

Kimoh, Dar You Are!

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A “nonsense” song which was recorded during the Works Progress Administration “Writer’s Project” interviews¹ in the nineteen-thirties was, we argue, a creolized version of Wolof phonetically transcribed as English. Specifically, the song which is the subject of this essay was collected during a field interview carried out during “the Hampton interviews,” which were part of the larger Federal Writers’ Project. In November, 1936, “an all-Negro unit” of the Virginia Writers’ Project under the direction of Roscoe E. Lewis began interviewing ex-slaves in Virginia and during the next year interviewed more than 300 elderly Negroes as part of this project.² The Writers’ Project interviews in Virginia, carried out during the period of Franklin D. Roosevelt’s administration, were part of a study that was preceded by more modest efforts in the Ohio River Valley, Kentucky, and Indiana.³ The analysis of this song from the 1930s reveals expressions of Senegambian cultural knowledge that generally have not been associated with North American black communities of that era. This era represents the last generation of African Americans who would remember a neighbor or relative who was born in Africa or who (possibly) grew up with people immersed in clearly identifiable African referents. Our work therefore builds on arguments that Lawrence W. Levine made years ago (1971)⁴ regarding the importance of song in understanding cultural continuity, resistance, and invention in the African American context.

Here we review the case of Fannie Berry, and present elements of her narrative as a way of reclaiming and re-ordering ways of knowing that have been “submerged, hidden or driven underground.”⁵ Following a short discussion of the “discovery” of this text, we provide a summary review of the conditions which produced the particular interview. The article moves on to a discussion of conceptual issues which are embedded in the way the interviews were conceived and implemented. We look at a complex of issues against the issues of class, historicity and the historical record, before analyzing the song itself and key aspects such as ethnographic work, “authenticity” and authorship in black diaspora studies.

Virginia Texts and Wolof Songs

For the last several years I have been doing research on slaves and free black immigrants in Virginia.⁶ After having noticed this song in the texts of a former slave’s narrative of the 1930s,⁷ I began making inquiries about its possible Wolof vocabulary. I decided to have several native Wolof speakers read it to determine if my suspicions were correct. Once I was satisfied that the song did contain Wolof vocabulary, I then sought to contextualize its existence as an oral tradition that had both apparent and hidden meanings, some concealed in language and some suggested by form.⁸ This new and different way of presenting this narrative and song, as an artifact of 20th century African American culture, and as a striking example of hidden traces of multicultural African American histories, could provide a window into life during the apex of the African creolization process in North America.

The presence of Wolof vocabulary and literary form suggests that this language and genre had become embedded in African American practice and perhaps white American cultural practice as everyday oral expression by the end of slavery. I sought the expert assistance of my colleague Charles Sow, a well known Senegalese author who has done extensive research in Wolof areas of Senegal. His strong literary sense and appreciation for Wolof culture brought the necessary understanding of nuance and Wolof tradition to the task. The reader will therefore note that some sections are respectively presented in the voice of either Sow or mine as we relate different and connected experiences of exploring the song and its historical context. In some ways, this paper is a dialogue between two “natives,” and a collaborative study of related cultural histories. It is the result of partnership between Sow, a native Wolof speaker and Senegalese artist, and myself, or a native African American of the Old Diaspora.⁹ A portion of the original song as it was recorded in 1937 is as follows:

*Kimo, Kimo, dar you ar,
heh, how rump te pume diddle
Set back pinkey wink,
Come Tom nippe cat,
Sing song kitty cat, can't you carry me o'er?
Up de darkies head so bold,
Sing song, kitty, can't you carry me o'er?
Milk in de dairry nine days old,
Sing song, kitty, can't yo' carry me home?¹⁰*

Li Moo Doy Waar!

“*C'est n'est pas de l'anglais,*” (This is not English) said Madame Wendy Wilson Fall in bringing to my attention the song excerpted from *Weevils in the Wheat*. It wasn't English, and it resembled Wolof. This resemblance could be found in the tone of certain words, and by their cadence, so terribly close to this primary language of Senegambia. But, the title of the song was already a call to this discovery: a question to be answered and understood. It refers to that which is “*doy waar*” (so surprising). The expression “*ki mo doy waar*” is in any case constantly used in Wolof conversation to mark surprise or admiration, to draw attention towards something or someone. And from the first reading, one is struck by these very familiar words in Wolof:

*Hey yo,
Di romb
Bu me title
Con tam
Guep Kat...*

I therefore immediately began a work of both transcription and interpretation which gives this text, with its slight differences, the perspective which Wendy Fall brings to it. Not being a linguist, I nevertheless proposed to follow up my suspicion that the song of Fanny Berry of Virginia has a general tone which clearly typifies the form known in Wolof as “*bak,*” a traditional song of Wolof wrestlers or warriors. The transcription follows:

1. Kimo, kimo doy waar
2. Eh, yow di romb, bu ma title
3. Tek bak, tegi winku
4. Cone tam, guep kat
5. Sing Song Kitty
6. Can't you carry me over?

The English interpretation would proceed as:

1. This one, this one, how surprising (shocking) he is!
2. And you who pass by, don't try to frighten me!
3. You pose a challenge; but you will only win a trap (you can gamble for victory, but you will only harvest a failure)
4. And that, just like the others who have done as you,
5. You sing a song, Kitty
6. Can't you get me out of here?

The last two lines (5 and 6) seem to be an English that is already, and somewhat, Africanized. If my understanding of all this is correct, there is definitely here a sense of a contest and a direct reference to a type of expression very well known in Wolof.

I must add that this is not the first time that I have this impression of finding something so culturally close to me in a text or an expression from the African diaspora of the Americas. Any Senegambian who examines the numerous Africanisms which exist in the vast cultural heritage of African Americans of the southern United States, for instance, can't miss the agreeable surprises which constantly appear in words and phrases which are manifestly Wolof, Fulani (Pulaar) or Manding. They remain intact or somewhat deformed in spite of the alienating context. This contradicts those who would have had them forget all in order to better control them.

In the case of Wolof, for example, a name or surname such as "tootie" is given to the youngest child of a family and is still very frequent in African American communities in the U.S. The daughter of the jazz pianist Thelonius Monk is named affectionately "Rootie Tootie" and he dedicated a composition named "Little Rootie Tootie" (meaning small or small child in Wolof). This is also sometimes called *Tootie Tankh* (small foot). There are other terms of African American vocabulary (particularly in Gullah) which are clear both in pronunciation and in their signification: Wow = yes; Funky = inflated (with anger, pride); Dig = understand; Guy = person, friend; Jive = reference to someone who is false. The most curious of these is the way of counting of certain Gullah communities: *go, didi, tati, nay, jowego*, all of this simply being counting from one to five in Pulaar.

The most recent research (Gwendolyn Midlo Hall, Ibrahima Seck) confirms that Wolof was one of the "lingua franca" or major languages of communication among the first communities of slaves in Louisiana, Mississippi, and Florida. This can be seen as normal, since, to a certain degree, Wolof already played that role in Senegambia, which was one of the first zones of Africa to be decimated by the Atlantic slave trade.

If we look back now to the song collected by the Hampton Institute WPA project which is presented in *Weevils in the Wheat*, we can see, in its form, that it closely resembles the genre of sport songs that Wolof wrestlers use when calling a verbal challenge before a fight. Léopold Sédar Senghor himself admired this genre and adapted this rhythm in several of his poems which he wrote in French.

The theme of these songs is often a sort of warning given by a wrestler to his adversary in the sense of “Attention! You want to defy me but look what awaits you!” Or, “Don’t say too much because, here, watch what is waiting for you!” (meaning a fall).

Therefore, by extension, a man in his moments of glory and success should pay attention; he should not make fun of others, because a fall and failure are never far, not to mention death itself. And it is not for anything that many of the sports songs, composed by wrestlers or by their “griots,” have passed to use as general wisdom. There are many examples of such verbal constructions in oral traditions in the form of sentences and proverbs where they always express a warning. Here are a few examples: 1) “*Buki, wiri-wiri, jaari ndaari*” (The Hyena would well make detours; she will always get to Ndari). *Ndari* is a place where the Hyena ate a lot of meat, but where she also met her punishment. 2) “*Fu ma diar, ku fu diar, tax ban*” (There where I passed by intact, whoever else passes there, will be covered with shame). The sense being “where I went unscathed, others will suffer.” 3) “*Mbeurum Bour a Bax, Badolo du ko tex, da koy ragal!*” (It’s good to be the aristocrat of wrestlers (champion) since the ordinary wrestler wouldn’t dare trip him up, because he is afraid of him!).

But the sportive song called “*bak*” or “*baku*” (the word which is found in the song which is the focus of this paper) always has a strong rhythmic character, and is accompanied by drumming. This is because it is also danced by wrestlers who are pronouncing on their arrival into the arena, addressing their adversaries and the crowd of spectators. The latter come to the stadium to see not just the combat but also the poets who, they know, are there composing songs spontaneously and talking. The spectators are there for this other aspect of the performance which is charged with praises. With his song, dance, and gestures, the wrestler also seeks to destabilize his opponent, diminish his forces, anger him, and make him lose concentration. This brings to mind the boxer Mohamed Ali, addressing Joe Frazier with his fist raised in the air, or George Foreman, talking to the American public, dominating the scene with his narratives before dominating his opponents physically.

And the song, “*kimo, kimo doy waar*” has exactly the same rhythmic, repetitive, dancing structure as the sportive Wolof songs. It suffices to compare it with the rhythmic formula of “*MBaru Bouki*” which is very popular among wrestlers:

“*Ndat Saay, Ndat Saay, Reguin!*,”

1 2 3 4 5 6

Reguin, Reguin, Ndat Saay

1 2 3 4 5 6

Six measures. And... “*Kimo, kimo, doy waar*” (Six measures).

1 2 3 4 5 6

Exactly the same metric! This is because in the sportive song, the sense, or the message, is not enough. For it to be successful, and completely “felt” it must be rhythmic so that it is both spiritual and physical. The sense of warning concerns the spirit as well as the body. A translation of the song is as follows: “Attention! You are passing by me trying to be shocking, and to impress people as you strut, but that which awaits you is the trap in which you will be inescapably taken, or your body will be hung (winku)!”

This same type of phrasing was equally proclaimed by the warriors known as the Wolof *ceddo* on their way to war, in which case the genre is known as *Xass*. In this case, the warriors swore about the exploits of combat or their eagerness to fight to the death. In this context, one must say that Wolof texts are immemorial, very ancient, but continually in use and maintained. The work of memory and remembering are fundamental elements in the transmission of culture and identity. For the majority of these African texts it is not surprising that we should find elements similar to the types of survivals which existed still in the America of the 1930s or later.

Comparative analyses of narratives of this genre between African researchers and African Americans could certainly reveal other things that are at least as evident as the case we examine here. Such future works on narrative and memory will offer unlimited possibilities.

The “masters of speech,” the Dogon, say that each person keeps within himself or herself the echo of the creation of the universe by *Amma*, the one God. This echo is the souvenir of the gigantic primordial explosion of human origins, the departure of *Amma* himself from the primordial egg. This element still resounds in each human being who knows how to listen to his deepest self; as each person, the Dogon say, is a grain of the universe. With such a conception of memory, body, and possibilities, it is logical to think that quantities of sacred texts, poems, words, charged sounds, even deformed or reconstructed, in the context of contact with other languages, are in some fashion pure in their most profound sense. These essential elements were not erased from the spirit of the Africans who were transplanted by force; the consciousness, force, and essential meanings in the cultures of these people have remained.

This type of encounter with a text which surges forward to us from the past causes regret that the ex-slaves in question were not better interviewed. Whether born in Africa or not, in any case they grew up with dynamic souvenirs which lived through their parents and direct progenitors. The questionnaires of the “slave narratives” seem to have very much concealed all that was a personal memory, precise and identifiable with Africa, each time leaving a very blurred and vague impression of the land of the slaves’ origins.

Reading with Africa on My Mind

In addition to presenting the song and analyzing its probable geographic and linguistic African origins, our intention is also to address the question of epistemological choices and methodological frameworks for “Negro” studies of that era in light of recent debates regarding western epistemologies (Trouillot : 2003; Tuhiwai - Smith : 1999) and the writing of alternative histories (Axel : 2002; Trouillot: 2002). We examine as well how the offspring of “Negro studies” disciplines, such as African American studies and Diaspora studies, are affected today by politics and local (American) custom.

If it can be assumed that “African” remembrances were not a focus of field interviews of the 1930s in North America,¹¹ it can also be argued that many creolized expressions of African cultures were probably overlooked or ignored by researchers during that period. It is probable that questions focused on African origins or practices were not considered relevant to the period’s mission (among African Americans) of proving and demonstrating the dignity and civilized nature of the black community in America. For most of the period following slavery, public wisdom and scholarly interpretation coincided in perceiving the African American community¹² as having lost most, if not all, of its African heritage as a result of the violence of the American slave and post-reconstruction experience.

An exception in this rather dim and limited view of the success Africans of North America enjoyed in transmitting culture to their descendents is the study of African American music. Levine and his cohorts of the nineteen sixties and early nineteen seventies, such as leading scholar and artist Amiri Baraka (Leroi Jones),¹³ point out clearly that African American music genres had African antecedents that were important to local cultures in form, function, and message. These scholars saw geography as a significant, and at times determinate, factor in the evolution and diffusion of musical forms. In the early 1970s, scholar George O. Carney and the eminent cultural geographer, Wilbur Zelinsky both called for studies on folk music to better understand the spatiotemporal processes in American culture, and hoped for more research on music geography.¹⁴ Music geography as a field has, in various ways and through various authors, covered jazz, blues, ethnic, and popular music. Scholars in this field study not only specific types or genres of music, but ways to imagine histories of music, its migrations, and typologies of music diffusion.

In an article entitled “*Music Geography*” (1971), Carney explains that many “approaches and themes have been employed by music geographers” and one of these is the “culture hearth and diffusion approach” (Carney 1990; Nash and Carney 1996).¹⁵ This is a pertinent approach in terms of Fannie Berry’s song, as it focuses on diffusion from a particular nexus of musical evolution and production, such as a Wolof cultural region, in this case. Here we might consider how Wolof forms were diffused throughout the Americas in variously abbreviated, transformed, and truncated ways that are still recognizable through language and structure.

Earlier writers such as Odum and Johnson (1925, 1929), or John Lomax (1917)¹⁶ sought to describe African American music of their era in a way that attributed a certain logic of historicity, even though their understanding of Africa or the forces of slavery was limited. Africa was at that time the mysterious Dark Continent, and the idea that “American Negroes” might still sing songs in specific African languages would have been truly remarkable and extraordinary for that time. Some African Americans may have even found such declarations insulting, and the reception Zora Neale Hurston had from her African American colleagues during and after her work with Franz Boas attests to this. This leads us to question how similar studies of African American narratives and oral histories might have fared in the nineteen twenties and thirties.

While there were marketable and acceptable ways of exploiting exoticism and even referencing Africa as Langston Hughes and Jean Toomer (well-known author of the book of poems and essays, *Cane*) did, to assert that African languages were present in folk songs, folk ballads, or family narratives was not popular and probably not possible during this era. Studies of African languages, which were just starting in British and French colonial contexts, had yet to be documented and published for general public consumption, or even distribution within a limited academic milieu. Such linguistic work to be carried out for a plethora of communities from Plains Indians to the Tiv of Nigeria was just beginning. Further, the savagery of “negroes” was still alive as the *major* operative concept which connected them to Africa, and this notion negated, at the same time, the possibility of “real” languages in Africa and the ability of American “Negroes” to have retained such “pitter-patter.” This concept discouraged black intellectuals from following Africanist research trajectories, as these topics ultimately included assumptions regarding the intellectual ability of the researchers themselves.

As has been discussed in innumerable essays and other works on the growth of racism in the U.S. following reconstruction, the years from 1898 to 1920 were periods of extreme repression of African American communities, which included hundreds of lynchings, the misrepresentation of black images in the media, and, coincidentally, the death of the populist movement. With this in mind, we can now turn to the conditions under which the song/poem “*Kimoh, kimoh*” as I call it, was collected.

The Interview Context

Fannie Berry, a woman in Virginia who was interviewed in the Hampton project, was born sometime between 1841 and 1842. At the time of the interview she was living in Petersburg, Virginia, and explained that she had belonged to George Abbot in Appomattox County, “*mongst de mountains,*” perhaps near present day Charlottesville. She says that she moved to Petersburg during the first year of the Civil War.¹⁷ Fannie recites, during the interview, three versions of a song which Sow analyzes above. Berry was known as a “prolific tale teller” and was about 86 years old at the time of the interview (1976:30). The interviewer mentions that the mass of material collected from Fanny was “not always internally consistent.” (1976:30)¹⁸. How this may affect our reading of the song which Fanny recites will be addressed later in the section on “cultural ownership.”

In the edited volume *Weevils in the Wheat*, it is stated that:

Although ex-slave narratives and reminiscences were published both before and after the Civil War, there seems to have been no concerted effort to interview ex-slaves until the late 1920’s. Before the Virginia Project, Andrew P. Watson, a graduate student in anthropology at Fisk University, interviewed 100 elderly Negroes in the period 1927-1929. Most of those interviewed were ex-slaves and Watson recorded from them autobiographical accounts and accounts of conversion experiences. Fifty conversion experiences and six autobiographies were published in 1945 in *God Struck Me Dead: Religious Conversion Experiences and Autobiographies of Negro Ex-Slaves*.¹⁹

This latter collection, *God Struck Me Dead: Religious Conversion Experiences and Autobiographies of Negro Ex-Slaves*, was even re-printed in another edited form, and the emphasis was on religious conversion, reminding us of the focus of the times. Another project of interviews (82 ones) was done in 1929 in Louisiana, this time focused on African American views of the institution of slavery.²⁰

The WPA was preceded, institutionally, by the Federal Emergency Relief Administration through which it was established through Presidential order. The stated purpose of the WPA /FWP interviews was to collect African American memories of slavery. Ironically, they were eventually to be accepted in the 1930s and 1940s not as an exercise in documenting history or complimenting written historical records, but as a project of recording folkways and ultimately, as a literary exercise. In fact, the well known African American poet Sterling Brown was appointed National Editor of Negro Affairs, having been named by Henry G. Alsberg. A proposal for a Negro studies project was approved in the fall of 1936, and provided funds for several interviewers. Roscoe et al state that “from the beginning the purpose of the Negro studies project was two-fold: to provide employment for educated Negroes on relief and to carry out “the collection and publication of authentic material on Negro life in Virginia *since Jamestown* (my italics).²¹

That Roscoe or anyone would imagine that the potential material about Africans who arrived in North America since slavery could be effectively covered in one study is a testament to how much the potential data was underestimated. To be fair, his statement is most probably a testament to his desire to impress his sponsors with the importance of his project and to continue the funding.

The Virginia Negro studies project was almost completed by 1937, and included the book *The Negro in Virginia* (Roscoe Lewis: 1938). Susie R. C. Byrd, who interviewed Fannie Berry and was considered to be one of “the more prolific interviewers,” left two sets of notes which are presented in *Weevils in the Wheat*.²² There, it is stated that her job was “to collect data concerning the history of Petersburg Negroes (1976:383). Byrd’s methodology was essentially based on what we call today the “semi-structured” individual interview approach. Using interview guides, which are provided as annexes to the study and still accessible, interviewers approached the older people who were their informants with the objective of culling some perspectives on slavery that were presented by ex-slaves themselves. The latter were considered as the primary and living sources of information on the subject.

Viewed from the vantage point of the great popularity today of studies of slavery and memory, one cannot but appreciate the irony that the grandchildren and great-grandchildren of that generation are already no longer perceived as viable sources for such memory studies. Little work, for instance, seeks to analyze hip hop or rap in the context of the collected earlier songs which remained from the Reconstruction period. We will return to this and related issues later in this essay. For the moment, it is important to note the words of Robin D.G. Kelley in the foreword of the volume *Remembering Slavery*, published in conjunction with the Library of Congress (1998)²³. Kelley states:

Those ex-slaves who lived to tell their stories do not all speak in one voice, nor do they share one big collective memory. The interviews do represent one of the few bodies of slave thought in which black slaves described the conditions they faced, their oppressions, their resistance. But some of the passages will frustrate readers interested only in dramatic cases of brutality or heroic acts of defiance. Alongside the tragic we finds stories of “happy darkies” who virtually pine for the days of slavery, as well as detailed, moving descriptions of the day-to-day violence inflicted on the very young and very old.

Stories like the latter were told at considerable risk. As Wes Brady put it in his interview, ‘Some white folks might want to put me back in slavery if I tells how we was used in slavery time, but you asks me for the truth.’ Readers must remember that when these interviews were being conducted, the stench of “strange fruit” still lingered in the Southern countryside where many of the informants still resided. In 1935 alone there were fifteen recorded lynchings, for which no one was prosecuted.

The ex-slaves had reason to be scared...But fear and Depression hunger alone do not explain the complicated character of their recollections. Slavery was a painful period, an era African Americans had been trying to forget since Reconstruction. Consider that many black churches worked hard to eliminate the “ol’ spirituals” as a way of removing all vestiges of slavery from their cultural memory. The worst of the informants’ slavery experiences may have been purged from their minds. (1998: vii-viii)

Kelly’s statement rightly suggests the importance of purged memories, or ideas hidden in “nonsense” words, that were unintelligible to the uninitiated and those who would punish slaves for expressed thoughts of resistance, disgust, and rebellion. Like Kelly, Harkin shows that negative emotions evoked by trauma strongly shape collective memories of such events, if they are not repressed altogether.²⁴

Another possible result is of course, exaggeration, or the selection of certain events over others. It is possible that although the meaning has become masked in the song “*Kimoh*,” time did not erase the importance of the song, and hence its survival and circulation. The very forbidden quality of the message in the song renders it deliciously memorable for the neighbors or descendants of the first person who sang it for his fellow slaves, in Virginia. For the *Kimoh* song actually states:

This one, this one, how surprising (shocking) he is!
And you who pass by, don’t try to frighten me!
You pose a challenge; but you will only win a trap (you can gamble for victory, but you will only harvest a failure)
And that, just like the others who have done as you,
You sing a song, Kaiti
Can’t you get me out of here?

There are two important elements to be considered, both connected to the repression of African American individuals and communities, and the quality of information we have inherited about those communities. To borrow from the volume *Remembering Slavery*, “the struggle over slavery’s memory has been almost as intense as the struggle over slavery itself. For many, the memory of slavery in the United States was too important to be left to the black men and women who experienced it directly. The stakes were too great.”²⁵ Berlin refers to those who would want to promote an attractive image of white paternalism that popular notions of life under slavery then promoted. Therefore, for those who were interviewed in 1936, the continued activities of the Ku Klux Klan and the generalized racist acts towards their communities did not encourage too much open talk about slavery. For the interviewees, whether young black historical scholars, writers, or young white folklorists, there was covert pressure from the administration and overt societal pressure against engendering alternative narratives of what slavery had been like, and for accumulating evidence of alternative views of that history.

Moreover, the young people, especially African Americans, who were engaged in the research were themselves caught in the dilemma that DuBois poignantly described as “double consciousness.”²⁶ They were interviewers; but somehow they were also the interviewees. Their parents, their uncles and aunts, and cousins had all descended through the same trajectory. When one considers that the actual citizenship of the American Negro was still up for discussion in the mid-1930s, it is entirely understandable that reinforcing images of Negroes with African culture was far from being a conscious priority or even an unconscious desire. We laud these early attempts to create a record of what slavery may have meant to its African American victims. We appreciate the opportunity to re-evaluate and use this effort as a tool to reconsider that history and to further uncover hidden narratives, texts and perspectives of that time.

Historical studies of the last decade have done much to reveal the ethnic and cultural origins of slaves in the mid-Atlantic and southern coastal states. For instance, numerable studies of the Carter family and their kin affiliates of Virginia have been based on careful readings of Carter family diaries, plantation notebooks, and accounting records as well as town and regional archives, such as the work of Lorena Walsh on Carter’s Grove²⁷. Through these works we learn that Robert “King” Carter, during his time the biggest and richest tobacco planter in Virginia, preferred slaves from the Senegambian regions whom he referred to as “*gambers*” (Andrew Levy: 2005:8)²⁸, and that he also imported and bought many Ibo slaves from Calabar.²⁹ M. Gomez estimates that perhaps as many as 30% of slaves in the 18th century were of Senegambian origin in old Louisiana alone. (1998:43).³⁰

If we apply historian Boubacar Barry’s definition of “greater Senegambia”³¹ to the data for the colonial United States, such as South Carolina, which treats slaves from the “rice coast” (present day Sierra Leone) as from another region, then the percentage of Senegambians and their creole descendents to other Africans present in Virginia at the time, such as Malagasy or Ibo/Calabari, becomes more significant. Barry relies on what he refers to as *zones of cultural influence* in defining geographic and ethnic affiliations. His approach is to describe the integrated nature of commerce, polity and language in the Senegambia just prior to, and during, the Atlantic Slave trade, rather than to emphasize the fragmentation that resulted eventually from the trade.³² In his view, minority ethnic groups in the sub-region were conversant with majority cultures and languages expressly due to the high volume of commercial activity and the high density of political networks that characterized 17th, 18th and 19th century Senegambia. Thus versions of Manding and Wolof could be found from Mauritania to Sierra Leone as sub-regional languages of trade, governance, and negotiation. If we accept Barry’s perspective and apply it to the problem of clarifying *which* peoples may have carried what I call “critical cultural influence” in the mid-and lower Atlantic southern states, then the fact that Wolof emerges as a significant element in the English Africans and others of that period used, cannot be surprising. Senegambian culture would have to be seen as an important “foundational influence”³³ to American culture, along with Anglo-Protestant influence and Huguenot influence.

As Ira Berlin has argued “Knowing that a person was a slave does not tell everything about him or her. Put another way, slaveholders severely circumscribed the lives of enslaved people, but they never fully defined them...The slaves’ history – like all human history – was made not only by what was done to them but also by what they did for themselves...slavery, though imposed and maintained by violence, was a negotiated relationship.”³⁴ Here we find ourselves directly confronted with issues of agency. What did Africans say among themselves? What did they sing to each other? What did they think of their situation? And, what can we understand about the modalities of selective memory, specifically, memories of slavery? Problems of lack of written testimony, typical of a majority illiterate population, leave us with scant written material to work with, those few materials emerging usually in the form of autobiography or veiled autobiographies as novels.³⁵ This still leaves huge gaps, many that admittedly we may never fill -- about what, and how, “everyman” and “everywoman” in the slave societies of the United States thought about bondage, and how they lived their lives of captivity. These questions really require us to read and re-read the slave interviews which are available, each time against the background of new ethnographic and historical information which emerge in the academy over time.

Ideally, such questions would also inspire ethnography among the living descendents and attempts at deconstructing and decoding the contemporary expressions of historically enslaved peoples’ views of themselves *and their history*. One would have to assume a sense of historicity in such communities, regardless of their distance from slavery or any other key events on a timeline. Otherwise, we risk following in the footsteps of our fellow sociologists and anthropologists of the nineteen thirties and nineteen forties, who took much of what former slaves said, and their grown children said, at face value.³⁶ When Fannie Berry, the protagonist of our narrative, was interviewed in 1937, it is probable that much of her narrative was taken at face value.

Mrs. Berry attributed the song to a “Mister Herbert,” a nephew of the slave owner who “*use to come down from de city and visit...*”³⁷ She adds, however, that “*de niggers*” sang it also “*partly wid words got out dey own minds.*”³⁸ Although the specific American origin of the song is uncertain, the probability that it is rooted in Wolof oral tradition and style becomes apparent with a “Wolof” reading. Whether it survived in the memory of a young white man who himself heard it when he was a child, or was shared by whites and blacks in a particular community, is not crucial to the act of placing the song’s African cultural inheritance. When Fannie refers to “*words got out dey own minds,*” she may be referring to African inheritance, or, at the least, to a qualified African American intellectual and cultural referent. That Mister Herbert might have sung the song is also not surprising, and does not affect our reading of the song’s origin or style. The frequency and volume of cultural exchange among African captives, African American creoles and Euro-Americans was great. The channel through which some practices may have traveled is interesting and deserves more study; but here we are obliged to limit ourselves to the cultural origins of a particular practice as an example of the persistence of some cultural expressions.

In his article of 1971, Levine points out that “Black songs were rarely completely formalized – handed down from generation to generation with no changes – or wholly spontaneous. Most often they were products of that folk process which has been called “communal re-creation,” through which old songs are constantly re-worked into essentially new entities,” quoting from Bruno Nettl.³⁹

In the case of Fanny’s song, she uses Wolof words and English words, and refers to Wolof terms for permits or papers (*caiti*), in describing desires to escape an American situation of captivity and repression.

Certainly the field of ethnomusicology has chartered some of these diasporic waters and one regrets that there has not been more cross-fertilization between these scholars and other work in today’s research on the North American African diaspora, particularly in occasions of comparison of, say, United States and Caribbean or South American (old) African diaspora communities. Not only has the body of songs which have already been recorded and discussed been generally ignored as a potential source of ethnographic material, but in general, tracking such folk songs to particular African forms (now that there is so much more information available than before) is only beginning. The same is true of studying older forms in relation to new oral expressions, such as hip hop and rap and their relation to Wolof “*talif*” recitations.⁴⁰

There is no doubt, however, that Senegambians were present and accounted for in Virginia. Ironically, the cover illustration for the volume by Levy, *The First Emancipator*, shows a list of Robert Carter’s slaves and at the end of that list, we see the name Sukeye. In fact, the list presents among others “Solomon, son of Sukeye” (no. 53 on the list). Solomon appears in the Senegambia as the name Suleiman, and Sukeye is the short version of the typical Wolof woman’s name, *Sukeyna*.

Humanity and Historicity

As we suggest above, it has been widely believed in the United States among academic and public circles that psychological and physical violence against African-Americans, particularly during slavery, had a transformative effect which erased black people’s memories or cultural background from Africa. Embedded in this view are assumptions about violence, humanity, and race. While it is true that the trauma of repression and racism significantly alter group and individual psychology as Fanon shows, trauma can also be a crucible. Melville J. Herskovits and others have argued that cultural retentions can take a variety of forms and iterations, including but not limited to invented cultural expressions based on synthesis and syncretism of diverse inherited cultural vocabularies.⁴¹ Others have argued that violence can erase a person or a people’s cultural being. Orlando Patterson has gone so far as to speak of a “social death” wherein genealogy, history and sense of self are inherently lost in the slave condition.⁴² Among the various problems which this position presents, there lies the question of how anger is generated, stored, or managed in the absence of an individual or community culture. In this article we assert that something vital remains that is itself primal to the human condition.

While we agree with Patterson that the slave condition is transformative and destructive, we insist that demographic features such as language groups, age and gender, and class need to be applied in any analysis of what the experience of capture, enslavement, and repression may or may not have achieved in deculturation.

The text of the Wolof song carries the refrain “*Can’t you carry me over?*” and “*Can’t you carry me home?*” This poignant call immediately signals to the listener that the author of the song has a sense of “otherness” and wants to leave where he is and go somewhere else. Furthermore, the song suggests strategy and anger. We allude to strategy because the song’s author consistently addresses “kitty kat.” Although Sow does not refer to this particular phrase, which he regards as English that is already somewhat Africanized, Wilson-Fall suggests that this is a version of the Wolof-ized term “*kaiti*” meaning notebook, license or receipt. A “*Kaiti cat*” would be someone responsible for papers, licenses, or receipts. As we do not know the year that this song was composed in America, we cannot rule out that the term *Kaiti* and the song already existed in the slave factories of St. Louis or Goree when the author left the Senegambian coast. In any case, the author is lamenting the absence of a “*kaiti kat*” to help him get away, to “get out of here.” In terms of anger, the narrative states “*you pose a challenge but you’ll win a trap,*” and in fact earlier says, “*you who pass by, don’t try to frighten me!*” These phrases communicate anger but also transmit an almost cold sense of observation, distance, and detachment. Perhaps the author is reassuring himself or herself of their own humanity in contrast to the inhumanity that they observe and experience as perpetrated by others: slave owners, overseers, and even other slaves.

Sow also points out that the very structure of the song recalls a category of Wolof song known as “*bak*” or “*xass*.” In either case, the form is employed in the context of confrontation and contest, which he explains in more detail later in this essay. Here we want to emphasize the coincidence of the *genre* of song with *the words* in the song, and their juxtaposition with the experience of captivity and enslavement. This song provides, we think, a rare look into the reflections of an African captive in America.

In an article written in 1971, Levine presents songs which apparently are of the same genre:

The old bee makes de honey comb,
The young bee makes de honey;
Colored folks plant de cotton and corn,
And de white folks gits de money.” (1919)

.....
I never have, and I never will
Pick no more cotton in Robinsonville,
Tell me how long will I have to wait,
Can I get you now or must I hesitate?⁴³

It is significant that both of these songs have a hostile theme, and both follow the meter of the “*xass*” genre. In reference to the songs above, Levine writes: “The importance of this (communal spontaneity) is evident; the songs sung at work and at play constitute a record of events, impressions, and reactions which is rarely available through other sources....To comprehend the importance of this record does not ensure that it will be read correctly. Despite their precocity in recognizing the centrality of music in black culture and their unremitting zeal in collecting that music, some of the most important students of early twentieth-century Negro folk music proved to be too deeply rooted in their own cultural milieu to comprehend the implications of much of what they had gathered” (1993:80).

Our position derives from a different view of what defines the human experience. Since violence and cruelty have accompanied the slave experience the world over, we find that stating that social death occurs, that a former self is wiped away, is not enough, and too simplistic. In the spirit of further examining the problematic as presented by Patterson, we have provided an example of a particular cultural stream, or complex, that appears to have survived the Atlantic crossing and North American violence. African cultures are not static, and further we would argue that the view of African ethnic (or cultural) “purity” is a project of essentialism.

On the other hand, the fact that the so called “nonsense song ” makes very little sense in English is critical to our argument, which is that assumptions negating African American cultural practice blinded researchers to important aspects of that community’s cultural inheritance. Many opportunities for research in North Atlantic African American communities⁴⁴ have been lost due to local perspectives of African American cultural identity, and more still will be lost if research, particularly historical and ethnographic research, does not pose new and differently framed questions. Our argument, with its literary/empirical example, demonstrates how the increasing concern with historicity and context in social inquiry widens the emic field and permits research to avoid naïve interpretations of supposed “primitive,” “culturally depraved,” and powerless societies.

In this article we thus imagine that some aspects of what Africans lived in Indian Ocean or South American settings might have been lived in a North American setting. We proceed from the understanding that a global and critical view of history is useful and necessary for imagining human commonalities in diverse and particular settings. By situating our argument in a global/local discourse, we respond to Rolph Trouillot’s call for “more responses to major changes in the relations between anthropology and the world”⁴⁵ and for more questions and research that challenge what he calls “Western monumentalism.”⁴⁶ Unlike Patterson’s thesis of “lost memory” and “destroyed identity” we suggest an alternative view which is that human beings re-invent themselves, and that to re-invent oneself is inherently human, and a qualifying characteristic of humanity.⁴⁷ We also argue that as Western understandings of African cultures deepen and become more sophisticated, reflecting comprehensions of dynamic cultural and historical movement in Africa, so these understandings can and should affect ongoing work on African diaspora communities in the Americas and in Asia.

Past knowledge, shadowy memories and current experience constitute a dynamic reservoir from which all people constantly situate their historic and projected identities. Where one social death occurs, another social life is being born.

Fannie Berry: Her Song, Cultural “Ownership” and Origins

Past assumptions that American versions of slavery wiped the African mind and cultural consciousness of any history or cultural legacy are no longer valid. Fannie Berry’s song, transferred over generations, has survived as an example of a captive African’s response to American slavery, probably in Virginia. Whether she heard it from a direct forebear, neighbor, or son of a slave owner, does not infringe on the integrity of the Wolof present in the song or its Wolof structure. The content of the words, as they are read in Wolof, to some extent explain why many, over the years, may have felt it best to leave it as a “nonsense” text. Well before Fannie Berry, such a challenging tone and aggressive text would have been justification for all manner of trouble and punishment in the plantation context. It is likely that over time the original sense of the song was lost, or rather the sense of the song was not lost (it was dangerous and should be read as nonsense) but the exact meaning of the words was forgotten.

We are reminded of the popular wisdom in America which states that "the Africans were all separated by ethnic group, the white people didn't want them to be able to speak to each other, to connive; they were all so separated, that's why everything was lost." One has to wonder whose supposition this originally was. Did slave masters really appreciate that Wolof, Timne, Manding, Fula, and Sousou might, in fact, have things in common?

One might speculate that this "differentness" has been over-sold and over-estimated. Of course, an ideology and popular opinion of irreconcilable difference would do well in assisting the general public to believe that in fact Africans had been irredeemably stripped of anything like culture, if in fact they brought any with them. This was the prevailing mood of the 1930s through to the 1950s.

Our objective is not to take pains to prove that African-Americans are this or that much more or less “African.” Rather, it is to point out that Africans would logically lose, or retain, as much as any other human beings under similar conditions would. It is worthwhile to consider what the reading of Fannie Berry’s song might reveal to us about cultural inheritance, location, and class. We have pointed out what we perceive as some of the salient issues to pursue.

¹ WPA Interviews, 1936.

² C. Perdue et al. *Weevils in the Wheat: Interviews With Virginia Ex-Slaves*. Charlottesville, VA: University Press of Virginia. 1976, xi.

³ *Weevils in the Wheat*. xiii.

⁴ Lawrence W. Levine. "The Concept of the New Negro and the Realities of Black Culture." In *Key Issues in Afro-American Experience*, Vol. II. Kilson, Martin, Nathan Irvin Huggins, and Daniel M. Fox, Huggins, and Fox, eds. Harcourt Brace and Jovanovich, New York. 1971. 78-88.

⁵ Linda Tuhiwai Smith. *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*. New York: Zed Books.. 1999. 69.

⁶ The research which I have been doing in Virginia has focused on slaves and immigrants from Madagascar arriving in the 18th and 19th centuries, and their descendents' memories of them.

⁷ *Weevils in the Wheat*. C. Perdue, T. E. Barden, and R. K. Phillips, eds. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia. 1976.

⁹ I also identify myself as a "native anthropologist" of the African American community and a native of the mid-Atlantic region of the U.S. In African American studies today, much of which has been subsumed under the rubric of African Diaspora studies, Africans and their descendents who arrived from the 15th to the 19th century are typically referred to as the "old diaspora."

¹⁰ from *Weevils in the Wheat*, Charles Perdue, T. Barden, and R.K. Phillips, eds. 1976; 1992, University Press of Virginia. 41-43.

¹¹ While it is true that Herskovitz and Zora Neal Hurston were both interested in cultural origins and cultural practices among African Americans, this interest was not mirrored in general within the American academy, most notably Anthropology, where the leading scholars of the time were carving out an internal "area studies" program on Native American (Indian) cultural anthropology and archeology projects. The exception was of course Franz Boas at Chicago. In the African American community, most scholars were concerned with demonstrating the American-ness of African Americans. The period is in fact characterized by internal debate within the African American community which is often typified as the DuBois-Washington debate. African Americans were not yet considered full citizens in most of the United States; hence emphasis on extra-American cultural traits did not apparently benefit the public debate and discourse on the future of the African American community.

¹² Within this paper, the terms “black,” and “African American” will be used interchangeably. However, the term “Negro” is used as it appears in pre-1970 texts and only in historical context, reflecting its use at the time.

¹³ Leroi Jones. *Blues People*. New York: William Morrow Company. 1963.

¹⁴ George O. Carney. “Music Geography.” *Journal of Cultural Geography*. Vol. 18, 1998.

¹⁵ Most research falls into ten general taxonomies: 1). The delimitation of music regions and interpretation of regional music (e.g., the substyle variations of country music in the American South, reggae music in Jamaica, Cajun music in southern Louisiana, and polka music in the American Upper Midwest). 2). The evolution of a music style with place, or place-specific music, ie... Detroit and Motown, bebop jazz and 52nd Street in New York City...” 3). The origin (culture hearth) and diffusion of music phenomena (e.g., the country blues hearth in the Mississippi Delta with blues musicians serving as diffusion agents in the spread of the music along its diffusion path to Chicago), 4). The spatial dimensions of music dealing with human migration, transportation routes, and communication networks (e.g., transnationalization of music with the exchange of artists between countries...”, and 5.) The effect of music on the cultural landscape (e.g., concert halls, polka ballrooms, and rock festival, among other topics.”(Carney, 1998:1)

¹⁶ John A. Lomax, “Self-Pity in Negro Folk Songs.” *Nation* 105 (9 August 1917): 141-145.

¹⁷ *Weevils in the Wheat*. C. Perdue, T. E. Barden, and R. K. Phillips, eds. University Press of Virginia, 1976. 31.

¹⁸ *Ibid.* 30.

¹⁹ *Ibid.* xi.

²⁰ John B. Cade, head of Extension at Southern University, organized these interviews for a class in United States history. See Perdue, et al., 1976. xii.

²¹ For a more complete and precise description of the creation and implementation of the interview project in question, see Perdue et al, 1976. xxvii – xx.

²² See Appendix 8.

²³ *Remembering Slavery: African Americans Talk About Their Personal Experiences of Slavery and Emancipation*, eds. Ira Berlin, Marc Favreau, and Steven F. Miller, The New Press, New York, in association with The Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. and as a companion to the radio documentary produced by Smithsonian Productions and the Institute of Language and Culture.

²⁴ Harkin, Michael E. "Feeling and Thinking in Memory and Forgetting: Toward an Ethnohistory of Emotions," *Ethnohistory* 50: 2 (Spring 2003).

²⁵ *Remembering Slavery*. Berlin, Favreau, and Miller, eds. New York: The New Press. 1998. xiii.

²⁶ W.E.B. Dubois. *The Souls of Black Folk*. Millwood, N.Y.: Kraus-Thomson 1973. 38-39.

²⁷ See, for example, Andrew Levy's *The First Emancipator: The Forgotten Story of Robert Carter*. New York: Random House. 2005, and Lorena Walsh's benchmark work, *From Calabar to Carter's Grove: The History of a Virginia Slave Community*. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia. 1997.

²⁸ Andrew Levy. *The First Emancipator: The Forgotten Story of Robert Carter, the Founding Father Who Freed His Slaves*. New York: Random House. 2005.

²⁹ There are references to slaves from "Bonny," and Calabar, throughout Carter's correspondence of the early and mid-eighteenth century. See, Wright, Louis B. *Letters of Robert Carter, 1720- 1727*. Marino, CA: Huntington Library. 1940.

³⁰ Michael A. Gomez. *Exchanging Our Country Marks: The Transformation of African Identities in the Colonial and Antebellum South*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press. 1998.

³¹ Boubacar Barry. *Senegambia and the Atlantic Slave Trade*. New York: Cambridge University Press. 1998.

³² Boubacar Barry. *Ibid.*

³³ Also a term favored by Wilson Fall, who approaches this issue with the works of Samuel Huntington in mind. Huntington, at Harvard, has written much about the foundations of American culture, such as his recent volume *Who Are We?*

³⁴ Ira Berlin. *Many Thousands Gone: The First Two Centuries of Slavery in North America*. Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press. 1998. 2.

³⁵ Scholarly studies that immediately come to mind are the recent works on Equiano, such as *The Interesting Narrative and Other Writings*. New York: Penguin Books, Vincent Caretta, ed. 2003; Paul Lovejoy's forthcoming article on that subject, based on a paper presented at the International Conference on slavery and the African diaspora; *Crossing Memories: Slavery and the African Diaspora*, Laval University, May 2-3 2005; "Autobiography and Memory: Gustavus Vassa and the Abolition of the Slave Trade;" and Henry Louis Gates's *The Bondswoman's Narrative* (2002).

³⁶ Our failure to do such ethnographies may be a measure of the degree to which this remains a painful subject in the larger society.

³⁷ *Weevils in the Wheat*. 40.

³⁸ *Weevils in the Wheat*. 40.

³⁹ Bruno Nettl. *Folk and Traditional Music of the Western Continents*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J. Prentice-Hall Publishers. 1965. 6-5.

⁴⁰ This is my own observation from the field, following discussion with many different Wolof writers, scholars, and poets in the years 1993- 2003.

⁴¹ Sheila Walker, 2001; Michael Gomez, 1998; Michael Lambek, 1994; and Rosalind Shaw, 2001 are some of my favorites.

⁴² Orlando Patterson. *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press. 1982. 2; 7-10.

⁴³ Levine. *The African Experience in Community Development*. Edward W. Crosby, Leroy Davis and Anne Adams Graves, eds. Needham Heights, MA.: Simon and Schuster. 1971. 80-82.

⁴⁴ I use this phrase, “North Atlantic” deliberately, choosing to use Trouillot’s term which he argues is more accurate than the “West.” Trouillot argues that “the West” is politically charged and “is a fiction...” and “an exercise in global legitimation.” Michel-Rolph Trouillot. *Global Transformations: Anthropology and the Modern World*. Palgrave-MacMillan. 2003. 1.

⁴⁵ Trouillot. 2003. 9. See also page 11, on “American essentialism.”

⁴⁶ Trouillot. 2003. 9.

⁴⁷ Patterson. 1982