

## Article

# From the Sacred Sound of the Conch Shell to the Cemetery Dance: Reimagining an Africana Festival Created in a Southern Appalachian City

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**Abstract:** To contemplate African American experience and its many racialized contours is to invoke a tensive quandary concerning the reconstruction of African American cultural identity in a dynamic network of historically assailed African diasporas. Utilizing a transdisciplinary approach that deploys historical analysis as well as cross-cultural and epistemological reflection, this article gestures in such a reconstructive direction from the local vantage point of Asheville, North Carolina's "African and Caribbean" Goombay Festival. One detects in the festival an exotifying, ambiguously celebratory quality that deprioritizes Affrilachian cultural memory in southern Appalachia in favor of consumable public entertainment. The ensuing argument culminates in a preliminary epistemological reimagining of the Asheville Goombay Festival by way of constructive intercourse with the ancestral spirit-based African Jamaican ritual institution of Gumbay Play, an institution that facilitates processes of identity formation through mnemonically engaged ritual performance. Further, it is argued that this reimagining can amplify the ancestral mnemonic potential of Goombay in Asheville to incorporate more fully the varied Affrilachian lifeworlds of western North Carolina, thereby making possible a reexamination of African American cultural identity in Asheville capable of producing substantive responses to the epistemological challenge of Affrilachian cultural identity formation within western North Carolina's greater social landscape.

**Keywords:** African diaspora; African-Jamaican religions; Goombay; Affrilachia; memory; black cultural identity; epistemology

## 1. Introduction

I first experienced the Asheville Goombay Festival in September of 2014. Having arrived downtown at Pack Square's Roger McGuire Green on the opening day of the festival, I immediately found myself awash in a multitude of bustling people, sights, smells, and sounds: flanking my left was a smiling white mother whose toddler daughter was dressed in costume as the famous ruler of Ptolemaic Egypt Cleopatra VII; arrayed before me were approximately twenty-five to thirty or so covered booths tended mostly by vendors and community members of color who, in addition to African-American art, offered clothing, statuary, wooden jewelry, and other goods with unclear origins in parts of West and Central Africa and the Caribbean, foods with Jamaican jerk aromas that whetted the growing crowd's appetite, a range of other consumable attractions, and information about local organizations and community programs; gaily weaving in and out of the spaces between booths was a college-age white woman with blonde dreadlocks and a brightly colored hula-hoop making her way to the area's central amphitheater, where people were dancing to R & B music performed on stage.

Asheville native Gloria Howard Free (Lady Gloria Free), the woman who led community efforts resulting in the establishment of Goombay in the early 1980s, stated in an interview that "I feel the

spirit of Goombay has impacted where I live. The nature of people free to dance, free to move, free to drum, free to sit and watch, free to play as children, if that's the case . . . Goombay has been an integrated affair in terms of the attendance. People have come" (Worthen 2015). Looming ironically over Goombay's space of "integrated freedom" is the controversial 1896 monument to Zebulon Vance, a popular North Carolina statesman who during an 1868 political speech in Rutherfordton lasting more than three hours equated social equality with black supremacy (Nash 2016, p. 112). Vance, a slave owner, was also a Confederate colonel who served as governor of North Carolina during the Civil War and for a half-term near the end of Reconstruction before being elected to the United States Senate in 1878. The sixty-five-foot-tall Vance Monument—a granite obelisk built in an area where slave auctions were once held—invokes the brutal memory of chattel slavery in western North Carolina, as do two other smaller neighboring Confederate monuments, one of which commemorates the Old Dixie Highway, General Robert E. Lee, and Colonel John Connally, while the other honors local Confederate soldiers (Frankel 2013; Slave Deeds 2016).

If, as Free's remarks suggest, Goombay conjures meanings that for African American Ashevilleans and others signal a shared experience of integrated freedom, then the nearby Confederate monuments point to meanings that enter into historical tension with Goombay. Likewise, African American experience more broadly conceived evokes regional, national, and transnational meanings embedded with historical tensions that connect with yet reach beyond Asheville and western North Carolina. The immediate origins of these tensions are locatable within the quest for African American self-determination in a North American society fraught with imperial master narratives and institutions inimical to this quest. The origins of these tensions are also found in the Greco-Roman imagination's malformed conceptions of Africa and its people and in Western Europe's later march toward political expansion, Enlightenment modernity, and the erection of an international economic order predicated on the subjugation of exploitable African bodies. To contemplate African American experience *today* in a manner substantially informed by the past, then, is to invoke a burdensome, tensive quandary concerning the reconstruction of African American cultural identity in a dynamic network of historically assailed African diasporas.<sup>1</sup>

Proceeding from a transdisciplinary methodological frame that privileges historical analysis along with cross-cultural and epistemological reflection instead of, for example, ethnographic anthropology, this article gestures in a transregional reconstructive direction, beginning from the local vantage point of the Africana-oriented Asheville Goombay Festival, which I have carefully observed for several years.<sup>2</sup> Asheville's "African and Caribbean" Goombay Festival bears an Africana orientation in that it seeks to promote exploration of the "richness and diversity of the African Diaspora and Asheville's African American community" (Our History 2014). Yet one detects in the festival's promotion and content an "exotifying," ambiguously celebratory quality that deprioritizes *Affrilachian* (non-white ethnic Appalachian, especially African American Appalachian) cultural memory. The ensuing argument culminates in a preliminary epistemological reimagining of the festival by way of historically grounded cross-cultural intercourse with the ancestral spirit-based African Jamaican ritual institution of Gumbay Play, an institution that facilitates processes of identity formation through mnemonically engaged ritual performance. Further, it is argued that this reimagining can amplify the ancestral mnemonic potential of Goombay in Asheville to incorporate more fully the varied *Affrilachian* "lifeworlds" (experiences

<sup>1</sup> I find more useful the pluralistic, processual conception of dynamically constructed "African diasporas," which stresses—among other things—nuances ensuing from regionally shaped experiences. For more on the historical and theoretical basis of this preference, see Colin A. Palmer. "Defining and Studying the Modern African Diaspora" (Palmer 2000, pp. 27–32); Tiffany R. Patterson and Robin D. G. Kelley. "Unfinished Migrations: Reflections on the African Diaspora and the Making of the Modern World" (Patterson and Kelley 2000, pp. 11–45).

<sup>2</sup> Initial research for this article was first presented in 2015 at UNC Asheville's African Americans in Western North Carolina Conference under the title "Ears to the Conch Shell, Feet to the Ancestors: Reimagining Asheville's Goombay Festival."

in combination with the environs that shape them) of western North Carolina.<sup>3</sup> Such reimagining in turn makes possible a reexamination of African American cultural identity in Asheville capable of producing substantive responses to the epistemological challenge of Appalachian cultural identity formation within western North Carolina's greater social landscape.

## 2. On Method and Terminology

I pause for a moment to provide additional clarity regarding the methodology herein employed as well as key terms. Reflecting on the past as “raw material” compelling her to “think critically” about her “native place,” Kentuckian and black feminist cultural critic bell hooks writes in her book *Belonging: A Culture of Place* that

We are born and have our being in a place of memory. We chart our lives by everything we remember from the mundane moment to the majestic. We know ourselves through the art and act of remembering. Memories offer us a world where . . . we are sustained by rituals of regard and recollection . . . I pay tribute to the past as a resource that can serve as a foundation for us to revision and renew our commitment to the present . . . (Hooks 2009, p. 5).

Hooks' comments give eloquent expression to a paramount issue in this article: the indivisible relationship between memory and cultural identity. This takes on singular urgency within the context of African American experience, especially upon considering the centuries-long genocidal assault waged by the institution of North American slavery and its Christian missionary foot soldiers on the cultural memory of enslaved African and African American laborers. Moreover, while not ignoring hooks' question of place (or emplacement) and belonging, the failure—until the mid-1980s—of southern Appalachian historiography to address the long-standing presence of African Americans compels an approach that, at least for the purposes of this study, affords priority to historical, mnemonic, cross-cultural, and epistemological considerations as they relate to the problem of cultural identity formation. Although important, in-depth analysis of southern Appalachia as politicized cultural construction and place will therefore not be central.<sup>4</sup>

Following a proposal made in 2013 by Dianne Stewart (then Stewart Diakit ) and Tracey Hucks, I suggest that the myriad and uniquely complex challenges facing African diasporans' attempts to re-theorize their cultural self-understanding necessitate an alternative transdisciplinary methodology unwedded to any single discipline. According to Stewart and Hucks,

We distinguish transdisciplinary from unidisciplinary research in several respects. The transdisciplinary scholar transgresses all relevant disciplinary boundaries to interlace varied tools, methods, frameworks, and datasets in pursuit of a research problem.

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<sup>3</sup> The term “lifeworld” is associated with nineteenth/twentieth-century Moravian philosopher Edmund Husserl, and has gained a measure of traction in some later philosophical and social scientific circles. Husserl delineates two types of knowledge that elucidate the meaning of the term:

. . . there are two sorts of truth: on the one side, everyday practical situational truths, relative, to be sure, but . . . exactly what praxis . . . seeks and needs; on the other side there are scientific truths, and their grounding leads back precisely to the situational truths, but in such a way that scientific method does not suffer thereby in respect to its own meaning, since it wants to use and must use precisely these truths. Edmund Husserl. *The Crisis of the European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology: An Introduction to Phenomenological Philosophy* (Husserl 1970, p. 132).

<sup>4</sup> Research converging on this topic is abundant. See Henry Shapiro. *Appalachia on Our Mind: The Southern Mountains and Mountaineers in the American Consciousness, 1870–1920* (Shapiro 1978); David Whisnant. *All That Is Native and Fine: The Politics of Culture in an American Region* (Whisnant 1983); Allen Batteau. *The Invention of Appalachia* (Batteau 1990); Lucy R. Lippard. *The Lure of the Local: Senses of Place in a Multicentered Society* (Lippard 1997); Jane S. Becker. *Selling Tradition: Appalachia and the Construction of an American Folk, 1930–1940* (Becker 1998); and Bill Hardwig. *Upon Provincialism: Southern Literature and National Periodical Culture, 1870–1900* (Hardwig 2013).

She responds to the problem-based questions driving her research as opposed to unidisciplinary questions and predispositions that impose limits upon her conceptual options based upon her principal discipline's preferred methods, theories, and tools. Inter/multidisciplinary scholarship leans toward transdisciplinarity but does not necessarily proceed from problem-driven inquiries that demand consolidated research methods in the pursuit of comprehensive proposals (Diakit  and Hucks 2013, p. 39).

The transdisciplinary nature of the present study lies in the fact that its fundamental "problem-driven inquiry" (Can the Asheville Goombay Festival be reimagined in a way that avoids exotification while fostering processes of African American Ashevillean/Affrilachian cultural identity formation?) "demands" a "consolidated research method" (hence the "interlaced" critical attention given to some of the historical, mnemonic, cross-cultural, and epistemological dimensions of the study's basic question) that bolsters a constructive "proposal." Perhaps a transdisciplinary sensibility is at work in a recent book by anthropologist John Jackson, Jr. which impugns the value of the well-established ethnographic method of Geertzian thick description for understanding expressions of Africana humanity such as that of the African Hebrew Israelites of Jerusalem.<sup>5</sup> Whatever the case, I join Stewart, Hucks, and Jackson, Jr. in exploring new approaches to thinking about Africana lifeworlds.

Readers should bear in mind three guiding terms that serve as touchstones for this article: "cultural identity formation," "ancestral memory," and "African diasporic spiritual technology." The terms, which interrelate, are each understood to signify an internally and externally contested, fluid, and performative process of construction, or configuration, rather than a static category somehow existing independently. The "cultural" designates "a vast panoply of ideas, facts, relics, secrets, techniques, applications, formulas, and documents" representing shared ways of "doing things," and the "sum" of a peoples' knowledge, as they "know it" (Wagner 1975, p. 22). Similarly, "identity formation" (which in Africana settings is more often than not *raced* in one way or another) becomes legible through the prism of performance, which is to say that identities "circulate experiences" through subjective and collective enactments of "cultural norms and non-norms" (Taylor 2011a).<sup>6</sup> "Ancestral memory" references a shared, messy practice of remembering (or rediscovering) physically deceased historical personages whose individual lives enrich, complicate, and/or nuance the larger process of cultural identity formation. Thirdly, the term "African diasporic spiritual technology" specifies an African-derived ritual technique (in this case Gumbay Play) formulated within a "diasporaed" community to promote mnemonic self-knowledge, healing, and social cohesion.<sup>7</sup> "Cultural identity formation," "ancestral memory," and "African diasporic spiritual technology" are also treated as terms whose meanings function at the level of epistemology. Thus, in relating the terms—and Gumbay Play—to Asheville's Goombay Festival, I am staging a reimaginative interface oriented toward a mode of mnemonic knowledge production.

Before providing necessary background concerning the intractable problem of African American cultural identity in the United States, and then moving to the article's main proposal, I find it important to establish a sense of the history surrounding the name "southern Appalachia." I find it necessary as well to establish an idea of the distinctness of the southern Appalachian region of western North Carolina, of which Asheville in Buncombe County (the region's largest metropolitan hamlet) is a part, and to address the relation of these factors to the recently minted notion of "Affrilachian identity".

<sup>5</sup> See John L. Jackson, Jr. *Thin Description: Ethnography and the African Hebrew Israelites of Jerusalem* (Jackson 2013).

<sup>6</sup> See also Matthew Causey and Fintan Walsh. *Performance, Identity, and the Neo-Political Subject* (Causey and Walsh 2013).

<sup>7</sup> My use of the term "African diasporic spiritual technologies" is the result of extensive conversations with Dianne Stewart during which she described African diasporic religions as "mystical technologies." See Dianne M. Stewart. *Three Eyes for the Journey: African Dimensions of the Jamaican Religious Experience* (Stewart 2005, pp. 36, 41, 183). In her study of New World iterations of Yor b  religion and African American religious nationalism, Tracey Hucks transmutes the noun "diaspora" into the verb form "diasporaed" to underscore the "Atlanticized" experience of African-descended communities wrought both by enslavement and by their efforts to constructively negotiate the many colonial perils of the "New World." Tracey E. Hucks. *Yor b  Traditions and African American Religious Nationalism* (Hucks 2012, pp. xxvi–xxvii).

### 3. Southern Appalachia, Western North Carolina, and Affrilachian Identity

It is not entirely clear how the Appalachian Mountain range—a nearly two thousand mile-long physiographic system stretching from Belle Isle just north of the eastern Canadian island of Newfoundland to north-central Alabama in the deep southeastern United States—acquired its name. David Walls has followed a trail that starts with a painted scene created by French artist Jacques le Moyne, who joined the Huguenot expedition of René de Laudonniere to the eastern coast of Florida in 1564 to build Fort Caroline near the mouth of the St. John's River. The scene depicts Native Americans searching streams for gold thought to have originated from distant northern mountains containing precious metals. Part of the description of Le Moyne's painted scene reads, "A great way from the place where our fort was built, are great mountains, called in the Indian language Apalatcy . . ." (Walls 1977, p. 58). From there Walls follows the term forward to its use on maps (one of the first also by Le Moyne) through writings—the likely first use of the exact term "Appalachia" being attributable to none other than writer Washington Irving—to geographical studies and novels (Walls 1977, pp. 58–59, 66).<sup>8</sup>

Walls contends that three principal forces motivated the "discovery" of a presumed southern Appalachian culture not long after the American Civil War: "the mountaineer's loyalty to the Union, the end of the frontier, and the rapid expansion of industrial capitalism. The first served to distinguish the mountaineer from other southern whites, and the second and third made him appear an anachronism in comparison to the mythical mainstream American" (Walls 1977, p. 67).<sup>9</sup>

Topographically, western North Carolina is somewhat isolated from the rest of the state by the Appalachian Mountains. This physical fact, along with entrenched assumptions from the post-Reconstruction period and early 1900s about Appalachia being an American ancestral frontier space typified by pure Appalachian whiteness, rugged, "fiery individualism," and a minuscule African American presence, and about the inevitability of the full racial assimilation of African Americans into mainstream white American society has until recent years rendered nearly invisible the historical presence of African Americans in western North Carolina (Inscocoe 1989, pp. 4–5).<sup>10</sup> These assumptions, however, have gradually been discredited by research showing that, in the words of William Turner, "Black Appalachians were some of America's first blacks—appearing almost a century before the landing at Jamestown (Turner 1985, p. xviii)."<sup>11</sup>

<sup>8</sup> After the American Civil War, the term "Appalachia" assumed an added cultural meaning associated with the people of the Appalachian Mountains, particularly white mountaineers. Following the geographic divisions of geographers Guyot (1861) and Powell (1895), if Appalachia is separated into northern and southern corridors, then we can say that the southern corridor, commonly referred to as southern Appalachia, has its own unique cultural profile that since the local color movement of the mid-1870s has summoned increasing but inexhaustive attention from novelists, writers, historians and researchers. Carvel Collins finds that between 1875 and 1900 in excess of two hundred novels and stories were published describing the "quaint," "isolated," and "peculiar" lives of "the hill people" who lived "in the shadow of awe-inspiring peaks." Carvel Collins. "Nineteenth Century Fiction of the Southern Appalachians" (Collins 1942–1943, pp. 186–90, 215–18).

<sup>9</sup> The mythic idea of the sui generis white mountaineer also has roots in the American Missionary Association (AMA), which was established in the 1840s. After abortive attempts to integrate churches in the post-Reconstruction south, the AMA refocused much of its ministerial work on Appalachia. However, the organization's by-laws required that the focal population of the work be unique in some significant sense. This stipulation hastened use of the term "mountain whites" while encouraging a particular disregard for ethno-racial diversity in southern Appalachia. More on the AMA's history can be found in chapter one of Chris Green. *The Social Life of Poetry: Appalachia, Race, and Radical Modernism* (Green 2009).

<sup>10</sup> Two famous examples of fictional works that fall within the local color tradition include Mary Noailles Murfree. *In the Tennessee Mountains* (Murfree 1884); and John Fox, Jr. *The Trail of Lonesome Pine* (Fox 1908). Some important secondary sources include John C. Campbell. *The Southern Highlander and His Homeland* (Campbell 1921); James W. Raine. *The Land of Saddle-Bags: A Study of the Mountain People of Appalachia* (Raine 1924); Horace Kephart. *Our Southern Highlanders* (Kephart 1926); Henry Shapiro. *Appalachia on Our Mind: The Southern Mountains and Mountaineers in the American Consciousness, 1870–1920* (Shapiro 1978); Mary Beth Pudup and Dwight Billings, eds. *Appalachia in the Making: The Mountain South in the Nineteenth Century* (Pudup and Billings 1995). See also Emily M. Satterwhite. *Dear Appalachia: Readers, Identity, and Popular Fiction since 1878* (Satterwhite 2011). The theories of Myrdal (1944) and Park (1950) lean toward the eventual assimilation of African Americans into mainstream American society.

<sup>11</sup> Turner's claim is substantiated by the work of Roethlisler (1964), Nash (1974), and Perdue (1979). Their work illustrates that African Americans were impactfully present in western North Carolina, South Carolina, and elsewhere throughout southern Appalachia long before the southward migration during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries of Mennonite, Lutheran, and Moravian Germans as well as Scottish and Irish Reformists down through the Shenandoah Valley "into the uplands and



One should consider dubious the stereotypical idea from the 1830s on that white mountaineers in western North Carolina were “cutthroats and savages,” or laggardly, slaveless “exponents of an arrested civilization” unfamiliar with African Americans and the institution of American chattel slavery, and lacking in the socioeconomic diversity necessary to create the kind of class hierarchy prevalent in the antebellum south (Frost 1899; Ralph 1903; Steiner 1918; Inscocoe 1989, p. 2). Just as dubious is the assumption of a generalized, pro-white American racial assimilationism among African Americans in southern Appalachia before and after the Civil War. We know that enslaved persons constituted less than ten percent of the population in the highlands of western North Carolina before 1865 and that ninety percent of whites in the region owned no slaves. But we also know that while the white settler population in the region may have harbored disdain for the institution of American slavery as the enemy of free, fair labor, and for the landed planter class’s exclusionary, aristocratic approach to government, a large percentage of this population during the antebellum period nevertheless conformed to “the mainstream of southern sentiment” (Inscocoe 1989, p. 9). It should come as no surprise then that the reactions of many western North Carolinians to Nat Turner’s rebellion, the raid on Harper’s Ferry, Abraham Lincoln’s election, the first battle of Fort Sumter, and secession were “often indistinguishable from those common throughout at least the Upper South” (Inscocoe 1989).

Indeed, the political dispositions of western North Carolina highlanders on the eve of secession ranged from “extreme unionism to equally extreme secessionism.” The latter disposition, writes John Inscocoe, “not only outweighed the former, but both sides cast their arguments in terms of which course would best ensure the survival and safety of slavery” (Inscocoe 1989, pp. 9–10). Helping to frame these political attitudes was a stratified, agrarian mountain economy whose wealthiest landed residents were usually “merchants, hotel or resort owners, land speculators, manufacturers, bankers, lawyers, doctors, or some combination thereof.” Contrary to fictive literary creations known as “local color” narratives, the economic activities of western North Carolina’s affluent slaveholding class involved trade networks that stretched beyond the highlands, suggesting the adoption of values and commercial aims that were in keeping with those of northern industrialists (Inscocoe 1989, p. 8).

Though slavery existed in western North Carolina on a much smaller scale compared to the rest of the south, it still provided a context for interaction between African Americans and whites. And yet we should keep in mind Carter G. Woodson’s position (underpinned by Frederick Olmsted and Albert Hart) that many southern Appalachian mountaineers in western North Carolina and elsewhere equated easterners’ commitment to the institution of slavery with a determination to build a nationwide regime as oppressive as that of imperial Britain (Inscocoe 1989, p. 9; Woodson 1916, p. 140). Hence, the argument goes, large numbers of southern Appalachians loathed the institution of slavery and the idea of enslavement, but not the slave’s personhood (Olmsted 1905; Hart 1906, p. 73; Woodson 1916, p. 140). Woodson concludes that this ideological perspective contributed to a postbellum southern Appalachian social environment wherein “White and black men work side by side, visit each other in their homes, and often attend the same church to listen with delight to the Word spoken by either a colored or white preacher” (Woodson 1916, p. 150).

When holding in view the analyses proffered by Woodson and Inscocoe, which conjointly describe attitudes toward slavery in southern Appalachia in terms both consistent and inconsistent with the prevailing attitude found throughout most of the south before the Civil War, the reduction of the historical African American presence in western North Carolina to mere mainstream racial assimilation is shown to be less than tenable. A reductionist interpretation emphasizing assimilation leaves little room to investigate, for instance, the possible role played in the formation of African American cultural identity in western North Carolina by areas like Ashe County’s Mount Jefferson (formerly “Nigger Mountain”)—a “station” of the Underground Railroad where during the nineteenth

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mountains of the Carolinas, Georgia, Kentucky, and Tennessee.” Carter G. Woodson. “Freedom and Slavery in Appalachian America” (Woodson 1916, p. 134).

century runaway slaves seeking passage to free states or Canada hid (Fletcher 1963, p. 64). An assimilationist interpretation is also likely to elide unique cultural considerations such as West African and Native American stylistic elements present in modern clogging, square dancing, and other hybridized “folk” dance traditions present in western North Carolina and other regions of southern Appalachia, or the derivative relationship extending back to the mid-eighteenth century between the Senegambian/Sudanese (specifically Wolof) *halam* (a type of plucked lute) and the later African American banjo tradition in southern Appalachia and elsewhere.<sup>12</sup> The African American banjo tradition exerted a significant musical influence in western North Carolina and also contributed to the development of the blues genre in various regions of the south throughout the first quarter of the twentieth century (Conway 1995, pp. 25, 27–29, 62; Jamison 2015).<sup>13</sup>

The transnational, interwoven historical landscapes of southern Appalachia are thus key pieces of the changing African American cultural identity puzzle in western North Carolina, including Asheville. “Affrilachian,” a new term with which to approach this puzzle, was coined in 1991 by renowned poet Frank X Walker. In the early 1990s, Walker, Kentucky’s first African American Poet Laureate, co-founded what is now a multiethnic literary collective known as the Appalachian Poets.<sup>14</sup> In an interview conducted during the Charleston, West Virginia leg of the collective’s 2009 bus tour, Walker addressed the meaning of his invented term, explaining that “The word Affrilachian exists to say in a very strong way that people of color live in the region that people know as Appalachia. And a lot of people have the misconception that it’s a monolithic culture that has zero diversity, and we know that’s not true” (Walker 2009).<sup>15</sup>

William Turner, Walker’s former professor, makes the point that while the term “Affrilachia” can play an important “modern” role in augmenting “pride and identity” and in drawing out “people to use cultural tools to fight for social justice and equality and to reclaim their communities,” the term is still little more than a branding label with which he is not “entirely comfortable.” Turner’s discomfort stems in part from the fact that the Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC)—an economic development agency created in 1965—has tended to define Appalachia and to distribute funds in a way that privileges urban cities over rural communities. A consequence of this pattern is that the “black communities in Appalachia’s rural interior . . . have been (and continue to be) ignored” (Turner 2011, pp. 27–30; About ARC n.d.). On the basis of Walker and Turner’s insights, we can conclude that the problematic branding label “Affrilachian” names—but is not limited to—a distinctive African American Appalachian cultural identity as well as historical experiences involving, among other things, exclusion from popular accounts of a “monolithic” (i.e., white) Appalachia, and socioeconomic neglect by way of federal, state, and local government policy. Importantly, the idea of “Affrilachian” as a branding label indicates that the moniker does *not* signify pristine lifeworlds impervious to commodification. Furthermore, to be Affrilachian is to participate in racially coded, vulnerable, and ever-unfolding ethnocultural identities whose unfixed meanings reference

<sup>12</sup> Much like “Appalachia” and “southern Appalachia,” the category “folk” is a discursive fabrication riddled with problems. Though beyond the scope of this article, questions raised by Jane Becker are important for readers to hold in mind: “How are tradition and the folk defined, and by whom? What is the relationship between the folk, tradition, and the marketplace? What consequences do interpretations of the folk and traditional culture have for those named as its bearer?” Jane S. Becker. *Selling Tradition: Appalachia and the Construction of an American Folk, 1930–1940* (Becker 1998, p. 3). See also Benjamin Filene. *Romancing the Folk: Public Memory and American Roots Music* (Filene 2000).

<sup>13</sup> Fiona Ritchie and Doug Orr consider the Malian *ngoni* (a stringed instrument) to be the West African predecessor of the American banjo. Fiona Ritchie and Doug Orr. *Wayfaring Strangers: The Musical Voyage from Scotland and Ulster to Appalachia* (Ritchie and Orr 2014, p. 296).

<sup>14</sup> A newer undertaking known as the Affrilachian Artist Project takes inspiration from the Appalachian Poets and from the Carolina Chocolate Drops, a Grammy award-winning black string band based in Durham, North Carolina. See The Affrilachian Artist Project (The Affrilachian Artist Project 2011).

<sup>15</sup> For an illuminating philosophical explanation of the idea of “Affrilachia,” see Paul C. Taylor. “Call Me out of My Name: Inventing Affrilachia” (Taylor 2011b). An excellent study proceeding from the perspective of rhetorical theory is found in Kathryn Trauth Taylor. “Naming Affrilachia: Toward Rhetorical Ecologies of Identity Performance in Appalachia” (Taylor 2011a).

the particular geography and historical currents of the Appalachian region while also redefining the region. Being Affrilachian also connects one to the wider African American experience.

But the wider African American experience is in its own way troubled by the problem of cultural identity. Indeed, the pressing necessity of new language like “Affrilachian” bespeaks this problem and the need for innovative responses. From the point of view of Virginia-born writer Harold Cruse, the muddle of African American cultural identity represents a grave “crisis” threatening the economic and political future of African American communities across the United States (Cruse 1967). Maybe Walker himself has experienced the weight of this crisis, having produced a creative corpus including eight collections of poetry, anthologies, *Pluck!: The Journal of Affrilachian Arts and Culture*, and the 2006 documentary *Coal Black Voices*, all of which variously converge on the multivalent cultural predicament of African American identity.<sup>16</sup> In any case, Affrilachian cultural identity and African American cultural identity in Asheville are inseverably situated within a larger historical state of affairs of great relevance to this article. A brief examination of this state of affairs is therefore required.

#### 4. Inside a Cultural “Crisis”

One can scarcely deny that the inveterate quandary of African American cultural identity is relevant to the present racially charged moment in American history, just as it was during the turbulent decades following World War I. Against the earlier but influential discursive backdrop created by the work of nineteenth-century British naturalist Charles Darwin, polymath Herbert Spencer’s theory of social Darwinism, and spirited North American debates on the “Negro question,” which were underway by the late 1700s, intellectuals before, during, and after the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s shaped conversations about the cultural character of African Americans (Darwin 1864, 1871; Spencer 1866–1867; Jordan 1968). The trailblazing research of W. E. B. DuBois, Carter G. Woodson, and Zora Neale Hurston gave unprecedented insight into the dynamics of African American cultural life, and the individual lines of research adopted by this trio assumed the pertinence of Africa (DuBois 1904, 1924, 1947; Woodson 1915, 1922, 1936; Hurston 1936, 1981, 2001). Yet the same assumption was eschewed by another researcher of considerable distinction.

In 1928, sociologist E. Franklin Frazier penned these words:

Many of those who criticize the Negro for selecting certain values out of American life overlook the fact that the primary struggle on his part has been to acquire a culture. In spite of the efforts of those who would have him dig up his African past, the Negro is a stranger to African culture. The manner in which he has taken over the American culture has never been studied in intimate enough detail to make it comprehensible. The educated class among Negroes has been the forerunner in this process (Frazier 1928, pp. 82–83).<sup>17</sup>

Frazier’s statement was part of an article entitled “La Bourgeoisie Noire” that impugned the idea that African Americans were an undifferentiated group with homogeneous interests, and asserted that the rising black capitalist class embraced white American bourgeois ideals over the political philosophy of Marcus Garvey’s Pan-Africanist movement. First published in the fifth volume of American leftist V. F. Calverton’s journal *Modern Quarterly*, “La Bourgeoisie Noire” laid an important foundation for Frazier’s controversial book *Black Bourgeoisie*, published twenty-nine years later. Of the many claims Frazier makes in the book, among the most upbraiding to African American middle and upper-class

<sup>16</sup> Walker’s effort to poetically wrestle with the meanings of Affrilachian identity prompts a groping for Africa, as seen in his poem “Healer,” which parallels the role of the African American “church mother” to that of the “Yoruba high priestess.” Frank X Walker. *Affrilachia: Poems by Frank X Walker* (Walker 2000, pp. 53–55).

<sup>17</sup> Countering Melville Herskovits’ argument demonstrating African cultural survivals in multiple African diasporas, Frazier insisted that North American enslavement effected an irremediable alienation between black bondpersons and their respective African cultural legacies, leaving them little choice but to embrace Christianity as a “new basis for social cohesion” and “take over the American culture.” See the first chapter of E. Franklin Frazier. *The Negro Church in America* (Frazier 1963). See also Melville J. Herskovits. *The Myth of the Negro Past* (Herskovits 1941).



sensibilities was the conclusion that “Because of their social isolation and lack of a cultural tradition, the members of the black bourgeoisie in the United States seem to be in the process of becoming nobody” (Frazier 1957, p. 26).

Three years after the publication of “La Bourgeoisie Noire,” Calverton introduced a concept that would give broader articulation to the cultural failure described by Frazier. In a study sharply critical of nineteenth-century anthropological “doctrine,” Calverton avers that

The existence of cultural compulsives makes objectivity in the social sciences impossible. One can be objective only in the observation of detail or the collection of facts – but one cannot be objective in their interpretation. Interpretation necessitates a mind-set, a purpose, an end. Such mind-sets, such purposes, such ends, are controlled by *cultural compulsives* (Calverton 1931, p. 689).

Calverton’s analysis implies that the production of interpretive social scientific knowledge is fundamentally motivated by cultural rather than objective factors. In general terms, social scientific knowledge is ultimately a cultural artifact serving the agendas of discrete ethnocultural groups that enjoy degrees of class privilege. This view, of course, brings with it the presumed existence of a shared, actionable sense of sociocultural identity on the part of any particular group. Still, the language of “cultural compulsives” makes possible a restatement of Frazier’s thesis regarding the black bourgeoisie: The social isolation of the black bourgeois class signifies the absence of internally developed, identity-based cultural compulsives within this group *not* tied on the most basic level to white American bourgeois capitalist values and attendant interests.

The cultural deficit diagnosed by Frazier would become the subject of a major book that appeared in 1967 titled *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual: A Historical Analysis of the Failure of Black Leadership*. Authored by the aforementioned Harold Cruse, a trenchant social critic, the book examines historical factors contributing to the inability of African American integrationist and nationalist intellectuals during the social ferment of the period from the early 1920s to the late 1960s to develop a cultural philosophy unmolested by white liberal, socialist, or conservative Russo-communist politics. Cruse offers his dire assessment:

The Negro intellectuals and radical theorists of the 1920’s and 1930’s did not, themselves, fight for intellectual clarity. They were unable to create a new black revolutionary synthesis of what was applicable from Garveyism (especially economic nationalism), and what they had learned from Marxism that was valid. Yet with such a theoretical synthesis, Negroes would not really have needed the Communist Party. They could have laid down the foundation for a new school of revolutionary ideas, which, if developed, could have maintained a programmatic continuity between the issues and events of the 1920’s and the Negro movements of the 1950’s and 1960’s. And the young Negro intellectuals of today would probably not be facing a theoretical and intellectual vacuum (Cruse 1967, p. 151).

Cruse’s central point is that the first six decades of the twentieth century witnessed an African American society essentially devoid of a sense of ethnic identity stable enough to cultivate values uniquely reflective of African American ethnic experience and social positionality. Also missing were clearly articulated *critical* values that could support a distinct cultural agenda encompassing philosophical, economic, and political concerns. Cruse names A. Philip Randolph, Chandler Owen, Paul Robeson, James Baldwin, Lorraine Hansberry, and many others as examples of African American social elites who fell short of delivering a practical, “synthetic” philosophical “foundation” for the Harlem Renaissance and the Civil Rights Movement (Cruse 1967, pp. 41–42, 174, 194, 281, 291). Such was the context for the “theoretical and intellectual vacuum” Cruse perceived so keenly in the 1960s, long after the first Great Migration (but during the subsequent two), the Great Depression, and the Chicago Black Renaissance. Curiously, Cruse’s analysis emerges despite the ten-year growth of the nationalist Black Arts Movement starting in 1965, the inaugural American Festival of Negro Arts, held

at Fairleigh Dickinson University in Teaneck, New Jersey the same year, and the founding of the Black Panther Party in 1966.

Cruse's historical account is not without a transnational dimension. He is critical of the varying strains of black nationalism active before, throughout, and after the civil rights era, and, similar to Frazier, struggles to see the relevance of Africa to the analysis of African American culture (Cruse 1967, pp. 553–54). Even so, Cruse's account engages wider diasporic political perspectives from cultural zones like the West Indies, Cuba, and West Africa, albeit in a limited fashion (Cruse 1967, pp. 342, 356–58, 408–9). Many pages of *Crisis* are devoted to explicating ideological conflicts extending from the 1920s through the Black Power movement between West Indian communist and socialist radicals in New York and their African American—especially middle-class/bourgeois—counterparts. Cruse shows the conflicts to have been multilayered, involving ideological divisions precipitated not only by differences in ethnic identity and in attitudes toward radical political reform, but also by the fracturing of Russia catalyzed by the political revolutions of 1917, and by the rise of Garvey's pro-capitalist, Pan-Africanist nationalism.

It is notable that Cruse moves beyond the West Indian-African American problem without exploring more thoroughly the role played by cultural identity. In addition, he does not take into account the constructive possibilities latent in cross-cultural analysis between African American and West Indian ethnic experience. What is most important to understand, stresses Cruse, is the exigent dilemma confronting the African American intellectual:

The Negro intellectual has been bereft of the means of solving his own problems because his class has traditionally been maneuvered into the position where his problems are solved by others. Instead of being able to essay his own solutions, the Negro intellectual has been transformed into a problem by the white liberal, who prefers to keep him in that position. The white liberal problem-solver . . . is the emasculator of the creative and intellectual potential of the Negro intelligentsia. Negro intellectuals cannot effectively interpret themselves in the arts, in social criticism, in the social sciences, in research fields, etc.; nor can they make objective interpretations of their own relation to the American scene that have any impact on American affairs (Cruse 1967, p. 260).

Cruse doubtless had many contemporaneous critics, some of whom, like writer-activist Michael Thelwell, questioned Cruse's sharp critique of black integrationism (Thelwell 1968). However, in a later essay, Hortense Spillers assesses Cruse a bit more favorably. Incorporating W. E. B. DuBois into her analysis, Spillers states that "If we concede to DuBois and Cruse that there is an African American culture, distinct within the framework of American culture, then we will also concede that its subjects can *reflect* on its status, as DuBois and Cruse are representative instances of just such reflective powers" (Spillers 1994, p. 106). Cruse is not postulating the non-existence of African American cultural idioms.<sup>18</sup> Rather, what's missing, he contends, is a concentrated effort by African American intellectuals to critically engage these idioms such that they can be leveraged in service to an African American sociopolitical program with clear philosophical moorings. Spillers helps us to recognize that the work of DuBois, Cruse, and others prefigures this type of engagement.

The seemingly nationalist mood of Cruse's language need not mitigate the contextual utility of his insights in providing a lens through which one may locally approach the quandary of African American cultural identity. The historical background established by Cruse and others before him helps to explain the ranging transregional web of factors pertinent to the question of African American

<sup>18</sup> Some important studies addressing African American culture that have appeared over the last five decades include Albert Murray. *The Omni-Americans: Some Alternatives to the Folklore of White Supremacy* (Murray 1970); Genevieve Fabre and Robert O'Meally. *History and Memory in African-American Culture* (Fabre and O'Meally 1994); James C. Hall. *Mercy, Mercy Me: African-American Culture and the American Sixties* (Hall 2001); Hortense J. Spillers. *Black, White, and in Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture* (Spillers 2003); Lara Langer Cohen and Jordan Alexander Stein. *Early African American Print Culture* (Langer Cohen and Stein 2012).

cultural identity in Asheville, and to the related creation of Asheville's Goombay Festival. We move now to these considerations.

## 5. On African American Cultural Identity in Asheville: A Historical Inquiry

How might one map African American identity in Asheville at the level of culture? Could an attempt at such mapping expose a need to culturally reexamine African American Asheville identity in a fashion that considers anew the pivotal, potentially transgressive role of ancestral memory? What extant institutions *within* the city's African American community could advance this reexamination? A substantial body of historical literature provides much-needed context for these queries (Ready 1986; Turner and Cabbell 1985; Perdue 1985; Inscoc 2001; Drake 2001; Dunaway 2003; Starnes 2005; Brundage 2005; Slap 2010; Waters 2011). We learn from this literature that African Americans have been present in the western North Carolina region since the mid-1500s as enslaved subjects initially within the domain of Spanish settlers and the Cherokee, as free persons, livestock drovers, domestic workers, railroad track layers, porters, and later as high-level professionals, entrepreneurs, property owners and business leaders.<sup>19</sup> We learn as well that Asheville's African American population increased significantly during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The increase was due in large measure to the completion of the Buncombe Turnpike in the late 1820s, the arrival of the Western North Carolina Railroad in 1880, and the touristic growth of Asheville from the 1870s through the first three decades of the 1900s as a "health resort" whose "pure air, water, and climate" were believed to remedy tuberculosis, malaria, dyspepsia, scrofula, and a range of other ailments (Chase 2007, p. 32; Helper 1886; Chapin 1891).

New England writer Charles Dudley Warner's observations of African American life in Asheville during the late 1880s reveal a complex spectrum. In his travel journal *On Horseback: A Tour in Virginia, North Carolina and Tennessee, with Notes of Travel in Mexico and California*, we find the example of formerly enslaved resident "Happy John." Once the bondman of Confederate General Wade Hampton, Happy John performed with a banjo, a guitar, and a mulatto girl named Mary at a street minstrel show before a gleeful multiracial audience in what, roughly speaking, is now Pack Square (formerly Public Square and Court House Square), a space bearing the name of philanthropist George W. Pack as well as the Vance Monument (Chase 2007, p. 41). Warner's descriptive commentary on Happy John's performance is revealing:

Happy John, who occupied the platform with Mary, a "bright" yellow [mulatto] girl, took the comical view of his race, which was greatly enjoyed by his audience. His face was blackened to the proper color of the stage-darky, and he wore a flaming suit of calico, the trousers and coat striped longitudinally according to Punch's idea of "Uncle Sam," the coat a swallow-tail bound and faced with scarlet, and a bell-crowned white hat. This conceit of a colored Yankee seemed to tickle all colors in the audience amazingly . . . "Oh, yes,"

<sup>19</sup> Theda Perdue's research indicates that by the second half of the eighteenth century, the Cherokee of North Carolina were actively involved in the kidnapping and enslavement of African Americans. Her research also shows that when the Cherokee republic was founded in 1827, three years before the authorization of the federal Indian Removal Act, blacks were "excluded from participation in the government." Referencing the February 21, 1828 and April 13, 1828 editions of the *Cherokee Phoenix and Indians' Advocate*, Perdue further expounds,

The founding fathers granted all adult males access to the ballot box except "negroes, and descendants of white and Indian men by negro women who may have been set free." The Constitution restricted officeholding to people untainted by African ancestry: "No person who is of negro or mulatto parentage, either by the father or mother side, shall be eligible to hold any office or trust under this Government." The Cherokees also sought to discourage free blacks from moving into the Nation and enacted a statute warning "that all free negroes coming into the Cherokee Nation under any pretence whatsoever, shall be viewed and treated, in every respect as intruders, and shall not be allowed to reside in the Cherokee Nation without a permit." Theda Perdue. "Red and Black in the Southern Appalachians" (Perdue 1985, pp. 26–27).

exclaimed a bright woman in the crowd, “Happy John was sure enough one of Wade Hampton’s slaves, and he’s right good looking when he’s not blackened up” . . . What most impressed us, however, was the taming to account by Happy John of the “nigger” side of the black man as a means of low comedy, and the enjoyment of it by all the people of color. They appeared to appreciate as highly as anybody the comic element in themselves, and Happy John had emphasized it by deepening his natural color and exaggerating the “nigger” peculiarities. I presume none of them analyzed the nature of his infectious gayety, nor thought of the pathos that lay so close to it, in the fact of his recent slavery, and the distinction of being one of Wade Hampton’s niggers, and the melancholy mirth of this light-hearted race’s burlesque of itself (Warner 1888, pp. 115–18).

Warner’s commentary documents the presence of African American minstrelsy in postbellum Asheville. His commentary additionally documents the willingness of some of the city’s emancipated African Americans to consume this form of minstrelsy within the context of late nineteenth-century American popular culture. Such consumption, coupled with that of whites and with Happy John’s “burlesque” performances, establishes a precedent in Asheville for framing the memory of slavery and the quandary of African American cultural identity in terms of “light-hearted,” festive rendition for all to partake in and enjoy.

Elsewhere on the spectrum disclosed in Warner’s journal we find these remarks made by an astute African American gentleman in Asheville:

Social equality is a humbug. We do not expect it, we do not want it. It does not exist among the blacks themselves. We have our own social degrees, and choose our own associates. We simply want the ordinary civil rights, under which we can live and make our way in peace and amity. This is necessary to our self-respect, and if we have not self-respect, it is not to be supposed that the race can improve (Warner 1888, p. 123).

This gentleman’s conclusions indicate nuanced, class-conscious analysis within the African American community of the social inequality issues posed by the community itself and by the emerging Jim Crow south. His conclusions also evince concern for economic independence and general “racial improvement,” concern that is all the more meaningful when placed in a broader context.

George Vanderbilt, who commissioned the building of Asheville’s famous Biltmore Estate circa 1889, would decide about three years later to also commission (as a loan) the building of an edifice located in the historic district of downtown Asheville at the corner of Eagle and South Market streets, a small area that by the late 1920s would be associated with an African American commercial district known as “the block” (Waters 2011, p. 151). Completed in 1893, the edifice was constructed to house the Young Men’s Institute (YMI), a “nonsectarian organization whose mission . . . was to support the economic, social, and cultural uplift of the city’s black residents” (Waters 2011, p. 80). According to Charles McNamee, Biltmore Estate’s first estate manager, the creation of the YMI and the construction of its edifice—later named the YMI Cultural Center, and now likely the oldest freestanding African American cultural center in the United States—were motivated by community leaders “of color” like former slave turned entrepreneur Isaac Dickson and school board administrator Edward Stephens, neither of whom were Asheville natives (Waters 2011, pp. 92, 119–20, 151–52). Local community leaders were of the opinion that the YMI could promote the social and moral edification of young African American men in Asheville, a goal consistent with the restrictive gender ideology of the late nineteenth century, while also providing the city’s African American community with a center where its “social, cultural, and economic interests could be developed and advanced” (Waters 2011, pp. 152–53). These leaders believed that, if properly funded, the YMI could function as an offsetting alternative to the “baneful influences of liquor saloons and . . . other demoralizing associations,” and secure the development of the “manly, self-reliant, and Christian character of black men.” With this belief in mind as well as an awareness of heightened concern at the time about “a decline in the moral character of young black men,” Vanderbilt funded the YMI for the first thirteen years of its existence (Waters 2011).

However, the YMI's incipient years were tainted by several failed businesses, frustrated organizational leadership, and anemic community support. As a result, Vanderbilt withdrew funding from the YMI in 1906 (Waters 2011, p. 153). He initially offered the YMI building to the African American community for ten thousand dollars, but due to the community's inability to raise that amount, Vanderbilt eventually accepted the reduced price of six thousand dollars, provided with the assistance of charitable whites (Waters 2009). While the YMI was unable to achieve financial stability in the years after 1906 leading up to the Great Depression (and has not to this day), the same period saw the rise of the block in the surrounding area (Walton 2016). The block contained a theater, social clubs, a shoemaking service, printing service, taxi service, pharmacy, library, newspaper, schools, gymnasium, churches, and hotels. Among the black professionals who worked in and frequented the block were physicians, school teachers, insurance agents, builders, photographers, hairdressers, dentists, lawyers, realtors, ministers, and music teachers (Chase 2007, pp. 140, 142; Robinson 1982). Since the Depression, and the start of urban renewal in Asheville, which was marked by the creation of the Redevelopment Commission in 1958, the block has declined, and is currently undergoing gentrification (Chase 2007, p. 174). When taking all of this into consideration along with Warner's travel journal, it is clear that the historical experience of African Americans in Asheville is multifaceted and needful of further transdisciplinary research to better understand what it adds to the larger, unfolding African American story.

But what of *culture* of the sort leading up to the Goombay Festival? For a period beginning in 1913, African American Ashevilleans under the leadership of Glen Alpine-born entrepreneur E. W. Pearson, Sr. held a well-attended multi-day event at west Asheville's Pearson Park that organizers seem to have dubbed the "Colored Agricultural Fair" (Asheville-Gazette News 1913). Especially popular among farmers, the fair was a place to enjoy livestock, poultry, and other local agricultural products. Entertaining attractions included "music, dancing, a beauty contest, athletic contests . . . aeroplane stunts," and "hundreds of prizes" (Chase 2007, p. 141; Asheville Citizen 1921). The few extant records of the fair indicate that it continued well into the late 1940s, by which time the event was known as the "Negro Buncombe County District Agricultural Fair" (Asheville Citizen 1947a, 1947b). Approximately twenty years after the launch of the Colored Agricultural Fair, another yearly, large-scale event known as the "Negro Music Festival" was launched. Originally intended to fund playground equipment for "negro children of Asheville," the festival was multiracial and garnered sponsorship from the Asheville Chamber of Commerce, the Community Chest, and the Negro Welfare Council (Chase 2007, pp. 141–42). It appears that by 1950, both the agricultural fair and music festival had waned in popularity, and there is no clear record as to why. Little research has been done on the cultural life of African Americans in Asheville between 1950 and 1980.

In the early 1980s Asheville witnessed the emergence of a third cultural event named "Goombay." Advertised as a "celebration of African and Caribbean culture," it is one of the largest festivals in western North Carolina, drawing more than ten thousand attendees (Our History 2014).<sup>20</sup> Apart from the YMI, Goombay is one of the few African American-led cultural institutions in the city. Yet, like the agricultural fair and music festival of previous decades, Goombay has not piqued much interest among researchers. Thus we are presented with an important opportunity to investigate Goombay's cultural significance and potential.

A brief clarification of the general format and details of the remaining discussion that follows is in order. The discussion consists of three main foci. The first involves the history of Goombay's arrival in Asheville in 1982, as well as its subsequent growth and current content. The second concerns Gumbay Play, an African Caribbean ritual practiced in the St. Elizabeth parish of western Jamaica. Gumbay Play forms part of a complex of interconnected African diasporic spiritual technologies

<sup>20</sup> Until 2013, the Goombay Festival was held in "the block." Local redevelopment construction near South Market Street led to the controversial relocation of the festival to Pack Square Park, a move that initially generated an increase in the festival's revenue.



in Jamaica. Aside from Gumbay Play, the complex is comprised of Obeah, Myal, and Jonkonnu (Jangkunu), all three of which will be addressed later.<sup>21</sup> Despite apparent similarities in nomenclature, there is no firm evidence that Gumbay Play is a direct cultural progenitor of Asheville's Goombay Festival. Nevertheless, the conceptualization of the festival as "African and Caribbean" invites consideration of Gumbay Play. Building on a critical treatment of this African Jamaican tradition, the third focus explores some mnemonic and epistemological implications of reimagining Asheville's Goombay Festival in conversation with Gumbay Play, particularly as these implications concern African American cultural identity in Asheville and Affrilachian cultural identity in western North Carolina. I should stress that this exploratory reflection is preliminary in nature, intended only to set a reimagined stage upon which communities and future researchers might build. Therefore, the analytical ground covered is, appropriately, far from exhaustive. Let us turn now to the Asheville Goombay Festival.

## 6. Asheville's Goombay Festival

The chain of events leading to the appearance of Goombay in Asheville is traceable to the year 1974. During that year Lady Gloria Free, her daughter Sherri, and others including Florence Green, William Green, James, Jacqueline, and Jocelyn King traveled to Miami Beach, Florida to attend the Alpha Kappa Alpha (AKA) Sorority Boule, a major biennial convention that serves administrative and ritualistic purposes within the organization. For Free, the "most memorable part of the Boule was . . . Goombay Night—a Caribbean celebration on the beach" with "music, food, and fashions" (Worthen 2015). Although unproven, it is possible that Goombay Night was partially inspired by the cultural presence since the 1560s of enslaved and free Africans who arrived in Florida within the colonial empire of Spain, traversing the Atlantic Ocean and the Caribbean isles from areas such as Gambia, Guinea, Sierra Leone, Ghana, the Republic of the Congo, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Angola to the south. Continual post-slavery immigration of African Caribbeans to southern Florida and other parts of the state to the present day enhance the plausibility of an African or African Caribbean cultural antecedent to Goombay Night (Anderson 2015). It is conceivable that this history in some way flavored the cultural atmosphere and celebratory spirit Lady Gloria Free experienced at Goombay Night in 1974, perchance spurring her resolution to birth the festive event in Asheville. In a recent interview, Free stated that "I chose for this [Goombay] to happen in my hometown . . . Goombay got me that night. I'd never experienced anything like that" (Worthen 2015).

Several years later, while in a fundraising meeting with the Friends of the YMI Cultural Center (FYMICC), Free introduced the idea of reproducing Goombay in Asheville. Those assembled were receptive to Free's proposal and would prove instrumental in bringing Goombay to life. Besides Free, the cadre was made up of Georgia Allen, Jeanne Bowman, Sophia Dixon, Helen Edington, Barbara Hunter, Barbara Jones, Jacqueline King, Portia Leverette, Madge Murray, Julia Ray, Jacqueline Scott, Willie Vincent, Inez Whitesides, and Wanda Coleman. Free linked the need for Goombay with a decline in African American economic ownership in Asheville. She reflects that the value of Goombay

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<sup>21</sup> My choice of the qualifier "African diasporic" is informed by the rationale adduced by Tracey Hucks in her recent landmark book on Yorùbá American religious nationalism. She contends that "African diasporic religions make the category of African much more fluid and receptive to flexible interpretations and point the reader to historical processes without the weighty conclusions and assertions of African-derived, African-inspired, and African-based." Tracey E. Hucks. *Yorùbá Traditions and African American Religious Nationalism* (Hucks 2012, pp. 5–6). More in-depth information on Obeah, Myal, and Jonkonnu can be found in Martha Beckwith. *Black Roadways: A Study of Jamaican Folk Life* (Beckwith 1929); Sylvia Wynter. "Jonkonnu in Jamaica: Towards the Interpretation of Folk Dance as a Cultural Process" (Wynter 1970); Judith Bettelheim. "The Afro-Jamaican Jonkonnu Festival: Playing the Forces and Operating the Cloth" (Bettelheim 1979); Kenneth M. Bilby. "Gumbay, Myal, and the Great House: New Evidence of the Religious Background of Jonkonnu in Jamaica" (Bilby 1999); Dianne M. Stewart. *Three Eyes for the Journey: African Dimensions of the Jamaican Religious Experience* (Stewart 2005, pp. 12, 51–52, 54, 59, 61–65, 151, 154–55, 157–68, 221, 279); Diana Paton and Maarit Forde. *Obeah and Other Powers: The Politics of Caribbean Religion and Healing* (Paton and Forde 2012); Jerome S. Handler and Kenneth M. Bilby. *Enacting Power: The Criminalization of Obeah in the Anglophone Caribbean, 1760–2011* (Handler and Bilby 2012).

goes back to walking through that area of town [the block] and looking at the businesses that were there, the shoe shine parlors and all that and to realize that in that particular area, if something like this happened, how differently we might feel, having *ownership* of something that would impact this community. And it [Goombay] has impacted my community (Worthen 2015).

Willie Vincent, the first secretary of the FYMICC, recalls that “The block was dead. There were people hanging out, drinking wine, doing drugs. We knew we had to clean up the block before we could have a [Goombay] festival there.” Julia Ray, another prominent FYMICC member, successfully suggested that an effort be made to recruit denizens of the block (mostly men) to clean and “police” the festival grounds. The men were required to remain sober and drug-free in the performance of these functions, and are said to have carried them out with dutiful “pride” (The Urban News 2006).

Since its first appearance in 1982, which attracted a modest, predominantly African American crowd, Asheville’s Goombay Festival has become a sizable multiracial celebration that appeals to residents and tourists alike. As noted in the introduction, Free attributes this appeal to a liberating “spirit.” I quote her again in full: “I feel the spirit of Goombay has impacted where I live. The nature of people free to dance, free to move, free to drum, free to sit and watch, free to play as children, if that’s the case . . . Goombay has been an integrated affair in terms of the attendance. People have come.” Free is convinced that Goombay releases “our essence. I am talking about the essence of all people” (Worthen 2015).

At present the Asheville Goombay Festival is both a cultural and an economic institution. As of this writing, the roster of Goombay sponsors includes these entities: the YMI Cultural Center, Inc.; The City of Asheville; Date My City; My Daddy Taught Me That; The Support Center; Minority Enterprise Development Committee; Bank of North Carolina; Barley’s Taproom and Pizzeria; Blueridge Biofuels; MB Haynes Corporation; McGill Associates; Prestige Subaru; Self-Help Credit Union; Signarama; Wholesale Glass and Mirror Company; and Salvage Station (Asheville Goombay Festival 2016b). The three-day 2016 festival was organized according to a full schedule of activities. Some of the activities consisted of an art show curated by a local community-building organization called Hood Huggers International; a “tour” presenting the histories of the YMI, Goombay, and African American neighborhoods in Asheville; a step show; a “hair show competition” entitled Heritage: A Journey through Hair; a block party at South Market Street’s Triangle Park, the walls of which display a community mural depicting the history of the block; a formal presentation on the block’s history; a ceremony honoring local “elders”; two community forums on obstacles to personal success and African American economics; workshops on African drumming, hip-hop, and circus acts; a parade featuring the Zulu Connection stilt walkers of New Orleans as well as colorfully-clad drummers and dancers; spoken-word poetry; Mossa Kan dance troupe performances; performances by DJ Kool, local artists Lyric, Free Flow, DJ Supaman, Santos, and Project Negus, as well as jazz, funk, rhythm and blues, and gospel music performances (Asheville Goombay Festival 2016a). The festival also now features more than sixty vendors offering a variety of “West African”, “Caribbean”, and African American cultural wares and foods (Saylor 2016). All of these elements collectively make Goombay a boon to Asheville’s tourist economy.

Given the financial motivations of Asheville’s agricultural fair and music festival of the early and mid-1900s, as well as the city’s dependence upon regular tourist consumption, the monetization of Goombay was perhaps inevitable. The situation recalls that of the Caribbean island nation of the Bahamas, where avid Euro-American tourism has encouraged the faithful holding of the Goombay Summer Festival in the capital city of Nassau, specifically in an area called Arawak Cay, “Arawak” designating the original inhabitants of the Caribbean. Since gaining independence from Britain in 1973, the Bahamas, in its efforts toward solvency, has relied mainly on appealing to tourists’ appetite for experiencing African Bahamian culture as a non-threatening, pleasurable spectacle of vivid color, food, drink, smiling drummers, dancing brown bodies in costume, and blithe celebration. Other similar festivals could be mentioned here as well, such as the annual Bahamian American Goombay festival in Coconut Grove, Florida, and different forms of West Indian Carnival which occur across much

of the Caribbean, in Canada, and in such European and North American cities as Paris, Rotterdam, Leeds, Manchester, Raleigh, Baltimore, New Orleans, and Worcester.<sup>22</sup> One wonders if carefully scripted, pre-packaged cultural exhibitions like the Bahamian Goombay Summer Festival would even exist without the weight of tourists' expectations. One also wonders if the neoliberal pressures of the international tourist economy impose upon African Bahamians and other African-descended communities a procedure of myopic historical remembrance designed to sate the adventurism of western and other global travel markets.

A sense of this adventurism and its predilection for the exotic is evoked by some of the language used to market Asheville's Goombay Festival, and by certain popular activities listed on the festival's 2016 schedule. An excerpted statement from a published description of the festival reads, "[The] Goombay Festival lives up to its West African name, meaning of 'rhythm or drum,' with *eclectic* (emphasis added) sounds, *vibrant, multicolored sights* (emphasis added) and the *tantalizing* (emphasis added) aroma of *exotic* (emphasis added) foods reflecting a multiplicity of cultures and traditions" (Our History 2014). The festival's activities are divisible into at least two general categories: those disposed toward aesthetic performance and a semi-educative cultural experience, and toward the creation of a consumable multisensory spectacle and public entertainment, and those disposed toward historical reflection and collective edification. Activities falling under the first category (the above referenced art show, hair show competition, African drumming and circus act workshops, parade, dance and hip-hop performances, etc.) deliver on the festival description's titillating promise of furnishing an "eclectic, vibrant, multicolored, tantalizing" and "exotic" experience for attendees and far outweigh, both in number and focus, activities under the second category. It can be said that activities from the first category facilitate a kind of amusing mercantilistic cultural adventure, whereas activities from the second category (the historical tour of Goombay, the YMI, and African American neighborhoods in Asheville, the presentation on the history of the block, the ceremonial honoring of local elders, and the community forums) acknowledge Asheville's African American past and its relationship to communal well-being in the present.

Taking a long historical view that reaches back just before the time of Asheville's first Colored Agricultural Fair, one might suggest a loose affinity between Goombay, the Negro Buildings of the international world's fairs of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and the African American-organized Emancipation expositions that took place between 1910 and the 1960s in Philadelphia, Atlantic City, New York City, Chicago, and other cities with then burgeoning African American populations. Goombay does try to address the issue of African American cultural identity, albeit in a less than clear, rather cursory manner. However, the world's fairs' Negro Buildings and the Emancipation expositions addressed themselves to the selfsame issue in a much more lucid way that strategically and publicly engaged African Americans' memory of themselves, America's "collective historical memory" of the African American experience, and that of other global nations.<sup>23</sup> Architectural design scholar Mabel Wilson theorizes this strategic mnemonic engagement of the African American, national American, and international publics:

Through a unique curatorial ethic that governed the content of these mainstream and segregated events, black men and women created and circulated public narratives of who

<sup>22</sup> The names of some of these festivals are as follows: Antigua Carnival, Batabano (Cayman Islands), Crucian Christmas Carnival (St. Croix), Carifesta (Montreal, Quebec), Cariwest (Edmonton, Alberta), Carnaval Tropical de Paris, Zomercarnaval (Rotterdam, the Netherlands), Leeds West Indian Carnival (United Kingdom), Caribbean Carnival of Manchester (United Kingdom), CaribMask Carnival (Raleigh, North Carolina), Baltimore/Washington One Caribbean Carnival (Baltimore, Maryland), Bayou Bacchanal (New Orleans, Louisiana), and Caribbean American Carnival (Worcester, Massachusetts).

<sup>23</sup> Historian Darin Waters argues for the "democratization" of America's "collective historical memory," an argument that comports fairly well with the sociomnemonic strategy of the Negro Buildings and Emancipation expositions. See Darin Waters. "Whose Story? Democratizing America's Collective Historical Memory" (Waters 2014).

they were and wanted to become—ideologies of history and progress that transformed over time in relation to changing economic, social, and political forces (Wilson 2012, p. 4).

The Negro Buildings and Emancipation expositions, Wilson argues, were curated with the aim of propagating a historically grounded yet adaptable self-defining narrative of hard-won liberation from chattel bondage into steady, humanizing “progress,” a narrative that speaks to the concerns later raised by Cruse in his analysis of the cultural crisis facing African Americans. Though spectacles of a sort to be certain, these exhibitions nonetheless evinced a degree of intentionality around memory and identity not found in Asheville’s Goombay Festival. That being the case, it becomes possible to interpret Goombay largely as an “othering” spectacle of Africana exotica unwittingly rooted both in the festive nineteenth-century minstrelsy of Happy John and in the early modern European pastime of gazing upon objects and bodies of non-European origin with a pricking, prodding, voyeuristic eye.

Benjamin Schmidt describes this centuries-old pastime well:

Especially during their most intense period of geographic production . . . the final decades of the seventeenth century and the first few of the eighteenth . . . Europeans were invited, in an impressive array of forms and venues, to observe an expressly “exotic” body: a body located explicitly beyond the borders of Europe, and a body meant to remain outside of Europe. This exotic corporality had distinctive qualities, several of which recur often enough to suggest an exotic archetype. Europe’s exotic body was a site of sexual “perversion”: of titillating sexual practices, typically characterized as “lewd” and obscene, and registering with the narrator of these descriptions . . . equal measure of abhorrence and fascination . . . . And the exotic body was elaborately staged. It was meant to be *seen* by its European audience, indubitably enticed by what they saw, and its presentation was predicated on a presumed voyeurism on the part of this European audience. The latter was encouraged to look at, and simultaneously warned of, the dreadfulness and perversity of that which was witnessed on the exotic stage (Schmidt 2015, pp. 163–64).

A crucial relationship exists between the imperial transgeographic voyages embarked upon by European adventurers during and after the so-called Age of Discovery and the othering practice of exoticism. An illustrative example of this relationship is Dutch sailmaker and sailor Jan Struys’ bestselling autobiographical travelogue *The Voiages and Travels of John Struys*. The book painstakingly details Struys’ harrowing experience of violent storms, slavery, heinous cruelties, and profound deprivation during his sojourns in Sierra Leone, Madagascar, Indonesia, Thailand, Taiwan, Japan, the Dutch East Indies, and elsewhere in the late 1640s and early 1650s (Struys 1684, pp. 3–12, 45–50, 227–33). The ramifications of encounters with foreign geographies and their inhabitants had by Struys and many other imperialist adventurers were not limited to Europe’s eventual political expansion; they also included a peculiarly urgent psychological need to create, measure, and fortify the European world’s sense of identity against the seductive, vilely grotesque yet “noble” strangeness of non-European, non-Western others.<sup>24</sup> These foreign encounters provided adventurers like Struys the opportunity to participate in the discursive construction of a culturally civilized, Christian European West contrasted sharply by barbarous pagan exotics in far-flung locales whose bodies and lifeways became subjects of sanctimonious criticism and entertaining consumption.

The Asheville Goombay Festival inhabits and thus helps to define a geography with a long history of discursive erasure vis-à-vis African American others that not only nourishes the fabricated local color myth of a pure, exotic white presence in southern Appalachia, but also shares in the process of Euro-American mythic self-narration. In the wake of this far-ranging history, Goombay

<sup>24</sup> Recall the early appearance of the idealized “noble savage” concept in Englishman John Dryden’s 1672 stage play *The Conquest of Granada by the Spaniards: In Two Parts, Acted at the Theater-Royall*. This concept was seized upon by late eighteenth and nineteenth-century Romanticism.

ultimately strives to liberate and unify people across racial lines through celebratory, entertaining sensual excitation and perfunctory historicocultural education that makes spectacular use of Africana exotica. Still, it remains questionable whether the festival has ever realized its goal beyond supplying a space wherein liberal-minded white Ashevilleans and tourists can merrily engage and consume negatively raced, African-descended others, thereby bolstering their sense of progressive white liberal identity. Goombay welcomes its own reinstrumentalization as a public vehicle not primarily for the nurturance of African-descended, Affrilachian identity, but for the contrastive cultivation of a positively raced white, solidarity-seeking political identity, further underscoring the importance of reimagining the festival.

A reimagining of Asheville's Goombay Festival is aided by cross-cultural interface with an African diasporic, mnemonically potent religiocultural institution elsewhere that is not dependent upon corporate sponsorship or unduly influenced by the preferences of modern tourists. As the work of anthropologist Alexis Bunten signals, avoidance of such an interface leaves unchallenged the culturally disfiguring but profitable Western tropes of representation that shape the tourism industry globally. In a sense basically consistent with Schmidt's analysis, tropes of this kind exotify African/African-descended, non-Western, and indigenous people by contributing to a worldwide economic system that incentivizes them toward personal commodification for financial gain and touristic enjoyment, a self-alienating phenomenon Bunten refers to as "autoexoticism" (Bunten 2010, p. 51). Historically grounded cross-cultural interface with Gumbay Play enables reflection on an African Jamaican spiritual institution confronted with the multidimensionally violent legacy of slavery and British imperialism in Jamaica beginning in 1655 when Britain seized control of the island from Spain.

Dianne Stewart has the following to say concerning the experience of slavery in Jamaica prior to its legal abolition by the British crown in 1834, which made enslaved Africans indentured servants and led to their complete emancipation in 1838:

Unfortunately, the institution of slavery required censorship, destabilization, and dehumanization of Africans and their cultures in order to flourish. Enslaved Africans had limited clandestine space to produce and institutionalize social customs, not to mention religious rituals. Thus Europeans glimpsed a fraction of African culture and religion in what they observed as antipathetic outsiders. The European gaze was intrusive and untrustworthy, and Africans knew it. Much of what Africans thought and did as religious beings was safeguarded within the boundaries of African communal life (Stewart 2005, p. 30).

The abolition of slavery in Jamaica was hastened by slave rebellions that occurred during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Exceeded in number by enslaved Africans imported into Jamaica from the Bight of Biafra and Gulf of Guinea islands between the early 1600s and mid-1850s, the Akan of southern Ghana, a major factor in the slave rebellions, constituted the second largest percentage of Jamaica's enslaved population, and by 1740 many Akan escapees were operating within the mountainous interior of St. Elizabeth parish as autonomous, militarily formidable Maroon communities whose political independence was officially but "incompletely" recognized by the British through treaties concluded the previous year (Eltis and Richardson 2013; Schuler 1970, p. 378; Kopytoff 1973). Moreover, it should be pointed out that the colonial regime installed in Jamaica before emancipation favored Africans who underwent Christian conversion. Stewart explains,

Becoming a Christian, in many cases, meant having the opportunity to learn how to read and write along with the opportunity to receive standard theological training. This offered converts more potential for upward mobility than the ancestral religions of Africa. For example, in honor of African emancipation from enslavement, the Bible Society of England granted 'a copy of the Testament and Psalter to those of the emancipated who possessed the ability to read on the first of August 1834' (Stewart 2005, p. 93).

From this abbreviated explanation, one can deduce that Gumbay Play, by virtue of it being a non-Christian ritual institution linked to other non-Christian ritual institutions with pronounced



cultural ties to West—and probably Central—Africa, was in sundry ways a target of suppression in post-emancipation Jamaica. Hence its lesser known presence relative to the Native Baptist (ca. 1830s), Revival Zion (ca. 1860–1861), and Rastafari (ca. 1930s) traditions, all of which have impacted each other and Jamaican society (Stewart 2005, p. 101). The preceding details provide some historical context for a discussion of Gumbay Play, to which we presently direct our attention.

## 7. Gumbay Play

Ethnographer Kenneth Bilby associates Gumbay Play in St. Elizabeth with two other African diasporic spiritual practices known as Myal and Jonkonnu. Anthropologist Martha Beckwith would add to this trio Obeah, another spiritual practice likely of West or Central African origin (Beckwith 1929, p. 151; Beckwith 1928, pp. 10–11, 50; Williams 1932; Cassidy and LePage 1967; Patterson 1975; Barrett 1976a, 1976b). Scholarly literature before the 1930s is nearly unanimous in declaring Obeah the criminally evil nemesis of Myal. But this perspective has been seriously weakened by recent studies highlighting Obeah and Myal as “avenues to neutral mystical power” and as legacies of “spiritual intelligence and subversive resistance” to enslavement (Stewart 2005, pp. 61, 68; Crosson 2015). Stewart claims that descriptions of Obeah and Myal recorded in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries by missionary George Blyth and other observers do not support a morally-based distinction between Obeah and Myal:

... the weight of testimony contests characterizations of Obeah as evil and Myal as good and suggests that the most striking distinction between Obeah and Myal is not moral but possibly structural. While Obeah is often described as a practice for individuals as well as groups, Myal is *only* described as a religious ceremony, an association based upon corporate duty, which featured charismatic leaders with identifiable groups and adherents (Stewart 2005, pp. 48–49).

A distinguishing structural characteristic of Obeah and Myal is found in the practice of spirit manifestation, which in this case is the ritualized procedure of allowing one’s body to serve as a communicative, ambulatory vessel through which ancestral spirits impart knowledge to their descendants and other humans. It seems that spirit manifestation via ecstatic dance is more common among Myal specialists known as *myal-men* or *myal-women/umen* than among Obeah practitioners (Stewart 2005, p. 65; Bilby 1999, p. 55). Nonetheless, both Obeah and Myal have been significant within the ceremonial program of Jonkonnu in St. Elizabeth parish since the pre-emancipation period.

Historically, the ceremonial program of Jonkunnu in the town of Nassau, St. Elizabeth emphasizes purposeful communion with ancestral spirits. Not to be confused with the tourist-pitched Junkanoo Summer Festival in the Bahamas, the word “Jangkunu” in Nassau also signifies an elaborately constructed, house-shaped headdress (the great house) containing doll-shaped objects and other small carved statuary worn during ritual dancing for ancestral spirits at local cemeteries (Bilby 1999, pp. 50, 57, 60–61). The making of the headdress, for which Myal specialists are usually responsible, is preceded by a “feast” of boiled, unsalted goat’s meat and rum, a ritual Beckwith associates with Obeah (Bilby 1999, p. 50; Beckwith 1929, p. 151). Typically made of wood and other colorful materials, the headdress, the purpose of which is to help “catch” or invoke ancestral spirits, is destroyed upon the removal of its contents and the satisfaction of the ancestors after an annual ritual procession that takes place during the Christmas season. The night before the destruction of the headdress, a compulsory Gumbay Play ceremony is performed involving intense drumming, singing (*myal sing*), and dancing (*myal dance*) intended to solicit approval and knowledge from the ancestors (Bilby 1999, pp. 50, 55–56, 60–61).

While Jonkonnu occurs annually during the Christmas season, Gumbay Play ceremonies are performed any time on an as-needed basis, and are generally therapeutic in nature (Bilby 1999, pp. 55, 57). Therefore, Gumbay Play can be understood as a separate ritual institution not dependent upon Jonkonnu. “Gumbay” designates an older type of rectangular-shaped, frequently

sheepskin-covered drum heavily used in Jonkonnu bands and in Gumbay Play ceremonies. The conch shell (the shell of a large sea snail) is another vital Gumbay Play implement utilized by the myal-man or myal-woman conducting the ceremony. Bilby's account of Gumbay Play in the Nassau community of St. Elizabeth is instructive:

At the centre of Gumbay Play is the religious specialist known as the *myal-man* or *myal-uman* . . . . When spiritual assistance is needed, the *myal-man* calls a Gumbay Play ceremony, which is announced by the blowing of a conch shell . . . the notes blown on the shell invite both the living and the spirits of local ancestors to the ceremony. Although a wide range of problems can be handled by the myal-man, ceremonies are most often held for the purpose of healing . . . Once the myal-man achieves the desired state of myal [ancestral spirit manifestation] . . . he is usually directed by the spirit to make his way down to one of the family cemeteries . . . where he is expected to dance in the presence of the ancestors, and to receive additional spiritual counsel from them (Bilby 1999).

Many vectors of epistemological meaning pertaining to Gumbay Play could be explored. However, for the purposes of this article, I will consider only two: ancestral memory and cultural identity. I will address some of the implications of these vectors for an epistemological reimagining of Asheville's Goombay Festival along mnemonic lines attentive to the interlaced problems of African American cultural identity in Asheville and Affrilachian cultural identity in western North Carolina.

## 8. Ancestral Memory, Cultural Identity, and a Reimagining of Asheville's Goombay Festival

One notes from the foregoing treatment that, far from being an exemplar of commodification or Christianization, the early history of Gumbay Play in western Jamaica's St. Elizabeth parish is punctuated by acute attention to the functionality of ancestral memory in generating and sustaining a dynamic, salutary identity consciousness tied to the community and region. Unlike Goombay in Asheville, Gumbay Play does not operate principally as a lighthearted festive space calibrated to fulfill the cultural expectations of extrinsic actors who existentially share neither the historical experience nor the memory or identity-related concerns and imperatives of the St. Elizabeth community. As a spiritual institution Gumbay Play demonstrates a communal, mnemonic ritual focus rather than an eagerness for external social intercourse with privileged transients whose cultural and identity interests are not congruent with those of the community directly benefiting from the spiritual efficacy of Gumbay Play.

The cardinal goals of Gumbay Play's ritual program are the maintenance of cultural identity and communal well-being through the fostering of ancestral memory that grounds the residents of St. Elizabeth historically, geographically, epistemologically, and spiritually. In short, Gumbay Play is a sociocultural node of identity formation whereby the lives of individuals and the community meet to enable collective access to vital, edifying spiritual power through active remembrance of ancestral histories, experiences, and knowledge. Gumbay Play can thus also be understood as a mnemonic cultural institution.

The sacred sound of particular musical notes blown through the conch shell by a Myal specialist "announces" a need to perform Gumbay Play and invites "both the living and the spirits of local ancestors to the ceremony." Gumbay Play reaches its zenith when, accompanied by skilled drumming and singing, the Myal specialist—under the direction of a bodily manifested ancestral spirit—dances in the presence of other ancestral spirits at a local family cemetery so as to manifest ancestral power, memory, knowledge, and "counsel."<sup>25</sup> I would suggest that Gumbay Play's key components—the deliberative blowing of the conch shell, drumming, singing, ancestral spirit manifestation, and

<sup>25</sup> Adding to the existing body of literature on ancestral spiritualities of the Caribbean, a recent article by Harcourt Fuller notes the centrality of ancestral veneration in the sacred musical traditions of Jamaica's Windward Maroons. These traditions are anchored in the memory of the great eighteenth-century Maroon chieftainness Queen Nanny (Granny Nanny). See Harcourt Fuller, "Maroon History, Music, and Sacred Sounds in the Americas: A Jamaican Case" (Fuller 2017).

specialized dancing before local ancestral spirits—work together as sacred musical performances to galvanize communal participation in a mnemonic experience of cultural identity rooted not in Christian imperial or autoexotifying neoliberal scripts but in Igbo, Guinean, Akan, and other African epistemological repertoires of ancestral origin. The sacrality of these musical performances confers upon the St. Elizabeth community's ancestral memory and sense of cultural identity a sacred, inviolable status opposed to erosive incursions. Indeed, one can say that the embodied music of Gumbay Play is itself carefully fashioned to strengthen the relationship between the community's memory and cultural identity; that is, musical sound in the context of Gumbay Play is just as much a mnemonic medium of knowing as it is a medium of performance. The sounds and danced movements of Gumbay Play are epistemological techniques that aid in transmitting the content of ancestral memory as well as the discrete identity consciousness it produces. Members of the community are empowered by the sacred soundscape and spirit-mounted, dancing Myalist of Gumbay Play to publicly assert a localized historical memory and cultural understanding of themselves in relation to their ancestors, the parish of St. Elizabeth, the region of western Jamaica, and the African continent. In this way, the community's cultural identity and sense of coherence are at once supported and propagated.

So what relevance does our analysis of Gumbay Play have to the epistemological challenge posed by the local question of African American cultural identity in Asheville and its role in the constructive project of Affrilachian identity formation in western North Carolina? Might Gumbay Play inform a preliminary epistemological reimagining of the festival that stretches its mnemonic reach to encompass broader Affrilachian lifeworlds?

An affirmative response to both questions prompts recollection of the festival's objectives: cultivation of an experience of economic ownership in the local African American community; mercantilistic African and Caribbean, African American, and wider African diasporic cultural celebration; arts-based cultural education; public entertainment, and hospitable multiracial inclusion of the city's broader community and seasonal tourists. If we ponder these objectives in conjunction with the festival's sponsorships, more questions arise: What are the primary factors governing *how* the festival remembers and presents the "richness and diversity of the African Diaspora and Asheville's African American community"? To what degree are the festival's organizing principles grounded in an understanding of the cultural histories of West and Central Africa, and those of diasporaed African-descended communities in the Caribbean, North America, and elsewhere? Is the festival doing any reflective work pertinent to the cultural crisis differentially probed by the aforementioned E. Franklin Frazier, Harold Cruse and, more recently, Frank X Walker? If so, what is the result of this work, and how does the result compare to the local African American community's present sense of cultural identity relative to the western North Carolina region? What accounts for the festival's apparent marginalization of Affrilachian identity? Whose interests are served by the festival?

If educative cultural celebration is a central trope of Asheville's Goombay Festival, then it is abundantly unclear what exactly participants are being directed to understand and appreciate, apart from the importance of local African American economic ownership and a few relatively well-known parochial histories. The organizing principles underlying the festival's composition are almost as unclear. To be sure, Goombay has never been explicitly imagined by its organizers in strictly mnemonic, identity-based, or spiritual terms, and is a cultural phenomenon in its own right. Nonetheless, the festival appears primed for a future of unchecked commodification that recalls Asheville's Happy John minstrel tradition. In addition, the research of Benjamin Schmidt and Alexis Bunten leads to the realization that Goombay also seems ripe for a future of ever-increasing susceptibility to the timeworn but still popular European-derived tradition of exotifying, culturally distortive entertainment at the expense of non-European others who knowingly or unknowingly participate in their own self-alienation.

The probability of Goombay's continued touristic co-optation brings into sharper relief the cross-cultural relevance of Gumbay Play. With its epistemological emphasis on an indissoluble relationship between regional geography, ancestral memory, and cultural identity, Gumbay Play

offers a trajectory for reimagining the Asheville Goombay Festival in a manner that expands its mnemonic range to include Affrilachian experiences in western North Carolina. Gumbay Play foregrounds a reimaginative trajectory predicated upon an implicit principle of constructive reciprocity. In other words, within the ritual environment Gumbay Play creates, cultural identity is forged through a mutual interplay between local and non-local experiences, both of which are formatively connected to a constellation of other historical experiences had by physically (but not spiritually) departed ancestral personages across multiple time periods and geographies inclusive of but not restricted to the parish of St. Elizabeth and the region of western Jamaica. As examples of possible subjects of ancestral remembrance inside the setting of Gumbay Play, one could cite the early leeward Maroon communities of the 1740s; enslaved Native Baptist preacher Sam Sharpe, who in 1831–1832 planned and led an initially non-violent insurrection beginning in St. James parish that was joined by more than one thousand slaves, and contributed to the abolition of slavery in Jamaica two years later ([Campbell 1987](#), p. 26); and the nationally famous Kumina queen/priest Imogene Kennedy from the eastern parish of St. Thomas. Kumina, a dynamic (but often ignored and maligned) post-emancipation religion of BaKongo origin that was introduced into eastern Jamaica by indentured African laborers, is headed by powerful female leaders (“queens”) such as the late Kennedy who are believed to possess the secrets of Myal ([Stewart 2005](#), pp. 141, 150, 154; [Early 2014](#)).

Despite being historically concentrated in the eastern part of Jamaica, Kumina’s comprehensive mnemonic embrace renders Kennedy a fitting subject of ancestral remembrance in Gumbay Play. Stewart expounds that “At the core of Kumina culture is a collective memory, grief, and indignation regarding African people’s capture, exile, enslavement, and oppression by whites . . . . All of the Kumina practitioners I interviewed [including Kennedy] identified their heritage in Jamaica with the period of African enslavement” ([Stewart 2005](#), p. 145). At the heart of both Kumina and Gumbay Play, then, are Myalists who do not confine ancestral memory to any single locality in Jamaica. Local ancestral memory is therefore never merely local. Rather, it enhances the articulability of non-local identities, just as non-local ancestral memory enhances the articulability of local identities. Thus it is probable that Kumina and Gumbay Play practitioners would welcome ancestral mnemonic engagement with other African Jamaican spiritual traditions like Convince, Ananse, Ettu, Tambu, Gerreh, Dinki Mini, Ni-Nite, Brukin’ Party, and Zella ([Stewart 2005](#), p. 141).

What can Asheville’s Goombay Festival learn from Gumbay Play? One lesson involves the question of African American cultural identity in Asheville. Gumbay Play’s principle of constructive reciprocity impels a dialectical reframing of this question not restricted to its local dimensions. African American cultural identity in this setting becomes an epistemological question filtered through the prism of geography as well as those of local and translocal ancestral memory. Hence, to ask what it means to be African American in Asheville is to simultaneously ask what it means to be Affrilachian in western North Carolina, and vice versa.

To be clear, I am not advocating a reimagining of Goombay that subordinates the local to the non-local or the non-local to the local. Goombay’s ancestral mnemonic embrace may conceivably include slaves sold at auction within the space the festival now occupies, the minstrel Happy John, and Asheville natives like Mary Jane Dickson Harris, one of the city’s first African American teachers; Paul Dusenbury, an early teacher at Stephens-Lee High School who went on to serve as the principal of Hill Street Elementary School, Hudgins High School in Marion, North Carolina, and Dunbar Elementary School in Forest City, North Carolina ([Heritage of Black Highlanders Collection 1888–1972a, 1888–1972b](#)); Isaiah Rice, a World War II veteran, community leader, and “Appalachian urban folk photographer” whose unique and voluminous photographic archive has recently been recognized as a major artistic contribution to the history of African Americans in Asheville from the 1950s to the 1970s ([Keenan 2016](#); [Waters et al. 2017](#)); and comedienne-actress Shirley Hemphill of the sitcoms *What’s Happening!* and *What’s Happening Now!*

Guided by Gumbay Play’s principle of constructive reciprocity, the Asheville Goombay Festival might also stimulate the process of local African American cultural identity formation through ancestral

mnemonic embrace of other non-local African American western North Carolinians. Some of these may include Sarah Gudger, a woman born into slavery near Old Fort in McDowell County who valued family, education, and the liberty to “move where she pleased” (Nash 2016, p. 47); Joe Anderson, a Madison County brickmason and enslaved laborer who in the 1850s was temporarily imprisoned as collateral for a debt owed to contractors for the building of Mars Hill College (Davis 1986, p. 6); Silvester Michael, a free farmer and property owner in McDowell County in 1860; George Mills, a Confederate soldier from Henderson County who was a body servant to Captain Walter Bryson and, after the Civil War, an active member of the Henderson County Chapter of the Confederate Veterans Association (Davis 1986, pp. 7–8); Transylvania County’s Loretta Mary Aiken (Jackie “Moms” Mabley), a pioneering twentieth-century comedienne and vaudeville performer; and Polk County’s Nina Simone, an internationally acclaimed multigenre pianist, singer, composer, and civil rights activist. These and countless other examples push the boundaries of Goombay’s mnemonic range in the direction of western North Carolina’s diverse Affrilachian component. In a refractory way, they also return us to the epistemological question of African American cultural identity in Asheville while prompting consideration of another lesson to be learned from Gumbay Play.

Neither Gumbay Play nor the referencing of the above ancestral personages should be interpreted as nostalgic romanticism or as any other purely ideological exercise. Rather, what must be understood is that Gumbay Play and its principle of constructive reciprocity bring into view the possibility of new performative configurations for Goombay that involve a balanced, inclusive mnemonic amplification leading to an epistemological revisitation of the complexity of local African American cultural identity in light of the heterogeneous Affrilachian lifeworlds of western North Carolina. It is by way of this analytical revisitation in connection with the interrelated histories outlined previously that another of Gumbay Play’s lessons surfaces: the process of African American cultural identity formation in Asheville is a matter of utmost *sacred* concern, as is the embedded process of Affrilachian cultural identity formation.

This means that Goombay’s posture toward the histories and ancestral figures influencing the local African American and broader Affrilachian cultural experiences would be characterized less by strategic consumerism and more by studious reverence in pursuit of a transregionally inclusive yet localized sense of cultural identity. Instead of deprioritizing, for example, the particular history of slavery in Asheville and western North Carolina, the indefinite history and problematic associations accompanying the term “Appalachian”, the displacement of the Cherokee and their African-descended slaves during the infamous Trail of Tears episode, the negative impact of the historical fantasies disseminated by local color writers, and the stories of Joe Anderson, George Mills, and Happy John, Goombay would treat these elements as some of the threads weaving the intricate fabric of African American Asheville and Affrilachian experience. They would therefore be considered relevant to the process of cultural identity formation, and would be engaged accordingly.

What’s more, the Asheville Goombay Festival so reimagined would encourage reverent exploration of cultural features specific to the southern Appalachian or western North Carolina region with known or possible African antecedents. Two examples that come to mind from our earlier discussion are western North Carolinian folk dance traditions and the African American banjo idiom in southern Appalachia and other areas. A third example is the persistence among African American and white mountaineers in southern Appalachia of a folk religion stereotypically described in popular and scholarly literature of the 1890s and early 1900s with reference to belief in “witchcraft, ghosts, haints, magic, signs, omens, sorcery, shamanism, fetishism, and superstitious practices” (Ziegler and Grosscup 1883, pp. 298–311; Porter 1894, pp. 106–7; Pierson 1897, p. 828; Doughty 1899, p. 391; Neve 1909, p. 617; Shearin 1911, pp. 319–22; Bradley 1915, pp. 440–42; Thomas 1918, pp. 78–79; Klotter 1985, p. 52). This example directs attention not only to the application of colonial categories to southern Appalachian folk religion, but also to a variegated religious landscape not completely defined by forms of Protestant fundamentalism, as many studies suggest (Abell 1982; Covington 1995; Blanton 2015).



In order to promote a more thorough understanding of the role of folk religion in the epistemological equations of African American cultural identity in Asheville and Affrilachian cultural identity, Goombay would incorporate activities (practitioner led-seminars, for instance) that increase the local community's familiarity with particular beliefs and ritual practices. Also to be addressed would be the lengthy history of discursive colonization of the indigenous religiocultural systems of West and Central Africa, as well as those of North America, and the relationship of this history to the local color movement and to contemporary popular American attitudes toward southern Appalachian folk traditions.

Finally, Gumbay Play's reimaginative trajectory creates space to reevaluate the connection within Asheville's Goombay Festival between sound, performance, and cultural identity. The foregoing analysis holds that the ritual program of Gumbay Play sacralizes the cultural identity of the St. Elizabeth community in western Jamaica. It additionally holds that the program's musical soundscape and performative repertoire are circumspectly designed for this purpose such that the ceremonial blowing of the conch shell, drumming, singing, and spirit-directed dancing that take place stimulate ancestral mnemonic encounters that nourish cultural identity. Goombay's soundscape and performative repertoire include African-inspired drumming, dancers in African garb, staged jazz, funk, rhythm and blues, hip-hop, spoken-word and gospel performances, stilt walking, and other spectacles which, when taken together, result in a kind of incoherent cultural parading.

The festival also incorporates historical activities, two previously stated examples being a presentation on the history of the block and a ceremony commemorating local elders. A reimagining of Goombay informed by Gumbay Play might reconfigure the festival's soundscape and performative repertoire to better reflect the reverent attitude of the ceremony for elders. This would take advantage of Goombay's latent ancestral mnemonic potential in a way that prioritizes the role of ancestral knowledge in the development of African American Asheville and Affrilachian cultural identity. Goombay's sounds and performances would be geared less toward vague, touristic celebration and more toward establishing an atmosphere that sacralizes the dynamic project of cultural identity formation. In brief, Goombay would become a local mnemonic institution wherein an African American Asheville and Affrilachian identity epistemology mediated by performed sound and ancestral memory could flourish.

## 9. Conclusions

The proposal I have advanced reconceives the Asheville Goombay Festival in accordance with ancestral mnemonic and epistemological possibilities spawned by constructive cross-cultural investigation of Gumbay Play in historical view of the inextricably conjoined cultural problems of what it means to be African American in Asheville and Affrilachian in western North Carolina. This reconception is contextualized against a many-layered historical backdrop that considers southern Appalachia and western North Carolina, the origin and meaning of the term "Affrilachian," the African American cultural identity crisis elaborated by Cruse, the African American presence in Asheville, the story of Asheville's Goombay Festival, and the sociocultural setting of Gumbay Play in post-emancipation Jamaica.

Some critics may respond inversely by asking what Gumbay Play can learn from Goombay in Asheville. While to be expected, this response is nevertheless well outside the purview of this study. Others might worry that my proposal lends itself to the problem of ethnic identity essentialism, or even to a spiritualized ethnocentrism out of step with the ever-shifting nuances of ethnic lifeworlds in North America. However, such concern would indicate a misinterpretation of the adduced analysis. The intention of the analysis is not to provide a means for retreat into an ethnocultural provincialism. Rather, the intention is to specify an alternative epistemological trajectory for historically cognizant cultural self-definition enhanced by time-proven traditions found in other African diasporas. The urgent importance of this processual trajectory is clarified by the historical erasure of the African American presence in southern Appalachia along with slavery and Jim Crow's legacy of assigning to African Americans a subhuman, cultureless criminal identity, a legacy still very much alive in America today

as evidenced by disproportionate African American incarceration statistics and the Black Lives Matter movement (Alexander 2010; Nellis 2016, p. 3).

Still other critics may contend that my analysis is too narrow, that it is unduly limited to the contexts of Asheville and western North Carolina. To this I would respond that the problems observed in the Asheville Goombay Festival are common among similar festivals like the CaribMask Carnival in Raleigh, North Carolina, the Baltimore/Washington One Caribbean Carnival in Baltimore, Maryland, Bayou Bacchanal in New Orleans, Louisiana, and the Caribbean American Carnival in Worcester, Massachusetts. Furthermore, as Cruse's historical assessment suggests, the problem of African American cultural identity formation is national in scope. My aim is not to ignore or reduce the overall scale of the problem. To the contrary, the purpose of this article is to constructively "drill down" into the problem from the local theater of Asheville in hopes of generating insights of use to African-descended communities in other regions throughout North America facing similar struggles. To paraphrase and recontextualize the timely words of Trinidadian scholar of African Caribbean languages and orature Maureen Warner-Lewis, one wonders at the sense of purpose that could be unleashed in African American people, if either through spiritual or secular means, or both, a sense of participation in a long historical process could be fostered (Warner-Lewis 1977, p. 77).

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