Gottschalk's Engagement with the Ungovernable: Louis Moreau Gottschalk, and the Bamboula Rhythm

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In 1848 New Orleans, Louisiana pianist and composer Louis Moreau Gottschalk composed “La Bamboula (Danse des Nègres), Op. 2”. My discussion centers on the relationship Gottschalk had with the African diasporic musical tradition denoted as the bamboula. I present an analysis of two narratives chronicling Gottschalk’s relationship with the bamboula rhythm. In reading across, through, and within these two narratives, I look to the fields of sound studies, cultural studies, Black studies, philosophy, and critical geography. I conclude that sound is sensual/and or extramusical in exploring possible ungovernable porosities incited through spatial dynamics via how communities existed within socio-sonic spaces. The foray into these concentrations is to consider the broader educational possibilities inquiries into the sonic presents.

INTRODUCTION

Pianist and composer Louis Moreau Gottschalk is most commonly recognized for his 1848 composition “La Bamboula (Danse des Nègres), Op. 2”. This discussion centers on Gottschalk’s relationship with the African diasporic musical tradition called the bamboula. It is often speculated that he first heard the bamboula at Congo Square in his birthplace of New Orleans, Louisiana. In the New Orleans neighborhood of Faubourg Tremé, Congo Square is one space of complexity in which a quilting of people and cultures occurred every Sunday from about 1817 to 1885. Congo Square is located in New Orleans within the oldest Black neighborhood in the United States, Faubourg Tremé. From 1817 to 1885 the New Orleans Municipal Court issued a mandate allowing enslaved populations to gather at Congo Square and sell and/or exchange goods and most importantly, engage in their religious and musical traditions. An observer of these gatherings, George Washington Cable, documented 18 West African cultures, they being, according to his records: The Mandingoes, Senegalese, Foulahs, Sosos, Agwas, Popes, Fidas, Cotocolies, Aradas, Nagoes, Fonds, Awassas, Iboes, Angolas, Malimbes, Yorubas, Socoes, and Ambrices (Stearns, 1956). This mixing of cultures resulted in Congo Square becoming a distinctly different space than made possible in Africa, the Caribbean, or in other parts of the Americas.
The bamboula stands as one of the musical traditions which would have occurred during the Congo Square gatherings. Bamboula denotes the dance, the accompanying instrument, a drum made of bamboo with one of the openings covered with a stretched hide (sometimes animal and sometimes synthetic), and the rhythm played on the instrument to accompany the dance. Presently, an example of the bamboula rhythm can be heard when listening the principle rhythmic structure in reggaeton (Sublette, 2008).

In this discussion of bamboula, I focus on the rhythmical aspect. Considering sound’s gestures is one way to process the governed and ungoverned dynamic of the bamboula rhythm. Sound is simultaneously governable and ungovernable. It is governable in the choices communities make in navigating, reconceptualizing, and repositioning sonic artifacts. However, sound is also ungovernable. Sound is unlike a physical body in that it cannot be grabbed and contained. The community I see as governing the bamboula rhythm exists as the Black enslaved communities who served as the scholars/practitioners/philosophers of the bamboula tradition in the context of Congo Square.

Louis Moreau Gottschalk is also himself a product of ungovernable geographies. His life begins May 8, 1829 in New Orleans, Louisiana and ends in December 19, 1869 in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. His 40 years on Earth comprise a transnationalistic existence. The place of Gottschalk’s birth, New Orleans, constitutes the deep, the dirty, the dirty dirty, and/or the global south (depending on who you speak with), while his place of death, Brazil, contains the highest concentration of people from the African diaspora outside of the continent of Africa. Perhaps, Gottschalk’s transnational presence and existence were ontological embodiments imparted through his familial existence.

I present an analysis of two narratives chronicling Gottschalk’s relationship with the bamboula rhythm. In reading across, through, and within these two narratives, I look to the fields of sound studies, cultural studies, Black studies, philosophy, and critical geography. The foray into the variety of concentrations is to consider the broader educational possibilities inquiries into sound presents. In unpacking the routing and rootings engendering sonic meanings, what emerges for me is how the archive, literally and conceptually, is critiqued (Derrida & Prenowitz, 1995). Furthermore, how do the socio-cultural, political, gendered spaces and places designated as archives, building and collective memory, simultaneously create possibility and impossibility (Halbwachs & Coser, 1941/1992; Winfield, 2007). In this discussion, my ethics reside in inquiring about points of impossibility, the gaps and silences, situated in historical narratives. What is the intentionality of the gaps and silences? How might sonic engagements with historical narratives enliven awareness of these gaps and silences?

In presenting these inquiries, the educational premise is the conceptual sympathetic resonance. These inquiries emerge from my positionality as a Black queer male, and witnessing for a lifetime the dampening of the historical educational spectrums in relation to Blackness in the United States. The narratives of Fredrick Douglass (1845/2015), Olaudah Equiano (1995/2003), Anna Julia Cooper (Lemert & Bhan, 1998), Pauli Murray (Bell-Scott, 2017) and many more, to witnessing the continued violence against Black bodies, via lynching, literally and conceptually, collectively function as erasures of both body and memory and, in schools, that education for Blacks and other marginalities in the United States has been an issue of life and death. One response to these violent conditions has been for Black people to re-embbody
epistemologies sonically, through song, sonic imitations, etc (Weheliye, 2005). What is revealed by these sonic acts is the series of improvised educational acts utilized to pass on, impart, and sustain cultural ways of “beingknowingdoing” (Gershon, 2017). For an outsider, combined with the primacy of the written over the spoken, it might be seen as though the marginalized community’s educational initiatives are non-active.

My exploration of Louis Moreau Gottschalk’s engagement with the bamboula rhythm addresses the problematics of the narrative depictions with attention to drawing out how sound meanings, informed through race, philosophy, and critical geography, make possible ways to consider how the gaps and silences are engendered. While this inquiry is about considering how the complexity of Gottschalk’s relationship with the bamboula rhythm informs the problematic foundations his narrative is situated in, the gestures of the inquiry serve to also to address how sonic blockages, the lack of attempts to hear and discern the gaps and silences, dampen the richness of education.

Louis Moreau Gottschalk was the child of a Jewish British immigrant father Edward Gottschalk and New Orleans born Aimée Bruslé-Gottschalk. 13 years prior to his own death, by the age of 27, he had experienced the death of both of his parents. The deaths of Gottschalk’s parents do not equate to them being less influential on his career path as a musician and traveler. While Gottschalk’s father, Edward, proves to be an individual who simultaneously routes and roots him to the profession of pianist/composer, it is his mother, Aimée who gives Gottschalk an early aural music education. Aimée, a pianist as well, garners Gottschalk’s musical interest via her own piano performances in which she sometimes places the younger Louis Moreau Gottschalk on her lap (Starr, 1995). It is important to note that Gottschalk’s interests in music, stimulated by his mother, take place during the cholera 1832 epidemic, while the family was in Pass Christian, Mississippi. Although the Gottschalk family was based in New Orleans, the Pass Christian residence served to lower the probability of contracting cholera and as an alternate residence due to the one in New Orleans being lost through bankruptcy (Starr, 1995). The physical un-rootedness of Gottschalk at 3 years old, due to both the cholera outbreak and familial economic conditions, can also be understood as creating a sort psychological un-rootedness.

Additionally, it is the Bruslé and Deynault branches of Gottschalk’s family tree that gives glimpses into the simultaneously ungovernable/governable geographic embodiments and psychological un-rootedness of Gottschalk. His great grandfather, Joseph-Antoine Bruslé was born in New Orleans in 1726, and in the 1750s migrated to Saint-Domingue (Haiti). While in Haiti, Bruslé resided in Petite Riveré d’Artibonite, central Haiti, and held the position as commandant of police. In 1794 he was appointed to the rank of captain in the British Army. When Haitian leader Georges Biassou ordered attacks on the coalition of the British, French, and mulatto forces in 1794, the attacks resulted in the death of Bruslé. Prior, in 1793, Théodat-Camille Bruslé, Joseph-Antoine’s son, escaped to Kingston, Jamaica. While there, he wedded Joséphine-Alix Deynault and with the aid of the British royal governor in 1804, the collective along with numerous in-laws migrated back to New Orleans.

Aimée Bruslé-Gottschalk’s family narrative denotes the complexity of migration she embodies. While Aimée is a New Orleans native, she is also a parcel of a migration continuum. Additionally, considering both Edward’s and Aimée’s narratives of migration,
experienced firsthand and through their families, loosely explains or perhaps unearths a ration-
ale for Louis Moreau Gottschalk’s transient existence. This transience also contends with the 
way he operated musically with sonic artifacts, specifically the bamboula rhythm.

Fredrick Starr’s *Bamboula: The Life and Times of Louis Moreau Gottschalk* (1995) presents 
a rich chronicling of Gottschalk’s transnational existence post-New Orleans. Perhaps the most 
pertinent aspect of Starr’s research is the intricate picture he paints of Gottschalk attending 
boarding school in Paris, France. For the aristocratic class in New Orleans, a designation of 
their class was the ability to send their offspring off to Paris, France to obtain education.
While Gottschalk’s family experiences extreme bouts of financial success and failure, Edward 
and Aimée, regardless of economic standing, always attempted to project an image of consist-
ent ascendance of financial prosperity. A tenet of this projected financial prosperity is 
presented in sending Louis Moreau Gottschalk to boarding school in Paris in 1841 as a pupil 
of Madame Dussert. She serves as director of Gottschalk’s academics while also being a 
proponent of his musical advancement. Paris is where Gottschalk matures as a pianist and 
composer to the acclamation as a prodigious talent. Paris is also where Gottschalk matures 
into understandings of social responsibility.

In 1848 Dr. Eugene Woillez, a patron of the arts and director of the psychiatric hospital at 
Clermont-sur-l’Oise, located approximately one hour north of Paris, invites Gottschalk as his 
guest. Gottschalk spends the greater part of that year at Woillez’s residence in Picardy. This is 
where he begins to see music as a healing agent. Evidence of Gottschalk’s shifting conscious-
ness is shown through his involvement in the asylum church where he composes a mass. 
Additionally, 1848 at Clermont-sur-l’Oise is where he composes “La Bamboula (Danse des 
Nègres), Op. 2.” Therefore, the shift in his consciousness is not merely in his more focused understandings of social responsibility through music, but also through realizing his composi-
tional voice. It is Gottschalk’s vulnerability to write music situated around rhythmic and har-
monic devices learned in his home place of New Orleans that conjured the Black diaspora as 
witnessed with the incorporation of the bamboula rhythm. Lastly, 1851 is one of many other points of social responsibility for Gottschalk. The Pleyel piano company experiences a major 
setback with a factory fire, requiring many of the workers to be laid off. Gottschalk organizes 
a performance to benefit the workers.

The complexity of Gottschalk is fascinating to me. In New Orleans Gottschalk appears to 
be a figure not yet engaged with concepts of social uplift, yet in Paris he is bitten by social responsibility. I am not emphasizing that he came to these realizations singularly. Rather, his 
narrative of migration places him in situations whereby his vulnerability proves to function as points of porosity. Gottschalk exemplifies a permeable individual whose bodily boundaries 
and psyche were susceptible to the ungovernable agent of sound formulated in the bamboula 
rhythm. Yet, I see Gottschalk’s susceptibility to ungovernability as a simultaneous epistemo-
logical/ontological existence learned from his family.

Susan Buck-Morrs, in her book *Haiti and Hegel* (2009), emphasizes how porosity is the 
inquiry into the ungovernable connections. Broadly defined, porosity describes the openings 
within a conceptualized space. Buck-Morrs contextualizes porosity in reference to the threat of 
sexual commerce as a primary component which dissolved conceived boundaries of race. The 
importance of Buck-Morrs’s idea of porosity resides in identifying specific elements which
dissolved boundaries. While sexual commerce is the boundary dissolver for Buck-Morrs, sound as vibrational affect is the independent agent I explore as a shifter and dissolver of boundaries in this discussion of New Orleans born pianist and composer Louis Moreau Gottschalk’s relationship with the bamboula rhythm.

In the following section will delve into the two narratives explaining how Gottschalk gained knowledge/embodied the bamboula rhythm.

**NARRATIVES OF GOTTSCHALK’S RHYTHMICAL INTIMACY**

A narrative often presented to explain Gottschalk’s relationship with the bamboula rhythm is centered on the family residence. The Gottschalk family residence during the Congo Square gathering of enslaved populations was on 88 Rampart Street, a half-mile from Congo Square. It is the close proximity to Congo Square that some historians use as an explanation for how the young Gottschalk was able to hear the musical activities from the Sunday gatherings.

Starr, in his book *Bamboula: The Life and Times of Louis Moreau Gottschalk* (1995) problematizes the spatial narrative surrounding how Gottschalk came to learn about the bamboula rhythm. In this biography, Starr chronicles the spaces the Gottschalk family resided. He locates the Gottschalk’s as residing on 88 Rampart Street from April 1831-March 1833. However, Starr notes that the family would have only resided there half of the due to the 1832 cholera epidemic. According to Starr, in avoidance of the cholera outbreak the family would have spent the other part of the time in Pass Christian, Mississippi. He concludes that the fragmented time the Gottschalks spent between the New Orleans and Pass Christian residences was too brief for Louis Moreau Gottschalk to internalize the bamboula rhythm. Starr situates the bamboula rhythm in the broader category of Creole musical traditions. Starr explains that the source of Gottschalk’s musical knowledge was imparted through his White Grandmother Bruslè and Black nurse Sally, both of whom came from Saint-Domingue, present day Haiti. Starr asserts that the likelihood of Gottschalk’s deeper knowledge of Creole music was aurally imparted from Bruslè and Sally.

Starr’s analysis presents an additional layer of spatial intimacy through proposing an alternative route for how Gottschalk gained knowledge of Creole music, more specifically, the bamboula rhythm. Furthermore, the bamboula is situated as being a piece of lineage imparted from within the household via his grandmother Bruslé and Black nurse Sally, both of whom would have imparted this rhythmical knowledge from Haiti. Starr doubts the likelihood of Gottschalk gaining knowledge of the bamboula rhythm simply because of the family’s proximity to Congo Square. However, Starr’s critique does not entirely denounce the possibility that Gottschalk had some intimate engagements in witnessing events which would have occurred Sunday on Congo Square with the aid of Bruslé and/or Sally.

Both narratives are rich and useful for considering possibilities for further inquiry into Gottschalk’s relationship with the bamboula rhythm. The first narrative discussed situated Gottschalk’s relationship with the bamboula rhythm as being developed through a close spatial proximity to Congo Square, whereas the second narrative situated his relationship within a gendered context. Additionally, both of these narratives are presented within rigid, dualistic
and hierarchal constructions that narrow and flatten possibilities to consider, as Gilroy would say, “the dynamics of dispersal and local autonomy” (Gilroy, 1993, p. 86). My critique in not situated in debating the validity of these narratives; rather, my critique cycles back the grand question of how do narratives work together in order to present, “unforeseen detours and circuits which mark the new journeys and arrivals that, in turn, release new political and cultural possibilities”? (Gilroy, 1993, p. 86).

Attending to the vibrational affect presented by the collective of these narratives is my suggestion, which considers the bamboula rhythm’s broader socio-sonic influence in relation to Gottschalk. Situating these two narratives closely presents possibilities of how space and time can be re-investigated. The following section functions as an explanation of the scholars, their theories, an explanation of the rationale for their inclusion. I present this upcoming discussion in accordance to considering how this informs my inquiry of Gottschalk’s relationship with the bamboula rhythm.

THE SCHOLARS AND THEORIES FRAMING MY DISCUSSION

How do narratives work together in order to present, “unforeseen detours and circuits which mark the new journeys and arrivals that, in turn, release new political and cultural possibilities (Gilroy, 1993, p. 86)”? The formulation of this question is in reaction to reflecting on the work of: cultural studies and Black studies scholar Paul Gilroy (1993); along with central sound studies scholars Jonathan Sterne (2012); and Steve Goodman (2012a); while considering the meanings of Gottschalk’s relationship with the bamboula rhythm.

Gilroy writes,

Critical space/time cartography of the diaspora needs to be readjusted so that the dynamics of dispersal and local autonomy can be shown alongside the unforeseen detours and circuits which mark the new journeys and new arrivals that in turn, release new political and cultural possibilities. (Gilroy, 1993, p. 86)

Gilroy’s context of newness is not rooted in an attempt to destroy connections to manifestations of past events in present times. Rather, Gilroy’s notion of newness deals with the irreducibility of tensions emanating from the dynamical distributive extremes of people, events, time and space. Furthermore, Gilroy’s statement is a call for the collective inquiry into the ontological and epistemological realms as a possibility to engage diasporas. Thus, newness is the continual reengagement with events predating the present in order to consider the meaning and enhancements these events offer.

I situate Gilroy’s statement in relation to the segment of Gottschalk’s narrative locating him in Paris. In the brief history presented at the beginning, while Gottschalk is a guest at the psychiatric ward, he receives an epiphany of his compositional voice through meditations on sonic themes from home, collectively in the household and more broadly from life in New Orleans. For Gottschalk, the bamboula registers as an embodiment of home space and place. Therefore, if Gilroy’s suggestion is to readjust the diasporically based critical space/time
cartographies, then Gottschalk’s engagement/engaging of embodied sonic modalities, the bamboula, moves beyond a compositional motive. The bamboula becomes a discourse about Gottschalk’s discovery of home through a dialogical relationship with the Black diaspora in order to consider the perceptual extremes the routes present. The creation of home away from New Orleans in Paris, and many other spaces and places, for Gottschalk, stand as variants of the cultural and political formulated in his relationship with the bamboula rhythm.

Jonathan Sterne writes, “Social space is sonic space. Space is the register in which sound can happen and sound can have meaning. But space is not a static thing. It is in constant formation, dissolution, and reformation” (Sterne, 2012, p. 91, original emphasis). Sterne emphasizes the insuperability of social and sonic spaces. Sterne’s use of “register” occupies a number of realms in reference to space. Simultaneously, “register” denotes sound’s dimensions while considering the index, as to acknowledge memory. Additionally, “register” articulates the proximity of relationships between people, matter, ideas, and symbols. In conclusion, space resists stasis and is constantly reformulated. The conception of space Sterne offers embodies a relational/social ethic. Sterne’s conception of the inseparability of social and sonic spaces is what I frame as the socio-sonic: the collective aural, oral, and spatial interaction in which communities engage.

Before moving on, I want to further describe the ethical conditions of socio-sonics. In considering the ethics of sound I found Walter Gershon’s discussion of vibrational affect helpful in addressing ethics in my proposed question. Gershon’s (2013) assertion of sound as resonance relinquishes sound from narrow conceptions situated in the Cartesian bodily division. He writes:

Sounds are a form of resonance and can therefore be understood as a kind of vibrational affect. My use of sound here is meant as a large umbrella that encompasses all sound possibilities including talk, music, and noise and I seek to make no valuation of either over another. (p. 258)

Gershon challenges anthropocentrism in how humanity privileges, orders, and values sound. His use of “sound possibilities” pushes against discussions of sound as reduced to a musico-logical subject. Furthermore, his acknowledgement of sound as vibrational affect, as related to resonance, decenters the primacy of the ear and considers sensual engagements with sound as a full body experience. The anthropocentric stance is also challenged in his push towards awareness of vibrational affect as related to both living and non-living matter as affected in ecological systems (Gershon, 2013). Thus, it is the susceptibility of all matter to vibrations that challenges, and perhaps topples, the hierarchy of who and/or what is affected. Rather, all is and all are affected through vibrations. Vibrations are mediums and agents that unite and loosen hierarchies (Derrida, in Rottenberg, 2002) of matters.

While an aspect of socio-sonics challenges anthropocentric engagements with sound, the challenge functions as an aporia. Hence, socio-sonics is not a remedy to the anthropocentric problem, but rather socio-sonics acknowledges the aporia as a set of ethical tensions, functioning as the affective, to consider how resonance creates broader change in all matter. Altogether, as collectively defined through sound scholars Blesser & Salter, 2007; Born, 2015; Chude-Sokei, 2015; Goodman, 2012b; Hainge, 2013; Kelly, 2011; LaBelle, 2010; Schafer,
1993; Sharpe, 2016; Stover, 2016; Voegelin, 2010; and Wright, 2015, and many more, sound is not entirely a cochlear experience; rather, sound is a full bodily experience in which all matters reshape environments simultaneously, while all environments reshape matters through sonic engagements.

These conceptions of social and sonic spatiality are utilized in this discussion to consider the sonic dynamics of some of the spaces and places Gottschalk experienced. While Sterne works with the social meanings of sound spatially, my perspective is further reinforced by considering the way boundaries were constructed in the sonic spaces of Gottschalk (Stoever, 2016). The socio-sonic in this presentation are both considerations of the social modalities created as result of sound, but also with ways in which boundaries formulated as result of sound. While Starr (1995) problematizes the folklore which situates Gottschalk as hearing iterations of the bamboula rhythm from Congo Square in the New Orleans familial residence, Starr does not entirely dismiss this narrative. I see this, in connection to reflecting on my own experiences with the cacophony and social dynamics of New Orleans, as a reminder of the impossibility to construct a boundary that is entirely non-transversable. Even further, while the bamboula rhythm came from Black communities, locally and internationally, in which enslavement was the violent oppressive medium that created physical boundaries, it is the sounds which permeated the psyches of Gottschalk’s most intimate community, his family. Thus, socio-sonics in this discussion is utilized to consider the both the social conditions and the boundary constructs within the contextual sonic conditions which constantly reconceptualize social/relational ethics.

Steve Goodman argues, “Vibrations always exceed the actual entities that emit them” (Goodman, in Sterne, 2012a, p. 71), acknowledging the existence of vibrations post emission. Goodman’s statement is a reminder of how the presence of vibrations permanence exists once expressed from mediums. Additionally, what intrigued me most, specifically, was Goodman’s acknowledgement of the life of vibrations as the foundational medium to commune, communicate, and inquire.

Goodman’s acknowledgement of vibrations combined with Gershon’s analysis of resonance in this discussion serve to consider how the rhetoric around Gottschalk’s relationship with the bamboula has been formulated. In particular, Starr’s premise of the bamboula rhythm’s impartation via Gottschalk’s Grandmother and Black nurse Sally is revelatory. It pushes against the dominant historical narrative of Gottschalk learning the bamboula from proximity to Congo Square. Buck-Morris (2009) contextualizes porosity by addressing how gender, particularly through women’s participation in sex work, dissolves boundaries. Starr repositioning the narrative of Gottschalk’s knowledge of the bamboula as being imparted by two women draws attention to how gender can construct spaces of silencing in historical narratives. Thus, Goodman’s assertion about the continual presence of vibrations post emission aids in becoming aware of how the gaps in Gottschalk’s narrative can be spaces of vibrancy as opposed to absence. Yet, the challenge for myself after becoming aware of the vibrations is to consider the source and/or sources the vibrations were emitted from. This inquiry in accordance with Goodman considers the sonic and philosophical meanings of Gottschalk’s relationship with the bamboula rhythm.

In the next section I situate my inquiry around inquiring about the possibilities of how the two narratives describing the Gottschalk’s first encounters with the Bamboula rhythm could
be examined through lenses of porosity and hegemony. I consider the ungovernable geographies of New Orleans and Gottschalk’s family life as two spaces to situate my critique and inquiry.

POROUSLY EMBODIED SPATIAL PULSES

The sonic occurrences within Congo Square in which the enslaved were confined and separated from the community provided a space rich in resistance. One element of this resistance involved the unique musical traditions that evolved from Congo Square.

By considering Congo Square through a lens of spatial resistance, it is clear that while human bodies where contained the sounds employed by musical performance practice and communication created, as a result of the gatherings, was something that resisted any sort of boundary and was able to permeate communities outside those bounded to the place of Congo Square. However, my mention of sound is not bound to a strict musicological discourse. Rather, sound in my mention is sensual/and or extramusical in exploring possible ungovernable porosities incited through spatial dynamics via how communities existed within socio-sonic spaces.

Rhythm is one way to conceptualize the networks of Louisiana’s history. In Louisiana’s history, rhythm is essential in considering the transmission of history, which converges with Jackson’s (2006) discussion of “vernacular networks” (p. 765). I propose the possibility of approaching rhythm, particularly ostinatos vs. syncopation, from a musicological stance to sit with the nonlinearity of history. The mention of rhythm simultaneously acknowledges how sound artifacts transmit socio-cultural information (Gershon, 2011, 2013), along with considering how ontologies and epistemologies create variations of grooves and ostinatos. Space’s anti-stasis attends to how the tensions in play within porosity are topos and topoi.

Agawu (2003) discussed “vernacular networks” (Jackson, 2006, p. 765) in the context of “everyday rhythm” (p. 73). He contextualized his discussion in relation to the rhythms that accompany traditional West and Central African dance. Agawu broke his description of the rhythmic occurrence into two parts, denoted as topoi and topos. He defined topoi as the macro context in which “cultural insiders” (p. 73) create meaning, whereas topos is the micro repetitive rhythmic moments within the dance accompaniment that serve as temporary points of reference for the collective ensemble, the dancers and the instrumentalists.

Another way to understand topoi and topos is to compare them to a grand musical composition versus an element or building block of the musical composition. Thus, topoi is the macro context understood as the grand musical composition, whereas topos are the smaller compositional elements that form the grand composition. The topos are also elements that migrate from the topoi and become present in various musical and cultural traditions. Agawu (2003) mentioned how topoi is rooted in specific communities and over time migrates to others. For Agawu (2003), topoi and topos and the dance are always understood as connected and as socio-cultural transmitters, though their meanings shift overtime, and across history.

For Agawu (2003), space was situated in reference to the inseparability of dance and music in West and Central African cultures. His context addressed rhythmical topoi, the macro, and topos,
the micro, which transmit cultural identity and values in addition to accruing alternative meanings according to societal migration. In this discussion rhythm is metaphorical to understand that histories themselves are ostinatos and grooves that are always occurring with degrees of variance. My grander assertion situates the ostinato as the multi-logical space (as opposed to dialogical since dia implies two interactions) in which variations of topos and topoi constantly reformulate, re-work and/or transgress boundaries. This way of processing and interpreting ostinatos causes me to be weary of the notion of what constitutes syncopation because the rigid set of dualities implied.

Syncopation is intriguing to me. A general definition of syncopation frames it as the re-orientation of accenting the beat (and or part of the beat) considered weaker with a stronger accent, whereas the beat considered stronger becomes the weaker. Therefore in 4/4 time beats 1 and 3, from a sociocultural, specifically a Western classical musical stance, are considered the stronger beats as opposed to beats 2 and 4 which considered the weaker beats. However, when beats 2 and 4 are (and/or the and’s or e’s of the beat) stressed, as witnessed in Black musical practice/and or tradition, the notion of these beats as occurring as stronger beats as opposed to 1 and 3 is situated within a discourse of syncopation which marks them as abnormal or exotic (Said, 1979/1994). The notion of syncopation presents an imperialistic problem. Thus, it is the idea of normalcy imposed through a White hegemonic aesthetic locus that assigns strong and weak to beats. To situate beats or rhythmical stresses in the binary of strong or weak implies other tensions of exoticism or abnormality. A question to consider with the sociocultural notion of syncopation is who gets to imply the binary strong vs. weak? Thus, understanding syncopation as an imperialistic practice literally and metaphorically in conceptualizing pulses and the stresses in time presents possibilities in addressing the two narratives of how Gottschalk relationship with the bamboula rhythm developed.

I situate the ostinato, ethically harmonized with the Agawu’s formulation of topos and topoi to counter the linear and exotized notions imposed through syncopation, overall, to consider the how the resonance of historical narratives, with attention to Gottschalk, function as a series of ostinatos. While New Orleans is a sonically cacophonous city made so through the production of reverberations from infrastructures and organisms, I do not see that as viable to presenting nor promoting a socio-sonic narrative which is overly simplistic. Specifically, the promoting of conceptions which assign an incidental historical framing which dampen and/or expunge voices within a narrative. Furthermore, while it is possible Gottschalk could have engaged with the bamboula rhythm in his birth city of New Orleans, it is not enough to rest the narrative explanation on sonic emanations from Congo Square.

The first narrative of Gottschalk situated his knowledge of the bamboula rhythm as being experience with aural emanations for Congo Square. This narrative depiction is hollow because it lacks nuanced theorizations of spatial interactions between the Gottschalk family residence and Congo Square. In this narrative, space is relegated to rigidity, without consideration of the broader community between the Gottschalk residence ad Congo Square, as a comprised of porous temporal spatial mediums absorbing and exchanging vibrations from multiple spaces and places. As a result an avenue of exploration presented could include theorizations situating communities as porous permeable mediums moving throughout the city spaces of New Orleans showing variances in space and time. Acknowledgement of this movement denotes the socio-sonic aspect of vibrational affect (Gershon, 2013) which counters the linear and hollow narrative depiction.
Furthermore, exploring the ever expanding ways communal bodies themselves are spaces which sustain and shift the dynamism of place is important in addressing both New Orleans and Gottschalk. In “Thinking Through Scale: Critical Geography and Curriculum Spaces”, Helfenbein (in Malewski, 2010) framed his discussion of space in three ways: “1. spaces that speak, 2. spaces that leak, and 3. spaces of possibility” (p. 305). Helfenbein acknowledged that space is not static. Space is temporal. Thus the plural denotation of multiple spaces is not a demarcation. Space acknowledges the connectedness along with the constant shifts in meaning occurring within and around. While a space can be understood as distinct, it also is not neatly confined; rather, space, according to Helfenbein (in Malewski, 2010), is dynamic through the expressions of speaking, leaking, and possibility. His discussion identified the actions occurring within a space and considered how the characteristics of neighboring spaces are transmitted. I further assert that Helfenbein’s characterizations situate space as resistant because of the dynamic, unsettled reformulations that space continually assumes. Space as leaking, speaking, and being full of possibilities is a simultaneous acknowledgement of space and the agents in space’s resistance to stasis.

Gottschalk, according to Helfenbein’s characterization of space as speaking, leaking, and full of possibilities, can be understood, spatially, as both space and agent. Enacting dynamical spatial shifts and being affected through the ostinato-esque existence, indicated through his utilization of ostinatos. These ostinatos could be understood as points of reflection on the bamboula rhythm, whereby he expressed his relationship with the bamboula in composition. The ostinato for him was the groove he had with aural histories, the bamboula rhythm, which opened up the spaces, characterized by Helfenbein, as “1. spaces that speak, 2. spaces that leak, and 3. spaces of possibility” (p. 305).

Thus, if the first narrative discussed about Gottschalk considers the spatial emanations from Congo Square as transmitted though resonance transgressing place in conjunction with how resonance permeated and was manifested in bodies, in motion around the Gottschalk family residence, the narrative is shifted from a syncopated mindset to one considering the ostinato. Specifically, the narrative is not situated in a binary of strong/weak or normal/abnormal, but rather through examining the tensions of porosity, those I would characterize as the multi-logics of topos and topoi, which acknowledge the possibilities of simultaneity that many socio-sonic actions of the bamboula rhythm’s transmission occurred.

The second narrative of Starr situated the core of Gottschalk’s bamboula rhythm knowledge as coming from Bruslé and Sally. Starr’s narrative counters the first in two ways: 1. shifting the discussion of socio-sonic space to within the family home, and 2. situating Gottschalk’s knowledge of the bamboula rhythm as rooted and dependent upon two women. However, Starr’s narrative of Gottschalk can be pushed further. Firstly, through loosening the rigid hierarchical critique employed to discuss Gottschalk’s interactions with socio-sonic spaces as an infant. It is the rigidity in this depiction which diminishes the spatial dynamics of New Orleans. Lastly, while Starr’s discussion highlights the importance of Bruslé and Sally in imparting knowledge of the bamboula rhythm to Gottschalk, his analysis does not address how the non-inclusion of them in previous discussions indicates the gendered foundation of Gottschalk’s narrative has been constructed. Thus, a challenge to Starr’s narrative would inquire about how Gottschalk’s history might appear if depicted in looser hierarchal framework with an elevated analysis of gender dynamics regarding his musical education.
With consideration of Bruslé and Sally as the essential forces in Gottschalk’s musical education in regard to the bamboula rhythm, I come back to the question about how narratives work together in order to present, “unforeseen detours and circuits which mark the new journeys and arrivals that, in turn, release new political and cultural possibilities” (Gilroy, 1993, p. 86)? It is the continuum between Buck-Morss’s (2009) discussion of porosity along with Agawu’s (2003) discussion of topos and topoi which situates Bruslé’s and Sally’s narrative as the “unforeseen detours and circuits” (Gilroy, 1993, p. 86). While Buck-Morss contextualizes porosity in reference to boundary dissolution via sexual commerce for women, an overall tension presented is the loosening of boundaries through gender. Perceiving the loosening of boundaries in how gender operates in Gottschalk’s musical educational narrative which has an inverse action in that a necessary narrative linearization is created, specifically, the possibility that socio-sonic space is not denoted as incidental and static, but rather intentional and dynamic. Bruslé and Sally can be seen as spaces embodying and imparting the bamboula rhythm carried from Haiti, according to Starr, to Gottschalk in New Orleans.

My assertion is not intended to dampen the sonic dynamism of New Orleans. Rather, my assertion is intended to acknowledge the additional factor that Gottschalk’s re-embodiment of the bamboula rhythm was made possible and enriched as a result of mental and physical boundary transgressions of two women from Haiti, Bruslé and Sally. However, when Gottschalk’s history is presented, only one possibility is presented, that he simply heard the sonic ruminations from Congo Square. Additionally, it is the bamboula rhythm, embodied and re-embodied, in the trio of Bruslé, Sally, and Gottschalk which articulate the narrative “circuits,” or the literal and conceptual topos and topoi.

CONCLUSION

The exploration of these narratives is a pedagogical engagement. Gottschalk’s relationship with the bamboula rhythm is an opportunity to problematize the over-privilegedness of written text to consider oral and aural meanings of the roots and routes, along with boundaries transgressed via embodiment engaged through this rhythm. In this exploration what is revealed is how the bamboula rhythm touched Gottschalk. Contextually in this discussion, touch is metaphorical, and describes how the bamboula, as a sonic component, functioned as a point for Gottschalk to re-discover home, in the forms of compositional voice and mental reconnection to New Orleans during his first time in Paris, France.

The ostinato, both as sonic modality and metaphor, expands possibilities for understanding how the bamboula rhythm exists as a continuum, which inhabits, survives, and is expressed as a result of how mediums impart and share this rhythm with communities. The two narratives presented simultaneously serve to provide critiques and show variances in considering how gaps in narratives are resonant areas (Weheliye, 2005). However, the challenge posed to the engager of these narratives is how one becomes a better listener: how, and why should one get sensually attuned to sonic relationships in narrative gaps?

The bamboula rhythm exemplifies a piece of oral and aural history and culture. Pushing sonic narrative analysis further regarding depictions of Gottschalk’s relationship with the
bamboula rhythm is enriched through analysis of gendered, spatial, and racial constructs. This also applies to education.

Presently, education operates as an archive in which the emphasis is on the presence of physical artifacts and the written text. Therefore, lack of the written record in an archive is equated with non-existence. This engagement with a segment of Gottschalk’s narrative highlights the broader problematic treatment of the communal oral and aural ways of being in education. Expanding the conception of ostinatos from a musical standpoint to encompass reflexive engagements allows us to see the constant reembodiment of diasporas, literally and conceptually in rhythmic and melodic cells. The point of change for the engager involves inquiry into the meaning of becoming increasingly sensitive and aware of the diaspora.

For the educator, sensitivity to diaspora as an ostinato translates to attending to the spoken and unspoken implications of curriculum on communities. How might educators attend to how violence and victimization, historically and presently inflicted upon marginalized communities around learning, have forced them to situate their knowledge as un-hearable and un-sensible to the outsider? Inversely, how have rigid notions of responsibility rendered community knowledge un-hearable and un-sensible for the educator (Derrida & Prenowitz, 1995; Mitchell, in press)? These inquiries are reminders of how responsibility as examined through these contexts is situated as a point of impasse is in need of engagements with sonic modalities to further challenge perceptions of stagnancy imposed by educational metanarratives.

NOTES

1. Groove and ostinato, from a musicological standpoint, denote both rhythmic and melodic repetition; however they are used as metaphors in this discussion to consider how historical narrative circulates and superimposes itself upon, around, through, inside, etc. non-linearly. This acknowledgement calls for those engaged in the narrative to loosen the constraints, represented in preconceived ideas, of how historical narratives develop and/or end. Rather, the historical event is a groove or ostinato, constantly occurring, which spurs reminders of the possible connectedness individuals have to various subjectivities, while with each round revealing other perspectives.

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REFERENCES


