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**Book Discussion:** Richard Price, *Travels with Tooy: History, Memory, and the African American Imagination*; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008; 452 pages; ISBN 978-0-2266-8058-3 (paper).

# African American Memory at the Crossroads: Grounding the Miraculous with Tooy

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*Travels with Tooy* may be both the most readable and the most complex and demanding of Richard Price's works on the Saramaka people of Suriname.<sup>1</sup> Gone are the relatively transparent and somewhat mechanical textual devices—the dialogical juxtapositions of clearly demarcated alternating passages in differing fonts—that presented readers with a certain narrative consistency and progression (even while carrying challenges of their own) in *First-Time* and *Alabi's World*.<sup>2</sup> In their place is a kind of multitextured narrative patchwork, a loosely stitched crazy quilt of time-coded stories and “teachings” that jump across eras and locations, both imagined and literal. The stories and lessons, presented less as chapters than as excursions within and across interlinked timescapes, lead through an ever-thickening evocation of the African American temporal-spiritual worlds inhabited by Price's partner in this enterprise, a very knowledgeable Saramaka Maroon *óbiaman* (healer and spiritual practitioner) known as Tooy. Only toward the very end of the book does Price attend to the matter of what his and Tooy's extended dialogue might tell us about some of the much-debated larger questions that continue to preoccupy students of African American societies and cultures. It is on these

1 Richard Price, *Travels with Tooy: History, Memory, and the African American Imagination* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007); hereafter cited in text.

2 See Richard Price, *First-Time: The Historical Vision of an Afro-American People* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983); and Richard Price, *Alabi's World* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990).

broader reflections that I would like to dwell here, giving no more than a nod to the remarkable ethnographic feast served up in *Travels*. (Nor am I able to devote any space to the themes of clashing cultural worlds, differential power, or intercultural negotiation that form important subtexts in certain parts of the book.)

I ought to point out at the start that the terrain explored in this book, both ethnographic and theoretical, is well within my own personal and professional “comfort zone.” During the 1980s, while the innovative Program in Atlantic History and Culture at Johns Hopkins University was still robust, I had the good fortune, as a doctoral student in anthropology, of studying with both Richard Price and Sidney Mintz. In 1983, having already carried out long-term fieldwork with Maroons in Jamaica, I embarked on nearly three years of field research with Aluku (Boni) and other Guianese Maroons in both the interior and coastal regions of French Guiana—peoples closely related to the Saramaka.<sup>3</sup> Price, my initial advisor and teacher, helped to orient me in innumerable ways for this work, continuing to offer guidance as I wrote up my research, while Mintz, in the later stages, served as a thoughtful and exacting dissertation advisor. Over the years I have returned from time to time to both French Guiana and Suriname—on one occasion, as a fellow traveler with Richard and Sally Price—to reconnect with people and places and reopen dialogues begun earlier.<sup>4</sup>

So it is perhaps easier for me than most readers to attune my own imagination to the adventurous yet convoluted and culturally dense *mélange* of “history,” “memory,” and “African American imagination” packed into these pages; it is easy to marvel, with a special sense of intimacy, at the ethnographically mediated cultural wonders of a world that feels at once familiar and strange. (As any Aluku will tell you, each Guianese Maroon people has its own understandings of the cosmos and its own ways of doing things, and Saramaka culture is both very similar in some ways and strikingly different in others from those of the other Maroon peoples of Suriname and French Guiana.) The “meat” of this book—its first 286 pages, supplemented by extensive notes, as well as an 80-page coda holding the largest corpus of Guianese Maroon esoteric language yet published—stands on its own as a uniquely grounded source on the complex cosmology of an African American people who have come to occupy a place of special importance in imaginings of the Afro-Atlantic world. Some of its secrets have no doubt eluded even its author, and remain to be decoded by differently positioned readers and writers yet to come. But many readers will likely locate its primary significance in the twenty-two pages of the interpretive chapter “Reflections from the Verandah” placed near the end.

As David Scott has argued, the Saramaka have been transformed, largely through the writings of Melville Herskovits and Richard Price (and, we should add, Sally Price), into something much larger than a particular people with a specific history. In Scott’s view, they have

3 See Kenneth Bilby, “The Remaking of the Aluku: Culture, Politics, and Maroon Ethnicity in French South America” (PhD diss., Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, 1990); and Kenneth Bilby, *True-Born Maroons* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2005).

4 See Richard Price and Sally Price, *Equatoria* (New York: Routledge, 1992).

come to serve as a kind of trope of the “ex-African/ex-slave” that forms part of a “metonymic narrative” reflecting certain ideological preoccupations peculiar to (US) American intellectual life.<sup>5</sup> In my view, Scott’s recontextualized reading of the authoritative texts of Saramaka ethnography, while offering valid insights on the intellectual milieu from which the Herskovits project issued, does not do proper justice to either the highly nuanced vision or the actual practice of Richard Price, who in works such as *First-Time* and *Alabi’s World* has always scrupulously and meticulously contextualized Saramaka historical discourse, situating it within both the local and broader politics of knowledge of which it is a part. Yet there is no doubt that the Prices, like Melville and Frances Herskovits before them (though in very different ways), have at times elevated their ethnographically grounded analyses of Saramaka life to a higher discursive plane, treating these Maroons as representative—or at least illustrative—of something larger (as an “example to the world,” in Richard Price’s own opening words in *Travels* [viii]).

In the final pages of the book, Price returns to this larger framing of Saramaka ethnography, but from a new perspective, this time relying primarily on a single individual’s lifetime of knowledge—though never in isolation from broader contexts or Price’s own knowledgeable insights and exercises of imagination—to reassert the same larger narrative that weaves through much of his previous writing. It is, after all is said and done, a narrative of unfettered human agency and imagination in the making of African American culture—but one deeply respectful of the sometimes ineffable force of both individual and social memory throughout African American history.

Some readers will recognize this as basically the same narrative embedded in the influential variant of “creolization theory” advanced in the much-cited collaboration between Sidney Mintz and Richard Price, which has since led to a good deal of debate about the relative importance of *continuity* versus *creativity* in the emergence of African American culture(s).<sup>6</sup> At the very outset, Price prepares readers of his new book for the eventual reappearance of this larger narrative, stating explicitly that one of the goals of the book is to demonstrate “the remarkable processes of creolization that occurred in the formative years of Saramaka society and the stunning continuation of similar processes into the present” (viii). Returning to this fundamental concern in his final reflections, he reveals a certain frustration with the fact that his and Mintz’s early theoretical exploration of such processes seems to have been used to fan certain unnecessary and distracting fires in subsequent writings on African American history and culture. Among the lessons to be learned from Tooy’s teachings, he suggests, is that “it

5 David Scott, “That Event, This Memory: Notes on the Anthropology of African Diasporas in the New World,” *Diaspora* 1, no. 3 (1991): 266–67.

6 See Sidney W. Mintz and Richard Price, *The Birth of African-American Culture: An Anthropological Perspective* (Boston: Beacon, 1992); originally published as *An Anthropological Approach to the Afro-American Past* (Philadelphia: Institute for the Study of Human Issues, 1976). As Stephan Palmié has suggested, it may not be entirely appropriate to refer to the set of ideas advanced by Mintz and Price as a variant of creolization theory, given that the term *creolization* does not appear in their original text; nonetheless, their text is now widely thought of as a foundational work in the (re)theorization of creolization, whether or not the authors approve of the uses to which their (sometimes bowdlerized) ideas have been put in subsequent writings on creolization. See Stephan Palmié, “Creolization and Its Discontents,” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 35 (October 2006): 446–47.

may be time to lay to rest the hoary academic debate between those who stress African continuities in the Americas (including the ongoing importance of African ‘ethnicities’) and those who stress the Africans’ creation of institutions in the New World” (287). Tooy’s “wisdom,” he hopes, may be able to provide a way out of the “ideological logjam” that seems increasingly to impede our attempts to talk and write productively about how enslaved Africans and their descendants, against tremendous odds, remade themselves in the Americas (288).

One can well understand Price’s impatience with the persistent dichotomization of African American cultural studies into opposing camps touting incompatible ideological positions. Inseparable as it is from competing narratives that are tenacious indeed—one a tragic narrative of loss and erasure, the other a triumphant counternarrative of self-(re)possession—the ongoing debate opposing claims of African cultural continuity to understandings that focus on institution building and cultural creativity in the Americas has too often misrepresented the crucial contribution made by Mintz and Price to the rethinking of this problem. Partly because both authors have steadfastly rejected that portion of Melville Herskovits’s project that can lead (through its emphasis on dehistoricized and decontextualized retentions and traits) to a kind of fetishized reification of surviving culture, Mintz and Price have been placed by some on the “side” of an ideological divide that is said to favor a theory of “cultural nakedness.” This side, some seem to believe, denies out of hand the possibility of continuity with an African past. One suspects that this misreading may have been influenced in recent years by a growing sense that at least some of those identified as being on the same side (the one favoring creativity) seem ready to use Mintz’s and Price’s critical insights to license the relegation of all scholarly investigations stressing African cultural continuities in the Americas to the dustbin—or at least to the unenviable realm of the “theoretically superseded.” Ideological polarization over such questions has no doubt been exacerbated by the fact that, as Price acknowledges, “social theory has recently been giving the study of ‘memory’ and ‘continuities’ something of a bad name” (303).<sup>7</sup>

This is not the place to enumerate the many ways in which works such as *First-Time* and *Alabi’s World* confirm the importance of memory in Saramaka thought. Nor is it necessary, for those who have read any of Richard and Sally Price’s writings on the Saramaka carefully, to point out that both authors have long argued for the continuing operation of certain general, underlying “African” cultural principles and ideas in various areas of Saramaka life (though always stressing the creative dynamism that characterizes their adaptation to changing circumstances over time). What needs to be pointed out is that, despite the clarity and subtlety

7 As David Scott indicates, recent critical interrogation of the concept of *memory* is motivated in part by a desire to “more adequately engage and unpack the reproduction of fossilized or repressive or vindictive remembering” (“Introduction: On the Archaeologies of Black Memory,” *Small Axe*, no. 26 [2008]: xiii). While this negative potential of remembering is clearly cause for concern (for instance, forms of memory may be harnessed and used by modern states in obfuscating or otherwise harmful ways), it may be worth pointing out the obvious here—that not all practices of memory involve such negative uses or consequences.

with which the Prices have made their arguments, their work on the Saramaka evidently remains open to contradictory readings, making it possible, depending on one's position, to criticize it for either making too little or too much of *continuity* and *memory*.

*Travels* would seem to represent, among other things, an attempt to expose the spurious oppositions upon which such reductive readings depend. The book seems designed in part to disabuse readers once and for all of any notion that Price's view of Saramaka culture discounts African continuities. Using rhetorical language that might be seen as catering to the hoary debate he wishes to transcend, he points to the "immense riches" of the Saramakas' "African pasts" (294). Imagining the new creole cultural synthesis that the Saramaka ancestors must have already fashioned by the mid-eighteenth century, he concludes that it would have displayed "striking African continuities"—just as it would have evidenced "immense New World creativity" (298). At the same time, he is sensitive to the tendency in some of the more recent theorizing of African diasporic culture(s) to equate *memory* and *continuity* with *passivity*. And so it is necessary to remind readers that in his own work on Saramaka, memory—whether reaching all the way back to Africa, or only to more recent times—is hardly something that is "passively" preserved; rather, it is "socially contingent" and very much "subject to human agency" (304). In the end, whether one chooses to emphasize (and make something of) the continuities or the creative innovations that are both characteristic of Saramaka culture is largely a matter of perspective and "taste." Price could not be clearer in acknowledging that both perspectives have some validity:

For readers who would like to celebrate or marvel at some of the strongest African continuities in the Americas (and this in a society that—unlike, say, urban Brazil or Cuba—has been largely cut off from its African roots for three centuries), this book should provide a feast. For those readers who are looking for evidence of creolization and creativity, there should be plenty to savor as well. (307)

The feast is indeed a sumptuous one. And despite Price's caveat that "even in this 'most African' of African American societies, direct formal continuities from Africa are more the exception than the rule" (308), readers so inclined will certainly be impressed by the degree to which Tooy's knowledge and imagination contain evidence of a complex African cultural background, certain components of which Price connects to fairly specific, or at least delimited, points of origin. (The coda is particularly rich in African-related linguistic material begging for further study and analysis.) Indeed, of all Price's works on the Saramaka, *Travels* is the one most revealing of specifiable African-derived building blocks (from both West and Central African sources) that centuries ago went into the construction of a new African American cultural synthesis on Guianese soil. Central to this process, as he envisions it, was the "motor" of "inter-African syncretism" (298). Because of the relatively insignificant role played by European-derived cultural materials and concepts in this process, Saramaka culture may well be in this sense the "most African" in the Americas, while also being highly creolized

(or synthetic); as “African” as it is, it is neither reducible to, nor directly continuous with, any ancestral African cultural area or linguistic zone.

While the African past is given its due in these final reflections—and in such a way as to make it very difficult to argue that Price might have any aversion, ideological or other, to the idea of African cultural continuity—the overall thrust remains what it has been in his (and Mintz’s) previous theorizing on African American culture. Cultural dynamism, rather than stasis, is what defines Saramaka social life. And if, in the Prices’ oeuvre, the Saramaka serve as a kind of trope signifying larger African American cultural realities, then what they signify, as much as anything, is the dynamic potential for innovation and change that human agency imparts to culture. This same processual thrust is evident in the larger lessons that Price derives from Tooy’s teachings, which he spells out for us in the final pages of the book—for instance, the suggestion that, as scholars of the diaspora, we should “move beyond debates about ‘memory’ and ‘forgetting’ in order to explore the complex politics of self-representation and identity through time”; that “we must remain focused on the historical conditions of cultural production,” and “must take account of conflict as well as consensus in representing culture and demonstrate its role in shaping and reshaping institutions”; that “we must grant full agency to African Americans, recognizing them as the central actors in the construction of their cultures”; and that “we must remain focused on process and change.” Methodologically speaking, “historicization and contextualization remain a primary responsibility,” along with “careful ethnography” (304). There is no room in this enterprise for approaches that treat the abstraction we know as *culture* as some stable essence that stands outside time or human agency.

These concluding reflections effectively dispose of the “hoary academic debate” that seems to fit so poorly the facts of Saramaka life both as observed by Price and as represented in the dialogue between him and Tooy. Or do they? Turning our attention to certain trends in disciplines other than anthropology—for example, in musicology and music criticism—we could easily get the impression that this debate has recently gotten a second wind, and for reasons that are not always without merit.<sup>8</sup> This can be clearly seen in Ronald Radano’s important book *Lying Up a Nation: Race and Black Music*, and some of the responses to it. Radano’s project is a laudable, indeed necessary, one: he wishes to foreground the complex, interracial foundations of a racialized body of music (“black music”) that has often been represented in essentialist and exclusivist terms, sometimes through invocations of an African past; exposing the socially and racially fluid history of black music in the United States more

8 History is another discipline that has seen the recent reemergence of this debate, particularly among historians of slavery. Limitations of space prevent a discussion of this literature here. For a good summary, see Richard Price, “On the Miracle of Creolization,” in Kevin A. Yelvington, ed., *Afro-Atlantic Dialogues: Anthropology in the Diaspora* (Santa Fe, NM: School of American Research Press, 2006), 115–47. For a strongly worded critique of some of the recent work by historians arguing in favor of African “retentions” and against “creolization theory,” see Stephan Palmié, “Is There a Model in the Muddle? ‘Creolization’ in African Americanist History and Anthropology,” in Charles Stewart, ed., *Creolization: History, Ethnography, Theory* (Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast, 2007), 191–92.

clearly might help to demolish the fiction of essential or natural racial difference (and the “color line” supported by this fiction) that has been encoded in black sound. His position, which at first appears to be relatively nuanced, is nicely illustrated in the following passage discussing a particular recorded performance by Louis Armstrong:

While African “retentions” most certainly inform this if not all of American music, to focus on these alone falsifies the depth, power, and experience of the new jazz expression. What is most obvious here is a remarkable creative invention that speaks to the impossibly complicated racial intersections at this particular moment.<sup>9</sup>

Few would object to this statement by itself, which deals in specifics and seems fairly balanced. What leads to contention is the implication running through much of the book that any exposition of, or theoretical engagement with, African continuities (whether “focusing on these alone” or in conjunction with other considerations) must necessarily be motivated by or tainted with outdated assumptions of “an immutable black musical essence that survives apart from the contingencies of social and cultural change”; “cultural stasis”; “an unyielding black essence”; “transhistorical endurance”; “essential claims of black identity”; “racial absolutism”; “some absolute, racially based quality”; “black music’s a priori essence”; and the like.<sup>10</sup> So frequently and loudly are these alarms against static and absolutist representations of black music raised in Radano’s (hyper)corrective text that one might be led to wonder whether, in his mind, there is any possibility of a theoretical middle ground—one in which serious explorations of memory and continuity might also play a productive and nonessentializing role.

Little wonder, then, if another eminent scholar of North American music, Samuel Floyd, sees in Radano’s position an indefensible assertion that “black music has no continuity with African music.” Indeed, according to Floyd, Radano projects his biased stance back in time, leading to the premature and unwarranted conclusion that because clear documentation is lacking, African music was never performed on the North American mainland during the slavery era.<sup>11</sup> Floyd argues that such omissions in Radano’s work suggest “a *completely* agent-less African slave culture, *completely* agent-less free African Americans, and *completely* silent drums on the American mainland in the eighteenth century.”<sup>12</sup> While acknowledging the need to take account of the interracial dynamic in studies of African American music, Floyd reminds us that there is also a need for balance. It is one thing to claim, as Radano does, “that black-white interaction in the United States is the source of black music.” But Radano’s notion of “interaction,” Floyd argues, “is a radicalized scheme in which the original source of the ‘white’ side of the equation is clearly Europe, and the African-American side, due to his claim

9 Ronald Radano, *Lying Up a Nation: Race and Black Music* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 26.

10 *Ibid.*, 3, 5, 7, 9, 26.

11 Samuel A. Floyd Jr., “Black Music and Writing Black Music History: American Music and Narrative Strategies,” *Black Music Research Journal* 28, no. 1 (2008): 113.

12 *Ibid.*, 114 (italics in original).

of African non-continuity, is left without a heritage.” This leads Floyd to pose the question: “From what source did the original ‘black’ side of black music come?”<sup>13</sup>

In some ways, this resurrected debate reflects the parochial peculiarities, and the perverse tenacity, of (US) American racial classifications and preoccupations; but there is more to it than that.<sup>14</sup> The question of what makes various kinds of music around the world identified as *black* distinctive—and often distinctive in overlapping ways—is not about to go away. And while answers to this question are obviously not reducible to simple, unmediated equations between *here* and *there*, *then* and *now*, there is a serious need for more and better musicological research on the important structural and aesthetic dimensions of diasporic musical interconnection, and the various possible historical bases of the real sonic commonalities that exist. In some cases, in fact, the evidence of “formal [musical] continuities” is so overwhelming as to render any questioning of African cultural continuity patently absurd. Take, for example, the close resemblance between the interlocking rhythmic patterns played by drummers in Aluku Maroon Kumanti (Kromanti) ceremonies in French Guiana and Suriname and those characteristic of certain drum ensemble genres still played in Akan-speaking (and neighboring) areas of West Africa.<sup>15</sup> The structural parallels between these are so specific and striking that one would be very hard put to try to explain them other than in terms of cultural continuity (whether specifically with Akan peoples or some broader portion of West Africa)—even though we lack historical documentation that might allow us to prove, through musicological analysis based on written notation, that such musical forms existed in the Guianas in the seventeenth, eighteenth, or nineteenth centuries. Granted, such cases, as Price suggests, are clearly more the exception than the rule.

Perhaps even more interesting, for present purposes, is the drum-based genre known as *aleke*, favored by young Ndyuka, Aluku, and Paramaka Maroons in Suriname and French Guiana. Based on a three-drum ensemble augmented with other percussion, *aleke* drumming, though it signifies *modernity* and *youth culture* to the current generation (as it did to the previous generation), sounds to all but the most finely attuned (which is to say, culturally trained) ear not only thoroughly *African*, but also *old*, possibly even *originary*—as if it might have once been played by eighteenth-century Maroons or enslaved Africans on coastal plantations. (A number of ethnomusicologists who have studied both West African drum ensemble music and “neo-African” drum-based traditions in places such as Haiti have told me that, to them, *aleke* drumming sounds as purely African as any of the traditions on which their work has concentrated.) Yet, *aleke* as such did not exist before the 1950s, when it was

13 Ibid., 118.

14 For some indication of how current controversies such as this represent resurrections of an academic debate that is “hoary” in (ethno)musicology as well as anthropology, see Richard A. Waterman, “On Flogging a Dead Horse: Lessons Learned from the Africanisms Controversy,” *Ethnomusicology* 7, no. 2 (1963): 83–87. Presenting his arguments at a conference in 1960, Waterman considered the controversy a “dead horse” because of his conviction that his mentor, Melville Herskovits, had been proven right.

15 See Kenneth Bilby, “Commentary,” in Douglass Sullivan-González and Charles Reagan Wilson, eds., *The South and the Caribbean: Essays and Commentary* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2001), 117, 191–92.

created by young Ndyuka Maroons experimenting with novel sounds. Even the name of the genre betrays its recent origins; it was named after a particular individual known as Alexander (Aleke, in the Ndyuka language)—a visiting coastal creole whose flare for performance inspired young Ndyuka musicians and dancers to introduce the stylistic innovations that led to the development of this new music.

This new musical genre, however, did not appear out of thin air. It grew partly out of older drum-based Maroon genres such as *loonsei*, features of which were blended with elements from coastal creole and other traditions; at the same time, over the years, aleke has continued to be open to a very wide range of cosmopolitan influences, including mass-mediated popular musics. But a good portion of aleke music has also been reindigenized, as players draw on older aesthetic principles and musical materials while continuing to modify the genre. As a result, despite the genre's "syncretic" origins and continuing dynamism (not to mention its symbolic associations with modernity and youth), most contemporary variants of aleke retain a thoroughly—and undeniably—African sound.<sup>16</sup>

Now, one could easily cite this story as an example of how surface resemblances can mask complex, convoluted processes of change over time (as when foreign journalists or other visitors oblivious to the actual history of aleke represent it as an "ancient" musical style brought directly from Africa); but one could also, just as sensibly, view it as an illustration of how such resemblances may bespeak very real cultural continuity at a deeper structural and cognitive level—continuity contingent on, but not irreconcilable with, the ever-changing concrete realities of the dynamic social world of which aleke is a part. Which of these sides of the story one chooses to stress is—as Price suggests in *Travels*—a matter of perspective.<sup>17</sup> Is it not reasonable to suggest that both perspectives might lead to valid insights?

Certain parts of the debate about continuity versus change, then, contentiously reemerge in the present climate for good reasons—because some observers have noticed that current academic trends, sometimes married with rigidly dichotomous thinking, privilege disjuncture and discontinuity (as aspects of *[post]modernity*, *postcoloniality*, *postnationalism*, *hybridity*, or what have you) in such a way as to suggest prematurely that continuity is a dead issue (or at least one that is uninteresting and necessarily theoretically unproductive). In the area of music, this bias could lead one to ignore or lose sight of some of the most interesting cultural

16 For more on aleke, see Kenneth Bilby, "Introducing the Popular Music of Suriname," in Peter Manuel, Kenneth Bilby, and Michael Largey, eds., *Caribbean Currents: Caribbean Music from Rumba to Reggae* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995), 221–31; Kenneth Bilby, "'Roots Explosion': Indigenization and Cosmopolitanism in Contemporary Surinamese Popular Music," *Ethnomusicology* 43, no. 2 (1999): 256–96; Andre R. M. Pakosie, "Ontstaan en ontwikkeling van de aleke: De popmuziek van de Marronstam der Ndyuka," *Siboga* 9, no. 1 (1999): 2–24; and Kenneth Bilby, "Aleke: New Music and New Identities in the Guianas," *Latin American Music Review* 22, no. 1 (2001): 31–47.

17 In a particularly interesting passage, Price points out that "in Saramaka the ideological emphasis on local discovery can mask African continuities" (for example, the Saramaka "consider Púmbu, Apúku, Vodú, or Papá [in contrast to Komantí, Luángu, or Tonê] to be New World discoveries") (302). One wonders: as Saramakas increasingly participate in the growing dialogue between peoples in Africa and the diaspora, might some of these real but locally unrecognized African cultural continuities eventually be noticed (by both Saramakas and others) and "unmasked," leading to their resignification among the Saramaka (in line with ideologies stressing transatlantic connections) as, say, *African*, *Kongo*, *Fon*, *Ewe*, or something else?

questions about the experience of Africans and their descendants in the Americas—including the fundamentally important questions about the deeper cognitive underpinnings of culture given a prominent, if not central, place by Mintz and Price (and, of course, given some consideration by Herskovits as well). (The latter questions are of particular interest in the North American case, where more obvious [or “purely African”] direct, formal continuities seem to be largely absent from most African American music, at least in the present day.)

Far from having outlived its usefulness, the serious study of the relationship between African and African American musics—despite decades of writing about the question—has barely begun.<sup>18</sup> The first truly in-depth musicological study of possible African sources of the blues—by Gerhard Kubik, an ethnomusicologist with probably more field experience researching music in Africa than any other living individual—appeared just a decade ago; it argues convincingly that a “west central Sudanic style cluster” prevailed in the development of this archetypally “American” cultural marvel. Samuel Floyd has used literary theory and extrapolation from vernacular musical practices to explore various kinds of African-related cultural memory in a wide range of black music. Composer and scholar Olly Wilson has continued to develop and refine his investigations of what he calls “underlying conceptual approaches” shared by much of African and African American music.<sup>19</sup> In one of his more recent contributions, Wilson productively draws on Mintz and Price’s essay to add force to his arguments.<sup>20</sup> Another study deserving of mention, by musicologist Thomas Brothers, focuses on musical structure in jazz performance, carefully analyzing parallels in “musical syntax” in such a way as to throw new light on the “profound ties between West African and African-American musical cultures.”<sup>21</sup>

Studies such as these begin to fill in the many blanks that remain in our understanding of the broadly shared cultural foundation that (conditioned locally by highly subjective perceptions and ideologies) would seem to lie behind what ethnomusicologist Ernest Brown has styled “musical pan-Africanism,” which he describes as “a recognition of the resonance in

18 This is not to detract from the achievements of the pioneers who laid the foundations for this area of study (there are far too many significant early works and authors to name here). My point is that there is a need for a great deal more, and more careful, research on this question—especially studies based on detailed musicological analysis of particular cases.

19 See Gerhard Kubik, *Africa and the Blues* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1999), 99; Samuel A. Floyd Jr., *The Power of Black Music* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995); and Olly Wilson, “The Significance of the Relationship between Afro-American Music and West African Music,” *Black Perspective in Music* 2, no. 1 (1974): 3–22.

20 See Olly Wilson, “‘It Don’t Mean a Thing If It Ain’t Got That Swing’: The Relationship between African and African American Music,” in Sheila S. Walker, ed., *African Roots/American Cultures* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2001), 153–68. Interestingly, Radano, in contrast to Wilson, quotes Mintz and Price (very selectively) in support of his rather rigid “anti-continuity” position (Radano, *Lying Up a Nation*, 57). Equally interesting is the appreciative nod to Mintz and Price’s essay in George Lewis’s recent history of the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (AACM)—the famous Chicago collective that has occasionally been accused of essentialism (or even racism) because of its engagement during certain periods with black cultural nationalist ideas and its adoption of the slogan “Great Black Music.” Finding in the Mintz and Price essay certain historical parallels with the contemporary methods and strategies of the AACM, Lewis credits these authors for “probing the ways in which slave communities promulgated ‘certain simple but significant cooperative efforts,’ that is, communitarian institution-building that was undertaken in order ‘to inform their condition with coherence, meaning, and some measure of autonomy.’” George E. Lewis, *A Power Stronger than Itself: The AACM and American Experimental Music* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), xi (italics in original).

21 Thomas Brothers, “Solo and Cycle in African-American Jazz,” *Musical Quarterly* 78, no. 3 (1994): 501.

musical style and/or content among the peoples of Africa and the African diaspora.”<sup>22</sup> There are no grounds for assuming that such recognition of resonance across wide spans of time and space necessarily or always depends on preexisting essentialist or other ideologies relying on absolutist or otherwise simplistic notions of cultural uniformity. Even as vociferous a critic of essentializing ideologies of *blackness* as Paul Gilroy is forced to recognize the real existence of “common sensibilities [among people in the African diaspora] residually inherited from Africa” — musical sensibilities being particularly conspicuous among these.<sup>23</sup> The studies mentioned above, and others, point to the promise of further, carefully contextualized research on the possible historically derived cultural bases of such shared sensibilities. While there clearly is a need to guard against the dangers of essentialist thinking and to resist reductive and totalizing representations of culture, blanket dismissals of musicological (or other) research on the question of cultural continuity in the name of anti-essentialism are, in my view, misguided and short-sighted.

I belabor these points not because they reveal any shortcomings in *Travels*, which seems to me unusually balanced in its treatment of the larger debate to which such controversies over music belong, but because the vexed question of musical continuities in particular brings to the fore an experiential, existential dimension that deserves some consideration here as well.<sup>24</sup> Music (defined in the broadest terms) belongs to that portion of human experience particularly rich in the ineffable. Although musical perception, like all else in human experience, is mediated and partly constituted through social relations and cultural systems, it cannot be reduced to social, material, or other “exogenous” factors. We still have a poor grasp of what it actually is that makes music, at a fundamental level, “work” — why certain sonic phenomena have the almost magical (because it is invisible yet very real) potential to move human psyches in special yet varying and sometimes unpredictable ways, at times even across vast geographic and cultural gulfs. Much of *Travels* wanders within or at the borders of comparable experiential domains (comparable in that they are similarly suffused with seemingly ineffable qualities). This is a book, after all, largely about the invisible but very real spiritual worlds to which Tooy

22 Ernest D. Brown, “The Guitar and the *Mbira*: Resilience, Assimilation, and Pan-Africanism in Zimbabwean Music,” *World of Music* 36, no. 2 (1994): 93.

23 Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 81. Because of Gilroy’s admission of such historically based musical resonance, Radano finds that he falls short of his critical aims; to Radano, this admission suggests that Gilroy is unable to rid himself completely of “absolutist notions.” Curiously overstating the case and forcing Gilroy’s quite subtle arguments into a polarizing scheme that allows only for extreme positions, Radano claims that “in an attempt to counter the foggy mystifications of black music, [Gilroy] succumbs to another trap: he assumes that music, despite its informing social contexts, maintains a purely sonic essence, and this, he contends, is what informs and binds a black diasporic experience” (Radano, *Lying Up a Nation*, 41).

24 It should be noted that the factuality of African musical continuities remains a “vexed” question only in a few parts of the Americas, such as the United States, and perhaps a handful of Latin American and Caribbean locations, such as Argentina and Barbados. In these places, for a variety of reasons, indigenous neo-African musical expressions (produced through inter-African syncretism) are at present absent (or unrecognized), and the persistence of African-derived musical features in local syncretic genres based partly on European or other traditions is less obvious (or more easily ignored). In contrast, in places such as Cuba or Brazil, the reality of African musical continuities is taken for granted, and scholarship on such continuities is aimed not at proving they exist (or once existed), but rather at tying them to particular parts of the African continent (when possible), interpreting their significance both past and present (for instance, the ways song lyrics sometimes use African-derived language or cultural idioms to embody local memory), and so forth. For a recent example from Brazil, see Silvia Hunold Lara and Gustavo Pacheco, *Memória do jongo* (Rio de Janeiro: Folha Seca, 2007).

serves as a privileged conduit. And while we may be, as Price suggests in another context, “in the realm of the politics of memory” (305) here, we seem to be somewhere else as well.

Music is, in fact, a large part of this “somewhere else”—this place where normal human language does not do the trick. As Price points out in the coda, “esoteric language is usually associated with music, drumming, and dance” (309). Indeed, it is clear that the marvelous worlds through which Tooy and Price guide us are full of spiritually potent sounds of one kind or another. This is nowhere clearer than in the “knocking the stone” ceremony that caps off this magical voyage, revolving around an entire night’s worth of sacred songs (278–86).

What originally reminded me of the fundamental importance of this experiential somewhere else in considerations of cultural continuity was Price’s passing comment that “the importance of spirit possession as a means for the transmission of historical as well as spiritual knowledge was something I only dimly understood before I met Tooy” (290). Not only does this observation offer powerful testimony to the inevitability of blind spots in even the most grounded ethnography, and the great difference that long-term—truly long-term—engagement with ethnographic contexts can make in uncovering such gaps; it also raises questions about the ontological, as opposed to epistemological, implications of debates about cultural transmission (and thus, continuity). Like Price, I have been impressed by the complex mnemonic “functions” of spirit possession, both in the Guianas and Jamaica, and have tried to understand the social and political ramifications of such phenomena; yet, I have often felt—particularly in the context of debates about identity and ancestry—that the significance of such spiritual practices and experiences cannot be contained within the understandings produced by the academic epistemologies and modes of analysis we have inherited.

Price also emphasizes the important role that “communal divination” must have played among the early Saramaka, as a means of negotiating shared understandings, as well as its continuing importance in present-day Saramaka life (295)—something he has highlighted in previous discussions. I witnessed much the same thing among the Aluku. Many times, during funeral ceremonies, I watched closely as appointed individuals carried out complex divination with the corpse of the recently deceased person, whose spirit had to be consulted before it could be ushered into the world of the ancestors; two bearers, one under the head, the other under the feet, would walk about the village, moving in fits and starts or in smooth beelines, at times responding to an interrogator, at others acting without any apparent prompting from living persons. Sometimes this process extended for days, and the communications of the spirit were submitted to multiple reinterpretations and adjustments before consensus was reached. Through subsequent conversations, as well as some prior knowledge of the “scripts” involved in each case, I was often able to piece together a fairly good understanding of the complicated social and political dramas that were played out through this cultural idiom—the conflicting claims negotiated and resolved (though sometimes only temporarily) through this complex ritual practice. This particular type of divination clearly has multiple West African origins, and would seem to represent a fairly unambiguous case of continuity with an ancestral past.

I will not deny that I felt, and still feel, a sense of amazement at the complex workings of this cultural institution. The Aluku themselves are quite aware that the agency of living individuals and their material concerns can impinge on the sacred mechanics of rituals and institutions inherited from the ancestors, including this particular tradition of communal divination. Indeed, to guard against abuses of this divinatory system by “liars” — interested individual bearers who might intentionally guide the corpse oracle so as to produce an outcome in their (or their particular group’s) favor — they purposefully select several bearers representing different villages, clans, and opposing kin and interest groups, regularly switching between these, sometimes on the spur of the moment. Nevertheless, despite the general acknowledgment that this system of divination is not above self-interested manipulation by the living, I have never heard an Aluku question its capacity to be used for genuine communications with the spirits of the dead.

Time and again, I have marveled at the intricacies of this practice. How exactly the various individuals and parties involved manage to bring these extraordinarily complex negotiations between themselves and a deceased member (or members) of the community under full control, finally achieving consensus, I do not know. What I do know is that this elaborate cultural institution, which has probably existed in some form among the Aluku since their inception as a people more than two centuries ago, amounts to something much more than its political and economic functions, or the varying social contingencies that inform it at any one point in time. Not only does it have a history, but it is a history that speaks in particular ways of human ingenuity and generations of cultural accretion (both in the Guianese forest and in West Africa). As a cultural institution it may perhaps even have some value, or be appreciated for qualities of its own. Among these qualities are those difficult-to-define ones that might fall under the heading of the *experiential* or *existential*.

The problem I am pointing to becomes that much more complex when we consider its implications for the understanding of cultural continuity in the African diaspora writ large. Nonetheless, the same kinds of questions can be raised in this larger arena as well. In a broad discussion of what he calls “the live dialogue between African and African American cultures,” for example, J. Lorand Matory singles out dance and music as “the paradigmatic aesthetic forms of the Afro-Atlantic world.”<sup>25</sup> Elsewhere, he notes in passing that everywhere that “Caribbean Latino music” has traveled, there are “religions of spirit possession, divination, and healing.”<sup>26</sup> How are we to account for these striking cultural “facts”? It seems perfectly reasonable to ask whether and how the aesthetic and spiritual “paradigms” suggested by Matory might be cognate not only with one another, but with Tooy’s musically permeated modes of negotiating and feeling his way through invisible (and visible) worlds, or with the

25 J. Lorand Matory, “The ‘New World’ Surrounds an Ocean: Theorizing the Live Dialogue between African and African American Cultures,” in Yelvington, *Afro-Atlantic Dialogues*, 284.

26 J. Lorand Matory, *Black Atlantic Religion: Tradition, Transnationalism and Matriarchy in the Afro-Brazilian Candomblé* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 5.

examples I have mentioned from Aluku—even if this question is beyond our capacity to answer satisfactorily at the moment. And what does it mean if we succeed in uncovering genuine connections of this kind? Alternately, what does it mean to refuse to attempt to do so on theoretical grounds (or methodological ones)? (Incidentally, like most music making, divination of the kind referenced above is more than just a cultural technique or idiom through which socially functional, goal-oriented activities are performed; readers might like to consider the implications of the fact that, in the Guianese Maroon languages, the word *fii*—derived from the English *feel*—is used to mean both “to feel, feeling,” and “to divine, divination.”) Are modes of feeling of this kind (not to be confused with “structures of feeling,” as elaborated by Raymond Williams) not transmissible to some extent across generations, given the proper conditions? Can such modes of feeling (or of perceiving) be explained (or more important, properly understood) merely as the momentary result of the presence or absence of social and economic contingencies favoring or militating against cultural change over time?

Speaking of his own particular interest in Afro-Brazilian Candomblé, Matory makes a comment that reminds us, once again, of the importance of perspective: “Although I am interested in the *fact* of Candomblé’s impressive continuities with African linguistic and ritual forms, I am more interested here in the *historical processes and activities* that have created such continuities, privileged some continuities over others, and officially masked numerous discontinuities.”<sup>27</sup> As an anthropologist, I certainly share Matory’s interest in questions of process and agency. But, as Matory suggests, that is not all there is to it. The *fact* of such continuities (or discontinuities) may also be of interest, and at times of central interest. Indeed, just as important as the fact of continuities is the question of *what* it is that is continuous, and the interpretation of the *significance* of particular continuities (whether or not this tells us something about agency), both within particular historical contexts and as viewed through larger theoretical frames. This question of significance may have an important existential dimension.

Despite the current skittishness in high academic theory about the elusive (and sometimes illusory) qualities of memory and continuity (not to mention culture itself), Price seems prepared to grant not only that Saramaka culture is as real as the human beings in whose heads it exists, but that it is comprised of distinctive contents, some of which have persisted (while incorporating innovative changes) across generations. Not only this, but he suggests that these have a certain intrinsic (or at least not entirely culture-specific) continuing value—a value that, at least in some cases, might be appreciated by non-Saramakas without a tremendous amount of cultural mediation. What else could he be alluding to when he writes of the “lives of rare grace, beauty, and wisdom” (308) that successive generations of Saramaka managed to build against all odds? He even goes so far as to represent Saramaka “religion”—after numerous qualifying caveats (including the need to recognize that *religion* does not exist as a separate,

27 Ibid., 7–8 (italics in original).

named category in Saramaka thinking)—as “a bounded, internally integrated, and enduring ‘system’ highly resistant to exogenous change” (307).<sup>28</sup>

Before closing his final reflections, Price makes the important point that Guianese Maroon religious systems differ from other African American religions in the degree to which they have been subject to colonial power or shaped through a larger Afro-Atlantic dialogue. Nonetheless, the story of how they came into being raises questions that apply to African American cultures across the hemisphere. One of the most important of these may be paraphrased as follows: how did Africans in the Americas manage to create meaningful social and cultural order (not to mention beauty) out of a shattering experience of unprecedented social and cultural uprooting and dislocation, and what were they able to bring from their homelands in doing so? In his final reflections on this fundamental question, Price privileges two voices—one the Saramaka *óbi*aman we have already come to know, Tooy; the other a poet, Derek Walcott. Both speak to the ineffable existential dimensions of this historical experience. But, to my mind, it is Tooy who speaks most revealingly, telling us that “when the Old Ones came out from Africa, they couldn’t bring their *óbia* pots and stools—but they knew how to summon their gods and have them make new ones on this side. They no longer had the original pots or stools, but they carried the knowledge in their hearts” (287). The “knowledge” brought by his ancestors, Tooy reminds us, was held not just in their minds, but in their “hearts”—as some of it still is in Tooy’s heart today.

This, too, is a part of the “miracle of creolization.”<sup>29</sup> In fact, it may be the most miraculous part of all—if only because it is the most difficult to access with the limited language we have at our disposal. We cannot fault Price, therefore, for deferring, in his closing thoughts on this question, to the lyrical prose of a master poet, whose Nobel lecture, quoted verbatim, provides a stirring finale, a meditation on the “frightening duty” owed by those who would try to capture something of this historical experience in writing.<sup>30</sup> With this closing rhetorical flourish, Price confirms the larger message that he would have us take away from his and Tooy’s fruitful collaboration—the lesson that, rather than surrendering to the reductive (and seductive) oppositions of a hoary debate that refuses to die a proper death, we as scholars of the diaspora must strive to find new and more nuanced ways of doing justice to a miraculous history. Those who made this history deserve nothing less.

28 I should add that, just as with *religion*, Guianese Maroons do not have a word in their own languages for *music* (or rather, a word that corresponds exactly in meaning with English *music*). Of course, this does not mean that what musicologists understand as *Saramaka music* or *Aluku music* does not really exist (or persist, as well as incorporate modifications, over time); it means, rather, that these Maroons fit these sonic and behavioral phenomena into conceptual categories somewhat different from those of native English speakers.

29 I must tip my hat here to both Price and Trouillot, from both of whom this nicely evocative phrase is borrowed. See Michel-Rolph Trouillot, “Creolization on the Edges: Caribbean Creolization in Historical Context,” in Brian Keith Axel, ed., *From the Margins: Historical Anthropology and Its Futures* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), which opens with the observation that “creolization is a miracle begging for analysis” (189), and more specifically, an “African American miracle”—one that was “repeated” across the hemisphere (191). Trouillot’s book chapter is a revision of an earlier article: Michel-Rolph Trouillot, “Culture on the Edges: Creolization in the Plantation Context,” *Plantation Society in the Americas* 5, no. 1 (1998): 8–28

30 Derek Walcott, “The Antilles: Fragments of Epic Memory” (Nobel lecture, 7 December 1992); passage reprinted in Price, *Travels with Tooy*, 308.