The Call-and-Response in the Diaspora

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The *call-and-response* [1], what Michael A. Gomez calls *reversing the sails* [2], describes the ways in which, despite the dispersals of their Diasporas, people of African descent continually return to the continent. This cultural feature has often been expressed through art and artistic expression- as Dr. David Hinds, a Guyanese activist, once said: "when you're listening to Hip Hop or Afrobeat, you are listening to high life, reggae, gospel, and plantation songs." My practice is informed by these dialogics within the African diaspora and the many ways it takes place, most prominently through textiles and iconographies. As part of reversing my own sails, I have been building a lexicon of symbols based on the *chitenge* (the Bemba form of the ubiquitous African wax fabric) which functions as a vehicle to remember, speculate and reimagine.

The history and multiplicity of African or Dutch wax fabrics is central to this practice, as it is an indigenous, colonial and appropriated object. Though the textile is culturally synonymous with Africa, wax fabrics originate with the Batik print method in Indonesia [3]. This indigenous practice was industrialized by Dutch colonial powers and found great popularity in West Africa in particular. This popularity can be attributed to local women selling the textiles in markets, acting as middlemen between global colonial industries and local markets. One infamous group was the *Mama Benz* [4], who were so named because they'd gotten so rich off the fabrics that they could even own a Mercedes Benz- needless to say, a nearly impossible feat for most colonized people.

Beyond this economic history, my interest lies in the naming of these textiles by the Mama Benz and the narratives and myths that ultimately evolved as a result. In *Ghanaian Women and Dutch Wax Prints,* Paulette Young explains "...central to this discussion is the practice of counter-appropriation, that is, how women as individuals are in dialogue with culture by transferring the foreign, in this case Dutch wax prints, into the local in a culturally appropriate way. It positions women not only as cloth distributors and

consumers, but also as producers of knowledge through the phenomenon of naming." [5] While the wax fabric is not indigenous to the African continent, it has been so synthesized into society that it has become a cultural object, its authenticity grounded in its multiple lives. By appropriating and naming my symbols, I am participating in an active, historical practice of counter-appropriation and knowledge production.

Coming from a culture that has experienced massive epistemicide, this act of remembering is liberating. Much of African epistemology is rooted in oral tradition and ritual. Unfortunately, due to forced and "voluntary" migration, these epistemologies have been actively erased or slowly forgotten. On the plantation, slaves were no longer associated with their tribe but with Africa as a whole- suddenly, they were not Yoruba or Asante but Black. Forced to live with each other, they forged new language, ceremony and song out of this random assortment of cultures. In confronting this, I turn to Dr. Hind's framework on Pan-Africanism as a tradition that has kept these epistemologies in our psychic spaces. There are many definitions and iterations of Pan-Africanism, but, for consistency, my practice is grounded in the following: it is an ideology which emphasizes the kinship of Black people wherever they are, and it developed organically as people were forced to live through the horrors of racialization, colonialism, and slavery. As Glissant writes, it is through the meeting and clashing that culture evolves[7]. This eventually manifested in *creolization*[6], a cultural blending that has produced incredibly valuable artifacts- such as Haitian *vodun* (voodoo), Rasta, New Orleanian Mardi Gras, Jazz and, of course, Hip Hop.

From childhood, I was taught that my family is Zambian. As I grew older though, I was surprised to learn that my family name, Mugala, is found in countries across Africa, including Uganda, Kenya and Tanzania. Unfortunately, the British destroyed most of our pre-colonial history, so information on our name is hard to come by. Luckily, my father was able to provide some insight- the Mugalas were a part of a tribe defeated by the Zulu that fled up north and were able to maintain a territory in modern Zambia by defending themselves against the local Ngoni. Similarly, my family fled economic stagnation in Zambia and have tried to build new life in America. Our history is far from unique in the Diaspora,

and much has been written on the toll it has taken on our bodies and histories. In a way, though, these repeated forced migrations have proven anathema to the attempted destruction of our past. As Debray writes, the movement of human bodies is central to the movement of ideas[8]. While the ancestor's journeys are no longer traceable by conventional means, the proof remains in the culture that we, their children, still live and breathe. Thus, our history can still be learned through music, cuisine, fashion, and language. My glossary is a continuation of that tradition, as it is composed of symbols that embody the continual migrations across the Diaspora and our ability to create meaning and culture in the places we inhabit.

The symbols I design hold multiple lives, some coming from pre-colonial Africa, and others from the beauty supply store. The ability of these symbols to be plural and have multiple meanings and contexts is powerful. A viewer once shared that, in my symbols, they saw "...an afro pick, cowrie shells and a staff made of papyrus leaves."- interpretations that, despite a shared culture, I'd never even considered. *Music in Africa and the Caribbean* uses the term 'inter-African syncretism' to describe this overlap and blending. In many ways my practice is strikingly like the tradition of sampling that is so central to Diaspora music. When you listen to Stevie Wonder, you're also listening to John Coltrane, Negro Spirituals, traditional African drums, and much more. Poet Douglas Kearney explained that the sampling used in his performance and poetry are a way of experiencing time travel to the past and into the future simultaneously- that, for a moment, all of these timelines overlap and coexist. In that way, Diaspora creators are never truly alone, as we always carry the artists of the past with us into our work.

My glossary participates in a long history of artistic transmission by using symbols that hold stories, practices, and culture. By integrating other Diaspora art forms- textiles, music, literature, etc- I am engaging the *call-and-response* that holds space to remember and reimagine. Together with symbols that are personal to me, this lexicon points to histories and futures within the African diaspora. I am excited by the dialogue that engaging with them provokes, and thrilled to experience the possibilities that will grow out of them.

Notes

1) Mario Joaquim Azevedo, *Africana Studies : A Survey of Africa and the African Diaspora*: *African American Music: An Introduction*, Eddie S. Meadows
2) Gomez, Michael A. 2020. *Reversing Sail : A History of the African Diaspora*. Cambridge, United Kingdom ; New York, Ny, Usa: Cambridge University Press.
3) Williams, Zoe. *The Story of African Wax Print Fabrics. Gathered*, 9 Oct. 2020.
4) Prag, Ebbe. *Mama Benz in Trouble: Networks, the State, and Fashion Wars in the Beninese Textile Market.* African Studies Review, vol. 56, no. 3, 2013, pp. 101–121.
5) Young, Paulette. 2016. *Ghanaian Woman and Dutch Wax Prints: The Counter-Appropriation of the Foreign and the Local Creating a New Visual Voice of Creative Expression*. Journal of Asian and African Studies 51 (3): 305–27.
6) Mario Joaquim Azevedo, *Africana Studies : A Survey of Africa and the African Diaspora*: *Music in Africa and the Caribbean*, Roderick Knight & Kenneth Bilby
7) Debray Régis. 2000. *Transmitting Culture*. New York: University Presses of California, Columbia and Princeton.
8) Mario Joaquim Azevedo, *Africana Studies : A Survey of Africa and the African Diaspora*: *Music in Africa and the Caribbean*, Roderick Knight & Kenneth Bilby