

Introduction

ALTERNATE CONSCIOUSNESS

IN THE DIASPORA

Rock speaks a rooster language
And the light is broken
Clear.

—AUDRE LORDE

The first chapter of Jamaican writer Erna Brodber's 1994 novel *Louisiana* is entitled "I Heard a Voice from Heaven Say." The chapter opens with these lines:

Anna do you remember? Can you still hear me singing it?

It is the voice I hear
The gentle voice I hear
That calls me home?
(9)

As the novel begins, the speaker, a spirit, recalls to her friend Anna the song that was sung at her funeral. The song called her home—to the other side, to heaven, to Zion, to Africa, to wherever the spirit travels after physical death. Describing the process to her friend, the spirit narrator continues, "And the singing. Vox populi. *I hear the voice, the gentle voice.* Is the voice of God. *That calls me home*" (10). The singing at the funeral serves a high spiritual purpose. It is not an empty ritual: it is nothing short of *the voice of God*, channeled through the singers to help the soul of the deceased transition to another place.

The last chapter of Brodber's novel, "Den Ah Who Seh Sammy Dead," is titled after the popular Jamaican folksong "Sammy Dead." Carrying the notion of spiritual survival to the novel's end, Brodber's resignification of the folksong coincides with the protagonist's own transition to a higher realm, while continuing to reinforce the connection between music and spiritual consciousness. What Brodber manages to do in this novel—by linking the spirit to the song, the voice, and the life-giving power of the word ("*I heard a voice from Heaven say*")—is to tap into a profoundly felt but deeply unspeakable aspect of African diaspora consciousness.

Consider, for example, the close of Trinidadian writer Earl Lovelace's short story "Joebell and America," in which the gangsta-stylizing Joebell is arrested after a fraudulent attempt to impersonate an "American" and migrate to the United States. As he is being arrested after his unsuccessful performance of cultural mimicry, he says, "I might as well take my losses like a West Indian, like a Trinidadian. I decide to sing" (124). At the moment of struggle and deep tribulation, the song is invoked.

Song functions for the African diaspora subject in both the Brodber and Lovelace instances as the sign and substance of an alternate mode of consciousness. It is a literal strategy of survival, in which the exclusively rational mode of "modern" Western consciousness has reached its metaphysical limitations and something else must step in to save the individual from psychospiritual death. Within both continental African and African diaspora contexts, a strong oral tradition, characterized by folktales, folksongs, poems, and music, is almost always featured as a predominant trait of these cultures. Yet the questions of why and how these oral forms serve these communities on the deepest level is less frequently tackled. As the selections from these two African Caribbean writers, Brodber and Lovelace, demonstrate, these oral characteristics speak to a realm in which the strongest and most empowering aspects of who we are collectively as a people is maintained. The song, the folktale, and the poem function as an alternate register of consciousness, one that at its most profound seems to connect to ancestral knowledge in both conscious and unconscious ways.

One could also argue that "dance" represents another aspect of this alternate realm of consciousness, and maybe this is why we in the diaspora, no matter how many centuries removed from our origins in Africa, do not treat dancing or the rhythm of the drum lightly. It is

almost as if, somewhere in the collective unconscious of even the most “modern” mind, there is the memory of a time when dancing was a sacred rather than simply secular activity.

In the last twenty years, within the context of academically produced intellectual discourse, increasingly heated exchanges have occurred concerning the notion of “authenticity” as it relates to definitions of culture and cultural identity. These debates have become most heated around two discursive practices related to Blackness, characterized as “Afrocentric” or “African-centered,” on one hand, and “antiessentialist” or “hybrid,” on the other. While “culture” in African-centered discourse is by and large exemplified by an imperative toward cultural cohesion, “hybrid” and “antiessentialist” discourses tend to emphasize the incomplete and unfinished nature of all identities; to imagine “wholeness,” in this context, is seen as a fiction parading as truth. My hope in this book is to show that striving for a conception of wholeness and cohesion is a cultural characteristic that can be traced throughout some of the most profound aspects of African Caribbean and African diaspora writings. It appears to have been a sustaining feature of Black life in the diaspora, functioning hand in hand with the impulse to survive trauma and genocide.

In his 1988 book, *The Predicament of Culture*, James Clifford takes the title of his introduction, “The Pure Products Go Crazy,” from the first lines of a celebrated poem by William Carlos Williams. Quoting the poem at length to demonstrate how Williams, a young white male physician, “finds himself off center among scattered traditions,” Clifford argues that this short poem epitomizes “modernity[,] since the condition of rootlessness and mobility is an increasingly common fate” (3). The crucial lines read:

Devil-may-care men who have taken
to railroading
out of sheer lust for adventure—
and young slatterns, bathed
in filth
from Monday to Saturday
to be tricked out that night
with gauds
from imaginations which have no
peasant traditions to give them
character
but flutter and flaunt

sheer rags—succumbing without
emotion
save numbed terror.
(*Predicament of Culture*, 2, italics mine)

Clifford situates his analysis of Williams's poem within the context of a critique of Western anthropology's ethnographic practices and historical claims to know "the other." He juxtaposes the poem and the "modern" rootlessness of the speaker's perspective with the claims of cultural identity made by the descendants of Wampanoag Indians, described by Clifford as speaking a "New England–accented English" and living in Mashpee, Massachusetts. It is within this context that Clifford asks the questions "Who has the authority to speak for a group's identity or authenticity? What are the essential elements and boundaries of a culture?" (7–8).

Keeping his critique more or less focused on the collapse of Western, universalizing master narratives and the transgressive nature of the white gaze, which attempts to name and quantify the racialized "other," Clifford uses the poem to suggest that the Westerner can no longer speak for various "natives." The questions of who these "natives" culturally are, however, and who among them has the right to speak on behalf of the collective are seen by Clifford as still pending and pursuable. Clifford, at a reflective moment in his own narrative, honestly states, "We are not all together in Williams' car" (7). I would like to argue that, despite expanding the contours of the critique of Western anthropology's relationship to indigenous cultures, "the predicament of culture" described by Clifford is peculiar to the "postmodern" cultural situation of the European intellectual, still adrift in bankrupt master narratives tied to imperialist traditions. This "where to go from here" predicament, while not absent from non-European cultural contexts, is much more characteristic of the white Western subject than it is of peoples who have historically suffered aggressive racial and cultural oppression and who are the descendants of peoples who identify with non-Western stories of origins.

In William Carlos Williams's modernist piece, the crisis of identity and the unreliability of older narratives is made clear by phrases such as "imagination which have no / peasant traditions to give them / character" and "succumbing without / emotion / save numbed terror" (*Predicament of Culture*, 2). This notion of "terror" that seems to

increase as “white” things fall apart has long been depicted and documented by Black writers, and of late also by scholars in the up-and-coming arena of “whiteness studies.” The Caribbean scholar Kenneth Ramchand, in an article titled “Terrified Consciousness,” takes the concept from Frantz Fanon’s chapter “On Violence” in *The Wretched of the Earth* to discuss how the terror of the white Creole slave-owning class increased as the Black population moved toward freedom. Representing the consciousness of the other side, and the existence of “peasant traditions that give a people character,” Earl Lovelace states:

The presentation of the history of African people in the Caribbean suggests that they were slaves—almost acquiescing in their enslavement—and then ex-slaves, as though, having ceased to be slaves, their ex-slavehood became their nationality; they weren’t thought of as Africans. But when I look at history, I see the Africans not as slaves in a passive sense, but as *enslaved*; the central theme of their existence was a struggle against enslavement. (Jaggi, “Interview with Earl Lovelace,” 25)

Earl Lovelace’s portrait of the cultural psyche is quite different from Clifford’s; it’s an immediate reminder that “culture” means distinctly different things, depending on a group’s experience of history. Lovelace’s characterization implies and describes a people whose previous identities were systematically crushed and denied, but whose survival depended on their ability to both resist and remember. In this context, “culture” is, among other things, the thing that will help you to survive. Thus “culture” is an affirmative set of beliefs and practices, since—as Audre Lorde tells us in her poem “A Litany for Survival”—we were never meant to survive.

By contrast, in another interview, the Caribbean writer Jamaica Kincaid states:

[T]here were Africans who had remained in Africa and there were Africans who were descended from slaves. I was descended from slaves. . . . It’s not exactly the ancestral family you hope for, you know, the founding member of your family is a captured person. . . . This was very sobering. I came back and I thought, well, I’m just nobody. In this world I live in, I’m nobody, and it’s quite fine with me. I choose that. I’m not African, I’m not anything. In fact, I have the blood of quite a few different people running around inside me, but I don’t claim them. This is dead. I’m now. (Dilger, “Jamaica Kincaid Talks to Gerhard Dilger,” 24)

Jamaica Kincaid's and Lovelace's views represent the range of reactions that Black people in the diaspora may hold in relation to their historical experiences, but Kincaid's position is self-admittedly a defeated one, in which she claims to speak for herself rather than "the tribe." Her statements don't speak to the spirit of survival that has characterized African diaspora cultures as a whole. When Lovelace invokes the term "culture," it is implicitly overdetermined by positive characteristics: "the thing" that would destroy the spirit is not described as "culture" but as something else. When Clifford invokes the term "culture" it is seen as an ideologically neutral category, which may or may not have combinations of positive and negative historic associations. The term is also primarily used to describe the exterior form rather than the interior content of a thing. Thus in the post-Clifford cultural studies arena the surface loss of African languages, rituals, and practices are held as proof of the de-Africanization of the Black subject in the diaspora, while internal consciousness, patterns of thought, and the philosophical worldview are understudied and underestimated as powerfully determining transnational aspects of identity.

This struggle over how to talk about the formerly colonized, specifically Black subject is significantly raised in the self-described "anti-essentialist" discourses of Black British cultural studies critics Paul Gilroy and Stuart Hall. Gilroy situates his analyses of race first and foremost within the context of critiques of white nationalist, racially pure discourses of British cultural sensibility. Drawing on Clifford's theories of travel, toward demonstrating how "the pure products go crazy," in his article "Cultural Studies and Ethnic Absolutism," Gilroy explores British scholar Raymond Williams's analyses of "English cultural sensibility." He shows that this sensibility was "not produced spontaneously from [its] own internal and intrinsic dynamics but generated in a complex pattern of antagonistic relationships with the external, supra-national, and imperial world" (190). Similarly, Stuart Hall in his 1992 essay "What Is This 'Black' in Black Popular Culture?" begins by criticizing "European models of high culture" (21). The crux of Hall's argument in this piece centers on what he calls "the end of the innocent notion of an essential Black subject" (32). He speaks instead of "the production of new identities . . . the appearance of new subjects on the political and cultural stage" (25). Gilroy, in his introduction to the 1993 text *The Black Atlantic*, cites and echoes Hall's views and goes on to say: "The ontological essentialist view has often

been characterized by a brute pan-Africanism. It has proved unable to specify precisely where the highly prized but doggedly evasive essence of Black artistic and political sensibility is currently located, but that is no obstacle to its popular circulation" (*The Black Atlantic*, 31).

In the work of both writers, a critique is made of aspects of contemporary Black cultural politics seen as the other side of white exclusivity and notions of purity. Gilroy's critique of "English cultural sensibility" as not produced solely by "its own internal and intrinsic dynamics" is clearly the mirror for his criticisms of what he calls "absolutist" aspects of Black U.S. cultural politics. He states as much when he says that "much of the precious intellectual legacy claimed by African-American intellectuals as the substance of their particularity is in fact only partly their absolute ethnic property" (*The Black Atlantic*, 15).

Yet the belief that "absolute" or even "essentialist" Black cultural politics are the other side of racist notions of conservative white culture is deeply flawed. If the historically different circumstances that produced both discourses are not to be elided, then great care has to be taken in discussing discursive practices that, even at their worst, are *reactions* to racist and imperialist violence as opposed to ideology formed from a spiritually bankrupt metaphysical order. In her 1987 keynote address at the "Journey across Three Continents Film Festival," Black U.S. scholar Toni Cade Bambara states:

A classical people demand a classical art . . . classical in the sense [that] the people, the work, are informed by our origins, our precedents, our prospects, and are centered in the understanding that all great art is derived from the folk. For while we may feel compelled by circumstance to fashion new forms, new idioms, new modes, new genres, they are bound to be compatible with, centered in, and informed by the very old truth-speaking traditions from the ancient mother culture: the fables, the parables . . . as in mama say, "Don't let your mouth get you into what your backside can't stand." (8)

Rather than claiming a cultural sensibility that is produced solely by its own "internal and intrinsic dynamics," Bambara first and foremost shows that the old "ancient mother culture" always informs the best aspects of the new. Instead of calling for the "production of new identities" that will replace what Hall refers to as binary, "mutually opposed either/or's," Bambara is focused on the interiority of the Black culture she is describing, rather than its oppositional relationship to imperialist discourse. Within this context, unlike in Hall's

analysis, the old is connected to the new in a cyclical, circular fashion, as opposed to being another linear departure announcing itself as progress.

Bambara continued her address with almost seamless exposure of the type of vulgar critique espoused by Gilroy when he speaks of “a brute pan-Africanism [that is] unable to specify precisely where the highly prized but doggedly evasive essence of Black artistic and political sensibility is currently located”:

[An art] classical in the sense that the people and the work are coherent. That is to say, that the insights and impulses that give rise to our expression are made appropriable, apprehendable, usable, sensible through metaphors and patterns that are familiar to us from everyday occurrence, rituals, ceremonies, tradition, spiritual practice. . . . And classical, too, in the sense that “it matters.” That it’s sustaining; that the work makes a difference between feeling disabled and enabled, between feeling invisible and indelible. It is the difference between feeling mute or being very much in voice. (8)

Here, Black artistic sensibility is explained in relation to the rituals of everyday life, while the functional nature of this art seems to be of the highest spiritual order when Bambara describes it as sustaining, enabling, and empowering. Once again, the differences between Clifford’s and Kincaid’s versus Lovelace’s notions of culture are replayed in the differences between Gilroy’s and Hall’s versus Bambara’s. This genealogy of culture and cultural expression, exemplified by Bambara and Lovelace, is at its best when it is providing the artist and his or her community with spiritually sustaining, functional forms of resistance art. The struggle between these competing ethoses in the contemporary terrain can be intellectually contextualized in relation to the philosophical struggle, a generation earlier, over the racial and cultural history of ancient Egypt.

In January of 1974, UNESCO organized two consecutive symposiums in Cairo, as part of a larger attempt to document historical information about continental Africa. The research was eventually compiled into several volumes as a *General History of Africa*, the second volume of which was devoted to ancient Africa and included papers presented at the 1974 conferences, the “Symposium on the Peopling of Ancient Egypt” and the “The Deciphering of the Meroitic Script.” Among the twenty international experts invited to speak on ancient Egypt and the Meroitic Script were Cheikh Anta Diop of Sene-

gal and Theophile Obenga of the Congo. Laying the foundation for contemporary African-centered discourse and scholarship, Diop argued that ancient Egypt was settled by phenotypically Black people from southern regions of Africa who traveled north along the course of the Nile river. In this symposium, the positions of Diop and Obenga were, by and large, opposed by eighteen scholars from Europe as well as other parts of Africa, even though they were well documented. At the end of the symposium, the UNESCO officials in fact singled out these two historians for praise, stating that “although the preparatory working paper sent out by UNESCO gave particulars of what was desired, not all participants had prepared communications comparable with the painstakingly researched contributions of Professors Cheikh Anta Diop and Obenga. There was consequently a real lack of balance in the discussions” (Mokhtar, *Ancient Civilizations of Africa*, 77).

To substantiate his particular claims, Diop drew on evidence from several sources. These included: (1) physical anthropology, (2) reports from Greek and Latin authors describing the Egyptians physically, (3) artistic self-representations from various periods in Egyptian history, (4) biblical evidence, (5) information from Egyptian sources relating to how Egyptians saw themselves, and (6) comparative studies of the similarities between ancient Egyptian and modern African languages.

Diop argued that in their own representations of their history, the Egyptians referred to the Ethiopians as their ancestors. He also linked Leakey’s research proving that the oldest human bones were found in Africa to Gloger’s laws connecting the evolution of warm-blooded animals in tropical climates to the development of pigmentation. He argued that even after substantial time had passed, tests could be done on pieces of skin found on skeletons to prove the existence of melanin. Lively discussion ensued at the symposium about the genealogy of the term “kemit,” meaning “Black” and/or “land of the Blacks.” Obenga, in his contribution to the symposium, noted that linguistic similarities also existed among Egyptian, Wolof, and other indigenous African languages, as demonstrated by the similar variations on the meaning and form of the term “kemit” across linguistic contexts.

Since those conferences took place, the reaction to these theories has been strong and vociferous. On the one hand, one school of critics claim that the “race” of the Egyptians, then and now, should not be important. Other critics consistently describe any attempt to document and discuss this period of African history, before colonialism and transatlantic slavery, as recouring to a mythic and imaginary past

that has no significant or tangible bearing on the present. Yet for many continental Africans and their diaspora descendants, establishing historical truth is crucial to the creation of just societies in the present. Further, it is a well-established fact that the misrepresentation of Black history has been consistently used to maintain dominance and oppression over African peoples.

At both symposiums Obenga's analyses of language were hailed as innovative and significant. His argument was summarized by the editor of *Ancient Civilizations of Africa* in these words:

Before making any comparison, one must be on one's guard against confusing typological linguistic relationship, which gave no clue to the predialectal ancestor common to the languages being compared, and genetic relationship. For example, modern English, considered from the typological point of view, had affinities with Chinese; but, from the genetic point of view, the two languages belonged to distinct language families. . . . Genetic relationship depended on establishing phonetic laws discovered by comparison between morphemes and phonemes of similar languages. On the basis of such morphological, lexicological and phonetic correspondences, one could arrive at common earlier forms. In this way, a theoretical 'Indo-European' language had been reconstructed in the abstract and had been used as an operational model. It was indicative of a common cultural macrostructure shared by languages which subsequently evolved along separate lines. (Mokhtar, *Ancient Civilizations of Africa*, 64)

Obenga's treatment of the issue of language seems of crucial relevance and significance to the philosophical questions of culture that have continued to hold sway. His emphasis on phonetic laws as crucial to establishing language history seems suggestive in terms of the relationship between ancient and contemporary African languages, on the one hand, and indigenous continental languages and the creolized languages that the descendants of enslaved Africans created, on the other. While these creolized "new world" languages have been primarily analyzed in relation to the colonial language groups that provided the outside structure, less attention has been paid to their relationship to indigenous African languages at both the phonetic and idiomatic levels. Whereas this research may be ongoing at the linguistic level, the question remains of not just how formative "old world" languages have been, but more importantly, whether or not the philosophies of culture associated with particular language families are

still operative in diaspora contexts. Clearly, therefore, exploring the philosophical worldview of various diaspora peoples is another way to investigate the extent to which cultural identities have been maintained.

The treatment of this relationship is implicitly at stake in the philosophy and writings of the negritude poets explored in this book. Further, the work of the Nigerian female scholars Oyéronké Oyéwumi and Ifi Amadiume, also addressed in this book, directly addresses the importance of paying attention to the relationship between language and culture. Their work suggests that close attention to the worldview and world sense at stake in native African languages can shed light on the way in which gendered particularities on the African continent and in its diaspora differ from the worldview and world sense of mainstream Western societies. My study begins with a reexamination of what was philosophically at stake in the early negritude discourse of Léon Damas, Aimé Césaire, and Léopold Senghor. It ends attempting to assess how and in what ways the essential questions that emerged from those early discussions have continued to have a kind of implicit, unspoken power in African diaspora discourse and writing. A connection is therefore drawn between the questions implicitly raised about collective consciousness in the discourse of the three writers who are considered the fathers of negritude, and a discourse of collective “folk” consciousness implicitly at stake in the work of various Afro-Caribbean writers.

In her analysis of the negritude poetry of Léopold Sédar Senghor, Sylvia Washington Bâ describes the relationship between the notion of “life force,” a kind of equivalent to the idea that power is internal, and the privileged position assigned to the word. She states that in the West African context “the word is both expression and creation, and, as such unites poetic creation and reinforcement of life forces” (*The Concept of Negritude*, 63). She describes the poet as someone who “possess[es] the gift of calling forth, or naming a force, an element, or a person and thereby ordering its realization. . . . The creative power of invocation enable[s] the spirit to transcend appearances and circumstances” (64). This description of the sensibility of the word and the philosophical worldview that informs Senghor’s work creates an almost seamless theoretical rubric for understanding the later poetry of Audre Lorde and Simone Schwarz-Bart’s writings, as well as Paule Marshall’s *Praisesong for the Widow*. Senghor’s theories and Bâ’s explanation of them also find a strong parallel in the critical essays of dias-

pora scholar, intellectual, and writer Zora Neale Hurston. Hurston's extraordinary essay "High John de Conquer," dealing with the folkloric figure of the same name, speaks more profoundly to this notion of 'inside consciousness' and creative power than many a text. In it, Hurston states:

High John de Conquer came to be a man, and a mighty man at that. . . . [T]he sign of this man was a laugh, and his singing-symbol was a drum-beat. No parading drum-shout like soldiers out for show. It did not call to the feet of those who were fixed to hear it. *It was an inside thing to live by.* It was sure to be heard when and where the work was the hardest, and the lot the most cruel. It helped the slaves endure. They knew that something better was coming. So they laughed in the face of things and *sang*, "I'm so glad! Trouble don't last always." And the white people who heard them were struck dumb that they could laugh. In an outside way, this was Old Massa's fun, so what was Old Cuffy laughing for? . . . He had come from Africa. He came walking on the waves of sound. Then he took on flesh after he got here. . . . It is no accident that High John de Conquer has evaded the ears of white people. They were not supposed to know. You can't know what folks won't tell you. If they, the white people, heard some scraps, they could not understand because they had nothing to hear things like that with. (922–23, italics mine)

This then, this notion of internal knowledge, or inside consciousness, is a kind of third sight or spiritual way of knowing that substantially characterizes aspects of cultural expression on both the continent and in various parts of the Black world.

In the diaspora, once we break free of the Western imperative to think in linear, "progressive" fashion, precolonial and preenslavement ways of knowing become as important as postcolonial and postenslavement systems of knowledge, if not more so. The transcultural significance of the circle in precolonial Africa is suddenly endowed with new meaning. Functioning as a symbol of balance, while being the sign and substance of unity between seemingly disparate philosophical principles, the circle as a symbol is exceptionally important on the African continent and beyond. In the chapter "Slavery and the Circle of Culture," from his text *Slave Culture*, Sterling Stuckey argues:

The circle is linked to the most important of all African ceremonies, the burial ceremony. From the movement of the sun, Kongo people

derive the circle and its counterclockwise direction in a variety of ways. . . . Coded as a cross . . . the sign of the four moments of the sun is the Kongo emblem of spiritual continuity. . . . In certain rites it is written on the earth, and a person stands upon it to take an oath, or to signify that he or she understands the meaning of life as a process shared with the dead below the river or sea. The use of the circle for religious purposes in slavery was so consistent and profound that one could argue that it was what gave form and meaning to Black religion and art. It is understandable that the circle became the chief symbolism of heathenism for missionaries, Black and white, leading them to seek either to alter it or eradicate it altogether. That they failed to do so owes a great deal to Bakongo influence in particular, but values similar to those in Congo-Angola are found among Africans a thousand or more miles away. . . . Thus scholarship is likely to reveal more than we now know about the circle in Africa, drawing West and Central Africa closer together culturally than they were previously thought to be. Wherever in Africa the counterclockwise dance ceremony was performed—it is called the ring shout in North America—the dancing and singing were directed to the ancestors and gods. (12, notes omitted)

Stuckey's analysis of the power of the circle is significant for a variety of reasons. First, it reveals the cross-temporal and spatial impact of this symbol as something that has had a deeply felt impact on various parts of the continent and the diaspora. Second, it shows that respect for the ancestors was combined with respect for the natural environment, as is made clear by the central role of the primary elements of life: air, earth, fire, water. Third, it demonstrates that spiritual continuity encompasses physical life and physical death as part of a natural regenerative order, and in this way, scientific, rational, intuitive, and spiritual forms of knowledge are united. Fourth, the collective nature of this system of knowledge is emphasized, since these rituals require a range of participants to be considered successful. Fifth, and most important, it suggests that a particular kind of metaphysical logic is operative at conscious and unconscious levels for both African and African diaspora peoples. This gives substance to the notion that comparable traditions link Black people as much as, if not more so than, the oppressive experiences of colonialism and slavery.

Scholar Oba T'Shaka quantifies and classifies the kind of knowledge suggested by the significance of the circle, with recourse to aspects of ancient Egyptian philosophy. His analysis makes it clearer and clearer that research into precolonial African systems of knowl-

edge provides a much richer framework for understanding diaspora cultures than systems of knowledge inherited exclusively from colonial and neocolonial institutions:

African symbolic systems are . . . rich because they are the products of collective wisdom and genius. . . . The Kemetic Mystery System represented the greatest educational achievement known to humanity, during either the ancient or modern period. Under this great system, worthy candidates were initiated into a Sacred Science that encouraged each initiate to achieve self-knowledge, which was conceived as being the basis for all knowledge. Mystery education proceeded by degrees according to the candidate's ability to master his anger, resentment, greed, sexual appetite and other aspects of his lower nature. The mastery of the liberal arts, the social sciences, mathematics, logic, the sciences, astronomy, astrology and music were also designed to enable the candidate to place the lower nature under the control of the intuitive, higher mind. The one injunction repeated over and over again in mystery training was to think before you speak, and think before you act. Rational, intuitive thought and conduct was required of mystery students because intuitive reason was seen as a primary characteristic of the creator. . . . Reason was not to be separated from emotion and intuition; reason was to be synthesized with emotion and intuition, so each person could find her or his own unique path in life. This was very different from the exclusively rationalistic thought systems of the West. The great Kemetic (Egyptian) Mystery System grew out of the earlier Ta-Seti or Ethiopian Mystery System. (*Return to the African Mother Principle*, 95–96)

The notion that this particular system of knowledge is a product of collective rather than individual genius is suggestive. Among other things, this immediately calls to mind the plethora of proverbs from both continental and diaspora contexts which have no author but are referenced with regard to the ethnic community they originate from (e.g., Ashanti, Yoruba, or Jamaican proverbs). Further, the combination of rational and intuitive knowledge that T'Shaka describes provides a rich rubric for pondering the notion of "inside consciousness" referred to by Hurston and demonstrated in diaspora literatures.

T'Shaka moves from discussion of the ancient Egyptian mystery system to a brief but more specific focus on the comparable Dogon mystery system. The Dogon, an ethnic people living in Mali, are said to live by this knowledge system to the current day, having never converted to either Islam or Christianity. "The wisdom of the Dogon

is contained in words that consist of four degrees of knowledge” (T’Shaka, *Return to the African Mother Principle*, 96). T’Shaka explicates these four degrees of knowledge in order to suggest the similarity between this system and the rich symbolic traditions that still exist in the diaspora. The four words represent different levels of knowledge. The first word, called *Giri So*, or *fore-word* knowledge. The fore-word represents knowledge that faces you: “It is more obvious and simple than the other levels of knowledge . . . [and] is learned through repeating over and over the symbolic events which gradually lead the initiate to gain a progressively deeper understanding of its meaning.” This definition calls to mind the significance of repetition in old spirituals and folksongs, as well as the blues. The second level of knowledge is called *Benne So* or *side-word*. It is less obvious: it “contains more profound explanations of symbolic events . . . than those found in *Giri So*” (*Return to the African Mother Principle*, 96). *Bolo So* is the *back-word*. It “gives the initiate the opportunity to tie together the three degrees of knowledge. Synthesis is the characteristic of *Bolo So*.” Finally, “the peak of this system of knowledge is the *So Dayi* or *clear-word*” (*Return to the African Mother Principle*, 97): “The clear-word is the highest word revealed to initiates who have spent years mastering the three lower degrees of knowledge—a process that requires the cleansing of the thought, words, and actions so that our words and insight will reflect the eternal wisdom of the soul like a clear word free of blemishes” (97).

In Simone Schwarz-Bart’s novel *Pluie et vent sur Têlumée Miracle*, several proverbial sayings, handed down to her by various mother figures in the text, function as her philosophical guide throughout her life. The four levels of knowledge in the Dogon mystery system could easily be applied to the process of transformation that Têlumée goes through. She learns two key proverbs early on. One tells her to be like a drum with two faces, deflecting the bad energy and internalizing the good; and the other tells her to ride the horse rather than be ridden by the horse, that is, not to make a habit out of sorrow. As a child Têlumée learns these proverbs, and her grandmother repeats the lessons of the proverbs in a variety of ways to reinforce their meaning. This seems similar to the *Giri So*, the first level of knowledge in the Dogon mystery system. At a later point, Têlumée begins to synthesize and apply the knowledge of the proverbs, and this strategy allows her to survive the many hardships and tribulations she encounters. She appears then to have achieved the equivalent of the third level of knowledge

referred to as Bolo So by the Dogon. At the end of her life, Télumée becomes a creator of proverbs, one who passes on this proverbial wisdom to others. It seems that at this point she is on the brink of a kind of So *Dayi* or *clear-word* level of knowledge. It is only after enduring and surviving significant tribulations that she arrives at this higher place. After making peace at the novel's close with an evil-minded wanderer who attempts to kill her, Télumée is given a new name by the village people. She is heralded not only for maintaining her spirit but also for having enough left over to help the same vagabond achieve peace before he dies. It is this ultimate act that makes the village people rename her Télumée Miracle, since, as they say, "Télumée, dear, Angel Medard lived like a dog and you made him die like a man" (*Bridge of Beyond*, 166). At the end of the novel Télumée and Simone Schwarz-Bart tell us:

I shine my lamp into every dark corner, I go all over this strange market, and I see that heaven's gift to us is that we should have our head thrust into, held down in, the murky water of scorn, cruelty, pettiness, and treachery. But I also see that we are not drowned in it. We have struggled to be born and we have struggled to be born again and we have called the finest tree in our forests "resolute"—the strongest, the most sought after, the one that is cut down the most often. (*Bridge of Beyond*, 169–170)

I reexamine the significance of the negritude legacy of Aimé Césaire and Léopold Senghor within the context of the First International Conference of Negro Writers and Artists in chapter 1 of this book, "Paris in 1956: Negritude and Cultural Discourse." While this particular conference is of relatively minor significance in the large scheme of things, the questions raised and discussed among the Black writers who came together then are still part of the intellectual landscape of today. At the heart of their conversations were struggles over what philosophical and civilizational legacies most shape the cultural identities of Black people. If the exclusionary and oppressive nature of colonialism had told us who we were not, then these conversations were attempts to figure out who we were. Two questions emerged in the course of this conference: "How will we talk about who we are as a people?" and "Should 'one's people' be defined in national or transnational terms?"

If chapter 1 and the conference, in discussing negritude, ask, "Who are Black people?" then chapter 2, "Colonial Legacies, Gender Iden-

tity, and Black Female Writing in the Diaspora,” asks “Who are Black women?” It goes on to consider what cultural theories and discursive practices guide how Black female writing is discussed and interpreted. Chapter 2 charts some of the post-1970 critical reactions to both Black women’s identities in general and the themes at stake in Afro-Caribbean women’s writing in particular. The discussions of identity that appeared after 1970 expose the extent to which slavery and colonialism bred Black women who both resist and imitate dominant European gender roles. Erna Brodber’s study *Perceptions of Caribbean Women: Towards a Documentation of Stereotypes*, for example, and Sylvia Wynter’s essay, “Beyond Miranda’s Meanings,” both theorize the extent to which colonialism, slavery, and European womanhood have historically shaped Black female identity and influenced the issues that surface in their writings. Yet strains within the early negritude debates and scholarship that have emerged since raise questions about alternate and complementary ways of theorizing this issue.

As early as 1970, Toni Cade Bambara in her anthology *The Black Woman* asked: “How relevant are the truths, the experiences, the findings of white women to Black women? Are women after all simply women? I don’t know that our priorities are the same, that our concerns and methods are the same, or even similar enough so that we can afford to depend on this new field of experts (white, female)” (9). In her essay “On the Issue of Roles,” from the same collection, she expands the question about how to discuss Black women’s identity in the diaspora by going beyond the roles inherited from both the dominant society and the slave environment to ask what came before. The logical answer is to turn back to the continent and see to what extent pre- and postcolonial continental culture expands the framework for theorizing Black (female) cultural identity in the diaspora. I pick up Bambara’s line of argument at the end of chapter 2, and in my analysis of the social theories of two Nigerian scholars, Oyèrónké Oyèwùmí and Ifi Amadiume, begin to expand the critical terrain within which this discussion can take place.

The third, fourth and fifth chapters of this book examine African Caribbean literature written from different locales. In these chapters I explore how both pre- and postcolonial cultural and civilizational legacies are represented in the work of various writers. The writers I study appear to use their characters as larger-than-life examples of the principles that actually do or should guide the societies they come from. Within African diaspora histories and cultural contexts, the

impact of the colonial legacy has been substantially documented. On the other hand, ambivalence frequently overshadows any certainty about “what in us is African.” This anxiety may be appeased by anthropological studies that document the retention of African words, phrases, dance steps, and ways of cooking in African diaspora culture. While these legacies are all valid, I suggest that the African cultural background is most evident in terms of four characteristics repeatedly demonstrated in the literature:

1. The notion of “power” as something experienced as internal rather than external.
2. The “word” and the rhythm of how the word is spoken as something endowed with the power to affect the spirit and influence spiritual transformation.
3. Art as produced by “the folk” or the “everyday people,” while having definite aesthetic appeal, is frequently practical or functional. Hence songs and tales, although entertaining, often have a moral that is meant to guide or inspire.
4. A sense of time as cyclical rather than linear. The focus is on the effect of events on the individual’s identity, rather than on a presumption of progress related to the abstract passage of time.

In short and long works of prose by Afro-Caribbean writers these characteristics appear again and again.

Chapter 3, “Negritude and Negativity: Alienation and ‘Voice’ in Eastern Caribbean Literature,” juxtaposes writing by Merle Hodge, Jamaica Kincaid, and Earl Lovelace. In this chapter, “alienation” functions as the legacy of colonialism while Césaire’s definition of negritude is used as a point of departure for exploring the existence of the African cultural traits delineated above. By the end chapter 3, Lovelace’s character Joebell is shown to represent the principles of internal power and communal balance.

Chapters 4 and 5 are explorations of the transformative power of the word. Chapter 4, “Diaspora Philosophy, French Caribbean Literature, and Simone Schwarz-Bart’s *Pluie et vent sur Télumée Miracle*,” explores writing by three French Caribbean writers from French Guiana, Martinique, and Guadeloupe, respectively. Léon Damas’s philosophy of negritude is explored through an examination of his poetry and is juxtaposed with Edouard Glissant’s postnegritude theory of creolization. At the center of this chapter, however, is a lengthy analysis of Simone Schwarz-Bart’s first novel. This work, more than any other,

appears to move beyond both colonial alienation and negritude's basic questions to expose the African cultural mores and values at the heart of the folktale and proverb in the diaspora. In this chapter, I propose that Schwarz-Bart's character Télumée picks up where Lovelace's Joebell leaves off, expanding the complexity of how an individual's sense of internal power can function as a stabilizing force within a larger communal context. I also suggest that by the end of Schwarz-Bart's text, Black female identity is compatible with both communal theories about culture, on one hand, and the social gender theories of continental African scholars, on the other. In the final analysis, however, social relations and culture have taken primacy over any articulation of individual, gender identity at the end of Schwarz-Bart's novel.

Chapter 5, "The Spoken Word and Spirit Consciousness: Audre Lorde and Paule Marshall's Diasporic Voice," charts the poetics of loss in the early writings of Audre Lorde, showing the interconnections among Western notions of the individual, cultural alienation, and the breakdown in the connection between "vision" and "voice." In Lorde's later poetry and in Paule Marshall's groundbreaking work *Praisesong for the Widow*, a transformational transition occurs from individualism and spiritual numbness to a kind of ancestral knowledge and collective consciousness.

The complexity of what we know and have maintained as African peoples living in the diaspora has yet to be fully revealed to us. What is apparent, however, is that the rebirth of ancient forms in a variety of contemporary modes is still carried forth in our stories, songs, dances, proverbs, jokes, riddles, language, music, and literature. In her article "'One of Dese Mornings, Bright and Fair, / Take My Wings and Cleave De Air': The Legend of the Flying Africans and Diasporic Consciousness," Wendy Walters argues that the Black female novel functions as one of the contemporary realms of folkloric transformation. Using analyses of Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow* and Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*, Walters begins her article by referring to the plethora of folktales and accounts across the diaspora about Africans during the period of slavery flying back home. What is most striking about her synthesis of these tales for the purposes of her article is not just how widespread they were, but how much "the old people" insisted on having been eyewitnesses to these events. From her quotation of Monica Schuler's essay "Alas, Alas, Kongo" we hear that in Jamaica in particular, the ability to fly was linked to avoiding salt; we also learn that fifteenth-century Portuguese missionaries to

the Kongo kingdom put salt on the tongues of converts in place of a water baptism in order to signify their conversion to Christianity (Walters, “One of Dese Mornings,” 9). We learn that research in the Sea Islands off the coast of Georgia revealed “twenty-seven variants of the Flying Africans legend” (“One of Dese Mornings,” 7). We also learn that these reports surfaced not only in the United States and Jamaica; one of the most striking comes from Cuba, as reported by Esteban Montejo in *The Autobiography of a Runaway Slave*:

Some people said that when a Negro died he went back to Africa, but this is a lie. How could a dead man go to Africa? . . . It was living men who flew there, from a tribe the Spanish stopped importing as slaves because so many of them flew away it was bad for business. [T]he Negroes [that] did not [commit suicide] . . . escaped by flying. . . . The Musundi Congolese were the ones that flew the most; they disappeared by means of witchcraft. . . . There are those who say the Negroes threw themselves into rivers. This is untrue. The truth is that they fastened a chain to their waists which was full of magic. That was where their power came from. I know all this intimately, and it is true beyond a doubt. (quoted in Walters, “One of Dese Mornings,” 4, 9–10)

The suggestion that these accounts were not just myths and stories relayed for the worthy purpose of uplifting the spirit of an enslaved people is profound. It speaks, among other things, once again, to the complexity of who we have been and who we still are as a people. It certainly speaks profoundly to the existence of alternate forms of consciousness. This alternate consciousness is borne out in our songs, spirituals, creole and Black vernacular sayings, our music, and possession rituals. While the stories about flying Africans may seem fantastic, Christian belief takes literally the physical ascension of Jesus from the grave the third day after his death. The third day. Third sight. Three, and numbers that are multiples of three, have always been symbolic in African and African diaspora spiritual contexts:

*I say fly away home to Zion
(fly away home)
I say fly away home to Zion
(fly away home)
One bright morning when my work is over I will fly away home*
—BOB MARLEY, “Rastaman Chant”