

# African american art

[History](#), [African American](#)



NNamdi Collection of African- American Art is composed of musical art, literary works and other artistic works that expressed African American ideas for freedom. To speak of African American evoked many negative ideas during the human rights activism against slavery. Such ideas as post colonialism, transnational, ethnicity, race and racism, Black Nationalism and many other terms emerged during this period. According to Tololyan, 1996, the African Diaspora, as African Americans were referred to, became the paradigmatic case towards the end of the 20th century.

The continued experience of the racial experience became crucial in the emergence of transnational identities of the African Americans due to their background as sons and daughters of slaves. The emergence of music as an art of expressing grievances by the African Americans in the 20th century has a relationship with the emergence of African American sensibilities. An essay, Travelling Music and musicians, the author explores the globalization of African Americans plights using music with special; focus on the exchange between African America, Europe, and the Black combined in the opposition to racial subjugation.

The racial tribulations faced by the blacks brought the idea of unified black musical ethos. This consequently brought the forging of collective identity through opposition to common enemy. This brought out the ease with which the complexities of the African Americans dissolved into a binary opposition between Blacks and whites. According to Faye Harrison (1998: 617), the construct has become nearly impossible to uproot, even though currently there is an increasing multicolored and multicultural society where racial

barriers are continuously sealed with interracial marriage. The contest is still on the whiteness or blackness of an individual.

Faye continue to state that the unending structural quality of racism with its set of economic political, ideological as well as color hierarchies continuously places blacks at the bottom of the ladder and this consequently is the cause of ultimate contest that reinforces the tendency of binarism. Claims of 'Africanness' as idealized and articulated through music is more or less similar to the nationalists' assertions of an opposite political valence in the 20th century (Potter 1998). According to Pamela Potter, German sense of superiority in music was principally used to uphold the racial superiority ideologies.

According to her study, she revealed that claims of music's attachments to the collective attachments to people's characters ca never be separated from the political and historical use to which such claims are upheld. African America's literature is celebrated musically, spiritually, and emotionally as a sign of remembrance to the past role of art in the common struggle against social in justice. It is also important to remember that German National Socialists in the early 20th century too claimed to be musical people, considering their passionate depth and spiritual transcendence through the work of art (Potter 1998: 200-234).

Potter clarifies that this should not be used to suggest that African Americans assertions of the centrality of the music can be equated to those of National Socialists, but should be used to underscore the importance of placing the spiritual and emotional dimensions in the context of solid historical as well as social practice. This article therefore links music, cultural

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identities, historical and political forces, and globalized economies in the 20th century with crucial and larger projects of analyzing the African American musical sensibilities.

This rejects the idea of static African American essence of favoring more continuous redefined and negotiated sense of culture that springs up from generation to generation in response larger majority white race. Black Atlantic- Paul Gilroy (1993) In his book, *Critical Atlantic*, Paul Gilroy is critical of the debate on the African American cultural studies and arguing for the centrality of the music for the construction and maintenance of the interethnic identities.

Gilroy's arguments centers on the multiplicity of the cultural flow between the African Americans, Caribbean, Britons, and North Americans. In his work, ships were chosen because of their symbolic middle age passage to invoke and provide his visual image for the transatlantic interaction. However, his continued work dwells in music is significant in making his point. He identifies three principles that regard relationship between race and culture. These three principle positions are: ethnic absolutism, anti-essentialism, and anti-antiessentialism.

In his description of positions of black music, he believes that the music is divided between those who see the music as a source of political charge towards enhancing the blackness identity and those who would dispute the existence of such a unifying factor in any political environment. According to his views, anti-essentialism is a social constructionist and ideological view of race that is often 'insufficiently alive to the lingering power of specifically racialised forms of power and subordination' (Gilroy 1998: 32).

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Gilroy expresses his displeasure by describing it as tantamount to forsaking the mass of black people in the societal system of governance. He elaborates his ideology by stating that he takes an exception to the idea that racial identity is simply an ideological effect. For Gilroy, even though he is against the idea of essentialism, race is not an imagined community, something that can be deconstructed so as to neutralize the importance of black homology.

The ability of music to link several expressive styles like language, dance and clothing as well as presenting idealized ethical and social sensibilities is central in the symbolic presentation of African American settings. In understanding the spiritual and ethical aspect of the Jazz performance, the combination requires several combination of voice, the ability to play with multiple musical parameters during performance and well as understanding the cultural foundation of the music. This gives the ethical goal of the music that it eventually makes sense such that a particular group of people can identify with.

Gilroy argues that this deep sense of belonging is not an escape but deep involvement of the art of music for the African Americans. This provides means of cultural integration with coping strategies for racism. In his book, "Communities Style", Veit Erlmann analyses the song 'The Lion Sleep Tonight'. This song was done by South African Zulu migrant workers lead by Solomon Linda and was recorded at various diasporic locations. Here Erlmann is specifically interested in the way this music was altered as it was revived and re interpreted by a succession of groups like the Weavers in 1952 and the Tokens in 1961.

These two groups were all American groups. Other versions came from the collaborations between Ladysmith Black Mambazo and the Mint Juleps in 1990. On all these versions of the song, at stake here was the construction of the African American identity through music. Erlmann described this as 'Endotropic performance' to emphasize the interracial construction of identity through similar styles. These forms of identities have emerged under this increasingly globalized social life. He describes this scenario as strange because a persons understanding of him or herself in the social world is no longer coinciding with the widely dispersed locations.

Jerome Harris in his essay, 'Jazz on the Global Stage', Jerome Harris provides an insiders analysis of the globalization of Jazz, based on his professional involvement for more than twenty years as a guitarist and bassist on a research he together with promoters, editors, journalists, other musicians and managers. He calls his work 'Ecology of jazz'. This is a web of interrelations between art makers, art users and mediators. Harris provides a very rich portrait of jazz in terms of performance and reception, especially in Europe (Bob Thompson, 1962: 221). More importantly is his approach to jazz music as a tool of identity and aesthetic.

He asks two main questions, who owns jazz? And what is the appropriate aesthetic for the jazz music. He tries to delineate the tension between African Americans sense of ownership of the music and the increasing participation of the non African Americans both as musicians and consumers. According to his views, he suggests that the reason why many African Americans have believed that they own the origin and aesthetic value of jazz

is because of the collective loss of identity that was threatening to dismantle the cohesive black communities in the post-civil rights era.

This belief was also held by many non-African Americans. In his views, Harris identifies two basic principles of coping with the dilemmas of who owns jazz. He chooses the classic dichotomies of tradition/innovation and mainstream/avant-garde. Both sides of his debate respect tradition and put emphasis on innovation. While other artists work to ward off the outside influence on jazz music, some emphasize the importance of accepting the necessary changes that may come with globalization of jazz music as a sign of identity by a particular group of people in their own way (Charles W, 1945: 33).

At the end, Harris concludes that the globalization and the hybridization of jazz music pose a painful experience of identity as well as cultural ownership for African Americans. At the same time, he sees it as offering new interesting possibilities when players interact with the rest of the world's music. Conclusion From the three works of art discussed above on the music as a sign of identity, it is clear that both artists agree that music has been the defining link for cultural identities.

In some of the African Americans' views on the ownership and identity of the music, it has been grossly affected by the modernization and the globalization of the world where the different aspects of arts have been diluted. This is the conflict between tradition and modernity which has been said to be dominating the debates. In Europe, the visual art seems to dominate the tribal art category where the sculpture was used to express the

feelings of particular social response in the art scene (Alma Thomas et al 1973: 123)

These arts explore the popular feelings of the people and to some extent the other group of people does not understand the context of the grievances when responding to such complaints. This was the dilemma of the music as an art in the early years of social uprising in the American society. Here western critics mostly devoted most of their attention to their culture and ways of thinking giving little attention to the expressions of these arts. The American cultural studies has shown emergence of arguments about the centrality of the music for the construction and maintenance of the interethnic identities.

Such arguments centers on the multiplicity of the cultural flow between the African Americans, Caribbean, Britons, and North Americans. In most of this art work, ships were chosen due to their symbolic middle age passage to invoke and provide the visual image for the transatlantic interaction. However, most of the works of different artists continued to dwell in passing the message of discomfort. This identifies different principles that regard and guide relationship between different races and culture. Bibliography

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