unethical, asymmetrical nature of modern capitalism.³² While Gilroy does state that the metaphor of the ship, which is central to his conception of the black Atlantic, does signify the memory of the middle passage (4), and while Bailyn and Eltis provide a survey of the historical realities of the slave trade and its ideological and material impacts upon modernity, the aspect of the African diaspora most often lost in this academic discourse is the chorus of voices that emanate from the individuals of the diaspora. It is one of the primary contentions of this dissertation that artists such as Fela and Sun Ra are among the loudest and most in-tune voices within this chorus, and as such they stand as exemplars of an African Atlantic expressive culture that values both the validation of African identities and the expression of historical narratives that ring true to an African Atlantic perspective.

Gilroy's black Atlantic is conceived as a means of addressing the modern cultural clash between nationalist and particularistic discourses experienced, in Gilroy's England,

³² I am influenced here by Cedric Robinson's use of the term "racial capitalism" to denote the underlying European racial ideologies present in any historical consideration of global capitalism (2000: 2).

through the double consciousness of being both black and European: "...occupying the space between [the two identities of black and European] or trying to demonstrate their continuity has been viewed as a provocative and even oppositional act of political insubordination" (1993: 1). The book is concerned with the "historical conjunction" of cultural nationalism and *creolité*: "the stereophonic, bilingual, or bifocal cultural forms originated by, but no longer the exclusive property of, blacks dispersed within the structures of feeling, producing, communicating, and remembering that I have heuristically called the black Atlantic world" (2-3). This conception of the black Atlantic as a heuristic device allows one the space to begin to look beyond the epistemological boundaries used to categorize and understand in order to draw a picture of a more complex, interdependent, and interdisciplinary thinking subject. Conceived in this way, Sun Ra is no longer an esoteric, fringe-occupying jazz musician but rather a musician who concerned himself with jazz, ragtime, blues, folklore, etymology, theology, Egyptology, and anything else he could get his hands on in a library, record shop, or bookstore. Conceived in this way, Sun Ra becomes the norm, not the oddball exception.

But the wholesale dismissal of the cultural nationalists' emphasis of African ancestry is not entirely helpful when considering the ways in which many people – Sun Ra and Fela included – identify themselves with respect to the larger world. While Homi Bhabha warns against the cultural totalization that seemingly indicates a desire to live "unsullied by the intertextuality of their historic locations" (1994: 34), the deployment of a diasporic³³ African identity is an important political and cultural strategy as old as the beginning of the Atlantic slave trade. John Blassingame writes that the retention of

³³ I will return to this quote in chapter 5.

African cultural practices represented both the political action of resistance as well as a psychologically significant assurance of home that is elsewhere (1979: 47-48). The sense of cultural rootedness that has survived, especially within expressive cultural practices, forms a cultural memory of Africa which, while it may not be grounded in corporeal experience, constitutes the key ingredient that allows an individual to distance himself from the cruelties of the captors (Okpewho, Boyce Davies, and Mazrui 1999: xv). Sun Ra, in repudiation of the idea that he was a man, told one interviewer that he chose to distance himself from humanity because of the horrific example of the African slave trade, a practice which reduced Africans to the status of commodities: “I suppose dogs came in through the Commerce Department – and birds and bees – and things. Like the black people in America. They came in as things” (Lock 1999: 63).

This diasporic sense of rootedness, though, complicates but does not negate Gilroy’s consideration of cultural change and exchange by reference to the black Atlantic as a “rhizomorphic, fractal structure of transcultural, international formation” (4). Borrowing from Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari (1987: 3-25), and making brief reference to fractal theory (Gleick 1987), the image of the rhizome complicates the usual application of the word *roots* by substituting the image of a complex, multi-directional root system (rhizome), which is itself a living, self-sustaining organism. By substituting the homonym *route* for the word *root* one is then called upon to acknowledge the perpetual movement and multi-directionality of culture rather than the static, uni-directional nature of roots, allowing one to theorize a cultural matrix in which dynamic change and movement are the norm (Gilroy 1993: 19).

A sense of *roots*, though, as stated above, is crucial not only for the psychological assurance of belonging, but is also central to the diasporic notion of an Atlantic culture.

Michael Echeruo writes of the “burden of Return,” claiming that,

No person can claim to be part of a diaspora who cannot, however improbably, claim also to be traceable by descent to a lineage and (hence) to a place. The point of *Roots* is not...that a particular location on a map has been identified, but that a claim can be made to such a location.... It is this possibility – this inalienable right to wish a return, to reclaim connections to a lineage, however fractured, that makes one individual a part of a diffuse and disparate collection of persons we call the diaspora. Moreover, that retrospective capacity makes brothers and sisters of all who are *authorized*, or who claim the right to claim connection to the lineage (1999: 13-14) [emphasis in the original].³⁴

While the metaphor of *route* as it is employed by Gilroy is useful in accounting for the cultural hybridity that is the creative norm of the black Atlantic, the maintenance of the more traditionally employed *root* is crucial to explaining the cultural continuities and sense of solidarity found throughout the diaspora. As Echeruo states, claiming a lineal connection to Africa is not an exclusive choice one makes in forming an identity, but it is an important choice people of the African diaspora make in order to declare both what they are and what they are not (1999: 11). In this sense, Langston Hughes is not limiting his intellectual heritage and identity when he writes, in his poem “Theme for English B,” of the cultural differences that are apparent in his writing when compared to that of his white classmates: “Being me, [what I write] will not be white” (1990: 248). Through all the parsings of various African diasporic identities – African-American, African American, Afro-Caribbean, Caribbean American, etc. – the one constant presence is the claim to African descent: an essential African identity (in all the positive and negative

³⁴ Other essays on the importance of homeland and return to the formation of diasporic identities include those by William Safran (1991) and Benedict Anderson (1994), though these authors focus primarily on non-African diasporic populations.

connotations of the word essential) which has been made explicit and granted importance through the constant presence of the collective memory and historical legacy of the Atlantic slave trade – its metaphysical presence in memory and its material presence in culture.

The African Atlantic, then, is constituted by a sense of connection and direction indicated by the word *roots* as well as the multidirectionality indicated by the use of the word *routes*, the normal state of this new ontological construction being one of perpetual motion that is, nonetheless, anchored on the continent of Africa. As the conduit of this perpetual motion, Gilroy offers the chronotope of the ship as a vessel that enables cultural hybridity on both the macro and micro levels.³⁵ At the macro level the ship is a unit in the larger system of the Atlantic, moving among the various parts of the Atlantic, forming a network of cultural and material trade that begins to make the once enormous space seem smaller and more familiar. By adopting the chronotope of the ship to his analysis, Gilroy means to “focus attention on the middle passage” while also bringing to mind the “various projects for redemptive return to Africa” (4). At the micro level ships are seen as systems in and of themselves – as “micro-systems of linguistic and political hybridity” that act as complete systems of exchange (12). Noting the relationships that have been drawn between maritime cultures and radical Atlantic ideologies by Peter Linebaugh and

³⁵ Mikhail Bakhtin defines chronotope as “the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature.... In the literary artistic chronotope, spatial and temporal indicators are fused into one carefully thought-out, concrete whole. Time, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history. This intersection of axes and fusion of indicators characterizes the artistic chronotope” (1981: 84). Gilroy borrows his definition of chronotope from Michael Holquist’s glossary toward the end of the text, defining chronotope as “a unit of analysis for studying texts according to the ratio and nature of the temporal and spatial categories represented.... The chronotope is an optic for reading texts as x-rays of the forces at work in the culture system from which they spring” (Bakhtin 1981: 426; Gilroy 1993: 225 n.2).

Marcus Redicker (1990), the ship, then, is the laboratory in which heterogeneous and constantly mobile collections of sailors are radically affected, while it also radically affects the terrestrial communities they find in ports. These aspects of the ship as a conduit of culture are particularly important to the movement of musical culture when one takes into account the movements of recorded music among the many ports of the Atlantic (Linebaugh 1982: 119). The introduction of recordings of Cuban *son* to the Congo in the 1950s, for instance, is still heard in Congolese rumba, being first imitated by local dance bands in Brazzaville and Léopoldville and ultimately incorporated into a distinct Congolese musical style (Stewart 2000: 21). Additionally, Abdullah Ibrahim claims that his former name Dollar Brand (he was born Adolphus Johannes Brand) came from his habit of trolling the docks as a kid in Capetown with a dollar in his hand, trying to buy jazz records from American sailors (Ibrahim 1997: liner notes).

Gilroy observes, then, that ships should be “thought of as cultural and political units rather than abstract embodiments of the triangular trade” (17). Certainly Gilroy is not suggesting that one should ignore the role ships played as the vessels of horror in the slave trade; one should bear in mind that, while the ship can be viewed as an exciting heuristic metaphor that aids in theorizing processes of cultural exchange, it is also a metaphor often employed by the colonial side of such exchange. Hegel writes, in his influential *Philosophy of history*:

The sea gives us the idea of the indefinite, the unlimited, and infinite; and in *feeling his own infinite* in that Infinite, man is stimulated and emboldened to stretch beyond the limited: the sea invites man to conquest, and to piratical plunder, but also to honest gain and to commerce. The land, the mere Valley-plain attaches him to the soil; it involves him in an infinite multitude of dependencies, but the sea carries him out beyond these limited circles of thought and action... Courage is necessarily introduced into trade, daring is joined with wisdom. For the daring which encounters the sea must at the same time embrace wariness –

cunning – since it has to do with the treacherous, the most unreliable and deceitful element.... The Ship – that swan of the sea, which cuts the watery plain in agile and arching movements or describes circles upon it – is a machine whose invention does the greatest honor to the boldness of man as well as to his understanding. This stretching out of the sea beyond the limitations of the land, is wanting to the splendid political edifices of Asiatic states, although they themselves border on the sea.... For them the sea is only the limit, the ceasing of the land; they have no positive relation to it (1991 [1822]: 90-91) [emphasis in the original].

The ship, for Hegel, is also a metaphor, but a metaphor of acquisitiveness, power, and dominance, the very opposite to Gilroy's intended use. While this does not negate Gilroy's deployment of the metaphor of the ship, it does complicate its use, adding an element of the colonial project that is a part of the anthropological and musicological discourses discussed above.

It is this conflation of the colonial and the anti-colonial, though, that drives much of Gilroy's analysis with regard to black nationalist discourses: the insistence upon black nationality as a category of culture that both constrains black identities (Is one African-American if she was born in the Caribbean?) as well as ignores the elements of European intellectual culture that have been adopted and adapted by black people – “the affinities and affiliations which link the blacks of the West to one of their adoptive, parent cultures: the intellectual heritage of the West since the Enlightenment” (2). Departing from this point, Gilroy is concerned throughout much of the book with illuminating the various ways in which black identities are not, in fact, closed off to the intellectual heritage of the West, but are, in fact, constitutive parts of it. As such, a large portion of Gilroy's project explicates and interrogates the problematic aspects of post-Enlightenment intellectual culture while also claiming those parts of it that have been absorbed by the practices of black intellectual production.

Gilroy's definition of the black Atlantic, then, is drawn as a means to theorize aspects of black identity that are more heterogeneous and fluid than is usually allowed by nationalist discourses. The concern of this essay, though, is not with the politics of identity as such, but rather with the intellectual environment in which artists such as Fela and Sun Ra both draw from and add to the larger intellectual discourse. David Eltis has proposed that the "Atlantic hemispheric community" is a unique geographic system in the context of human history in that, contrary to the pre-modern migrations from Africa to Asia, Europe, and the Americas, the modern Atlantic community has been marked by "continuing and intensive contact between the source society and the migrant society." The Atlantic hemispheric community, then, is conceived as a larger geographic area in which "everyone...had values which if they were not shared around the Atlantic were certainly reshaped in some way by others living in different parts of the Atlantic basins." Defining community in this broad way suggests that "events in one small geographic area were likely to stimulate a reaction – and not necessarily economic – thousands of miles away" (Eltis 1999: 141). When considering the larger community in this manner, Eltis proposes that, while the economic effects of Atlantic exchange directly impacted people's material existence – especially so with the slave trade – it is the exchange of cultural attitudes and values underpin this broader economic behavior (143-44).

This Atlantic community in which cultural and economic exchange is so prevalent, when considered from Eltis's position, can be characterized as a collection of culturally hybrid societies in the sense that there is no one cultural group that is so distinct as to be unaffected by outside influence. This is particularly important in any consideration of the broad discourses surrounding African cultural representations – a

discourse which places certain societies within a state of perpetual nature while others (Western) are allowed to “progress.”³⁶ Through the systems of trade established between Europe and Africa as well as within Africa, many African cultures were influenced by the introduction of European material culture and cultural practices very early on in the history of contact. John Kelly Thornton notes that West African societies, like all other societies, experienced cultural change that was both a natural part of any society’s historical process – for example, the 1624 KiKongo translations of the bible sound archaic to contemporary readers of KiKongo, providing a clear example of linguistic change – while also, clearly, being fundamentally affected by the presence of Europeans (1992: 210). Contemporary archaeological and historical evidence suggests that the introduction of European items from trade, as well as the local African manufacture of European items, was introduced to coastal West Africa by the 18th century, and possibly as early as the late 15th century (DeCorse 1987: 28), diffusing European items throughout the continent by way of intra-African trade. In addition, Thornton argues that European musical practices may have been introduced to West Africa as early as the late 16th century by way of a German sailor who was captured and enslaved to the ruler of Fatema in modern-day Sierra Leone; the sailor was found to be an “excellent horn player” and was kept as a court musician and a private music instructor (1992: 225). While it is not clear if the horn in question was a locally made horn or a European horn, what is significant about this story is the fact that there was a European-trained music instructor resident in West Africa as early as the late-16th century, training students who then

³⁶ As was mentioned earlier, Rosaldo identifies the effect of nostalgia in the colonial and neo-colonial relationships between the West and Africa as one that creates an image of perpetually under-developed African societies in order to create a “stable reference point for defining (the felicitous progress of) civilized identity” (1989: 108).

presumably disseminated their newly expanded repertoire of musical materials and playing techniques.³⁷

When considering the Atlantic community from this perspective, though, there are two qualifiers that must be kept in mind with regard to the dynamics of African and African diasporic cultural contributions. First, one must bear in mind that the modern history of African migration is dominated by the forced migration of the Atlantic slave trade; as such, the economic and ideological motivations of the European populations who implemented and perpetuated the slave trade lie at the ontological core of the Atlantic community. Linebaugh's metaphor of the Atlantic mountains suggests that in order to understand the contours of the surface it is necessary to study the geological dynamics at work under the surface – a historiographical consideration, in a manner similar to Michel Foucault's historical archaeology (1972), of the historical event that is primarily responsible for such a wide-ranging African diaspora. When viewed from this perspective, one cannot understand the rhizomatic, multi-directional exchanges of musical ideas and materials without undertaking a broad consideration of both the inter-cultural dimensions of exchange – exchanges between Africa, Europe, and North America which were primarily set in motion by the Atlantic slave trade – and the intra-cultural dimensions of exchange between different African societies and individuals in a culturally and economically inter-dependent environment.

³⁷ Nketia notes that the use of wind instruments in West Africa is less prevalent than stringed or percussion instruments, although a number of societies from West to Central Africa use them for ceremonial purposes (1974: 92-97). Stone documents two African horns that were in use during her ethnographic work in Liberia: the transverse horn (*tíru*), and the war horn (*kó-turu*) (1982: 89). Stone also lists a Western horn (*kwii-turu*), but then notes in parentheses that she is referring to a trumpet. In the late 16th century there were two types of horns used in Europe: the *trompe*, or hunting horn, and the *cor à plusieurs tours*, or spiral horn. Both of these instruments were metallic “natural horns” (no valves) and would have been among the instruments circulating at the time if, in fact, a European instrument was introduced to Sierra Leone during this period (Meucci 2008).

Secondly, given the historical fact of the slave trade, one must consider that the cultural exchanges among the Atlantic societies was not an exchange of political equals, but rather a complex hegemonic process in which African societies were placed in a subaltern position with respect to European societies. Having been placed in such a position, Africa has suffered through both the economic and political disadvantages that are the legacy of the colonial encounter as well as the stigmatization that has become a malignant legacy of this dynamic – Africa exists, in the European historical imagination, only to represent the “paradigm of difference,” the thing which *we* are not (Mudimbe 1994: xii). As has already been discussed with regard to musicology, the academic discourses of the social sciences have played a central role in the creation of this paradigm of difference; it is the reactions to this paradigm, as they are exemplified by artists such as Fela and Sun Ra, which are at the core of this dissertation, producing works that can be sounded and read as historical narratives which celebrate both the commonalities among Africans (“I’m an African man / Original / I no be gentleman at all” (Anikulapo-Kuti 1997a)) as well as the personal and cultural particularities (“...nothing else is half as real / As the myth of me” (Sun Ra 2005: 82)).

But more than just creating a counter-narrative in opposition to the dominant narrative, these newly articulated historical narratives present alternative interpretations of the evidence of history, highlighting the apositionality of the Object as now occupying the seat of the Subject. Mudimbe suggests that such radical reinterpretation of historical narratives and materials problematizes the ontological premises of dominant historical narratives “by suggesting that philological or historical power is not transcultural but that it nevertheless treats well-known and perfectly spatialized old texts as a virgin domain

awaiting a new mastery” (1994: 25). Sun Ra obsessively read history, philosophy, theology, etymology, and linguistics in order to decipher what he believed to be the true historical narrative that had been suppressed but which was there to be read, under the surface. In a typical intellectual stance, Sun Ra approached his harsh critique of the destructive nature of Christianity by adopting a years-long intensive study of the bible, deciding during college that “there wasn’t no need bein’ an intellectual if I couldn’t do somethin’ that hadn’t been done before. [So] I decided I would tackle the most difficult problem on the planet” (Primack 1978: 15). As a result of this profound and creative study of spirituality and history, much of Sun Ra’s rhetoric is filled with biblical allusions that deploy the stories of the bible as metaphors in a manner contrary to the usual theological discourses. In his composition “I, Pharaoh” (1980), which will be discussed in detail in chapter 3, Sun Ra calls attention to the story of Pharaoh from the book of Genesis rather than the story of the Israelites in the book of Exodus that is more commonly associated with African American religious practices, thereby complicating the image of the Pharaoh as an oppressor with that of Pharaoh as the symbol of generosity and intellect.

It is this kind of intellectual hybridity that has become a norm of the contemporary “global cultural consciousness,” creating new forms of cultural consciousness, “being neither here nor there, ‘us’ or ‘them,’ but being in-between, in a ‘third-space’” (Stokes 2008: IV.5; Bhabha 1994). Emphasizing the hybridity of cultures does not imply cultural impurity so much as it highlights the fluidity of modern cultures that is a result of the speed and availability of modern communications, the ease and relative affordability of international travel, and the mass distribution of cultural objects

as commodities. To illustrate this modern condition I offer the example of an internet chat group concerned with Congolese soukous guitar with which I have been sometimes involved (Schuster 2008). The group was started by Scott Schuster who lives in New York and is an amateur guitarist and music documentarian as well as a professional business consultant and a former correspondent for ABC News. The members of the group reside in the United States, Europe, the Caribbean, Africa, Australia, and Asia, although the effect of participating in the group is one of inhabiting the same space, embodied by the chat group. Alan Kisaka, one of the participants, is a musician and music director for a church in Los Angeles who has created a number of soukous instructional videos and uploaded them to YouTube.com where they are viewed and discussed and which are often debated by the chat group. I have, over time, practiced several of Alan's videos and have transcribed his compositions to music notation, more for my own practice than for anyone else's use. The chain of cultural signifiers embedded in just this brief example is quite long, emblematic of this state of "being neither here nor there": sitting in my attic in Holyoke, Massachusetts I have practiced and transcribed music posted on a website that is managed by a non-professional musician living in New York but who often travels to East Africa; the music was composed by a Kenyan expatriate living in Los Angeles, who elsewhere provides video documentary evidence of him performing his songs with non-African members of his church in a club in Kampala, Uganda; this Kenyan expatriate learned to play soukous in Nairobi, Kenya from Congolese musicians who were expatriate residents in Kenya but who learned the music

from older Congolese musicians who created the music by listening to recordings of 1950s Cuban *son*, combining *son* with local Congolese folk musics....³⁸

The effect of this story's convergence of diverse musical sources, geographic locations, and human identities is one of defining a new cultural formation that has a relationship to the originating cultures (if any culture can be definitively said to have originated any of this) but which is a hybrid of many elements with many attendant aesthetic and political inputs. This movement of cultural materials and ideas, according to James Clifford, is characteristic of modernity – a collection of travelling cultures that test the accepted notions of cultural contact and stasis, implying a conception of culture that emphasizes a perpetual state of change (1997). George Lipsitz broadly refers to this normative cultural hybridity as the “poetics of place” in which it may no longer be useful to think of cultural production in terms of geographical place (landscape), but which rather theorizes cultural production in terms of “the presence of concurrent ethnoscapescapes, mediascapes, technoscapes, finanscapes, and ideoscapes.... [The] dynamic movement of ethnic groups, images, technology, capital, and ideologies allows us to inhabit many different ‘places’ at once” (Lipsitz 1997: 5).³⁹ It is this sense of a “poetics of place” that is infused throughout the African Atlantic and that, for the purposes of this dissertation, defines much of the substantive action of composing the African Atlantic as seen through the work of Sun Ra and Fela.

A choreographic description of the African Atlantic intellectual environment:

³⁸ For a full description of the creation of Congolese rumba see (Stewart 2000).

³⁹ For the concepts of ethnoscape, mediascape, technoscape, finanscape, and ideoscape Lipsitz cites (Appadurai 1990: 1-24), reprinted in (Appadurai 1996: 27-47).

Of all the places and times that Fela and Sun Ra could have met each other, they may have met – though they may not have – in Lagos, Nigeria during the Second World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture (FESTAC).⁴⁰ But the connection, or lack of connection, between Sun Ra and Fela at FESTAC in 1977 is truly not important to this dissertation on composing the African Atlantic – one does not need to track down some documentary or anecdotal evidence of their meeting to know that they were in roughly the same place at the same time interacting with the same institutions and the same crowd of people. What is important in considering Fela and Sun Ra at FESTAC is that, for instance, they both interacted with the same entity (FESTAC) at the same time but in their distinctly personal ways: Sun Ra wanted to be a part of the Egyptian delegation when entering the National Stadium at the opening ceremonies, declaring his allegiance as being historically and ideologically determined by origins rather than national membership (Crawford 2009); Fela chose, as a result of his experience of being an original member of the FESTAC executive organizing committee, not to enter the stadium and not to participate in the festival, staging a counter-FESTAC series of concerts at his own club that presented an alternative to the official FESTAC program (Idowu 2003: 16-19). The point, of course, is that both Fela and Sun Ra participated in FESTAC in their own way: in Fela's case participating by actively not participating, and in Sun Ra's case participating by questioning the discursive arrangements of the festival. Both manners of participation had effects both large and small on their personal biographies and their work subsequent to the festival: Sun Ra felt further alienated from

⁴⁰ Szwed notes that Sun Ra warned his musicians not to attend Fela's counter-FESTAC events at the Afrika Shrine while Veal states that members of the Arkestra did jam with Fela's band and Trevor Schoonmaker lists Sun Ra among the attendees (Szwed 1998: 342; Veal 2000: 153; Schoonmaker 2003: 3). FESTAC and Fela's counter-FESTAC will be discussed in more detail in chapter 5.

African American culture when the Arkestra was barred from participating in the closing ceremonies for refusing to enter the stadium using the raised-fist Black Power salute (Szwed 1998: 342); and Fela was severely set back materially, artistically, and psychologically in the wake of the Nigerian army's raid on his home compound, the Kalakuta Republic, undertaken as a reprisal for his outspoken criticism of the Nigerian government before and during FESTAC (Veal 2000: 155-57). The point here, of course, is that Sun Ra's and Fela's presence at and relationships with the festival is a much more illuminating and productive topic of discussion than one which can be crafted from the minutia of considering whether this person met that person.

Rather than focusing on specific intellectual connections among Fela, Sun Ra, and other members of the African Atlantic intellectual community, then, for the remainder of the dissertation I will discuss the various intellectuals and ideas, both musical and extramusical, that these two artists interacted with in a more choreographic manner akin to Fred Moten's discussion of Beauford Delaney, Antonin Artaud, and Billie Strayhorn as members of the New York avant garde (Moten 2003: 31-41). Moten describes the movements of these diverse intellectuals through New York and Europe choreographically, relating their work and travels via the temporal and spatial play of their movements through the same spaces, different spaces, different times, same times – movements which are, with this group of intellectuals, related to expatriation and the perspectives of the outsider experience and which have impacted upon the larger conception of 20th century American and European avant garde aesthetics. Drawing a connection between the sounding of music and the grouped analysis of intellectual biographies, Moten asks the question,

What if we understand the geographical history of the New York avant-garde choreographically, by way of the turning point? We could think it choreographically, bringing the aesthetic back on line, by way of a rhythm analysis that would inject some choreographic play of encounter into our analytic, making certain folks meet in the city. Turning point might then become vanishing point, where the absent presence of the performance becomes the absent and structuring center of perspectival urban space. We could think this in relation to the desire for bohemian space and the way that desire is activated in and as the displacement of the ones who had been there. Such displacement...[takes place] before the fact of another mode of thinking that might be structured by and as a collaboration with what and who had been there before. This is to say that the avant-garde is not only a temporal-historical concept but a spatial-geographical concept as well (2003: 40).

This choreographic interplay of biography, geography, and art implies a more nuanced approach to the idea of *influence* when considering the relation of one artist to another, drawing attention to the ground of encounter – as in Foucault’s famous table top metaphor (1970: xviii-xix) – rather than the more linearly configured model of cause and effect. In this choreographic model, one does not only consider Fela’s effect on Sun Ra or Sun Ra’s effect on Fela or Baraka’s effect on Fela or Sun Ra’s effect on Baraka.... All of these intellectuals are acting on a common ground (*episteme*) as insistent voices that are but singularities (or rather bundles of singularities) within the totality of the discourses of black cultural production. If the ground of encounter is taken, as a whole, to be the rhizomatic, dialogic space of the African Atlantic, then any one intellectual or group of intellectuals operating on that ground affects it and is affected by it. In much the same way that Foucault suggests that the commonality which binds all the frustrated attempts of aphasiacs to arrange objects is the tabletop on which the objects are to be arranged, the African Atlantic is a common (watery) ground of cultural production.

Conceived this way, one does not need to limit the discussion to intellectuals of the African diaspora, though when bringing European intellectuals into the discussion it

is best to contextualize the power relations that are always buried in the discourse as a type of subterranean white supremacy of intellectual production.⁴¹ Moten addresses this power relation in two ways: in his subtle reference to “four of [Frederick] Douglass’s ‘contemporaries’ – Marx, Nietzsche, Freud, and Saussure” (2003: 7) and his purposeful leaving of a number of authors and musicians (most prominently Nietzsche and Schoenberg)⁴² to remain as ghosts of his narrative; and in his idea of intellectual convergence and cultural nonconvergence. Moten states that in trying to think through the various intertextual strands present in Baraka’s writing he is trying to get at “whatever generative forces there are in the asymptotic, syncopated nonconvergence of event, text, and tradition” (87). This nonconvergence contrasts with the intellectual convergence of ideas he reads and sounds in Baraka, Heidegger, Derrida, and Sollers, noting that the nonconvergence is cultural, “emerg[ing] in and as a certain glancing confrontation – of Africa, Europe, and America, of outness, labor, and sentiment – that is both before and a part of the material preface to the theoretical and practical formulation of a black public sphere” (87-88).

This being said, in discussing the intellectual environment in which Sun Ra and Fela operated, one can, if done well, discuss, as an example, Fela and Foucault as

⁴¹ Originally conceived as a means of theorizing about the material presence of white privilege in history (Roediger 1991) and in legal studies (Harris 1993), contemporary whiteness theory has been adopted by academics throughout the social sciences and humanities as a means of explicating the sometimes subtle yet always insistent dynamics of white cultural, political, and economic dominance that are achieved by the deployment of various preferential behaviors. Among the more compelling works on whiteness theory within the broad field of cultural studies is George Lipsitz’s *The possessive investment in whiteness: How white people profit from identity politics* (2006) and John Fiske’s *Media matters: Race and gender in U.S. politics* (1996).

⁴² Throughout Moten’s discussion of the presence of tragedy and elegy in Baraka’s writing, Nietzsche’s *The birth of tragedy* (1994) remains an unacknowledged ghost in the background (Moten 2003: 85-102). Similarly, though there are a number of connections that could be made between Moten’s discussion of Cecil Taylor’s album *Chinampas* [floating gardens] (1988) and Schoenberg’s *Book of the hanging gardens* (1990), Schoenberg’s presence is only felt if one knows he is there (Moten 2003: 41-63).

contemporaries who call attention to some of the same issues. One of the major traps in this kind of rhetorical configuration, though, is the kind of *post hoc ergo propter hoc* (after it therefore because of it) notion which often expresses itself as an *a priori* assumption that the African intellectual must have had these thoughts after an encounter with the European intellectual. This dynamic is well illustrated in the work of Carl Sagan, recounted by Mudimbe, who, when confronted with evidence from Marcel Griaule's work which argues that aspects of Dogon cosmology are strikingly similar to European cosmology, concluded that a European traveler must have recounted the European 20th century discovery of the dwarf star Sirius B to the Dogon (Mudimbe 1988: 13-15; Sagan 1979: 66-80). In this example Sagan ignores the fact that Dogon cosmological knowledge of Sirius B (the "star of the *fonio*") is known to have existed in the mid-19th century, implying, one can only conclude, that there must be time travel involved in the story of Dogon cosmology.⁴³

But returning to the example of Fela and Foucault, it is possible to begin to conceive of how one may have influenced the other in either a direct or roundabout manner, or even in the sense – and this is my true agenda here – that they were both extraordinarily articulate intellectuals who, in their own fields and with their own tools, expressed similar ideas about social justice from a similarly antiauthoritarian stance, both possessing a talent for expressing the radically liberal *zeitgeist* of the 1960s and 1970s in their often universalist commentary on the politics of the local and personal. As an example of the hint of influence that may or may not be, take Foucault's idea of governmentality (*gouvernementalité*) and the connection one could probably argue –

⁴³ This dynamic will be discussed further in chapter 5 with regard to Mudimbe's concept of epistemological ethnocentrism.

academics can argue anything, after all – to Fela’s 1977 composition “Colonial mentality” (2000b), or for that matter the 1974 composition “Ikoyi mentality versus Mushin mentality” (2007). Foucault’s essay “Gouvernementalité” (2000c: 201-22) was first published in 1978. In February of 1977 Fela’s home compound, the Kalakuta Republic, was infamously raided, most likely as political retribution for his outspoken criticism of both FESTAC and the Nigerian government in his music – “Zombie” (2001d), a ridiculing indictment of the Nigerian military, was released just months before FESTAC – and in his public staging of a counter-FESTAC series of performances at his club the Afrika Shrine. The raid on Fela’s Kalakuta Republic was noted in a number of stories in *The New York Times* and the story also appeared in French language media such as *Le Monde* at the same time.⁴⁴ Though Foucault expressed no significant interest in music other than European art music in his writing and interviews, he did have a keen sense of the relationship of his writing to current events and popular culture. And so it is likely that at some point Foucault encountered a news story about the Kalakuta raid, and the news story probably mentioned that Fela was an anti-neocolonial activist. Given that Foucault was a quick writer who published often, it is possible, then, that his neologistic conflation of the words *gouvernement* and *mentalité* was in some way connected to having read a story about Fela’s protests against the Nigerian *government* and his compositions that explicated the neocolonial and class-based *mentality* of Nigerian working class reality.

⁴⁴ In the *New York Times* see (Darnton 1977b, 1977c). John Darnton, the New York Times correspondent who covered FESTAC, was still in Nigeria when Kalakuta was raided and was expelled from the country a month later. Part of the documentary film *Konkombe* features Fela’s 1978 occupation of Decca’s offices in Lagos and was shown on European television that year (Marre 2000; Veal 2000: 179-80).

Flipping this configuration to imply that Foucault influenced Fela is a bit more difficult. Fela had an often expressed impatience with academic discourse that makes it unlikely that he would have read Foucault (Olorunyomi 2003: xxii). Also – and this is the clincher – given that “Colonial mentality” and other compositions like it predate Foucault’s “Gouvernementalité,” to argue that Foucault’s idea influenced Fela’s composition would be akin to Sagan’s time-travelling copy of a 20th-century European cosmological text – a type of scholarly derangement that seems to be activated by some white writers and politicians when talking about the relations between black and white intellectual cultures (or when discussing anything having to do with the first black president of the U.S., for that matter).⁴⁵ As John Fiske observes with regard to the racial dynamics of American popular culture and contemporary politics, the stultifying and dominating effects of whiteness in American culture are most often activated and motivated by the culturally conservative white population’s growing fear of multiethnicity and a nagging “fear of retribution for its history of domination” (1996: 46). This fear of a loss of control over politics, culture, capital, etc. has caused and continues to cause a form of historical revision that often strains credulity, as, for instance, was the case with post-Reconstruction assessments of the alleged failure of Reconstruction policies, famously outlined by W.E.B. Du Bois in the final chapter of his *Black Reconstruction in America* (1998 [1935]: 711-30). The point here, of course, is that many arguments based on political or cultural causality become mired in the author’s own ideologies and masked by the author’s seemingly professional scholarship.

⁴⁵ As an example, a quick perusal of the comments on any story published in *The Huffington Post* having to do with Barack or Michelle Obama can serve as evidence of this dynamic – a dynamic one commenter memorably labeled ODS: Obama Derangement Syndrome.

So, again, the idea of discussing a variety of intellectuals in a choreographic rather than strictly causal relationship allows for a freedom of movement among intellectuals – their works and their biographies – that is more consciously reactive, more mindful of the agency of individuals, while also acknowledging the dominance of some voices and the strategies one may employ to slip through the cracks so that a situation marked by dominance is not one of total, unremitting subjectivity. I must add that it is tempting here to describe this dynamic of resistance with reference to a concept such as Foucault’s notion of “counter-conduct” (2004: 195-232), but the larger argument of this dissertation, of course, is that the compositional strategies Sun Ra and Fela enacted and exemplified are themselves part of a larger integrated strategy of cultural resistance which does not need to rely upon European theory to categorize it as such.

CHAPTER 2 – “THIS AIN’T NO SIDESHOW”: MUSICAL COMPOSITION AND THE MYTHIC SPACE OF PERFORMANCE

I’m paving the way for humanity to recognize the myth and become part of my mythocracy instead of their theocracies and democracies and any other kind of ocracies they got.

Sun Ra, in *Sun Ra: A joyful noise* (Mugge 1980)

Oyinbo no teach us nothing
Na we open dem eye
Na 500 years slavery cause am
(Europeans taught us nothing
It is we who civilized them
with 500 years of our slave labor)
Fela Anikulapo-Kuti, “Perambulator” (1998)

Dialogic composition:

In his book titled *Time passages: Collective memory and American popular culture*, George Lipsitz takes the title of his first chapter from Rahsaan Roland Kirk’s usual warning to audiences that “this ain’t no sideshow” (Lipsitz 1990: 3). More than an off-hand comment from a musician before he launches into an impassioned and singular performance, Lipsitz notes that Kirk often addressed his audiences in this manner as a way of putting them on notice that his performance, while outrageous to some degree, was not crafted for entertainment alone but rather as a means of engaging his audience in the main show: the mutual playing-out of collective memory through black music, indicating its significance as part of a historical narrative and as a marker of identity. In presenting his show – decidedly not a sideshow – Kirk called “attention to his role as a black musician in a society controlled by whites.... His stage antics...revealed a sedimented layer of historical knowledge and historical critique beneath the surface appearance of novelty and performance” (4). Kirk’s performances recontextualized

popular musical forms, relating them to “their origins within the historical struggles of the Afro-American past” (3): his performance of “Old rugged cross” reveals an impassioned and satirically overblown⁴⁶ text which undermines the “sacred” nature of its origin; and his blues composition “Blacknuss” is introduced as having been composed entirely on the black keys of the piano, highlighting the segregated, unequal relationship between black and white that exists on the keyboard as a metaphor for a racially polarized society (Kirk 2003).⁴⁷

The radical (rooted) deformation⁴⁸ and commentary that Kirk performs upon these well known melodies and musical forms became, to a large extent, integral parts of the text of the music – parts which are not always apparent in inscribed forms of the music, both written and recorded, but which become fully realized in the complex of relationships that exist among composer(s), performer(s), audience, musical and non-musical sounds, words, and context. In this sense, then, referring to the inscribed music as the *text* of the music strips much of the signified meaning from the composition itself, rendering the music as an asocial, apolitical phenomenon whose worth exists merely in

⁴⁶ My use of the word overblown here is meant in the deconstructively musical sense that Fred Moten applies to his sounding/reading of Nathaniel Mackey’s phrase “overblown hope” (Mackey 2001: 118): “Maybe hope is always overblown, but the overblown produces unprecedented sound, overtones of the heretofore unheard (of), laughter outside the house, ‘unhoused vacuity’” (Moten 2003: 83).

⁴⁷ Contrary to the Paul McCartney and Stevie Wonder composition “Ebony and Ivory,” black and white keys on a piano do not “live together in perfect harmony” (McCartney and Wonder 1983), but rather represent an unequal relationship within music. The white keys of the piano represent the eight notes of the diatonic scale, upon which the tonal harmonic system of European music is based. The black keys, taken separately, represent a pentatonic scale (F# major or Eb minor pentatonic) that constitutes, in some form, the classic pitch collection of the blues, some African musics, and some Asian musics. Given the hegemonic dominance of European music in most Western representations of music history, these two sets of piano keys, taken separately, do not exist on an equal plane.

A similar observation is also made in James Weldon Johnson’s *Autobiography of an ex-colored man* when the narrator expresses what he sees as a culturally determined affinity for the sound of the pentatonic scale: “I remember I always had a particular fondness for the black keys” (1965: 396).

⁴⁸ Here I am referring to Houston Baker’s concept of the deformation of mastery in which a writer, speaker, or performer parodies or otherwise Signifies on his own mastery of expressive form (1987: 49-52).

the integrity of its musical construction. Such formalist analysis misses much of the meaning and significance of music when it reductively focuses on the music as a mere aestheticized object. In the case of Kirk, as with Sun Ra and Fela, a significant part of the substance of a composition is realized only when the composition is performed, being dependent upon a dialogic relationship with an audience in order to unlock and display its full range of signified meanings. Through this performative process the musicians and audience create the texts of compositions in the sense suggested by Walter Ong when he observed that the etymological root of the word *text* means “to weave” in Latin (2002: 13): the text exists in its discursive performance, woven together and communally interpreted rather than meticulously crafted and presented in its monumental form.

The idea of composing the African Atlantic implies an aesthetic framework or poetics of musical composition common throughout the African diaspora even while it is not agreed upon or, often, explicitly stated or debated as such. While some writers such as Edouard Glissant have argued in great detail for a poetics that is simultaneously open-ended and particular, one does not encounter much of a self-conscious and self-identifying discourse about what is and is not a poetics of African diasporic musical composition. Despite the work of some intellectuals who have theorized African diasporic compositional practices with relation to European practices (e.g., Abiam and The Pan-African Orchestra 1995; Lewis 1996, 2008; Wilson 1973, 1974), or some who have described what is particular to African diasporic musical practices (e.g., Baraka 1967a; Baraka 1963; Floyd 1995, 1998), by and large the discourses of African diasporic compositional practice take place in the performance and contestation of music: composers (very broadly defined) compose, musicians play, audiences (musicians and lay

people) receive, react, and evaluate, composers and musicians evaluate and respond to the audience, on and on in an open-ended, dialogic, intertextual, multi-media processual discourse. This is not a mere working-it-out-on-the-bandstand, and it certainly ain't no sideshow.

Music as representational art:

One of the first things to sort out in this new conception of composition, as was stated in chapter 1, is the issue of whether the music itself can be called representational: whether the music itself speaks to its audience. Western musicology and aesthetics have long claimed that music is a non-representational art form: that it expresses no information that can be cognitively understood in the way that language is understood.⁴⁹ Peter Kivy argues that music is non-representational because ascribing representation to music assumes the conscious intentionality of the composer, implying that what the listener experiences and perceives as being the expressive qualities of the work are exactly what the composer intended (1989: 64). Kivy's overarching thesis is that music is often expressive of emotional content, but this expressiveness does not mean the music is a representation of the composer's intended meaning (11):

In spite of the fact that there are *some* cases in which composers intended, I believe, to write expressive music by writing music representative of expressive behavior, I advance the view here that expressive music only *resembles* expressive behavior (66) [emphasis in the original].

Other writers on music and representation have approached their subject by applying representational analysis theory of the visual arts, producing a mixed result which sometimes claims that music is, in fact, representational (Howard 1972), and

⁴⁹ This argument, of course, refers to musical sounds without words, whether those sounds are from an inanimate instrument or from the non-linguistic sounds of a singer's voice.

sometimes claims that it is not (Scruton 1976). Richard Kuhns provides a compelling critique of Roger Scruton's argument against representation, observing that through the correct application of Scruton's criteria one can conclude that music is, in fact, representational. Among the most salient points, Kuhns notes that if a listener is trained to listen to a particular form of music, that listener will hear quite a bit of information that would otherwise pass one by (1978: 121). Along with Kuhns's word *trained* I would propose to add the word *acculturated*, acculturation being a training, of sorts, that allows one to gain competence within a culture. Adding the concept of acculturation has the dual effect of both loosening the grip institutions often hold on the acquisition of knowledge – one can learn about musics in social settings as well as institutional settings – and reminding one that musics are culturally created phenomena which are not entirely musically intelligible to all except those who share common cultural knowledge. Considering the concept of representation in this way, one then can better appreciate Kuhns's statement with regard to culture and representation: "What is representational is both historically and culturally conditioned. In some cultures music alone is representational; in some cultures (such as ours [Western]) representational capacities of music are subject to the fundamental shifts of theory" (123).

Most modern writers who are familiar with the aesthetic principles of African and African diasporic musics, though, have long disputed this universalized claim of the non-representational character of music. What Kuhns is alluding to in his argument against Scruton – but what he is not naming outright – is the ethnocentric nature of the belief that because one does not understand a representational system it must not be saying anything intelligible. Certainly with regard to African American music, particularly blues and jazz,

much of the descriptive rhetoric refers to the music as talking, crying, saying something, telling a story, etc. While this can be explained as metaphorical description of subjective musical experience – not an objective description of an actual phenomenon – the talking drum traditions of West Africa are an example of quite literal cognitive meaning expressed through music, offering a distinct counter-narrative to the Western discourse of musical representation. John Miller Chernoff notes that the talking drum traditions of West Africa are particularly well documented, with two important factors providing for communication with its intended audience: the prominence of tonal languages throughout West Africa in which the pitch and timbre of spoken language are important elements in assigning meaning to words; and the general perception throughout West Africa that drums are melodic instruments, and not solely percussive (1979: 75).⁵⁰ The linguist George Herzog noted, in 1945, that the linguistic-cognitive content of drumming had been well documented within the field of anthropology but had not, until then, been considered in any depth within the field of linguistics. His observation with regard to West African “drum-signaling” is that the drum languages are so closely tied to the native languages of the performers, they are only intelligible to either members of the performer’s language group or to members of other language groups who speak the performer’s language with some fluency (1945: 217). The same systems of representation that allow for drums to express linguistic-cognitive information also allow for musicians playing non-percussion instruments to communicate linguistic content. Chernoff notes that several of his informants indicated the highlife song “Yiadam boakye” as an example

⁵⁰ In addition to Chernoff, the general ethnomusicological literature with regard to West African talking drum traditions include the works of J.H. Kwabena Nketia (1963), and John F. Carrington (1971, 1969). There is also a fascinating early description of talking drum performance in a travelogue/ethnograph by R.S. Rattray, particularly in chapter 22 titled “The drum language” (1923: 242-86).

of a non-percussion instrument talking, with the bass line, at one point, saying in Twi, “*hwe ne nante, hwe na to*/look at her walking, look at her buttocks” (1979: 76; Jerry Hansen's Ramblers International Band). John Carrington similarly describes a trumpet solo from a Congolese military band performance which included an impromptu signaling by the trumpeter, expressing a crude joke the adult Congolese observers would not relate to him but which several young boys did later (1971: 48-49).

That musical instruments can speak to an audience is a phenomenon which is widespread throughout West and Central Africa. In her ethnographic work with the Kpelle of Liberia Ruth Stone has outlined a number of musical concepts in the Kpelle language which she correlates to similar conceptions from other African language groups. In the Kpelle language the word *tin* is used to describe the everyday sounds of life as well as the unstructured sounds that may come from a musical instrument as it produces sound in a random, non-musical fashion: e.g., dropped on the ground, accidentally bumped against, and so on. A different word, *wóo*, is used to describe sounds created by people or by “surrogate people”: e.g., animals, birds, musical instruments making sounds with cognitive meaning, etc (1982: 58). Musical instruments, when they are considered to be “surrogate participants,” are “regarded as extensions of the performers who play them” and are therefore considered to be articulate voices in the process of musical production (57). Hugo Zemp similarly describes the idea of musical instruments as articulate participants in musical performance among the Dan of Côte d’Ivoire.

The musician is generally identified by the name of the instrument that he plays: one says “man who plays the tambour” (*baa-zə-mɛ*), “man who blows the horn” (*tlu-pyɔ-mɛ*), etc. But there exists a general term – rarely used, it is true – that covers all the musical instruments: it is *we-pə*, “the thing that speaks.” The musician, the instrumentalist, is the *we-pə-kə-mɛ*, “man who plays the thing that speaks.” This term is rarely used, and we only encountered it on our third visit to

the Dan, because in the everyday language one normally specifies the instrument that one is playing. However, the general terms *we-pə-kə-me* and *we-pə* appear in proverbs...[and] in myths; one time we heard a village chief at the end of a festival thank the “men who play the things that speak” (1971: 72-73).

Part of the problem one encounters with regard to representation within European musicological discourse is the emphasis placed on Western scientific taxonomy rather than playing technique or some other criteria in the classification of musical instruments. Western musicologists have long used the categories set by Erich von Hornbostel and Curt Sachs in 1914 which divide musical instruments into the general categories of chordophones, aerophones, membranophone, and idiophones, with further sub-classifications that purposefully follow the Linnaean taxonomic system (1961: 9). Alan Merriam, in his *Anthropology of music*, instructs his readers – ethnomusicologists in training – to approach their field work by first documenting the material culture of the music they are studying, describing the instruments according to the “recognized taxonomy” as it is set out by Hornbostel and Sachs:

Each instrument must be measured, described, and either drawn to scale or photographed; principles of construction, materials employed, decorative motifs, methods and techniques of performance, musical ranges, tones produced, and theoretical scales are noted (1964: 45).

The Western classificatory system, then, categorizes instruments according to their materials and methods of construction rather than their sound or social functions – a system of descriptive value at odds with the priorities which would be set by West African musicians if called upon to characterize their expressive cultures in their own words. Stone observes that Kpelle musicians primarily classify musical instruments according to the general method used for playing: by blowing, or by striking (1982: 56). Struck instruments (*yále*) includes instruments categorized by Western musicologists as

membranophones, idiophones, and chordophones, while blown instruments (*fêe*) are the equivalents of Western aerophones (87). A similar system for instrument classification is also found with the Dan of Cote d'Ivoire:

The Dan divide musical instruments into two categories which are distinguished by their playing technique: those that one “blow” and those that one “strike.” One says “blow into a musical instrument” (*we-pə-pyə*) or “strike a musical instrument (*we-pə-zə*)” (Zemp 1971: 82).

In the Kpelle conception of *yále*, or struck instruments, the emphasis when describing a chordophone is on the fact that a string is struck by fingers, moving the string to produce a sound (Stone 1982: 87).⁵¹ While the Kpelle do make a secondary classification within the categories of *yále* and *fêe* which roughly corresponds to the Western musicological practice of classifying instruments according to their construction, the construction of the instrument is not as important as its use (88). The guitar, for instance, being categorized as a struck instrument, is as much a percussion instrument as it is melodic or harmonic.

Percussive melodies and modal harmony:

In a manner that is similar to the Kpelle classification and use of instruments, many of Fela's compositions, for example, can be heard to use guitars as percussive elements within the orchestra rather than as primarily harmonic and melodic instruments as would be the case in a jazz big band. Figure 1 illustrates the repetitive phrases played by the two guitars in the composition “Mr. Follow Follow”⁵²:

⁵¹ Stone notes that the word *yále* in Kpelle translates to English literally as “break.” This relates to Moten's concept, borrowing from Mackey, of the “break” or “cut” in African diasporic expressive practices (Moten 2003).

⁵² Note that the guitar is an octave transposing instrument, sounding one octave lower than written.

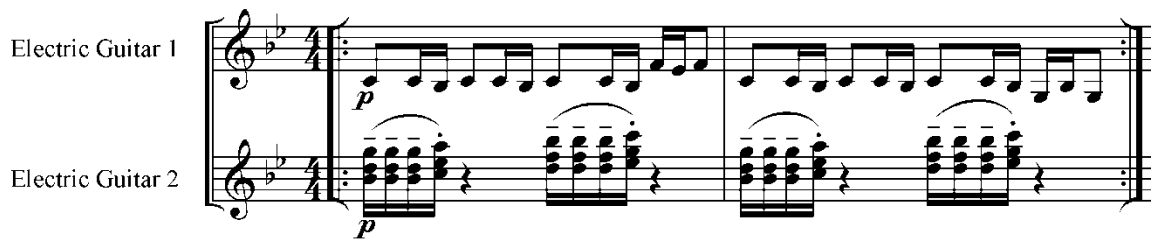


Figure 1: "Mr. Follow Follow" guitar parts

Both guitar parts repeat without variation throughout the 13 minute composition, save for one brief stop-time figure during the vocal portion at c.9:04. Though the parts do provide harmonic information – guitar 1 plays a C minor pentatonic phrase while guitar 2 plays a triadic phrase that outlines the C Dorian mode – the strict repetition of the parts as well as the thin mid-range timbre and relatively quiet dynamics of the guitars suggests they are employed in the same manner in which percussion instruments are employed in a West African percussion ensemble⁵³: their smaller, supporting parts fill a rhythmic and harmonic space that is neither occupied by nor intrudes upon other instruments’ musical space, illustrating a West African musical aesthetic Kwabena Nketia refers to as the “hocket-technique” of compositional orchestration (Nketia 1962). Placing the guitar parts from Figure 1 in context, Figure 2 illustrates this layered rhythmic and harmonic texture

⁵³ Veal relates Fela’s use of guitars to the “chicken scratch” style of playing exemplified by James Brown’s guitarists (2000: 84), as well as to the ambiguously labeled tenor guitar parts (e.g., guitar 1 in Figure 1) which are common in juju compositions and which can also be heard, in another context, in the famously propulsive guitar line in the song “Could you be loved” by Bob Marley and the Wailers (Veal 2000: 93, 258; Waterman 1990a: 183-84). I note that Veal’s and Waterman’s identification of these parts as being played on tenor guitar is ambiguous because the examples they give are of lines that are played in the lower register of the guitar’s range. The Western-made tenor guitar is a slightly smaller and higher-pitched four-stringed instrument while the common guitar is a baritone instrument in its lower register. My assumption is that referring to these parts as “tenor guitar” is a local term for this type of guitar part.

as it is played by the full instrumental ensemble in a four measure excerpt of the first melodic phrase.⁵⁴

⁵⁴ Figure 1 and Figure 2 are from my own transcription of the recording “Mr. Follow Follow” on the CD *Zombie* (Anikulapo-Kuti 2001d). This transcription may not represent the manner in which Fela composed the music and words, the contributions of the individual musicians who played on the recording, or the way Fela or any of his musicians conceived of, discussed, or described this music. Any inaccuracies or misrepresentations in the transcription are my own. Note that the first quarter notes in the tenor and baritone sax parts are from the end of a previous phrase and should not be heard as part of the melody statement.

Mr.Follow Follow

Excerpt, measures 17-20

♩=85

Soprano Sax. *f*

Tenor Sax. *mp*

Baritone Sax. *mp*

Trumpet in B. *f*

Electric Guitar 1 *p*

Electric Guitar 2 *p*

Electric Bass *mf*

Drum Set *mf*

Conga *mp*

Shekere *mp*

(Fig 2: Continued below)

Mr. Follow Follow excerpt

The musical score is for measures 17-20 of the piece "Mr. Follow Follow". It is written for a 2/3 time signature. The score includes ten staves, each representing a different instrument or voice part. The parts are: S. Sax. (Soprano Saxophone), T. Sax. (Tenor Saxophone), B. Sax. (Baritone Saxophone), Bb Tpt. (B-flat Trumpet), E. Gtr. 1 (Electric Guitar 1), E. Gtr. 2 (Electric Guitar 2), E.B. (Electric Bass), D. S. (Drum Set), C. (Conga), and Shek. (Shekere). The S. Sax., T. Sax., B. Sax., and Bb Tpt. parts play a melodic line with a triplet of eighth notes in the first measure. E. Gtr. 1 plays a continuous eighth-note pattern. E. Gtr. 2 plays a rhythmic pattern of eighth-note chords. E.B. plays a melodic line with a triplet of eighth notes. D. S. and C. play a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes. Shek. plays a simple bass line.

Figure 2: Measures 17-20, "Mr. Follow Follow"

This manner of thickly layering repetitive instrumental parts is a common aesthetic of many West African musical genres, with most instruments seemingly acting as substitutes for instruments of a drum orchestra. What sets Fela's musical language apart from other African musics, however, is the manner in which he incorporates the harmonic structures of the late 1950s American modal jazz movement – "Mr. Follow

Follow” is composed entirely in the C Dorian mode – allowing the soloists to emphasize the rhythmic and melodic aspects of their improvised lines without the need to follow intricate chord changes. In doing so Fela consciously adopted a style of harmonic practice that, while often portrayed as being related to Medieval and Renaissance European musical practice,⁵⁵ Fela viewed as a more essentially African way of composing music (Tannenbaum 1985: 24). Abiam observes that Fela’s extensive use of the Dorian mode as the harmonic basis of his compositional style marks his harmonic language as being closely aligned with traditional Yoruba musical practices (Collins 2009: 116-19).

Gerhard Kubik describes several distinct systems of harmony which have grown out of African folk practices and which are present in contemporary African musics as well as in African diasporic musics such as blues and jazz. Among a number of organizational models for African harmonic practices is one general model based on the experience of hearing the overtone partials of a complex sound. The simplest of these systems, which Kubik calls a single-fundamental system, creates melodic and harmonic structures based on the perception of the first several partials of the overtone series, the first four of which produce the sound of a major triad (Figure 3). Examples of musical cultures that follow this model are the Wagogo of Tanzania and the !Ko of Botswana and Namibia. As both Kubik and John Blacking have pointed out, such single-fundamental systems are based on only a few notes such that it is nearly impossible to create harmonic progressions

⁵⁵ For an overview of traditional modal harmony in European music see Grout and Palisca (2001: 52-54, 146-47). My own introduction to modal harmony was through the theory curriculum at the Berklee College of Music, particularly through the use of Pease’s and Pullig’s text *Modern jazz voicings* (2001) and the required harmony curriculum. The introduction of modal practice in jazz harmony is most often attributed to the popularity among musicians of George Russell’s book *The lydian chromatic concept of tonal organization for improvisation* (1959). Though Miles Davis does not mention this book in his autobiography, he does indicate that Russell was helpful in explaining modal harmony to him in the 1950s (Davis and Troupe 1989: 225).

(Kubik 2007: 186-87; Blacking 1959). But while one may not be able to create a harmonic progression, moving from one chord to another, certainly one can create a sense of harmony based on either the linear or simultaneous sounding of these notes.

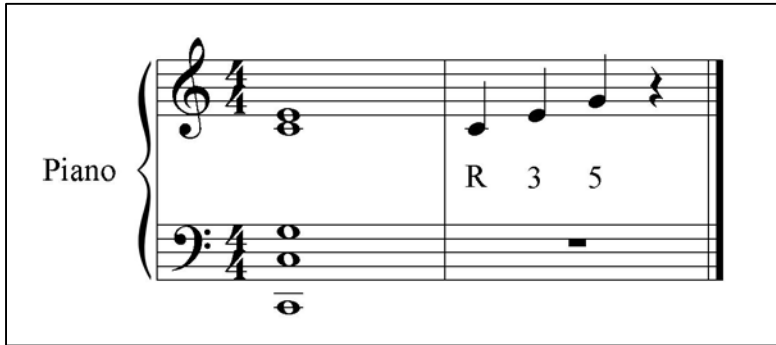


Figure 3: Simple overtone series, fundamental C

Kubik also states that elsewhere in Africa some cultures have created harmonic systems based on the practice of shifting between two roots, usually a whole tone apart. In this system, even if one hears only the first four partials over a fundamental note, the combined partials begin to form a hexatonic scale similar to the Lydian mode, minus the 7th degree, which, when played against a harmonic background that shifts between the two tonal centers (e.g., C and D), begins to sound like the harmonic language of modal jazz (Figure 4): “In jazz, shifting tonality is the hidden African matrix in some of the so-called modal jazz propagated at one time by Miles Davis and by John Coltrane” (187). Kubik gives an example from the -Nkhumbi/-Handa of Angola which illustrates this hexatonic scale derived from the overtones of a musical bow (2007: 187; 1973).⁵⁶ In a similar example from Hugh Tracey’s recordings from Luba and Kanyoka musicians in the Congo, the music, when roughly transcribed, consists of a constant vamping shift

⁵⁶ Kubik also connects this dual fundamental system of harmony to Bo Diddley’s simple but thrilling chordal guitar solo on the song “Bo Diddley” (Bo Diddley 1990).

between the notes c-e-g and d-f \flat -a, the triad forms of C major and D minor (Tracey 1973, 1998). In this example the combination of major and minor triads a whole step apart produces a hexatonic scale more akin to the Western diatonic major scale – essentially the same scale as is produced in Figure 4 except for the $\flat 4/\flat 11$ interval.⁵⁷

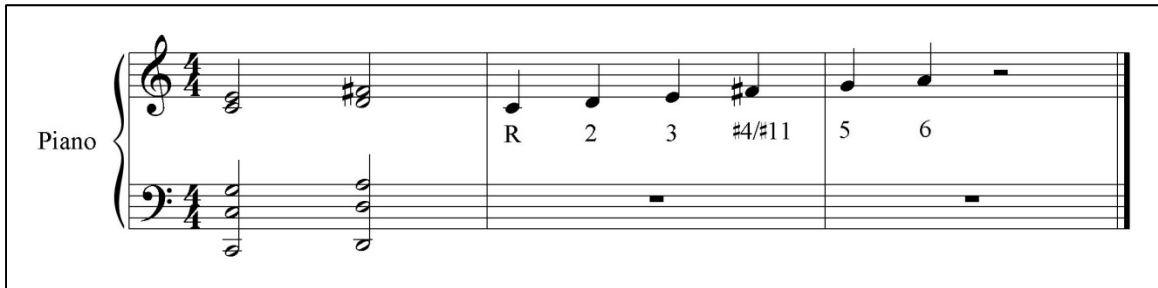


Figure 4: Simple overtone series, C and D fundamentals

In addition, it should be pointed out that the modal harmonic system does not only describe the practices of modal jazz but can just as easily be used to describe the harmonic language of funk, blues, Ali Farka Touré, etc. Certainly one could argue that many of Touré’s songs and instrumental compositions such as “Ali’s here” (1999) are modal in the sense that they are composed against a static harmonic center in much the same way as, for instance, John Lee Hooker’s “Tupelo blues” (1991). Drawing Touré and Hooker together is by design, of course. Though Touré’s music is distinctly Malian, he often stated his affinity for the blues, and particularly for Hooker’s playing, noting that the blues sounded like his own local music: “When I heard Hooker’s music for the first

⁵⁷ Though this example seems at first to be related to Kubik’s other examples of dual-fundamental harmony, the note f \flat is not a part of the overtone series derived from either a C or D fundamental. The minor triad is not derived from the experience of simple overtones, most likely having been derived from the harmonic instability of partials six and above (Hindemith 1942: 37-38, 75-77).

time I heard echoes of Tamasheq blues.... [American blues musicians] interpret a culture of which they don't know the biography" (Rammant 2006: 27).

It is important to note, though, that modal harmony – and any system of harmony, for that matter – is originally a language of musical analysis that can be applied to composition if one chooses to do so; it can be used to describe music as well as compose music, but it does not necessarily describe how musicians think about music except in certain limited cases. The fact is that all systems of music theory, from the very beginning of European musicological writing, have begun as descriptive exercises – as in the case of Johan Fux's *Gradus ad Parnassum* (Mann 1971), written as an often (unintentionally) funny Socratic dialogue between a student (Fux) and a teacher (Giovanni di Palestrina) – which have often become prescriptive practices in the hands of some rather insistent teachers of composition.⁵⁸ Charles Seeger notes that this same descriptive-prescriptive confusion often creeps into the writing of musicologists, focusing their sense of musical experience through the lens of their previous theoretical training rather than leaving them open to other interpretations of that experience. In this case, writers fail to distinguish “between a blue-print of how a specific piece of music shall be made to sound and a report of how a specific performance of it actually did sound” (1958: 184). The theoretical language of modal harmony, then, should be seen as a tool musicians applied to composition and improvisation – albeit a tool that syncretically fit with different musicians' needs for open-ended structures and, in the case of Fela, a harmonic language that felt more familiar and more essentially African.

⁵⁸ Paul Hindemith springs to mind here in his polemical indictment of simple-minded listeners (Hindemith 1942, 1946). Fux's writings, though, were widely acknowledged in the study of European musical composition, certainly having been influential for Haydn and Mozart, among others (Mann 1971: xi-xiv).

One of the classic examples of modal jazz composition that not only affected Fela's approach to composition but also, arguably, anticipated some of the more abstract constructs of free jazz was Miles Davis's "So what" (Davis 2004), a composition which used a greatly simplified harmonic structure that allowed musicians to emphasize the elements of melody and rhythm in their improvisation without needing to follow complex chord changes (Figure 5). The entire harmonic structure consists of 16 measures of D Dorian, 8 measures of E \flat Dorian, and 8 measures of D Dorian – in effect, the harmonic structure remains static, modulating up a half step to E \flat and then modulating back to D. The advantage of labeling the harmony according to the scale rather than assigning chord names (e.g., Dm7 and Ebm7) is that the harmony, while seeming to be static, can be voiced pandiatonically using any notes of the scale (d, e, f, g, a, b, c in the case of Dm7) rather than being restricted to the four chord tones (d, f, a, c) and the standard harmonic tensions (e, g, b) that are implied by the use of chord symbols. Though all of the notes of the D Dorian scale are available to be played against Dm7, the use of the standard chord symbol implies the primacy of the notes (d, f, a, c), the four notes that define Dm7 in its most basic form. Modal harmony, in essence, implies that any of the diatonic notes of the D Dorian mode, when played against a bass line that emphasizes the D as being the harmonic center, produce the various harmonic shades characteristic of the Dorian mode.

So What

harmonic structure

Miles Davis

D Dorian

5

9

13

17 E \flat Dorian

21

25 D Dorian

29

The image displays a musical score for the jazz standard "So What" by Miles Davis. It consists of eight staves of music, each containing four measures of whole notes. The first staff is labeled "D Dorian" and begins with a treble clef and a key signature of one flat (B-flat). The subsequent staves are marked with measure numbers 5, 9, 13, 17, 21, 25, and 29. The staff starting at measure 17 is labeled "E \flat Dorian", indicating a key signature change to two flats (B-flat and E-flat). The final staff, starting at measure 29, returns to the "D Dorian" mode. The notation uses diagonal lines to represent whole notes, and the piece concludes with a double bar line and repeat dots at the end of the eighth staff.

Figure 5: "So what" harmonic structure

The European system of modal harmony, often referred to as the “church modes,” was essentially a pre-tonal system of harmony based on ancient Greek modes that fell out of favor in Europe after the Renaissance with the ascendance of early tonal harmony (Grout and Palisca 2001: 52-54). Some contemporary music theorists, though, have suggested that, rather than grouping contemporary modal harmony with the older musical practices associated with the church modes, 20th century modal harmonic practice can be more accurately described as a “centric” use of diatonic musical materials (Straus 2000: 112-31). The centric model essentially describes music as being composed around a stable center that can, of course, shift or move, but which is not bound by the rules of harmonic progression that are a core feature of tonal harmony. With tonal harmony, music is created and heard as moving through a system of harmonic changes that, by force of the “natural” rules of tonal harmony, will ultimately lead to the predetermined destination of the tonal center or home.⁵⁹ Though both of these systems have a center to them, the difference between the two systems lies in the necessity of harmonic movement (required for tonal music to remain “interesting”; not required for centric music), the ways in which the harmony moves (tonal harmony has a clear but flexible body of rules as to how music should progress; modal harmony has no such set of rules and can shift its center as it pleases), and the relative durations of individual moments of the harmony

⁵⁹ There is nothing natural about the rules of tonal harmony, of course, though elements of its various constructions are related to people’s experience of the overtone series: the series of subtle harmonic tones that are present in any naturally produced sound and almost all synthetic sounds, save for a pure sine wave. Hindemith was one of the few contemporary compositional theorists to explicitly construct the basis for musical composition on the progressive application of partials of the overtone series (e.g., 1942).

The seemingly natural quality of tonal harmony that we experience in the West is a result of our musical enculturation – our inundation with tonal music that predominates the radio, television, audio recordings, performances, lullabies, etc. My polemic intent here, of course, is to draw a parallel between the idea of tonal music’s seemingly inevitable sense of progression toward a tonal center and Hegel’s progressivist philosophy of history – “History with a capital H” (Glissant 1989: 64; Hegel 1991 [1822]) – as well as Marx’s and Engels’s stages of historical development (Marx and Engels 1970: 42-56).

(tonal harmony must shift often to maintain a sense of movement and interest; modal harmony is most often characterized by long plateaus of static harmony that seem to valorize a distinct lack of harmonic movement).⁶⁰

And, of course, the use of the word plateau in the last sentence is by design. In their book *A thousand plateaus: Capitalism and schizophrenia*, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari describe the fundamental difference that exists between the line and the point in artistic production, building upon Edmund Husserl's differentiation between vertical and horizontal temporal schemes to highlight the applications of temporal order (vertical) and temporal flow (horizontal) (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 294-96; Husserl 1964: 48-50). In fleshing out their analysis, Deleuze and Guattari describe a punctual system which sets localizable points in time as places of reference, allowing one to order memory such that each individual memory can be abstracted from others. Memory, as such, is punctual in that it consists of multiple points which connect a person to her past while shaping her future. By contrast, music draws horizontal melodic lines which can be represented as vertical structures only when all horizontal lines are added together. The representation of these horizontal lines through the use of a strictly punctual (vertical) system would essentially atomize the music in such a way as to make it unintelligible – as if Richard Wagner's famous "Tristan chord" was an artistic statement in and of itself, not needing to be heard in its musical context at the end of the first phrase of *Tristan and Isolde* as an aesthetic or philosophical statement or as a logical construction arrived at through the slow but constant addition of chromatic notes to European compositional practice over a period of decades (Magee 2002: 208-10; Nattiez 1990: 47, 217-29).

⁶⁰ For a fuller description of plateau modal structures in modern jazz composition see (Miller 1992).

In musical composition and improvisation the horizontal and the vertical can be connected, though, through the use of diagonal lines, connecting moments of locality and highlighting relationships in a manner that allows for both the dialogic, contrapuntal quality of horizontal flow and the analytical nature of vertical ordering, producing an aesthetic that is more comparative and associative than merely flowing or merely atomistic. In the hands of an artist such as John Coltrane the choice of when and where to emphasize the linear (horizontal) or harmonic (vertical) approaches to improvisation was liberating: “I could play three chords on one. But on the other hand, if I wanted to, I could play melodically. Miles’s music gave me plenty of freedom” (Coltrane and DeMichael 1960). In the case of “So what,” then, Coltrane is free to play scalar, melodic ideas using the D and E \flat Dorian modes as well as create ideas from various chord arpeggios stated against the D and E \flat Dorian centers – in this he is not tied to one approach or the other.

But modal harmony, with its long plateau structures, does not only provide a sense of harmonic centrality; in “So what” there is also a radical decentering in its abrupt modulation from D to E \flat .⁶¹ This isn’t a chord change so much as it is a jarring modal change – a shift from D to E \flat may be a shift of harmonic centers that are close to each other in terms of interval (just a half step away), but these centers are as distant as can be from the perspectives of both tonal harmony and psychoacoustics. Common practice tonal harmony builds most of its chord progressions, cadences, and modulations on some fairly simple rules about structural similarities, which imply stable relationships between

⁶¹ This discussion of musical decentering comes from Ekkehard Jost (1994: 21), amplified and adapted by Fred Moten (2003: 100).

things, and structural differences, which signal the need for change. In Figure 6 I have arranged two examples of the overtone relationships between tonal centers by constructing chords based on fundamental notes (D and G in Figure 6a, and D and E ♭ in Figure 6b). In Figure 6a the relationship between D and G is a dominant harmonic relationship, implying that the most natural harmonic movement away from D, according to the principles of tonal harmony, is toward G, a fourth away from G.⁶² In this first example one can see that there are several instances each of two overtones that are common to both fundamental notes D and G, namely d and a.⁶³ More importantly, though, the notes of the overtone structures of fundamentals D and G, when combined, create a G major scale that includes both the major 7th (f♯) and the flat 7th (f♮) intervals.⁶⁴ According to the rules of tonal harmony this cadence from D to G implies both the instability that forces harmonic movement from D toward G as well as the inherent instability of the G because the flat 7th dominant interval (f♮) causes the ear to want to move toward the next tonal center, in this case C.

One can see here that, according to the logic of the tonal system of harmony – a logic we have become accustomed to hearing even if we don't understand it theoretically – there is a perpetual sense of needing to move from one place to the next, only fully resting when one reaches the end of a composition that fully meets our expectation of

⁶² Of course the relationship between a key center and its dominant is more complex than a simple interval of a fourth, but the very basic resolution of one chord to another in Western tonal harmony is through this cycle of fourths. For an overview of basic tonal cadences see (Kostka and Payne 2000: 152-57).

⁶³ In this Figure some lines have been drawn between the common partials of D and G as both unisons and octave equivalents.

⁶⁴ This ♭7 interval in the overtone series is not quite the same as the tonal ♭7 in the equal temperament tuning system. The 6th overtone lies somewhere between the equal-tempered ♭7 and ♮7 intervals but is closer to ♮7 (Hindemith 1946: 17).

rest, as in the final massive chord of the Beatles’ “A day in the life,” or confounds that expectation of rest as in the case of a jazz song form (“Anthropology,” for instance) which, by design, ends in a dominant cadence, known in tonal harmony as a half cadence, signaling a return to the beginning of the form and another cycle of the chorus, on and on until someone either plays a different cadence signaling an end (a coda or a “tag”) or until everyone simply stops playing.

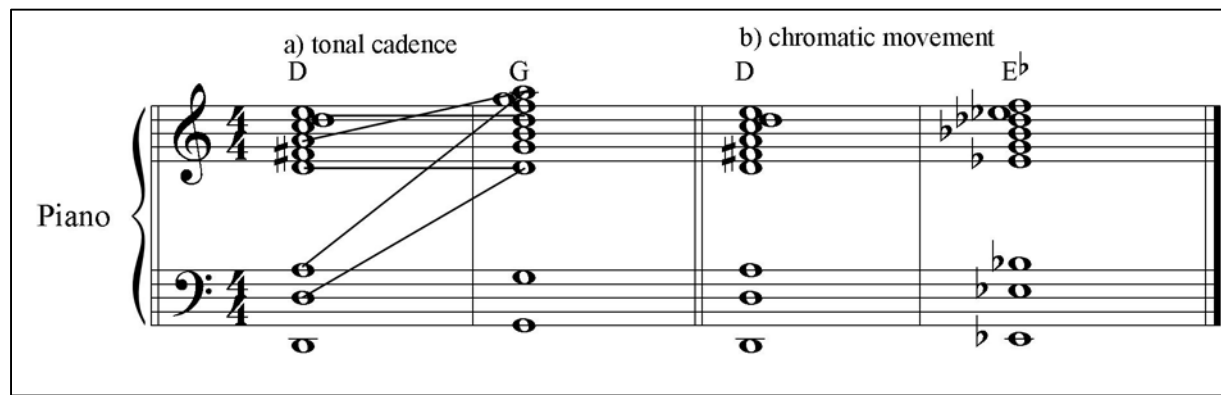


Figure 6: Tonal and chromatic overtone relationships

Figure 6b, however, is a different story entirely. Illustrating the half-step difference that separates the two harmonic centers, there are no overtones in common between the fundamental notes of D and E \flat ; the chromatic movement upward toward E \flat , away from D, is rather jarring and unexpected if one is used to hearing music move in a tonal fashion. There is absolute sense in the movement from D to E \flat , no doubt, but the sense of it doesn’t come from the common practice harmony of tonal music, or even from a sense of expectancy one might feel from the simple similarities of overtone structures involved in a tonal cadence. The sense of movement in the chromatic change of “So what,” reductively outlined in Figure 6b, acts on a listener as if a long line is

suddenly displaced for a while, only to return to a semblance of normalcy and balance which is disrupted again later (Figure 7).

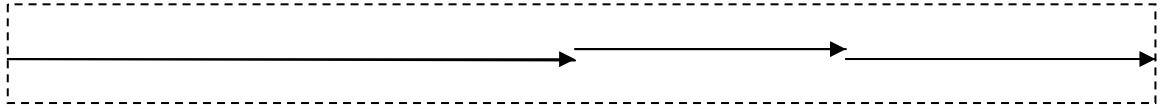


Figure 7: A broken center line

In this figure one must imagine that what precedes the box has always preceded it and what comes after will always move in the same manner as what came before and what was; it is not so much a linear progression, as in the forward movement of History with a capital H, as it is a patterned movement that always incorporates what has come before (history with a small h), is periodically decentered, jarred from its stable, orienting existence, and then brought back to center before it begins the pattern again.

But the primary reason the structure of “So what” may not be strictly cyclical is, given that there are no harmonic cadences indicating the end of the form and the beginning of a new chorus of the form, if one were to strictly adhere to the structure when performing this composition there would only be a seamless continuation from the end of the form to the beginning.⁶⁵ The patterned/cyclical nature of the form, then, is not in the musical composition if one were to abstract the composition from its performance – the statement of form comes from the performance of the composition: Jimmy Cobb accenting phrases of eight bars on the drums; the winding down of an improvisational idea to indicate the end of a solo; Coltrane’s increase in volume and the density of notes

⁶⁵ My transcription of the harmonic structure of “So what” (Figure 5) is written as a typical lead sheet out of a sense of convenience. This common inscriptive practice may add to the sense that the form is strictly cyclical, though I am not aware of a better alternative.

in order to highlight the fluency with which he shifts from D to E \flat ; etc. The tricky nature of performing “So what” is often the seamlessness of the end of the form merging into the beginning. The composition is arguably similar to the 32-bar AABA structure common to many jazz ballads. But where a ballad such as Tad Dameron’s “If you could see me now” will include harmonic cadences which indicate the end of a section or movement to another key center, Davis’s AABA form includes none of these harmonic signposts and Bill Evans’s recorded piano performance does not inject any of the customary harmonic cadences. Evans’s playing, in fact, seems to be more reminiscent of the style of harmonic “planing” that was part of Claude Debussy’s and Maurice Ravel’s Romantic language and that Davis has stated he heard in Evans when deciding to hire him (Davis and Troupe 1989: 225-26).⁶⁶

This construction of long modal plateaus which lack harmonic cadences ultimately produces a harmonic form that sounds as an endless pattern or cycle, leaving many a lesser musician caught out by the sudden shift to E \flat she mistakenly thought would not come for another 4 or eight bars, having lost track of where the form begins and ends. But the long, seemingly endless form also provides the means by which composers such as Fela and Sun Ra created music with the intention of engaging their audience, not through the construction of harmonic movement that holds the interest of the listener, but through the seeming lack of harmonic movement, opening the music up to other textual and intertextual aspects of expression. This is, in essence, the harmonic language of composing the African Atlantic: a language that is but one of the many

⁶⁶ Harmonic planing is also commonly known as harmonic parallelism. See (Kostka and Payne 2000: 500-04) and (Ulehla 1994: 196-202).

combined levels of discourse that inhabit the compositional process and musical substance.

Musical composition in the African Atlantic:

Musical composition is too often discussed within European musicology and compositional discourses as being the act of an individual who writes, edits, and perfects original music through a contemplative process of playing, listening, imagining, and inscribing music. Inscription is sometimes expanded to include such contemporary practices as MIDI sequencing and audio recording, but the undisputed inscriptive medium of Western musical composition is musical notation. Jazz composition is an area of composition that still exists seemingly outside many of the prescriptive norms of European composition, even if it is making inroads into the teaching of composition at the university level. In jazz composition the composer or composers seek to find a balance between pre-composed (and often notated) music and the open spaces of uncomposed or less composed music which allow for the agency of individual musicians to improvise and respond, adding their own voices to the composition. As such, in jazz composition there is usually a composer such as Sun Ra, Charles Mingus, Duke Ellington, etc. who is recognized as being the composer, but the performance of a work will sound different – be different – depending on the musicians who play it, the audience who experience it, and the historical moment in which it is performed: as an example, James Brown’s “Say it loud, I’m black and I’m proud” performed in Boston during the aftermath of Martin Luther King Jr.’s assassination took on a social significance that transcended its message of cultural pride (Brown and Tucker 2002: 183-89; Ward 1998: 392). While Western musicology has often emphasized the necessity of a composition’s

strict repeatability – a performance of a composition should sound the same regardless of where or when it is performed – jazz composition is not bound by the need for such strict repeatability, purposefully conceived as a means by which performers can express their individual voices more so than as a vehicle for expressing the singular voice of a composer: while the composer’s musical voice is always present – an Ellington composition always sounds like an Ellington composition – a single performance of the composition is always meant to sound different as a result of the individual musicians’ improvisation as well as the particular time and space in which it is being performed.

Jazz composition, in order to be fully realized, is dependent upon a convergence of social events that activate the composition in such a way as to bring out all of its various layers of signified and Signified meaning: the skill, commitment, and enthusiasm of the musicians meets the attentiveness, reactivity, and willingness of the audience in a designated space and a designated time such that the totality of the *composition* – all of the layers of implicit and explicit meaning that arise from this communion of Performer-Audience-Text – transcends the time and space of performance, drawing upon the diverse, interacting and conflicting, collective and individual memories of performers and audience, activating the remembered presence of people past (Martin Luther King, Jr., Pharaoh, Coltrane, Malcolm X, Aunt Hester,⁶⁷ etc.) and simultaneously composing various visions of the future that can or could be (Exodus, de-colonization, a post-post-colonial Kalakuta Republic, improved socio-economic conditions, a more conscious way of living, an Obama presidency [Yes We Can]).

⁶⁷ Moten invokes Frederick Douglass’s harrowing story of his Aunt Hester’s whipping as an iconic example of the haunting presence(s) of memory in black expressive culture (Moten 2003: 1-24; Douglass 2003: 259).

In an essay on contemporary hip-hop performance, Greg Dimitriadis begins by describing the contrast between the composed music of post-Renaissance European art music tradition and the performance-based musical traditions of most other musics, characterizing the fundamental difference as being between Western “closed narrative” – musical forms that also include Western popular songs – and the open narratives of most other cultures’ forms of expression (2004: 423) – narrative forms that Peter Manuel describes as “open-ended, expandable or compressible approaches used in narrative epics, *juju* music, *ch’in* variations, and, indeed, most musical genres outside of Western bourgeois traditions, which often operate more through repetition and variation of short motifs” (1988: 23). Dimitriadis notes that the open-ended nature of African diasporic narratives allows for spontaneous interaction between the performer and the audience, “allowing for an open-ended and engaging social experience” (2004: 423). This social experience is an integral part of the musicians’ responsibility for performance, articulated most clearly in this extended quote from Christopher Small:

The musician regards himself as responsible, not just for the sounds he makes, but for the whole social progress of the event, for its success as a human encounter. The musician as he improvises responds not only to the inner necessities of the sound world he is creating but also to the dynamics of the human situation as it develops around him. It is his task to create not just a single set of sound perspectives which are to be contemplated and enjoyed by listeners, but a multiplicity of opportunities for participation along a number of different perspectives (1987: 295).

Though European art music used to exhibit many of these same improvisational aesthetic values, post-Renaissance European art music began to “claim a kind of autonomy from social contexts, allowing more room for single-perspective narrative or narrative progression *per se*” (Dimitriadis 2004: 424). This social autonomy allowed composers to develop extended musical structures that required a listener to engage with the music in a

contemplative manner and with a cultivated sense of delayed gratification. This attitude is exemplified by Aaron Copland's statement of expectations regarding the audience for his own music:

It is insufficient merely to hear music in terms of the separate moments at which it exists. You must be able to relate what you hear at any given moment to what has just happened before and what is about to come afterward. In other words, music is an art that exists in point of time. In that sense it is like a novel, except that the events of a novel are easier to keep in mind, partly because real happenings are narrated and partly because one can turn back and refresh one's memory of them (2009 [1957]: 6).

One must note, however, that this sense of expecting to hear music as a tightly structured narrative is a relatively modern development in European art music – a development that Lydia Goehr argues only became solidified in the 19th century when composers began to conceive of their “works as discrete, perfectly formed, and completed products,” requiring performers to reproduce the notes, articulations, and dynamics of the score with a high degree of fidelity (1992: 222, 231). This newly insistent prescription of what should be played marks, for Goehr, the beginning of the musical *work* in which the work itself, embodied in the score, is viewed as being more essential and authoritative than the performance of the music. Prior to the 19th century European composers had been less prescriptive about which notes performers should play and how they should play them, such that, according to Goehr's argument, labeling the compositions of someone such as Johan Sebastian Bach as being “works” is a retrospective exercise which characterizes Bach's 17th century Baroque music according to a standard of prescriptive practice that did not fully exist until the 19th century Romantic era of music (8, 113-15).

Following from Goehr, then, one could say that a composer such as Richard Wagner composed musical “works,” especially so given that he composed very detailed musical scores in addition to writing opera libretti and stage instructions, drawing sketches for stage designs, and even participating in the design and fundraising for the construction of the Bayreuth Opera House – all undertaken as part of his concept of *gesamtkunstwerk*, or total work of art (Magee 2002: 238). By contrast, Bach’s compositions, as brilliantly conceived as they are, leave much to the interpretation of musicians and conductors, often having been inscribed rapidly and performed the same day as part of his duty as Cantor to compose new music for weekly church services and other church events (Miles 1962: 86-87). One might be tempted to describe the differences between Bach and Wagner according to their individual temperaments or their historical periods, or even the fact that Bach was a well known improviser and Wagner was not known as such. But the more fundamental difference between the two composers lies in the more or less thoroughly defined nature of the composed music as well as the music’s connection with community social events (Bach) or a more monumental, all encompassing presentation (Wagner).⁶⁸

While Goehr’s theory of the musical work is not universally agreed upon,⁶⁹ it does raise the question of how we construct ideas and theories about music when our discourse is dependent on the retrospective consideration of either written scores or sound

⁶⁸ In his book *Musicking: The meanings of performing and listening*, Small notes that European concert hall performances are certainly social events, but the social nature of these events lies more in the audience members socializing with one another and being seen at the event than in the interaction between the performers and the audience (Small 1998: 19-29).

⁶⁹ Stephen Davies contends that, rather than separating 19th and post-19th century musical works from compositions that preceded them, one can describe 19th century works as being “‘thicker’ with constitutive properties” than earlier works, all composed within European musical practices that had been developing for centuries (2003: 494; 2001: 90).

recordings. Written composed pieces – music that is composed by means of a written score – retain much of their meaning and form across time and space regardless of social context. The documentation of music by means of audio recording imposes much of the same dynamic upon music, “reducing musical experiences or performances to ‘music-object[s],’ thus placing the entirety of the piece at the fingertips of the listener and potential composer” (Dimitriadis 2004: 424; Small 1987: 43). Composers who compose by means of a written score are more apt to create long-form narrative structures than music based on the repetition and variation of phrases, creating music with distinct and highly structured beginnings, middles, and ends.

But the written score is not the only inscriptive practice associated with musical composition and with the dissemination of music through space and time. Similarly inscribed, though in a different media, sound recordings exist as autonomous, disembodied music-objects in a manner similar to written music:

The recording thus allows for a manipulation (often a splitting up and ordering) of sound bytes, in a manner similar to the way movable type allows for a manipulation of language. Both technologies encourage the construction of longer narrative paradigms separate from their immediate contexts of production (e.g., dance spaces) (424).

Musical recordings, though, carry with them an inscription of the voices of performers, not simply the creative “voice” of the composer inscribed in notation which represents her musical and aesthetic intentions. Jonathan Sterne writes that the technologies of sound recording have been used as a means of sending messages through time: “the voices of the dead had their cultural converse in the ears of the not yet born” (2003: 307). While the physical markings on a record or tape cannot be “read,” as Theodor Adorno once strangely prophesied (2002: 277-80), the inscribed voices of the past are “sounded,”

such that one can hear Sun Ra's piano playing even in his physical and temporal absence. Certainly audio recordings can be read in the sense that one can learn to play a piece of music through the imitation, on an instrument or with a voice, of the repeated play-back of the recording, but "reading," in this instance, is an aural equivalent of an otherwise ocular activity.⁷⁰

In a sense, then, audio recordings exist in time and space as the aural equivalent of static texts. Recording is a process that commodifies the music, decontextualizing the music from the perspectives of both the music's use-value (its status as a commodity to be traded for money) as well as its signified value (to whom it is addressed and what it signifies for its various audiences). Though there is a lot to be said for the value of recorded music, aesthetic and otherwise (the ability to experience and appreciate thrilling or historically important performances in new temporal contexts; the ability to create new creolized forms of music from varied, repetitive, contemplative, and creative listening), the fact of inscriptive recording is also an element of an audience's experience of music which alienates individuals and communities from the original experience of musical composition and performance as contextual, communal, multi-media, multi-modal, dialogic, and, ultimately, an inherent expression of a community's political and historical discourse. While the distribution of musical recordings was noted briefly in chapter one with regard to the Atlantic exchange of ideas and artifacts, this manner of disembodied distribution of music brings with it both new compositional possibilities (e.g., sampling and dubbing) as well as an unfortunately distorted sense of the long preparation and

⁷⁰ Paul Berliner writes that the transcription of recorded performances has become a staple of jazz musicians' musical education (1994: 104-05). This issue will be discussed further in chapter 3 with regard to Sun Ra's thoughts on musical training.

forethought that precedes the creation of a performance: the years of preparation and practice involved, for instance, in a musician's training, all leading to the musician's ability to perform with an effortless sense of mastery of his instrument.⁷¹

In a work that draws together many strands of improvisation and philosophy in the varied practices of black music, literature, and visual art, Fred Moten differentiates between the practices of improvisation and the idea of extemporaneity (2003: 63-64). The ascription of the word *extemporaneous* to the improvisational performance of music, for example, implies that there is a lack of forethought and preparation – “an absence of prescriptive vision” – in an improviser's performance that silences the performance's “previousness” by wiping away the inscribed and hard-earned memory of the musician's preparation – a preparation that grounds musical performance in a history of personal dedication as well as socially and historically determined knowledge. Improvisation, by contrast, grounds and pre-figures the performance in the fullness of its preparation and enculturation within the traditions of black expressive culture, tying the musician not only to the practices of other musicians, living and dead, but also to every person who took up a word or a phrase of a material object and did something creative with it that changed its shape, its color, its smell, its meaning: “repetition with a signal difference,” as Gates puts it – Signifyin(g) on the signified meaning (1988: xxiv). This is true whether we are discussing the recontextualization of a musical phrase as a means of constructing a solo, the constant upping of the ante when guys play the dozens, the musical use of a record turntable in such a manner that Alexander Graham Bell never would have imagined, or the virtuosic performance of a musician such as Coltrane on a musical

⁷¹ One only needs to watch a single episode of the television show *American idol* to realize that many people are unaware of the preparatory work involved in becoming a singer.

instrument that was invented in 19th century France as a means of helping asthma patients exercise their lungs (Rose 1995). All of this indicates an attitude toward composition distinct from that of European art music, but which is also common throughout the world in its reliance upon open-ended structures and its close connection to social institutions and practices.

In an article on musical composition in Oxford Music Online (2007), Stephen Blum prefaces his overview with a brief survey of culturally determined meanings and procedures of musical composition from various African and Asian societies, drawn from a broad reading of ethnomusicological literature.⁷² Blum first cites the example of *ekisoko* performance from the Baganda people of Uganda, noting that among the Baganda, as with many societies, “compositions are valued...as a repertory of items that can be recomposed.”⁷³ The Baganda musical practice of *ekisoko* consists of the spontaneous re-composition of existing songs with reference to current events, a practice separate from *okuyiyya* which is the originary process of creating a text and melody. While a well received *ekisoko* can become a part of the corpus of *okuyiyya*, thereby opening it up to be re-composed in turn, one would not simply perform an *okuyiyya* without improvisational re-composition and social re-contextualization: the existent text must be tied to the historical moment, connecting the past with the present. The successful performance of *ekisoko*, then, is largely dependent not just on the compositional skill of the performer, but also on the performer’s ability to assess current events according to events of the past

⁷² Since this long article, as comprehensive as it is, has no page numbers (it is an electronic article), sometimes does not cite specific sources, and does not include page numbers for citations, I will cite the original sources as best I can.

⁷³ Though Blum does not provide a citation for Baganda musical practice, I believe the clearest citation is (Wachsmann 1965: 183-85).

and in accordance with community morality as well as the audience's familiarity with the corpus of *okuyiyya* and with the customary practices of *ekisoko*. In the case of this facet of Baganda expressive culture, then, the process of composition consists of the two interdependent processes of pre-composition (*okuyiyya*) and re-composition (*ekisoko*) in order to create a socially significant event that allows the society to theorize the past and present with relation to one another.

In a similar example Blum gives a brief description of some of the ritual elements of Shona *mbira* composition and performance, most likely gleaned from Paul Berliner's ethnographic study of *mbira* music and culture. While *mbira* performance is generally associated with the Shona religious ceremony known as the *bira* (Berliner 1981: 23), there is a specific repertoire of *mbira* compositions that are meant to attract specific spirits to a social event (74, 87). Though the performance of *mbira* compositions is highly improvised, the melodies, musical forms, and performance practices are prescribed by the social and aesthetic expectations of the audience and the spirits who are being called. As such, *mbira* compositions are considered to exist as familiar but malleable frames for improvisational performance, a successful performance creating a sense of spiritual significance through the invocation and presence of spirits. The invocation of the spirits, then, is realized through the performers' and the audience's shared memories of repertoire and performance practice – practices which are infused with spiritual, moral, and ethical significance and which activate a communal text through their performance alone (190-206).

In another example, Blum cites Steven Feld's description of the Kaluli performance practice in which a composer spontaneously creates a "path" (*tok*), enabling

both the composer and the audience to “simultaneously experience a progression of lands and places and a progression of deeply felt sentiments associated with them” (Feld 1990: 151). In this case, the composer creates an improvised performance using a repertoire of customary melodic shapes and musical effects along with a communal sense of geography and history in order to create a “path” between the past and present. It is significant here that the community’s historical memory and relationship with their physical environment are as important to the process of composition as are the, for want of a better phrase, purely musical elements of melody and rhythm. In the context of this social determination of Kaluli musical practice, composition becomes an integrated practice of pre-composition, improvisation, and the dialogic conversation between the past and present.

This sense of music creating a path between past and present is common to many musical cultures, many of which include the words “path,” “road,” “way,” “story,” etc. as a means of characterizing the music’s ability to draw performers and audiences into a dialectical relationship with past, present, and future, connecting a society’s sense of history with the materiality of the present (Fela) or with a prophetic vision of the future (Sun Ra). Veit Erlmann gives the example the Zulu word *indlela*, meaning “path,” which *isicathamiya* musicians use to refer to the contours of a vocal melody as distinct from that of an instrumental melody (*shuni*). When applying the word *indlela* to the description of *isicathamiya* composition, the effect, then, becomes one of defining a composition by the performers’ participatory journey along the “path” of the performance rather than by reference to a predetermined melody: “...the form a song takes is defined as quite literally the traces of collective interaction, of a group of people leaving their imprint on

the normative conventions set by a community” (Erlmann 1996b: 50-51). *Isicathamiya* composer Joseph Shabalala adds further dimensions to the concept of “path” by noting that, in a musician’s training, there is an “open[ing] of the way” (*ukuvula indlela*), enacted through spiritual engagement with music and life, as well as a second opening (*ukuhlahla indlela*) through which music can lead one toward new friends and places (Ballantine 1996: 25, 27).

In summarizing the position of Meki Nzewi on the fundamentally improvisational nature of Igbo instrumental compositional practice, Kazadi wa Mukuna states that in the context of musical performance, composition is viewed “as a process of fulfillment during the creation and ceases to exist after its completion.... In this context, a musical composition or dance exists in perpetuity and does not necessarily become ‘a past referential framework for a new creative experience every subsequent performance occasion’” (wa Mukuna 1997: 240; Nzewi 1991). Seen as such, Igbo instrumental composition cannot be separated from the performance of the music, existing in the performance alone as an open-ended, socially determined and determining text. wa Mukuna does distinguish his position from that of Nzewi in that his own work concentrates on the culturally-defined compositional practices of vocal music, defined, as they are, by the particularity of various African languages (240). The net effect, though, is the overall characterization of Igbo composition as constituting a socially determined and temporally contingent expressive practice that is far from the closed-narrative forms of the West.

A poetics of composing the African Atlantic: Liminality and the mythic space of performance:

One can begin to see, then, that the necessarily communal practices of African diasporic composition focus on the creation of text and meaning, but the improvisational nature of such composition renders the creation of text as object difficult and sometimes problematic. James Stewart contends that African diasporic aesthetic traditions, among other traditions, lack a sense of “fixity” in their creation of aesthetic works. He gives the example from *Muntu* (Jahn 1961) of “temples” being made of mud, often being washed away and re-built, as well as the example of 18th and 19th century Japanese artists who produced drawings and distributed them cheaply, like broadsheets, often re-using the drawings “for wrapping fish” (Stewart 1968: 4). Stewart likens this example to the broadsheets that are often circulated on city streets in black neighborhoods – a means of written expression that Sun Ra habitually used (e.g., Corbett 2006c). Stewart observes that this lack of a preservationist ethic is at odds with the European emphasis of iconic perpetuation, implying that those who do not preserve works of art are not mindful of the work’s value. Arguing that a black aesthetic is more concerned with improvisational and contingent creation, Stewart emphasizes the ontological nature of a black aesthetic: “Perpetuation, as the white culture understands it, simply does not exist in the black culture. We know, all non-whites know, that man cannot create *a* forever; but he can create forever. But he can only create if he creates as change. Creation is itself perpetuation and change is being” (4).

Though Stewart’s essay exhibits some of the undiluted essentialism often attributed to (primarily African American) cultural nationalist polemics, his description of the purposefully ephemeral nature of African diasporic aesthetics echoes Chinua Achebe’s description of the ethos of Igbo aesthetics:

...once made, art emerges from privacy into the public domain. There are no private collections among the Igbo beyond personal ritual objects like the Ikenga. Indeed, the very concept of collections would be antithetical to the Igbo artistic intention. Collections by their nature will impose rigid, artistic attitudes and conventions on creativity which the Igbo sensibility goes out of the way to avoid. The purposeful neglect of the painstakingly and devoutly accomplished mbari houses with all the art objects in them, as soon as the primary mandate of their creation has been served, provides a significant insight into the Igbo aesthetic value as process rather than product. Process is motion while product is rest. When the product is preserved or venerated, the impulse to repeat the process is compromised. Therefore the Igbo choose to eliminate the product and retain the process so that every occasion and every generation will receive its own impulses and kinesis of creation.... Visitors to Igboland are often shocked to see that artefacts are rarely accorded any particular value on account of age alone.... In popular contemporary usage the Igbo formulate their view of the world as: “No condition is permanent” (1990: 63-64).

The process of creation, then, takes precedence over the object that is created; a musical composition, according to this aesthetic, has no reified importance as an object when compared to the crucially important action of composition. It is because of this articulated sense of priorities that *composing the African Atlantic* remains in its active, dialogic, creative form, distinct from the inscribed forms of composition that become embodied in written scores and audio recordings.

In the process of thinking through this new conception of musical composition, I was struck by reading Edouard Glissant’s thoughts on the intellectual traps which present themselves when trying to forge a Caribbean literary practice that is neither naively essential nor coldly objective. In his discussion of the supposed objectivity of European literary realism he warns of the problematic effect of this literary practice: the “surface effects of literary realism are the precise equivalent of the historian’s claim to pure objectivity” (1989: 74) – a claim that, in another context but a similar discourse, Foucault described as the fictional aspect of historical writing (1998b). Seen from this perspective, the aesthetic structure of realist narrative creates a semblance of a culture, place, time,

etc. which is, in fact, a necessarily subjective text (the view of the author), obscuring the historically determined dimensions of a society: landscape, climate, fears, expectations, desires, etc....in other words, the lived experience of the society. For Glissant, a truly Caribbean literature would adopt a critical and dialogic view of both the medium of writing – in the case of Martinique a critical deployment of both créole and French – as well as the multi-layered and multi-media construction of narrative that is simultaneously the text of the individual (witness and commentator) as well as text of the society (member and participant).

In his introduction to Glissant's *Caribbean discourse*, Michael Dash situates Glissant's commentary on language as being *in situ* – a mediation between speaker and listener, conqueror and conquered – with respect to the négritude commentary on language by writers such as Léon Damas and Aimée Césaire (Glissant 1989: xx-xxi). In particular, Césaire lamented the expressivity and authenticity that is washed out of language when written language is privileged over spoken, the inscriptive over the oral, the visual over the aural. Similarly, both Fela and Sun Ra composed and performed music with an attitude of abstract expressiveness grounded in vernacular expression, adopting a more affective, oblique, and humorous approach that is both engaged in the moment of performance and radically/rootedly grounded in their own vernacular expressive traditions: for example, "Space is the place" is simultaneously a composition of utopian science fiction as well as a repetitive call-and-response that asks the audience to join the band in a journey (Sun Ra 1973); Fela's "Just like that" is simultaneously a song about Professor Hindu's occult ceremonies at The Africa Shrine and a commentary on

colonialism and the Biafran conflict (Anikulapo-Kuti 2001c).⁷⁴ Other more terrestrial examples of this abstract expressivity include spaces in *A love supreme* where Coltrane's supreme fluency and command breaks down in moments of high emotion, emitting overblown screams that are intensely affective and emotionally eloquent (Coltrane 2003); and the recorded version of Baraka's poem "Dope" in which the material commentary of the words is recontextualized and resituated within the sacred practice of sermon and the profane language of the street, becoming inextricably linked to Baraka's voice (1988: 263-66).

I was also struck by Glissant's pleasant surprise and epiphany regarding African American oral performance as it impacts upon textuality. In his essay titled "Cross-cultural poetics" he relates his surprise and delight at having first experienced the participatory response of an African American audience during a public lecture on African American literature at Tufts University, comparing it with a filmed performance of Martin Luther King, Jr. delivering a speech in which the amplified voice projecting through the loudspeaker acts as an echo of the voice – an electronic response to MLK's call. Glissant notes that he "discovered the doubling of the voice, the echo played behind the speaker to repeat and amplify his speech." In these instances of performativity "repetition is not gratuitous," indicating for Glissant "a new management of language" (1989: 140). This same performative dynamic is expanded upon in Carlton and Barbara Molette's observations on Lewis Nkosi's work, noting the "ultratextual" relationship that

⁷⁴ Professor Hindu was a Ghanaian spiritual advisor who Fela credited with creating a spiritual awakening for him in the early 1980s (Veal 2000: 175-78). Carlos Moore, though, claims that Professor Hindu's influence on Fela, while personally satisfying, was ultimately destructive of Fela's overall project: "...it gradually eroded the political coherence of the movement he had fought so hard to build. Ultimately, it sowed chaos among those around him" (2009: 270).

exists between performer and audience in much African drama (1986: 80-81). African audiences often respond out loud to actors in the middle of dramatic performance, creating the expectation that performers should be able to respond appropriately and with skill if they are being challenged on their interpretation of the drama. In this situation audiences are mindful of the fact that dramatic performances are not reality, making it “very difficult for an African to think of drama merely as literature because the force and integrity of the drama is realizable only in its performance” (Nkosi 1965: 111).

This ultratextual relationship between performers and audience is a crucial part of my argument regarding the African Atlantic compositional practice of:

$$\begin{array}{c} \text{Performer – text – Audience} \\ = \\ \text{TEXT} \end{array}$$

The performative aspect of African diasporic musics is integral to the compositional process/matrix I call composing the African Atlantic, comprising a good portion of the textual substance of any one composition such that it is more descriptively indicated as Text with a capital T. In an essay on hip hop music, Andrew Bartlett cites David Coplan’s observations on the centrality of performance to the abstracted text of music (Bartlett 2004: 396). Coplan states that, in following from James Fernandez’s ethnographic work on metaphor in expressive culture (1974: 133), “we may regard metaphors as iconic and enactive rather than merely symbolic forms of representation”:

In musical performances, metaphors fuse several realms of experience into single, encapsulating images linked to the formation of personal identity [cites (Nisbet 1969: 4)].... The images of performance embody values and characteristics that people identify, at some level, with themselves.... [Ultimately] it is not any systemic logic of music as organized sound but rather the nature of metaphoric enactment that prevents the analytic reduction of music performance to other levels of action (Coplan 1982: 123).

Metaphor, then, takes on a level of meaning that surpasses the symbolic and verges on the material; this enactment of metaphor through performance essentially defines a space and is, in turn, defined by the space of performance. Space is experienced as clearly distinct from place.

Michel de Certeau offers a useful set of definitions which differentiate the words *space* and *place* as they are deployed in any socially re-inscriptive interpretation of signified meaning: *place* is “ruled by the law of the ‘proper,’” whereas *space* “exists when one takes into consideration vectors of direction, velocities, and time variables. Thus space is composed of intersections of mobile elements. It is in a sense actuated by the ensemble of movements deployed within it” (1984: 117). In this sense, then, Fela’s Kalakuta Republic, with its own laws and government, is a new governmental *space*, distinct from the *place* of Lagos which happens to surround Kalakuta; the Nigerian government did not agree with Fela’s assertion that people within the walls of Kalakuta were not subject to the laws of Nigeria, but nevertheless, the assertion alone was a powerful performance of individual agency, even if that agency was thwarted by the state through arrests and coordinated violence. In the epilogue of the 2009 edition of Fela’s auto/biography *Fela: This bitch of a life*, Carlos Moore writes: “[Fela] saw the Africa that he and his parents inherited as ‘not the real Africa.’ The Kalakuta Republic he set up in the heart of a large, sprawling ghetto was his attempt to reinvent and reimagine another Africa: a space of belonging for all, especially the dispossessed” (288).

This differentiation of *space* and *place* also adds new layers of meaning to Sun Ra’s frequent statement that “space is the place.” Not only is there a liberating sense of elsewhere – somewhere else – in the statement, but the newly defined *space* of

performance and dialogue, the possibility of somewhere else, can become the new *place* with a new “law of the ‘proper.’” In the poem “The image reach,” Sun Ra seems to be speaking to a personified liminal space of “The territory of the non-memory/The realm of the moving potential/of that which is not--” (2005: 53). In this mythic space, characterized by an absence of memory and the presence of potential, he says to the space,

...“Take these”
For I have one foot upon
The threshold of other realms
And wings
Have grown
Upon my mind
To take me
Beyond the gravity
And gravitation
of the earth.⁷⁵

Much like Moore’s characterization of Fela’s reinvention and reimagination of Africa as a new space of community and social justice, Sun Ra’s poem conjures a “territory of the non-memory” where one can begin to imagine the “threshold of other realms,” of other possible interpretations of history and other ways of ordering societies. In this way Sun Ra’s thoughts are similar to Foucault’s statement that dreams can indicate the possibilities of other orders of existence: “Man has known since Antiquity, that in dreams he encounters what he is and what he will be, what he has done and what he is going to do, discovering there the knot that ties his freedom to the necessity of the world” (1993 [1954]: 47). In an essay that critiques Freud’s relegation of dreams to the status of pathology, Foucault states that dreams have long acted as a sign of other worlds and other

⁷⁵ In *The immeasurable equation* (Sun Ra 2005: 53), the last six lines of this poem are placed in brackets since, according to an editorial note, they did not appear in the version of the poem that was published in Baraka’s and Neal’s *Black fire* (1968: 218).

possibilities. Fela expressed a similar sentiment about dreams, stating that, “If one can remember a dream, I think you can start controlling it from there. Dreams are uncontrolled travels of the soul” (Moore 2009: 265). Keorapetse Kgositsile makes a broader and more materially oriented regarding African writers’ mediation between imagined spaces and material existence: “...the revolutionary poet concretizes the dreams of the people for a better life” (1976; quoted in Mzamane 1984: 148).⁷⁶

In a way, then, an artist’s performance acts as part of the ritual process which helps performers and audience alike to form, articulate, and debate these dreams. In his discussion of the evocation of ritual transformation in Nigerian writing, Ato Quayson summarizes Victor Turner’s concept of liminal space, describing a broadly transformative process that is achieved through a series of “rituals of transition” (1997: 87). In the liminal, transitional phase of ritual performers create a sense of “conceptual anti-structure and ambiguity.... Conceptually ambiguous, the phase of transition is ritualized in ways that draw upon expressive symbols of cross-identities and the blurring and merging of distinctions” (87-88; Turner 1982: 26). These ambiguous liminal symbols “signify a state of antistructure, a condition of pure disorder and negativity which exists outside of society, in violation of social and semantic taxonomies” (Apter 1992: 215). Liminality, within the context of ritual, constitutes a “close connection with deity or with superhuman power, with what is, in fact, often regarded as the unbounded, the infinite, the limitless” (Turner 1967: 98). Turner states that in the liminal stage performers adopt alternative identities as a means of signifying transition, often appearing as “...androgynes, theriomorphic figures, at once animals and men and women, angels,

⁷⁶ Mzamane notes that Kgositsile is paraphrasing a passage from Barry Feinberg’s overview of South African poetry in the anthology *Poets to the people: South African freedom poems* (1981).

mermaids, centaurs, human-headed lions, monstrous creatures that combine nature and culture” (Turner 1990: 11; 1982: 26). All of these images “combine aspects of nature with those of culture which are not available on an everyday experiential level. In the liminality of transition, culture is in a ‘subjunctive mood,’ a state of ‘as if,’ ‘maybe,’ and ‘perhaps’” (Quayson 1997: 88; Turner 1982: 82-84), with the condition of liminal figures being “one of ambiguity and paradox, a confusion of all the customary categories” (Turner 1967: 97).

It is in this liminal state – neither here nor there – that performers and audience alike can begin to construct a new narrative through the process of *communitas*. Deborah Kapchan defines *communitas* as being the final stage of the liminal process, a sort of “feeling together” that is “experienced in liminal moments of transition from one symbolic domain to another” (2003: 134). Developed from Turner’s description of group experiences as variations of “spontaneous, ideological, and normative *communitas*” (1982: 47-50; see also Turner 1969), Kapchan states that the performative experience of *communitas* creates social situations in which “everyday rules give way to other, sometimes dramatically different norms, or ‘anti-structures’” (134). Events in which the normative social structures of life are so thoroughly undermined – in which performers and audience create a condition of *communitas* – are often conceived as being liminoid events, achieving a sense of power which subverts the dominant social structure and proposes other structural orders (135; Turner 1976).

The concept of liminality is a crucial step in connecting the mythic space of performance that both Fela and Sun Ra create through composition and performance with the more fundamentally dialogic commune of performers and audience. In a passage that

echoes this liminal shift, even if it does not identify the shift as such, Baraka draws a connection between Sun Ra's historical orientation and the pageantry of Arkestra performances.

Sun-Ra wants a music that will reflect a life-sense lost in the West, a music full of Africa. The band produces an environment, with their music most of all, but also with their dress (gold cloth of velvet, headbands and hats, shining tunics). The lights go out on some tunes, and the only lights are flashing off a band on Sun-Ra's head, or from altoist, Marshall Allen's, or some of the other sidemen (1967a: 128-29).

In this description of a typical performance Sun Ra and members of the Arkestra don costumes that indicate other places/times/people, distancing themselves from the present and from their assumed nationality and cultural groups. These new personae act as liminal images, re-configuring themselves as not-quite-human-not-quite-now in an effort to create a new discursive field of mythic play.

Fela accomplishes much the same thing through his use of music, introducing the trance-inducing rhythm section groove and the major melodic themes, stated against static modal harmonies. After individual instrumental solos with call-and-response patterns in the horns, Fela usually begins the *yabis* section of the tune at approximately 6:00-10:00 minutes into the composition, engaging in a dialogue with his audience about politics, culture, history, etc.⁷⁷ Couple this with the volume, alcohol, marijuana and tobacco smoke, closeness of the audience, the visual and corporeal presence of the dancers, the performers' costumes and body paint, and by the time the performance reaches the *yabis* section the audience has been through a ritual of transition, ready to commune with Fela. As Fela performs his *yabis*, the dancers and other musicians respond

⁷⁷ As will be discussed in chapter 4, *yabis* is a dialogue that Fela often wrote into his compositions in which his voice is more conversational than musical, creating a lyric text which is quite literally dialogic. Michael Olatunji provides the most thorough analysis of *yabis* (Olatunji 2007).

in chorus, providing the response to Fela's call which is also echoed in the horns. Such responses underline Fela's statements through repetition while also providing Fela's political and social discourse with overt validation and agreement; this validation, by itself, invites the audience to respond in turn, legitimizing their desire to participate and contribute in a manner which helps them to interpret pressing issues of modern West African politics and urban existence (Veal 2000: 115; Stapleton and May 1987: 17). While Fela did engage in more didactic relations with his audience, often lending books to audience members as he spoke to them before and after performances at the Afrika Shrine (Veal 2000: 13-14), the predominant textual relationship between composer and audience was the performance of the music itself.

Having made the liminal transition to a mythic space of performance, the musicians then engage their audience in a mythic-historical revision, challenging the epistemological and ontological *a priori*s of society, contextualizing their audiences' experiences of modernity, offering alternative solutions and narratives. While both Sun Ra and Fela exhibited elements of didacticism in their texts and performances, by and large the discourse with their audiences remained open to interpretation and reception, leaving audiences to believe or not believe, or to walk away or disagree as they may. The liminal transition, though, sets the stage for the audience to receive and engage with the artists' messages, making of it what they will while adding their own participatory voice and presence to the larger Text of the performance.

But the sense of liminality that is created in performance also operates as an immediate and material reaction to the daily lives of the performers and audience.

Borrowing from James Boon, Veit Erlmann states that *isicathamiya* performances create

“‘privileged operational zones’ which temporarily protect their practitioners from outside intervention by the hegemonic order” (1996b: xvii; Boon 1973: 8). The all-night Saturday *isicathamiya* performances are organized around the work-week schedules of the performers and audience, the prevalence of crime on the streets at night, and the legal restrictions, during Apartheid, of nightly curfews. Closed into a performance hall until the next morning, the performers and audience create a safe space for self-expression and community support which Erlmann describes as the “[embodiment] of an imagined order, located in a heroic past beyond the here and now and constructed through multisensory communicative means such as sound texture, dress, and dance” (98). Naming his book *Nightsong* after the isiZulu term *ingoma ebusuku*, meaning “song of the night” (xv), Erlmann states that “nightsong performances...build relatively unpatrolled and unmonitored locations, alternative spaces which untangle the participants from the ‘chronological net,’ as Keletso Atkins calls the complex fabric of industrial time and leisure time, in which migrants are caught” (135; Atkins 1993: 87).

Additionally, Erlmann argues that the untangling of the chronological net of industrial time, created within the space of *isicathamiya* performance, acts as an illustration that “African performance...constructs ‘another world of virtual time’ by virtue of overlapping, repetitive cycles that have no common pitch or metrical reference points” (134; Blacking 1973: 27). Previous to this, Richard Bauman argued that performance acts as ritualized communication, creating a physical and temporal space in which performers and audience interact (1984: 3). Erlmann notes that while some authors have reductively applied Bauman’s concept, describing performance as the creation of bounded “events” and “social product” (e.g., Stone 1982: 25), his application of

Bauman's framework is deployed as a means of discussing the various ways *isicathamiya* performers "construct spaces [and] protective spheres" (134). This construction of a performative space allows both the performers and audience to "imagine [that] another kind of world is always a judgment about this one" (Beidelman 1986: 204). As such, Erlmann states that "the nightsongs seem to be marked by an opposition between verbal descriptions of the naturalness of the today and its deprivation and unspoken, embodied imaginings of the past and the future" (xix).

But it is not just the music and its performance that are socially determined. In some cases one could argue that "social order is, in part, musically structured since musical activity comprises one important public domain in which a worldview is made patent in a multileveled and powerful form" (Turino 1989: 29). As is the case with Thomas Turino's (2000) description of the role of music and musicians in creating a sense of nationalism in Zimbabwe and Kelly Askew's (2002) analysis of the role of musical performance in defining and shaping Tanzanian social relations, music is often called upon as a mediating and shaping force in people's sense of themselves with respect to community, nation, and politics. Echoing this statement, Erlmann states that *isicathamiya* performance "does not emanate from a social base, it is itself a field of changing and conflicting social relations" (1996b: 102) – the music, in this case, creates the social environment more so than the social environment shaping the music. These combined examples from Southern and Eastern Africa indicate a break from, or at least a

broadening and complicating of, a central paradigm of ethnomusicological writing: music is shaped by the cultural, social, and geographic environment in which it is created.⁷⁸

Turino's conception of "musically structured" social order is largely borrowed from Feld's sociomusicological assessment of his own ethnographic work on Kaluli "music." The word music in the last sentence is placed in parentheses since, as Feld notes, the Kaluli do not conceive of music as such, but hear "only sounds, arranged in categories shared to greater or lesser degrees by natural, animal, and human agents" (1984: 389). While there are some in Kaluli society who are recognized as being skillful composers and performers, all Kaluli are expected to gain competence in the recognition, interpretation, and production of sounds from the human and physical environment as a means of both coping with the practicalities of living in the forest as well as the requirements of Kaluli social life.

Not only does physical adaptation to the rain forest demand and favor acute auditory perceptual skills; Kaluli have developed the kind of ideological and aesthetic scaffolds for these skills that humanize them and provide a coherent cultural framework for their acquisition (389).

The acquisition of these skills are an important part of Kaluli socialization in which a mature and confident adult is referred to as "hard" (*halaido*), denoting a sense of "social competence, physical maturity, verbal competence, sound competence" through which one can "perform, influence outcomes, take control over one's life, [and] invoke proper social strategies." The maturing and enculturating process of becoming hard, then, acts as a "central metaphor [that] links land, body, maturity, control, vitality, language, aesthetics, and social action" (390). The aim of this poignant example, though, is not to

⁷⁸ This is argued quite literally by Mark Slobin in his theory of micromusical change, positing a framework for understanding musical change similar in many respects to Darwinian theories of speciation (1993).

argue that all musical performance acts with the same level of social significance as with the Kaluli; rather, this example provides a means of fleshing out the argument often made regarding African musics – and often too simply stated – that musical performance is an integral part of everyday life. In the case of composing the African Atlantic this “integral part of everyday life” is the means by which the composer and audience come together to discuss, argue, debate, and otherwise create the narratives that constitute the primary Texts of composition.

Yet another aspect of this narrative composition consists of the very carnivalesque atmosphere created by the audience – an aspect of liminal transition often viewed as being separate from the performance. In his discussion of Isaac Julien’s film *Territories* (1984), Kobena Mercer applies Mikhail Bakhtin’s concepts of dialogism and carnivalization as a means of situating the film within an African diasporic aesthetic practice which engages an audience in a re-interpretive and re-inscriptive dialogue about time, space, and place. The film’s dialogic engagement with its audience allows for both film-maker and audience to envision and debate alternatives to the present and future that are often absent from dominant public discourses: “The possibility of *change* is prefigured in collective consciousness by the multiplication of social dialogues” (Mercer 1988: 56). In his explication of the dialogic principle in literature, Bakhtin notes that such an activation of collective consciousness comes from a purposeful appropriation of language:

The word in language is half someone else’s. It becomes “one’s own” only when...the speaker appropriates the word adapting it to his own semantic and expressive intention. Prior to this moment of appropriation the word does not exist in a neutral or impersonal language...but rather it exists in other people’s mouths, serving other people’s intentions: it is from there that one must take the word and make it one’s own (1981: 293-94).

In the film, then, the film-maker loosens the dominant culture's grip on the Word and History through reference to a non-dominant interpretation of (hi)story, a kind of Signifyin(g) on the materials of history that allows for new meanings, new significations.

Mercer argues that this dialogic relationship between film and audience is enabled through a carnivalization of culture, creating "an event/process in which social boundaries and hierarchical power relations are momentarily dissolved and upended." The film "enacts or embodies the critical spirit of carnival with 'the sense of the gay relativity of prevailing truth and authority' [It] 'carnivalizes' codes and conventions such as space-time continuity in editing" (54). This is an important dynamic of African diasporic expressive culture, often upending social rules and morality in a manner that is sometimes more radically profound than the term Signifyin(g) can express – Bakhtin's carnivalization is not the sly and subtle shifts in meaning inherent in Signifyin(g), but a fundamental, even if momentary, communally determined act of refusal:

...carnival celebrated temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order; it marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions . . . with the sense of the gay relativity of prevailing truths and authorities. We find here a characteristic logic, the peculiar logic of the "inside out," of the turnabout, of a continuing shift from top to bottom, from front to rear, of numerous parodies and travesties, humiliations, profanations, comic crownings and uncrownings (Bakhtin 1984: 10-11).

Though Bakhtin's observations of carnival were of 16th century European events as portrayed in the fiction of François Rabelais, carnival has become a well known series of more-or-less anarchic social events throughout the Caribbean, the Americas, and Africa

that express a similar sense of socially endorsed nose-thumbing within its larger celebration.⁷⁹

This carnivalesque of performance bears some resemblance, as well, to strategies of textual borrowing and construction found in many African diasporic oral compositional practices. Laura Jarmon, borrowing from Marcel Proust, describes the oral compositional strategy of *bricolage* as textual composition by means of appropriating materials at hand (2003: 222).⁸⁰ Proust's narrator in *Remembrance of things past* compares his own writing process to his wife's dress making practice: "I should work beside her and in a way almost as she worked herself...and, pinning here and there an extra page, I should construct my book, I dare not say ambitiously like a cathedral, but quite simply like a dress" (Proust 2007: 1033). In this manner, Roland Barthes credits Proust with being essential to his own work, adopting a sense of "circular memory" from Proust's work which makes any reading or thinking part of the narrative of life (Barthes 1975: 36).⁸¹ This is reminiscent of Walter Ong's observation, cited earlier, of text conceived as weaving, and also brings to mind Robert Farris Thompson's discussion of "rhythimized textiles": thoughts, memories, commentary, and history constructed from the combination of many pieces in a manner reminiscent of the hocketed West African construction of rhythm (1983: 207-23). Extending these examples of *bricolage* even further, Thompson's reference to hocketed rhythms brings the discussion of

⁷⁹ Daniel Crowley addresses issues of African and African diasporic expressivity in the broad experience of carnival performance (1999a, 1999b).

⁸⁰ Though similar, Claude Lévi-Strauss's use of the word *bricolage* is meant to characterize a mode of thought that is often placed in opposition to scientific thought (Lévi-Strauss 1966).

⁸¹ This interpretation of Proust's example is similar, in a sense, to Foucault's ideas of self-transformation through discursive engagement (1998a: 406) and "book experience" (2000a: 246), though Foucault adds a socially determined and enacted moral dimension to his conception that contrasts with the more personally defined ethical nature of Barthes's reading.

compositional technique back to the additive rhythms mentioned earlier in this chapter. Hocketing is a textural technique in Western music, orchestrating notes such that each voice enters only when others are silent and exits when others sound; the combined voices in a hocketed composition express the full musical idea while the abstracted individual voices seem only hesitant and partial.

But in the broader consideration of African diasporic expressive traditions, the process of composition by piecing together fragments of ideas – of *bricolage* – is most often associated with Gates’s larger project of defining the rhetorical strategies of Signifyin(g). In his comments on the reassembling of fragments of history scattered by the slave trade/diaspora, Gates refers to this broader African diasporic expressive tradition as

...an extraordinarily self-reflective tradition, a tradition exceptionally conscious of its history and of the simultaneity of its canonical texts, which tend to be taken as verbal models of the Afro-American social condition, to be revised. Because of the experience of diaspora, the fragments that contain the traces of a coherent system of order must be reassembled. These fragments embody aspects of a theory of critical principles around which the discrete texts of the tradition configure, in the critic’s reading of the textual past. To reassemble fragments, of course, is to engage in an act of speculation, to attempt to weave a fiction of origins and subgeneration. It is to render the implicit as explicit, and at times to imagine the whole from the part (1988: xxiv).

This sense of reassembling the fragments of one’s history is not merely an academic exercise, though, being operative in Lorna McDaniel’s ethnographic description of the Big Drum musical tradition of Carriacou, one of the Grenadine islands that constitute the nation of Grenada. Through the performance of drum rhythms and songs that refer to specific West African nations – and which have retained a surprising amount of musical and linguistic vocabulary from these nations – Big Drum has “helped to establish harmony in the new society and reassemble codes of inheritance, family, and lineage. The

encoded songs reflect the pluralistic social organization of nine national groupings,⁸² which mirror the ethnic inheritances of the people” (1998: 167). McDaniel adds that individual Carriacouans’ sense of connection (roots) to a specific African nation is often transmitted within a family not through the passing along of stories of one’s heritage but through the learning of the Big Drum nation songs and the identification of a family’s national rhythm, often “embraced as that person’s national code” (71). In this instance, music is more than just an African cultural “survival” that points to a vague sense of a society’s African heritage; in the case of Carriacou’s Big Drum tradition there is a naming and claiming of lineage to specific African nations rather than to the continent as a whole.⁸³ If, in the case of Big Drum, one can piece together a historical narrative through the performance of songs and rhythms, the argument for musical *bricolage* in the composing of narratives acquires a thickened and more integrated sense of just how such Texts are dialogically constituted.

But in addition to the compositional procedures of *bricolage*, the element of texture plays a crucial role in composing the African Atlantic; the use of varied musical textures can be, and has been, interpreted as adding significant and Signifyin(g) content to Fela’s and Sun Ra’s compositional practices. Veal suggests that Fela’s growing use of sonic space in his recordings of the 1980s indicated a deepened sense of spirituality and cultural nationalistic intent, expressed in the music’s timbre and texture (2000: 176),

⁸² The nine nations that represent the West African origins of Carriacouans are: Cromanti, Igbo, Manding, Kongo, Arada, Moko, Chamba, Temne, and Banda (McDaniel 1998: 18). As of 2011 there is a new anthropological and ethnomusicological project which will seek to more clearly define the connections between the Temne of Sierra Leone and the expressive and everyday culture of Carriacou (Grant 2011).

⁸³ Recordings of Big Drum songs include those compiled by Andrew Pearse (1956) and Alan Lomax (1997, 1999, 2000, 2001), all captured in the 1950s and 1960s. McDaniel’s work has been expanded in a follow-up article on Big Drum (2002) and was preceded by an article on “memory spirituals” in Trinidad (1994). Rebecca Miller has since done research on string band music in Carriacou (2008).

while Olaniyan writes that this same sonic change was effected as a means of emphasizing Fela's didactic intent (2004: 152). While there is truth in both of these perspectives, the point, of course, is that composing the African Atlantic is both of these things and more: music is the central element of the liminal transition undertaken by the musicians and audience as they create the communal Text of the composition; the texture of the music is an aspect of the Text (text/ure), lending itself simultaneously to the realization of signified meaning and the achievement of *communitas*.

Olaniyan's discussion of Fela's sonic texture borrows the idea of aural perspective from Theo Van Leeuwen, defining it as "the manipulation of sound to situate the listener in certain ways in relation to the music and the subject the music represents" (Olaniyan 2004: 152-53; Van Leeuwen 1999: 14-25). Though the concept of perspective is a well known aspect of visual arts, noting the multiple and varied relationships that exist between a work of art and its viewers, the modern use of sound technologies has also produced a number of methods by which a musical artist can "manipulate sound-to-listener distance in order to create certain kinds of impressions or symbolic meanings with the aural perspective such manipulation [of sound] intimates" (Olaniyan 2004: 153). Olaniyan states that this does not mean, in the case of the relative loudness of the music, that the aural perspective shifts with the listener's ability to adjust the volume knob of a stereo. Rather, a listener can perceive a sense of closeness or tension or dialogic informality or any number of signified meanings implied by the artist's manipulation of the relative loudness of the musical recording – the creation of sonic fullness or saturation – as well as by other audio processes made available to musicians through the use of recording studio and sound amplification technologies: the distribution of voices and

instruments in the stereo field to create a sense of spatial distribution; the use of reverb and echo to create a sense of the music in a physical space of some size; the use of compression and equalization to more sharply define the dynamic range and frequency spectrum of individual voices and instruments; the use of modular effects such as phase shifting and tremolo to add a sense of movement and temporal shifting to voices and instruments;⁸⁴ the use of tape saturation and distortion in order to muddy up the clearly defined textures of voices and instruments.... All of these technology-based effects can be employed by an artist in order to create sonic textures that are integral parts of recordings and performances, acting as significant and signifying compositional techniques.

In another example of an artist's manipulation of loudness as a means of creating signified meaning, Christopher Trent (1994) describes Sun Ra's use of an overdriven, distorted vocal texture in an early version of the cosmo-drama composition "I Pharaoh" (Sun Ra 1980)⁸⁵ and on a recording of the composition "What's new" (Sun Ra 1975), adding a sense of otherworldliness to the recorded performances of these compositions that becomes a signifying and Signifyin(g) part of the text. As background Szwed discusses the introduction of noise – unstructured, disorganized sound – and the use of sound processing technologies to the sonic palette of 20th century composers and multimedia artists, allowing them to transcend some of the limitations traditional musical composition places on the expression of people's everyday experiences of modernity (1998: 228-29). Among this newly acquired palette of compositional techniques is the

⁸⁴ Veal discusses a number of spatial and temporal audio processing techniques as they apply to Jamaican dub composition (2007: 71-76). Alexander Case also discusses the use of temporal masking and time-reversed waveform as additional temporal sound effects in music production (2007: 80-81, 316, 318).

⁸⁵ Another version of this composition (Sun Ra 1994c) will be discussed in some detail in chapter 3.

aspect of sound distortion, first thought of as a technical mistake but later adopted as a means of manipulating a sound's texture and signified meaning, implying that "something is out of hand... [The] performer is either incompetent or too powerful for the instrument, or... a music is being produced that is more natural, primitive, unrehearsed, perhaps more dangerous" (229). Distortion also adds, for some, a sense of the corporeal experience of the music, obscuring the lines between instruments – basses and guitars can become percussive and drums can become melodic – and blurring the music's sense of pitch and timbre such that the music is felt more than heard (Veal 2007: 167, 194; Gilroy 1991: 164). With this growing collection of timbral and textural techniques in hand, Sun Ra became increasingly focused on acquiring (and sometimes building) new instruments as well as experimenting with the timbral and textural boundaries of the Arkestra's combined sound (Szwed 1998: 229-30, 276-77).

In addition to the use of sound technology, the compositional elements of tempo, orchestration, and dynamics can also shape the music's engagement with an audience. Veal writes that, by the early 1980s, Fela had begun to slow his music down and add more sonic space to his performances, trying to "create a 'sacred space'" in his performances where "musical and textual symbols would interact to add a more profound cultural resonance to the music (Veal 2000: 176). Waterman notes a similar aesthetic change in the slowing of tempos and adoption of Yoruba dance drumming among jùjú bands after World War II in an attempt to broaden the appeal of the music. Audiences for this new jùjú performance interpreted the changes in the music as creating a more contemplative and solemn mood (1990a: 86). But more than simply contemplative, musicians often describe their performance as specifically spiritual in its content and

intent. Wole Soyinka writes that music in Yoruba expressive culture is the language through which the spiritual transition from the living to the spirit world takes place in drama (1976: 36). Similarly, Erlmann likens *isicathamiya* performers to “diviners and healers...by virtue of their ability to direct the flow of power through special channels of words, music, and bodily movement,” adding that “performance, unlike ethnographic description, potentially transforms individuals into persons in control of their own destiny” (1996b: xix). This, of course, is part of Sun Ra’s stated intent when leading his group away from the stage at the end of a performance: it “[symbolizes] leaving the planet while alive, rather than dead. You hear the voices leaving. I also use this on records, but live the sound diminishes gradually” (Szwed 1998: 260). This image of musicians leading the audience, borne along on the vehicle of music, is a central chronotopic metaphor of composing the African Atlantic, discussed in chapter 3 with regard to Sun Ra’s revisions of Exodus and his re-creation of African diasporic flying narratives. These rhetorical metaphors, grouped together as a chronotope which signifies road/path/journey, are embedded in the performance practices of the African Atlantic, activated by the recounting of shared cultural memories such that the true Text of the music is created in the dialogue between performers and audience. This is the central creative action of composing the African Atlantic.

CHAPTER 3 – ASTRO-BLUES AND COSMO-SPIRITUALS: SUN RA THE TRADITIONALIST

The alternative to limitation is INFINITY. Yet, be warned! Infinity is precision discipline. Infinity being INFINITY is naturally of duality because and as it is written, “The secrets of wisdom are double to that which is.”

Sun Ra, *The immeasurable equation* (2005: xxxv)

Resist me-----

Make me strong.

Resist me-----

Make me strong.

For since I cannot be what you will

I shall always be that much more so

What I will.

Sun Ra, “Saga of resistance” (Baraka and Neal 1968: 212)

“The myth of me”: Sun Ra’s biomythography⁸⁶.

Though Sun Ra’s work is most often associated with his musical orientation toward free jazz and his philosophical orientations toward Egyptology and outer space, a close examination of his music and writing indicates a consistent and loving yet often ambivalent grounding in the traditions of African American expressive culture. In addition to the blues-based musical materials and early big band extended structures that are found throughout his body of work and a piano playing style that ranges from stride to swing to free, often within a single composition, one of the more consistent dialectical elements of his music is his relationship to the spiritual songs and to spirituality. Graham Lock writes of the thematic and rhetorical elements of the spirituals that can be found in Sun Ra’s music while, at the same time, documenting his fundamentally anti-Christian stance (Lock 1999: 13-43). Departing from Lock’s discussion of the relationships

⁸⁶ I am borrowing here from Audre Lorde’s characterization of her own semi-fictionalized autobiography, *Zami: a new spelling of my name* (1982), as a “biomythography” – a mythologized biography of the self.

between Sun Ra's music and the spirituals, this chapter will comment upon the manner in which Sun Ra consistently worked within established African American expressive traditions, Signifyin(g) upon them to such an extent as to often seem disconnected from the mainstream. In creating a distinct compositional and performative style, elements of the blues, ragtime, and spirituals were assimilated, re-combined, and re-presented in such a fashion as to seemingly present themselves as new musical genres. In creating such a radical reinterpretation of more traditional musical and extra-musical materials Sun Ra creates both a political commentary on American society in general and African American society in particular, while posing a challenge to the European epistemological and ontological foundations upon which the dominant American historical narrative has been constructed. The very nature of such a radical social commentary forged from traditional expressive materials suggests that, far from being a cultural outsider, Sun Ra served as the archetypical trickster figure Esu-Elegbara, the Gatesian figure of meta-linguistics (1988: 6), whose Signifyin(g) upon traditional materials is both complicating and clarifying, constantly digging at the questions that are buried in our too-often unreflective use of language and unchallenged understanding of history.

Though the purpose of this chapter is not to provide a biography of Sun Ra,⁸⁷ there are a few facts that need to be established in order to provide a historical context in which to situate this essay. Sun Ra arrived in Birmingham, Alabama in 1914 with the given name Herman Poole Blount. I use the word arrived rather than born out of respect for Sun Ra's thoughts on the etymological significance of the word *birth* – birth =

⁸⁷ John Szwed's, *Space is the place: The lives and times of Sun Ra* (1998) is the most thorough biographical work. Prior to Szwed the most comprehensive statement was Allan Chase's master's thesis, *Sun Ra: Musical change and musical meaning in the life and work of a jazz composer* (1994).

berth/internment = burial = death – as well as for his ambivalence regarding a family name that did not reflect his heritage. In response to one interviewer’s question, “What is your first memory?” Sun Ra replied, “I’m not a human. I never called anybody ‘mother.’ The woman who is supposed to be my mother I call ‘other momma.’ I never call nobody ‘mother.’ I never call nobody ‘father.’ I never felt that way (Theis 1983: 48).” But members of his family, while they seem to have indulged his singularity, were also often more blunt about his beginnings. As his sister Mary recalled in a 1992 newspaper interview: “He was born at my mother’s house over there by the train station...I know ‘cause I got on my knees and peeped through the keyhole. He’s not from no Mars” (Kemp 1992: 6).

The issue of family and belonging is an ever-present and yet inconsistent theme in Sun Ra’s story of himself, occasionally owning up to his terrestrial beginnings but more often highlighting his extra-terrestrial belonging. I use the word belonging consciously in the last sentence because even though Sun Ra often claimed to be from Saturn, both Chase and Lock agree that he never stated (on the record, at least) that he was born on Saturn (Chase 1994: 258 n.; Lock 1999: 42). While this may seem to be a subtle difference, it is consistent with the major themes of alienation and belonging in Sun Ra’s work. Late in life Sun Ra noted that he had given up quite a lot in order to pursue his individual path in life: “I left my family, I left my friends, I left *for real*. I left everything to be me, ‘cause I knew I was not like them. Not like black or white, not like Americans. I’m not like nobody else. I’m alone on this planet” (Lock 1994: 151). But while it is not the place of this essay to speculate as to the psychological reasons for such a profound sense of alienation, Sun Ra does write elsewhere of the loving and nurturing attention of

his family – or of family in general if not his family specifically – that helped to create the person he became. The poem “The visitation” reveals Sun Ra’s thoughts with regard to the nurturing influence of family, referring to his life as a “visitation” upon the Earth.

Black hands tended and cared for me
...black hearts, minds and souls love me –
And even today the overtones from the fire
of that love are still burning (Baraka and Neal 1968: 213).

The second half of the poem, though, writes of the concurrent experience of harsh white society that tried to contain him, but which is also a strong formative presence:

Those who segregate did not segregate in vain
For I am,
And I am what I am.

Similarly, in the poem “Saga of resistance,” Sun Ra acknowledges the transformative creativity that is made possible as a result of resistance to adversity.

Resist me---
Repulse my dreams.
Thus is a spark brought from nothing...
...Now, nothing is the same:
 The stones are blackened-----
 The grass is ashes
 The burning sun is still no less itself
 But all else is changed
 Nor ever shall it be as it was before (212).

The degradations and restrictions of living in a racist society, then, are the motivations that drive Sun Ra in his fundamental, and one might say Hegelian, dialectical exercise of destroying – negating – all understanding of the world as it was seen before, constructing a new reality in its place. In a particularly succinct explication of Hegel’s dialectical method, Marcuse comments that Hegel’s philosophical system is a negative philosophy: “...the given facts that appear to common sense as the positive index of truth are in reality the negation of truth, so that truth can only be established by their destruction”

(1999: 26-27). The ideologies of history and social order, by this definition, are all to be questioned and rearranged as best suits a newer critical reading of the truth, redefining truth as a contingent discourse rather than a monumental collection of facts.

But Sun Ra's outlook on life is not entirely shaped by the negative experiences of growing up in Birmingham. Like most musicians, Sun Ra's musical experiences as a child and a young man were formative to his conception of self-expression. He remembered that his parents listened to records by Bessie Smith, Ethel Waters, and Duke Ellington, noting that he was particularly attracted to the piano players (Lyons 1983: 85). The family also took Sun Ra to see live musical acts such as Bessie Smith, Mamie Smith, Clara Smith, and Butterbeans and Susie when they would pass through Birmingham (Primack 1978: 14; Sun Ra 1989: liner notes). Schuller has speculated that Sun Ra may have heard the Fletcher Henderson Orchestra as a child (Schuller 1968: 253 n.), and certainly Sun Ra has confirmed that Henderson was his most important and long-standing musical influence, ultimately leading, in Chicago, to an extended gig as Henderson's piano player in the 1940s (Szwed 1998: 24, 34, 53-57).

What is not known, though, is the specific body of songs that Sun Ra would have encountered while attending church. It is easy to establish that Sun Ra attended the Tabernacle Baptist Church in Birmingham while being raised by his maternal grandmother (Rusch 1984: 64; Szwed 1998: 9). Hymnody and folk spirituals have long been important in the African American church traditions, with Baptist congregations not only maintaining and perpetuating the early publication of Watts's *Hymns and spiritual songs* (Lincoln and Mamiya 1990: 354; Watts 1804 [1707]), but also bearing the credit for having "'blackened' them" (Whalum 1973). By the 1920s, though, Baptist churches

had generally adopted the *Baptist standard hymnal* (Townsend 1924) as their songbook, with many of the songs taken from the early collection of folk spirituals, *Slave songs of the United States* (Fisher 1963: 159; Allen, Ware, and Garrison 1995 [1867]). Despite the fact that Sun Ra has not mentioned the music of the Baptist church in any published interview, his church attendance and the common use of these hymnals suggest that he was well acquainted with the spirituals created during the time of slavery that were common to the Baptist church. Certainly one can speculate as to whether there is a one-to-one correspondence between compositions: Lock suggests that the album titles *Purple night* (Sun Ra 1990) and *The night of the purple moon* (Sun Ra 1974) are most likely references to a line in the spiritual “Didn’t my Lord deliver Daniel”: “De moon run down in a purple stream/De sun forbear to shine” (Lock 1999: 36; Johnson, Johnson, and Brown 2002 [1925]: 149-50). But the most pressing questions lie in Sun Ra’s relationship with black church traditions and with his liberally creative reference to and transformation of those traditions.

Sun Ra’s church attendance is significant to any consideration of his musical, oral, and written production in that spirituality is his most consistent and most prominent theme. And yet, Sun Ra’s articulation of his vision of spirituality is, at one and the same time, lovingly *of* as well as aggressively *opposed to* his early experiences in the Baptist church, projecting the seemingly contradictory image of a man who is so opposed to Christianity that he once polemically claimed that Moses was a more destructive mythic-historical figure than Hitler, yet who prolifically quoted the bible and fashioned much of his music after the spiritual songs and the rhetorical style of the Baptist church.

Moses said fear the creator. Why should a person fear the creator, be afraid to express themselves? They talk about Hitler, the worst dictator was Moses.... They

call him a wise man – what’s wrong with them? That man was a murderer, a liar, and a deceiver. Moses wasn’t good for this planet, I don’t care who sent him. The Egyptian government, they contributed so much to humanity – he ain’t left no art, no beauty, no alphabets. Nothin’ (Lock 1999: 20-21).

In this statement Sun Ra critiques the fundamental role of Christianity in African American life in much the same manner as George James in his work titled *Stolen legacy*, emphasizing the Egyptian origins of the Western intellectual heritage and, by extension, the role of Christianity in the suppression of that aspect of the Egyptian past (James 2001 [1954]: 38, 153-55). In an interview with Graham Lock from 1990, Sun Ra complained about the destruction of Egyptian Sun iconography “by Christians who, he [Sun Ra] said, ‘were trying to put this planet in darkness.’ He decried it as ‘a planned strategy to get rid of what they call sun-worship; but it wasn’t sun-worship, it was the truth’” (1999: 18). This account of the destruction of Egyptian Sun iconography follows from James’s argument and is elaborated by Martin Bernal (1987: 121-60) and Gibbon (1776-88a: Vol. 3 - 28, 199-200; 1776-88b: Vol. 5 - 109-10).

Yet, far from being a cranky and potentially anti-Semitic tirade against an important figure to both African American and Jewish theologies, Sun Ra’s critique of the role of Moses in African American theology is a crucial point in attempting to understand the radical historical revision that is both stated and implied in all of Sun Ra’s work. Having established some of the necessary biography, the remainder of this chapter will begin to expand the discussion of Sun Ra as an intellectual of the African Atlantic. First, in order to broaden and deepen the discourse on Sun Ra within this broad cultural and intellectual field, it is necessary to address the multi-faceted concept of *discipline* as

it appears in much of his music, writing, and interviews.⁸⁸ Having established a broader intellectual field, the chapter will address Sun Ra's historical focus on Egypt through his re-telling and re-contextualization of the Exodus narrative in his composition "I, Pharaoh." Drawing together the themes of flight, spirituality, and discipline, this composition is an exercise in dialectical negation that asks his audience to consider what is left behind when one leaves and who one should follow in the leaving. Next, the chapter will provide an explication of the "Space chant" discussed by Lock, placing it within the pantheon of the spirituals and African American spirituality and drawing a closer connection between Sun Ra's "cosmo-spirituals" and the African diasporic "flying narratives": folkloric narratives of captive Africans flying back to Africa that appear with marked consistency throughout the Americas and the Caribbean. At the core of all things Sun Ra is a radical reinterpretation of the historical materials that make up the narrative before us: "Myth was here before history. When they started history the truth couldn't move, 'cause they put a lot of lies in there too" (Lock 1994: 148). In his composition titled "Of invisible them," Sun Ra asks a pointed question of his audience: "Are you so willfully ignorant of what you should be/That you think you are only what others say you are?" (Sun Ra 1990).

Discipline and disciples: Music, freedom, the Bible, and study:

One of the common misconceptions that people first form when encountering Sun Ra's music is to mistake the sometimes obscure nature of his music and rhetoric for

⁸⁸ The mere mention of the word *discipline* often causes readers to associate the word with Foucault's concept as laid out in *Discipline and punish* (1995). In this book Foucault conceives of discipline as a mechanism of power by which the state exerts control over the behavior of individuals – a concept that is far from Sun Ra's use of the word. If one were to characterize Sun Ra's concept of discipline according to Foucault's writings it would more closely resemble Foucault's concept of self-transformation from his later writings (e.g., 1992), though I think it is best to allow Sun Ra to speak for himself.

simple craziness (“weirdness,” as my students have told me), or for a mocking, ingenuine, and nihilistically odd tone of voice. Most often the theatrical, other-worldly qualities of Sun Ra’s performance style are not readily understood outside of its intended cultural context: an expression of black musical and historical knowledge intended for a black audience in a specific spatial and temporal context. But in addition to the sometimes mean-spirited dismissal of Sun Ra as a mentally-disturbed charlatan, much of the Arkestra’s audience by the 1960s had become a young, white crowd who viewed a musical performance by Sun Ra as an opportunity to drop acid and “freak out” to the crazy music (Szwed 2007), misinterpreting the practices of musical and historical signifying as being merely transgressive. Ingrid Monson notes that this misinterpretation of African American expressive culture, particularly as it relates to jazz, is a problematic form of racism that has long characterized the relationship between black jazz musicians and the white members of their audience.

To the extent that well-meaning white Americans have confused the most “transgressive” aspects of African American culture with its true character, they fall into the trap of viewing blackness as absence. Whether conceived as an absence of morality or of bourgeois pretensions, this view of black-ness, paradoxically, buys into the historical legacy of primitivism and its concomitant exoticism of the “Other” (1995: 398).

From this perspective, then, blackness is seen as signifying a perpetual state of degradation rather than a way of being and of perceiving oneself in the world. This whitened perspective, as well, is also related to a fundamental split that runs through modern Western society regarding the general status of freedom in society – a split that often takes the form of either a nihilistic “do what you like” attitude, or a morally grounded and socially determined understanding of freedom. This split shows itself quite clearly in some of the broader discourses regarding free jazz, particularly as free jazz

relates to African American cultural practices and the commercialized culture and politics of modern American society.

In the title of his book *Freedom is, freedom ain't: Jazz and the making of the sixties*, Scott Saul borrows from Ellison's imagined preacher in the prologue to *Invisible man* as a means of drawing attention to the contradictory nature of representational art and racial identity while making a connection to competing definitions of and experiences of freedom within the United States (2003: xiii).

"Now black is..." the preacher shouted.
"Bloody..."
"I said black is..."
"Preach it, brother..."
"...an' black ain't" (Ellison 1980 [1952]: 9)

In this passage, Ellison's preacher testifies, and the audience responds, to both the multiple, signified identities and the cultural particularities that constitute the ontology of what "black is," as well as the ideological invention of race – "black ain't" – which creates artificial, though materially significant, social and political barriers, too often delineating both the in-groups and the out-groups of societies. The word *black*, then, simultaneously acts as an adjective and a noun, understood to embody different sets of values depending on one's perspective: positive and affirming for some, foreign and troubling for others. Ellison's preacher, in dialogue with his congregation, affirms the comfort of group identity while also acknowledging the hostility that is often forced upon them.

Saul's intention in borrowing from Ellison, though, is to highlight the differing conceptions of freedom which he views as diverging along similarly constructed lines. Citing Eric Foner, Saul situates the dominant American discourse on freedom within the

context of Cold War politics where freedom came to be redefined as the freedom to choose within a free market economy, contrasting the material abundance of the United States' capitalist system with the comparatively limited consumer choices of the Soviet socialist economy (13; Foner 1998: 252-63). The 1959 kitchen debate between Nixon and Khrushchev exemplified this new definition of freedom, since the U.S. controlled message "presumed that social happiness could be measured by the quantity and quality of goods for sale – that consumerism and material wealth were at the root of freedom" (Saul 2003: 14-15). As if reading from the same script, David Lilienthal, the Atomic Energy Commissioner during the Truman administration, wrote, "[by] freedom, I mean essentially freedom to choose to the maximum degree possible...It means a maximum range of choice for the consumer when he spends his dollar" (Foner 1998: 263-64).

In lock step with the Cold War redefinition of freedom as being naturally and inextricably linked with material consumption, Saul writes that democracy itself came to be reformed in order to fit this revised material freedom. In this new Cold War democracy, "a society was valued less for the way it inculcated the participatory or civic virtues of engagement and dissent and more for the way it respected the privacy of the individual and therefore held the totalitarian threat in abeyance" (13). Political scientists and politicians began to believe that "the state was best when it promoted an 'absence of interference,' an 'absence of obstacles to possible choices and desires'" (14; King 1996: 15-28). Within this context, Howard Brick wrote that the new democracy worked best,

...where there was a wide umbrella of consensus among leading political players, no astringent debate between political parties over fundamentals, lack of sharp divisions among elements of the population at large, and consequently a popular willingness, aside from electoral participation, to let politics go of its own momentum (1998: 19).

By contrast to much of this political and economic background, many jazz musicians conceived of freedom as being separate from the dominant idea of freedom – freedom as rank individualism and free choice, fully egocentric and veering toward anarchy. Jazz musicians, as with many others who existed outside of the privileged spaces of the dominant society, rejected the growing notion that freedom should be determined by the language of free market capitalism. Saul notes the explicit complementarity that exists between freedom and discipline within the broad field of jazz improvisation (2003: 20). One can pursue an individual voice within the jazz field, but the pursuit of individuality is limited by the needs of the collective; individual expression is realized within the context of a group statement, allowing a musician the freedom to play as one pleases but within the formal and aesthetic limits of the music. This ability to assert one's identity while remaining within the boundaries of the collective voice is attained through the discipline of study and practice. Ornette Coleman stated that his musicians had “complete freedom,” but they expressed that freedom as part of a group effort (1959: liner notes). Similarly, Miles Davis once commented on Wayne Shorter's broad yet depthful playing, stating that Shorter “understood that freedom in music was the ability to know the rules in order to bend them to your own satisfaction and taste” (Davis and Troupe 1989: 274). Herbie Hancock described the aesthetic of this same mid-60s Miles Davis group as being characterized by a sense of discipline that they referred to as “controlled freedom.”

I mean, how many times have you *talked* to somebody and...you got ready to say, make a point, and then you kind of went off in another direction, but maybe you never wound up making that point but the conversation, you know, just went somewhere else and it was fine. There's nothing wrong with it. Maybe you *like* where you went. Well, this is the way we are dealing with music (Monson 1996: 81; Obenhaus 1993).

As Hancock suggests, even though the music may move in an unfamiliar direction or state something that is incomprehensible to some listeners, there is a sense of dialogue and narrative to it that is realized through the disciplined practice of the musicians. In describing the manner by which his approach to free drumming is separate from the unsubtle and thoughtlessly anarchic playing of amateurs Sunny Murray stated that advanced jazz musicians practice a kind of “controlled freedom” which exhibits a level of compositional depth beyond the rank beginner’s fumbling and the amateur’s need to make every musical gesture comprehensible and apparent: “*Complete* freedom you could get from anyone who walks down the street. Give them twenty dollars and they’ll probably do something pretty free!” (Wilmer 1967: 163).

George Russell marks this kind of complete freedom in jazz as the work of musicians whose playing reflects an unconscious relationship to the politics of the time rather than a more contemplative, purposeful, and spiritually informed practice.

...I don’t believe in freedom. I don’t think anything like that exists in the world or in music. I think there are higher laws although, as you move under higher laws you may operate under fewer laws, thus moving in a state of relative freedom as compared to being under numerous smaller laws. But there’s always a law in music (Jones 1974: 68).

But as Russell continues this line of thought he enthusiastically includes Sun Ra’s name among the musicians who exemplify this spiritually informed approach to disciplined freedom in music (69). As Sun Ra stated his own position on the subject in a characteristically direct yet enigmatic manner, “Look at the kind of people who say, ‘I’m free, white, and 21.’ Are they free? I see myself as P-H-R-E but not F-R-E-E. That’s the

name of the sun in ancient Egypt.”⁸⁹ As such, Sun Ra stated that freedom must always be tempered by discipline in order to avoid the self-indulgence and narcissism that plagues contemporary societies: “Liberty...is not all it’s cracked up to be: even the liberty bell is cracked, for that matter, and it was liberty that led people to the use of crack” (Szwed 1998: 309-10). In Sun Ra’s view, the only way the deleterious effects of systematic racism and rampant materialism could be countered was not through protest, but rather through the “precision and discipline” that is required to re-orient and re-situate oneself in the world (Soutif 1981: 43) – a sense of discipline that ruled Sun Ra’s life and the lives of his musicians, publically expressing itself primarily in music.

The theme of discipline is one that is consistently and insistently expressed in Sun Ra’s narrative, always present in its varied meanings but never simplistically rendered. In order to gain some grasp on the larger subject, the concept of discipline, as it is conceived by Sun Ra, must be considered from a number of different aspects: the discipline of study and the science of music; the discipline of performance; and the use of discipline as a social corrective. This section will highlight some of the academic and spiritual pursuits that Sun Ra undertook in his quest to turn his musicians and his audience away from the history of modernity – a history that he viewed as more of a statement of ideology than a historically accurate narrative of facts – toward the myth-science of the Astro-Black universe.⁹⁰ Building on the discussion of discipline and freedom, this section will address

⁸⁹ The word for Sun or Sun God in the ancient Egyptian language is *r*’, which is commonly written as Re. I believe that “Ph,” in this case, is a homonym for the masculine suffix pronoun *f* (he/him/it), which identifies Re as being a masculine noun (Collier and Manley 2003: 148, 156). See Appendix 1 for the hieroglyphic representations of these words.

⁹⁰ Sun Ra often referred to his group as the Myth-Science Arkestra, though the group’s name varied from album to album. “Astro-Black” is the title of a composition, performed in Robert Mugge’s documentary

Sun Ra's practice of discipline as a means of integrating his wide-ranging and depthful study with the intensive practice, composition, rehearsal and performance of music.

Szwed states that the 1965 album *The magic city* (1993) marked a shift in Sun Ra's compositional practice, indicating, perhaps, Sun Ra's growing association with the New York Black Arts Movement and with Black Nationalism in general (Szwed 1998: 212-15). Prior to this album much of his music consisted of very well crafted but not entirely unusual jazz compositions and arrangements. "El is a sound of joy," for instance, is a rather bluesy, swinging big band piece with a baritone sax riff that could easily inhabit a Charles Mingus composition and a melodic line that exhibits some of the angularity of a Thelonious Monk line. With *The magic city*, though, Sun Ra shifted to a performance aesthetic more clearly aligned with the free jazz movement of the 1960s as well as with a compositional style Szwed likens to Butch Morris's concept of conduction (Szwed 1998: 214; Morris 2006). Alan Chase observed that Sun Ra's compositional style seemed to change around the time of the move to New York, sounding more like the conducted improvisations he witnessed at concerts in the 1980s than the tightly scored and rehearsed compositions of his earlier career (2009). But another musical dynamic, emphasized later in this chapter, is Sun Ra's adoption around 1959 of long-form, modal structures used to string multiple compositions together in medleys that both Robert Campbell and Graham Lock refer to as "space chants" (Campbell and Trent 1994: 18; Lock 1999: 226 n.81). In adopting this freer, less harmonically cluttered approach to performing established compositions Sun Ra moved beyond the closed narrative form of composition to a longer modal, dialogic form, opening the musical structures further to

Sun Ra: A joyful noise (1980). It is also a common term Sun Ra used to relate themes of outer space and Black cultural production.

be used as vehicles for dialogue and setting a platform from which he could teach. It is in these modal forms that the dialogic nature of Sun Ra's music most closely associates itself with the aesthetic of *Composing the African Atlantic*.

Sun Ra often referred to himself as a scientist, though not in the modern sense of one who uses the scientific method in order to prove or disprove theses. Conceived in much the same manner as the philosophers of the Enlightenment who undertook a reevaluation of thought and knowledge according to new principles of rigorous study – Kant, for instance, stripped philosophy down and then built it up again from the simple statement “all our knowledge begins with experience” (2003: 41) – Sun Ra compulsively studied theology, history, linguistics, etymology, mathematics, mysticism, and nearly anything else he could lay his hands on, spurred on by chronic insomnia and fed by the Chicago and New York public libraries. Early in his time in Chicago Sun Ra first read Du Bois, and, having read Booker T. Washington while at college, came to the conclusion that both Du Bois and Washington were correct in their respective sides of their famous debate: one should develop both a knowledge of the sciences and the humanities in order to transcend the social and cultural limitations that he saw as constituting the most insidious side of racism (Szwed 1998: 62). Precision and discipline became the tools that allowed Sun Ra to protest, in his own way, social inequities, but they were also the means by which he achieved his artistic and personal goals in life, adopting and adapting the material tools associated with science as signifiers of discipline. For Daniel Kreiss, this appropriation of technologies is essentially a decontextualization and redeployment of the “master’s tools,” such that the “artifacts and technological metaphors” of space and science are used to create a new “‘mythic consciousness’ of technologically empowered

racial identity that would enable blacks to recreate and invent technologies and construct utopian societies on outer space landscapes” (2008: 58). Kreiss characterizes Sun Ra’s music and musical performance as an example of a “black knowledge society,”

a metaphorical utopia of consciousness facilitated by science and technology and grounded in the cultural values of ancient Egypt and a reimagining of outer space. Sun Ra’s engagement with artifacts and metaphors of energy, outer space, and advanced technologies represents a black cultural uptake and reconception of cold war science in terms of long-established African-American social narratives of liberation and empowerment (61).

Building on this Sun Ra “created a performance style around the ‘black knowledge society’” where themes related to Egypt and space were incorporated into performances as a means of engaging audiences in the dialogic contestation of historical narratives (61).

At some performances small robots and remote-controlled cars were sent into the audience as a means of challenging people’s consciousness (Corbett 2006b: 6).

Additionally, Sun Ra conceived of the band’s costumes and performative presentation as a means to challenge and change African Americans’ consciousness of self, society, and history, stating that his intention was to make “the black people, the so-called Negroes, conscious of the fact that they live in a changing world” (Kreiss 2008: 62; Szwed 1998: 173).⁹¹

Similarly, Sun Ra’s critique of Christianity was also grounded in a broad sense of black consciousness that allowed for radical social change and innovation (Kreiss 2008: 62). In a 1989 interview he discussed some of the limiting effect of Christianity he addressed in his Chicago street corner discussions.

...I found myself talking on street corners to black people – I felt they needed it. No white people – I was talking about computers, I was talking about spaceships,

⁹¹ These “extramusical” aspects of performance are also related to the liminal shift discussed in chapter 2.

I was talking about flying into outer space. I was talking about everything – satellites! – to black people. A black minister told me, “Hey, well, you know, it ain’t in the Bible.” I’d say, “They’re going to the moon, they’re going to go further, I don’t care what it says in the Bible – that’s what’s going to happen” (Sinker 1995: 24).

In a sense, Sun Ra’s intensive study is more akin to Foucault’s “archaeology” than historical revision. In *The order of things*, Foucault is concerned with the ways in which a broadly conceived European intellectual culture,

...has made manifest the existence of order, and how, to the modalities of that order, the exchanges owed their laws, the living beings their constants, the words their sequence and their representative value... It is...an whose aim it is to rediscover on what basis knowledge and theory became possible (1970: xxi).

In this passage Foucault differentiates between the writing of history – a process of narrative writing that is far too vulnerable to ideological distortions – and a more fundamental analytical process that seeks to delve into the *a prioris* of knowledge in order to discover the culturally determined origins of knowledge and social behavior. In a very purposeful manner, then, Foucault is attempting to illuminate “the epistemological field, the *episteme* in which knowledge...grounds its positivity and thereby manifests a history which is not that of its growing perfection, but rather of its conditions of possibility.... Such an enterprise is not so much a history, in the traditional meaning of the word, as an ‘archaeology’” (xxii). Following from this, one could argue that Sun Ra’s emphasis of mythic narrative over historical narrative derives from a studied mistrust of “History with a capital H” as well as an understanding of the ways in which cultural memory is often characterized as “myth,” making his discursive project more of an archaeological dialogue than a historical revision or – as is more commonly ascribed to all things Sun Ra – a fantastic exercise in myth-making. But rather than rely upon the singular project of synthesizing a frighteningly large library of information in order to

theorize the *episteme*, as Foucault did, Sun Ra uses the information from his own voluminous study as a means of facilitating discussion, engaging his audience in the dialogic theorizing of the *episteme* of Black experience.

But Sun Ra's autodidactic study habits were not, as is the case with many people who are self-educated, a result of the lack of access to educational institutions. Sun Ra attended Industrial High School in Birmingham, graduating in 1932, and then attended Alabama A&M in Huntsville on a band scholarship in 1935-36 (Primack 1978: 15). While at Huntsville Sun Ra trained as a teacher, registering for classes in English composition, social science, biology, and art as well as music theory and music history classes and formal piano lessons with a classically trained teacher, Prof. Lula Hopkins Randall (Szwed 1998: 27; Primack 1978: 15). But even though he was an excellent and dedicated student, Sun Ra had originally gone to college to become a teacher and to avoid becoming a musician: "My grandmother said musicians always die early, they catch the TB, it just wasn't a good profession. She was bitterly against it" (Primack: 14). His advanced skills as a musician always attracted other musicians, though, and music quickly became both a steady source of income as well as a means by which he could find potential students. In addition, although he had dedicated himself to becoming a teacher, Sun Ra found that the curriculum in college was too limited and too confining, deriving more satisfaction from his own studies in the library. After his first year in college, he decided to dedicate himself to self-study, staying for a few years in Birmingham to read, write, practice the piano, compose music, and gig in the Birmingham area and throughout the South, eventually moving to Chicago in 1946 (Szwed 1998: 32-37, 47-50).

The combination of musical practice and broad interdisciplinary study is crucial to understanding that Sun Ra considered himself to be a teacher who composed and played music rather than as a musician who wrote poetry and essays (32-33). Music became, for him, more than a means of artistic expression, providing an opportunity to explain his thoughts in a spiritual language that could communicate in ways words could not.

My words are music and the music is words but sometimes the music is of the unsaid words concerning the things that always are to be.... The music comes from the void, the nothing, the void, in response to the burning need for something else (Sun Ra 2005: xxxii).

As a result of this expanded and personal interpretation of expression, Sun Ra's rehearsals and performances became opportunities to teach, and he began to spend time writing poetry and essays which were occasionally published (e.g., Baraka and Neal 1968) but were more often distributed on street corners and handed to interested – or not-so-interested – people he met (Corbett 2006a: 38; 2006c: 5-6; Szwed 1998: 76). His language is often obscure and didactic – as in the essay “The Bible was not written for Negroes!!!!!!” (Corbett 2006c: 89-91) – but the effect is not that of someone who acts articulate but who is, in fact, merely pompous and offensive. Rather, one senses that Sun Ra's music and writing is always striving for a truth that is just beyond one's ability to grasp it.

And this striving to understand is most clearly visible in Sun Ra's intensive study of the Bible. Though he was anti-Christian, as evidenced by the previous quote regarding Moses, Sun Ra was a very devoutly spiritual man.⁹² From his time in college to the end of

⁹² The issue of Sun Ra's spirituality will return in chapter 5, constituting an important part of his influence on the aesthetics of the Black Arts Movement.

his life Sun Ra centered all of his study on the overarching project of gaining a deeper understanding of the Bible in an effort to understand its “real meaning.... I decided since I was making such good marks, there wasn’t no need being an intellectual if I couldn’t do something that hadn’t been done before, so I decided I would tackle the most difficult problem on the planet” (Primack 1978: 15). Because of this dedicated and depthful study of the bible, much of Sun Ra’s writing and interviews are peppered with direct quotes and paraphrases from the Bible, causing one to liberally employ a Bible concordance in order to better appreciate his intended, yet multiple, meanings.⁹³ As an example, the phrase quoted above, “My words are music,” is presented on another page of the same essay as, “My music is words and my words are music. Why should only 144,000 understand?” (Sun Ra 2005: xxxi). The allusion to 144,000 is a reference to a passage from the Book of Revelations:

And I saw another angel ascending from the east, having the seal of the living God: and he cried with a loud voice to the four angels, to whom it was given to hurt the earth and the sea, Saying, Hurt not the earth, neither the sea, nor the trees, till we have sealed the servants of our God in their foreheads. And I heard the number of them which were sealed: and there were sealed an hundred and forty and four thousand of all the tribes of the children of Israel (*Bible*: Revelation 7:2-4).

By reference to this passage in the Bible one can infer that Sun Ra is making a commentary on the power of his music to provide his audience with a liberating message, while also asking why such a message of liberation should be granted only to a select few.

⁹³ Robert Denig’s online bible concordance at *GodsView.com* has been indispensable when reading Sun Ra’s lyrics, poetry, and essays (Denig 2009). Denig’s database uses the King James translation of the Bible exclusively, though, and while this is the version of the Bible that Sun Ra seems to use, it is occasionally instructive to compare translations. John Bruno Hare’s *Internet sacred text archive* (Hare 2008) allows one to search multiple translations of the bible along with other texts.

Another passage from the same essay implies that one must also discover the etymology of the word “voice” as well as understand the biblical significance of his words.

The tree of the knowledge of good and evil is forbidden as far as the fruit of it is concerned but so is the tree of life. What price forbidden fruit and forbidden trees to those to whom it is forbidden? Did you ever see a voice walking? If you didn’t, it is probably because you did not realize the meaning and significance of the word the voice (Sun Ra 2005: xxx).

This passage makes reference to the Book of Genesis.

And out of the ground made the LORD God to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight, and good for food; the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of knowledge of good and evil...But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it: for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die (*Bible*: Genesis 2:9,17).

But the word *voice* bears significant weight in last sentence. The Oxford English Dictionary lists the etymology of *the voice* as coming from the Latin words *vocem* or *vox*: voice, sound (*OED* 2007). In early use the definition of voice as sound was used to draw a connection from voice to sound to music to the spiritual: “The Voice is the eternal musical instrument of heaven and earth, from angels down to birds” (Ruskin 1949 [1889]: 162). Especially when *voice* is preceded by the article *the*, the OED lists both of the following definitions:

Sound, or the whole body of sounds, made or produced by the vocal organs of man or animals in their natural action...also occas., the faculty or power of producing this; or concretely, the organs by which it is produced; [and] In or after Biblical phraseology, esp. the voice of God. Chiefly in fig. use and freq.= “the expressed will or desire *of* God, etc.; the divine command, ordinance, or world.”

The voice, then, is both the music and the voice of God, while the question, “Did you ever see a voice walking?” implies that neither God nor the voice of music are terrestrial

beings who walk about as humans or animals.⁹⁴ As a result, one is not bound to listen to the instructions of people who tell us what is forbidden knowledge, one is only bound by the voice of God.⁹⁵ This is, in fact, the very basis of Sun Ra's compulsion to study, understand, and communicate: the compulsion to find the truth that is hidden in the text: "If you are dissatisfied with yourself in the scheme of things and the altar has not changed conditions, perhaps you should consider the altar" (Schonfield 1970: 3).

This lifelong compulsion to study became a central part of Sun Ra's conception of discipline, and discipline became the manner by which a significant amount of his music was identified. Campbell and Trent have identified sixteen distinctly numbered, though not sequential, instrumental compositions titled "Discipline": e.g., "Discipline No.1," "Discipline No.11," "Discipline 27" (Campbell and Trent 1994: 817-18).⁹⁶ Though I can find no documentary evidence that Sun Ra explained these titles, discipline was a consistent theme in interviews when he was asked the seemingly obligatory questions about musical practice. When discussing, with Leonard Lyons, his process of learning to play piano as a young man, Sun Ra specifies that it was a disciplined process of duplication rather than one of vague imitation.

⁹⁴ The issue of *voice* relates to the discussion in chapter 2 regarding the past voices embedded in musical recordings, as well as to an upcoming discussion, toward the end of chapter 5, regarding the voices embedded in a "commodity who speaks."

⁹⁵ Francis Davis illustrates Sun Ra's humorous and dramatic use of his voice as the voice of God in a story of the poet Tam Fiofori, a friend of Sun Ra's, being saved from a police beating in a New York subway station. As the police came upon Fiofori with nightsticks in hand, Fiofori shouted, "Creator, help me," and a deep, disembodied voice – presumably Sun Ra's – loudly sounded: "LEAVE THE MOTHERFUCKER ALONE." At this the police seemed startled and confused, and they left Fiofori alone. Later, when Fiofori expressed surprise that the "Creator" would use such blunt language, Sun Ra replied, "He speaks to each man in his own tongue.... Why would he speak to you in a language that you wouldn't understand?" (1991: 12).

⁹⁶ Though this is an area I have not developed, I do suspect that the numbering of the Discipline compositions has numerological significance; Szwed indicates that Sun Ra's rehearsals were peppered with lectures on personal discipline, black history, etymology, and numerology (1998: 97-98).

The pianist has to be a careful artist. It's like a painter trying to duplicate the work of an old master. He must get every detail and every fine line. Of course, a true artist would not want to duplicate someone else's work, but he would be capable of it (1983: 88).

This method of strict duplication as a means of learning the fine craft of playing music is certainly consistent with the rote method of learning that is common to jazz (e.g., Berliner 1994). When Lyons asks if this rote method is similar to Plato's notion that art begins with imitation Sun Ra responds with a story that illustrates his conception of musical practice as discipline.

A trumpet player, Bill Martin, who was with Count Basie, told me what keys all the instruments were in. I told him I had never done any transposing, and he said it didn't matter, I could do it anyway. So I could, because I didn't know that I wasn't supposed to be able to. I listened. I obeyed my teachers. You might call it faith. That was my discipline (88).

Several important points can be gleaned from this seemingly ordinary exchange. The first is that Sun Ra shows, again, that his intimate familiarity with biblical scripture can be used to extract the moral lesson from the original, recontextualize it, and place it in service of his art. In this case, Sun Ra borrows a passage from the Book of Job which is intended to convey the discipline of consistent faith:

Then he sheweth them their work, and their transgressions that they have exceeded. He openeth also their ear to discipline, and commandeth that they return from iniquity. If they obey and serve him, they shall spend their days in prosperity, and their years in pleasures. But if they obey not, they shall perish by the sword, and they shall die without knowledge (*Bible*: Job 36:9-12).

The passage is then re-contextualized in such a way as to equate his musical practice and intellectual pursuits with the disciplined practice of one's faith. Though this may at first seem to be a conjoining of ideas in order to dutifully fulfill the role of an interviewee, the joining of musical and moral practice is significant in that it implies both the issues of expressive agency and of culturally-based social norms with regard to the hierarchies of

educational relationships. Albert Mosley writes that musical practice across the African diaspora is rooted most firmly in the oral traditions of transmission and expression. As such, African diasporic musics have moral significance with regard to the emphasis they place on the expressive agency of the performers as well as through their strong counter-examples of viable oral-expressive cultures operating within the context of an overarching hegemonic musical culture that emphasizes the use of musical notation (2007: 346-47). In his clear description of the process of learning to play the piano through rote duplication and through a respectful deference to his teachers – expressed, again, in the language of the bible – Sun Ra draws a connection among the intellectual, the moral, and the spiritual.

With Sun Ra these three elements – intellectual, moral, and spiritual – are combined in both his vision of how to live his life as well as his expectations for the people around him, but they are not dogmatically applied to all. Human life, he believed, is based on trial and error, not “precision and discipline” (Theis 1983: 48), proposing that people should learn through apprenticeship with a “master” who deals with discipline. In this sense, discipline is equated with the ascetic lifestyle of monks, denying the body in order to discipline the mind (49). Such a lifestyle is descriptive of how Sun Ra organized his own life, and also of the life he expected of his musicians. When asked by one interviewer how he approached working with musicians, Sun Ra laid out his long-term expectations.

Each one among us has different potential. The problem is, who is going to allow them to develop? Also, it is essential to always be there, always present. It is possible that nothing will happen for two or three years, but it is important that they be there when I decide that the moment has come. He must have patience and, also, other things that on this planet are hard to define.... Nobody reaches full development, and my goal is not to push them to such a degree of

development because they would stop, because that would be death. What is important is that the potentialities are eternal. It is less important where you are now...you must never stop. When you have an experience that you have never had before, new possibilities appear. You open your eyes, you see and you smell new things. The world cannot hear what we can do, we have made so many things.... In the United States, for years, we have rehearsed six hours a day. Today as well, I rehearsed without stopping. In the course of a single rehearsal I manage to compose two pieces, sometimes ten. And it's necessary to write each part for each musician and his instrument. If his instrument does not project the right sound, I must re-write it or give his part to someone else and write a new one for him. All of this must be balanced delicately. Many musicians are incapable of staying in this band.... They always talk of freedom.... What is important in this band is to play in a way that progresses toward new possibilities. I say this to musicians, but I tell them so much that they can't comprehend it all. If there isn't this progression, what does it serve to play music? (Carles 1972: 11-12)

Sun Ra, then, equates discipline with freedom: the means by which a person may progress as an artist and a person in order to attain a more thoroughly creative practice. The corollary of this freedom is also present in the passage, implying that the lack of disciplined practice in life is equivalent to death. Asked by another interviewer how he views humanity, he replied, "Well, they don't have any discipline. They always talking about freedom, but they don't demonstrate they're free 'cause they bow to death all the time. Since they do die they are not free" (Rusch 1984: 65). The idea of discipline, then, is not just one of musical practice, but of the conduct of one's life – the moral and spiritual elements from above.

In another interview, Sun Ra expands on the idea of strict discipline in learning and practice, drawing attention to the importance of grounding one's practice in an awareness of one's cultural and artistic heritage.

In the army it is necessary to learn discipline. Then, on the battlefield, when confronted with something completely different from what one has learned, he can improvise. This is necessary, urgent even. If one is not capable of finding another way to do something, one is not a good soldier. Discipline must permit one to find the most natural way to do things. Without this base, total freedom is impossible. Everything needs roots. The stronger they are, the stronger the plant

is, the more pure the mineral elements are that it takes from the soil. It is the same with men: they think that they must be in contact with their most ancient roots. They often believe that they must tear out their roots, but this is not true (Carles 1973: 24).

In this example, Sun Ra directly acknowledges the cultural particularity of African diasporic knowledge, referring to the roots that nurture and provide a base – a tabletop – on which information, from whatever source available, can be considered, interpreted, arranged, and incorporated.

African Egypt: A retelling of the book of Exodus:

But returning to the interview with Lyons quoted above, another interesting aspect is revealed when Sun Ra corrects Lyons when he asks if Sun Ra's conception of musical practice is similar to Plato's conception of art. Though Sun Ra had been an avid reader of Egyptology since the 1940s, he was particularly influenced by the writings of George James with regard to the relationship between ancient Egypt and Western Civilization (Szwed 1998: 71). In his book *Stolen legacy*, the primary thesis of James's work is that the philosophical writings usually attributed to the Greek philosophers were often, in fact, plagiarized works taken from the Alexandrian Library after Alexander the Great's invasion and occupation of Egypt in the 4th Century BC (2001 [1954]: 2). Though James's work has been roundly ignored and often attacked, some of his contentions, particularly with regard to the pre-Socratic philosophers, have come to be widely accepted, even if not attributed to James (Bernal 1987: 75-115). In his book James discusses the issue of discipline with regard to Pythagoras's doctrine of the process of purification through the use of intellectual and artistic discipline.

The harmony and purification of the soul is attained, not only by virtue, but also by other means, the most important among them being the cultivation of the intellect through the pursuit of scientific knowledge and strict bodily discipline. In

the process, music also held an important place. The Pythagoreans believed and taught that just as medicine is used to cure the body, so music must be used to cure the soul. (2001 [1954]: 57-8)

James later locates this use of the arts in attaining discipline and purification within the educational curriculum which is outlined in various ancient Egyptian texts and which is later identified with Aristotle (131-37). The irony embedded in the rhetoric of those who dismiss James's thesis, though, is that the sources of some of Pythagoras's and Plato's writings have since been accepted as being of Egyptian origin. The section of Plato's *Republic* that sets the order of the celestial spheres, for instance, is now known to have been previously attributed to Philolaus (c.470 BC), Pythagoras (c.525 BC), and before that the Egyptian philosopher known by the Greek name Hermes Trismegistus, whose dates are unknown, identified in its 1657 English translation as having been written some time "after Moses" (Trismegistus 1657: 2; Yates 1964: 127).⁹⁷ With this connection in mind, Sun Ra's correction of his interviewer has the added significance of implying that his ideas do not originate with the philosophy of the Greeks (Plato) but can, rather, be traced to their African origins and their African-descendant cultural practices. This may be a subtle and possibly obscure point, but with all things Sun Ra it leads to a much wider field of knowledge: a discussion of piano practice becomes a broader discourse on the Bible, European philosophy, and History with a capital H.

The Egyptian origins of Western philosophy in particular, and the history of Western civilization in general, are present throughout Sun Ra's many writings and compositions, most prominently in his seeking to revisit and re-contextualize the biblical

⁹⁷ Baraka also mentions Trismegistus in the poem "Black dada nihilismus" as part of his condemnation of the West's appropriation of African history and culture (Baraka 1964b; 1988: 71-73). Szwed writes that this poem is representative of Sun Ra's intellectual influence on Baraka (1998: 209).

story of Exodus. Returning for a moment to the earlier polemical statement from Sun Ra with regard to the destructiveness of Moses as a mythic-historical figure, it is clear that Sun Ra is not drawing parity between the actions of Moses as expressed in the Bible and the actions of Adolph Hitler in the 20th century. The specific complaint that Sun Ra makes in this interview is that the identification with Moses and the Israelites that is common to African American spiritual beliefs is a revision of history that does not follow from historical facts. Drawing from the historical-philosophical writings of James as well as the historical-archeological writings of Cheikh Anta Diop (1974), Sun Ra concluded that, rather than pursuing a mythical identification with the plight of the Israelites, African Americans would be better suited to identify with what he saw as their true historical relationship with African Egypt. The composition “I Pharaoh” (Sun Ra 1994c) illustrates Sun Ra’s identification with Pharaoh instead of with the Israelites as well as his re-contextualization of the Biblical story of Moses in which Pharaoh becomes the heroic figure while Moses becomes the destroyer.

Once I dwelt in Egypt land
Once I dwelt in Egypt land
Once I dwelt in ancient Egypt
When the world was young
There was always springtime in the air
There was Heaven in everything
I remember when I walked beside the Nile
In ancient Egypt.

One first notices the connection between this song and the spiritual titled “Go Down, Moses”: “When Moses was in Egypt land, Let my people go” (Johnson, Johnson, and Brown 2002 [1925]: 51). Sun Ra’s composition, though, re-writes the narrative from the vantage point of Pharaoh. While the song “Go Down, Moses” enters the Biblical narrative in the Book of Exodus where Moses is asked by God to lead the Israelites out of

Egypt (*Bible*: Exodus 3) and then famously confronts Pharaoh – “Moses and Aaron went in, and told Pharaoh, Thus saith the LORD God of Israel, Let my people go, that they may hold a feast unto me in the wilderness” (*Bible*: Exodus 5:1) – Sun Ra chooses to emphasize an earlier book in which Pharaoh orders his people to store food against an impending famine:

And let them gather all the food of those good years that come, and lay up corn under the hand of Pharaoh, and let them keep food in the cities. And that food shall be for store to the land against the seven years of famine, which shall be in the land of Egypt; that the land perish not through the famine. And the thing was good in the eyes of Pharaoh, and in the eyes of all his servants. (*Bible*: Genesis 41:35-7)

In “I Pharaoh” Sun Ra sings, “I’m the Pharaoh who fed the world for seven years,” identifying himself with Pharaoh through the use of the first person *I* and through listing the virtuous aspects of the Pharaoh that are often not emphasized.

I was Pharaoh then
I’m the Pharaoh who fed the world
for seven years
[musician calls: Pharaoh]
You’ve heard of me
I fed the world
for seven years...
For centuries

The duality of the Biblical story of Pharaoh – Pharaoh the provider in Genesis and Pharaoh the oppressor in Exodus – is the complicating factor that causes Sun Ra to note that the story of Moses is not a simple story of escaping oppression, being complicated by the question of what one leaves behind in abandoning Egypt. That the story of Moses as an important allegory in African American spiritual beliefs is not in dispute; much of Sun Ra’s narrative production involves an Exodus, of sorts, to outer space, echoing the connection many African Americans made between the story of Exodus and the spiritual

desire for deliverance, reflected again in the 20th century migration out of the South. But Sun Ra's narrative in "I Pharaoh" questions this allegorical connection by emphasizing that which is abandoned – a rhetorical dynamic that Wilson Moses describes in modern Afrocentrism as a focusing on the "high cultural" aspects of ancient Egypt as both a reaction to the racist contention that Africans have no culture as well as a rejection of the "crass cultural formulations" often promoted as evidence of a distinct culture (Moses 1998: 234).

Additionally, Sun Ra personalizes his connection to Pharaoh through a reference to his own name in stating that "there was Heaven in everything" (1980): the Egyptian Sun God Re/Ra was said to be the King of the heavens, with an all-seeing eye – literally the sun – which infused all plants and animals with life (Wilkinson 2003: 206). The name Sun Ra, though it had several earlier versions such as Le Sony'r Ra, can most clearly be traced to his identification with the Egyptian sun deity known by its general name Re. Ra is an alternative spelling of the name of the Egyptian deity commonly attributed to E.A. Wallis Budge's translation of *The Egyptian book of the dead* which was an influential book in Sun Ra's evolving conception of history (Szwed 1998: 65; Budge 2001). Interestingly, the words Re and Ra are also musical terms derived from the Western practice of solfege, or sight singing.⁹⁸ Re is both the natural second and the natural ninth interval, while Ra is a chromatically flatted second or ninth. In jazz the chromatically

⁹⁸ My use of solfege as a metaphor in this section is not related to any reference that Sun Ra made to solfege in a published essay or interview. It is fair to assume, I believe, that Sun Ra was introduced to solfege as a means of learning to sight sing notation at some point during his musical training. In an interview with Primack (1978) Sun Ra briefly discussed his studies with Prof. Lula Hopkins Randall, a classically trained pianist, while at Alabama A&M, taking classes in harmony and composition and learning to play piano pieces by Bach, Haydn, Mozart, etc. Given that Sun Ra had this brief period of training – a type of training that uses solfege to teach some of its fundamental skills in musicianship – and given his penchant for etymological word play, I believe that the musical meanings of Re, Ri, and Ra would have been clearly understood.

lowered 9th interval as well as the chromatically raised 9th – with its solfege name Ri – have become standard harmonic colorations since the Bebop-era, used to add a dissonant quality to dominant chords at points of dramatic tension.⁹⁹ In Sun Ra’s words, “Some call me Mr. Ra. Some call me Mr. Ri¹⁰⁰. Some call me Mr. Mystery” (Mugge 1980). His connection with his name, in my reading, is a connection with the altered intervals of jazz harmony as well as it is a connection with the Egyptian sun deity. That Sun Ra would choose his name based on both the spelling drawn from Budge – a book which is widely criticized for its mistranslations as well as its mystical orientation – as well as a commonly used chromatically “altered” musical interval is characteristic of his playfully Signifyin(g) nature, truly shaking a linguistic sign until a number of competing signified meanings come loose and yet remain in orbit.¹⁰¹

But the Egyptian deity Re, among its many forms, was known for its omniscient presence on earth, playing a central role in the growth of crops and the provision of light (Wilkinson 2003: 206). In “I Pharaoh” Sun Ra emphasizes the role of Pharaoh in the provision of food to the known world as well as Pharaoh’s non-discrimination regarding who was fed.

I did *not* discriminate
 I fed the rich
 I fed the poor
 I fed the wicked
 I fed the righteous
 I fed the good
 I fed the evil

⁹⁹ See Appendix 2 for further description of altered harmonic intervals and their solfege syllables.

¹⁰⁰ This is my transcription of Sun Ra’s words, and so I have chosen the spelling Ri (as opposed to *Ree*, for instance) to emphasize my point. Szwed uses the spelling Re, but this could just as easily be pronounced *ray* (Szwed 1998: 83). In solfege practice the syllable Re is pronounced *rā* (as in ray), and the syllable Ri is pronounced *rē* (as in reed).

¹⁰¹ For a quick rundown of Derrida’s loosening of the Sign, see p.2, note 2.

I Pharaoh fed everyone

Again, laying aside the Biblical portrayal of Pharaoh as the oppressor, the emphasis in this passage is placed on the productivity and the sharing of resources that the Egyptian version of history portrays. As such, Sun Ra is providing commentary not only on what he views as the obscured (altered) history of ancient Egypt; he also creates a metaphorical representation of the oppressive conditions of modernity in which there is massive production of resources coupled with an inequitable distribution of those resources. In a sense, Sun Ra alludes to aspects of the consumerist discourse of freedom discussed earlier, proposing a moral critique of the accumulation of capital that steps one or two feet beyond Marx, proposed, as it is, from the perspective of the “commodity who speaks” – a perspective Marx could not have imagined.¹⁰²

Though the example of the composition “I Pharaoh” suggests a larger discussion of the themes of Exodus, migration, and spiritual belief, what is most salient to the current discussion is the way in which Sun Ra engages this story as a means of proposing a historical counternarrative. “I Pharaoh” questions the historical veracity of the dominant interpretations of Exodus and illuminates its function as an ideological narrative, asking its listeners to consider what is abandoned in the act of flight. Whether the new truth that Sun Ra proposes in “I Pharaoh” is factually verifiable or politically and culturally clarifying is not as interesting a question, though, as is the matrix of ideas and associations created in Sun Ra’s Signifyin(g) upon the story of Exodus – a story that has become a central theme in African American church traditions. This re-telling and re-

¹⁰² This issue of the “commodity who speaks” is discussed further in chapter 5, p.176.

interpretation, as much as with his use of traditional musical materials, identifies Sun Ra as Esu within the African-diasporic storytelling tradition as outlined by Gates:

Linguistically Esu is the ultimate copula, connecting truth with understanding, the sacred with the profane, text with interpretation, the word (as a form of the verb *to be*) that links a subject with its predicate (Gates 1988: 6).

Given this rhetorical framework, then, Sun Ra functions as both aspects of the trickster figure – Esu Elegbara standing for the figure of writing, and the signifying monkey standing for orality – in that he combines both the written and the oral in a manner that complicates, broadens, and deepens our conception of what is true and what is myth. To Sun Ra, there is no fine line between the two; all history is myth and is therefore open to interpretation. What Sun Ra proposes is not a definitive new interpretation of Exodus, but rather a different and more complex interpretation which asks its listeners to more closely consider the act of flight in the discourses which contain those things (unknown) that lie ahead as well as those things (unconsidered) that were left behind.

Sun Ra's spirituals: The flying narratives of the African Atlantic:

But the trope of flight in Sun Ra's work – escape in the case of Moses – extends beyond his interpretation of Exodus, Signifyin(g) upon the music of the Southern African American church as well as upon the African diasporic myths of flight. Folk narratives of flying are common throughout black populations in the Southern United States and in the Caribbean, having been established as a means of dealing with the psychologically and spiritually damaging conditions of slavery. Sun Ra's consistent reference to the themes of exodus, flying, and outer space are purposeful narratives that borrow from and signify upon the flying narratives in a manner that is meant to re-form and recontextualize

African American folk culture. The resulting creations are narratives that infuse new meaning into existent material and propose new directions for the audience.

As an example, Lock notes not only a rhetorical similarity between the recorded sermons of Rev. A.W. Nix, a Baptist preacher who may have occasionally preached at the Tabernacle Baptist Church in Birmingham that Sun Ra attended as a child (Lock 1999: 31) and who moved to Chicago in 1921 (Nix 1995),¹⁰³ but also notes thematic similarities between Nix's recording of his sermon "The White Flyer to Heaven" and Sun Ra's "Space chants – A medley." In his sermon Rev. Nix evokes a celestial image of ascension that, while not accurate as to the position of the planets,¹⁰⁴ is evocative of the biblical struggle "against spiritual wickedness in high places" (*Bible*: Ephesians 6:12):

Higher and higher! Higher and higher!
We'll pass on to the Second Heaven
The starry decked Heaven, and view the flying stars and dashing meteors
And then pass on by Mars and Mercury, and Jupiter and Venus
And Saturn and Uranus, and Neptune with her four glittering moons (Nix 1995)

The "White Flyer" itself is a train bound for heaven on which "God is the engineer, The Holy Ghost is the headlight, and Jesus is the conductor. It departs when Jesus cries, 'All aboard for heaven!'" Nix indicates at the beginning of the sermon that The White Flyer is based on Matthew 7:14: "Because straight is the gate, and narrow is the way, which leadeth unto life, and few there will be that find it." As is common in many blues songs, the train here is the vector of escape and deliverance, carrying its passengers down the narrow path and over the horizon to a place that is sure to be free (Baker 1984: 11).

¹⁰³ David Evans's liner notes.

¹⁰⁴ Travelling from Earth outward, one would encounter, in order of distance, Mars, Jupiter, Saturn, Uranus, Neptune, and Pluto. Venus and Mercury are closer to the sun.

Sun Ra's version of the ascension is not, in this instance, immediately rooted in a biblical reference to the Books of Ephesians or Matthew, but it follows a similar path to that of Nix. In the performance "Space chant" that was released on the album *Sun Ra and his Year 2000 Myth Science Arkestra Live in London* (1996), there is a progression of narrative and a fervor that is, in many ways, similar to that of Nix's sermon.¹⁰⁵ "Space chant" is a title that was often given to a medley of pre-existing compositions usually performed at the end of a concert, strung together against a static harmonic center much like the plateau modal structures discussed in chapter 2. The "Space chant" from 1991 is a medley of seven compositions, all originally recorded either in a studio or in concert between 1960 and 1980¹⁰⁶: "Space is the place" (1971); "We travel the spaceways" (1960); "Next stop Mars" (1963); "Saturn rings" (1980); "On Jupiter" (1979); "Rocket number nine take off for the planet Venus" (1960); and "Destination unknown" (1974).¹⁰⁷ Taking these compositions all together, and considering the dates of their earliest recorded performances, they imply, if you follow Lock's comparison between "Space chant" and the spirituals, that Sun Ra's compositions existed in a close relationship with the spirituals from fairly early in his career as a composer.

¹⁰⁵ For a full lyric transcription of "Space chants," see Appendix 3.

¹⁰⁶ The listing of the seven compositions in "Space chants" from Lock's liner notes to the CD *Live in London 1990* (Sun Ra 1996), which is repeated in Campbell and Trent (1994: 657), has the composition "Second stop is Jupiter" (1960) instead of "Rocket number nine take off for the planet Venus." I have changed the listing of the compositions because of the prominence of the lyrics to "Rocket number nine take off for the planet Venus" in my own transcription, and because Campbell and Trent list "Second stop is Jupiter" as being part of "Rocket number nine take off for the planet Venus," and not as a separate composition (1994: 85). "Rocket number nine take off for the planet Venus" was first released on the album *Interstellar low ways* (Sun Ra 1967) and was later released with the shortened title "Rocket number nine" on the album *Space is the place* (Sun Ra 1973).

¹⁰⁷ The years listed for these compositions indicate the year in which they first appeared on a recording, either official or unofficial, as they are listed in Campbell and Trent (1994). Often, compositions are listed as appearing on an unofficial concert tape made by a sound engineer or an audience member before they are listed on a commercially released album or CD. These unofficial recordings sometimes provide a more accurate picture of when a composition was created and first performed than an officially released LP.

Thematically, within the performance of “Space chant,” there are some connections to be made to both Nix’s sermon and some common spirituals. Lock notes a similarity between some lyrics from the composition “Destination unknown” and the spiritual “The old ship of Zion”:

You haven’t met the captain of the spaceship yet.
You’re on the spaceship Earth,
And you’re outward bound,
Destination unknown.
You better pay your fare now.
You’ll get left behind.
You’ll be left hanging,
In the empty air.
You won’t be here,
And you won’t be there (Sun Ra 1996, 1994a).

King Jesus is her captain, Hallelujah!
O get your ticket ready, Hallelujah!
She is coming in the harbor, Hallelujah!
She will land you safe in heaven, Hallelujah! (Katz 1969: 96)

Both of these compositions list a form of transport as a means of deliverance to a place of redemption and promise. Both share a commonality with Nix’s White Flyer in that the promised transport is the only assured way to travel down the narrow path to their extraterrestrial destination. In both “The old ship of Zion” and “The White Flyer to Heaven” Jesus has a corporeal role in their transport: the captain of the ship to Zion, and the conductor of the White Flyer. Though Sun Ra does not identify the captain of the Spaceship Earth, he does remind the audience that they haven’t met the captain yet. In a performance of “Saturn rings” which was recorded in 1980 – a composition that comprised part of another “Space chant” medley – Sun Ra announced, “I am Sun Ra, the Lord of the Saturn rings,” with James Jackson responding, “Who put those rings around Saturn?” (Campbell and Trent 1994: 317). While not identifying himself as the captain of

a vessel, this line does place Sun Ra in a position of authority with regard to space travel. It is interesting to note here, as Lawrence Levine has done with spirituals, that God and Jesus in these narratives are corporeal beings with which passengers have a relationship, an aspect of African American spirituality that both Levine and Sterling Stuckey identify as being distinctly African (Levine 1977: 37; Stuckey 1987: 24).

In addition to the themes of extraterrestrial travel that exist in “Space chant” and in “The old ship of Zion,” there is also a connection to be made to the business transaction of gaining access to transport. In both compositions there is a ticket to be purchased; one assumes that the price of the ticket is not monetary, but rather a spiritual reckoning, rewarding the passengers’ act of faith with access to a spiritually and materially improved existence. Sun Ra makes the further step of identifying the transport as a commercialized form of transport – Outer Spaceways Incorporated in “We travel the spaceways” (1996, 1966) – which is reminiscent of Marcus Garvey’s Black Star shipping line of the 1920s: a black owned and operated business venture that, in part, promised its passengers a return to a home they had never visited (Cronon 1969).

This last observation is crucial to making a further connection between Sun Ra’s themes of space travel/exodus and the folkloric “flying” narratives that are found throughout the African diaspora. An important argument of this dissertation is that the folkloric content of the music and broader discourses of the African Atlantic is often masked by the discourses of futurism and modernity, space travel acting as a metaphor for Exodus which acts as a metaphor for emigration/return, etc.¹⁰⁸ In the case of Sun Ra,

¹⁰⁸ This is one among many themes of writers who posit the idea of Afrofuturism. Mark Dery broadly defines Afrofuturism with regard to black creative deployment of technological themes in literature, music,

narratives that most often present themselves as future oriented – a social order that *will be*, set in outer space – and narratives that tell of the (primarily Egyptian) past are, in fact, revisions of the past phrased in the language of folk traditions. Levine, paraphrasing Mircea Eliade, provides a telling description of African American sacred expression, characterizing it as an enactment of one’s perceived physical proximity to spirits and the spiritual world.

[For] people in traditional societies religion is a means of extending the world spatially upward so that communication with the other world becomes ritually possible, and extending it temporally backward so that the paradigmatic acts of the gods and mythical ancestors can be continually re-enacted and indefinitely recoverable. By creating sacred time and space, Man can perpetually live in the presence of his gods, can hold on to the certainty that within one’s own lifetime “re-birth” is continually possible, and can impose order on the chaos of the universe (Levine 1977: 31-32; Eliade 1959).

Spirituality, then, is a vehicle for travel, even if, in the Western sense, no physical travel is achieved. Those who enter into the narrative – both the performers and the audience – are brought along in a radical act of (re)imagination, ideally achieving a sense of *communitas* through their dialogic participation in the narrative Text..

Following from this, one can begin to see Sun Ra’s narratives of flight and Exodus as related to the common themes of flying and escape that are disbursed throughout the folklore of the African Atlantic. More than a syncretic reinterpretation of the Bible’s story of Exodus, a class of African-derived folktales have been identified throughout the Americas and the Caribbean in which Africans and their descendants are said to have flown back home, “refusing to endure the harsh conditions in the slave quarters and transmigrating to Africa” (Rice 2003: 88). In this imaginative exercise of

and art, concerning itself with “African-American signification that appropriates images of technology and a prosthetically enhanced future” (1994: 180).

freedom – freedom of the mind and spirit while the body may remain in captivity – the middle passage then becomes “more than a one way trip between the decks of a dirty slave ship” (Cohn and Platzer 1978: xiii-xiv). In this manner, expressive culture acted as a means of rebellion and escape.

Slave resistance was often cultural as well as political: the resistance of a people to being swallowed up by a foreign way of life. In this case resistance may be understood as a refusal to abandon one’s values and traditions as well as – at another more familiar level – singular acts ranging from quiet sabotage to organizing and fighting back (Mullin 1992: 2).

Levine notes that folk beliefs provided a “sense of group identification, but they had another dimension as well: they actually offered the slaves sources of power and knowledge alternative to those existing within the world of the master class” (Levine 1977: 63). As such, the flying narratives and their derivatives (travel by road or water is also escape/flight) became a culturally determined means of spiritual and psychological, if not physical, resistance, acting as – and this is crucial to understanding Sun Ra’s emphasis of study – an important source of knowledge, historical narrative, and counter-mythology. Mythic stories of escape are particularly strong in the Caribbean as in the example of Haiti. Courlander writes of the Haitian story of “the water road” in which the phrase “under the water” does not necessarily mean under but, rather, through. The *loa*, Haitian water deities, live under the water of lakes and rivers and provide a spiritual link between Haiti and the continent of Africa (1960: 69-71). Courlander notes here a generalized importance of water to spiritual beliefs in West Africa that he borrows from Herskovits (1960: 71; Herskovits 1958: 233).

But most narratives of escape involve flying rather than water transport. In a well known narrative of slavery, Esteban Montejo describes how his fellow captives “escaped

by flying. They flew through the sky and returned to their own lands. The Masundi Congolese were the ones who flew the most; they disappeared by witchcraft” (1968: 43-44). McDaniel writes about the survival of a number of flying myths associated with the folklore of the Carriacou Big Drum ceremony (McDaniel 1998: 2).¹⁰⁹ Borrowing from Lorne Marshall’s novel, *Praisesong for the widow*, McDaniel connects the various tales of flying that she identified in Carriacouan folklore with the story of Ibo’s Landing from South Carolina which Marshall’s narrator Avey Johnson first heard from her great aunt Cuney (Marshall 1983: 37-40). While the story of Ibo’s landing is not, strictly speaking, a story of flying – the Ibo captives walk across the water on their way back to Africa – a strong connection can be made between this story and similar stories in which Africans, finding themselves held in captivity, absent themselves from the material world through either an act of self-sacrifice, as in the frequent acts of suicide during the Middle Passage, or through an imaginative and spiritual removal of oneself from the material realities of the moment. Throughout Marshall’s novel characters frequently “fly” away from their troubles in a number of different acts, large and small. Avey Johnson’s husband would

¹⁰⁹ McDaniel has an extended quote from (Edwards 1793: 76) regarding the “melancholy” nature of Igbo slaves in the Caribbean (McDaniel 1998: 56). This is central to the connection that she makes between the story of Ibo’s Landing and the folklore of the Caribbean. In checking this citation I could not find any reference to Igbo or to the nature of Africans in general. The section surrounding the cited page does, however, discuss the “fearful” nature of native Carib spiritual practices and their effects upon the psychic well being of the participants (Edwards 1793: 73-77). But despite the obnoxious nature of Edwards’s narrative, and despite the fact that I cannot locate the cited passage, Carib people were not African and so their social demeanor has little bearing on the discussion of the myth of the flying Africans. That being said, the Flying Africans myth certainly exists in Grenada (Carriacou is part of the nation of Grenada). In a very telling instance of African-descendant symbolic communication, Julien Fédon, the leader of the late-18th century Grenadian slave rebellion, left a message for the remaining slave population upon his escape to Cuba by nailing a compass to the bottom of his canoe. The message, drawing upon Congolese symbols of power, indicated “the certainty of reincarnation: the especially righteous person will never be destroyed but will come back in the name or progeny, or in the form of an everlasting pool, waterfall, stone, or mountain” (Jacobs 2000: 41).

return from work at the end of the day and listen to jazz and blues on the record player in order to relieve the stress and indignities of work (94) – one of the records being the Lionel Hampton composition “Flying home” (123).¹¹⁰ Avey attempts to stave off the on-coming effects of seasickness by closing her eyes and letting her mind “float” to a remembrance of a sermon she heard as a girl (197-203). A short while later the crowding of the boat and the seasickness that she couldn’t avoid cause her to experience a memory of the horrible conditions and the misery of the slave ships of the Middle Passage (209).

But while Marshall separates the belief system associated with the story of Ibo’s Landing from the church practice of the Ring Shout (33-34), Alan Rice draws a connection between dance, the Ibo’s Landing myth, and baptism as it is practiced in Southern African American church traditions. Combining these elements that are most often separated into the realms of sacred and secular, Rice states that together they indicate the Africanization of Christianity through their emphasis on performativity and emotional intensity (2003: 97-98). In Marshall’s narrative her great-aunt Cuney was thrown out of a church Ring Shout performance for momentarily “crossing her feet” in a fit of dancing that was contrary to the aesthetic of the Ring Shout’s foot shuffle. Though the Ring Shout and dancing are supposed to be separate, exclusive practices, Avey notes that to her Ring Shout “felt like dancing in her blood” (34-35). Similarly, Stuckey writes about the ecstatic leaps associated with the Christian practices of slaves through Ring Shout performance. Noting its creolized African cultural origins, Stuckey quotes from a white observer in New Orleans in the 1850s who describes a scene in which Africans

¹¹⁰ Randy Weston notes that “Flying home” was one of the tunes he played as a member of Lionel Hampton’s backing band during a 1961 trip to Nigeria with the American Society of African Culture (Weston and Jenkins 2010: 105). This was also the trip during which Weston first met Fela.

repeated short passages of scripture and danced in a counter-clockwise circle with individual participants periodically leaping into the air and fanning their limbs (Stuckey 1987: 54; Bremer 1924: 276-77). Stuckey likens this scene to the practices of the sanctified church that cause the congregation to begin rocking with the rising spirit of the ceremony, the authenticity of the event being measured by the emotive quality of the service and the congregation (Stuckey 1987: 55; Baldwin 1963: 49-50).

It is the ecstatic leaping/flying of these ceremonies that Rice identifies as a symbolic act of liberation which indicates a freedom of mind and spirit even while the body may not be free (2003: 98). Eric Lott notes a similar dynamic in 19th century black minstrel show performers – borrowing a quote from Herbie Hancock discussing contemporary break dancers – who attained temporary escape “by the superior power of grace and invention” from the hostile dominant society that was designed to “drain every atom of life and feeling” out of them (1993: 43). In the act of performance the dancers maintain ownership over the expressivity of their moves while demonstrating their freedom from Earthly restrictions. Commenting on the emotional substance of church performance, Stuckey writes of the subversive nature of black spiritual expression:

The community in which the celebrant attains such a [passionate] state basically rejects the authority of those who exercise control over it, since outbursts of general fervor, followed by the incapacitation of some worshipers through possession and convulsions, challenge the master’s sense of discipline (1987: 56).

Other writers have made similar observations with regard to the social-political aspects of popular music performance in black communities. Kelley describes “urban dance halls [as] places to recuperate, to take back their bodies” (1994: 169), as is the case with the earlier example of Avey Marshall’s husband’s after work music listening habits. Also, as was discussed in chapter 2, Erlmann has noted a similar dynamic among South African

workers in the weekend competitions between isicathamiya choral groups, constructing an alternative public sphere as a means of escape from the work week and the depredations of Apartheid (1996b).

Lock has noted that Sun Ra's performances were often a form of the same ecstatic Ring Shout ceremony which brought the performers and the audience together in a communal space, creating both a moment of catharsis as well as historical reenactment of the Middle Passage, slavery, and escape (1999: 39-41). The final scene of Mugge's film *Sun Ra: A joyful noise* (1980) shows much of the band dancing in a counter-clockwise circle in front of the stage. While Sun Ra, several rhythm section players, and three horn players continue to play a repetitive riff, John Gilmore chants, "Travel the spaceways/From planet to planet." The dancers sing a repetitive, descending line while they dance, and at a certain beat in every passage leap into the air and then dance forward again. This scene repeats until Sun Ra finishes playing his organ, comes down off the stage, and then leads the group through the audience and out the back of the concert hall. The scene in its entirety is crucial to gaining an understanding of the manner and the method of transmission of cultural and historical information through performance: the performance is a reenactment of a remembered past which is not a part of the dominant historical narrative. In this way, the music combines with its performance and the participation of the audience in order to form the true Text of the composition, speaking to and through the audience, performers, and the composer(s), whether physically present or not. This compositional process which seeks to express the cultural memory of performers and audience of the African Atlantic will be central to the broader discussion of chapter 5; it is the fundamental connection that this dissertation seeks to make between

the composing of music and the determination of narrative Text through the examples of Sun Ra and Fela Anikulapo-Kuti within the discursive space of the African Atlantic.

CHAPTER 4 – “TEACHER DON’T TEACH ME NONSENSE”: FELA AND THE DISCOURSES OF AFROBEAT

Long long long long time ago
Long time ago
Before they come force us away as slaves
Long time ago
During the time they come force us away as slaves
Long time ago
The European man na him dey carry shit
Long time ago
Na for them culture to carry shit
Long time ago
During the time them come colonize us
Long time ago
Them come teach us to carry shit
Long time ago
Long long long long time ago
Long time ago

“I.T.T. (International Thief Thief)”

“Our Yoruba tradition is a very modern tradition”¹¹¹: Fela and West African cosmopolitanism:

In his retrospective essay titled “The social background of the Black Arts Movement,” Larry Neal posed the question, “suppose James Brown read Frantz Fanon?” (1987: 18). Certainly the act of speculating about the type of political artist that would be created by such a combination of musical sensibility and explicitly articulated politics can be fascinating as an exercise in historical revision – imagine a game of Fantasy Baseball played with musicians and political theorists instead of athletes. But this sort of imaginative exercise also serves as a kind of critical shorthand in the task of trying to describe an artist who doesn’t fit neatly into any of the more readily available categories

¹¹¹ A quote from *jùjú* musician Joshua Olufemi in (Waterman 1990b: 378).

of artists. Michael Veal quoted this very line from Neal as part of the biographer's task of trying to succinctly characterize Fela's vast yet distinctive body of work (2000: 241) – a challenging task given the freely creative borrowing and adaptation of materials and procedures that characterizes modern music. Veal describes Afrobeat as “a heavily politicized, African-American influenced variant of the Nigerian dance-band highlife tradition,” proposing alternatively that it is also “a ‘re-Africanized’ form of African-American funk music” (11). Elsewhere he writes that “Fela combines the autocratic band-leading style and dancing agility of James Brown, the mystical inclinations of Sun Ra, the polemicism of Malcolm X, and the harsh, insightful satire of Richard Pryor” (4). Similarly, Tejumola Olaniyan describes Afrobeat as “a fusion of indigenous Yoruba rhythms and declamatory chants, highlife, jazz, and the funky soul of James Brown,” significantly placing the use of Yoruba musical materials – and implying an overarching Yoruba musical sensibility – before the examples of Western and Western-influenced musics (2004: 32).

But the very task of trying to neatly define any contemporary artist's conceptions of composition and performance highlights the aesthetic challenge of modernity brought about by the globalization of trade and communication. As Peter Linebaugh has suggested, the long-playing record is one of the most important conduits of African diasporic communication, allowing for the hand-to-hand trading of musical ideas across space in much the same way as black sailors distributed Pan-Africanist literature in African, European, and American ports (1982: 119). In the space created by the cultural displacement of modernity one finds, even still, a remarkable consistency between the intent of the original performance, the reception of the disembodied performance, and the

subsequent new composition and performance based upon the newly received musical materials: for example, the audio inscription of a musical performance in a recording studio in the Southern United States, distributed globally as an inscribed “product,” and ultimately played on a turntable in Nigeria where it is finally heard. Though the music may serve a new purpose, the repetitive, percussive rhythms and modal harmonic structures of James Brown’s recorded music, for instance, exist in Fela’s music in a syncretic form that is easily recognizable to anyone who is familiar with Brown’s music. The primary question – or rather one question expressed as a typical binary – is whether this syncretism exists because James Brown played African music, or whether it exists because Fela felt a particular affinity for Brown’s version of African American soul. The answer to this Janus-faced question, of course, is that, given the hybrid nature of cultural exchange, both sides of the question are simultaneously true. George Lipsitz’s concept of a “poetics of place” – a sense of place embedded in the music which continues to represent the specificity of places long after the music has moved on to an uninscribed space – indicates that both Nigeria and the United States are present in both James Brown’s and Fela’s music; the frequent and multi-directional exchanges of cultural production ensure that both places are present in the work of both artists, consciously and unconsciously interacting with each other and with others (Lipsitz 1997: 3-5).

This chapter will highlight the musical and political development of Fela’s compositional and performative styles, paying particular attention to the free borrowing and passing-on of both “traditional” and non-traditional aspects of Nigerian expressive cultures. Olaniyan writes of Fela’s desire to create a politically charged yet “‘authentic’ postcolonial music,” adopting the guise of a “cosmopolitan nativist.” To this end, Fela

freely borrowed musical materials and practices, political concepts, and aspects of identity from various African and European sources in a manner that leaped past “postcolonial musical modernity” to become more broadly signifying of “postcolonial modernity” – a type of hybridity or *créolité* “best theorized as an aporia pulling together two or more apparently contradictory paradigms. In a condition of aporia, social and political action can only be contingent and continuously subject to revision; only a full affirmation of this in both thought and praxis can make aporia enabling” (2004: 158). But rather than saddling Fela’s cosmopolitan fashioning of music and identity with a strictly European theoretical framework, Olaniyan seems to be following, even if in an unacknowledged manner, Gates’s contention that Esu is the Yoruba deity aporia, likening Esu’s “double-voiced utterances” to the deconstructionist practice of avoiding or evading the closed reading of texts, instead producing a “double, aporetic logic” more akin to the open, dialogic nature of African diasporic performative composition (Gates 1988: 40; Culler 1982: 109). Fela’s version of Afrobeat is one among many aporetic genres of music in the African Atlantic.

While Afrobeat is a very distinct and personal musical genre that clearly sets itself apart from others both by style and by substance,¹¹² it is also an amalgamation of the various styles of highlife, jazz, and funk Fela had played and interacted with over the years. But identifying these “background” musics – highlife, jazz and funk – does not provide nearly enough of a nuanced description of the web of cultural practices implied by these three stylistic labels. In an attempt to draw a more depthful, even if less clearly defined (and more aporetic), picture of Fela’s music and its presence in African Atlantic

¹¹² Other genres of Nigerian popular music include *jùjú*, *fùjì*, and *àpàlà*. For overviews of these various genres see (Omojola 2006; Waterman 1990a; Klein 2007; Bender 1991).

discourses, this chapter will begin with an overview of Fela's musical practice, highlighting both the historical development of each style as it relates to Fela's music as well as its relationship to West African and African diasporic musical practices.

But Afrobeat is most often distinguished from other styles of music not only for musical reasons but for its political content and its simultaneous concern with Nigeria (place) and the African diaspora (space). Following from the discussion of Fela's music this chapter will then address the formative roles of Black Power politics and Yoruba cultural identity as they manifest themselves in Fela's music. What is made clear throughout Fela's career is that there is a constantly changing sense of purpose and place, always grounded in Fela's vision of himself, but oriented outward toward a Nigerian audience, in particular, and an African diasporic audience, in general. Through the use of his expressive voice, Fela engaged his audience in a political discourse particular to Yoruba culture, as in his employment of "*yabis* songs" (Olatunji 2007), while also presenting itself as a broadly African discourse, as in the multi-leveled musical exchanges with artists such as James Brown. In the next chapter the work of Brown and Fela will be analyzed with a view toward illuminating the complex pattern of musical and extra-musical transatlantic exchanges between the two artists – exchanges that exemplify and more clearly illuminate an African diasporic, and for Fela Pan-African, musical aesthetic which prominently values the oral-compositional process of Signifyin(g). Such an analysis of artists and their works will highlight the choreographic movements of both Fela and Brown – their music, their bodies, and their personas – through the broader discursive space of African Atlantic culture, identifying them, along with Sun Ra, as singular though integrated members of a larger intellectual community.

Highlife jazz and the beginnings of Afrobeat:

In order to gain a sense of Fela as a politically informed musical artist it is necessary to fill in some biographical details as well as some of the historical and cultural information that operated upon Fela and his community. Fela was born and grew up in Nigeria in a privileged, upper-middle-class family in the town of Abeokuta. His grandfather, Rev. Joshua J. Ransome-Kuti, was an Anglican pastor who recorded a number of Yoruba traditional songs and Christian hymns in the 1920s and 1930s (Collins 2009: 134). John Collins notes that Rev. Ransome-Kuti is listed in the 1929 “Catalogue of Zonophone West African Records by Native artists” as having recorded 44 Yoruba sacred songs, hymns, and piano instrumentals as well as the Abeokuta national anthem, “K’Olurun Da Oba Si” (137 n.6). Fela’s father, Rev. Israel Oludotun Ransome-Kuti, was also a pastor, a music teacher, and the Headmaster of Abeokuta Grammar School. Wole Soyinka, Fela’s first cousin and a student of both of Fela’s parents, describes Fela’s father as being a very strict music teacher, insisting that all students should study music, regardless of their interest or aptitude, and caning students who sang or played their instruments poorly (1981: 176-77). Fela’s mother, Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti (FRK),¹¹³ was a crucial anti-colonial activist, women’s rights activist, and union leader, and arguably, as I will discuss later in this chapter, the single most influential person with regard to Fela’s later development of both political consciousness and musical style.¹¹⁴

¹¹³ Since Fela’s mother was a crucial influence on Fela’s political stance and ideologies I will adopt the abbreviation FRK for the remainder of this chapter. This is a convention adopted by Johnson-Odim and Mba (1997) as well as Shonekan (2009).

¹¹⁴ It should be noted that the sub-title of Veal’s book, *The life and times of an African musical icon*, is most likely borrowed from a 1985 Nigerian newspaper article about his mother titled “Life and times of Nigeria’s first woman nationalist” (Alapafuya 1985) – a small but potentially significant detail.

But Fela admitted that he was embarrassed by his grandfather's legacy; he felt that his grandfather's work aided the perpetuation of Christianity in Nigeria, thereby helping to extend the grasp of colonialism in Africa (Collins 2009: 134). Soyinka expressed a similar attitude toward Bishop Crowther of Abeokuta, noting the violence that had been enacted against Yoruba culture under the guise of Christianity (Soyinka 1981: 1-4). As Fela progressed in his political self-education in the 1970s he came to believe that the true value of his own work was to help dismantle the structures of neo-colonialism (Collins 1992: 77). In fact, Abeokuta holds a special place in Nigerian history since it was colonized, in the 19th century, by Yoruba Christian missionaries who had lived for many years, quite often for generations, as expatriate Christian converts in Sierra Leone (Waterman 1990b: 369-70). West African Christian converts such as those in Abeokuta quickly became an African elite class, being afforded positions of privilege in the church and throughout the colonial administration. But, as is the case with the Gramscian traditional intellectual who supports the oppressive policies of a government in order to maintain his class privilege (2000: 301), British colonial authorities used and distorted Yoruba political structures as a means of establishing a system of indirect colonial rule (Vaughan 2003: 283-84). Fela's mother FRK, in fact, was one of the leaders in protests against one such case, leading to the temporary dismissal of the colonially installed *Alake* (king's representative) of Abeokuta (Johnson-Odim and Mba 1997).

In fact, Fela was in a similar position to that of Miles Davis and Wynton Marsalis in that he came from a place of educational and monetary privilege, enrolled in an elite music school, and spent his evenings playing and listening to American and European jazz (Veal 2000: 40). In this his experience was similar to that of other West African

musicians such as Bobby Benson, Manu Dibango, and Guy Warren who spent time in Europe studying and playing music at the beginning of their careers (Graham 1988: 53). In London, Fela studied music at the Trinity College conservatory from 1958 to 1962, training to be a music teacher and composer. Though he was originally meant to study law while in London, studying music at a prestigious music school was a way for Fela to satisfy his family's middle-class desire to see Fela get a "proper" music education if he was to, in fact, pursue music as a career (Veal 2000: 40). At roughly the same time there were a number of African students and alumni associated with Trinity College, some studying Western art music composition including the "Great Five" of Nigeria: Ayo Bankole, Fela Sowande, Adams Fiberisimi, Akin Euba, and Samuel Akpabot. In addition, Kwabena Nketia, the Ghanaian musicologist and composer, preceded Fela by several years. The resulting influx of Western trained art music composers and musicologists throughout West Africa contributed to the spread of chamber groups and symphony orchestras in many of the West African urban centers (Euba 1988: ch. 4).

Another group of Africans at Trinity, including Fela, simply wanted greater knowledge of Western instruments and music theory so that they could incorporate the newly gained knowledge and skills into the composition and performance of African popular music, which, at the time, was dominated by highlife (Veal 2000: 39). During his time at Trinity Fela spent much of his energy trying to make the transition from highlife musician to jazz musician, although he did form a band called the Highlife Rakers in London, playing piano and trumpet. Many highlife musicians felt that experience in jazz bands helped them to develop instrumental technique, and Fela, noting the discipline of jazz that underpins its freedom, found a way to bridge the gap between his desire for a

rigorous musical education and the desire to reject the staunch Eurocentrism of Western musical education. The musical environment outside of Trinity was probably as important to Fela's musical training as the academic training since London was an urban European center of musical diversity at the time. Other West African highlife musicians who spent time playing in jazz bands in Europe and the U.S. during this period were Zeal Onyia, Bobby Benson, Manu Dibango, and Guy Warren (Graham 1988: 53).¹¹⁵ Prior to studying in London Fela had begun his musical career as a backup singer with Victor Olaiya's band the Cool Cats – Olaiya remembered Fela as being very talented but “very restless and a big rascal” (Uhakheme 1997: 14) – but upon returning to Nigeria he was determined to find a way to fuse jazz with the already existent highlife scene.

But while Fela's interests were primarily in the aural traditions of jazz and African popular music, his training at Trinity was important mostly to his family: “A compromise with his family, Fela's enrollment in Trinity was an attempt to apply a sheen of respectability to a profession largely at odds with the Ransome-Kuti family's social status” (Veal 2000: 40). Speaking about his time in London studying music, Fela had much the same experience as any music student who first discovers jazz.

I had a stereo, but I never bought any records. I had this single I was listening to all the time, Frank Sinatra's “Mr. Success” (he hums a swinging horn chart). But the first guy who really knocked me out was (drummer [*sic.*]) Louis Prima. Then I went to hear Louis Armstrong at a ballroom club in London and he knocked me out. And then I got fed up with Louis Armstrong. I said, “what can I listen to now?” And I went to a nightclub one day and I heard this record going “Ba-duh...ba-da-duh...ba-dah-ba-dah-ba-dah-duh.” It was Miles Davis. After that I listened to Miles, Coltrane. After I became ideological, I found the reason why this music got me. Walking through the streets back home, I would hear many tapes of these traditional musicians from the bush. That was when I got the

¹¹⁵ Many West African musicians, including Manu Dibango, are not referred to as highlife musicians, though it was a common musical genre in which West African musicians began their careers. For an overview of Manu Dibango's career see (Dibango and Rouard 1994).

connection - all the sounds Miles and Coltrane play are very common among people in the bush (Tannenbaum 1985: 23-24).

But Veal suggests that Fela's upper-middle-class upbringing may have, for a time, insulated him from the political realities around him (1994: 114).¹¹⁶ Indeed, at this early stage of music making, Fela was not yet fully aware of the European origins of the African popular music he most often played. Highlife is a hybrid form of music created during colonialism, a dance music which combined traditional African musics from Anglophone West African countries with imported European music and musical instruments (Sprigge 1961: 40). European instruments and music arrived in West Africa in the 1700s and 1800s along with European sailors, traders and slavers, with the largest expansion of this colonial move into West Africa taking place from the mid-1800s onward. Expeditions of the British West Indian Regiments in West Africa constituted some of the first sustained contacts among European, American, Caribbean, and African musicians. By the mid-1800s missionaries introduced the harmonium (a small organ that works by means of a bellows) and hymnals to West African congregations, recruiting and training Africans to preach as well as sing in choirs. It was through this training that African musicians began to be systematically introduced to Western musical education, grounded in Western common practice harmony with an emphasis on reading and writing Western musical notation (Bender 1991: 74-75). As a result of the growing presence of colonial administrators and the growing numbers of Nigerians who had received a Western musical education, drama clubs and choral societies often organized concerts

¹¹⁶ Though it is not possible to know if Fela's lack of political engagement was common among West African students in England in the mid-20th century, his experience does stand in contrast to Fela Sowande's history of political engagement during his student years (Omojola 2009: 45-72). For an overview of the political activities of West African students in England throughout much of the 20th century see (Adi 1998).

that featured English melodies and harmonies paired with lyrics in African languages, such as with the songs composed by Fela's grandfather. As an example of the type of music featured at an African Christian concert in the late 1800s, the following is a partial program of a concert by the Abeokuta Choral Society in 1898, directed by Rev. Olubi of the Church Missionary Society: Handel's "But thou didst not leave my soul in Hell" translated into Yoruba; two Yoruba Christian hymns; a Yoruba translation of "Evangeline"; the third act of Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* performed in English; and an excerpt from *The Merchant of Venice* performed in Yoruba (Lynn 1967: 121).

West African highlife grew out of this colonial background, though it filtered the use Western musical materials and instruments through the lens of West African musical practices and instrumental techniques. Early highlife was characterized by the use of West African bell rhythms, two finger guitar picking, and the influence of European hymnal structures (Sprigge 1961: 40). The proto-highlife music which spread across West Africa probably came from Gombe music of the Ga people of Ghana and spread in popularity and practice across West Africa (Collins 1976: 62). But essentially highlife, named for the upper-class pretensions of West African nightlife, was an urban elite genre of music, created for the entertainment of colonial administrators, comprised largely of European musical traditions and instruments, and favoring musicians with Western musical training playing Western musical instruments. With an emphasis on the use of brass melody instruments, these bands grew out of the military bands that were associated with slaving forts (62). This brass band music spread inland over time and became more Africanized, fusing more traditional African melodies and rhythms with European

military music and instrumentation.¹¹⁷ Ghanaian urban dance bands, for instance, played a repertoire of Western dance music, including foxtrot, waltz, quick-step, along with early highlife compositions. In the 1930s these bands played primarily for the colonial elite, along the way coining the term highlife in a manner similar to the mock pretensions of the African American cakewalk (Southern 1997: 222, 255, 257, 316-17). A number of these bands in Ghana, with names such as The Cape Coast Light Orchestra, The City Orchestra, The Koforidua Royal Orchestra, and The Cape Coast Sugar Babies also occasionally performed with visiting African-American vaudeville performers (Collins 1976: 62-64).

Similar brass bands formed in Nigeria in the 1930s and 40s, with the New Bethel School Band from Onitsha in eastern Nigeria, considered to be the first Nigerian highlife band (Bender 1991: 86). Most of these bands purchased Western brass and stringed instruments from the military supplies of the Niger Company, the British government trading company associated with the colonial administration (87). Though there has always been variation in group instrumentation, by the 1960s the typical highlife orchestration consisted of:

...eight to twenty musicians, among them two trumpets, one or two saxophones, an upright bass, and electric guitar, and a set of percussion. Sometimes a trombone is added, and currently most popular recordings are supplemented by two muted trombones playing in unison (King 1966: 4).

Tellingly, though highlife bands had most often used drum sets in a manner similar to Western dance bands, by the 1960s there was a trend among many bands to replace the

¹¹⁷ Though it is a different genre born in a different place under different circumstances, the development of early New Orleans brass band music bears a number of similarities to the spread of brass band music in Africa. For an overview of early brass bands in New Orleans see (Hersch 2007). For a brief history of brass bands in West Africa see (Collins 1987, 1989).

drum sets with more traditional African drumming ensembles, thereby Africanizing the instrumentation, playing techniques, and repertoire of the music (Bender 1991: 89).

Additionally, many West African highlife artists were influenced by recordings of Caribbean and Latin music as well as by the presence of musicians from the British West Indian Rifles who were sometimes attached, from the 1870s onward, to the European military forts (the old slaving castles) that dot the West African coast (Collins 1989: 223). The compilation CD *Marvellous boy: Calypso from West Africa* (Various artists 2009) highlights the presence of calypso in West African highlife music in the 1950s and 1960s. Listening to Bobby Benson's songs "Gentleman Bobby" or "Taxi driver (I don't care)" or to Victor Olaiya's "Yabomisa sawale" one can hear that much of the music can easily compare to representative calypso compositions such as Mighty Sparrow's "Teresa" or "Country girl" (2004 [1959]). Fela's mid-60s Koola Lobitos composition "Highlife time" (2000a) has a big band calypso feel that is, in places, interrupted by more bluesy and dissonant sounds, blending various musics in a manner that is clearly hybrid though not yet the integrated modal structures of Afrobeat.

But in some instances highlife was used by the ruling elite as a form of propaganda, forcing artists to use their music in a manner similar to Antonio Gramsci's "traditional intellectual": as deputies of "social hegemony and political government" (2000: 306). Along these lines, Fela recorded the song "Viva Nigeria" while in the United States in 1969 out of economic necessity and against his own political beliefs. In dire financial straits and stranded in the U.S., Fela wrote the lyrics to "Viva Nigeria" – the music was already a part of the Koola Lobitos repertoire, titled "Waka waka" (Veal 2000: 68) – as a pro-Nigerian government, anti-Biafran secessionist anthem in order to make

quick money from the Ghanaian record producer Duke Lumumba (Olaniyan 2004: 26). In the song Fela proclaims that “we are all Nigerians/we are all Africans/war is not the answer...it will never be the answer” (2000a). While later in life Fela expressed his regret for having recorded the song – he was personally supportive of the Biafran cause (Oroh 1988: 21) – what is instructive about this song with regard to Fela’s seeming lack of political consciousness is the way in which he is actively engaged in aiding the hegemonic interests of the Nigerian government and the oil companies who supported the government in its fight against Biafran secession. When compared with Fela’s later political compositions, and taking into consideration his later role as a political gadfly in Nigerian politics, this composition indicates a degree of political disengagement as late as 1969, representing the work of someone, at that point, more akin to the Gramscian traditional intellectual than to the politically conscious artist he later became.

Christopher Waterman suggests that, given the relationship of music to traditional political structures in West Africa, some popular music works indirectly to legitimize and reinforce the inequalities which exist in West African societies by communicating dominant social values and constructing a “metaphor of social order” (1990a: 213). While Fela was a highlife musician in the midst of creating Afrobeat – his own self-styled mixture of highlife, jazz and American funk – other genres of Yoruba popular music such as *jùjú*, *fùjì*, and *àpàlà* music are “closely connected with traditional social structure and the modern Yoruba elite, often depending on both of these as sources of patronage” (Veal 1994: 10). Recordings and performances in these genres include praise songs for patrons, often commissioned for specific social events or composed on the spot as a means of inflating the social importance of the patron and thereby secure monetary

contributions (“dash”) from the audience (10-11). Criticisms of patrons in praise singing are indirect and often proverbial, sometimes ambiguous and open to multiple interpretations, and designed specifically to support the traditional power dynamics of Yoruba society (Waterman 1990a: 178). Fela’s recording of “Viva Nigeria” and his later recording “Buy Africa” (1997c), commissioned by Nigeria’s delegation to Ghana’s International Trade Fair in 1970, are representative of the way in which Fela’s early music sometimes worked in support of the power elite and in contrast with and contradiction to his later political orientation.

With his early musical grounding in highlife and its attendant social and political concerns, then, Fela studied Western musical theory and jazz while a student in London with the intention of creating a musical blend of highlife and jazz which he hoped would distinguish his music from that of others – essentially focusing, at this point, on fame rather than political discourse. Highlife band leader O.J. Ekemode remembers Fela, after his return to Nigeria, coming often to see his band the Modern Aces in the early 1960s when they were resident at the Independence Hotel in Ibadan.

He always stand near the stage with his trumpet...and just play along.¹¹⁸ So by that time I really like the way he played trumpet. I always go and pull him on the stage to play.... He was playing jazz. And later on he found out that he has to come back to his roots before he can be known. And already we were there (Stewart 1992: 101-02).

Returning to Nigeria from his London studies in 1963 Fela formed a jazz and highlife group known as Koola Lobitos, based at the Kakadu Club in Yaba, a neighborhood of Lagos. Koola Lobitos was a popular band with the Lagos nightclub crowd, and once even acted as backing band for Millicent Smalls and Chubby Checker when they visited

¹¹⁸ Fela played trumpet early in his career before switching to saxophone.

Nigeria (Collins 1992: 77). It was with this band that Fela composed and performed songs such as “Highlife time.”

But while Koola Lobitos experienced moderate success, their mixture of jazz and highlife was difficult for Nigerian audiences to fully grasp, especially given that the popular bands of the time were playing a mixture of highlife and the more easily accessible soul music (Veal 2000: 39). Fela found respect as a musician but not quite the success that he wanted, noticing that South African musicians such as Hugh Masekela and Miriam Makeba had achieved some notoriety and financial success in the United States. The change for Fela’s career, sparking a radical shift in both his political outlook and his musical production, came during an extended visit he made with the Koola Lobitos to the United States in 1969. During this time Fela developed a relationship with an African-American woman named Sandra Izsadore, a member of the Black Panther party and a political activist. Through his discussions with Izsadore, Fela gained an awareness of African-American struggles against racism and colonialism. He also came to realize that music could be used to make direct political statements. Years earlier Fela’s cousin Wole Soyinka, studying in London at the same time as Fela, had been interested in the close relationship between jazz and political protest (Soyinka 1993: 197), but it had not registered that deeply with Fela at the time.

You see, at the beginning, my musical appreciation was very limited, but later I got opened to many Black artists. And I saw that in Africa we were not open, as at the time they only let us hear what they wanted us to hear. When you played the radio, it was controlled by the government, and the White man played us what he wants. So we didn’t know anything about Black music. In England I was exposed to all these things, but in Africa they cut us off. It was after I was exposed that I started using jazz as a stepping-stone to African music. Later, when I got to America, I was exposed to African history which I was not even exposed to here. It was then that I really began to see that I had not played African music. I had been using jazz to play African music, when really I should be using African

music to play jazz. So it was America that brought me back to myself (Collins 1992: 77-78).

This time, upon returning to Nigeria Fela changed his family name from Ransome-Kuti to Anikulapo-Kuti (one who carries death in his pocket) because of the trouble his political opinions and activities caused for him and his family (Collins 1992: 76). He also changed the name of his group to Africa 70 and began to create his own form of music called Afrobeat based on his newly conscious attitude toward music and politics. Fela indicated that the band name Koola Lobitos had no meaning of consequence, “koola” being made up and “lobitos” being Spanish for “little wolves” (Veal 2000: 41). The new band name, Africa 70, indicated a more purposeful and politically conscious approach to musical composition and performance, marking 1970 as the year of Fela’s political paradigm shift. Similarly, he changed the name of the Afro-Spot to the Afrika Shrine, “‘cause I wanted some place meaningful, of progressive mindful background with roots. I didn’t believe in playing any more in nightclubs” (Moore 2009: 110). A few years earlier Fela Sowande had warned against Nigerians adopting a “‘limited identification’ with their traditional past, so that, in music, to dance to highlife bands in nightclubs is synonymous with love for African music” (1967: 261). Fela’s statement that he “didn’t believe in playing any more in nightclubs” indicates a conscious break with what Olaniyan terms the “apolitical” nature of his early musical career, marking the beginning of the more well known period of Fela’s career as a politically conscious composer (2004: 7-23).¹¹⁹

¹¹⁹ While it is debatable as to whether Fela’s music was ever truly apolitical, certainly there is a stark political contrast between his early and later music. Olaniyan’s outline of the political development of Fela’s music will be discussed later in this chapter.

Following this paradigmatic shift in politics and musical genre, Fela's music grew in popularity while it gained a sense of political commitment, though it is difficult to tell at this point in his career if the popularity was a result of the growing political content or if the popularity developed in spite of the content. Fela began to conceive of musical recordings and performances in a manner that Lipsitz describes as taking "commodity culture for granted" as a vector which allowed him "to speak *to* and *through* the systems of communication and commerce that signal the emergence of fundamentally new opportunities and dangers" (1997: 12). The commodified form of the music (recordings and performances) allowed Fela the opportunity to engage his audience in a political discourse while also providing him with the ability to stretch the boundaries of what did and did not constitute popular music in Nigeria.

Fela stated that, though he listened to other popular music in order to gauge popular tastes, he primarily took musical materials at this point – "rhythms [and] spiritualness" – from listening to traditional African musics: "I may listen to [popular music] to see what's happening, but I still prefer to listen to deep sounds from the villages all over Africa" (Stewart 1992: 121). Though the big band sound of Fela's groups signify a modern urban approach to music, Veal notes that Fela used his horn section, for instance, as a stand-in for the more traditional talking drum parts, even while he preferred not to foreground the linguistic elements of more traditional Yoruba music. This idea is echoed in an excerpt from Veal's interview with *Glendora Review* editor Olakunle Tejuoso:

It is through Fela that I learned a lot of traditional rhythms.... He also has all kinds of slangish ways of tossing in these idioms, and they just flow together. And where, in the case of traditional music, you have a talking drum which people can decode, he has his horns. If one of them goes off into a solo, suddenly some kind

of traditional Yoruba adage or proverb or folk song will come out of the horn. There are people in the crowd who will decode it just like a drum, and you will see these people going wild at this point. (Veal 2000: 93)

Through this broadened study of music and politics, Fela began to perceive a series of connections among West African musics, 1950s African American jazz, 1960s American Black Power politics, and his knowledge and experience of the struggles over postcolonial African politics and identities.

I played a lot of jazz in the beginning of my career because it had cultural information that enriched my mind. Coltrane, Miles, Sonny Rollins, that era, because I found a heavy relationship between that music and my culture. That influenced me a bit, at the beginning of my career. When I changed, I used this knowledge to penetrate into the culture of my people (Watrous 1989).

Fela's sense of connection between African and African American musics, in this statement, is perceptive but vague, similar in a sense, one might argue, to Norman Weinstein's characterization of the cosmopolitan, African diasporic creative practices of the Art Ensemble of Chicago as something akin to "a psychology of Africanizing imaginings, a poetics of African imagination" (1997: 9). But Robin Kelley warns against the rank abstraction of musicians' creative practices, noting that the poetics of the Art Ensemble's music – and I would argue Fela's music – must be seen as "a product of both the cultural milieu in which these artists create and the history that preceded them" (1997: 24). Following from this, while Fela's music may be influenced by a vague sense of cultural connection, that sense is informed by his personal history and experiences and by the broader histories of both Nigeria and the African diaspora; Fela's music is as much a part of the discursive culture of the African Atlantic as are any other creative or political formations, deserving of an analytical approach fully grounded in historical research. As such, one must understand the political and intellectual dynamics of both Nigeria (place)

and the broader African Atlantic (space) in order to fully situate Fela's music within the choreographic play of its environment.

“I be Africa man, Original”: Africanism, Black Power, and Pan-Yoruba identity:

Much has been written about the sudden and direct influence of African American Black Power ideology on Fela's music stemming from his group's 1969-70 trip to the United States. Travelling to the United States in 1969, ostensibly to break into the American music market as Hugh Masekela and Miriam Makeba had done previously, Fela was first introduced to African American and Caribbean writings on Black Power, sparking an ideological paradigm shift that drastically changed his music, his life, and ultimately, his relationship with Nigerian society. In the United States Fela was first, and very significantly, exposed to Black Power ideologies through his relationship with Sandra Izsadore, a politicized member of the Black Panther Party, and through his subsequent reading of key texts – in particular *The autobiography of Malcolm X* (Moore 2009: 84-85). Returning to Nigeria in 1970, the entire orientation of Fela's music and musical career changed radically such that, as his friend Mabinuori Idowu stated, Fela began to conceive of music as a means by which he could “spread the message that will make the wretched of the Earth liberate themselves” (1986: 41).

But Fela's introduction to Black Power ideology should be viewed more as a catalyzing event than as an introduction to entirely foreign concepts. Bearing in mind the political legacy of his family, particularly the career of his mother FRK, Fela's trip to the United States should be viewed less as a revelation than as a re-acquaintance and an updating of the revolutionary political activity that surrounded him as a child. This section will trace Fela's ideological conversion through his statements with regard to his

U.S. visit and through an analysis of select compositions from different phases of his career. What is clear, in the end, is that Fela developed a highly sophisticated, even if sometimes inconsistent, political philosophy, incorporating elements of Black Power, Pan-Africanism and anti-colonialism in order to reinvent himself as a Gramscian “organic intellectual”: an observer of Nigerian civil society whose self-appointed task is to re-educate the masses as to the ways in which their government, Western governments, and multinational corporations act in a hegemonic fashion that blinds people as to their own self-interest (Gramsci 2000: 309). In Fela’s own estimation, what he determined to do was to use his music as a “‘weapon’ against the continuing exploitation of the African masses by local and international interests” (Veal 1994: 12).

Just a quick scan of Fela’s album cover art, created by a number of young Nigerian artists, gives an indication of the range of subjects and level of commitment involved in Fela’s aesthetically determined and determining political ideas.¹²⁰ Several album covers feature Egyptian and other Pan-African imagery, reflecting Fela’s growing interest in Afrocentric writings which ultimately prompted him to rename his group Egypt 80. *Perambulator* (1998) displays a number of hieroglyphs and sub-Saharan African imagery cast against a green, red, and yellow background – the Pan-African colors adopted in the early 1900s from the Ethiopian flag – with a photo of Fela in mid performance at the center (Figure 8). One image, toward the upper left-hand corner is of a man with sub-Saharan phenotypical facial features wearing a hat and beard similar to

¹²⁰ Veal lists a number of the artists who created Fela’s album art through the use of photographic collage, oil painting, and cartoon drawing: Ghariokwu Lemi, Kenny Adamson, Maxo-Max-Amoh, Okanlawan Banjoko, Ajao Bello, Frances Kuboye, Boniface Okafor, Remi Olowookere, and Tunde Orimogunje (2000: 142). Lemi wrote a short essay on his experiences with Fela for the *Glendora Review* which was later reprinted (2003). For a related discussion of the dynamics of popular art, historical narratives, and politics in Zaire, see (Fabian 1996).

those in hieroglyphs of the Egyptian pharaohs. This image suggests an awareness, in the early 1980s, of Cheikh Anta Diop's thesis that the ancient Egyptians were more phenotypically black than their modern historical depictions would suggest (Diop 1967).



Figure 8: Perambulator cover

The cover of *Shuffling and smiling* (2000d) shows another image of an unambiguously black Pharaoh sitting on a throne, facing several black Christian and Muslim clergy who have money either on the ground before them or in a collection plate (Figure 9). Written on the side of the Pharaoh's seat are a number of hieroglyphs and the phrase "YES. Why not African religion." Fela's critique of Christianity and Islam, featured in several of his compositions from the late 1970s onward, bear some resemblance to other commentators such as E. Bolaji Idowu and Molefe Kete Asante, as will be discussed below. The sense of caricature one perceives from this album cover, though, coupled with Fela's often derisive satire of political and religious figures, indicate a more provocative attitude

toward religion that Idowu or Asante, often bearing some resemblance to African American criticisms of minstrelsy and Uncle-Tomism.



Figure 9: Shuffering and Shmiling cover

Several of the album covers strongly affirm Fela's more material concerns with and commitment to Black Power ideologies and resistance to neo-colonial authority. The cover of *V.I.P.* (2000e) shows a cropped photograph of Fela reading Walter Rodney's *How Europe underdeveloped Africa* in the lower right hand corner (Figure 10). To the left of the central image of Fela there is a smaller image of Fela in mid performance with a raised-fist Black Power salute.¹²¹ As will be discussed later in this chapter, not only were Fela's compositions influenced by reading key political and historical works, but his conversations with audience members, both on and off the stage, were quite literally

¹²¹ And while this raised-fist salute indicates Fela's solidarity with Black Power politics, this same salute was also involved in the distancing of Sun Ra from much of the mainstream of black politics in the 1960s and 1970s. This was previously discussed in chapters 1 and 3.

infused with ideas from these works. One image in John Collins's *Fela: Kalakuta notes* shows Fela, in mid performance, standing at a microphone reading from a book (2009: 88).

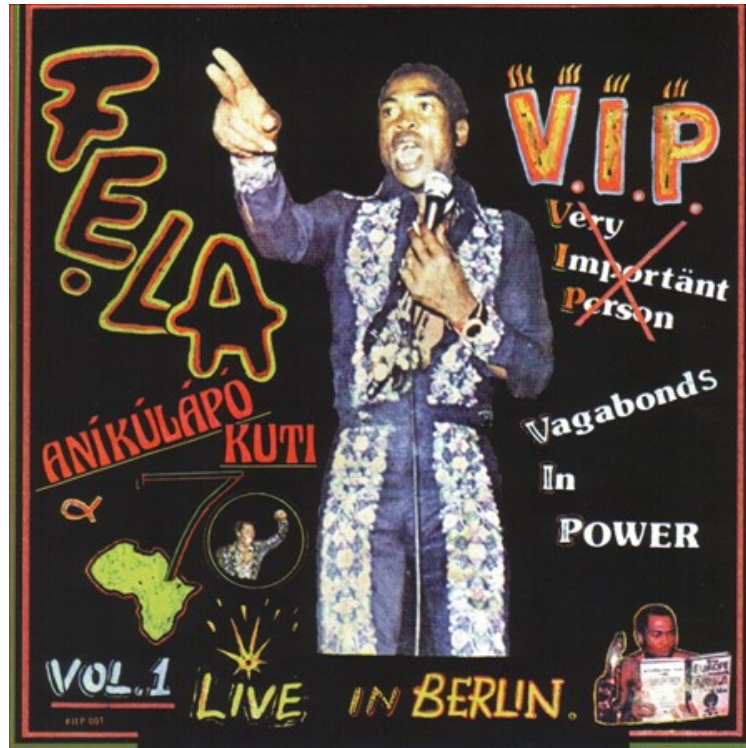


Figure 10: V.I.P. cover

The cover of *Expensive shit* (1997b) displays a famous image of Fela and his wives, all topless, standing behind barbed wire displaying raised-fist Black Power salutes and seemingly triumphant smiles (Figure 11). The image of Fela and his wives indicates a broad commitment to both counter-cultural protest, flouting the social conventions of Nigerian society with their public nakedness, as well as an essentialist attitude toward African male-female relations: the “naturalness” of nudity and of prolific polygynous marriage. The title of the album – and the immediate reason for the photo’s defiant stance – refers to Fela’s 1974 arrest for marijuana possession during which the police, sure that

Fela had swallowed his stash, sat him down on a toilet and waited to retrieve the evidence (Moore 2009: 124). After this arrest, Fela had the fence constructed to surround his Kalakuta compound, partly as a way to keep the police from raiding his home with impunity (129). Though the police stated that a later raid on his home – complete with riot gear and teargas – was undertaken to retrieve an underage girl (Collins 2009: 37), Fela claimed that the primary motivation for the raid was the challenging presence of the fence.



Figure 11: Expensive shit cover

The cover of *Overtake don overtake overtake* (2001a) is a painting which begins to tie Fela's sense of politics with imagery of Yoruba history and spirituality. Fela is seen in the painting standing to the side of a body of water, a half immersed saxophone and a large pedestal with a bust of his mother coming from the water (Figure 12). Fela stands

with a raised fist in front of an over-sized grand piano, a number of women – presumably some of his wives – standing and sitting to the side. Again, the color scheme is Pan-African green, red, and yellow, but the image is also specifically Yoruba. The water seems as if it could be one of the bodies of water in the Yoruba sacred city of Ile-Ifè, *Qsàrà* (lagoon) or *Òkun* (ocean); and the pedestal may be the *Òpǎ Qrǎnyàn*, the staff of Qrǎnyàn (Idowu 1994 [1960]: 14), one of the sons of Odùdúwà, the first ancestor of all Yoruba (12). If this interpretation is correct, then it places Fela’s mother, FRK, within the lineage of Odùdúwà, making her a heroic figure by association with Qrǎnyàn, most famous in the pantheon of Yoruba deities as a warrior. Placing the *Òpǎ Qrǎnyàn* in the water also suggests a connection between FRK and Olókun, the goddess of the sea (14). This interpretation is reinforced by the documentary *Music is the weapon* (Flori and Tchalgadjeff 1982) in which, when describing a number of Pan-African images on the wall behind the altar at the Africa Shrine, the narrator notes that FRK’s portrait is placed next to those of Malcolm X and Kwame Nkrumah, stating that, following her death, Fela came to see her as “the spirit of rain.”¹²²

In addition, one can see a phrase written at the bottom of the painting: “This painting has been sanctified by our ancestors to support the ‘Movement Against Second Slavery’ MASS.” Veal notes in his discography that Fela’s composition “M.A.S.S.” remained unreleased as a recording (2000: 298), but he describes a performance of the composition he heard at the International African Festival in Brooklyn, NY in 1989 (217-

¹²² This scene is at c.23:05-23:47 in the film. Raisa Simola also observes that an earlier edition of Moore’s auto/biographical book *Fela: This bitch of a life* (most of the text consists of transcribed interviews with Fela and others) included two un-numbered chapters at the beginning and end of the text that were meant to represent FRK’s voice as a spirit. Both chapters were titled “*Afa Ojo*, she who commands rain” (1999: 94-95).

18). During the performance Fela was directly critical of Islam and of African Americans' lack of awareness of its detrimental effects: ""I'm disappointed. Americans don't know what is happening, man – African-Americans especially. The Muslim religion is not for Africans at all.... 'Alaaaaahu Akbar!' What the fuck is that, man? I'm African, man, I don't understand that shit! Our ancestors can throw Allah away with one little finger." Veal indicates that Fela's position on Islam is similar to that of Asante, even if Asante's approach is far from vulgar and more historically reasoned (Veal 2000: 279 n.137; Asante 2003: 1-40). One should also note that Idowu made similar remarks about the deleterious effects of Christianity and Islam on people's adherence to Yoruba traditional values, also without the vulgarity (1994 [1960]: 211). Essentially, while Fela makes a raw political argument, Asante makes the same argument from a historical perspective and Idowu from a theological perspective.



Figure 12: O.D.O.O. cover

The combined effect of “reading” these few album covers is one which establishes some of the varied cultural and political influences at play in Fela’s conception of Afrobeat. Olaniyan offers a framework for discussing the changes in Fela’s broad ideology, proposing that, in combining Fela’s changing musical styles with the changes in ideology, there are three distinct phases in his musical career: the apolitical avant-pop hustler, the Afrobeat social reformer, and the political Afrobeat musician (2004: 3). Departing from Olaniyan’s framework I will flesh out the arc of Fela’s career with regard to Fanon’s articulation of the revolutionary stages of art, combining Olaniyan’s and Fanon’s frameworks and discussing several illustrative compositions.¹²³ One needs to note here, though, with regard to both Olaniyan’s and Fanon’s frameworks,

¹²³ Veal also notes the connection between the phases of Fela’s career and Fanon’s framework (2000: 242-43), although the following analysis is my own.

certain structural similarities to Hegel's outline of historical progression. In his *Philosophy of history*, Hegel proposes that societies progress through three primary phases based on the extent to which he believed different societies had achieved a sense of consciousness or "Spirit": ahistory ("unreflected consciousness...the childhood of History"), pre-history (ahistory with the added elements of "bravery, prowess, magnanimity" taking the place of ahistory's rank despotism), and History ("the realm of abstract Universality...the *Manhood* of History") (1991 [1822]: 105-08). Following from this *a priori*, he places Africa in the category of ahistory, Asia and the Americas in pre-history, and Europe, alone, in History (hence Glissant's "History with a capital H" from chapter 1). Given this rough parallel it is best to simply note Olaniyan's use of the word "apolitical" as well as Fanon's absolutist tendencies before adding to the overarching aporia of analysis.

In the first phase of his career, as has already been established, Fela played "highlife jazz" – or what Olaniyan terms "avant-pop" – a combination of the highlife dance music popular in Lagos' nightclubs, and the jazz that Fela began to play while he was a music student in London.¹²⁴ Fanon, in describing his concept of the formation of national culture, identifies three phases in the evolution of the native intellectual (1963: 222-23). In the first phase, "the native intellectual gives proof that he has assimilated the culture of the occupying power," romanticizing the culture of the colonizer as a means of advancement within the colonized society. This phase of revolutionary development corresponds most closely to Olaniyan's characterization of Fela's early career as an "apolitical avant-pop hustler," during which Fela composed and performed music for

¹²⁴ For a flawed but informative overview of the musical characteristics of Fela's highlife jazz, see (Oikelome 2009).

entertainment and for personal advancement (2004: 7-23). The 1968 recording “Highlife time” is representative of what Olaniyan characterizes as the apolitical nature of Fela’s early music – party songs for the party set.

It’s highlife time
A morning time
And jump for joy
At this swinging club
It’s a brand new place
That plays the latest craze
It’s got the beat
It’s got the hit! (Anikulapo-Kuti 2000a)

But the contention that Fela’s music was, at any stage, “apolitical” is only arguable at best given the broadly political nature of African and African descendant performance in a cultural and historical field most often dominated by a European aesthetic. As was mentioned in chapter 2, Lipsitz, writing about the performance style of Rahsaan Roland Kirk, notes the “sedimented layer of historical knowledge and historical critique beneath the surface appearance of novelty and performance” (1990: 4). Similarly, though expressed in vernacular terms, Umar Bin Hassan of the Last Poets confirms the presence of this historical knowledge in the rhythmic feel and presence of the everyday music: “Up on the down, down on the beat/The funk of the slaveships become the sound in the street” (Oyewole and Bin Hassan 1996: 82). The liminal space of performance is more than the removal of oneself from the grasp of everyday life and economy as was noted with regard to *isicathamiya* performance in chapter 2 – the very performance itself, whether explicitly political or not, creates a text via the *communitas* of event and the activation of collective memory; the performance, conceived as a dialogic text, is itself a politically significant element of the community’s discourse about itself and the state of the world. Stated as such, it is difficult to maintain that Fela’s music is in any sense apolitical given that its

very presence, whether or not it articulates explicit political themes, is counter-hegemonic.

Moving on from the rank apolitical, during Fanon's second phase of development, "the native is disturbed; he decides to remember what he is." However, during this phase, "since the native is not a part of his people, since he only has exterior relations with his people, he is content to recall their life only.... Old legends will be reinterpreted in the light of a borrowed estheticism and of a conception of the world which was discovered under other skies" (Fanon 1963: 222). Similarly, in the second phase of Fela's career Olaniyan sees, primarily, an "Afrobeat moralist": one who mythologized "traditional" African values, adopted essentialist ideas regarding polygyny and paternalism, and often presented music that rated, in his estimation, only just above undiluted, unsubtle proselytizing and moralizing (2004: 24-49).

As a moralist, he took the foundational structures of the society for granted but pointed out the bad behaviors and social disorderliness all around him.... [He] interpreted the numerous problems of the society as having their source in a general moral turpitude; moral rearmament through satire was Fela's solution (48).

In this phase Fela "found that singing about Nigerians in three-piece suits in steaming tropical Lagos had far greater resonance with his audience than singing about how whites came to enslave Africans centuries ago" (42).

But in highlighting the incongruities of everyday experience Fela was able to engage his audience in a discourse concerning the structural nature of neocolonialism rather than berating them for not having seen it, drawing attention to the propagandistic and ideological functions of postcolonial urban Nigeria. In his 1975 composition

“Gentleman” Fela prefaces his identity as an African man by giving a detailed description of a suit-wearing Gentleman in Lagos (1997a).

Africa hot
I like am so
I know what to wear
But my friend don’t know
Him put him sock
Him put him shoe
Him put him pant
Him put him singlet
Him put him trouser
Him put him shirt
Him put him tie
Him put him coat
Him come cover all with him hat
Him be gentleman
Him go sweat
All over
Him go faint
Right down
Him go smell
Like shit
Him go piss for body, him no go know
Me I no be gentleman like that
 I no be gentleman at all-o
I be Africa man original
 I no be gentleman at all-o

But Fela’s critique in “Gentleman” is not entirely his own. In his 1967 essay “Nigerian music and musicians: Then and now,” Fela Sowande writes about Westernized Yoruba who were “busy getting ‘emancipated’” from their Yoruba traditions, expressing astonishment at some people’s lack of attention to the local climate.

One sign of this emancipation was to be seen coming from church on Sundays, dressed in English suits which were often woolen and complete with waistcoats (or vests) wearing Saxone or Lennard shoes, perspiring profusely under the relentless tropical sun that seemed totally unwilling or incapable of “emancipating” itself, and against which the only protection was a felt hat, or a bowler hat and walking stick. The emancipated Nigerian of this period seems to have come from the same stock as Noel Coward’s “mad dogs and Englishmen” who *go out in the noonday sun!* (1967: 259) [emphasis in the original].

In another paragraph on the same page Sowande also critiques the neocolonial adoption of European language and education as a marker of status in Nigeria.

Another sign of emancipation was a supposed fluency in the English language, which had then become the official language of government; the acquisition of this supposed fluency was an almost morbid obsession, but unfortunately it meant no more than finding and using the longest and most high-sounding words in the English language, with or without appropriateness mattered very little, for it was the “sound” of the words that mattered. One did not say “I disagree with you”; one said instead, something like: “my decision that I cannot accord you my acceptability is stamped with irrevocability”; then one has proven his mastery of the English language, and was greeted with clapping of hands and shouts of “*igi iwe*,” as an assertion that one had become a veritable “tree of books.”¹²⁵

Fela makes similar observations regarding European languages and education in many of his lyrics. In the 1976 composition “Mr. Grammarticalogylisationalism is the boss” (2010), he makes a direct connection between the use of European languages and one’s prospects for material success in Nigeria.¹²⁶

The better Oyinbo* you talk
The more bread you go get
School starts, na grade-e four bread
B.A.- na grade-e three bread
M.A.- na grade-e two bread
Ph.D.- na grade-e one bread
The better Oyinbo you talk
The more bread you go get
Dey na be man
Which man?
We talk Oyinbo well-o well to rule our land-e-o
That man
Oh yes
He talk Oyinbo past English-e man
He talk Oyinbo past America man

¹²⁵ As the ever relevant Mighty Sparrow once phrased a put-down of pomposity in his song “Well-spoken moppers,” “Pompomloomically speaking you’re a pussyistic man, most elaquitably full of shitification” (2002).

¹²⁶ All words marked with an asterisk (*) can be found in a glossary of Nigerian Pidgin and Yoruba words in Appendix 4.

He talk Oyinbo past English-e man

As was previously mentioned, the cover of *V.I.P.* includes an image of Fela reading Walter Rodney's *How Europe underdeveloped Africa*. Much of Fela's discussion of colonial education in "Mr. Grammarticalogylistationalism is the boss" and in other compositions such as "I.T.T." and "Perambulator" is reminiscent of Rodney's critique of the function of colonial education as a cultural component of the intentional underdevelopment of Africa (1981: 238-61). In "Perambulator" (1998) Fela points out the disparities involved in the working-class experience of working long hours for little pay, decades on end, only to be rewarded with a cheap gold wristwatch at the end of one's career. The reason Fela gives for this inequity is the purposefully poor quality of colonial and neocolonial educational systems, designed to prevent people from questioning their lot in life.

As him go to school before
No solution
Them go teach am plenty things
No solution
Them go teach am plenty English
No solution
Them no teach am nothing for himself
No solution
Them go give am certificate
No solution
To go carry file for office
No solution
Them go give am certificate
No solution
To make am certified slave
No solution
Them go give am certificate
No solution
To make am civil servant
No solution
Them go teach am for them school
No solution

That Mungo Park discovered River Niger
No solution
I say when Mungo Park him reach-e River Niger
Na African people na them show am the way
You see?

Interestingly, Rodney mentions at one point in the section of his book dedicated to education an example of a “West Indian calypsonian who, in satirizing his colonial school days, remarked that had he been a bright student he would have learned more and turned out to be a fool” (248). Fela made a similar statement in an interview regarding the culturally stultifying effects of Nigerian colonial schools.

Go to all the African schools.... No single African student knows anything about African history. Africa taught the world about music, but the Christians and the Muslims fucked the African’s minds up. All the best African musicians, all the best artists, gave up the bus - they wanted to play like the White man. The African man is very proud of classical music. (Imitating an African with an English accent) “Oh yes, I like Bach” (Tannenbaum 1985: 24).

But as interesting and incisive as the music of this second phase may be, Olaniyan contends that it had not yet progressed beyond a moralistic type of cultural essentialism to a more mature and grounded political analysis. Olaniyan identifies the final phase of Fela’s artistic development as signaling his status as a “political Afrobeat musician,” proposing narratives that historicized political phenomena, framing them in terms of class relations, racial relations, and the larger structures of imperialism and neocolonialism (2004: 57). Fanon refers to the third phase of artistic development as the fighting phase, during which the intellectual “...shake[s] the people. Instead of according the people’s lethargy an honored place in his esteem, he turns himself into an awakener of the people; hence comes a fighting literature, a revolutionary literature, and a national literature” (1963: 222-23). In this phase, though, the artist is still using the techniques and language

of the oppressor, Fanon not allowing for the possibility that a Westernized artist could make a substantial connection within his vernacular community.

The native intellectual who comes back to his people by way of cultural achievements behaves in fact like a foreigner. Sometimes he has no hesitation in using a dialect in order to show his will to be as near as possible to the people; but the ideas that he expresses and the preoccupations he is taken up with have no common yardstick to measure the real situation which the men and women of his country know (223).

It is poignant, then, that after having returned from his university education in London trying to play jazz in Nigerian nightclubs, Fela's mother commented that jazz was alienating him from Nigerian audiences, urging him to return to playing African music (Moore 2009: 73). In addition, Fela's adoption of Pidgin as his primary language of performance, as will be discussed below, indicates a changing sense of Fela's consciousness regarding his own class position with respect to his primary, intended audience: urban working-class Nigerians. These examples begin to form a picture of growing self-awareness coupled with an increasingly material orientation in his political analysis.

But while Fela's political analysis may have become more concerned with structural issues and material conditions, his compositions of this period maintained their narrative focus on the interpersonal conflicts of politics rather than relying upon an abstract and unsubtle didacticism. In the 1982 composition "Power show" (2000c) Fela discusses the rampant abuse of the personal power exhibited by government bureaucrats, interpreted as being part of a neo-colonialist mentality. Fanon writes of the colonizer beating up on the colonized, prompting the colonized to beat on fellow colonized (1963: 54). The proletariat, as irreplaceable functionaries, is pampered by the colonial regime (109), while the lumpenproletariat fights on the side of the oppressor as soldiers and

police (137). “Power show,” released in 1982, illustrates Fela’s subtle yet direct rhetorical style by engaging the audience in a story that is all too universally familiar, aided in its dialogic intent by the harmonic and rhythmic structures of the music itself. The entire composition is built around a C Dorian harmonic center with the bass and guitars maintaining a steady vamp throughout. All of the musical elements combined work to highlight the political discourse of the lyrics, the jazz elements illustrating Fela’s cultural independence and cosmopolitanism. The single harmonic center, referred to in chapter 2 as a plateau structure, provides, almost literally, a harmonically uncluttered platform from which Fela can speak. In the long vocal section (c.6:04-9:45), “Power Show” highlights Fela’s powerful yet humorous critique of Nigerian governmental corruption and the petty power displays of some of its officials, highlighting the humiliating yet all-too-common scene of an immigration official needlessly taunting and delaying someone who is trying to cross the border. The official looks over the dirty clothes and unsophisticated manner of the person and decides he is a “nonentity.” The official wanders off to use the bathroom, comb his hair, and take a nap, while the person who is trying to cross the border has no choice but to wait with feigned patience. Fela draws a parallel between this scene and similar scenes throughout Nigeria, perpetuated by the petty behavior of the neo-colonial elite and government functionaries, rather accurately characterizing the relationship many Nigerians feel they have with their government (structure), and thereby illuminating the superstructure of laws and values that contribute to the politically oppressive environment in Nigeria.¹²⁷ As such, Fela is

¹²⁷ Marx proposes the idea of structure and superstructure as a means of differentiating the relationship between people as economic beings and the laws that govern: “In the social production of their life, men enter into definite relations that are indispensable and independent of their will, relations of production

performing the literary function of the fighting phase of Fanon's exposition on the literature of colonized people. Fela's politics and lifestyle, articulated in his songs, attempted to awaken ordinary Nigerians to the largely obscured forces that impacted their lives. In "Power show" the specific problem is the arrogance of an immigration official, but in highlighting the fact that this dynamic takes place in many government offices Fela shows his audience that there is a systemic problem across government offices – a problem that impacts him as well as them.

But "Power show" and other works such as the 1983 composition "Perambulator" (1998) include an element of humor in their social and political critique, standing in contrast to other compositions from the late-1970s onward such as "Authority stealing" (2000e) and "I.T.T. (International thief thief)" (2000c) which were harsher and more direct. Olaniyan suggests that in the early to mid-1970s, immediately following his political epiphany, Fela's songs were humorous though primarily moralistic – "the Afrobeat social reformer" – taking the foundational structures of society for granted and focusing, instead, on lecturing his audience about social disorder and bad, un-African behavior (2004: 48). In the 1970 composition "Buy Africa" (1997c) Fela encourages Africans to support African economies through buying local goods. In the 1975 composition "Who no know go know" (2001b) Fela laments the lack of knowledge among Africans as to their own historical figures, though he is not yet able to articulate the structural dynamic that create this educational deficit, and, bizarrely, promotes Idi

which correspond to a definite stage of development of their material productive forces. The sum total of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which, rises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness" (Marx and Engels 1978: 4).

Amin as an African leader on the same level of global cultural importance as Kwame Nkrumah and Sekou Touré. As Fela matured in his political outlook, the songs after this moralizing period reflect what Olaniyan describes as Fela's period of fully "political Afrobeat," in which he was able to lead his audience in their understanding of the structural nature of oppression (2004: 57).

In addition, in this later phase Fela began to articulate a more globally oriented understanding of oppression, advocating a Pan-African vision of political and cultural relations that closely followed other musicians' growing interest in the political stance of Malcolm X (32). Frank Kofsky describes what he terms Malcolm X's late-life "revolutionary socialist internationalism" as a framework that greatly influenced the politics of black musicians in the 1960s (1998b: 476). In this later phase of Malcolm's political development he drew parallels between African freedom movements, the Cuban revolution, and the need for a social revolution in the United States (Malcolm X 1965: 9). He also noted the ties between international struggles and local struggles as a means of making a connection, for his audience, between distant international events, local conditions, and the overall need for education: "You can't understand what is going on in Mississippi if you don't understand what is going on in the Congo.... [The] same interests are at stake..." (125).

While Fela at first approached politics from a local Nigerian point of view, the text of his songs ultimately became broader commentaries on global politics and economics. "I.T.T. (International Thief Thief)" is an indictment of multinational corporations which promote and take advantage of corruption in the Nigerian government as a means of gaining access to and control over Nigerian land and resources. The song

draws links between slavery, colonialism, multinational corporations, and Nigerian governmental corruption, outlining the neocolonial superstructure in a way that engages its listeners in a political discourse and impacts upon their own sense of class consciousness. Fela calls out the neocolonial Nigerian elites who use their business and governmental positions to accumulate personal wealth. In the passage quoted as an epigraph to this chapter, the irony of the choral phrase “long time ago” resides in the fact that, for Fela, Nigerian elites who continue to act as proxies for European and American governments and industries are still carrying shit – both a literal reference to the British colonial preference for the use of bucket latrines in urban areas, creating work for some Nigerians as carriers of human waste, and a metaphorical connection between this newly created profession and the neocolonial activities of contemporary Nigerian politicians (Olaniyan 2004: 148). As such, carrying shit was brought to Nigeria “long time ago,” but this practice which was “na for them culture” is still metaphorically taking place. Fanon comments that the bourgeoisie is the primary class which connects the nation to the neocolonial powers (1963: 152). Creating a bourgeois dictatorship, the former colonizers and their business interests promote a leader who will stabilize the region and protect their interests (165), making it necessary, according to Fanon, to stifle the growth of the bourgeoisie in order to truly de-colonize (175). This promotion of social revolution through the creation of class consciousness represents the final stage of Fela’s transformation from the traditional intellectual whose activities supported the agenda of the ruling class to the organic intellectual of much of his later career.

One of the most significant events in Fela’s political development and cultural reorientation was his meeting, in Los Angeles, and becoming romantically involved with

Sandra Izsadore, a former member of the Black Panther Party (BPP). Izsadore was a self-described cultural nationalist who had become involved with the BPP and other protest movements as a means of political expression of “Black Pride” (Moore 2009: 92). She indicates that in 1969 she was a member of an African dance troupe called Swaba when one of the conga players in the group, named Juno, introduced her to Fela at the Ambassador Hotel in Los Angeles. Much of the relationship between Fela and Izsadore was spent talking politics, with Izsadore freely sharing her views and recounting her arrest for assaulting a police officer during the 1967 Los Angeles riots (95). Though Izsadore didn’t know it at the time – “I assumed Fela was already there” (96) – Fela was seemingly unfamiliar with the entirety of Black Power ideology.

I felt that Fela being an African from Africa, he would more or less laugh at me trying to do an African thing, as if I couldn’t do it good enough. But I didn’t know at that time that I was surprising Fela and teaching him at the same time (97).

Having discovered Fela’s relative lack of political consciousness, Izsadore introduced him to the ideas and rhetoric of African-American political and cultural figures such as Huey Newton, Eldridge Cleaver, Stokely Carmichael, Angela Davis, Martin Luther King, Elijah Mohammed, Jesse Jackson, and Malcolm X (95-96). Fela was particularly influenced by reading the Autobiography of Malcolm X, claiming Malcolm as his new hero:

This man was talking about the history of Africa, talking about the white man...Ohhhh! I never read a book like that before in my life. After Simon Templar¹²⁸ – that fictitious man I’d wanted to imitate – here was a true story, about a MAN! Can you imagine how it took me? Ohhhh! I said, ‘This is a MAN!’ I wanted to be like Malcolm X! Fuck it! Shit! I wanted to be Malcolm X, you

¹²⁸ Simon Templar was a fictional character in a series of mystery novels, films, and television shows, all known popularly as *The saint*. The character and most of the novels and screenplays were written by Leslie Charteris.

know. I was so unhappy that this man was killed. Everything about Africa started coming back to me (85).

The influence of Malcolm X on Fela, and on musicians in general, is important not only as a politically significant role model, but also as an intellectual who tied together music, politics, and freedom, allowing artists to envision a newly politicized aesthetic. Malcolm commented that jazz is,

[The] only area of the American scene where the black man has been free to create.... If given intellectual independence... [The black man] can come up with a philosophy that nobody has heard of yet. He can invent a society, a social system, an economic system, a political system, that is different from anything that exists or has ever existed anywhere on earth. He will improvise; he'll bring it out from within himself (1992: 63-64).

American jazz musicians of the 1960s noted Malcolm's impact on their sense of political consciousness as it related to their music. Archie Shepp, in the liner notes to *Fire Music*, writes of Malcolm's politics and rhetoric being born from the same conditions of frustration he believed was central to the creation of jazz: "Malcolm knew what it is to be faceless in America and to be sick and tired of that feeling. And he knew the pride of black, the negritude which was bigger than Malcolm himself. There'll be other Malcolms" (1995 [1965]). Essentially Malcolm acted as a strong signifier to musicians and other intellectuals, representing both a person of intellectual depth and vision as well as an exemplar of the "Black Experience."

What Coltrane signifies for black people because of the breadth of his vision and the incredible energy behind his spiritual quest, Malcolm X signifies in another way – not as musician, but simply and profoundly as black man, as Black Experience, and that experience in process of discovering itself, of celebrating itself (Henderson 1969: 110).

Fela was influenced immediately by Malcolm's oratorical style – the use of sarcasm and irony in particular was syncretic with Fela's own style – and by his emphasis

of black pride, black beauty, and black self-reliance (Veal 1994: 117). Fela was well aware of African-American music – soul music, and James Brown in particular, were very popular throughout West Africa in the 1960s, causing most leaders of popular groups to add soul music to their repertoire or somehow combine elements of soul with their own music (57). Veal notes that many West African groups in the late-60s to early-70s included elements of Western rock, funk, and soul in their music, naming Osibisa, Sonny Okosuns, Monomono (led by Joni Haastrup) as representative examples (79).¹²⁹ Monomono’s “Ema kowe iasa ile wa” includes subtle and virtuosic blues guitar and electric piano phrasing played over a shifting rhythmic bed that is unmistakably West African (Various artists 2008).¹³⁰ Geraldo Pino and the Heartbeats’s “Heavy heavy heavy” includes elements of James Brown’s insistent funk rhythm along with the subtlety of Percy Mayfield and an organ style that sounds distinctly like Fela (Various artists 2010). Fela was particularly taken with Brown, though, whose musical style ultimately found its way into the mix of Afrobeat as a prominent feature. Brown’s frequent use of long, rhythmically complex single chord (modal) vamps allowed Fela the freedom to concentrate, in performance, on delivering the text of his compositions, creating, again, a plateau or platform from which to speak. Like Malcolm, Fela then developed an idiomatic style of singing that lent itself to sermonizing – a style of dialogic performance called *yabis* music which will be discussed in more detail below.

Fela was, as well, influenced by Malcolm’s intellectual awakening, self-education, and revisionist approach to black history. Malcolm provided for Fela, and

¹²⁹ Veal cites two compilation CDs which feature rock influenced music: *Money no be sand* (Various artists 1995) and *Africa funk* (Various artists 1998), both of which have been difficult to locate.

¹³⁰ Veal comments on Fela’s keyboard style, comparing his timbral and percussive approach to the playing of Sly Stone, Art Neville, Booker T. Jones, and James Brown (2000: 84-85).

others, a “counterdiscourse to the prevailing Euro-American hegemony characterized by racial apartheid and all the imaginable inequities that attend it” (Olaniyan 2004: 30).

Olaniyan suggests that Fela took three primary lessons from Malcolm’s writings: the old adage that “knowledge is power”; the importance of “speaking truth to power”; and “the significance...of advocating and cultivating pan-African political and cultural relations and unity” (31-32). Fela noted that Malcolm’s conversion to Islam had provided him with the structure and discipline by which he was able to educate himself, seeking out books that provided a revised framework of history – history that had been hidden from people of color by the dominant (white) culture (Malcolm X and Haley 1964: 177-78). In this sense Malcolm – and Fela through Malcolm’s influence – was fulfilling Carter G.

Woodson’s exhortation toward self-education in the service of liberation.

Philosophers have long conceded...that every man has two educations: “that which is given to him, and the other that which he gives himself. Of the two kinds the latter is by far the more desirable. Indeed all that is most worthy in man he must work out and conquer for himself. It is that which constitutes our real and best nourishment. What we are merely taught seldom nourishes the mind like that which we teach ourselves” (Woodson 1933: 126).¹³¹

Fela not only followed this philosophy in his own life, but also proselytized to others.

Mabinuori Idowu stated that Fela had “decided that it was time to re-educate and re-direct the thinking of the African man” (1986: 6). Olakunle Tejuoso confirmed Fela’s emphasis of reading and self-education, commenting on his role in cultivating political awareness among his audience during his regular performances at The African Shrine.

Fela was the eye-opener for [a lot] of us – this man had a message.... In the 70s, Fela would be in The Shrine with books spread out for all the university students, telling them: “You don’t know anything, go and read this book....” He was a force for us. Where else could we get this knowledge about ourselves? There were

¹³¹ In this passage Woodson quotes Jean-Paul Richter, though he does not cite a specific source.

no books to read, if you're not in the right discipline, you wouldn't know. But you go to The Shrine, listen to the records, and there's a message there (Veal 1994: 25).

Fela viewed his role as a public intellectual as that of a commentator who acts as the "...untamable, unassimilable Negro who 'knocks down the system and breaks the treaties'" (Fanon 1967: 167), involving himself in the negation of the state and material conditions of Nigerian society, making clear to his audience that, in Marx's words, things "appear upside-down as in a camera obscura" (Marx and Engels 1978: 154). By making explicit the dialectical relation of his audience to the state – an obscured relationship that benefited the state in its obscurity – Fela purposefully made himself an annoyance to the ruling elite, "a scandal and an abomination to bourgeoisdom and its doctrinaire professors" (302). His outspoken political activity became a negation of the state and its norms, just as his musical innovations became a negation of the musical and social practices of Nigerian musicians before him, transcending the systems of patronage which had long been associated with some musical genres in West Africa.¹³²

It is important to note here that the focus on Black Power ideology as the primary source for Fela's political activism is often misleading given that Fela's family has a long and well-documented history of activism (Veal 2000: 24-25): In addition to his position as headmaster of Abeokuta Grammar School, Fela's father was the first president of the Nigerian Union of Teachers; Fela's mother was a well known women's rights activist,

¹³² Marcuse further develops Marx's theory of negation, both of whom challenge and complicate Hegel: "Hegel's philosophy is indeed what the subsequent reaction termed it, a negative philosophy. It is originally motivated by the conviction that the given facts that appear to common sense as the positive index of truth are in reality the negation of truth, so that truth can only be established by their destruction. The driving force of the dialectical method lies in this critical conviction. Dialectic in its entirety is linked to the conception that all forms of being are permeated by an essential negativity, and that this negativity determines their content and movement" (Marcuse 1999: 26-27).

anti-colonial activist, and a union leader; Fela's brother Bekolari is a physician, a former secretary-general of the Nigerian Medical Association, and a past chairman of the first Nigerian human rights organization, Campaign for Democracy. He spent some years in prison during the 1990s as a result of his political activities; Fela's brother Olikoye, another physician, is a former medical school professor, past Minister of Health, and past Deputy Director General of the World Health Organization. In addition to his immediate family, Fela's first cousin is the Nigerian writer and political activist Wole Soyinka. While it is clear that Fela's exposure to and engagement with Black Power ideologies was significant to his sense of political consciousness, it acted merely as a catalyst for his transformation rather than as a collection of entirely new information written on a previously "apolitical" *tabula rasa*. Stephanie Shonekan argues that, while Fela's 1969-70 trip to the United States certainly had an immediate and dramatic effect on the political content of his music, the legacy of his mother's activism – and, as will be discussed below, the songs that accompanied the women's movement's protests his mother helped to lead – provided a "geographic/cultural/ethnic/familial immediacy [that trumped] the temporal immediacy of the Black Power movement" (2009: 133).

Considering the legacy of political engagement in his immediate family alone, one can begin to see some of the tensions between the often-told portrayal of Fela's political conversion as originating in North American Black Power ideology and the realities of Fela's political upbringing. George Lipsitz notes that Fela's introduction to Black Power ideologies did not supplant his politically informed upbringing in Nigeria so much as add the critical dimension of a "diasporic consciousness" to his sense of politics and music (Lipsitz 1997: 39-40). Fela's mother, FRK, was, in particular, a much more

influential political presence in Fela's career than is often described in the literature.¹³³

Fela often mentioned his admiration for his mother's fearless determination and outspoken nature in her political activities: "My mother was quite heavy politically. And, ohhhhhhh, I liked the way she took on those old politicians, all those dishonest rogues. She wouldn't have anything to do with them. None of them" (Moore 2009: 42). In discussing his memories of his mother's political commitment and determination, Fela recounted an incident from 1947 in which FRK drew national attention.¹³⁴

She was organizing a big protest demonstration with the women of Abeokuta. She was protesting on the streets with the women. And they went straight to see the District Officer of Abeokuta. He was a young white boy; one of those fresh British guys who tried getting arrogant with my mother. She had gone to see him to expose the demonstrators' grievances. The District Officer must have said something in a disdainful voice, like: "Go on back home." To which my mother exploded: "You bastard, rude little rat...!" Something like that. Ohhhhhhhhh! What a scandal! It was something heavy at that time. And the news went around like fire, man. The *Daily News*, the national newspaper then, printed the story immediately. Imagine insulting the highest motherfucking representative of the British imperial crown in Abeokuta. Ohhhhhhhhh, man! I was proud (42).

Fela often rode with his mother in the car as she saw to her political work with the Abeokuta Women's Union (AWU) and the Nigerian Women's Union (NWU) in the 1940s, attending campaign meetings and marveling at the fact that she was the first woman in Nigeria to drive a car (42). In addition, Fela recounted a story in which his mother once introduced him to Kwame Nkrumah when he visited Nigeria on vacation in the mid-1950s, Nkrumah joking with FRK that he didn't want to meet with any Nigerian

¹³³ A few significant contributions should be noted. Cheryl Johnson-Odim and Nina Emma Mba (1997) have written an excellent biography of FRK, only mentioning Fela in a few relevant sections. Raisa Simola (1999) tracks some of the main currents in FRK's political life through the literature on both FRK and Fela. Stephanie Shonekan (2009) discusses FRK's direct influence on Fela's music, significantly developing a minor theme from Johnson-Odim and Mba.

¹³⁴ This incident is documented in (Mba 1982: 151).

politicians on his trip because he wouldn't meet with "corrupt people.... They are slaves to the people in England. You know that" (46-47).¹³⁵

Wole Soyinka, as well, mentions the formative influence of FRK's political activities in the 1930s and 1940s on his own sense of politics (2006: 35), proudly re-telling the story of FRK chewing out a colonial administrator over the phone regarding the Allied use of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, drawing parallels with the determination of the AWU to unseat the Alake of Abeokuta from his installment by the colonial administration (1981: 223-24).¹³⁶ In Moore's book Fela recounted the beginnings of FRK's problem with the Alake.

The Oba Alake Sir Ladapo Ademola II was the Chief of Abeokuta. But my mother never called him a king, as he had titled himself. She called him a chief. Her reasons are historically right because Abeokuta never had a king. Odùdúwà, the ancestor of all Yorubas, founded the sacred city of Ilè-Ifè. Odùdúwà had only seven children and they were the only kings of Yorubaland.... The Alake was not one of those seven kings. So my mother would never call him king. When she spoke to the press or to white people she would always say, "The Chief of Abeokuta, the Alake" (2009: 43).

FRK's forthright confrontation with authority gained her great respect among ordinary Nigerians, but it also skirted with danger in that such a confrontational attitude is often met with reprisals.

One of the things that becomes clear in Fela's biography is the extent to which Fela was impressed by the people in his life who risked and suffered physical harm in the

¹³⁵ Johnson-Odim and Mba state that FRK probably first met Nkrumah in the mid-1940s when Nkrumah and Joe Appiah were vice-presidents of the West African Students Union (WASU) while FRK and her husband were leaders of the Nigerian branch of WASU (1997: 126-27).

¹³⁶ Despite the many places where Soyinka recounts his sometimes awed impressions of FRK in *Ake*, the 1981 memoir of his early years, James Gibbs, writing in 1988, stated that he had not yet seen evidence of her "remarkable" example reflected in Soyinka's fictional female characters: "I suspect that she has already provided a model for Soyinka himself, for his political style seems to owe something to her impetuosity, and to her perception of confrontations in terms of individuals" (1988: 544).

expression of their political beliefs. Both of Fela's parents risked their safety – his dad was nearly killed for refusing to remove his hat for a Nigerian soldier (Moore 2009: 38) – in defiantly standing by their convictions. Fela also seemed to be very impressed with Izsadore's willingness to go to jail (85). Clearly Fela adopted these attitudes toward political expression and personal risk in his music, indicating that the police harassment began in earnest with the change in the political orientation of his songs and with the re-naming of the band (Koola Lobitos became Africa 70) and the club (the Afro-Spot became the Africa Shrine) in the early 1970s (110). It bears noting, though, that there is a major qualitative and political difference between Izsadore's willingness to risk her personal safety with the American authorities and Fela's willingness to risk his personal safety with the Nigerian authorities. In the case of Izsadore, she was protesting against a power structure that she had every reason to believe acted toward her based on racist ideologies. Fela, on the other hand, dealt with the Nigerian authorities with the attitude that they should have been representing his interests as a Nigerian citizen, often expressing intense frustration with the Nigerian government's actions against its own citizens. In recounting one of his arrests from the mid-1970s, Fela stated,

...after they put me in that cell with people they call "criminals," I started thinking: "Who the fuck is society? Who jails society when it does horrors to people?"... I concluded to myself: "Fuck society, man. It's unjust!" (119).

Similarly, FRK expressed great surprise and disappointment in the fact that Nigerian authorities had attacked the Kalakuta Republic in 1977, exclaiming after the family's suit against the government was dismissed, "Why are they doing this to us?" (Johnson-Odim and Mba 1997: 169-70).

But FRK is often acknowledged as the primary source of Fela's pervasive anti-authoritarian attitude, having provided him with the example of her early political activities and having supported his own political works and ideas throughout his career. His anti-authoritarian nature, though, also impacted his sense of identity and family. In the early 1970s Fela dropped his family name Ransome, which he considered to be a colonial name, replacing it with Anikulapo, meaning "one who carries death in his pocket" (Collins 1992: 76). Following from this, in the early 1970s FRK also unofficially adopted the name Anikulapo in place of Ransome as a means of expressing her support of Fela's political struggles (Johnson-Odim and Mba 1997: 168).¹³⁷ Elsewhere Fela discussed his anger at the fact that his parents had asked a German missionary to name him at birth, saddling him with the birth name Hildegart: "Me, who was supposed to come and talk about Blackism and Africanism, the plight of my people. Me, who was to try and do something to change that" (Moore 2009: 29). Interestingly, as a result of her experiences with racism while a student in England, FRK had also years earlier rejected her original first name Frances, from that point forward only using Funmilayo, her middle name (31).

But of course the anti-authoritarian spirit was not only directed toward personal and familial relations primarily, expressing itself outwardly toward politics in ways that were simultaneously more profound and subtle. In the 1940s FRK abandoned her western-styled clothes in favor of Yoruba traditional clothes and began to give speeches in Yoruba instead of English as a means of identifying with the market women,

¹³⁷ FRK's husband, Rev. Ransome-Kuti died in the 1950s. Though Rev. Ransome-Kuti was very supportive of his wife's political work, it is impossible to say whether FRK would have changed her family name had he still been alive.

indicating an awareness of the class differences that lay between her and the market women she represented as the head of their union (Johnson-Odim and Mba 1997: 66-67). There was a similar dynamic which existed between Fela and his intended audience in that Fela made a conscious decision to adopt Pidgin as his primary language of performance (Veal 2000: 94-95), although it has been suggested that the adoption of Pidgin has also been undertaken, in some cases, as a means of broadening a recording artist's marketability in a global yet predominantly Anglophone record-buying market (Fosu-Mensah, Duran, and Stapleton 1987: 229). In both of these instances, though, one is reminded of Gayatri Spivak's articulation of the politics embedded in one's personal history, highlighting the need to deconstruct one's own class privilege in order to effectively engage with social change (1985: 120). As such, both Fela and FRK sought to remove some of the barriers that separated them from their artistic and political audiences, with the wider distribution of musical recordings also aiding the distribution of ideas. In the 1977 composition "No agreement" (2000d), Fela states "Your papa talk, my papa talk/My mama talk, your mama talk," indicates that the source of Fela's anti-authoritarian inheritance is not only his mother but all parents who instill wisdom in their children and who create history and community morality through the discursive act of talking with each other and with their children. In this lyric Fela also draws a parity with his audience in that his mother's famously political outspokenness is equated with the ability and the right of all parents to talk – a right that was exercised in his family and ought to be exercised in others.

Yabis songs: The political discourse of performance:

Of course the issues of talking and outspokenness – and of language in general – are central issues with regard to Fela’s music, marking the ways in which he prolifically composed, engaged with his audience, and created a larger discourse of African identity and politics that continues to significantly impact contemporary musics and people’s understanding of the functions of music in society.¹³⁸ Michael Olatunji credits Fela with introducing *yabis* music to Nigerian popular music, establishing its popularity during the 1970s when he began to present three weekly shows at his Lagos club the Africa Shrine: Friday night was known as “*Yabis* night,” Saturday night was “Saturday comprehensive show,” and Sunday was “Sunday afternoon jump.”¹³⁹ *Yabis* night on Fridays attracted the largest crowds, and Fela would stretch out his performances and *yab* a bit, ridiculing himself, the band, the audience, and members of government (note the line from Fela’s composition “I.T.T,” “Make I yab then” (c.12:11)). It was during these *yabis* performances that Fela would begin to turn his critical voice toward the corruption and the seeming inanities he saw as being part of contemporary neo-colonial Nigerian life (2007: 27).

Olatunji states that after taking the stage, Fela would often call to the crowd, “Everybody say *ye-ye*,” the crowd dutifully responding, “*Ye-ye*,” indicating their agreement to participate and their willingness to listen.¹⁴⁰ Several lyric transcriptions in CD liner notes list *ye-ye* as a Pidgin word meaning stupid (e.g., Anikulapo-Kuti 1998), though Olatunji notes that when the two syllables are combined and accented in a

¹³⁸ For an overview of Fela’s influence on contemporary Hip Hop and R&B see (Patel 2003: 25-35).

¹³⁹ Veal states that when he visited Lagos in 1992 the weekly performances were Tuesday, Friday, and Saturday nights (2000: 9), noting that Tuesdays were more contemplative and Fridays more dance oriented, with Saturdays still called “comprehensive show” (5-6).

¹⁴⁰ Veal notes the same common exchange with audiences (2).

particular way (*yèyè*) it becomes the Yoruba word for satire (32). But whether the word is “stupid” or “satire” – or simultaneously both – after a few rounds of call and response the audience is with Fela, ready to commune with the “Chief Priest” in a public ceremony that was explicitly political and counter-cultural, couched in the guise of fun but infused with intellectual intensity and seriousness of purpose. The call-and-response pattern, of course, is one of the most prevalent features of Fela’s lyrics, central to nearly every composition after the early-70s shift in the music. Typically the dancers and horn section will respond as a chorus in repetitive phrases that are initiated by Fela, as in the following passage from the 1976 composition “Zombie” (2001d).

Zombie o zombie
 Zombie o zombie
 Zombie no go go unless you tell am to go
 Zombie
 Zombie no go stop unless you tell am to stop
 Zombie
 Zombie no go turn unless you tell am to turn
 Zombie
 Zombie no go think unless you tell am to think
 Zombie
 Zombie o zombie
 Zombie o zombie

Through the sheer repetition of the word “zombie” this composition literally drives its message home, listing all the directions soldiers are given through endless drills such that they simply act when ordered to do so, bypassing their ability to think.

Attention
 Zombie
 Big march, Small march
 Zombie
 Left turn, Right turn
 Zombie
 About turn, Double up
 Zombie
 Salute, Open your hat

Zombie
 Stand at ease, Fall in
 Zombie
 Fall out, Fall down
 Zombie
 Get ready, Attention
 Zombie
 Big march, Small march
 Zombie
 Left turn, Right turn
 Zombie
 About turn, Double up
 Zombie
 Salute, Open your hat
 Zombie
 Stand at ease, Fall in
 Zombie
 Fall out, Ha!

Having been stripped of their humanity, the soldiers, as zombies, dispassionately follow their orders.

Go and kill
 Joro jara joro
 Go and die
 Joro jara joro
 Go and quench
 Joro jara joro
 Put am for reverse
 Joro jara joro

The repetition of the various chorus phrases act on the audience in a manner that is almost the reversal of the soldiers' dehumanization – where the soldiers are taught to follow orders without question, Fela's audience is challenged to question the order of a society that too often predicates its power on the unquestioned violence of its soldiers. In this repetitive yet discursive performance dynamic one is reminded again of the "ultratextual relationship," mentioned in chapter 2, that often lies between African performers and audiences: audiences are mindful of the artificial nature of performance

while maintaining that any performance is a reflection of and a comment on reality (Molette and Molette 1986: 80-81).

The essence of *yabis* in performance, though, is Fela's habit of parting from the script in a long, digressive manner, much like in the scene from the documentary *Music is the weapon* (Flori and Tchalgadjieff 1982) in which Fela stands at a microphone after being released from jail in the early-80s, comparing the Nigerian penal system's treatment of prisoners to that of Nazi Germany.¹⁴¹ Isidore Okpewho identifies digression as a stylistic component of much African storytelling, noting Fela's habit of digression in the middle of performance, lecturing and communing with his audience (1992: 96). He observes that this type of digression is characteristic of Yoruba hunters' performances (*ijala*) in which the performer continually moves from theme to theme in order to maintain the audience's interest, to create suspense, or to didactically lecture (1992: 97; Babalola 1966: 64-65). Soyinka notes that *ijala* is an oral compositional practice associated with the Yoruba deity Ogun, the hunter, who "manifests a temperament for artistic creativity matched by technological proficiency" and whose "world is the world of craft, song, and poetry." In celebration of Ogun, *ijala* is used, as well, to comment on and speculate about "animal and plant life, [seeking] to capture the essence and relationships of growing things and the insights of man into the secrets of the universe" (1976: 28). Idowu states that Ogun is widely believed to be the deity "who goes in advance to prepare the road for others" in both the literal sense of showing one the way as well as the metaphorical sense of preparing the way for all other deities to enter Ile-Ifè and therefore interact with people (1994 [1960]: 86). Musically, Olaniyan characterizes

¹⁴¹ This scene is c.36:10-37:30.

Fela's music and life by reference to Ogun's wild nature, causing Fela to often choose fast tempos over more serene and contemplative musical settings (2004: 152).¹⁴²

But even if the tempos may seem fast, most compositions allowed for space in which Fela might *yab* with his audience. Related to the Nigerian Pidgin word *yab*, meaning to make fun of a person or thing, *yabis* music is music that ridicules (Olatunji 2007: 26). Olatunji further defines *yabis* as "a biting satirical song that is deliberately composed with the aim of correcting an atrocity, a misdemeanor or sacrilege committed by either an individual or a corporate body within a particular society," relating his definition of *yabis* to Afolabi's notion that expressive culture effects the "correction of vices" in society (Olatunji 2007: 27; Afolabi 2004: 151). *Yabis* music is similar in function to *efe* music from the Egbadó group of the larger Yoruba nation which allows performers to criticize or ridicule any individual or group within the community through the use of masks, dance, and musical performance. In *efe* the names of those being ridiculed are not mentioned, but the audience is given enough information to decode the meaning (Olatunji 2007: 27).

But *yabis* music has its own features that are distinct from more traditional musical forms and genres, most prominently in its use of Pidgin as a primary language of performance. Fela began to use pidgin as a means of widening his audience while pitching his message toward the subaltern (29), referring to Pidgin as "the language of the

¹⁴² The tempos of most of Fela's compositions, when measured by the standard Western measurement of quarter note beats per minute (BPM), are actually quite slow to medium, ranging from c.85-125 BPM (since nearly all of Fela's compositions include a steady shekere rhythm that sounds like four quarter notes per measure, I have chosen to use this standard measurement for tempo). The compositions "Perambulator" and "No buredi" seem to be exceptionally fast pieces at c.145 BPM each, though what makes these compositions fast is Fela's common use of 16th note subdivisions (jazz most often emphasizes 8th note subdivisions), causing the music to feel more busy even while the tempos are moderate.

common man” (Olatunji 2001: 42). Other musicians have similarly attempted to widen their audiences through the strategic deployment of language. Waterman writes that a jùjú bandleader from Ekiti, Nigeria told him in 1982 that he often recorded the A side of a record in his own Yoruba dialect and the B side in a more commonly understood “standardized” Yoruba in order to increase his potential audience from the local to the national and international (1990b: 372). Karin Barber also notes the use of English lyrics in recordings by West African popular musicians that are specifically targeted toward a Western audience, the musicians often recording separate versions of the same songs in local African languages (1987: 27). Nigerian Pidgin developed as a common trade language used by the multi-lingual working-class urban populations of Nigeria in their everyday negotiation of a greatly heterogeneous society (Olatunji 2001: 41). As with Pidgins everywhere, Nigerian Pidgin is not the native language of any population, but rather it exists to facilitate communication among diverse populations meeting and doing business in culturally diverse environments.¹⁴³ But Pidgin began to work its way through all levels of Nigerian society as some of the children of the Nigerian elite became a part of Fela’s audience. Mabinuori Idowu observes that Fela’s adoption of pidgin bears significance beyond its status as a common language of working-class Nigerians.

What makes it more explosive is its appeal to the teenage offspring of the Nigerian elites. For the first time, slum dwellers and the privileged children of the local (V.I.P.) elite have come together in a highly charged and educative cultural experience (1986: 95).

¹⁴³ Pidgins are most often discussed within the field of linguistics as a means by which people from diverse backgrounds create a common trade language. For a more general overview, Robert Hall (1966) offers a comprehensive discussion of the linguistic formation of pidgins. Geneva Smitherman describes the pidgin created in North America as a result of the Atlantic slave trade which eventually developed into an idiomatically distinct North American language (1977: 3-8).

Pidgin, as a vocabulary, lends itself particularly well to musical performance in that adjectives and adverbs are expected to not only perform as linguistic qualifiers, but they should also be onomatopoeically descriptive as in the percussive sound of the word *gbosa* used to accent the word “slap” in the song “Jaga Jaga” discussed below (Olatunji 2001: 45). In addition, Fela’s deployment of Pidgin allowed him to add syllables to words to make their presentation more rhythmically playful and to cause words to stand out in a sort of agogic accenting of their very presence – an oral compositional practice that Isidore Okpewho refers to as “marking time” with words (1992: 74). The word “dustbin” in the composition “Perambulator,” for instance, later becomes “dust-e-bin-e,” rhythmizing the word and accenting it in a manner that calls attention to its silliness in the discourse. Fela states that while many government officials from around the world travel to Europe to gain skills and knowledge that may not be available in their home countries, Nigerian politicians, in his estimation, waste resources and energy in traveling to England to study less consequential problems such as solid waste management – as if there was no solution to the complexities of solid waste management that could be created by Nigerians.

Of course Fela is not the only contemporary artist who has performed *yabis* songs, and *yabis* songs are not limited to Afrobeat artists. Other Nigerian artists such as Tunji Oleyana, Eedris Abdulkareem, African China, Femi Kuti, and Seyi Akinlolu have maintained the conversational spirit of Fela’s *yabis*, composing, recording, and releasing recordings as a means of injecting timely political commentary and dialogue into the everyday experience of Nigerian life (Olatunji 2007: 30). Olatunji gives the example of Abdulkareem’s hip hop composition “Jaga jaga” (2006), using the onomatopoetic words

*jaga jaga** and *gbosa** to indicate the chaos and too frequent gunfire that often intrudes upon and seems to characterize the experience of urban life in Nigeria (2009: 313).

Nigeria jaga jaga
Everything scatter scatter
Poor man dey suffer suffer
Gbosa! Gbosa!
Gunshot I dey hear...

When President Obasanjo criticized the song in the media, stating that “Nigeria is not jagajaga, it’s the boy’s papa, his mama and his entire family that are jagajaga,”

Abdulkareem followed up with another song in response, “Letter to the President” (Olatunji 2009: 326; Various artists 2006).

Hello Mr. President, Hello!
Jaga jaga no be insult
It simply means say things don* spoil
Mr. President, we want solution
People dema die across the nation
Poverty dey ruin we nation
Thief dem dey chop alone...
My people no go school-o
My people no know book-o
That’s why dem dey* crazy-o
That’s dem dey mad-o
Eedris, dem say na* your papa jaga jaga Eedris
Dem say na your mama jaga jaga
Na who be my papa?
Na who be my mama?
Naija* na my papa
Africa na my mama...

One of the ironies of this exchange between Abdulkareem and President Obasanjo is that Obasanjo was also Fela’s political nemesis decades earlier when he was the militarily appointed Nigerian head of state (1976-97). Obasanjo is named as one of the head thieves in Fela’s composition “I.T.T.,” and he was President when Fela’s Kalakuta Republic was famously ransacked in 1977. Obasanjo is mentioned by name again, along

with Vice-President Lt.Col. Shehu Yar’adua, in Fela’s 1981 composition “Coffin for head of state” (1999), recounting the incident in which Fela and others carried a coffin to the gate of the Dodan barracks in Lagos – the barracks from which the army launched its attack on Kalakuta – as a protest against the raid’s contribution toward hastening Fela’s mother’s death (Johnson-Odim and Mba 1997: 168-70).

We go Dodan barracks
Waka* waka waka
We reach them gate-e-o
Waka waka waka
We put the coffin down
Waka waka waka
Obasanjo dey there
Waka waka waka
With him big fat stomach
Waka waka waka
Yar’Adua dey there
Waka waka waka
With him neck like ostrich
Waka waka waka
We put the coffin down
Waka waka waka
Them no want take am
But them take am

And while Fela was not the only contemporary artist to produce *yabis* songs, he was also not the only *yabis* artist in the 1970s and 1980s. In the early 1980s Fela’s cousin Wole Soyinka composed and sang several songs with the popular Nigerian group Tunji Oyelana and His Benders, producing the album *Unlimited liability company* (1983). In the song “Unlimited liability company” Soyinka directly and explicitly addresses then President Shagari regarding rampant corruption in the Nigerian government, referring to the Presidency as if government was a business (Chairman), and finally calling for the President, in a bit of word play on Shagari’s name, to “share-de-gari” (*gari* is dried cassava flour, sometimes used as a metaphor for money).

Chairman, wetin* you dey find for home?
 We think say you still dey* overseas
 Ah, I forget, it's getting near the time
 For a meeting of all the shareholders...
 Chairman, dis meeting go hot-o
 Your directors don chop* all we money
 While you dey shake hands with kings and presidents
 Your business partners don* shake de treasury loose...
 Two point one billion naira na in you spend so far
 E don vanish for inside Kainji dam...
 How many many I do talk-o
 How many many I go shout-o
 What of that two point eight billion
 Wey you take hide and seek-o?
 Make y take yourself commot*
 Semi jeje,* se mi jeje...
 Me too, I want some gari
 Share-de-gari, share-de-gari
 Share-de-gari, share-de-gari (Olatunji 2007)

Soyinka's open willingness to name names and the clever word play in this song recall Fela's own practices, as in the song "I.T.T.," discussed above, where he names both Obasanjo and Abiola in a text that re-imagines International Telephone and Telegraph as International Thief Thief.

In the song "Etika revo wetin?," which James Gibbs translates as "What is this ethical revolution?" (1986a: 148), Soyinka openly mocks the infuriatingly bland and non-committal language of politicians in Nigeria while also confirming his own nationally-determined sense of patriotism. Gibbs notes that the song, through its constant airplay, became associated with political groups opposed to President Shagari's 1983 re-election campaign (1986b: 19), while Barber further observed that the song could be heard blaring from taxi drivers' stereos throughout Lagos in 1983 (1987: 3). The chorus of the song, in

fact, has become so well known that a number of writers, including Olaniyan, mistakenly identify the song's title as "I love my country."¹⁴⁴

I love my country, I no go lie
Na inside am I go live and die
I know my country, I no go lie
Na im an me go yab till I die
I love my country, I no go lie
Na inside am I go live and die
When he turn me so, I twist am so
He push me, I push am, I no go go (Olatunji 2007: 36).

In one verse of the song Soyinka conflates the chaos of poorly planned development with the inanities of political propaganda, juxtaposing the technological successes of the West to Nigeria's urban reality which necessitates viewing their urban landscape from "right in the middle of heavy traffic."

The Russian astronauts flying in space
Radioed a puzzle to their Moscow base
They said we are flying over Nigeria
And we see high mountains in built-up area
Right in the middle of heavy traffic
Is this space madness, tell us quick
The facts were fed to their master computer
Which soon analyzed the mystery factor
"That ain't no mountain," the computer said, snappish!
It's just a load of their national rubbish! (Olaniyan 2004: 101-02)

One thing to note in this passage is Soyinka's shift from Pidgin to standard English, leaving one writer to comment that, given Soyinka's occupation, education, and class status, such frequent shifting produces a version of Nigerian Pidgin that awkwardly "[groans] under the weight of standard English" (Omamor 1997; in Zabus 2007: 108

¹⁴⁴ This was a source of confusion and frustration in my own research until I found a close-up image of the LP projected as a graphic for an excerpt of "Etika revo wetin?" on a YouTube video, again identified as "I love my country" by the person who uploaded the video (plantetolusola 2009). The only U.S. library listed on WorldCat as holding this LP is the Smithsonian Institution. I am still trying to obtain a copy of the recording.

n.160). While Olatunji does state that Pidgin is an essential part of *yabis* music as it was conceived by Fela and other Nigerian artists, one could argue, as I will do in the examples following Soyinka's, that it is not a *sine qua non* of *yabis* if one begins to define the genre more broadly; if the importance of Pidgin is its ability to connect to a broad audience, then the use of other languages such as Yoruba and English can achieve this same goal in other contexts if their deployment is mindful of the music's audience. The common link that binds all examples of *yabis* music is its use as a tool for political commentary and discursive engagement.

In yet another part of the song Soyinka addresses the wastefulness of the Nigerian government's early-80s agricultural development project known as "The Green Revolution," noting the government's tendency to hire consultants to explain simple things for exorbitant amounts of money, and predicting the headache of waking one day to hear of a new fictional project called the Etika (Ethical) Revolution.

De day dem bring Green Revolution
 Country seek tink say he get salvation
 He give a shout, he tink at last
 Green Revolution go end in fast
 Education is good for me and you...
 But that was nothing but chicken feed
 A nation in need is my friend indeed
 Summon the Chief Chemical Analyzer
 To spell out the magic of fertilizer
 Country seek, hear me, I no be miser
 Millions dey hide for fertilizer...
 One morning time I wake for my bed
 And the radio say, I sick for my head
 No, make I talk true, de thing wey he mention
 Na something call Etika Revolution
 Etika Revo kinni?*

Etika Revolution
 Etika Revo how much?

Etika Revolution (Olatunji 2007: 36-37)

While one can surely debate the quality of the vocal performance on this recording, Soyinka's songs were closely tied to his primary vocations as a writer and political activist. Brian Crew briefly describes Soyinka's 1983 collection of political sketches, titled *Priority projects*, which were performed on street corners and university campuses in Nigeria as a form of political guerilla theater. The sketches attacked a number of the suspiciously wasteful and costly government projects such as the construction of a new capital city at Abuja and the failed "Green Revolution" project. Throughout all of the sketches ran the central theme of a worker digging a big hole, seen as "a visual metaphor of the bottomless pit of extravagance and corruption characterizing the Shagari regime" (2001: 101). While Crew briefly notes the use of songs in these sketches, Christiane Fioupou states that one of the songs was "Etika revo wetin?," also stating that one of the sketches was titled "Etika Revolution" (1989: 431). The songs, in this case, were composed as lyric poems that were integral to dramatic performances, but their musical setting and wide commercial distribution indicate a mindfulness of connecting political ideas with a broader audience that brings to mind Lipsitz's observation, mentioned earlier, that some artists use "commodity culture" as a means of distributing ideas and facilitating discourses (1997: 12). Soyinka, like Fela, recorded and distributed these songs as a means of popularizing a political discourse, though Fela was the more successful and influential musical artist, making Afrobeat the *yabis* genre *par excellence*.

But having established that Fela was not the only contemporary *yabis* artist, he was also not, arguably, the first artist to perform politically incisive *yabis* songs. Ato Quayson points out elements of irony and sarcasm in some of the song texts inscribed in Samuel Johnson's *The history of the Yorubas*, originally composed as a means of

performing a social and political critique, which one could argue indicates an early example of *yabis* music (1997: 32-34). Quayson notes that Johnson frequently used song texts throughout his narrative, leaving Michel Doortmont to speculate that the narrative is a “collection of not well connected praise-songs, engineered [by Johnson] into a seemingly coherent epic tale” (1994: 79). Quayson suggests that the section titled “Circumstances that led to the Ajayi war” is particularly illustrative of the historiographical use of song texts. In one song, which would have been sung by people in Oyo, the text mocks Adelu, the *Alààfin* of Oyo” (Johnson 2006 [1921]: 334).¹⁴⁵

L'aiye Onalu li ro'kan le okan
L'aiye Kurūmi li ro'gba ro'gba
L'aiye Adelu ni ipele itele idi

In Onalu's¹⁴⁶ time we used changes of dress
 In Kurūmi's time we used cloths of the finest weaving
 In Adelu's time our best becomes our every day's

Johnson observes that the third line regarding Adelu was understood by its intended audience to be an ironic jab, referring to a proverbial phrase, “*ibere otosi bi omo olorò la iri* (when poverty begins, one appears like a rich man's son),” meaning that when one is poor one cannot afford to buy new clothes, ultimately making it necessary to wear one's best clothes for everyday use.

Quayson agrees with Johnson's characterization of the lines, adding a few observations that add to its ironic depth. The first two lines are “parallel constructions which are praises of the conditions under Kurūmi,” lending even more weight to the jab

¹⁴⁵ The *Alààfin* is the principal *Qba* (king) of Oyo, the seat of Yoruba central government (Johnson 2006 [1921]: 40-41). Adelu was the *Alààfin* of Oyo c.1859-75.

¹⁴⁶ A footnote in Johnson indicates that Onalu is “Kurūmi's other name” (2006 [1921]: 334). Kurūmi was the *Arẹ* (senior councilor to an *Qba*) of Ijaye who refused to acknowledge Adelu's succession as *Alààfin* of Oyo (331).

embedded in the third line. Quayson also proposes that there is an alternate translation of the third line, hinging on the tonally affected interpretation of the words *itele idi*:

“depending on its tonal inflection, it could either mean ‘bunch of firewood’ or ‘buttocks.’” The new translation reads, “In Adelu’s time the fine cloths for our shoulders become that by which we covered our bottoms.” Given that, contextually, the word “bottom” or “buttocks” makes more sense than “bunch of firewood,” Quayson observes that in reading this third line “it is difficult to miss the irony tipping over into sarcasm.”

Johnson’s frequent use of song texts, then, are a means of adding drama to his historical narrative, creating a textual dynamic that “[invites] the audience/reader to participate in the history he is outlining. Even in cold print, the songs capture some of the tension of the lived experience of the events [Johnson] describes.” Quayson states that Johnson’s use of these song texts without paraphrase has the effect of injecting the voice of oral history into an otherwise written mode of historical narrative. He likens this tension between oral and written narrative to Hayden White’s observation that the problem of Enlightenment historians was “their incapacity to conceive of historical knowledge in general as a *problem*. This is because they drew the line too rigidly between ‘history’ on the one hand and ‘fable’ on the other, without recognizing the general difficulties in setting down truths about the past in the form of historical knowledge” (1978: 140). Following from White, Quayson adds that “the problem of history-as-knowledge would also relate to the difficulties in separating historical knowledge from the cultural discourse in which it is couched.” This is a particular problem with Johnson’s *History* in that it is a written narrative based on oral sources. One could also argue that there are places in the narrative where Johnson clearly undermines

the oral historical sources of his text. At the very beginning of the narrative, Johnson recounts the commonly understood history of Odùdúwà, the first king of the Yoruba, up to his break from his Islamic heritage (2006 [1921]: 3-4). Then Johnson states, “Such is the commonly received account among this intelligent though unlettered people. But traces of error are very apparent on the face of this tradition” (4-5). He then uses two 19th and early 20th century European sources in order to make some “safe deductions” about the true history of the Yoruba before finally saying, “but let us continue the story as given by tradition” (5-7). In this case, then, while one can glean instances from Johnson’s text of earlier uses of music in ways that are similar to contemporary *yabis* music, Johnson’s role as a mediating voice sometimes undermines the discourses embedded in the songs.

And finally, the most immediate and arguably most important early source of *yabis* music in Fela’s life was his mother, FRK, and the members of the AWU who, in keeping with Yoruba expressive traditions, composed and sang hundreds of songs as accompaniment to their meetings and protests, praising, encouraging, shaming, and deriding through musical performances that were viewed as “a way of circulating the news and expressing political opinion” (Johnson-Odim and Mba 1997: 82).¹⁴⁷ Given the fact, mentioned earlier, that he often accompanied his mother at political meetings and demonstrations in Abeokuta, Fela’s exposure to these songs and to the stubborn directness of both FRK and the AWU women had to have made a deep impression on Fela’s sense of music’s social functions, even if it is often not fully acknowledged. As

¹⁴⁷ Shonekan states that, based on an endnote in Johnson-Odim’s and Mba’s biography of FRK, she was able to locate and translate to English a collection of more than 200 songs collected in a notebook and deposited in the FRK papers at the University of Ibadan in Nigeria (Shonekan 2009: 129; Johnson-Odim and Mba 1997: 95 n.33). While there is no indication as to whether FRK composed any of the songs or whether she was the one who transcribed them in the notebook, these are known to be songs that were sung at meetings and demonstrations of the AWU.

Stephanie Shonekan argues in an important essay regarding FRK's influence on Fela, where other writers have emphasized FRK's political influence they have often overlooked her musical influence (2009: 129). Since, in the broader argument of this dissertation, the political and historical discourses that emanate from musical performances are integral to the music's Text, emphasizing the continuous act of *composing* over the completed action *composed*, Fela's early experiences with the AWU's use of music as an integral element of political action is a fundamental part of the story.

Shonekan notes that, upon examining the songs in translation, she saw a surprising amount of correlation between the song texts and Fela's lyrical style and politics (129). As an example, during the AWU protests against unfair taxation and the role of the colonially-installed Alake Ademola in the enforcement of these tax laws, the women, through their songs, accused the Alake of being a thief and warned him that his days as ruler were numbered (135), stating directly that they would not pay the unfairly waged market taxes: "Even if the tax assessment is only one penny / Ademola we [women] will not pay any tax in Egbaland anymore" (138). This brings to mind again Fela's calling out of Obasanjo and Abiola in "I.T.T." as well as his line from the 1980 composition "Authority stealing" (2000e) where he throws the rhetoric of law enforcement back at government officials who are stealing from the country: "You be thief / You dey steal / You be robber."

Another AWU song about the Alake makes a particularly dramatic statement about the sexual politics that underpinned the women's relationship with authorities in Abeokuta:

[Alake], for a long time you have used your penis as a mark of authority that you are our husband. Today we shall reverse the order and use our vagina to play the role of husband on you.... O you men, vagina's head will seek vengeance.... (Johnson-Odim and Mba 1997: 83).

Yet another song echoes this sentiment: "It is from the head of the vagina / that you men are born" (Shonekan 2009: 135). These songs highlight both a similarity to Fela's use of graphically jarring imagery, as with the excremental metaphor in "I.T.T.," as well as a seemingly fundamental disconnect between the maternal example of FRK and the AWU women on the one hand and Fela's well known misogyny on the other. In the 1972 composition "Lady" (1997c) Fela exhorts African women to return to "traditional" African values and gender roles. A "lady," in this song, wants to seize power, smoke cigars, and take the first piece of meat, knowing that "anything man do / She self fit do." A more traditional "African woman," in this song, is servile and submissive.

She know him man na master
She go cook for am
She go do anything he say
But Lady no be so
Lady no be so
Lady na master

Olaniyan states that "Lady" exists as a companion piece to the previously discussed "Gentleman," both acting as "exemplars of Fela's nativism," an aspect of cultural essentialism which will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter (2004: 159). But where "Gentleman" lampoons Nigerian men who eat, dress, and act like Europeans, Olaniyan asserts that "Lady" is a more cutting "satire against overly Westernized African women and a most eloquent manifesto that gave many boys of my generation our first popular and pleasurable language of male chauvinism" (44). Commenting on the seeming disconnect between the "progressive" lyrics of "Gentleman" and the retrogression of

“Lady,” John Howe observed that the artist in Fela “had no interest in perfect philosophic correctness which has a very limited role in showbiz” (1997: 130). It is, in the end, difficult to reconcile the strong and inspiring presence of his mother – and his father’s well known support of FRK’s work – with the reality of Fela’s thoughts and actions on gender.

By contrast to Fela’s paternalism many of the AWU songs were composed in praise or encouragement of women both in and out of the AWU, often performing songs as a means of shoring up a sense of solidarity among women. One song encouraged all women to join their efforts, indicating to both women in general and the Alake in particular that they would succeed whether or not the colonial administration and the Alake liked it: “All of us are hoping to have many children / Come and see the women’s hospital / If you like us, the knife will cut the yam / If you don’t like us, the knife will cut the yam.” Another song was composed in praise of FRK’s leadership of the AWU: “You the eldest daughter of the kingdom / You will always be gorgeous, adored, and loved” (Shonekan 2009: 136). In yet another instance, song was used in seeking assistance when one woman’s husband refused to allow her to attend a meeting. The woman sang from her door, ““Oh, women, my husband will not allow me to come to the meeting,” whereupon the women ran to the house, grabbed the man, and rolled him outside in the dust” (Johnson-Odim and Mba 1997: 82). Given this story one can only imagine how the AWU women would have summarily dealt with Fela’s misogyny as expressed in “Lady” had they encountered it.

Extending her musical and textual analysis, Shonekan discusses a number of specific stylistic similarities she found between the women’s songs and Fela’s music,

noting that they commonly “include direct irreverence, often with a touch of ridicule and humor and a sharp twist of sarcasm; symbolism and imagery; the use of a communal/collective voice; didactic conversational style; and repetition and emphasis” (2009: 137). Several of these aspects of Fela’s rhetorical style have already been discussed, but the significance of symbolism and imagery warrants a bit of attention in that it connects the AWU songs with Fela’s songs through the use of folkloric imagery that is a common part of Yoruba expression. This use of symbols and imagery – drawing upon cultural memory and creating discourse through communal, dialogic action – is a central theme in composing the African Atlantic; just as Sun Ra led his audience through a revision of history toward an imaginative exodus outward to a new space of possibilities, so did Fela, FRK, and the AWU women use music as a means of bonding together and creating a new narrative of possibilities. In chapter 5, after a discussion of the broader African Atlantic community, this dissertation will begin to connect the musical practices of Sun Ra and Fela to that of the larger community through what I call, borrowing and adapting from Gilroy (1993: 199), the chronotope of the road. Through the chronotope of the road, Sun Ra, Fela, FRK, and many others seek to create roads/paths/trains/lines to other places and times, distilling all times into the present and all places into one space in order to continually create a narrative that simultaneously and aporetically inhabits the past, present and future. This is the core dynamic of Composing the African Atlantic.

CHAPTER 5 – THE AFRICAN ATLANTIC INTELLECTUAL ENVIRONMENT: COMPOSING A NEW HISTORICAL NARRATIVE

A great song arose, the loveliest thing born this side [of] the seas. It was a new song. It did not come from Africa, though the dark throb and beat of that Ancient of Days was in it and through it. It did not come from white America – never from so pale and hard and thin a thing, however deep these vulgar and surrounding tones had driven. Not the Indies nor the hot South, the cold East or heavy West made that music. It was a new song and its deep and plaintive beauty, its great cadences and wild appeal wailed, throbbed and thundered on the world's ears with a message seldom voiced by man. It swelled and blossomed like incense, improvised and born anew out of an age long past, and weaving into its texture the old and new melodies in word and in thought.

W.E.B. Du Bois, *Black reconstruction* (1998 [1935]: 124)

This is our kind of rhythm in Africa
We send our messages through music
This is our tradition in Africa

Mahlathini and the Mahotella Queens, “Kazet (Gazette)” (2006)

Between Bandung and FESTAC: A pan-African union of art and politics:

While chapter epigraphs serve many rhetorical purposes in written works, setting the tone for a narrative or providing some form of poetically inspired evidence, the two epigraphs at the beginning of this chapter are specifically meant to provide the final book-end to this dissertation, helping to complete the idea stated at the beginning of chapter 1 that musical performance throughout the African Atlantic is often conceived as a broader means of involving performers and audience in the dialogic formation of historical narrative – performers and audience engage in the purposefully dialogic act of composing the African Atlantic. In the quote from the song “Kazet,” recorded and released in 1987 by the South African group Mahlathini and the Mahotella Queens, the singers make a simple yet common statement about African music’s function as a conduit for the communal sharing of stories, identifying the rhythm itself rather than the lyrics as

the vector for these stories – the song itself acts as a “gazette,” passing a message from place to place as an aural and material equivalent of Walter Benjamin’s traveling storyteller who spreads the news (Benjamin 1968: 83-109). While one could engage in a discussion of whether the singers’ reference to messages in the rhythm is an attempt to argue for the representational value of African musical sounds, this dissertation has undertaken a different path, arguing throughout that the use of rhythm, harmony, melody, and timbre – the so-called elements of musical composition – are but four of the many elements that comprise the larger discursive practice of composing the African Atlantic. Though there are certainly instances in which the music itself is representational, as is the case with drum languages, the fundamental argument of this dissertation has been that the dialogic creation of historical narratives – narratives which are most often characterized as being extra-musical elements of performance – are, in fact, constitutive elements of the music such that, in their absence, the music loses much of its signified substance and aesthetic dimension. The fact that a song such as “Kazet” is an example from popular music (a South African genre known as *mbaqanga*) rather than from so-called art music helps to reinforce the socially-determined nature of this dialogic form of composition: without some level of popular participation and consent the larger Text of the composition would not exist.¹⁴⁸

The epigraph from Du Bois engages this same dynamic which uses music to spread the news, but it brings in the further dimensions of diaspora and collective memory. Rather than describing the story of Africans’ presence in the Americas as a new story, Du Bois calls it a “new song” which “[weaves] into its texture the old and new

¹⁴⁸ For an overview of South African popular musical styles, including *mbaqanga*, see (Coplan 2008).

melodies in word and in thought.” Robin Kelley quotes this same passage from Du Bois as a means of crafting a historicized explanation for the expressive practices of the Art Ensemble of Chicago, stating that,

The Art Ensemble's music is, after all, an unfinished multivolume history of freedom – a self-conscious sonic memory of the Middle Passage, the overthrow of slavery, dance halls in the age of Jim Crow, migration and city life, rebellion against brutality, and black love. Their music is all about freedom, political and aesthetic (1997: 13).

Kelley notes that the image of the Middle Passage is a key element in the Art Ensemble’s music, as well as in the music of other artists who share a similar Pan-African orientation, in that it allows the artists to “forge new cultural forms out of many disparate pasts” through a dialogic engagement with their audience’s sense of history and diasporic membership: “[The Art Ensemble’s] Pan-African sensibility allows them to claim ancestral roots in Senegal and Mali, southern Africa and Nubia, Congo Square and Chicago’s South Side” (14). Expanding on this diasporic orientation, Kelley argues that the “emancipation of form” which occurred in black avant garde music in the 1950s and 1960s, creating both the long modal structures and the eclectic and associative structures of free jazz, developed as an aesthetic reaction to the changing politics of the time – politics that were exemplified throughout the African diaspora by the non-aligned, anti-colonial spirit of Bandung as well as the pan-African initiatives of leaders such as Kwame Nkrumah (20).

Within the context of this radical revision of histories and cultures, African and African diasporic musicians have worked to re-define their lives and their music amidst a collection of competing and often conflicting fields of commercial pressures, historical narratives, and aesthetic values. Toward this end, this chapter will seek to situate both

Sun Ra and Fela within the larger political discourses which took hold throughout Africa and the African diaspora in the twentieth century, broadly characterized here as pan-African discourses. While one can certainly argue that elements of Fela's and Sun Ra's works can be tied to the diverse field commonly called Afrocentrism, or to the more specific field known as Egyptocentrism, what becomes clear in the close study of both Fela and Sun Ra is that neither cared for a strict adherence to any one theory, theorist, or movement, fashioning their art and their ideas through a broadly cosmopolitan approach to intellectual culture that defied the quick and easy labels too often used and too strictly adhered to in scholarly discourses. In this chapter I have adopted a more inclusive wide-angle lens which George Shepperson refers to as "‘pan-Africanism’ with a small letter," a diverse grouping of "all-African movements and trends which have no organic relationship with the capital ‘P’ variety" – that is, with the Pan-African movement proper which has become identified with the Pan-African congresses and the political work of intellectuals such as W.E.B. Du Bois and George Padmore (1962: 346). In defining pan-Africanism in such a broad sense one is able to focus on what W. Oduoye-Kodjoe refers to as the "transitory values" of pan-Africanism – those values which express the concerns of particular times and places – while bearing in mind the "core values" symbolized by *pan* (inclusiveness) and *Africanism* (African origin) (1986: 385-407).

But by means of expressing caution, Kelley also argues that the overemphasis of political discourses runs the risk of characterizing the music as one-dimensional or merely ideological¹⁴⁹; given that musicians such as those in the Art Ensemble – and I

¹⁴⁹ Earlier in his essay Kelley takes issue with Norman Weinstein's contention that the Art Ensemble's performance style can be characterized as "a psychology of Africanizing imaginings, a poetics of African

would argue Sun Ra and Fela – produce performative works which are so sonically diverse, visually rich, and historically grounded, it is important to pay critical attention to the literary, dramatic, and visual aspects of their performance styles in order to properly situate them as individuals and groups within the broader discourses of their intellectual environment (22). To this end, a good portion of this chapter will discuss some of the areas of aesthetic convergence that can be found between the work of both Sun Ra and Fela and that of the writers and musicians whose work in the 1960s and 1970s has most commonly been called the Black Arts Movement (BAM). While Sun Ra certainly was associated with some aspects of the BAM, performing at events sponsored by the Black Arts Repertory Theater and publishing poetry in the classic BAM anthology *Black fire*, it is certainly a stretch to say that Fela had any association with this movement. But as was argued in chapter 1, the concern with this dissertation is not so much with specific, documented contact between individuals as it is with the choreographic interplay of individuals and ideas within the larger *episteme* of intellectual production. While Fela may not have been in contact with Amiri Baraka, for instance, both Fela and Baraka shared a political orientation toward their work that identifies them as significant political theorists and activists rather than merely a musician or merely a writer; for both Fela and Baraka their identities as artists are simply inextricable from their identities as political figures.¹⁵⁰ Discussing the work of Fela and Sun Ra with regard to the BAM intellectuals, then, is not so much an exercise in drawing connections among individuals as it is an

imagination,” essentially relegating their work to the status of ideology (Kelley 1997: 14; Weinstein 1997: 9).

¹⁵⁰ Woodard argues that Baraka’s politics are at the core of both his identity as an artist as well as his widespread cultural relevance and influence (1999: xii). Fela’s role as a political artist was discussed in detail in chapter 4.

explication of some limited aspects of politicized artistic expression these artists hold in common: the common *episteme*, stated in summary form, is the African Atlantic, and the common aesthetic discourse of this group – its poetics – is one that composes the *episteme* (the African Atlantic) time and time again.

Another means of focusing the narrative of this chapter is through the adoption of the 1977 Second World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture (FESTAC) in Lagos, Nigeria as an example of a spatial and temporal ground which was shared by Fela, Sun Ra, many of the BAM writers and artists, and many influential pan-African intellectuals of the time. In fact, what was mentioned in chapter 1 about Fela's and Sun Ra's oppositional relationships with FESTAC, participating and resisting at the same time, highlights the dynamic nature of their work while also suggesting reasons why it is inappropriate to broadly apply the labels of intellectual movements to a critical appraisal of these artists. Sun Ra worked with the Black Arts Movement and interacted with many BAM artists – he was certainly influential for Baraka – but he never associated himself with this movement in an unambiguous fashion, nor with any other defined movement for that matter, seeming to prefer, by his very nature, an eclectic approach to life and intellect.¹⁵¹ Similarly, Fela never connected himself, *per se*, with any movement such as Afrocentrism, anti-colonialism, Marxism, etc., but rather borrowed freely from any source that interested him and made sense to him, sometimes with uneven results. I am thinking here of the story in the 2009 epilogue to Moore's book in which Moore introduced Fela to Cheikh Anta Diop, only to be horrified when Fela grilled Diop about

¹⁵¹ Szwed wrote that Sun Ra's "uniqueness was a source of pride, but at the cost of loneliness. He enjoyed the presence of people, but at a distance, on his own terms"; as such, his social habits were often more akin to "the rituals of the *flaneur*, the watcher, not the participant" (1998: 35).

stories of extraterrestrials building the pyramids – an absorption of what he needed from Diop’s work, but a critical, if not outright loony, adaptation rather than over-respectful adherence (Moore 2009: 270-71). In both instances there is an ambivalence regarding the need to limit oneself to any one writer’s or any one intellectual movement’s ideas. Veal writes of Fela’s conflation of local, national, and international in his conception of pan-African identity (2000: 176) – a conception that Fela variously called Africanism, pan-Africanism, or Blackism, even arguing at one point that Africa should be considered a nation rather than a continent (Moore 2009: 29, 255) – while Olaniyan more broadly identified Fela’s creative sense of cultural identity as being related to nativism: “nativism in African discourses rarely speaks in the name of this or that ethnic culture as of African cultures generally,” remaining “unapologetically transnational, continental” in breadth and cosmopolitan in its approach to culture (2004: 212 n.5).¹⁵²

Emphasizing the reactive rather than the essential, Emmanuel Obiechina argues that nativism is an understandable form of intellectual activism in African academia which grew from the broad anticolonial struggles of the early to mid 20th century.

Cultural nativism, or that aspect of it called literary nationalism, is so fundamentally universal a phenomenon in unequal social situations such as that engendered by colonialism that its inevitability hardly deserves an argument.... Whether this nativism or cultural affirmation finds expression in psycho-political terms such as the African Personality or in the literary ideology of Négritude its cultural implications are obvious. There is a fundamental assumption that the African has had a civilization which is distinct from all other civilizations and which distinguishes him from all other human beings (1968: 26).

Nativism, then, is viewed by Obiechina as a strategic response to the all-too-common colonial experience. Charles Keil also uses the word nativism in a similar fashion while

¹⁵² For an overview of nativism in African and African diasporic discourses, see (Adéèkó 1998) and (Appiah 1992).

attempting to counter some of the accusations of cultural essentialism that Ralph Ellison leveled against Baraka's *Blues people*, characterizing the factual mistakes and speculation of some of the early chapters as aspects of Baraka's own "myth of the Negro past" (1991: 39; Ellison 1964).

[Baraka] is really writing about a complex sort of nativism or, more accurately, a musical revitalization movement. Negro music, since the days of the first recordings but especially during the last two decades, has become progressively more 'reactionary' – that is, more African in its essentials – primarily because the various blues and jazz styles are...symbolic referents of in-group solidarity for the black masses and the more intellectual segments of the black bourgeoisie (43).

While it certainly is not fair to characterize all pan-African expression as nativist – nor is labeling a discourse nativist necessarily negative in all cases – much of the writing and music associated with FESTAC and the BAM involves a level of attention to African cultures and to European hegemony which begs an assertive and protective response. One could certainly argue, in fact, that both FESTAC and the BAM were, to some degree, nativist constructions formed in the face of a withering denial of cultural agency; as such, both FESTAC and the BAM are fully fledged expressions of agency.

The issue of labeling a large diasporic population as African, though, is immediately confronted with the problem of cultural essentialism, weighing the similarities of the diverse populations that constitute the diaspora against the particularities of each individual group. While on the one hand many of the broader categories ascribed to African or pan-African identity can be traced to the colonial need to categorize and control its colonized populations (e.g., Amselle 1990: 58), the same broad identity has long been used as a means of creating solidarity and a semblance of cohesion among peoples who have been scattered widely throughout the world.

Nkrumah, with his acceptance of the geographical borders of Ghana dictated by

colonization rather than determined by the various cultural groups involved, chose to form a cohesive nation largely through the use of consciously chosen cultural symbols and arts, creating and shaping a sense of nationality among Ghanaians who simultaneously viewed themselves as members of the Asante nation, the Dagomba nation, the Ewe nation, and so on.¹⁵³

This same dynamic of discussing heterogeneous populations as if they represented a homogeneous community also impacts upon the identity of some groups that are often viewed as distinct and particular, as is the case with the cultural designation Yoruba. Christopher Waterman states that prior to the 19th century the word Yoruba was not a common cultural identity used by the majority of Yoruba-speaking people. The large grouping now known as the Yoruba, prior to the advent of colonialism, was a diverse collection of Yoruba-speaking people organized into 15-20 “independent polities...[with] shifting patterns of allegiance and competition” (1990b: 369). The larger group designation Yoruba was created, in large part, by colonial administrators who deemed it necessary to form centralized leadership structures based on broadly conceived cultural identities in order to more efficiently control populations (Ranger 1983: 261-62). As such, cultural practices and symbols such as music and chieftaincy titles were strategically adopted as a means of creating a semblance of a unified Yoruba culture, though one which often did not reflect reality (Waterman 1990b: 371): “There are no exclusive cultural institutions that are universal among all Yoruba speaking peoples” (Obayemi 1983: 74). Genres of Nigerian music that are often referred to as “traditional Yoruba music,” such as *dùndún* and *bàtá*, are, in fact, “referring either to a core set of

¹⁵³ For an overview of Nkrumahism and nation building in Ghana, see (James 1977).

genres disseminated over a wide area by the indigenous empires of the 18th and 19th centuries...or to localized styles performed by and for people who would identify themselves as Yoruba only in interethnic contexts and certainly not while participating in community-based ceremonial events” (Waterman 1990b: 371).

In addition, a pan-Yoruba identity – a largely Atlantic diasporic identity – began to emerge in the late-19th century as a result of the experiences of repatriated groups of Yoruba-speaking people, creating what Waterman calls “paradigms of a modern black culture grounded in indigenous tradition yet oriented toward the wider world” (1990b: 370).¹⁵⁴ Among these repatriated populations were the emancipados from Brazil, known as the Amaro, who brought with them cultural practices which had syncretically adapted to the native and European cultures they had encountered in the Americas. In addition, the Saro were an expatriate group of Yoruba-speaking people who had been educated at mission schools in Sierra Leone and sent back to Nigeria as missionaries, creating the first translations of the Bible and the Koran in the Yoruba language (370). This is, of course, related to the history of Abeokuta as a place where Yoruba expatriates from Sierra Leone returned to Nigeria in order to proselytize their newly acquired Christian religion. As was mentioned in chapter 4, both Fela’s father and grandfather were ordained ministers and Western-trained musicians, the grandfather being particularly known for composing liturgical songs and translating hymns into the Yoruba language.

Toyin Falola and Ann Genova note that the history of collective Yoruba politics is marked by the “consistent exploitation of Yorùbá ancestral city state fissures,” paraphrasing David Laitin’s argument that modern Yoruba political alliances are

¹⁵⁴ Debra Klein (2007) further develops the idea of the pan-African Yoruba identity with regard to Yoruba bàtá music’s global impact on other cultures’ music and visual arts.

predominantly characterized by a sense of commitment to their ancestral city of Ile-Ife – an adoption of “hometown ideologies” which was handily co-opted by the British colonial administration as a tool of indirect rule (2006: 178; Laitin 1986). Andrew Apter discusses a similar dynamic with regard to the Nigerian government’s justifications for its uses of “traditional” governmental structures in the 1960s and 1970s as a means of uniting a vastly heterogeneous national population (1996: 442-43). In his summation of the closing ceremonies at FESTAC President Obasanjo noted the ceremony’s performative connection to Nigeria’s Northern Islamic heritage, praising the former British colonial administration for having had the foresight to maintain such “traditional power structures” as a means of maintaining order. Apter argues that Obasanjo was entirely correct in his analysis of the British use of Hausa-Fulani political structures, but where colonial administrators saw a means to control the population Obasanjo claimed to have tapped into a precolonial system of organizing government on a national scale, creating a semblance of both national unity and pan-African identity through the performance of a collective identity that never truly was (456-59). In this example Obasanjo appears to exhibit a form of nativism that Adéléke Adéèkó, in a discussion of African literary practices, terms “structuralist nativism,” described as a type of literature which “has as its sources *conventions* and *philosophies of representation* derived from recognizably indigenous practices” (1998: ix) [emphasis in the original]. This type of nativism concerns itself with the use of “precolonial narrative and interpretive *forms*” in a modern context and with modern techniques, ignoring the fact that forms and techniques of literature – and one could argue, in another context, forms of government – are

historically determined phenomena which often cannot be abstracted from their particular temporal context.

But the true concern of this dissertation is with the dynamic aesthetic and political relationships between Sun Ra, Fela, and the wider *episteme* of the African Atlantic. One of the primary observations made in chapter 1 is that, of all the places and times that Fela and Sun Ra could have met each other, they may have met in Lagos, Nigeria during FESTAC. After many years of planning, scheduling, and re-scheduling, FESTAC was held in Nigeria in January and February 1977, with delegations of artists, politicians, and other cultural workers from throughout Africa and the African diaspora converging on Lagos for two weeks of music, dance, and theatrical performances, readings of poetry and prose, art exhibitions, and political colloquia that showcased the range and the commonalities of African diasporic expression. In a sense, FESTAC was largely conceived and experienced by many of its participants as a unified pan-African artistic expression of what Abdulrahman Mohamed Babu referred to as the “Spirit of Bandung” (2002: 123) – an aesthetic expression of the spirit of political and economic cooperation among colonized and de-colonized nations in service of a continuing anti-colonial and anti-imperialist struggle. While Babu’s intention was to describe the cooperative political and economic agreements forged among non-aligned Asian and African nations in the wake of the 1955 Bandung Asia-Africa Conference, this spirit understandably became crucial to the work of writers, artists, and musicians throughout the African diaspora and beyond. From Ghana’s 1957 independence from British colonial rule to the present day, Africa and Africans have struggled to re-define their place in the world that has been too often defined by the European historical narrative and too often controlled by the

mechanisms of European and American capital. The Bandung Conference was a watershed event in the growing Pan-African consciousness of the mid-20th century, providing a clear example of the commonality of the colonial experience that cut across diverse cultures with diverse interests throughout Africa and Asia.

The language of the spirit of Bandung has made its way into the more contemporary language of cultural studies as well, following from the example of writers such as Askia Touré who identified Black Power politics with a growing sense of “revolutionary black internationalism” that he called “Bandung humanism” (Snellings 1965). Keith Baird has suggested that, in writing about postcolonial societies, one might use the term “Bandung peoples” as a means of avoiding other loaded terms such as “third world,” “underdeveloped,” and so on, rejecting, as it were, the tabletop on which the description of societies is too often arranged in favor of a new tabletop, a new paradigmatic perspective. Baird argues that the legacy of the Bandung Conference among postcolonial nations stands for the “reclamation of territory” and “accession to the exercise of self-determination” that is a central part of the concern of national liberation movements of the 1950s, 60s, and 70s. The legacy of Bandung also indicated to many an opportunity to strategize about how best to achieve “complete intellectual emancipation from their former overlords and full recognition of their rightful status as equals in the family of humanity” (2000: 19-20).

Ahmed Rajab notes that the primary spirit of cooperation among the newly and soon-to-be decolonized nations represented at the conference was largely mobilized by the efforts of both India and China, purposefully organizing nations in a manner that excluded the United States, the Soviet Union, and the former colonial nations. Rajab

observes that a similar dynamic was at play in the first decade of the 21st century, largely mobilized by India and China with significant contributions from Brazil as a means of shoring up the less developed economies among nations who were members of the World Trade Organization (2005: 19). But among African nations there was not a strong consensus as to how the broad policy of non-alignment should be approached, often, unfortunately, expressing fundamental disagreement along lines drawn by colonial languages which had subsequently been adopted as unifying national languages. Babu writes that, prior to the 1963 formation of the Organization of African Unity (OAU), various African national constituencies were formed by two particular conferences in 1961 (2002: 179). In May 1961 a conference of primarily Francophone African nations meeting in Monrovia, Liberia – though, significantly, Nigeria, Liberia, and Ethiopia were in this group (Tekle 1988: 51) – agreed upon a post-colonial strategy for economic development that, driven in part by a suspicion of Soviet-bloc influence, relied heavily upon the advice and assistance of the United States and the former colonial European nations. But prior to the Monrovia conference, in January 1961, a conference of primarily Anglophone African nations meeting in Casablanca, Morocco under the leadership of, among others, Kwame Nkrumah, resolved that they were strongly opposed to any non-African political or economic interventions, agreeing to strategically ally themselves with Soviet-bloc nations only insofar as they were not the former colonizers. It is this Casablanca group that Babu claims represented the “Bandung spirit” in that the primary focus was upon acting without the help or agreement of the former colonial nations.¹⁵⁵

¹⁵⁵ This split between nations aligned according to the principles of the Monrovia and Casablanca conferences may help to explain Kwame Nkrumah’s comment to FRK, recounted in chapter 4, that he did

Malcolm X stated that the example of the Bandung conference served as a model for African and Asian people to find commonalities even given their religious and cultural diversity, adopting a “Bandung strategy” of excluding white participation from black political processes as a means to create an open, cooperative, and inclusive discourse among people of color (1965: 5-6). The spirit of Bandung is not merely a legacy of the conference, though, by many accounts being a crucial part of the experience and purposeful attitude of the conference attendees who forged alliances without the omnipresent colonial gaze.¹⁵⁶ In his book on the Bandung conference titled *The color curtain*, Richard Wright recalls a conversation he had with a representative of the Philippine delegation regarding his country’s reasons for attending the conference. After relating his country’s desire for continued American military protection, the representative stated,

Why are we at Bandung? Brother, in the past we have been objects to be moved here and there. We were handled as only those on the outside wanted us handled. We had no say in the matter.... Now, we want to show those people that we can manage our own lives. And this conference is a demonstration of that. We’ll have our difficulties, but at least we want to try (1956: 171).

Wright’s overall impression of the conference was of a vastly diverse group of people whose unity was found in the commonalities “of colonial experience, of subjection, of color consciousness,” noting that “ideology was not needed to refine their relations.”

I got the notion that ideologies were the instruments that these men had grown used to wielding in their struggles with Western white men and that now, being together and among themselves, they no longer felt the need for them. As the importance of ideology declined, I began to feel that maybe ideology was a

not want to meet with Nigerian government officials while vacationing in Nigeria, referring to them as “slaves to the people in England.”

¹⁵⁶ Again, this point brings to mind the discussion in chapter 3 of Sun Ra’s street-corner lectures in Chicago which he purposefully organized with no white participation.

weapon that suited only certain hostile conditions of life. Racial realities have a strange logic of their own (176).

But there is an odd conceptual leap Wright seems to make with regard to colonialism and race when he is describing Indonesian President Sukarno's opening speech at the conference. As Sukarno's speech was the first, it set the tone for much of the conference, establishing what Wright saw as the central themes of race and religion that infused most of the rest of the program. At one point Sukarno described his concept of "Moral Violence" as being a means by which decolonized nations could assert their moral authority in their dealings with the West, counteracting the cultural violence that colonized nations experience from the West. By way of explaining this concept, Wright quotes Sukarno on religion – "religion is of dominating importance particularly in this part of the world" – and then on colonialism – "almost all of us have ties to common experience, the experience of colonialism." Wright then states immediately after this that "Sukarno was appealing to race and religion; they were the only realities in the lives of the men before him that he could appeal to" (Wright 1956: 139-40). This seems to be to be an odd conflation of race and colonialism, as if the two things were one and the same. It is true that these concepts are closely linked through the diabolical logic of colonialism – race is used as a means of justifying the act of colonial possession and domination – but Wright's quick exchange of one concept for the other seems to support a sort of naturalized position with regard to their combined meanings, as if he is stating "of course it is true, race and colonial subjugation naturally go together."

Nevertheless one of the most far reaching legacies of the Bandung conference was its solidifying of people's focus on the need for international awareness and cooperation. George Lipsitz notes that a sense of membership in a larger diasporic population has long

been an important factor in the creation of social movements, allowing local minority communities to envision themselves as being part of an empowering global majority (1997: 31). Harold Cruse argues that African and African-descendant societies should be considered from an African perspective, especially given the Eurocentric orientation of even the most sympathetic elements of white society (1968: 200). The dominant Marxist critique of European society, for instance, emphasizes the issues of the white working class even while it acknowledges the deleterious effects of race-based discrimination; it does not take into account the cultural particularities of different groups, as in the example of class distinctions within the black American community that are particular to the black American community. Among African American communists during the 1930s the Communist Party (CP) publications and the study groups associated with local CP chapters provided a link between local struggles and events in Africa and the Caribbean (Kelley 1990: 94; Hudson and Painter 1979: 102). This was a significant early source of political and historical information for Sun Ra as he would often visit the CP-run Modern Bookshop in Birmingham, a local meeting place for both black and white intellectuals that featured literature on labor movements and on black history (Szwed 1998: 33; Kelley 1990: 132-33).

This politicized sense of focus on Africa was part of the organizational dynamics leading up to FESTAC. In a brief overview of FESTAC Ronald Walters writes that the festival was essentially “a cultural manifestation of Pan Africanism just as the 6th Pan African Congress [PAC] had been in a political sense,” exhibiting many of the same dynamics of consensus and division as had marked the diverse interests of the delegations to the 6th PAC (1993: 81). In an essay in *Black World* James Garrett provides an

overview of the challenges and misunderstandings among African and African diasporic delegations involved in the planning and implementation of the 6th PAC in Dar-es-Salaam, Tanzania in 1974. In 1970, during the early stages of planning, some of the African and Caribbean delegations to an organizational meeting in Philadelphia felt that, under the forceful leadership of Baraka's Congress of African Peoples, their concerns were becoming marginalized in favor of the concerns of African Americans, moving them, in some instances, to hold caucus meetings in hotel rooms and private homes separate from the official conference program (1975: 6). By the time the PAC was held in 1974, African delegations had taken control of much of the logistical planning, and the priorities of the Congress had shifted, under the leadership of Tanzanian authorities, from a non-governmental Congress to a Congress dominated by African governmental concerns (19-20). Walters argues that a similar dynamic took place in the FESTAC political colloquium, recounting the story of his involvement in the colloquium as one of trying to argue for the legitimacy of African diasporic delegations within a forum dominated by continental African delegations. In the struggle to gain consensus among delegations on what he and other members of the American delegation considered to be substantive, goal-oriented proposals, much of the discourse at the political colloquium was dominated by African delegations who represented states – the non-state, diasporic delegations were left with the impression that their contributions were marginalized as a result of state vs. non-state (or continental vs. diasporic) concerns (1993: 82-83).

Walters broadly characterizes the difference in perspectives between the state delegations and non-state delegations at the colloquium as being related to the tensions between what St. Clair Drake termed continental Pan-Africanism – Pan-Africanism

which is concerned primarily with African nationalism and freedom movements – and traditional Pan-Africanism’s more diasporic orientation (Drake 1982: 353-59). Citing Maulana Karenga, Walters argues that the lack of attention to the influence of international politics and finance on African and African diasporic concerns caused the colloquium to produce only a vague sense that something was accomplished rather than achieving more practical and manageable goals (Walters 1993: 83; Karenga 1976). This argument is related to Malcolm X’s contention that, in addition to re-focusing African Americans’ attention to political and social issues in Africa and throughout the diaspora, Africans and African diasporic peoples should be deeply concerned with the workings and global impact of American politics. Speaking at a press conference in Accra, Ghana after his pilgrimage to Mecca he highlighted the need for concerted political cooperation throughout the African diaspora.

I said that the 22 million Afro-Americans in the United States could become for Africa a great positive force – while, in turn, the African nations could and should exert positive force at the diplomatic levels against racial discrimination. All of Africa unites in opposition to South Africa’s apartheid, and to the oppression in the Portuguese territories. But you waste your time if you don’t realize that Verwoerd and Salazar, and Britain and France, never could last a day if it were not for United States support. So until you expose the man in Washington, D.C., you haven’t accomplished a thing (Malcolm X and Haley 1964: 361).

In practice, though, both Karenga and Walters describe a FESTAC political colloquium that was marred by different and sometimes competing interests.

And of course the artists and musicians, in addition to the politicians and writers, were in attendance, though their presence was in many respects just as politically charged. Sun Ra and the Arkestra performed at FESTAC, though they were asked to attend at the last minute with no financial help for travel and with few other American musicians being asked, leaving Sun Ra to speculate that music had not been a priority for

the festival's organizers. Though the group had little money to spare, Sun Ra stated that their presence at the festival was important in that it would help to provide Africans with an image of African American musicians that was contrary to the dominant negative images (Szwed 1998: 341-42). During the opening ceremonies, when the performers marched into the National Stadium in Lagos as members of national groups in a manner similar to the opening ceremonies of the Olympic games, Sun Ra apparently asked to be allowed to march with the Egyptian delegation (Crawford 2009). Napoleon Jones-Henderson recounted his own experience of entering the stadium at the opening ceremonies as a member of the American delegation. One thing that struck him upon entering the stadium – something that hadn't occurred to him prior to entering – was the fact that, while most delegations wore some sort of national dress as a marker of their nationality, the American delegation had no such costume.¹⁵⁷ What did indicate the American delegation's particularity as well as their solidarity with other national groups in the stadium, though, was their raised-fist Black Power salute, which Jones-Henderson stated was an unambiguous sign that the delegation was from the United States: "We had a flag and didn't even know it!" (Jones-Henderson and Billops 1992: 114). As was indicated in chapter 1, though, the Black Power salute also acted as an exclusionary rite when the Arkestra was barred from participating in the closing ceremonies as part of the U.S. delegation when Sun Ra refused to enter the stadium with the raised-fist salute (Szwed 1998: 342).

¹⁵⁷ Richard Wright made a similar observation about presentation and national identity at Bandung, noting the variety of "exotic national costumes" worn by the delegates as they enter the conference (1956: 135-36).

Fela had, at one point, been an enthusiastic supporter of FESTAC and a member of the Nigerian National Participation Committee (NNPC) which was tasked with organizing Nigeria's participation in FESTAC as well as coordinating the overall logistics of the festival. In a 1975 interview Fela noted that, in the wake of General Murtala Mohammed's coup against General Yacub Gowan, he remained optimistic about the direction of the festival (Collins 2009: 136). But as the preparations for FESTAC continued, Fela, among a number of people, became increasingly disillusioned with the rampant corruption alleged to have been sapping money away from cultural and political programs meant to benefit Nigerian citizens. There was an ongoing investigation into allegations of corruption leading up to the festival, and at one point in the proceedings Leopold Senghor, the president of Senegal and the patron of the first World Festival of African Arts in 1966, quit the organizing committee and nearly removed Senegal's delegation from the official program (Apter 1996: 441). Some argued, though, that even given the likelihood of corruption among the organizers, FESTAC represented a broader project that was still worth supporting, as with one commentator's acknowledgement and dismissal of the corruption charges, in an anthology of Nigerian writing edited by Cyprian Ekwensi which was published in commemoration of FESTAC, justifying his continued support of the organizing committee and of FESTAC by making reference to the festival's promotion of a grander pan-African unity with Nigeria as its leader (David-West 1977: 3). Supporting the idea that Nigeria envisioned itself in the role of continental leader, Andrew Apter writes that, though there were questions regarding the massive amounts of public money the Nigerian government paid, for instance, in the building of a new National Theater and other highly visible prestige projects, the true agenda of the

Nigerian government was to promote the image of Nigeria as an up-and-coming political and economic presence in Africa newly flush with income from oil production, essentially producing a “grand illusion” of development without the actuality of development (1996: 442-43).

But while some argued both sides of the corruption issues, others contended that FESTAC was, essentially, unrepresentative of Nigerian national culture and of African cultures in general. In an essay on the state of cultural production in Africa, Wole Soyinka writes retrospectively of FESTAC that “our people were offered a narrowed-down, reductionist aspect of culture in a gargantuan orgy of ill-organized spectacles” which produced “something pronounced into being by a Ministry of Culture. What Nigeria exhibited was Culture as a sum, not even of parts, but of spectacular parts.” These “spectacular parts,” for Soyinka, were played out in a kind of “‘Festacian’ revelry” which presented African culture as something symbolized by and “relegated to the archives of that supracultural monstrosity known as the National Theatre.”

The theater of which nation, by the way? Of Nigeria? Or of Bulgaria, from where the concrete carbuncle was lifted, then grafted onto Lagos marshlands? What, in that general's cap or Christmas cake of a structure, constitutes even a fragment of Nigerian or African architectural intellect, modern or traditional? (1990: 110).¹⁵⁸

In sum, Soyinka argues that FESTAC was, in addition to the financial corruption, perhaps more disturbingly culturally corrupt, presenting only a thin veneer of pan-African cultural production such that there was no substantive benefit.

¹⁵⁸ Soyinka's characterization of the National Theater as a “general's cap or Christmas cake of a structure” is a reference to the odd, spoke-like design of the Theater which, when seen from the front, resembled a giant military officer's hat or some sort of ornate cake. Members of the NNPC referred to the theater as General Obasanjo's cap having, prior to the 1976 coup, referred to it as General Gowon's cap (Apter 1996: 444-45).

Fela's own concerns about FESTAC and the NNPC seemed to straddle both the monetary and cultural concerns about the festival. Though he eventually fell out with the NNPC, Fela had at one point been an enthusiastic member of the committee, viewing the festival as an opportunity to re-establish the centrality of the arts to the post-colonial Nigerian educational system. While still on the committee Fela submitted a list of proposals which outlined his vision for the festival, quoted in full by Mabinuori Idowu (2003: 17-18):

1. The aim of the festival as a whole should be to redirect the thinking of the common man.
2. Specifically, the festival should attempt to re-educate the common man in Nigeria and Africa about the role of colonization on African history and religion.
3. The festival should aim to rid the present generation of the imposed influence of foreign cultures. The festival should provide African history books that are written from an African (rather than colonial) perspective, and which, due to imperialist manoeuvres, are not easily available in Africa.
4. To achieve a solid unity among the black race, based on a strong foundation of African unity, an effective communication system should emerge from the festival.
5. Efforts must be made to encourage all Nigerians to participate in the festival. Financial incentives and encouragement should be given to artists to encourage them to participate and perform at their best.
6. All directors responsible for various sections of events should be given opportunities to use their positions to bring about policies that will enhance the future development of cultural institutions in the country, i.e., theatres for film, performance space and art galleries.
7. The activities of the festival and the ideas behind them should be channeled through the educational curriculum in the country to benefit future generations.
8. Mini-festivals should be held all over the country, and those selected should be provided with necessary instruments and equipment to perform. In view of this, the sum of 5 million Naira [approximately 7 million U.S. dollars in 1977] voted is inadequate to support meaningful participation.
9. The composition of the committee itself, drawn from outside the circle of working artists, makes Nigeria's participation in a festival of this nature a huge joke.

With regard to this last point Idowu notes that Fela's concern was with the military leadership of the NNPC: "Fela argued that a soldier who does not know the professional problems faced by artists cannot effectively represent the needs of artists to the

committee” (18).¹⁵⁹ The military leadership of the NNPC, however, certainly seems to be a strong indication that Apter’s analysis of FESTAC’s propagandistic value to the Nigerian government is an apt characterization.

Fela ultimately withdrew from the NNPC in protest over the committee’s lack of willingness to engage in a more substantive cultural project, organizing a counter-FESTAC series of performances at his club, the Afrika Shrine, telling his audience one evening, “Brothers and sisters, this festival isn’t our festival. It’s their festival. It’s for the V.I.P.s” (Darnton 1977a).¹⁶⁰ Though the Nigerian government discouraged FESTAC participants from visiting the Afrika Shrine many certainly did, with some artists such as Stevie Wonder and Randy Weston jamming with Fela’s band. Randy Weston recounts his experience of being at the Shrine for one of Fela’s performances during the festival (Weston and Jenkins 2010: 113). At one point in the performance Fela introduced Weston to the audience: “Ladies and gentlemen, I want you to meet my brother from America.” Weston played with the band on an unnamed composition, and when Fela reached the *yabis* section he grabbed Weston’s hand and began to curse the Nigerian military, even though many members of the military and police were in attendance. Weston began to worry about the seeming danger of Fela’s rhetoric existing in such close proximity to its target, but Fela maintained his grasp on Weston’s hand while continuing to curse the soldiers, the audience cheering him on.

¹⁵⁹ In the wake of an investigation of corruption within the NNPC prior to FESTAC, President Obasanjo appointed naval Commander O.P. Fingsi as head of the committee (Darnton 1976). In addition, two of the writers published in the FESTAC anthology of Nigerian writing edited by Cyprian Ekwensi are identified as officers in the Nigerian army (Ekwensi 1977).

¹⁶⁰ Note, of course, Fela’s alternate meaning of the term V.I.P. – “Vagabonds in power” (Anikulapo-Kuti 2000e).

There had been some warning signs that the government might take retributive action against Fela for his outspoken opposition to FESTAC. When Fela tried to visit Stevie Wonder at the Mainland Hotel an army officer interceded, barring him from visiting any member of a foreign delegation (Idowu 2003: 16). Louis Farrakhan, who was staying at the hotel, apparently approached an American named A.J. Saffi who was standing with Fela, telling him to pass a message along to Fela that the Nigerian government was planning to silence him. Through an insider's connection Farrakhan had heard that the government was concerned about Fela's influence on young Nigerians via his political activities and his openly counter-cultural lifestyle (17). Farrakhan's warning proved to be accurate when Fela's compound, the Kalakuta Republic, was raided by more than 1,000 Nigerian soldiers only a week after FESTAC ended, beating people – Fela's mother was thrown out a window – raping a number of Fela's wives, and setting fire to the house (Darnton 1977c; Moore 2009: 135-41).¹⁶¹ Fela had re-named his home compound the Kalakuta Republic in 1974, a name he found during his time at Alagbon Close police headquarters, claiming that *kalakuta* is a kiSwahili word meaning rascal¹⁶²: “The prisoners called the cell I was in ‘The Kalakuta Republic.’ So if rascality is going to get us what we want we will use that name, because we are dealing with corrupt people

¹⁶¹ It is significant, as well, that Christopher Darnton, the *New York Times* correspondent who covered both FESTAC and the Nigerian government's raid on Fela's Kalakuta compound, was arrested by Nigerian authorities and deported about a month after publishing a story about the raid (Darnton 1977b). In a similar incident in Uganda, Rose Mbowa writes that the playwright Byron Kawaddwa was killed soon after attending FESTAC, possibly as a reprisal for his outspoken criticism of the Ugandan government (1996: 89-90). Karin Barber notes that popular music seems to be particularly disturbing to governments, acting as a vector of political information and group solidarity (1987: 1-3).

¹⁶² The word *kalakuta* is not in any kiSwahili dictionary, though several possible root words are. The word *kala* literally means “word” (Krapf and Binns 2006 [1925]: 126). The word *kuta* is both a verb meaning “to see, to find, to happen,” and a noun meaning “wall.” Though *kalakuta* is clearly a vernacular word, its etymological meaning can be variously interpreted as “word wall,” “word that sees,” “word that finds,” or “word that happens,” all *apropos* to Fela's biography.

so we have to deal rascally with them” (Collins 1992: 72).¹⁶³ John Collins relates the story that the police gave about the November raid, claiming that they had been trying to retrieve an underage girl from Fela’s compound who was trying to join Fela’s group of dancers against her father’s will. Since the father was a police inspector, after an attempt to get Fela to send the girl out the police entered the compound with riot gear and tear gas, beating a number of people and sending Fela to the hospital (2009: 37). By Fela’s account, though, the police story of retrieving an underage girl was a pretext for an attack that was, in his opinion, spurred by his having erected a three meter high barbed wire fence around the Kalakuta compound in order to “protect myself and my people from police” (Moore 2009: 129).¹⁶⁴

The Black Arts Movement, politics, and Sun Ra:

But despite the arguments which condemned the corruption and political cynicism of FESTAC – and despite the disappointment it brought to Sun Ra and the horrendous disaster it visited upon Fela – FESTAC was an important and inspiring event for many artists and intellectuals throughout the African Atlantic, reflecting much of the spirit of artistic movements such as the BAM. One of the primary characteristics of BAM writing and music was, essentially, the conscious fusing of aesthetics and pan-African politics, guided, in large part, by the political example of Malcolm X and, arguably, the spiritual yet historically grounded orientation of artists such as Sun Ra. As Askia Touré phrased it,

¹⁶³ Collins states that the 1974 composition “Alagbon close” (2007) and 1975 composition “Expensive shit” (1997b) were both written in response to Fela’s April 30, 1974 arrest for marijuana possession. Collins also notes that the 1976 composition “Kalakuta show” was written as a documentary piece, voicing Fela’s perspective on the November 23, 1974 raid on the original Kalakuta Republic in the Mushin neighborhood of Lagos, across from the Empire Hotel which housed the original Africa Shrine club (2009: 40).

¹⁶⁴ This incident was discussed in more detail in chapter 4.

employing a particularly Sun Ra-like neologistic conflation of spatial/space/special (1995), Sun Ra's example provided,

spacial dimensions
transcending epochs
of Apocalypse, rising
to vindicate utopian
vision each lush,
contrapuntal dawn

Baraka also identified Sun Ra as a purveyor of "consciously Spiritual Music" which transcended the seemingly utopian focus on space travel to demonstrate "the higher principles of humanity, the *progress* after the death of the body" (1967a: 137). Identified as such, Sun Ra was a crucial figure of the BAM, both influencing and influenced by the broader African Atlantic, absorbing and reflecting the concerns of the political and aesthetic *episteme*.

To a large extent, many of the BAM writers describe their growth as artists with regard to the development of political consciousness rather than by reference to the development of their writing craft. In the poem "The awakening" Keorapetse Kgotsitsile writes of the various revolutionary figures he had looked to in his youth while trying to sort out the political mess of growing up in South Africa, all viewed in his youth as projected against a "white background" (Baraka and Neal 1968: 226-27). After flirting with Marx, Kgotsitsile paid attention to several South African historical figures (Shaka, Dingane, Moshoeshoe) and a couple of Pan-African figures (Garvey, Du Bois) before his first paradigm-shifting experience with "Nkrumah's voice." From here he followed after a number of African nationalist leaders (Lumumba, Kenyatta, Mandela, Sobukwe, Kaunda, Babu) as well as Castro and Mao, all adding up to a "Twentieth century recipe / For a grass roots favorite dish." The true paradigm shift of the poem, however, comes

after Kgositsile's move to the U.S. when he begins to hear "Brother Malcolm's voice" cutting through the clutter of the 1960s, "Endorsing 'Bandung'" and shifting Kgositsile's views of himself and the world such that "Now I see everything against a Black background."¹⁶⁵ This poem truly calls attention, again, to Foucault's tabletop, as was mentioned in chapter 1 – the epistemological ground on which stories and ideas are arranged; or, as Sun Ra put it, "If you are dissatisfied with yourself in the scheme of things and the altar has not changed conditions, perhaps you should consider the altar."¹⁶⁶ The fundamental paradigm shift that Kgositsile takes from his experience of Malcolm's rhetoric is a move away from national concerns to a more fully realized international perspective of both diaspora (people) and justice (desired end), concerned less with how one might resist or engage with the nations and multinational corporations of the West than with how one might align one's interests and concerns with others who share a similar history. As Kwaku Ampiah discusses, one of the broad political consequences of the Bandung Conference was the development of policies of non-alignment among African and Asian nations, essentially refusing (or attempting to refuse) to choose sides in the Cold War split between the U.S. and the Soviet Union (2007: 3).

In his essay "And Shine swam on," Larry Neal indicates that the Black Power impulse follows the internationalist orientation of Malcolm X rather than that of Du Bois's Pan-Africanism in that such an orientation is more concerned with human rights than with civil rights (1989: 14). While in the early 1950s Charles Thompson tied the

¹⁶⁵ Similarly, Larry Neal wrote that, in the jumbled political context of the 1960s, "the voice of Malcolm cut through it all, stripping away the sham and the lies" (1989: 13).

As an interesting and peripherally related note, Kgositsile's last name translates roughly as "was a king" in Setswana. While the word *kgosi* is usually translated as "chief," pre-colonial Setswana culture viewed *dikgosi* as something akin to European royalty.

¹⁶⁶ This quote was cited in chapter 3.

emergence of African American civil rights discourses to the post-war emergence of discourses on human rights, culminating in the 1949 Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1951: 249-50), Neal argues that Malcolm's insistence upon human rights drew a more solid connection between the situation of African Americans and that of other political struggles throughout the world – essentially noting Malcolm's "Bandung spirit" while not naming it as such. St. Clair Drake argues that many of the civil rights and black consciousness movements of the 1950s and 1960s were largely enabled and driven by some of the broader concerns of U.S. Cold War politics. Drake states that, within the context of the Cold War propaganda struggles between the U.S. and the Soviet Union, African Americans gained tentative support and increased resources for their political and educational initiatives as a result of growing international awareness of the divide between the American image of a free society and the material reality of American minority populations. Drake argues that the field of African American studies, for instance, was allowed to develop in U.S. academia from a purposefully ideological position rather than from an "Establishment-sponsored" perspective such as that which has marked African studies, allowing the new discipline to develop in an atmosphere that largely side-stepped the objectifying nature of many of the social sciences (1984: 226-28).¹⁶⁷

On cultural background, Komozi Woddard writes that, according to Larry Neal, Janheinz Jahn's books *Muntu* (1961) and *Neo-African culture* were important to the BAM writers' understanding of African cultural values and the connection of those

¹⁶⁷ Mudimbe ties the overall project of African studies to the colonial history of anthropology, missionary work, and the "explorer" texts of early European travelers in Africa (1988: 44).

values to African American experience (Woodard 2006: 65, 301 n. 16).¹⁶⁸ Woodard also notes the close connection between the Harlem Renaissance writers' thematic associations with literature, music, and Africa, particularly in the work of Langston Hughes (64-65). In his 1930 poem "Afro-American fragment" (Gates and McKay 2004: 1300-01), Langston Hughes writes of Africa as a distant cultural memory, created and re-created in history books in much the same way that Fela often described as the stultifying effects of colonial education and articulated in language that is echoed by Sun Ra through the voice of Pharaoh¹⁶⁹:

So long,
So far away
is Africa.
Not even memories alive
Save those that history books create,
Save those that songs
Beat back into the blood—
Beat out of blood with words sad-sung
In strange un-Negro tongue—
So long,
So far away
Is Africa.

But Hughes primary poetic voice was found in the vernacular language of the blues, touching upon the issues of everyday life in the simplified yet subtle and rhythmic language of popular blues songs. In his book *To make a poet black*, J. Saunders Redding describes what he considers to be the essential and distinctive quality of Hughes's poetry as the ability to "give expression to...the dark perturbation of the soul...of the Negro" (Redding 1939: 115). Redding notes that while a poet such as Countee Cullen can speak

¹⁶⁸ I have found no book written by Jahn which is specifically titled *Neo-African culture*. The two citations I have found that most closely fit this title are Jahn's *A bibliography of neo-African literature from Africa, America, and the Caribbean* (1965), and *Neo-African literature: A history of black writing* (1969).

¹⁶⁹ See the discussion of "I, Pharaoh" in chapter 3.

more readily to a formally educated, middle- and upper-class black audience, Hughes's poetry has the ability to articulate the lives of everyday people through his use of vernacular language and genres. Similarly, Sterling Brown pays homage to the powerfully affective presence of the blues singers in his 1932 poem "Ma Rainey," speaking to the "little and low" who attend Ma Rainey's shows in order to hear their lives reflected back to them in a ceremony of collective catharsis (Gates and McKay 2004: 1258-59). Following some years later, Robert Hayden also articulated the all-too-common indignities of life that lie behind the great dignity and subtlety of Bessie Smith's presentation of her stage self in his 1948 poem "Homage to the Empress of the Blues" (1519-20).

In the essay "The need for a cultural base for Civil Rites and Bpower mooments" [*sic*], Baraka addresses the global vision which must be adopted in order to form practices of cultural production infused with a broader, more interconnected black consciousness. In Baraka's conception of Black Power, the political-cultural struggle is both global and local.

There are wars going on now to stop black power, whether in Sinai, Vietnam, Angola, or Newark, New Jersey. The difference is that in Newark, New Jersey many colored people do not even *know* they are in this war (tho they might realize, on whatever level of consciousness, that they are losing) (1971b: 41-42).

But Baraka's approach to political struggle is mindful of how people come to form a sense of consciousness, veering away from a dogmatically materialist interpretation of historical change. Northrop Frye writes that the substance of successful literature is not formed simply through the expression of the individual writer's worldview, but rather through the writer's expression of cultural tradition and myth (1963: 21-38). In expressing the need for such a communally determined sense of cultural tradition, Baraka

identifies the need for black people to re-cover and re-discover their own historical past as a means to rid themselves of the hegemonic presence of the post-Enlightenment “‘pure’ Europeanism (whiteness)” that runs through the dominant culture.

A culturally aware black politics would use all the symbols of the culture, all the keys and images out of the black past, out of the black present, to gather the people to it, and energize itself with their strivings at conscious blackness. The Wedding . . . the conscious-unconscious. The politics and the art and the religion all must be black. The social system. The entirety of the projection. Black Power must mean a black people with a past clear back to the beginning of the planet, channeling the roaring energies of black to revive black power. If you can dig it??? Not to discover it now . . . but to revive. Our actual renaissance (1971b: 44).

In creating this globalized sense of black consciousness Baraka claimed that a person must rid himself of the ideological traps and false truths of white society, embracing, in its place, the idea of black people as “spirit worshiper[s]”: “The religious-science and scientific-religion is the black man’s special evolutionary province. He will reorder the world as he finds his own rightful place in it” (40). In this passage Baraka calls attention to the connection between science and spirituality which is central to the pan-African and Afrocentric critique of post-Enlightenment Europe,¹⁷⁰ but which most directly reflects the presence and influence of Sun Ra and his “Myth Science” Arkestra.

The Black Arts Repertory Theater (BARTS), established in Harlem in 1965 by Amiri Baraka and Larry Neal among others, was a central institution in the articulation and dissemination of the new aesthetic.¹⁷¹ Musicians associated with BARTS such as Andrew Hill, Marion Brown, Albert Ayler, Archie Shepp, and Cecil McBee participated in street and loft performances throughout Harlem and Greenwich Village as a means of showcasing and disseminating the free jazz aesthetic. Having performed at a number of

¹⁷⁰ See, for example, (Mudimbe 1988; Moses 1998; Asante 2003).

¹⁷¹ BARTS was, of course, only one organization among many that were associated with the BAM. For an overview of BAM artists and organizations see (Smethurst 2005).

Baraka's loft performances, Milford Graves noted that Baraka's poetry readings at these performances had a politicizing effect on a number of musicians (Anderson 2007: 99). Music and musicians were central to the BAM aesthetic, informing the artistic practices and political rhetoric of its core community; Sun Ra and his Arkestra were an integral part of the BARTS group, playing at club performances and mobile shows largely organized by the BARTS musical director Andrew Hill (Baraka 1997: 299). Many of the BARTS musical performances were part of a mobile arts performance project, with musicians, actors, poets performing on the back of a flat-bed truck at different locations throughout Harlem.

Baraka describes the beginnings of Operation Bootstrap which was one of the Johnson administration's Haryou Act programs created in the wake of the 1964 Harlem riots. BARTS received a few hundred thousand dollars in money for arts programming through Operation Bootstrap, some of which was dedicated to the Jazzmobile musical performances which were presented on various streets and parks in Harlem throughout the Summer of 1965 (306-07).

We brought new music out in the streets, on play streets, vacant lots, playgrounds, parks. I think perhaps the Jazzmobile came from our first idea. We had trucks with stages we designed from banquet tables, held together by clamps.... And Pharaoh, Albert, Archie, Sun Ra, Trane, Cecil Taylor, and many other of the newest of the new came up and blew (307).

The program was successful in that it reached a wide audience, popularizing music that had previously been seen as avant garde and, therefore, elite.

[Each] night throughout that summer we flooded Harlem streets with new music, new poetry, new dance, new paintings, and the sweep of the Black Arts movement had recycled itself back to the people. We had huge audiences, really mass audiences, and though what we brought was supposed to be avant and super-new, most of it the people dug. That's why we knew the music critics that put down the new music as

inaccessible were full of shit. People danced in the street to Sun Ra and cheered Ayler and Shepp and Cecil and Jackie McLean and the others. It was a great summer! (308).

This mobile, socially oriented attitude toward performance is reminiscent of much of Sun Ra's history of performance, the audience and musicians interacting with one another in a manner that often blurred the line between stage and audience. It is reminiscent of the scene from Robert Mugge's film *Sun Ra: A joyful noise* (1980), discussed at the end of chapter 3, in which many of the musicians have left the stage and are dancing in a counter-clockwise ring shout pattern before dancing through the audience and out of the hall, as Lock has indicated was a common ending to an Arkestra performance.¹⁷² One could also view this part of the Arkestra performance as a second-line performance similar to the New Orleans funeral tradition of parading through the streets after leaving the graveyard in a second line, the funeral attendees dancing behind the musicians. In Wynton Marsalis's book *Jazz in the bittersweet blues of life* there is a description of Marsalis leading the audience out the door of a club during a performance, the musicians continuing to play as they all danced out onto the street and around the block (Marsalis and Vigeland 2001: 33-34). The point, of course, is that the mobile and socially oriented nature of Sun Ra's performance practice is indicative of a key aspect of the larger African Atlantic aesthetic: without the participation of an audience, the full Text of the music does not exist.

¹⁷² Probably the most compelling argument for the central importance of ring shout to African American expressive traditions is made by Sterling Stuckey in his book *Slave culture* (1987: 3-97). In making the connection between Arkestra performances and ring shout Lock notes that he witnessed this ending to a number of performances he attended (1999: 39). Lock points out the counter-clockwise dancing in Mugge's film and mentions viewing a number of amateur video examples of the same dance he borrowed from the writer and collector Chris Trent. In fact, when presented with the puzzlingly contrary image of the Arkestra dancing in a clockwise direction in the cover image to the Leo Records CD *Live at the Hackney Empire* (1994b), Lock contacted the publisher and confirmed that the image was mistakenly reversed in the printing process (1999: 231-32 n.146).

One of the primary concerns of BARTS and other organizations associated with the BAM was the dissemination of the political and aesthetic concerns of the new artists, realized, for example, in an anthology such as *Black fire* (Baraka and Neal 1968). Having written the liner notes for Coltrane's *Live at Birdland* LP (1964) on Impulse Records, Baraka asked Impulse's Bob Thiele to produce an album featuring some of the jazz musicians associated with the BAM. Recorded live at the Village Gate in New York in March 1965 as a benefit for BARTS, the LP titled *The New Wave in Jazz* (Various artists 1966) featured groups led by John Coltrane, Albert Ayler, Archie Shepp, Grachan Moncur, Bobby Hutcherson, and Charles Tolliver (1997: 306). In *The autobiography of LeRoi Jones* Baraka states that he was "infuriated" to find that Sun Ra and the Arkestra, who had performed at the concert, were left off the album, but in the original liner notes he wrote for the LP, re-printed in *Black music*, he states in more circumspect language that the omission was due to "the missionary's vagaries," leaving an ambiguous sense of who was to blame for the omission (1967a: 174). In the liner notes Baraka sums up the aesthetic which this compilation exemplifies: "New Black Music is this: Find the self, then kill it" (176). In this famous quote Baraka attempts to summarize the primary aesthetic at play within the New Jazz of the 1960s – essentially the 1960s avant garde which is larger than the label "free jazz" can encompass – which attempts to transcend the limitations of form by emphasizing the primacy of expression and spirituality. In this new aesthetic Coltrane "is a mature swan whose wingspan was a whole new world," but who nevertheless "showed us how to murder the popular song" (174).

Benston expands on Baraka's analysis of Coltrane as an exemplar of a new aesthetic for a moment, noting that such an aesthetic calls for the personalized re-

harmonization, re-arrangement, and re-interpretation of songs such that one moves beyond the mere creation of a personal vision of the music toward a more essentially black manner of performance as, for example, with Coltrane's version of the Rogers and Hammerstein's "My favorite things" (1976: 87). The significance of Coltrane's recording of "My favorite things" (1961), though, transcends the refusal to adhere to form, creating a newly extended form that pays tribute to the melody and harmony of the Rogers and Hammerstein original during the melody statement, but then adopts a long single-center modal plateau from which the musicians improvise in a free yet coherent excursus on the theme. In addition, Coltrane's use of the soprano saxophone on this recording is significant, adding a new timbre and texture to the music that, arguably, signifies both the timbral preference found throughout Africa for sharp timbres which cut through a collection of sounds as well as the possible presentation of the soprano sax as a stand-in for a West African wind instrument such as the piercingly affective alghaita horn (Kubik 1999: 88-89). These formal, harmonic, and timbral modifications of the music indicate a growing sense of the limitations of musical systems and a creeping awareness of the need to break with "traditions." Radano writes that free jazz, in all its varied forms, "represented not an aberration, but a fracture in the continuum of a tentative, constructed mainstream" (Radano 1993: 4). Whether this break from the mainstream is expressed in a free-form Arkestra "space chord" or a politically challenging rant against the status quo of postcolonial Nigeria, in each of these cases, on some level, there is the spectral presence of Africa which saves the free-form nature of the music from pointless nihilism

or narcissism – in each and all of these cases, memory and community is always present.¹⁷³

But while Sun Ra's music and performative example were important to the BAM musicians and writers, this was not always the case; though Baraka became an enthusiastic advocate for Sun Ra, his early opinions were not as complimentary as his opinions of even a few years later. In an essay titled "New York loft and coffee shop jazz," first published in *Down Beat* in 1963, Baraka refers to Sun Ra as "weird," having considered him to be a "'modernistic' faddist," but indicates that he is willing to consider Sun Ra's music a bit more closely based on the testimony of people whose opinions he respects; Baraka notes that he had not yet seen or heard Sun Ra's group that was then performing at the Playhouse Coffee Shop in New York, but others had told him it was "a really swinging group" (1967a: 95-96). Just a few years later, in his 1966 *Down Beat* essay titled "Apple cores #3," Baraka seems to have radically changed his opinion of Sun Ra (126-31). He mentions that he saw a film in Chicago a number of years earlier titled *The cry of jazz* that featured Sun Ra's music, leaving him with a sense of the music's vagueness, but states that Sun Ra's music has since come to distill much of the unrealized creative spirit of the late 1950s, producing the "mature and profound music and compositions of [a] philosopher-musician" (128). Later that same year, in the fifth installment of the "Apple cores" column titled "The Burton Greene affair," Baraka offers Sun Ra's "consciously Spiritual Music" as a counter-example to the "anti-soul" aesthetic of Greene's "white, super-hip (MoDErN)" piano playing.

¹⁷³ George Lewis (1996) proposes a framework for differentiating between the communal, ethically driven improvisation of African diasporic musics (Afrological) and the individualistic, indeterminate improvisation found in some forms of contemporary European art music (Eurological).

Sun-Ra, who knows something of the Wisdom Religion itself, uses his knowledge to make his music bridge to higher human principles. Sun-Ra speaks of the actual change, the actual evolution through space, not only in space ships, but of the higher principles of humanity, the *progress* after the death of the body (137).

Commenting on the seemingly perpetual relationship between African American expressive culture and the so-called avant garde of aesthetic modernism, Baraka states in an earlier essay that, “We are, all of us, *moderns*, whether we like it or not” (70). Ingrid Monson observes that this statement indicates the conscious creation of what she terms an “Afro-modernist sensibility,” formed “through the creative fusion of black aesthetics and modernism” (2007: 72). Monson notes that, rather than signaling the wholesale adoption of white aesthetic values and practices, this new Afro-modernist aesthetic practice operated as what Gilroy, borrowing from Bauman’s more literally formulated political concept, referred to as the “counterculture of modernity” (Gilroy 1993: 36; Bauman 1986). How does this square with Baraka’s early characterization of Sun Ra as a “‘modernistic’ faddist” though? The first quote in this paragraph, claiming affiliation with modernism, is from an essay that was first published in *Metronome* in 1961, while the quote regarding Sun Ra the “‘modernistic’ faddist” was published in *Down Beat* in 1963; in the first instance, Baraka identified himself as being among a group of modernists, while in the second example he distanced himself from modernism. While Baraka was never dismissive toward Sun Ra’s music there have certainly been others who have referred to Sun Ra and other members of the jazz avant-garde as being more aligned with the European avant garde than with the vanguard of black artists; in this they mistakenly identify what is meant to be a departure from European aesthetic practices as an actual alliance with the European avant-garde. During a blindfold test in *Down Beat* magazine Miles Davis once identified the Arkestra as a second-rate European group

(Feather and Gitler 1976: 34-35). Similarly, Wynton Marsalis claimed that Sun Ra's music was more directly related to the early 20th century European avant-garde musical practices of serialism and atonality than to anything that formed within African American culture (Sidran 1995: 349). Similarly, Anthony Braxton has long been criticized for his alleged over-reliance on European compositional aesthetics and procedures even while Braxton's own characterization of his music is as a "Trans-African pedagogy" (Lock 1999: 159-62, 156). Commenting on his seeming over-reliance on European musical influences, Baraka claims that Braxton is part of the "*Tail Europe* school of Negro musicians who, while presumably playing jazz, really seek to make African-American music a banal appendage of European concert music! Their entire mission seems to be to prove to white people that they have heard Webern, Berg, or John Cage" (Baraka and Baraka 1987: 266). Lock notes that Baraka and Braxton, though, are actually quite similar in some of their thoughts on musical authenticity and representations of jazz in the press, drawing particular attention to rhetorical parallels between Baraka's essay "Jazz and the white critic" and parts of Braxton's *Tri-axium writings* (Lock 1999: 160; Baraka 1967a: 11-20; Braxton 1985: 235-308).

Also likely, though, is that Baraka's attitude toward modernism is an example of the function of antinomy in his work which operates in much the same manner as John McCole's discussion of Walter Benjamin's oeuvre. McCole views Benjamin's work as being broadly characterized by his rhetorical preference for antinomy, seen, for example, in Benjamin's simultaneous complaining about the loss of an "aura" about things cultural – an aura which aids in the transmission of tradition – while also celebrating that loss since aura tends to mystify culture when it is adopted in the writing of history (1993: 3-

8). Benjamin himself referred to this tension between tradition and history as a “fundamental aporia” which spanned both the “discontinuum” of tradition and the seeming continuum of history (295). Baraka’s early poem “Hegel” (1969: 23-24) is an example of antinomy present in a single work, expressing both an attraction to Hegelian philosophy’s promise of definitive answers and a repulsion to its hegemonic nature and its lack of attention to life’s realities.

No single redeeming
word, has come
wringing out of flesh
with the imperfect beautiful resolution
that would release me from this heavy contract
of emptiness.

In this poem Baraka exhibits, in a manner similar to that of Benjamin, both an acknowledgement of the “aura” of culture as well as an understanding of the limited and limiting nature of culture.

While Baraka’s opinions of Sun Ra seemed to solidify in his 1966 essays, it was also in 1966 that *Down Beat* started shifting its opinion of Baraka from that of a valued contributor to an editorial outcast. When the “Apple cores” column first appeared in *Down Beat* in 1964 the editorial introduction characterized Baraka as “one of the most provocative spokesmen for the ‘new jazz,’” identifying him with a growing aesthetic radicalism within the jazz community while also effectively distancing themselves from that radicalism (Baraka 1964a).¹⁷⁴ In a discussion of Baraka’s *Down Beat* columns, Iain Anderson notes the growing editorial disillusionment with Baraka’s perspective which ultimately led them to respond, in 1966, through the voice of Brooks Johnson, a black

¹⁷⁴ All six of the “Apple cores” essays were reprinted in the book *Black music* (Baraka 1967a: 113-44). Except for the citation of the original editorial introduction I otherwise cite the reprinted versions of these essays.

writer who wrote frequently for *Negro Digest* (2007: 158). In a June 16 essay Johnson essentially tore into Baraka, and by proxy the entirety of the free jazz movement, calling him a “pimp” for “paranoid...neo-neo-Toms” such as Sun Ra and other jazz artists he did not name who, in his opinion, produced talentless and chaotic art under the guise of Black Nationalism in a manner that offended his own identity as a black man (1966b). In a follow up essay published in October, Johnson characterized the presence of nationalist politics in the jazz community as a “perversion of black pride,” stating that it was “easier to be a racist than a good trumpeter” (1966a). One should note not only a correspondence between Baraka’s growing concern with the jazz avant garde and the withering of *Down Beat*’s editorial support, but also the fact that this was not the first or last time that the editors and writers of *Down Beat* were involved in the marginalization of musicians and writers who expressed strong opinions on the relationship between music and Black Power politics¹⁷⁵; this example illustrates both the growing concern among black intellectuals with both music and politics – essentially music as politics – as well as a growing reactionary concern that politics should remain separate from music.

Baraka, among others, included both fragments of music and elements of African American musical performance practices in his poetry. The poem “Dope,” for instance, achieves its true expressive intent only when heard performed in Baraka’s voice, gaining subtlety, power, and nuance through the use of emphatic repetition, call-and-response phrasing, and dramatic shifts in volume, articulation, and emphasis (1988: 263-66). The written text of the poem often includes sounds that are partially notated, such as with the

¹⁷⁵ See, for instance, Ingrid Monson’s and Frank Kofsky’s discussions of *Down Beat* editors’ and writers’ marginalizing responses to Abbey Lincoln’s and Max Roach’s expressions of politics in their music (Monson 2007: 238-82; Kofsky 1998b: 123-30).

opening line “uuuuuuuuuu,” leaving no indication as to the line’s articulation or dynamics. In a recorded version that accompanies the *Call & response* anthology of African American literature (Hill 1998), Baraka can be heard articulating each vowel as a staccato note, emphasizing each syllable’s rhythmic impact, and varying the dynamics of the lines in alternating crescendos and decrescendos in something that sounds more like a rising and falling, highly staccato version of “òò-òò-òò-òò-òò-òò-òò-òò-òò-òò.” Aside from the percussive effect, the staccato articulation of each vowel adds a signified image of a simian sound, essentially Signifyin(g) on a racist signifier that has so often been used to impugn the intelligence of black people. Later in the recording the written word “oowow!” is heard with a strong accent on the third and fourth letters such that it now sounds like a triplet figure with a heavily accented middle note (oo-WO-w, sounding like “oo-WAH-w”) rather than two eighth notes with no given articulation (oo-wow).¹⁷⁶ In this case, rather than striving to find a system of inscription that fits the sound of the poem such that a reader can hear the poet’s aural intent in much the same way that some specifically trained musicians in European art music can often hear a composer’s intent through reading a musical score, Baraka presents the written poem as one dimension, leaving it to the reader to fill in the aural and performative dimensions either through the sounds of their own experiences of language or through the experience of hearing Baraka perform the poem. In this way the poem acts much like a musical lead sheet in jazz performance: the lead sheet outlines the basic melody, chord changes, and structure of a composition which the musicians then perform in a manner that is creatively free while

¹⁷⁶ Joseph Holloway notes that the word *wow*, along with other words such as *okay*, *bozo*, *jive*, *juke*, and *moola*, have entered American English as linguistic retentions from African languages (2005: 6, 59).

remaining loosely though idiomatically tied to the written text.¹⁷⁷ Larry Neal ties this sense of textual improvisation and performative expressiveness to the poets' aesthetic response to the politics implied in Malcolm X's rhetorical style.

We can learn more about what poetry is by listening to the cadences in Malcolm's speeches. Listen to James Brown scream. Ask yourself, then: Have you ever heard a Negro poet sing like that? Of course not, because we have been tied to the texts, like most white poets. The text could be destroyed and no one would be hurt in the least by it. The key is in the music (1989: 20-21).

As with the sense of African diasporic art's ephemeral nature discussed in chapter 2, Neal acknowledges that the true Text of poetry and music is in its performance which, when completed, leaves only a trace in the form of the written text as well as in the memory of the audience and the performer.

This dimensional difference between the written and performed text is also operative in Baraka's dramatic collaborations with musicians such as Archie Shepp, Albert Ayler, and Sun Ra, all of whom composed music for Baraka's plays in the 1960s (Anderson 2007: 99). Baraka conceived of music as part of the broader textual experience of drama: "The music, to me, is an added dramatic dimension – as narrator, as actor. Music, to me, is as much alive as the actors. It has as much importance" (Shannon and Baraka 1994: 232). Baraka's use of music, in fact, borders on the claim that music is representational, stating that, "Music has ideas in it...what the composer wants to say, what he feels, what kind of emotional parallel music conjures up" (232). And as each actor is an individual with expressive strengths and weaknesses, so too are musicians in

¹⁷⁷ I once had the odd experience of teaching a short section on jazz history to a number of university music students who were, by and large, not familiar with jazz (jazz majors were required to take a semester-long jazz history course). During one lecture I gave each of the students a copy of the *Real book* lead sheet of "Cherokee" and asked them to follow the form while they listened to a recording of Charlie Parker playing the tune. After listening to Parker's brilliant improvisation on the melody and form one student sputtered in frustration, "But...how do we know he is playing the song?!"

their dramatic effect. Regarding his use of Ayler as a composer and performer Baraka stated that he is interested in “the kind of power and force he has” when playing live.

I’ve used him when I wanted improvisation added to the text.... The play is as much a generator of emotions as any other kind of thing. And if you have a musician improvising off the emotions he gets from the play, then it creates a kind of improvised life of the play at the same time that you have a kind of stated life of the play (232-33).

In working with Sun Ra as a composer and performer for *Black mass* (Baraka 1971a; Baraka and Sun Ra 1968), Baraka states that he was looking for an “other-worldly wisdom or dimension, which changes something to fear, terror, contemplation of the laboratory, contemplation of what wisdom and knowledge really are” (Shannon and Baraka 1994: 232).

But it is with the play *Slave ship* that Baraka created a vehicle for engaging an audience in the dialogic composing of historical narrative which most closely resembles the practices of composing the African Atlantic (Baraka 1967b). Larry Neal comments that the use of music in *Slave ship*, composed by Sun Ra, Coltrane, Ayler, and Ornette Coleman, adds to the sense of history as “a series of expressionistic tableaux,” avoiding the use of plot in favor of what Baraka describes as “pageant” in order to evoke the jumble and horror of the Middle Passage (1989: 73-74). Benston states that in the play Baraka creates a sense of music as “strength, memory, power, triumph, affirmation – the entire historical and mythical process of Afro-American being,” noting that through the use of audience participation in the opening dance number *Slave ship* is transformed from mere drama to something more akin to ritual (1976: 253) – essentially a liminal ritual in which the performers and the audience dialogically compose the historical narrative of the African Atlantic. Benston comments that Baraka “interprets the evolution of [African

American music] as the struggle of African expressiveness to assert itself in ever-changing musical forms,” approaching black music in a manner that “demands a wholly different historiography; for what interests him is the Afro-American as a type of consciousness, a *way of expression*” (83). In *Blues people* Baraka ties this sense of consciousness, expressed through music, to the historical creation of an African American identity, forged in the dual realities of African heritage and American residence.

When America became important enough to the African to be passed on, in those *formal* renditions, to the young, those renditions were in some kind of Afro-American language. And finally, when a man looked up in some anonymous field and shouted, ‘Oh, Ahm tired a dis mess,/Oh, yes, Ahm so tired a dis mess,’ you can be sure he was an American (1963: xii).

Again, as with the example from Du Bois at the beginning of this chapter, one can see the drawing together of history and identity with a sense of music as an important vector of expression.

But more than just showcasing the musical side of a broad artistic movement, one of the defining characteristics of the BAM is the close association between music and literature, with poets such as Baraka and Haki Madhubuti adopting the tempos, phrasing, and textures of jazz. Laid on its side, Madhubuti’s poem “Don’t Cry, Scream” (1969: 27-31) resembles the dramatic arc of tension and release that is a classic feature of most well-conceived jazz solos, arranged such that there are long, gradual rises, occasional spikes, as well as precipitous falls (Figure 13), reaching moments of screaming tension reminiscent of John Coltrane’s playing throughout his classic 1965 album *A love supreme* (2003).

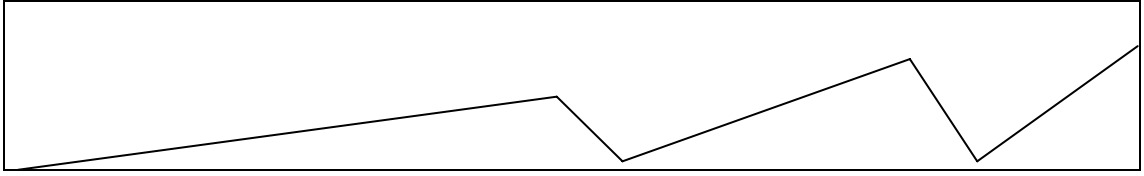


Figure 13: Dynamic arc

dynamics of the poem, sometimes indicating that the poem should whisper, sometimes indicating that it should scream like Coltrane’s horn at the cracked top of its register (“blowing a-melodics...screeching, screaming...blasting”), always acting in much the same way that a music composer indicates the dynamics of music – the loudness or softness – as an integral part of shaping the subtleties and the affective force of the musical experience. Coltrane, of course, was a significant inspirational figure to the artists of the BAM, signifying a breadth and depth of artistic commitment which was analogous to the political commitment and vision of Malcolm X. While Coltrane himself may have been more ambivalent about the overt expression of politics in his music, it is clear that his music did signify, for others, a profound sense of connection between experience, intellect, and spirituality.

In addition to the dynamics of Madhubuti’s “Don’t cry, scream,” Smitherman points to several instances in which the musical memory of the reader/audience is called upon to interpolate a moment of musical performance into the poem. Madhubuti includes the line, “teeth dropped in tune with ray charles singing ‘yesterday’” (Smitherman 1977: 142), an evocation of Ray Charles’s version of the song “Yesterday” (1967) which requires the audience to interpolate the melody of the song as it was performed in an African American rhythm and blues style and to abandon the aesthetic of the original version sung by Paul McCartney (Beatles 1987). Elsewhere, Smitherman (141) notes the

connection between Baraka's repetition of the word "please" in his poem "The nation is like ourselves" (1970) and James Brown's "Please please please" (2004). Throughout the poem Baraka employs the word "please" as part of an ironically repetitive formula – "please mister liberated nigger," "please mr. ethnic meditations professor" – and then ends the poem with several lines to be sung in the style of James Brown.

yes the sweet lost nigger
you are our nation sick ass assimulado
[sings] please come back
like james brown say
[talk-sings] please please please

In this poem one can begin to see the frustrations that Baraka and others felt with regard to Brown's seeming lack of political engagement (to be discussed below), but at the same time the borrowing and Signifyin(g) on the repetitive "please, please, please" indicate that the poet speaks to an audience with a shared language and a shared iconography.

Building on this sense of iconography, Larry Neal refers several times to James Brown's "New breed" in *Visions of a liberated future* (1989: 7, 130), making a literary comparison between the rhetorical style and substance of Malcolm X and the musical poetics James Brown. In the passage quoted above which refers to James Brown's screams, Neal certainly does not reduce Brown's affective power to a mere scream, instead emphasizing the sometimes forgotten element of affect too often excluded from Western poetics. Another element of the scream, though, is that, given its lack of strictly representational content – its lack of a fixed signified meaning – the scream very easily travels across barriers of language and culture. As such, it would be profitable for this dissertation to consider some of the cultural relationships that exist between Fela and James Brown – between them as people, for sure, but primarily between them as

musicians whose music and iconic status bears notice. Through a close consideration of the web of cultural ties between Fela's political Afrobeat and James Brown's iconic importance to Black Power-influenced aesthetics one can both deepen and complicate the varied relationships which existed in African Atlantic musical and political culture.

Capping and Signifyin(g): The cultural exchanges of Fela and James Brown:

In the case of Fela and James Brown, the exchange of musical ideas back and forth across the Atlantic, sometimes conscious and sometimes not so, created a Signifyin(g) web that I refer to in this chapter as *capping*: an expressive process employing the multiple layers of signifying tropes which, through the process of being passed back and forth between and among their users, gain depth and richness, taking on new layers of meaning while also maintaining their original core content. Smitherman (1977: 119-20) lists capping as one of many rhetorical strategies of Signifyin(g), broadly defined by Gates as "repetition with a signal difference" (Gates 1988: xxiv). But capping, according to Gates, is also a "black vernacular equivalent of metalipsis" (145), requiring the reader or listener to make multiple cognitive and imaginative leaps in the process of interpreting the capped expressive trope. Metalipsis, in European literary studies, is defined as,

...various kinds of complex figure or trope that are figurative to the second or third degree; that is, they involve a figure that either refers us to yet another figure or requires a further imaginative leap to establish its reference, usually by a process of metonymy. Extended similes and rhetorical questions sometimes show a *metaleptic* multiplication of figures (Baldick 2008).

Through metalipsis, then, meaning is inferred rather than received directly; it is a dynamic form of expression which allows for a multiplicity of meanings to be communicated through the use of a single, complex message. Capping, as a culturally-

determined expressive form that bears some relation to metalipsis, is grounded in the commonality of African heritage and is animated by a sense of creatively deconstructive aporia.

Following from these definitions provided by Gates, Smitherman, and Baldick I would suggest that the complexity and quality of capping one experiences in listening to Fela's music, for instance, is dependent upon one's cultural identity and positionality: the layers of meaning a listener takes from the music is different depending upon whether the listener is Nigerian or American, black or white, wealthy, middle-class, or poor, etc. While Fela's music was meant primarily to address a working-class Nigerian audience regarding contemporary Nigerian social, his audience was not solely working-class Nigerian. Through the recording and distribution of his music Fela's *audience* has become international and multi-generational, providing a framework for politicized music making that is directly connected, for example, to the work of a number of contemporary hip hop artists such as Common, Talib Kweli, and Mos Def (Patel 2003: 25-35). Through this inter-generational exchange of ideas and aesthetic – an exchange which transcends the temporal and spatial contexts of the music – Fela's example has been instrumental, even in his absence, in creating what Mark Anthony Neal dubiously refers to as a group of “celebrity Gramscian” artists who use the public forum of celebrity as an opportunity to engage their audience in a critical public discourse (2003: 114). Whether or not one accepts Neal's label, though, one could argue that the practice of political engagement exhibited by contemporary artists who claim Fela's example as an influence can also be characterized as other examples of composing the African Atlantic. In addition, one can

view this same intergenerational influence as another Signifyin(g) layer in the same capping process which connects both Fela's and James Brown's musical practices.

In his autobiography, James Brown recounts the 1970 tour which first brought him and his band to Nigeria. Brown states that while he had a sense that his music was qualitatively African, he was ignorant as to the specific content of African music.

It's a funny thing about me and African music. I didn't even know it existed. When I got the consciousness of Africa and decided to see what my roots were, I thought I'd find out where my thing came from. My roots may be imbedded [*sic*] in me and I don't know it, but when I got to Africa I didn't recognize anything that I had gotten from there (Brown and Tucker 2002: 221).

The general consciousness of Africa, as Brown conceived it in 1970, was, of course, articulated within the context of the Black Power movement of the 1960s, of which Brown was an icon. Brown's music was, in the words of Thulani Davis, "proof that black people were different. Rhythmically and tonally blacks had to be from somewhere else. Proof that Africa was really over there for those of us who had never seen it – it was in that voice" (1980: 29). Robert Elliot Fox writes that black music acts as a resonating source of African historical memory, stating that while "original blackness" may be only a historical memory, it can be felt in the continuing presence of African-derived drum rhythms; in this Fox is concerned with the "'deep song' of the black experience as it manifests itself cross-culturally in the wake of the diaspora, in the aftermath of slavery and colonialism, and in the continuing struggle for true independence against forces (internal and external) of neocolonialism" (1995: 3). This dynamic is part of an "African-Atlantic continuum." Note here that some African music has survived nearly intact, as in the case of the Big Drum ceremony in Carriacou (McDaniel 1998); in other African Diasporic musics Africa is a more distant, felt presence, leaving the listener to note the

connection to Africa through a seemingly nebulous process of trying to determine filiation. Though Brown claimed to be ignorant of the specific historical and cultural content of African music, he had come to represent, for many African Americans, an awareness of identity and nationality that was no longer tied to the nation-state but was, rather, articulated through a generalized sense of filiation with an African cultural past which had been historically ruptured through the workings of global racial capitalism and further diffused through the Eurocentric ideological control of historical narrative.

That Brown was an icon of the Black Power movement, though, was not without its complexities and contradictions. In fact, the quote from Larry Neal at the beginning of chapter 4 – “suppose James Brown read Frantz Fanon?” (1987: 18) – was not truly meant as a retrospective revision, as I implied, but more of a statement of frustration with Brown’s seeming lack of political consciousness. While Brown was rightfully known for his black-positive statements such as in the 1968 song “Say it loud (I’m black and I’m proud)” (2008), his relationship to the Black Power movement was far more ambivalent. In his autobiography Brown states that Black Power meant black pride and political participation to him, but he is far more suspect, throughout the text, of the more confrontational aspects of the Black Power movement, preferring the passive side of the Biblical notion of self-defense over the proactive defense of self (Brown and Tucker 2002: 169). To illustrate this ambivalence, Brian Ward gives the example of Brown’s song “America is my home,” released in 1968 just prior to Brown’s visit to Vietnam to perform for American troops (Ward 1998: 390; Brown 2008). While many black nationalists had hoped Brown would adopt a more overtly political stance in his music, this song seemed firmly wedded to the idea of assimilative participation in the U.S.

government. Baraka was scathingly critical of this song in particular, stating that it was “an example of Afro-American culture, an R&B song for sure, but it did not have the consciousness of Black, so it could not be called Black. To sing lies about America is not beneficial to the Black Nation, therefore, it’s not conscious of Blackness.” Baraka refers to the song as an example of “PimpArt,” written and performed in a manner similar to “a CocaCola commercial on a soul station. Colored form, and like PimpArt, white content” (1971b: 131).

Of course Fela was aware, at least by the late 1980s, that Brown was disappointingly non-political, though he recognized Brown’s significance to the broader African aesthetic presence throughout the diaspora, stating that,

James contributed to African music in America.... He’s African, and though he’s not as political as I’d like him to be, this is a good place to start telling African-Americans about how desperate the situation is in Africa – not just in South Africa, but all over (Watrous 1989).

It is no surprise that Brown’s music was popular throughout West Africa by the 1960s, beginning to eclipse highlife as the most popular dance music as a result of its syncretic relationship to some popular and traditional African musics. As was discussed in chapter 4, Fela, beginning from secondary school, had been a highlife musician who had encountered and absorbed jazz while he was a music student at Trinity College in London (Veal 2000: 39-46). Returning to Nigeria after receiving a degree in music education, Fela’s further musical career was predicated on the conscious mixture of highlife and jazz – a musical connection that, to Fela, was a purposeful attempt to create a unique art music that would introduce jazz to Nigerian audiences. Throughout much of the 1960s, though, Fela struggled to connect with audiences since the structures and practices of jazz were foreign to Nigerian conceptions of musical aesthetics; even his mother, at the time, told

Fela to “start playing music your people understand, not jazz” (Moore 2009: 73). Veal has speculated that Fela’s music throughout his career, though more particularly with regard to the jazz elements, is often at odds with Yoruba musical aesthetics which project complexity in the cognitive content of the “lyrics, language-based drumming, and music” (2000: 248). The jazz influences in Fela’s Afrobeat are, accordingly, too direct, too explicit, and too removed from the Yoruba language for much of the wider Nigerian audience; it sometimes does not allow for the uses of proverbial language and indirection that are idiomatic to Yoruba musical sensibilities, though, as I argue in chapter 4, it often does, albeit in a créolized form.

The popularity of James Brown in West Africa, though, speaks to what Olly Wilson has suggested is a combination of the audience’s recognition of African musical elements coupled with the novelty of the non-African expressive voice (1974: 21). John Chernoff further explains Brown’s popularity by highlighting the specific musical elements of rhythmic layering and band discipline in Brown’s compositional style – elements which are syncretic with a West African conception of compositional aesthetics and communal performance.

James Brown is the most popular Afro-American musician in Africa particularly because the rhythms in his arrangements are extremely open and stable, and his songs generally involve a bridge in which all the instruments change together and then return to their former relationships. To an African ear, James Brown times these changes extremely well as he and his band move through the transitions of a song, and his arrangements bear close comparison with African arrangements (1979: 115).

This concerted change and return brings to mind the example from chapter 2 of the jarring effect of the single, mostly regular though sometimes intermittent, harmonic structure in the composition “So what.”

By the mid-1960s Fela was struggling to maintain a career in popular music in Nigeria while regional musicians such as Sierra Leonean singer Geraldo Pino were succeeding through the adoption of a James Brown-like persona and the performance of Brown's songs such as "Cold sweat" and "Let yourself go" (Veal 2000: 61). Fela's own music did not consciously take on many of the musical elements representative of Brown's style – the modal harmonic language, the exact repetition of parts, the multiple layers of additive rhythm – until his 1969 trip to the United States, trying to break into the American music market but finding, instead, a political and aesthetic direction for his music that was largely animated by the literature and philosophies of the Black Power Movement. Fela notes that reading the *Autobiography of Malcolm X*, in particular, caused him to become aware of his need to begin to create music that was more consciously African in character and in orientation – to begin to use jazz to play African music rather than the other way around. It was during this visit to the U.S. that Fela composed "My lady frustration," a tribute to his girlfriend and political role model Sandra Izsadore, which he considered to be his first truly African composition (Moore 2009: 88). With the stable, repetitive rhythms and modal harmonic language which were characteristic of James Brown's compositional style, Fela felt that he had finally begun to realize a compositional language that was both expressive of his personal musical vision as well as representative of his Yoruba particularity and his African diasporic identity. In essence, though, one should note the seeming irony of the fact that Fela's trip to the U.S. sparked in him a realization of what truly constituted an African way of composing music.

Adding to the layers of musical and cultural exchange – the further working of the capping process – James Brown toured West Africa with his band in 1970, performing in

Lagos, Nigeria during a period in Nigerian history that witnessed the end of the Biafran conflict (Brown and Tucker 2002: 220). While in Lagos Brown and his band were able to see and hear Fela's band in performance.

I think when [Fela] started as a musician he was playing a kind of music they call Highlife, but by this time he was developing Afro-beat out of African music and funk. He was kind of like the African James Brown. His band had a strong rhythm; I think Clyde picked up on it in his drumming, and Bootsy dug it, too. Some of the ideas my band was getting from that band had come from me in the first place, but that was okay with me. It made the music that much stronger (221).

As one can see, the complex dynamics of multiple cultural exchanges between Brown and Fela began to deepen as Brown noticed his musical influences upon Fela while also noting Fela's influences on his own band members, drummer Clyde Stubblefield and bassist Bootsy Collins. A close consideration of this specific cultural exchange between Brown and Fela ultimately reveals a complex pattern of oral-compositional practices that can be characterized as simultaneously a micro process – the everyday Signifyin(g) upon expressive materials – as well as a macro process I refer to as capping, producing generation upon generation of influence such that it is impossible to sort out the originary artists or ideas in any one musical composition or genre.¹⁷⁸ Gilroy characterizes this multi-directional relationship between Fela and Brown as a shift from the linear chronotope of the road to a more rhizomatically determined chronotope of the crossroads, invoking the aporetic logic of Esu and deconstruction such that there can be no fixed, finite meaning or identity (1993: 200). I would suggest, instead, that, as was discussed in chapter 1, both the (linear) road and the (aporetic) crossroads exist in this exchange,

¹⁷⁸ Jacques Derrida argues that the endless possibilities of context cause any sense of meaning in a sign to be so loosened that it is no longer possible to find an originary meaning. This is an argument, as some have mischaracterized it, for radical epistemological and moral relativism, but rather a description of meaning as subtle and complex and determined by context (Derrida 1982: 1-27).

found in the directional claim to roots that is a key element of diasporic membership as well as the multi-directional, rhizomatic routes that comprise the creative energy of African Atlantic culture.

Returning to the passage from Larry Neal at the beginning of this chapter regarding James Brown and Frantz Fanon, a related passage from Maya Angelou's *All God's children need travelling shoes* ties the musical with the political while also highlighting the sometimes seeming disconnect between the two spheres of expression. Angelou describes a scene in Ghana in which a speech by Malcolm X is preceded by the performance of a highlife band. In Angelou's recounting of the scene Malcolm X is unmindful, and possibly dismissive, of the highlife band, stating,

I do not want you to think that because I have been sitting quietly, that I do not appreciate your invitation. The fact is, I am in no mood to dance. I think of our brothers and sisters at home, squirming under the heel of racial oppression, and I do not care to dance. I think of our brothers and sisters in the Congo, squirming under the heel of imperialist invasion, and I do not care to dance. I think of our brothers and sisters in Southern Africa, squirming under the heel of Apartheid, and I do not care to dance (1986: 134).

Malcolm provided his own recollection of the same event, noting the similarities between highlife and African American jazz while maintaining a separation between musical and political expression.

It was my first sight of Ghanaians dancing the high-life. A high and merry time was being had by everyone, and I was pressed to make a short speech. I stressed again the need for unity between Africans and Afro-Americans. I cried out of my heart, "Now, dance! Sing! But as you do – remember Mandela, remember Sobokwe! Remember Lumumba in his grave! Remember South Africans now in jail!" I said, "You wonder why *I* don't dance? Because I want you to remember twenty-two million Afro-Americans in the U.S.!" But I sure felt like dancing! The Ghanaians performed the high-life as if possessed. One pretty African girl sang 'Blue moon' like Sarah Vaughn. Sometimes the band sounded like Milt Jackson, sometimes like Charlie Parker (Malcolm X and Haley 1964: 364-65).

In the summary of his biography of Fela, Veal speculates that if Malcolm had delivered this speech in concerted performance with the highlife band the audience would have witnessed the first afrobeat performance (2000: 281). While this may be true to an extent, it is also the political aesthetics of African identity in Fela's expressive voice that James Brown recognized: a common heritage that is directly experienced in Fela's music and that is felt in the roots and routes of Brown's music; a heritage that, in its very articulation, is as politically expressive as the eloquent rhetoric of Malcolm X. The Atlantic exchange of musical and political-aesthetic materials and ideals represent the full expression of combining the political philosophies of Frantz Fanon and Malcolm X with the musically expressed aesthetic of blackness one hears from James Brown. Drawing from a multitude of carefully chosen and constantly shifting sources Fela was able, over the course of his career, to create an original form of music that was grounded in the "traditions" of music that came before; a form of dance-party music that was as politically charged as a speech by Malcolm X while maintaining its value as entertainment and its depth as art.

Composing a new historical narrative:

As stated at the beginning of chapter 1, rather than referring to this new conception of composition as *African Atlantic composition* or *composition in an African Atlantic style* I have chosen to call it *composing the African Atlantic*. In this rhetorical configuration composition becomes a more fully social process which activates the sedimented memories of history that, for its core black audience, signify an essential African identity grounded within the historical context of the Atlantic slave trade as well as a contemporary consciousness of the cultural *métissage* that is the creative reality of

modernity (Mudimbe 1994: 52-55; Amselle 1990). Certainly Sun Ra and Fela were radically different artists in terms of musical practice, particular aesthetics, personal temperament, etc., coming from different geographical, political, class-based, and temporal contexts. But there are core issues in each of their bodies of work that indicate a commonality of epistemological and ontological *a priori*s – a common understanding of the African Atlantic *episteme* – which unites their musical practice with that of others of the African diaspora, composing the history and wishes of African diasporic people night after night through the medium of dialogic performance. To this end Sun Ra stated that he used music as a means to engage his audience:

I am a musician, but I'm another type of musician.
I use music as a medium to talk to people.
I'm not a minister, I'm not a philosopher, I'm not a politician, I'm in another category.
Music is a language, you see, a universal language (Sinclair 2010: 1).

This universal language, one could argue, is not the metaphysically superficial cliché often involved in the everyday theorizing of cultural universality, but rather an acknowledgement that music can be used as a means of activating, structuring, and debating the memories which constitute the dialogically determined history of the African Atlantic.

Raphael Samuel, in writing about New Orleans Mardi Gras culture, observes that memory, both personal and cultural, is a dynamic phenomenon that is “dialectically related to historical thought rather than being some kind of negative other to it”; as such, memory is historically conditioned, becoming re-ordered and re-fashioned according to desires and the positionality of those whose memories they are (1994: ix-x). While some conservative commentators such as Mary Lefkowitz complain that Afrocentrism is a

distorting revision of history, others such as Du Bois, in *Black Reconstruction*, have noted the conservative white distortion of history which ultimately necessitates the revision and reclamation of history.¹⁷⁹ In *The Afrocentric idea* Molefe Kete Asante writes about the power differential inherent in certain forms of discourse as they are experienced by people of African descent in the United States. In particular, the rhetorical forms of criticism, sermon, and lecture are structured so as to imply that one party to the discourse (the critic, preacher, or lecturer) holds a position of authority with relation to their audience that limits the audience's ability to respond and to participate in the discursive process (1998: 32-33). As such, these authoritarian discursive practices affect people of African descent in several ways. Given that criticism is an authoritative form of discourse, the positionality of the critic with relation to the societal power structure indicates whether that critic will be supportive of the power structure – a critic whose judgments and evaluations are aimed at the subaltern, for instance – or threatening to the power structure's maintenance of authority. While this has obvious implications for the level of threat the power structure perceives from publicly voiced criticism, Asante's primary concern is the ways in which these discursive forms frustrate the personal agency of people of African descent, “even to the point of subverting, through the educational system, many African scholars and intellectuals who otherwise could and would have been recognized as free agents” (33-34).

As a means of responding to – or rather, undermining – this frustration of African diasporic historical agency, both Fela and Sun Ra tell the wider history of diasporic

¹⁷⁹ Lefkowitz's book *Not out of Africa: How Afrocentrism became an excuse to teach myth as history* (1996) has become a prime example of the conservative reaction to Afrocentric discourses that adopted a particularly shrill timbre in the so-called “culture wars” of the 1990s. For an incisive critical response to Lefkowitz see (Moses 1998: 1-17); for a broader response to the “culture wars” see (Keita 2000: 3-13).

Africans through the mediation of common historical narratives, but also through the telling of their own life stories. In his 1940 autobiography *Dusk of dawn*, Du Bois describes his changing sense of the relevance of autobiography to the explication of racial politics, expressing a sense of ambivalence about the work of most autobiographers: “In my own experience, autobiographies have had little lure; repeatedly they assume too much or too little: too much in dreaming that one’s own life has greatly influenced the world; too little in the reticences, repressions and distortions which come because men do not dare to be absolutely frank” (1975: vii). Nevertheless, Du Bois writes that his own autobiography has significance as a literary work only in that his life is representative of the problematic racial politics of the modern world.

I seem to see a way of elucidating the inner meaning and significance of that race problem by explaining it in terms of the one human life that I know best. I have written then what is meant to be not so much my autobiography as the autobiography of a concept of race, elucidated, magnified, and doubtless distorted in the thoughts and deeds which were mine (viii).

In a manner similar to Du Bois, both Sun Ra and Fela created commentaries on the history of the African Atlantic that were reflections of their own lives – lives that were reflective of the history, that celebrated the status of Subject, and that rejected the status of Object.

But the balance between Subject and Object is, in many cases, difficult to negotiate. While Gilroy spends a decent portion of *The black Atlantic* in review of the objectifying, Othering effects of rationality as it has been defined since the Enlightenment, some of his arguments fall prey to the very traps they seek to avoid. Though the proposition of the black Atlantic as a heuristic device is very helpful in the project of conceptualizing a trans-national intellectual community (1993: 3), Gilroy later

states that the black Atlantic is also “one single, complex unit of analysis” (15), thereby implying a quantifiable and nearly corporeal state in his use of the word *unit* (Pettinger 1998: 144). I would not want to overstate this argument – nor do I want to dismiss it wholesale – but it bears noting that the proposition of the black Atlantic as a unit of measurement implies an objectification of the primarily subjective experience of culture: the maintenance of the heuristic device allows for such a subjective experience while the “unit of analysis” runs the risk of claiming the black Atlantic to be a Kantian *thing in itself* (*noumenon*), existing outside of the cognitively constructed temporal and material world in contrast to the phenomenal object which can be known through reference to the senses.¹⁸⁰ If the black Atlantic is, as Gilroy writes, manifested in the historical “conjunction [of] the stereophonic, bilingual, or bifocal cultural forms originated by, but no longer the exclusive property of, blacks dispersed within the structures of feeling, producing, communicating and remembering” (1993: 3), then it is the lived and “remembered” historical experience which is illuminated by the black Atlantic framework – a framework that allows for the hybridity of modern existence in an environment which seeks to atomize, categorize, and totalize.

The differentiation between the heuristic framework and the thing objectified is an important distinction with regard to the consideration of musical culture given Gilroy’s later articulation of the affective nature of black music being one of the fundamental elements that distinguishes it from European musics. Gilroy writes that

¹⁸⁰ Kant divides objects into *phaenomena* (“world of the senses”) and *noumena* (“world of understanding”). *Noumena*, also referred to generally as *things in themselves*, are “things which are mere objects of understanding, and which, nevertheless, can be given as such to an intuition, although not to one that is sensible” (Kant 2003: 265-66).

black art forms as a whole are characterized by the continuity of art and life in contrast to the European epistemological conception which separates the two:

The particular aesthetic which the continuity of expressive culture preserves derives not from dispassionate and rational evaluation of the artistic object but from an inescapable subjective contemplation of the mimetic functions of artistic performance in the processes of struggles toward emancipation, citizenship, and eventually autonomy. Subjectivity is here connected with rationality in a contingent manner. It may be grounded in communication, but this form of interaction is not an equivalent and idealized exchange between equal citizens who reciprocate their regard for each other in grammatically unified language (57).

The important moral imperative of black expressive forms, then, is grounded in the discursive, extra-linguistic, and extra-musical elements of expression that, while mindful of the uses of post-Enlightenment rationality, are not wedded to it. Adding a newly revived sense of a jazz saxophonist or blues guitarist “talking” to her audience, one can see that the European epistemological construct articulated by Kant does not fully describe the expressive quality of black music as it is articulated here: if we consider the communication that takes place through the modality of musical performance as being phenomenal, then how does one allow for the expression of cultural memory – memories of things that are *known* to be true but which have never been experienced first hand? If, additionally, musical communication is thought to be expressive of things that can be intuited but not known through direct experience (*noumena*), then the direct, affective experience of the music – an affective experience which communicates through the emotional connection of both artist-audience and audience-audience in the crucial moment of *communitas* (Turner 1969) – is nullified by the separation of the affective experience from the phenomenal.

In a sense, this dichotomizing of the word *experience* is a distinctly Kantian construction which does not adequately allow for the fundamental epistemological difference between the affective, spiritual, and yet non-phenomenal nature of black musical communication, and the non-representational, affective experience one assumes when considering musical experience from the European epistemological point of view. Kant states that “the receptivity of the subject, its capacity to be affected by objects, must necessarily precede all intuitions of these objects.... As a pure intuition, in which all objects must be determined, it can contain, prior to all experience, principles which determine the relations of these objects” (Kant 2003: 71). What is problematic about this statement is its assumption that one’s prior experience of phenomena allows one to *know* something about similar phenomena one has not experienced first hand. If this is true, then, Hegel is correct in his analysis of African history (Africa’s ahistory), even given that he had no first hand experience of Africa or Africans, drawing his information from the writings of others and intuiting Africa’s history based on his prior experiences of people, trees, animals, etc. In *The philosophy of history* Hegel dedicates nine pages to the geographical description of sub-Saharan Africa and then states: “At this point we leave Africa, not to mention it again. For it is no historical part of the World; it has no movement or development to exhibit. Historical movements in it – that is in its Northern part – belong to the Asiatic or European world” (1991 [1822]: 99). Elsewhere, the unidentified writer of a brief essay on the intellectual history of Africa, published in *Putnam’s Monthly* in 1856, repeats Hegel’s perspective, claiming that “the most minute and careful researches have, as yet, failed to discover a history or any knowledge of ancient times among the negro races. They have invented no writing.... They have no

gods and no heroes; no epic poem and no legend, not even simple traditions” (Walker 2001: 14). Given these bizarre examples, then, Kant’s epistemological statement, and its application by Hegel and those who followed, can be viewed as an example of what Mudimbe calls “epistemological ethnocentrism” – what I referred to in chapter 1 as a *post hoc ergo propter hoc* view of culture – “...the belief that scientifically there is nothing to be learned from ‘them’ unless it is already ‘ours’ or comes from ‘us’” (1988: 15).

In his historical survey of the contemporary Afrocentrist movement, Maghan Keita proposes the use of the term *alternative epistemologies* as a framework for discussing the cultural and historical visions of Molefi Kete Asante, Maulana Karenga, and their Afrocentric predecessors. Noting that knowledge is constructed and agreed upon within a social context according to epistemological conventions and is therefore subject to revision and recontextualization (2000: 11), Keita writes that much of the Afrocentrist project has been one of both historical revision as well as the reification of the fundamentally African epistemological assumptions and values – assumptions and values that are shared by Africans and people of African descent alike and which demonstrate a separate intellectual heritage from that of the normative European epistemology. While Keita’s explication of alternative epistemology is occasionally thin, sometimes mixing epistemological with ontological categories as in his use of the term “epistemologies of blackness” (4-5 ff), the crucial point is that the proposal of any category of *alternative epistemology* implies there is something lacking in the traditional European universalist conception of epistemology. Charles Mills writes that the questioning of the universalized view of epistemology has most often come from historically marginalized groups such as people of color, women, and anti-capitalists

(1988: 237). While Mills observes that the alternative epistemologies most often discussed are not necessarily alternatives to the epistemological frameworks developed from philosophers such as Kant and Descartes (237), he does note that it is the epistemological problems and questions themselves which are in dispute – the very political realm of who gets to set the venue and terms of debate – as well as a rebellion against the self-appointed rule-makers: “largely white, male, and propertied” (238).

One of the central problems in producing any written representation of people outside of one’s cultural group – outside of oneself as well, in the grand scheme of things – is that much of the discourse falls under the purview of anthropology. Mudimbe notes that anthropological discourses are “constrained discourses, develop[ing] within the general system of knowledge which is in an independent relationship with systems of power and social control,” leaving anthropological discourses to be confined by the intellectual conventions of its discipline as to what can be said and how it can be said (1988: 28). Heidegger locates this intellectual constraint in the European Enlightenment’s adoption of procedures and values from modern science by intellectuals whose work lay outside the natural and physical sciences. This wedding of science with traditionally humanistic disciplines came to define both the agreed-upon procedures for the production of knowledge as well as the only legitimate means of knowing (1977: 126). Heidegger critiques the objectifying nature of anthropology, identifying it as the source of anthropology’s ethnocentric nature – an ethnocentrism which falsely claims to present objective truth. Anthropology, according to Heidegger, is “that philosophical interpretation of man which explains and evaluates whatever is, in its entirety, from the standpoint of man and in relation to man” (133).

Anthropology is that interpretation of man that already knows fundamentally what man is and hence can never ask who he may be. For with this question it would have to confess itself shaken and overcome. But how can this be expected of anthropology when the latter has expressly to achieve nothing less than the securing consequent upon the self-secureness of the *subiectum*?¹⁸¹ (153)

The fundamental problem is found, then, in the application of scientific procedures to the study of human phenomena. Where scientific method requires the adoption of an objective stance toward the object of study, the subject (*subiectum*), then, becomes the central authority in the observation, definition, and validation of the object of study: “When man becomes the primary and only real *subiectum*, that means: man becomes that being upon which all that is, is grounded as regards the manner of its Being and its truth” (128). Through this objectifying process, the subject – in this case, the anthropologist – creates a “world picture,” or worldview, based upon the placement of the subject within the center of the image, tasked with describing what he sees around him and defining all that is possible in that world from his perspective.¹⁸² This objectified and objectifying definition of worldview, created within an institutionally legitimated intellectual discipline through the use of epistemologically approved scientific procedures, allows for the abstraction and the commodification of people as the objects of study.

The more extensively and the more effectually the world stands at man’s disposal as conquered, and the more objectively the object appears, all the more subjectively, i.e., the more importunately, does the *subiectum* rise up, and all the more impetuously, too, do observation of and teaching about the world change into a doctrine of man, into anthropology (133).

¹⁸¹ “We must understand this word *subiectum*...as the translation of the Greek *hynokeimenon*. The word names that-which-lies-before, which, as ground, gathers everything onto itself” (Heidegger 1977: 128).

¹⁸² Though I typically alternate the use of the pronouns *he* and *she* in order to avoid the awkwardness of *he or she*, *he/she*, or *s/he*, I am consciously using masculine pronouns in this example in order to emphasize the male-centered normativity of this discourse and others like it.

The ultimate question for those who seek to reject this radical objectification – the status of Object – is, given the overarching prevalence of these cultural discourses, how does one go about the business of creating an alternative narrative with the tools at hand?

Jean and John Comaroff comment on South Africans' use of European education and intellectual tools in order to combat European hegemony. They note that Christian missionaries throughout Africa acted as central agents of colonization, effecting a "colonization of consciousness" (1991: xi).

It is a process in which the 'savages' of colonialism are ushered, by earnest Protestant evangelists, into the revelation of their own misery, are promised salvation through self-discovery and civilization, and are drawn into a conversation with the culture of modern capitalism – only to find themselves enmeshed, willingly or not, in its order of signs and values, interests and passions, wants and needs (xii).

Some of the colonized "natives" question and reinterpret the symbols of colonialism through "cultural subversion and re-presentation," a practice that de Certeau characterizes as one by which the practitioners attempt to "escape [the dominant order] without leaving it" (Comaroff and Comaroff 1991: xii; de Certeau 1984: xiii). When undertaken in an unreflective manner, though, some of those who work to subvert the dominant order actually contribute to their own domination, falling into a trap that Kwame Anthony Appiah describes, with regard to the problematic of nativism in some African literature, as a "positivistic conception of European languages and disciplines as mere tools; tools that can be cleansed of the accompanying imperialist – and more specifically, racist – modes of thought" (1992: 56). As clever as one may be, all languages evolve within cultures with relation to specific historical experiences, rendering even the most sophisticated scientific procedures unlikely to strip a language (or any cultural artifact, for that matter) of the entirety of its ideological content.

But many of the arguments used to describe Sun Ra's deployment of outer space metaphors employ this same strategy of arguing that technologies and science can be reduced to mere tools which one can then use as one wishes. Lynn Spigel argues, though, that Sun Ra, along with other black intellectuals and politicians in the 1950s and 1960s, began to appropriate images of technology and outer space as a means of envisioning a more just and equitable society, "a new unbounded landscape on which social relationships might be improved" (2001: 168). For Daniel Kreiss, as was mentioned in chapter 3, this appropriation of technologies decontextualizes and redeploys these images as tools – the "master's tools" – which can be used to create a new utopian "'mythic consciousness' of technologically empowered racial identity" (2008: 58). Whether Sun Ra and other artists escape the traps associated with arguments regarding the "master's tools" is open to interpretation, but the overarching point which emphasizes technological means of travel, escape, etc. is a central trope of African Atlantic expression.

As was mentioned in chapter 1, Gilroy's use of the chronotope of ships in *The black Atlantic* does not address all the positive and negative ways others might use the same chronotope (1993: 4), as in the case of Hegel's metaphor of ships at sea which highlights the colonialist, acquisitive nature of European commerce (1991 [1822]: 90-91), or, for that matter, Sun Ra's claim that African Americans were the only American immigrants who arrived on ships, without the need for passports, via the Commerce Department (Theis 1983: 49).¹⁸³ In this last example, Sun Ra highlights the dehumanizing

¹⁸³ Similarly, Malcolm X stated, "we're all black people, so-called Negroes, second-class citizens, ex-slaves.... You are ex-slaves. You didn't come here on the 'Mayflower.' You came here on a slave ship. In chains, like a horse, or a cow, or a chicken" (1965: 4). As with the example of Fela and Foucault given in chapter 1, the point of this comparison of Sun Ra's and Malcolm X's statements is not that one influenced

nature of slave-trade capitalism – what Césaire refers to as “thingification” (2000: 42) – such that people (Africans) were relegated to the status of mute objects (never subjects) which could then be traded as commodities according to the vagaries of a (subjectively) personified market. Fred Moten offers a critique of this objectifying dynamic through engaging with Marx’s hypothetical “commodity who speaks” in which Marx imagined what a commodity would say about its use-value and exchange-value if only it could speak (Moten 2003: 8-9; Marx 1990: 176-77). Moten states that “what is at stake is not *what* the commodity says but *that* the commodity says”; it is, essentially, “the idea of the commodity’s speech that Marx critiques, and this is because he believes neither in the fact nor in the possibility of such speech” (9). Marx’s apparent “absence of preparation or foresight” – his refusal to consider the possibility of a commodity who speaks – both ignores the literal screams of enslaved people, inscribed by Frederick Douglass and personified by Aunt Hester (Douglass 1987: 259), and the more abstract commodity embodied in musical recordings.

Moving, then, in the critical remixing of nonconvergent tracks, modes of preparation, traditions, we can think how the commodity who speaks, in speaking, in the sound – the inspirited materiality – of that speech, constitutes a kind of temporal warp that disrupts and augments not only Marx but the mode of subjectivity that the ultimate object of his critique, capital, both allows and disallows (Moten 2003: 11).

Moten’s primary concern in arguing against Marx on behalf of the commodity who speaks is to instill in the reader/listener a sense of corporeal beings who remain as the memory of a physical presence embedded in objects that, according to the logic of capitalism (and Moten argues that Marxism is no better), should appear only as distant,

the other but that both are exceptionally articulate figures whose ideas those of the broader *episteme*, the African Atlantic.

objectified specters which can be reductively traded according to their subjectively determined exchange-value.

George Lipsitz makes much the same observation with regard to the varied, sometimes troubling, and sometimes liberatory uses people make of popular culture: “For some populations at some times, commercialized leisure is history – a repository of collective memory that places immediate experience in the context of change over time” (1990: 5). Media companies, at one and the same time, strip historical content from objects of popular culture while they also provide the population with the means by which they understand history: the indirect provision of history through an ideological apparatus that is hostile to historical consciousness. As such, there is a “paradoxical relationship between history and commercialized leisure.”

Time, history, and memory become qualitatively different concepts in a world where mass communication is possible. Instead of relating to the past through a shared sense of place or ancestry, consumers of electronic mass media can experience a common heritage with people they have never seen; they can acquire memories of a past to which they have no geographic or biological connection (5).

This dynamic of cultural commodification, then, on one level strips music of much of its value as a vehicle for interpersonal communication, re-branding it as a commodity that has equal monetary value for all and no historical value for anyone, reducing music to a commodity which can be stockpiled, controlled, and sold (Attali 1985: 5). On the other hand, this disconnection of the music from its past also serves a liberatory function of sorts, freeing the music from its entrenched signified meanings and thereby “making the past less determinate of experiences in the present” (Lipsitz 1990: 5). One needs to differentiate, though, between the music as realized in performance and the music as a rank commodity – as a thing to be recorded and sold or as a concert for which audience

members merely purchase tickets but do not engage. Lipsitz writes that Fela was among the first generation of artists who relied upon the mass-marketed commodified form of music as a means of disseminating a political message, ironically adding a layer of signified meaning in which a commodity is used to argue against the commodification of music (so much for Marx's speaking commodity, relegated to the curiosity bin of deconstruction) (1997: 12). Fela's relationship with record companies was sometimes contentious, as in the case of his group's occupation of a recording studio in the film *Konkombe* (Marre 2000), but his recordings always maintained a very high standard of production quality, typical of the type of production which calls for the use of expensive studio time most often financed by an advance payment from a record company.

In addition, Fela's performances and the sale of his recorded music, while targeted at a Nigerian audience in particular and a black audience in general, were not closed to a non-black audience. Both Lindsay Barrett (1981) and Dennis Ferdi (1983) provide descriptions of Fela performing to very enthusiastic, predominantly white audiences in Europe in the 1980s. Fela's political stance resonated with European youth, generating a significant multi-generational and multi-cultural audience for Fela's music and politics. Barrett writes that Fela's *yabis* in France and Belgium were accompanied by an on-stage French translator (1981: 729), noting the audiences' reactions to Fela's performances:

Hardly anyone from Nigeria in that [Parisian] audience had realized the extent to which Fela has become a folk hero to European youth. The roar that greeted not only his own appearance but the appearance of the band onstage at the Nouvel Hippodrome in Porte de Pantin could be heard nearly a mile away on that Sunday night. This, it turned out, was only the beginning. Throughout the show security men were carting away fainted enthusiasts and several times that stage was almost stormed.... The crowd was totally his for the entire duration of the concert which ran more than two hours over schedule (729-30).

Paraphrasing Barrett, Veal writes that “Fela’s message of naturalism, antimilitarism, and social rebellion struck a chord with the concerns and sensibilities of late Cold-War European youth, which were similarly rooted in a mixture of postwar, antinuclear, postcolonial, and ecological sentiment, and similarly infused by the spirit of America’s social struggles of the 1960s” (2000: 184). Veal states that much of the European youth interest in Fela’s music and politics was sparked by the airing of a television documentary titled *Music is the weapon* (Flori and Tchalgadjeff 1982). As a result of this uptick in interest, a number of European journalists travelled to Nigeria to interview Fela, characterizing him as, in Barrett’s words,

...this pop singer with a message that seemed to engender more wrath in government than anyone in their own tradition seemed to be able to do. They left with the impression of an unbelievably virile, uncompromising hedonistic lifestyle that was somehow both totally free and highly disciplined.... They succeeded in building up the image of a national martyr whose ideas, although totally unconventional in terms of European mores, were even more unacceptable in his own society (1981: 730-31).

Certainly Sun Ra also had a sense of music business being separate from life; at one point in an interview, even if only for a moment, he admitted that the name Sun Ra was a business name: “Sun Ra is not a person...it’s a business name, and my business is changin’ the planet” (Corbett 1994: 316). But more importantly, Sun Ra realized early on that he needed to control the publication and distribution of his music, creating Saturn Records as a means of retaining control over his recorded and written output. It is sometimes hard to imagine in this era of internet marketing and distribution just how unusual it was for an artist to create a successful record company as a means of maintaining control over one’s own creative works (Mingus tried it with little success), but Saturn Records is still a viable company that controls the release of Sun Ra’s music,

essays, and poetry.¹⁸⁴ Baraka noted in his *Down Beat* column “Apple cores #6” that Sun Ra’s Saturn Records label was a model for the maintenance of creative black music through the mechanism of independent black ownership of a record company: “Sun-Ra has been doing it for years. His self. Saturn hovers above all of us. Sun-Ra, who is the modern master. The orchestrator” (1967a: 140). This is the same issue of the ownership of the infrastructure of black musical production that is central to Kofsky’s writings on jazz (Kofsky 1998a, 1998b). It is also similar to Garvey’s emphasis of black ownership of trade infrastructure with regard to black communities regaining some sense of economic standing (Cronon 1969), and is related to the commercialized celestial travel discussed in chapter 3 with regard to Sun Ra’s uses of space travel as metaphors of escape and Exodus.¹⁸⁵

In a sense, then, the connecting theme that runs between both Sun Ra and Fela is a temporal and spatial preoccupation with leading their audiences on a discursive journey down a road, path, journey, etc. – a theme than can be called, for the sake of brevity, the chronotope of the road. Moving beyond the use of trope in the sense that vast space and time are folded into narratives performed on a much smaller spatial and temporal scale, the chronotope of the road is simultaneously aporetic, as with Gilroy’s chronotope of the crossroads,¹⁸⁶ and discursive, allowing the artists and the audience to compose the African Atlantic through the enabling medium of musical performance. The significance of roads in Yoruba expression is related to the importance of the journey. Esu, “the deity

¹⁸⁴ Corbett notes that after Sun Ra’s death there was some contention over the ownership of Sun Ra’s catalog of music and writing (1994: 173-77), though there has been a surge of releases from his written and recorded catalog since 2000.

¹⁸⁵ For the previous discussion of Space chants and Outer Space Incorporated, see p.93.

¹⁸⁶ See p.172.

of aporia,” is the “guardian of crossroads – the one to pray to for guidance and proper directions” (Olaniyan 2004: 100). Gates notes that Esu’s crossroads dwelling essentially stands for the “crossroads of difference,” projecting and interrogating meaning through the constant aporetic frustration of closed, resolved discourse (Gates 1988: 41). This deconstructive interrogation of discourse, presented as a journey, can be seen most clearly in Fela’s composition “Perambulator” (Anikulapo-Kuti 1998), a critique of postcolonial class inequality in Nigeria. A perambulator, in the Oxford English Dictionary, is “a person who walks or travels through or about a place; a traveller; a pedestrian” (OED 2007). While it also has maintained some connection to the professional practice of land surveying, Olaniyan emphasizes the “leisurely” nature of perambulation, and Veal gives the word a sense of “aimlessness” (Olaniyan 2004: 98; Veal 2000: 252). Essentially, perambulation is aimless, directionless walking, and this sense of aimlessness is reflected in “Perambulator” in the redundant and confusing directions of the lyrics. Olaniyan reads this composition as indicating Nigeria’s political state of perambulation – a sense of scattered aimlessness that has come about as a result of Nigeria’s fits and starts of development within the context of modernity, neocolonialism, oil wealth, and corruption (96). He notes that traditionally there are social sanctions in Yoruba society against “*irin iranu*, aimless walk or perambulation” (98).

[A] culture that conceives life as one long journey cannot but be perpetually apprehensive about the nature of paths and directions: Are they purposive and do they advance the journey or are they purposeless and impede it? (99-100)¹⁸⁷

¹⁸⁷ Olaniyan cites (Idowu 1994 [1960]: 18-29) regarding Yoruba creation narratives that emphasize journeys.

As such, Fela's perambulation, leads his audience on a winding path/road which tries to find meaning in the chaos of society while also demonstrating that the chaos is the meaning.

Sun Ra similarly commented on the roads people travelled and the directions they could, should, and did take. In a commentary on the goals of the Civil Rights movement, particularly questioning the theological connection between Pharaoh and white supremacy (Lock 1999: 23), he observed in the song "There is change in the air,"

The people and the leaders walk hand in hand
They're on the right road
They're going the wrong direction (Sun Ra 1993c).

As was discussed in chapter 3, Sun Ra's interest in the story of Pharaoh is a questioning of what was left behind during the Exodus from Egypt, an interrogation of direction, or lack of direction, reminiscent of the concern with *irin iranu*. In a more utopian manner, Sun Ra most famously made reference to,

Traveling
[The] strange celestial road
To endless heaven (Sun Ra 1987).

In this, Sun Ra follows, again, from the example of the spirituals as did Du Bois at the very end of *The souls of black folk*, citing the text of a song as a means of inspiring a more fully realized Text in composing the African Atlantic (Du Bois 1999 [1903]: 163-64; Johnson, Johnson, and Brown 2002 [1925]: 184-87).

Let us cheer the weary traveller
Along the heavenly way.
[I'll take my gospel trumpet
And I'll begin to blow.
And if my savior helps me

I'll blow wherever I go]¹⁸⁸

¹⁸⁸ Du Bois only cites the first two lines of this song, though I believe lines 3-6 are *a propos* to the discussion.

Appendix 1: Egyptian hieroglyphs

Re (*r*): Sun, or Sun God

☉ | or



Suffix pronoun he/him/it (*f*):



Appendix 2: Altered harmonic intervals

The sight-singing system known as solfege or solfeggio has been a standard part of the training of musicians in the West for many years. The standard diatonic major scale (fig.1) is sung according to the syllables that have become familiar to most people in the West, allowing the singer, ultimately, to be able to sing any melody from notation without the use of a reference instrument.¹⁸⁹

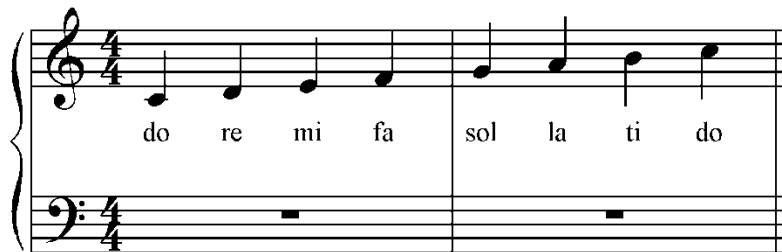


Figure 14: diatonic solfege syllables

As most melodies are not confined exclusively to the unaltered notes of the diatonic scale, though, it has been necessary to include syllables that express all of the notes of the chromatic scale in both their ascending and descending forms (fig.2).

¹⁸⁹ There are so many methods for sight singing that use the solfege system that they are nearly too numerous to mention. One classic work is Clément Lenom's *Thirty lessons in solfege* (1947). Another common method is Paul Hindemith's *Elementary training for musicians* (1946). Though Hindemith didn't write the solfege syllables in his exercises, the same method of singing is assumed.

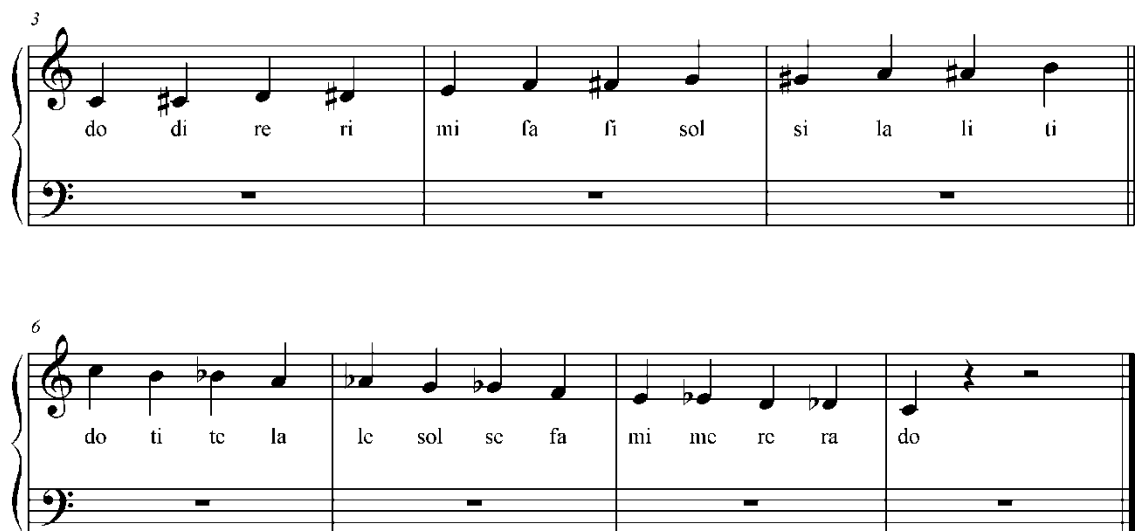


Figure 15: chromatic solfege syllables, ascending and descending

Since the late swing era, much of the harmonic material of jazz has been based on the extended diatonic harmonies that became popular with French Romantic composers such as Claude Debussy and Maurice Ravel. In this extended harmonic system, the triad, which is the basic unit of Western diatonic harmony (intervals 1, 3, and 5 in Fig.3a; Do, Mi, Sol in solfege), is extended by first creating a major seventh chord (intervals 1, 3, 5, 7 in Fig.3b; Do, Mi, Sol, Ti) and then continuing to stack notes on top of the seventh chord in intervals of a third. The most commonly used extended intervals in jazz are the first three extended notes, intervals 9, #11, and 13 (fig.3c; Re, Fi, La). These extensions are commonly called harmonic tensions because they are harmonic notes that are not considered to be chord tones – in other words, the chord tones (1, 3, 5, and 7) define what the chord is (C Maj7 in the case of fig.3b), while the harmonic tensions add the color and texture that makes a harmony sound like the harmonic language common to modern jazz as well as to Romantic-era European art music (C Maj7 with the tensions 9, #11, 13 in fig. 3c). Typically, a jazz lead sheet will include the basic chord symbol of a harmony,

such as C Maj7, and the musician is then free to add or remove notes depending on the harmonic context of the performance (some configuration – either more or less – of fig. 3c).

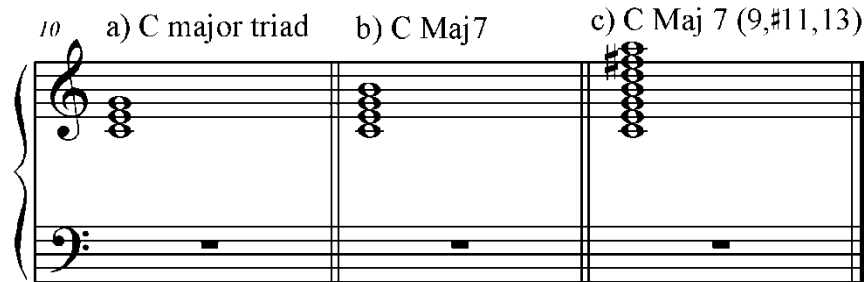


Figure 16: extension of harmony

But particularly with dominant chords – chords with a flatted (dominant) seventh interval (Te instead of Ti) – it is harmonically possible, and often desirable, to include chromatically altered intervals that further add to the sense of dramatic tension in the music. Figure 4a is an example of a dominant chord with the natural (unaltered) tensions 9 and 13 (Re, La) added. Figure 4b shows a dominant 7th chord with the altered interval $\flat 9$ (Ra), while figure 4c is a dominant 7th chord with the altered intervals $\flat 9$, $\sharp 9$, and $\flat 13$ (Ra, Ri, Le).

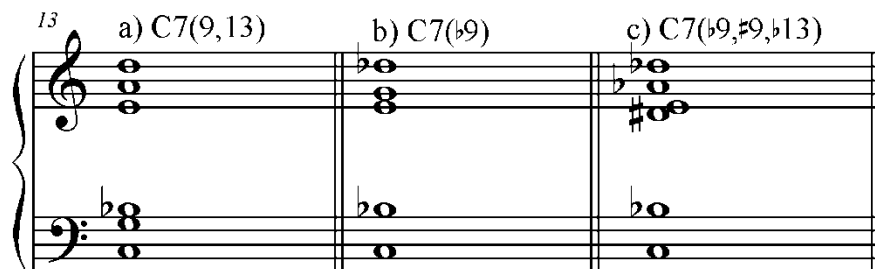


Figure 17: altered harmony

When singing the harmonic tensions according to the system of solfege, the natural 9 interval (written $\natural 9$) is sung using the syllable Re (pronounced *ray*). Using the chromatic syllables, the $\flat 9$ is sung as Ra (pronounced *rah*), and the $\sharp 9$ is sung as Ri (pronounced *ree*).

Appendix 3: “Space chants – A medley”

Transcribed from: Sun Ra and his year 2000 myth science Arkestra. 1991. *Live in London 1990*. London: Blast First BFFP60. CD.

(June Tyson)

Space is the place
Space is the place
Space is the place, yeah
Space is the place

Outer space

Lets see a place
A place that's really
Real
There's no limit to the things that you can do
There's no limit to the things that you can do
Your thought is free
And your life is worthwhile

Space is the place
Space is the place
Space is the place, yeah
Space is the place

(Tyson and band members)

Space
Space
Space
Space

(Sun Ra with June Tyson responding)

Outer space
 Outer space
Is a pleasant place
 Is a pleasant place
Outer space
 Outer space

(Band chants)

Space
Space
Space
Space

We travel the spaceways
We travel the spaceways

(Sun Ra with the band responding)

We travel the spaceways
 We travel the spaceways
From planet to planet
 From planet to planet
We travel the spaceways
 We travel the spaceways
From planet to planet
 From planet to planet
Sad and boring, come along
 Sad and boring
With the same old same thing
 With the same old same thing
It's sad and boring
 Sad and boring
With the same old same thing
 With the same old same thing
Come on and sign up
 Come on and sign up
With Outer Spaceways
 With the Outer Spaceways
Outer Spaceways
 Outer Spaceways
Incorporated
 Incorporated
Come on and sign up
 Come on and sign up
With Outer Spaceways
 With Outer Spaceways
Incorporated
 Incorporated
Come on and sign up
 Come on and sign up
Come on and sign up
 Come on and sign up
With Outer Spaceways
 With Outer Spaceways
Incorporated
 Incorporated
We travel the spaceways
 We travel the spaceways
From planet to planet

From planet to planet
We travel the spaceways
We travel the spaceways
From planet to planet
From planet to planet
Come on and sign up
Come on and sign up
With Outer Spaceways
With Outer Spaceways
Incorporated
Incorporated

Rocket number nine take off for the planet
Venus
Venus
Venus
Venus
Venus

Rocket number nine take off for the planet Venus
Venus
Venus
Venus
Rocket number nine take off for the planet Venus
Venus
Venus
Venus
Zoom
Zoom
Zoom
Zoom
Up in the air
Up
Zoom
Up
Zoom
Up in the air
Rocket number nine take off for the planet Venus
Venus
Venus
Venus
Rocket number nine take off for the planet Venus
Venus
Venus
Venus

We travel the spaceways
 We travel the spaceways
From planet to planet
 From planet to planet
We travel the spaceways
 We travel the spaceways
From planet to planet
 From planet to planet

It's not going to stop at Jupiter
 It's not going to stop at Jupiter (13x)
Jupiter

(From Heaven)¹⁹⁰
As deep and dark as you
On Jupiter
The skies are always blue (6x)

The second stop is Jupiter (13x)

Jupiter
 Jupiter

Have you heard the latest news from Neptune?
 Neptune?

We're going to Pluto too
 We're going to Pluto too

We travel the spaceways
 We travel the spaceways
From planet to planet
 From planet to planet

You're on the spaceship Earth
 You're on the spaceship Earth
You're on the spaceship Earth
 You're on the spaceship Earth
And you're outward bound
 And you're outward bound
Destination unknown
 Destination unknown
Destination unknown

¹⁹⁰ This line is unclear.

Destination unknown

You haven't met the captain of the spaceship yet, have you?

You haven't met the captain of the spaceship yet, have you?

You're on the spaceship Earth

You're on the spaceship Earth

You're on the spaceship Earth

You're on the spaceship Earth

And you're outward bound

And you're outward bound

Destination unknown

Destination unknown

Destination unknown

Destination unknown

You better pay your fare now

You better pay your fare

You'll get left behind

You'll get left behind

You'll be left hanging

You'll be left hanging

In the empty air

In the empty air

You won't be here

You won't be here

And you won't be there

And you won't be there

So you better pay your fare

You better pay your fare

On the spaceship earth

On the spaceship earth

And you're outward bound

And you're outward bound

Destination unknown

Destination unknown

Destination unknown

Destination unknown

Appendix 4: Glossary of Nigerian Pidgin and Yoruba words

The liner notes to many of the currently available recordings of Fela's music include lyric transcriptions, often footnoting words from Yoruba and Pidgin as a means of aiding comprehension.

Chop: eat (Pidgin)

Commot: to get out, to give away (Pidgin)

Dabaru: confuse (Yoruba)

Dey: to be, or to be alive; in the process of doing something (Pidgin)

Don: do (Pidgin)

Edumare: a supreme God (Yoruba). Also known as Olodumare.

Gbosa: an onomatopoeic word indicating the sound of a gunshot (Pidgin)

Ifa: oracle (Yoruba)

Jaga jaga: chaos (Pidgin)

Jedi jedi: hemorrhoids (Yoruba)

Jeje: Easy, quiet (Yoruba)

Kini/Kinni?: what is? (Yoruba)

Kobo: Nigerian decimal currency

Molue: slang for bus (Yoruba)

Na: now (Pidgin)

Naija: Nigeria (Pidgin)

Naira: Nigerian base currency

Nko?: Isn't it? (Yoruba)

Omolanke: hand-pushed truck (Yoruba)

Oyinbo: white person, white language (Yoruba)

Quench: die (Pidgin)

Sef: again (Pidgin)

Sha?: Really? (Yoruba)

Sufferheads: Lagos under-class (Collins 2009: 39)

Waka: walk (Pidgin)

Wetin: what (Pidgin)

Yansh: bottom, ass (Pidgin)

Ye-ye: stupid (Pidgin). Olatunji states that Fela often used the exclamation “ye-ye” in his back and forth with the chorus during *yabis* performances. When the two syllables are combined and accented in a particular way (*yèyé*) it becomes the Yoruba word for satire (Olatunji 2007: 32).

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