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From the Islands to the Motherland

Motivic Traveling in Contemporary Gospel Music

Lauren Eldridge Stewart

Black gospel music does a lot of traveling. This traveling is partially represented by choirs in Europe and Asia who invite in Black American clinicians such as Donald Lawrence and Jason Nelson,¹ and Korean and Japanese choruses that tour U.S. churches and perennially amaze via social media platforms. Across national and cultural boundaries, gospel music stars have long traveled far and wide to carry their message, and their stylistic choices have moved even farther. In fact, I would propose that this type of physical traveling is made possible by what I call “motivic traveling,” a practice whereby musicians adopt and use influences geographically distant from the historical origins and the attendant traditional narratives of their genres, but still within a field of exchange and ideas.² This field extends across geographic and cultural boundaries. Motives are “short, musical ideas” that can be characterized by their harmony, melody, rhythm or combinations thereof.³ Elements such as groove and timbre heavily influence these ideas, as they are central in many conceptions of the gospel music genre. Motives are by their very nature movable, displaceable, traveling because the musical idea is substantial enough to be identified as such. In this article, I will focus on the motivic traveling practiced by Black American gospel musicians. Motivic traveling is found at the origins of gospel music and throughout its history. To employ a set of linguistic tropes frequently used by Black American gospel musicians, this article examines this motivic travel as a

few of its proponents head “to the islands” and prepare for a journey “back to the motherland.”⁴

This article is a close reading of the music and actions of a select set of Black American musicians, though the framework of motivic traveling is not limited to African diasporic musical practice. My discussion is not exhaustive and does not account for the ways in which the building blocks of the gospel genre—foundational organizational principles such as harmony, rhythm, repetition, and call and response—are deeply embedded in all of these sites. This music garners a tremendous response and international reception in part because of diasporic recognition, the sort alluded to by Kenneth Warren in “Appeals for (Mis)recognition: Theorizing the Diaspora.”⁵ As a point of entry into this vibrant intellectual discourse, I focus here on the music of Black Americans. Further, the term “motivic traveling” may seem reminiscent of the practices of homage and signifying.⁶ This is hardly accidental, given the close relationship between homage and signifying, and the context that both terms provide for the reception of Black music. In fact, while discussing hip-hop music in an updated preface to the most recent edition of *The Signifying Monkey*, Henry Louis Gates points to signification as homage.⁷ Signifying works along two dimensions: past and present. Through acts of homage, DJs and producers are both repeating and revising along those two dimensions. By directing the listener’s attention to the spatial dimension, I am introducing a third

axis to this analysis, one that takes into account the cultural associations that define the contours of our racialized world.

Additionally, expressions of motivic traveling are not limited to diasporic or international exchange. A ready example of motivic traveling within a single nationality is offered by gospel music. The geographic regions of the continental United States have signature subgeneric sounds, all of which could be classified as gospel music, but each of which is closely associated with a region. The New York groove, made famous by artists like Hezekiah Walker, has earned ad-libbed callouts, akin to a cultural geo-tagging, on numerous other records nonnative to the region.⁸ The bass-guitar-and drum-heavy New York texture is not to be confused with the sound and danceability of Chicago-style choir music, which draws on both a community choir tradition and a choreography-inclined nature that shares city space with house music. Ricky Dillard and the New Generation Chorale is emblematic of this style, which traffics in the traditions set by Milton Brunson and the Thompson Community Choir and Father Charles G. Hayes and the Cosmopolitan Church of Prayer. Both the New York groove and Chicago-style choir are easily set apart from the lyrical dexterity of West Coast praise and worship style gospel as performed by voices such as Judith McAllister, the Hawkins family, and Andrae Crouch.⁹ What can be understood specifically by considering motivic traveling in a global context are the affective bonds and diasporic kinship practices deployed in the music. Additionally, much foundational gospel music research locates the elemental origins of the genre in West African sonic practice. In a passage evocative of this consensus, Pearl Williams-Jones writes

that “the cultural traditions and ideals of West Africa are the ultimate source from which the basic concept of a black aesthetic tradition is defined. . . . Black gospel music . . . retains the most noticeable African-derived aesthetic features of all.”¹⁰ Gospel as global phenomenon draws our attention to the flows of ideas across cultural boundaries, boundaries that are often physical and geographic in nature.

This article is concerned with the exchange of aesthetic values among gospel musicians throughout the African diaspora in the contemporary moment, but a bit of the history of this exchange is illustrative. The 1966 First World Festival of Negro Arts, in Dakar, Senegal,¹¹ was a UNESCO project hosted by ardent négritude theorist President Léopold Senghor. Artists from around the world made their pilgrimage to this celebration of what Samuel A. Floyd termed diaspora aesthetics¹²— among them Duke Ellington, Alvin Ailey, and Langston Hughes. These artists were motivated by the twin possibilities of cultural exchange and cultural familiarity, possibilities confirmed by the interactions noted in the local press. Connections flowed from multiple directions— germane to this article, historian Penny Von Eschen notes that Black American gospel musicians such as Mahalia Jackson and Marion Williams were very popular, receiving warm welcomes and enthusiastic audiences in spite of occasional language barriers. They took their “homecoming” seriously, using subsequent opportunities such as U.S. State Department tours to further connect with audiences around the world and throughout the African diaspora. These relationships formed at the level of musical motive, spurred by the density of diaspora aesthetic gesture in gospel music. Writing of this time period, Mark Burford

offers readings of Black gospel music as both “a register of West African cultural retentions that result in an African American vernacular distinctiveness” and a relational, rather than prescriptive, practice.¹³ In the 1960s, as well as today, Black gospel music creates an intangible network of meaning and connection, a network that has important ramifications for the continued development of the genre itself.

How do Black American musicians hear, imitate, and commune with other locations in the African diaspora? Particularly in the lineage-focused genre of gospel music, a sense of rootedness in tradition is valued, but innovation combined with even more/deeper roots is invaluable. The recordings profiled in this article provide a sense of location within diaspora, as elements appreciably foreign but not quite “other” aid in the wonder of worship.

Although the focus here is on contemporary gospel music, motivic traveling is also evident in numerous genres performed by Black Americans throughout the twentieth century. For example, ideas about Africa abound in jazz—listen to *Fleurette Africaine* by Duke Ellington (originally titled *La Plus Belle Africaine* and composed for the aforementioned Dakar festival), *A Night in Tunisia* by Dizzy Gillespie, or *Africa* by John Coltrane for clues as to how these ideas are threaded through the genre.¹⁴ A genre in which ideas about Africa are perhaps less frequently theorized is concert music by Black Americans throughout the twentieth century. Haiti has been a particularly fascinating subject for concert music; examples include *Ouanga* (1932) by Clarence Cameron White and *Troubled Island* (1938) by William Grant Still.¹⁵ During the same period, Shirley Graham Du Bois composed *TomTom: An*

Epic of Music and the Negro (1932), which depicts her ideas about the African continent before she relocated to Ghana and became a citizen in 1961, but after she studied at the Sorbonne in Paris and encountered Afro-diasporans from places other than the United States in 1926.¹⁶ In these pieces, and others like them, the composers express ideas about the Caribbean islands and the African continent through rhythmic and melodic motives. Throughout the first half of the twentieth century, syncopation and pentatonic structures were often intended to signify African identity, and Haiti was widely regarded as being the most African location outside of Africa.¹⁷ Thus, by imagining either Africa directly, or Haiti as a geographically nearer African proxy, the aforementioned composers were taking part in a diasporic conversation also emerging through the global travels of the Fisk Jubilee Singers and the mission spread of the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church. Much earlier points in this conversation have been taken up recently by Tsitsi Jaji and David Garcia, who also theorize about the function of music in the African diaspora.

Returning to the present moment, a review of motivic traveling in contemporary gospel music, with special attention to geographic location, might also focus on rhythmic and melodic motives intended to signify African and Afro-diasporic identity. An example of this is Donnie McClurkin’s *Caribbean Medley*.¹⁸ McClurkin’s 2000 project was followed by several waves of releases, such as *Alive in South Africa* by Israel and New Breed (2005), *Say Yes* by Michelle Williams (*Journey to Freedom*, 2014),¹⁹ and *Secret Place (Live in South Africa)* by Vashawn Mitchell (2016).²⁰ The titles of these albums—including the words “alive” and “journey” and reference to a

specific place—gesture toward movement and purpose. In each of these projects, U.S.-based performers refer their listeners to sites outside of the United States where they are commercially viable, where they glean inspiration, and where their influence boosts record sales and concert revenue. The correspondingly eager reception of these performances reflects consumption patterns and changing congregational dynamics across the United States.²¹

This sphere of influence becomes even more audible when the consistent culture of remake, retake, and repeat performance in gospel music is taken into account. Not only are the performable songs of major albums taken to church Sunday after Sunday, but artists routinely remake/retake songs in a style much different than other genres. Most other genres are not afforded weekly audition spaces of varying scale and reach, assessment spaces that are just as important as global recording releases. Rather than being seen as derivative, homage is a common practice/praxis.²² In fact, it is through performed knowledge of the tradition—that is, the ability to play a hymn traditionally and then transform it through harmonic substitutions and other musical techniques—that many younger artists seek legitimacy. Additionally, songs can accrue meaning through repeated performances in diverse contexts.

Through the praxis of homage, gospel music gains a vocabulary that practitioners can use to communicate various intimacies to targeted groups. Mellonee Burnim has described it thus: “gospel is not just a musical exercise; it is a process of esoteric sharing and affirmation.”²³ One subset of this vocabulary contains the sonic motives and ideas about the Caribbean and Africa performed by Black people in the United

States. There are several possible functions of this cultural signaling, three of which I will theorize through a mixed-methods approach in this article.²⁴ First, practitioners use these motives to enliven gospel music. Enlivening includes calls to dance, which expose and generate rhythmic tensions while serving an aesthetic imperative toward live performance, even within a studio. Second, practitioners appeal to increasingly diverse congregations, both within the United States and abroad. These congregations are connected both by the travels of their members and by virtual space. Third, by deploying these closely related, yet audibly different, ideas within an established cultural idiom such as gospel music, practitioners are holding up their end of a longstanding conversational exchange regarding Black American identity within diaspora. Enlivening, appealing, and exchanging each contains multiple significatory possibilities, a characteristic that mirrors the music and the musical field.

To Enliven

I begin our exploration of motivic traveling with the call to enliven music. Enlivening, much like appealing and exchanging, is multireferent—it brings people into relationship with sound with urgency and immediacy, but it can also describe the experience of that sound. It can be both prescriptive and descriptive. Here, I discuss enlivening as the sort of motivic traveling that dictates the engagement of listener-participants with sound.²⁵ For example, gospel songs that feature Caribbean and African signaling often begin with an exhortation to dance. Often, this is couched in an introduction featuring *ad lib*s at least four bars in length. Representative

examples include *I Agree* by Jonathan Nelson and *He Reigns/Awesome God* by Kirk Franklin featuring Papa San.

A closer listen to *You've Got Me* by Jason Nelson demonstrates this call to movement.²⁶ Nelson released this up-tempo praise piece in 2018. It unfurls a Latin tinge after a West African-inspired drumming introduction, effectively traveling to both “the motherland” and “the islands” through motivic reference. The nearly one-minute introduction from *The Answer* provides an ideal context to examine the motivic traveling performed throughout the song. A hand drum roll opens to a variety of percussive sounds, including a high-pitched sticking that manages to clear even the guitar in aural prominence (rhythmic motive). During the first few seconds, Nelson and his background singers vocally accent the danceable rhythm. Exclamations then begin, by Nelson (“Hey!) and an anonymous higher voice, approximating the vocal practice of ululation heard throughout West Africa and the Caribbean.²⁷

The rhythmic shifts and syncopations afterward contribute to the movement-centric feel of the recording. At about 34 seconds, Nelson says (presumably to the audience, his congregation, or perhaps to the assembled chorus), “Come on, you can move your feet a little bit. If I can move my feet, I KNOW you can move your feet!” Besides serving as a self-deprecating gesture that charms his audience and puts them at ease with his formidable singing ability, this invitation clarifies the function of the instrumentation, rhythm, and ornamentation. A little later, the danceability of this song is further emphasized by the introduction of a montuno figure played by the piano, a gesture which reminds the listener what

kind of dance to perform. Although it is not a given that all gospel music should be danced to, and the appropriateness of dancing within worship has a fraught history among Black Americans, what Paul Gilroy refers to as “distinctive kinesics” should alert audiences to an ongoing diasporic conversation.²⁸

The call is not always to dance, however, and it's not always explicitly verbalized. Sometimes, enlivening occurs through shifting the vocal timbre to fit heightened emotional states. Attention to timbre has long been considered a vital detail in gospel music; Horace Boyer cites it as “the most unique characteristic of gospel singing.”²⁹ Though at one point necessary due to technological and amplification restraints, the use of varied timbres has remained despite many recordings taking place in a controlled studio environment rather than a church. In these timbral shifts, the voice takes on the capacity for movement, not through time, but through space. Take for example the song *Onaga*, performed by J. J. Hairston and Youthful Praise, and featuring Tim Godfrey, a Nigerian worship leader. In addition to being an example of enlivening, this song is also an example of continued collaboration between African and African-American recording artists.³⁰ The song begins with a six-note loop with occasional internal repetition—a rhythmic and melodic motive—that resembles a video game soundtrack in its isolated ring and echo, backed by an ambient blanket of cheers and screams. The second pass of the loop is joined by an ascending horn swell, and Godfrey exclaims, “Let me hear you scream!” The final word, “scream,” is deployed in that exact timbre, thus instructing audience members as to the appropriate response, which is captured by the live recording.

The screams are then foregrounded in the musical texture. Enlivening here functions as a sort of intensification of sound, the shift in timbre from a call to a scream registering to the listener as a significant shift in frequency.³¹ This song, released on the album *Miracle Worker* by J. J. Hairston (recorded in Abuja, Nigeria, and Landover, Maryland, in 2019), is one of several on the project that both feature Nigerian lead

singers and emphasize the live performance setting. Accompanying music videos are of live recording sessions (no matter the extensive postproduction work such as overdubbing that must be done to achieve the production values of the record). The song itself is pedagogical in structure – the leader calls the word “onaga” and the background vocalists respond with a translation, “It’s working.”

Time stamp	Call (response)	Type
0:12	Let me hear you scream (*screams*)	Directive
0:22	Chains are breaking for my sake (Ehhh! For my sake)	Exclamation + repetition
0:48	Children of God (Yeah!)	Answer
1:02	Children of God, will you shout hallelujah (Yep!)	Answer
1:06	Shout hallelujah to the Lord most high (Ah, Alleluia, Alleluia, Alleluia)	Directive
1:26	Onaga (onaga)	Repetition
1:40	Is it working? (It’s working)	Answer and repetition
3:33	I feel like screaming (feel like screaming)	Repetition

Table 1: Featured calls and responses in *Onaga* (2019)

This is not the only call-and-response structure featured in the song. Table 1 represents several audible calls and responses in order to provide some examples of the different types of call and response featured in this song. The table itself is not exhaustive, given that repetition is a central feature of this song, but it should be sufficient to guide the listener in a consideration of call and response. The diversity of function is especially notable—some are directions given by the song leader and obeyed by the praise team, some are question-and-answer couplets, and some repeated phrases. These functional categories are not mutually exclusive; in fact, combinations of these functions are possible, as in the “answer and repetition” example. Altogether, the lyrical and vocal calls and responses reflect an overall motivic symmetry, a balance in expression that is also displayed through the “video game” sound effect and in the horn and organ parts.³²

Enlivening exhortations such as these feature in several songs with similar characteristics. In *I Will Bless the Lord (African Clap Song)* by Bishop Paul S. Morton,³³ the lead soloist Makeba Jones begins the song with a statement that merits full repeating here:

Come on
 We're gonna go way back
 Back to Africa
 We're gonna speak in our native
 tongue, of Swahili
 Baba means father
 It means protector
 Can everybody say “baba”?
 Can everybody say “baba”?
 Come on, put your hands together,
 hallelujah

Jones’s call to worship and reclamation of a pan-African, Afro-diasporic identity not only animates her listeners by compelling them to repeat after her; this statement also works to transcend demographic differences among the audience members, cloaking them in an assumed, imagined experience of being Black outside of Africa. This cloaking is not always seamless—the audience for gospel music is simply too big, too scattered, and too diverse. Brent Hayes Edwards points out a similar complication in diasporic discourse in *The Practice of Diaspora*, stating that “the level of the international is accessed unevenly by subjects with different historical relations to the nation (for instance, in a collaboration between a U.S. citizen marked by a context of violent racist exclusion, disenfranchisement, and segregation of a minority population, and a French West African citizen marked by a context of colonialism, invasive subjugation of a majority population, and Eurocentric structures of privilege and mobility).”³⁴ His solution to this complication is the act of translation—an act which at times refers to the linguistic, but at other times encompasses the ways in which community is communicated across very real boundaries, difference, and distance. Translation does not erase the differences inherent in diasporic discourse, because if there were no differences, translation would not be necessary. Rather, translation is an attempt at communication, and a move toward community. Translation can enliven—Nelson’s grounding of sound in an embodied experience, the call and response of *Onaga*, and the call to worship offered by Makeba Jones not only enliven the music, but also translate the inclusivity of community. Heard in this context, Jones’s ad libs are powerful utterances in a diasporic

discourse, and the intent of a song like *Onaga* can expand from merely educational to cooperative. Let's now turn to the details of this conversation.

To Appeal

I continue our exploration of motivic traveling with the potential of gospel music to appeal. Motivic traveling not only enlivens the auditory atmosphere; it also appeals to listening publics, within both physical, in-person congregations and imagined, virtual worship communities. The word "appeal" is also multifaceted—it can interest and charm, or it can plead and beg. One way of considering the facets of gospel music's appeal is intrinsic to a typical in-person church service's structure. In the beginning of the service, musicians attempt to appeal, that is, to interest the congregant. By the end of the service, musicians are participating in a different type of appeal, that which exhorts the congregant to form a closer relationship with God and the church. Certainly, it could be argued that both functions are occurring simultaneously, throughout the service. The virtual worship community takes these two aspects of appeal, these two different service functions, and compresses them further. For decades, televangelism has made a simple count of the congregation nearly impossible—it has effaced the physical boundaries of what church is and where it takes place.³⁵ The expansive nature of the church's reach has been thrown into sharp relief during the COVID-19 pandemic. Churches, both with and without preexisting vibrant streaming ministries, have quickly taken to social media platforms such as Facebook and YouTube to participate in a weekend maelstrom of voices reaching into homes and eardrums quarantined by stay-at-home

orders. In such a media landscape, echoing elsewhere's appeal to listeners as they seek identification with and education by an adaptive cohort of musicians.

Jonathan Nelson engages in this type of motivic traveling in his 2016 release *I Believe*. Born into a Maryland minister's family, Nelson has lived and sung in a variety of locations. His tenure at the Faith Center in Sunrise, Florida, has been extremely influential in the development of his musical style. The Broward County congregation informed his approach to his 2016 album *Fearless*. During an interview with the YouTube channel/media outlet Gospel Goodies, Nelson stated:

I purposed to record live because [of] my church, The Faith Center, in Sunrise, FL. . . . I love my church, and I always tell people I love the atmosphere at the church. It's always so friendly, always free, always open. I mean, you can go in any direction . . . *we have a lot of islanders*, so you can go reggae, you can go hardcore, Pentecostal church, we can go CCM style worship, we can go to hymns. It's such an open environment. There's never a struggle for the atmosphere. And so, for me to go live, I wanted to capture what Sunday morning feels like at the Faith Center.³⁶

In this interview, Nelson draws a clear connection between the geographic location and demographic composition of the south Florida congregation at which he served and his own stylistic eclecticism.

During an interview with Trina Braxton and Quad Webb-Lunceford on Sister Circle TV, Nelson outlined several influences and inspirations.³⁷ The segment begins with a video clip of a live performance of *I Believe*, which then jumps to the interviewers seated on a couch swaying and smiling. This dancing is referenced

shortly afterward when Nelson is welcomed onto the set—“I saw y’all dancing a little bit. That’s good!” Webb-Lunceford replies by exclaiming, “I just love *the rhythm* of that! And *the Caribbean inspiration*, it’s so amazing.” Nelson volleys the compliment by pointing out “*a little African vibe too.*” This interaction is freighted with the language of motivic travel. First, Webb-Lunceford’s one-word gesture toward the “rhythm” stands in for a host of rhythmic, melodic, and harmonic motives. She then recognizes the “Caribbean inspiration” of the song, a phrase that is a telling gesture toward what she hears and how the song registers in ways both familiar and unfamiliar to her. Nelson’s response, which adjusts the focus toward an “African vibe,” further encourages the audience to engage in motivic traveling, while broadening the itinerary.³⁸

In that section of the interview, Webb-Lunceford and Nelson are sharing a vocabulary of motivic travel, shaped by extramusical referents. Her phrase “Caribbean inspiration” likely comes from the steel pan timbre used throughout. His phrase “African vibe” can be felt in the formal organization of the song, particularly within the latter third, which imitates an African call-and-response praise chorus, in a style described by Jean Kidula in an article about African music in North American churches.³⁹

Later in the interview, Nelson says of *I Believe*, “I will be honest, that was an unplanned hit. I planned for it to be an album filler. I live in south Florida . . . and it’s a melting pot of culture, and I wanted to celebrate the culture that I had begun to experience...I didn’t realize that it was going to take over on YouTube. I didn’t realize that I was going to hit almost every island. . . . I didn’t know that it was going

to cross me over into Africa.” This statement demonstrates some of the power of motivic traveling. For Nelson, his embrace of motivic gesture and reference toward the Caribbean and West Africa actually resulted in those markets opening to him. When asked about his touring in Africa, he replied, “I literally just got back from Africa a couple days ago. When I started experiencing the culture in Africa and the Caribbean, they have such a freedom in their expression of worship. I wanted to continue work in those areas. . . . I really want to continue to celebrate the culture. I want the listeners in America to experience what I have been experiencing in those other cultures.”

This type of citation extends past staged radio, YouTube, and television interviews into live performance. Featured on the First Baptist Church of Glenarden’s YouTube page is an excerpted video from a church service of one of Nelson’s performances of *I Believe*.⁴⁰ Once the instrumentalists begin introducing the song’s material, he spends a great deal of time encouraging the congregants to move and be moved, to dance despite their context of church. He soothes possible anxieties of his presentation not being churchy enough by closing with a medley of more traditional and familiar tunes, such as *We Have the Victory*. The line “Tell me / who can / stand be-/ fore us / when we / call on / that / Great / Name!” is much more rhythmically conservative, even as it is contingent on an effective song leader to dictate how quickly the chant will go. This is the same sort of deft retreat into an identity that Melvin Butler describes within Donnie McClurkin’s *Caribbean Medley* performance,⁴¹ wherein the song leader transitions abruptly at a rhythmically complex “hot” point to a “cooler,” more traditional texture. This shifting of gears can also be compared to

the manner in which a pastor may try to pull the congregation back from a shouting moment by interrupting a rhythmic pocket with a selection that is meant to be calming and soothing.

This cultural code switching primes the congregation to visibly and audibly engage with Nelson. In an illuminating interlude, he connects his travels to his mode of expression, in an attempt to drive the congregation toward a more ecstatic worship:

I'm a little bit on fire, *I just got back from Africa*, and they just go crazy. They say 'misbehave.' I need to know, just for thirty seconds, are there any people who don't care about who's standing next to you, who's looking at you? But you done been through some stuff this year. And we almost made it to the crossover. If you've got a good memory, you would behave like you got a good memory. And your behavior oughta be to misbehave!

A roar begins to build in the congregation, alongside a drum crescendo, as soon as Nelson cues the congregation with "I need to know." Hands raise and wave, tambourines are pulled from their resting places under pews. The congregation has decided to move with Nelson and render their communication with God increasingly audible. Nelson's call to worship was clearly compelling. Motivic traveling is nestled within the call, both the "music itself" and the narrated ad libs. Both shape the language of exchange between this local incident of music making and its broader, global context.

To Exchange

I conclude this exploration of motivic traveling with the capacity of gospel music to demonstrate diasporic exchange. Exchange is multivalent—it could refer to simultaneous giving and receiving, or to

a short encounter. The word also recalls national boundaries that are traversed (e.g., foreign exchange, an exchange student). Motivic traveling is ultimately an exchange at each instance cited within this article—none of the artists mentioned began these conversations in which they are participating. They listen to musical ideas of place, adapt them to their own songs, and then release those songs, along with the ideas, back into the conversation. It is in this way that the ideas accrue numerous additional meanings and multiple significations. The quotation of West African and Caribbean musical ideas within gospel music works to shape how that music sounds and who hears it. It also impacts how the listeners listen, and fuels diasporic conversation, the contours of which have been explored by Samuel A. Floyd, Eileen Southern, Olly Wilson, and several other musicologists.⁴² Jean Kidula describes a similar phenomenon at work in her chapter "Singing the Lord's Song in the Spirit and with Understanding" when she gestures toward "seminal African participation" in the charismatic worship genre discussed within this article.⁴³ Her phrase "African involvement and the reverberation of musicking drawn from an indigenous ethos" can be used to explain not only the popularity of gospel music within African churches, but its incessant echoing around the world.⁴⁴ This diasporic conversation occurs through performance, citation, and repetition. With each audition, the ideas at the foundation of the mixture develop.

Take, for example, what I heard in a local midwestern Pentecostal church during the fall of 2019. When my husband and I stepped into Greater Grace Church, we weren't sure what to expect. We had recently

relocated to the area, and our search for a new church home proved that there were countless approaches to contemporary gospel music. This congregation chose to open the service with a praise and worship period,⁴⁵ consisting mainly of Jonathan Nelson's song *I Believe (Island Medley)*, from his 2016 project *Fearless*. The version on the album already tops seven minutes, but the praise team (a small ensemble of singers backing a worship leader) on this morning rendered a version nearly three times that length. Other distinctions are made clearer after briefly outlining the song.

The track begins with a series of three orchestra hits, each followed by a simple, cheerful motif sounded by a synthesizer imitating a steel pan's hollow resonance. The third sounding of the motif is then answered by a counter that emphasizes a *cinquillo*, and demonstrates how to appropriately layer that rhythm over the consistent metronomic framework.⁴⁶ Meanwhile, Nelson exclaims, "Come on, everybody get your feet happy, let's go! Come on!" (This exhortation to dance to Caribbean-inflected gospel music is similar to other utterances by Jason Nelson, Donnie McClurkin, and a host of other performers.) These ten seconds at the very beginning do much to locate the listener in a rhythm, nearly as much as the subsequent, ska-style backbeat does to displace that rhythm with syncopation.

As I sat in the congregation, I immediately noticed a substantial alteration of the song, based on rhythm.⁴⁷ The congregation consistently emphasized the second and fourth beats with their claps and movements, rather than the *cinquillo*. The effect/affect was that the song moved much slower than the original recording. The worship leader extended the head of the song ("Jehovah /

You / I trust / in You / oh Lord"), looping it with the tag ("I believe / I believe / . . . / You"), and delaying the second part of the verse ("You are the God of miracles"). This had the effect of teaching the congregation the song, with which some members may have been unfamiliar. The worship leader also avoided reproducing potentially challenging melismatic parts ("so long") in favor of a simpler unison statement ("bye bye," which is actually a response to "so long"). These edits ultimately encouraged the congregation to participate in singing—by the end of the song, members formed a conga-style line around the sanctuary, marching on beats 1 and 3, which emphasizes the intended backbeat. Greater Grace proved themselves to be an adaptable congregation, shifting from clapping on beats 2 and 4 (an awkward clash with the instrumentation) to marching on beats 1 and 3, a flexibility that I was prepared to recognize by Melvin Butler.⁴⁸

The point of this illustration isn't how much the congregation's interpretation differed from the original version. It is, rather, the insistent engagement with the musical, culturally specific ideas promoted by the original version. Each Sunday, music ministers choose what to perform with the hope that their selection will engage and inspire the congregation to praise and worship. Their choices are careful, sometimes optimistic, but always rooted in fostering some type of conversation and engagement. To choose motivic traveling is bold and noteworthy. The act of engaging a song at the level of an individual congregation spreads both the musical ideas contained within and the message of inclusion and kinship.

These choices appear to be made by people of African descent throughout the

diaspora, and the exchanges promoted by motivic traveling can be located in both U.S. congregations and those abroad. As Guthrie Ramsey writes, “hybridity . . . has always been a part of the background and pedigree of African American culture.”⁴⁹ Musical collaborations that take place on the African continent are sites of exchange that demonstrate the potential of motivic traveling. One such site for exchange is the live album recording—Israel and New Breed’s Grammy award-winning *Alive in South Africa* (2005) featured several African artists, and VaShawn Mitchell has recorded in South Africa twice, first with *Secret Place: Live in South Africa* (2016) and more recently with *Vashawn Mitchell Presents Africa Worship* (2020). Another important site for exchange has been the House on the Rock Cathedral in Lagos, Nigeria. Since 2006, House on the Rock has annually hosted *The Experience*, an all-night gospel concert that bills itself as the largest event of its kind. *The Experience* features several notable musicians from around the world, as well as Nigeria’s foremost stars. J. J. Hairston and Kirk Franklin have cited their trips to Nigeria as pivotal moments in the development of their identities as members of the African diaspora. It’s important to note that not all performers recruited to *The Experience* are of African descent. The Australian group Planetshakers and white American songwriter Don Moen are frequent attendees and performers. However, the concert is oriented as an African event (with marketing materials that welcome a global audience to Nigeria), and artists of African descent, whether based in Nigeria, the United States, or the Caribbean, far outnumber those who do not identify in that way. While beyond the scope of this article, House on the Rock’s

The Experience specifically, and Nigeria’s gospel music scene more generally, may prove central to understanding current flows in contemporary gospel music.

Another song from Hairston’s *Miracle Worker* hints at a broader diasporic conversation taking place. Mercy Chinwo, a Nigerian Idol, leads a remix of her song *Excess Love* with Hairston’s band and backing vocal group Youthful Praise. Comparing the original and remix, as well as considering the featured participation of Chinwo in Hairston’s project, demonstrate some of the contours of this dialogue. The original version, released on *The Cross: My Gaze* (2017), begins with piano and guitar outlining the melody. Chinwo enters this backdrop with an almost nasal timbre. Her enunciation of the lyrics is careful, closing out each word and never dropping a consonant, an effect made even more notable by the reverb on the track. It is not until she arrives at the chorus that she rises above a speaking volume, belting:

Jesus you love me too much, o
Too much, o
Too much, o, excess love, o

The quintessentially Nigerian utterance “o” is transformed by the presence of U.S.-based background singers in the remixed live performance. Instead of using the vowel as a simple accent, as in the original, Chinwo sings the vowel in the remix as a melisma, signifying on both her song and the presence of Youthful Praise. She begins the song at a belting intensity, instead of crescendoing between the first verse and chorus. *Excess Love* becomes, for Chinwo and Youthful Praise, a thrilling collaboration, and a beacon of the possibility of communicating with and communing within music.

In conclusion, these quotations and citations are a way of conversing across diaspora. They are simultaneously specific and expansive, generative and creative. These sonic identifications are a part of a rich tapestry that covers the Black church, appearing in some places, but not everywhere all of the time. Joyce Marie Johnson describes this tapestry as a “synthesis of music, dance, poetry, and drama distilled into a unified whole.”⁵⁰ The tapestry includes at least three other types of diasporic conversation beyond the scope of this article—historical, kinetic, and sartorial. Each of these has the potential to expand instances of motivic traveling into a more robust Black musical tropology in the tradition of Sam Floyd, as developed by Horace Maxile.⁵¹ Extensive Black History Month pageantry takes place year-round in U.S. churches, incorporating youth speeches to highlight the accomplishments of Afro-diasporans. Praise dancing, or liturgical ministry, involves Black bodies moving through sacred space in a way that runs parallel to the secular, but also invokes African dance tropes frequently.⁵² Finally, attire pays homage to traditions old and more recent, such as hats that have their origins in Victorian-era costuming,⁵³ and African craft beading and wax-print fabrics by companies such as Vlisco, dating to the Black Power aesthetic.⁵⁴ The sartorial is particularly resonant with the contemporary gospel artists mentioned in

this article—take, for example, the album cover of their peer Todd Dulaney’s recent album *To Africa with Love* (2019), which features his head in profile, superimposed over a sketch of the African continent, dressed in an African wax-print collared shirt. In music videos and on social media platforms, musicians such as J. J. Hairston (see the video for *Onaga*) and, perhaps even better known, Donald Lawrence and Ricky Dillard use African attire to signal musical mood and imagined kinship. Historical, kinetic, and sartorial diasporic conversations potentially pull the mainly sonic motivic traveling that I have described in this article into a multidimensional, signifyin(g) practice.

Through the practice of motivic traveling, musicians create narratives around their persons and their music. The success of their motivic travels is a matter of musical and reputational authenticity.⁵⁵ These artists have come to this diasporic conversation willingly as a way to enrich their music and ministry. Their consistent engagements not only outline the diasporic discourse, but are also wholly informed by it. The three gestures outlined in this article (enlivening music, appealing to broader congregations, and exchanging diasporic referents), along with the three gestures outlined in the previous paragraph, can guide our listening in this genre, as musicians continue to usher us to the islands and the motherland.

NOTES

1 For example, see Nelson's 2020 Norway residency with the Stavanger Gospel Company at St. Petri kirke and Lawrence's 2018 Denmark residency with True Gospel Singers. <https://sgcompany.no/jason-nelson-til-church-i-februar/>. For further information on these types of host institutions, see Waseda Minako, "Gospel Music in Japan: Transplantation and Localization of African American Religious Singing," *Yearbook for Traditional Music* 45 (2013): 187–213.

2 In *Mahalia Jackson & the Black Gospel Field* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), Mark Burford conceptualizes the genre as a "field of broad possibilities linking a diverse range of church denominations, personal beliefs, musical styles, individual desires, strategic goals, performance contexts, cultural producers, and economic stakes" (xi). He connects this field of cultural production to the genre conceptions held by gospel artists, including Jackson (25). Motivic traveling is one way in which such a field can be traversed.

3 See W. Drabkin, "Motif," *Grove Music Online*, <https://doi.org/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.19221> (accessed Jan. 14, 2021).

4 The inspiration for this article's title comes from travel tropes often repeated in gospel music.

5 In *Cultures of U.S. Imperialism*, ed. Donald Pease and Amy Kaplan (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993). Diasporic recognition refers to a manner of imagined community, whereby a member would recognize another member from a different place by virtue of appearance or behavior. Warren writes about an idealized diasporic recognition ("a claim of racial identity, of shared consciousness, of a Negro intersubjectivity in which old world and new world stand together in a mutual relationship that predates European civilization," (5) and the frictions that this vision has with reality.

6 Signifying has been described by Henry Louis Gates as "the art of riffing . . . repetition and revision." Further, Gates describes the sampling that hip-hop producers engage in as a two-step process--first quoting, then transforming; first signifying, then formal homage. Henry Louis Gates, *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African American Literary Criticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), xxx–xxxii.

7 See *ibid.*

8 See <https://www.culturalfront.org/2015/08/cultural-geo-tagging.html?m=1> for an

explanation of "cultural geo-tagging," a term coined by literary theorist Kenton Ramsby.

9 This sort of regional comparative study of gospel music has been called for by Joyce Marie Johnson in her article "The Changing Nature of Gospel Music: A Southern Case Study," *African American Review* 29/2 (1995): 185–200.

10 Pearl Williams-Jones, "Afro-American Gospel Music: A Crystallization of the Black Aesthetic," *Ethnomusicology* 19/3 (1975): 373.

11 See Penny Von Eschen, *Satchmo Blows Up the World: Jazz Ambassadors Play the Cold War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006).

12 See Samuel Floyd, "Toward a Theory of Diaspora Aesthetics," *Lenox Avenue: A Journal of Interarts Inquiry* 4 (1998): 25–67.

13 See Mark Burford, *Mahalia Jackson & the Black Gospel Field* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 10.

14 Numerous scholars have also addressed these sorts of ideas within jazz. See Von Eschen, *Satchmo Blows Up the World*; Robin D. G. Kelley, *Africa Speaks, America Answers: Modern Jazz in Revolutionary Times* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012); Carl Woideck, "Authentic Synthetic Hybrid: Ellington's Concepts of Africa and Its Music," in *Duke Ellington Studies*, ed. John Howland (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

15 For more information on these works, see Chapter 4, "Visions of Vodou in African American Operas About Haiti," in Michael Largey, *Vodou Nation: Haitian Art Music and Cultural Nationalism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006).

16 I attended an SEM paper given by Fredara Hadley, titled "This Woman's Work: Centering the Contributions of Shirley Graham Du Bois and Black Conservatory Alumnae," on Nov. 10, 2019.

17 Several works from Katherine Dunham's oeuvre are founded on this principle, including *Island Possessed* (New York: Doubleday, 1969). Further reference on these types of Afro-diasporan communiqués can be found in Tsitsi Jaji, *Africa in Stereo: Modernism, Music, and Pan-African Solidarity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014); and David Garcia, *Listening for Africa: Freedom, Modernity, and the Logic of Black Music's African Origins* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017).

18 *Live in London and More . . . , 2000*, Verity 01241-43150-2. For an ethnographic portrayal of how Jamaicans perceived this piece, see Chapter 5, "Performing Ethnicity," in Melvin Butler, *Island*

Gospel: Pentecostal Music and Identity in Jamaica and the United States (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2019).

19 Produced by Harmony Samuels, a Brit of Nigerian descent, this song echoes a traditional Nigerian praise chorus, *When Jesus Says Yes*, <https://youtu.be/d9KPXBnh0tE> (posted Oct. 30, 2013).

20 There's been a remarkable amount of engagement between VaShawn Mitchell and the South African press, which, while beyond the scope of this article, might build on these ideas.

21 For a nuanced exploration of the impact of multicultural music making on congregations, see Birgitta Johnson, "Singing Down Walls of Race, Ethnicity, and Tradition in an African American Megachurch," *Liturgy* 33/3 (2018): 37-45.

22 For further writing about homage in Black American music, see Lauren Eldridge, "Will We Remember the Way We Were?: The Past and Future Tenses of Lauryn Hill's 'Ex-Factor,'" <https://musicologynow.org/will-we-remember-the-way-we-were-the-past-and-future-tenses-of-lauryn-hills-ex-factor/> (published May 14, 2018).

23 Mellonee Burnim, "Functional Dimensions of Gospel Music Performance," *Western Journal of Black Studies* 12/2 (1988): 112.

24 In this article, I use musical analysis throughout, virtual ethnography in the first two subheadings ("Enliven" and "Appeal"), and in-person ethnography in the final subheading ("Exchange"). This type of approach, though hardly new, has been championed especially since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic by ethnographers, including Liz Przybylski, *Hybrid Ethnography: Online, Offline, and In Between* (Los Angeles: Sage, 2021).

25 Burnim also gestures towards the living quality of gospel music, stating that at gospel performances, "energy cycles continuously from performer to congregation and back again. The event takes on its own dynamic quality; it is not simply live, but *alive*." "Functional Dimensions of Gospel Music Performance," 115.

26 Jason Nelson, Jonathan Nelson's brother, also participates in this crossover style, though less often.

27 Though ululation can be heard around the world, it signifies in this example as Caribbean/West African due to the broader sonic context.

28 For the appropriateness of dance within worship, see Melvin Butler, "Singing like David Sang: Queerness and Masculinity in Black Gospel Performance," in *Readings in African American Church Music and Worship*, vol. 2, ed. James Abbingtion (Chicago: GIA Publications, 2014), 715-25; and Alisha Lola Jones, "Pole Dancing

for Jesus: Pentecostal Religious Pluralism and the Bodily Performance of Sexual Ambiguity in Liturgical Dance," in *Flaming?: The Peculiar Theopolitics of Fire and Desire in Black Male Gospel Performance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020). For "distinctive kinesics," see Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 75. Gilroy describes the emergence of a postslave Black population with the ability to communicate through the body in a performative way, in sports, dance, and music.

29 Horace Boyer, "Contemporary Gospel Music," *The Black Perspective in Music* 7/1 (1979): 23.

30 Further examples of this specific type of collaboration are noted in Jean Ngoya Kidula, "Singing the Lord's Song in the Spirit and with Understanding: The Practice of Nairobi Pentecostal Church," in *The Spirit of Praise: Music and Worship in Global Pentecostal Charismatic Christianity*, ed. Monique Ingalls and Amos Yong (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2018), 135.

31 This timbral shift in intensity could work both ways, toward either a more intense state or a less intense state; see Butler, *Island Gospel*, 141.

32 By motivic symmetry, I mean that although there is extensive syncopation, there are rarely unanswered calls. This contributes to an overall sense of balance in both the vocal and instrumental parts.

33 Bishop Paul S. Morton and Full Gospel Baptist Church Fellowship Mass Choir, *Cry Your Last Tear (Live)*, Light Records, Tehillah Music Group 7209 (2008).

34 Brent Hayes Edwards, *The Practice of Diaspora: Literature, Translation, and the Rise of Black Internationalism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 7.

35 For further reading in this area, see Jonathan L. Walton, *Watch This! The Ethics and Aesthetics of Black Televangelism* (New York: New York University Press, 2009); and Marla Frederick, *Colored Television: American Religion Gone Global* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2016).

36 https://youtu.be/Z_NmonqUQFI (published March 22, 2016; accessed Feb. 20, 2020, emphasis mine).

37 <https://youtu.be/Uh9Dufwra5w> (published Sept. 14, 2018; accessed Feb. 20, 2020).

38 Throughout my analysis of this interview, I focus on how Nelson is pitching the music, and how Webb-Lunceford is receiving that pitch. This is not a substitute for my own analysis of the music, which appears in brief later during the paragraphs about the First Baptist Church of Glenarden performance.

39 See Kidula, "Singing the Lord's Song."

40 <https://youtu.be/h3nCbplJX6E> (published Sept. 21, 2018; accessed Feb. 20, 2020).

41 *Island Gospel*, 141.

42 See Floyd, "Toward a Theory of Diaspora Aesthetics"; Eileen Southern, *The Music of Black Americans: A History* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1997); and Olly Wilson, "The Heterogenous Sound Ideal in African-American Music," in *Signifyin(g), Sanctifyin', and Slam Dunking: A Reader in African American Expressive Culture*, ed. Gena Caponi (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1999), 327.

43 Kidula, "Singing the Lord's Song," 134. Kidula describes the beginning of the charismatic and Pentecostal worship movements in the 1960s as having "seminal African participation"--that is, African-identified worshippers and musical tropes were centrally involved.

44 *Ibid.*

45 The service format of church varies from congregation to congregation. Some churches have an extensive liturgy, whereas other churches follow a relatively simple format of singing (praise and worship), prayer, sermon, offering, and dismissal.

46 Cinquillo is defined by Michael Largey as a "five-pulse dance rhythm" in the *Oxford Music Online* entry for Ludovic Lamothe, <https://doi.org/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.44715> (accessed Oct. 10, 2022).

47 This alteration of music from the recorded version in performance is referenced at the beginning of this article.

48 Melvin Butler, "Musical Style and Experience in a Brooklyn Pentecostal Church: An 'Insider's' Perspective," *Current Musicology* 70 (2000): 33-50.

49 See Guthrie Ramsey, *Race Music: Black Cultures from Bebop to Hip-Hop* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 191.

50 Johnson, "The Changing Nature of Gospel Music," 185.

51 See Horace Maxile, "Extensions on a Black Musical Topology: From Trains to the Mothership (and Beyond)," *Journal of Black Studies* 42/4 (2011): 594. Maxile builds on Samuel Floyd's article "Troping the Blues: From Spirituals to the Concert Hall," *Black Music Research Journal* 13 (1993): 31-51.

52 For an expansive discussion of "kinetic orality" and embodied hereditary musical knowledge, see Kyra Gaunt, *The Games Black Girls Play: Learning the Ropes from Double-Dutch to Hip-Hop* (New York: NYU Press, 2006).

53 See Michael Cunningham, *Crowns: Portraits of Black Women in Church Hats* (New York: Doubleday, 2000).

54 See Tanisha Ford, *Liberated Threads: Black Women, Style, and the Global Politics of Soul* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015).

55 For more on the importance of racial authenticity and the stakes for musicians, see John Jackson, *Real Black: Adventures in Racial Sincerity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).