Rhythms of the Afro-Atlantic World

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Rhythms of the Afro-Atlantic World emerges out of a conference, “Rhythms of the Atlantic World: Rituals and Remembrances,” held at the University of Michigan in the spring of 2005. Conference participants explored the ways the peoples of the Atlantic turned to music, dance, and religious rituals to express their experiences of crossing and recrossing that ocean of tears and misremem-bering: not only their sorrows and fears, but also their resilience and resistance to oppression, the joys they took from life and love, the desires that drove them. Scholars from Brazil, West Africa, Europe, the Caribbean, and the United States reported on the gestures, rhythms, bodily movements, and song patterns that followed often reluctant travelers from Iberia to the Cape Verde Islands, from Senegal and the Bight of Biafra to Bahia and Surinam, and thence across the Caribbean to New Orleans, Charleston, and New York—and, at times, back again. Sessions described how, through song and dance, Atlantic peoples performed barely remembered traditions, stories of worlds they had never known and their hopes for unseen futures. Papers reported on conflicting elements in Trinidadian and Brazilian carnivals; the movement of Jews displaced from Spain and Portugal to Senegal and the transformation of their musical traditions within the Afro-Jewish communities they formed there; the flow of architectural forms from Senegal to Portugal to Brazil, of ritual dances from West Africa to Guiana to syncratic fusion churches in the Bronx—or, counterclock-wise, from Africa to Cuba and Brazil and down to Argentina, where they assumed the tango’s many-layered forms. At all times, conference participants asked about memories and transfigurations, how distant origins surfaced as
suppressed pentimentos, unconscious vestiges embodied in muscle memories, speech patterns, and rhythmic gestures. The conference was interdisciplinary, transregional, and transnational. *Rhythms of the Afro-Atlantic World* has selected presentations that focus on contemporary music, dance, and religious rituals, especially as they figure Afro-Atlantic interconnections and the complex ways cultural performances connect the local to the global. The volume’s underlying concern is with the ways cultural performances create sites of Afro-Atlantic political agency and empowerment. In all these ways, the conference represented the particular vision of the University of Michigan Atlanticists.

Who were the scholars who made up Michigan’s Atlantic community, the individuals who imagined “Rhythms of the Atlantic” and brought it into existence? Some of us had long-standing connections with the University’s Latin American and Caribbean Studies Program, others with the Center for African and African American Studies, still others with the American Culture Program, which included in its commodious folds Native American, Latino, and Arab American studies, or with the History and English Departments, with their strong foci on African, U.S., Caribbean, and European history and literature. We reached out, as well, to the Law School, to draw in colleagues connected with an international research and teaching project, “The Law in Slavery and Freedom,” as well as to fellow researchers at Michigan State University. Many of us drew our inspiration from diasporic and race studies, from examining the impact that the Middle Passage, chattel slavery, peonage, and racial discrimination had on the formation of contemporary Atlantic cultures and politics. Others focused on the impact of colonialism on indigenous and exploited peoples around the Atlantic and on their patterns of political and cultural resistance, still others on comparative emancipation studies. Some of us were drawn by literary historian Joseph Roach’s vision of a circum-Atlantic world formed and transformed through cultural performances as varied as jazz funerals, Mardi Gras, and theatrical performances. “The circum-Atlantic world,” as Roach imagined it, “insists on the centrality of the diasporic and genocidal histories of Africa and the Americas, North and South, in the creation of the culture of modernity.” “While a great deal of the unspeakable violence instrumental to this creation may have been officially forgotten,” he explained, “circum-Atlantic memory retains its consequences, one of which is that the unspeakable cannot be rendered forever inexpressible.”  

Only partially-forgotten memories repeatedly resurface in circum-Atlantic music, dance, theater, and religious rituals. Reembodiments of the past, reinventions of the unsuccessfully repressed, they substitute present creativity for past traumas. Crossing national and ethnic di-
visions, densely layering inherited forms with current experiences, they come together to create an “oceanic interculture.”

The object of Michigan’s Atlantic Studies Initiative was to interweave our disparate perspectives; to encourage discussions and team teaching among Latin American, Caribbean, British, and African historians, anthropologists, and literary critics; to open the borders constraining U.S. history within land-locked confines. We offered courses on comparative indigeneities, comparative slaveries, revolutions, and empires; the material Atlantic; and sexualities and the discourses of modernity. Out of our discussions and interdisciplinary courses, a multilayered vision of a circum-Atlantic world emerged, a vision that was, at times, conflicted and contradictory, but always open-ended and interdisciplinary. We insisted on positioning the South (Africa and South America) and the twin archipelagos of the Cape Verde Islands and the Caribbean at the center of our vision of Atlantic studies. We repeatedly explored the Atlantic’s relation to modernity, to modernity’s origins in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries as well as to the postmodern world of global capitalism. Europe’s exploitation of the natural resources and rich lands of the South, we argued, its penetration of the sub-Saharan gold trade, its seizure of gold and silver from Mexico and Peru, its trade in the addictive crops of Brazil and the Caribbean (sugar, coffee, chocolate, and spices) and in the most revolutionary commodity of all, human bodies from the Americas and Africa, greatly enriched European economies, stimulating the commercial and industrial revolutions. Long before textile factories fouled the air of Lancaster and Manchester, modern industrial systems developed on and across the Atlantic: on British and Dutch trading vessels, where, as Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker argue, large numbers of men, subject to harsh, industrial discipline, “cooperated on complex and synchronized tasks . . . subordinated to mechanical equipment”; on the large-scale plantations of Brazil, Surinam, and the Caribbean, where sugar was not only grown but refined and where the bodies of field hands constituted the systems’ movable parts. The Atlantic’s economic revolutions, partnered with its political revolutions, produced the first modern republics (the United States and France) and the first postcolonial independent nations (the United States and Haiti)—along with that ultimate expression of political modernity, the affirmation of man’s inalienable right to life, liberty, and happiness. This last point should not surprise us. Liberty and slavery wound around one another in the circum-Atlantic world, for, as Toni Morrison argues, liberty cannot be imagined except in opposition to chattel slavery. Inspired by eighteenth-century declarations of the rights and equality of man, new indepen-
dent republics took form across Latin America in the early nineteenth century. Political modernity stepped forth upon the world stage.

To these economic and political themes, others of us brought a cultural studies concern with performance—not only literal performances, as in music or dance, but also performances of the most inner sense of self. Turning to the proliferating literatures of the early modern and modern eras, we sought evidence of the emergence of modern subjectivities, the decentered subject dependent on others for her/his sense of self. While Hegel did not formulate his master/slave conundrum until the late eighteenth century, we found examples far earlier, in Prospero’s dependence on Calliban and Crusoe’s on Friday. Others of us looked at the fragmented Caribbean subject as she emerged in Jean Rhys’s novels and the rootless, centerless subject depicted so differently by Claude McKay and Nella Larsen. At the same time, we invited Brazilian artists to display their work, listened to Caribbean poets, watched the films of Isaac Julian and Sembene Ousmane. In short, we sought the origins of the modern cosmopolitan subject in the flow of circum-Atlantic literature and performance.

Always, we insisted on seeing the circum-Atlantic as a whole, never ignoring the centrality of Africa to the Atlantic experience, at the same time as we refused to divide the Atlantic into a Black Atlantic and a Western Atlantic centered on struggles between indigenous Americans and European imperialists. Such a division would inevitably marginalize African diasporic peoples and cultures in Latin America and indigenous Americans in the Caribbean. Most seriously, it would ignore the ways their systemic exploitation by Europeans were interrelated—as were the oppressed’s efforts at resistance. Indeed, precisely what intrigued us was the interaction of peoples and cultures—and modes of oppression—around and across an Atlantic that was at all times black, red, and white. Organizing conferences and exchanging and commenting on one another’s papers, we worked to refine a University of Michigan vision of the Atlantic world and Atlantic culture. *Rhythms of the Afro-Atlantic World* exemplifies this vision—at the same time as it expands and enriches it.

Insisting on the dynamic flow of cultural forms and traditions from West Africa to Brazil, Haiti, Cuba, New York, Paris, and back again, *Rhythms of the Afro-Atlantic World* inscribes the circum-Atlantic as a theater of cultural exchange and production. In tracing these movements and transformations, it insists on the critical importance of the body’s sensuality in linking past memories to present creativity, building on a long-standing tradition in black Atlantic studies that stretches from W. E. B. Du Bois, through Alain Locke, Langston Hughes, Claude McKay, Aimé Césaire, and Leopold Sédar Senghor, to Paul
Gilroy and current musicologists. Not only does *Rhythms* insist on the vital interconnectedness of cultural performance and political enactments; in doing so, it problematizes the traditional division of global and local.

Pointing to Afro-Atlantic communities’ active participation in the transformation of African cultural traditions into new cultural forms through the appropriation of modern technologies, *Rhythms of the Afro-Atlantic World* problematizes not only the local/global binary but our understandings of tradition and hence of modernity itself. As explained by Senegalese dancer/choreographer Germaine Acogny (the subject of one of the essays in *Rhythms*), “tradition is not . . . a sleeping lake but a sea with waves coming and bringing new things.” For half a millennium, African cultural forms have been dispersed and reformed across the diaspora—disrupted, disempowered, and reassembled during colonization. Commodified, born aloft on radio signals and Internet connections, they have returned to Africa, where, yet again, they are being reappropriated, transformed, and politicized. Swirling around the circum-Atlantic, Afro-Atlantic cultural forms refuse the dichotomies of local/global and traditional/modern—just as *Rhythms of the Afro-Atlantic World* refuses the dichotomy of cultural/political. This is the complex, multilayered and interactive vision *Rhythms* holds up to its readers. Like Afro-Atlantic cultural performances, *Rhythms* links traumatic and resistant memories to current creativity and political agency. Refusing to forget, it forges new directions.

**Notes**

2. Ibid., 2.
3. Ibid., 4.