

Dar Gnawa: Creating Heritage and the African Diaspora through Sound, Image and Word¹

by Deborah Kapchan* (New York, USA)

Heritage, as folklorist and performance studies scholar Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett notes, “is a mode of cultural production in the present that has recourse to the past. Heritage thus depends on display to give dying economies and dead sites a second life as exhibitions of themselves” (1998: 7). In this paper I examine the production of musical heritage, and its effects in the world music market. I demonstrate how discourses of history and race are reconfigured through the musical collaborations between Randy Weston and Gnawa master Abdellah El Gour. El Gour, who has been playing with Weston since the 1960s, has transformed his house in Tangier into a public institute called Dar Gnawa, the House of Gnawa. Dar Gnawa is a space for the display of *tagnawit*: literally “Gnawanness”. The word represents *Gnawa knowledge as practiced*, its epistemology.² In this paper, I examine how *tagnawit* is self-consciously transformed into heritage, reconfiguring as well lines of genealogical influence in the African diaspora.

Gnawa in the Popular Imagination

In their ritual function, the Gnawa heal those afflicted with spirit possession in Morocco through all-night ceremonies (*lilat*, pl.) that placate the spirits with music, incense, colors, and animal sacrifice. The Gnawa play music that induces trance (*jadba*) through the regular rhythms of heavy metal castanets (*qraqab*) and the bass melodies provided by the *hajhuj*, a three-stringed instrument tuned in an octave and a fifth. But the Gnawa have also become very popular on the world music market, collaborating with African American jazz musicians, American rock and roll musicians, and French recording artists, while also participating in festivals all over Europe and touring occasionally in the United States. In Morocco and elsewhere the Gnawa have become symbols of the “essence of African culture” (Serfaty 1969), Morocco’s link to the

¹ This article has appeared in similar form in *Music and Anthropology*, volume 7, and in the book that followed: *Traveling Spirit Masters: Gnawa Trance and Music in the Global Marketplace* (Wesleyan University Press, 2007).

* Associate Professor of Performance Studies at New York University.

² The word is a Berber syntactical construction that has been incorporated into Moroccan Arabic syntax. Adding the Berber prefix “ta” and the suffix “t” to an Arabic root makes a noun of identity (a *nisba*, made by adding “i” to the end of a noun, as in “Gnawi”) into a noun of attribution. Thus *huwa Gnawi* means, “he is a Gnawa” whereas *and-u tagnawit* means that “he possesses [the qualities, or attributes of] Gnawa-ness.” Those possessing *tagnawit* are most often born into a Gnawa milieu and come up through the ranks, learning the ritual in all its complexity by observation, participation, and slow initiation. Those who do not possess *tagnawit* are the popularizers who, for purposes of commercialization, have adopted the Gnawa identity and music but know little of its deeper ritual significance, its history in the bones.

African diaspora and the international struggles for racial equality.³ In liner notes and popular music criticism, the Gnawa become the embodiment of the “blues” on the African side of the Atlantic. How does this happen?

The Encounter

In the summer of 2001 I found myself in Tangier I was there to visit the master Gnawi Abdellah El Gour. I had met Abdellah when he was on tour in the United States with African American composer and pianist Randy Weston and his ensemble. The two of them had been collaborating for thirty years. At that time, El Gour was an electrical engineer for Voice of America radio broadcasting and Weston had a music club called African Rhythms in Tangier. Although he left in 1975, Weston has continued playing with El Gour and the Gnawa in international venues. I was in Tangier to understand how these two men, their two musical traditions, and their histories intertwined. Further, I was interested in how El Gour and Weston, while each possessing their own relation to the African diaspora, music, and innovation, came to be possessed by a historical narrative that animated and defined them both.⁴

Walking up the steep steps from the Tangier port and entering the narrow streets of the medina, I found the house quickly. It was indistinguishable from the others. It wasn't until I entered that I found the sign designating the location (figure 1).

³ The Gnawa came to national attention in post-Independence Morocco as contributors to the popular music groups Nas al-Ghiwan and Jil Jilala, adding an African aesthetic to the music and helping to create a particularly Moroccan sound. In the 1960s, international revolutionary discourses were prevalent in the mentality of the Moroccan intelligentsia—the Black Panthers and Reggae music were held up as examples of liberation discourses. The Gnawa represented the slavery experience and the existence of racism in this narrative, but they were also the connection to authentic aesthetics and political activism. Indeed, Abraham Serfaty, the noted Jewish writer and critic of the government at this time who was jailed and subsequently exiled until 1999, wrote about the intimacy of aesthetics and politics in African art and life, drawing inspiration from Leroi Jones (Amiri Baraka) and the Black Panthers. On the occasion of the Pan-African Festival, held in Algiers, Algeria, in 1969, Serfaty wrote:

In the face of this pretend “culture” of the slave masters where “the triumph of the economic spirit over the imagination” provoked “a schism between art and life,” the black slaves preserved the essence of African culture where “it was, and will always be inconceivable to separate music, dance, singing or any other artistic endeavor from the existence of man and his cult of gods.” (Serfaty 1969: 32–33, quoting Leroi Jones, *The People of the Blues*, translation mine).

Today not all Gnawa have a history in slavery (due to apprenticeships by non-Gnawa), yet this part of their past remains prominent in representations by scholars (Pâques 1991), music producers, and only sometimes by the Gnawa themselves. Foregrounding the history of Gnawa slavery links them to the larger African diaspora

⁴ “Well, I was working at Voice of America and at the same time I was playing with the Gnawa. I was at this time a *muhib*, a lover of the music and trance (*al-hal*), not a master. And I knew an English teacher. And this English teacher heard Randy [Weston] play; he met Randy Weston and introduced us.”

Randy Weston was on a tour of several African nations at this time, a project funded by the State Department with the intention of introducing African American artists to their roots in living African traditions. “A young Moroccan teacher brought me and Abdellah El Gour together,” Randy Weston recounted to me later that year, speaking of the same individual. “If you’re interested in African traditional music, you have to hear the Gnawa,” he told me. He was like a spirit, because neither Abdellah nor I remember his name or know what happened to him.”



Figure 1

“Dar Gnawa,” it said, “Commemorating the Memory of God’s Mercy” (*dar gnawa tuhiyyu dhikra at-tarahhum*). And indeed both commemoration and memory were created and displayed here. But of what and for whom?

El Gourd had transformed his traditional medina house into a museum of sorts, an institute for the instruction, practice, and promotion of Gnawa culture. He called it a *markaz*, a center or institute. After welcoming me, Abdellah waved his arms in the direction of the photos on the walls. “*Hiya hadik dar gnawa*,” he said. “This is Dar Gnawa.”

“Gnawa always had their trades,” Abdellah El Gourd was quick to tell me. “Not like now. Then you were a carpenter, a metal smith, a mason, everyone had their job. And you were also a Gnawi. Now people make being a Gnawi into a profession. It’s even on their *carte nationale*. It wasn’t until 1993 when I retired that I began to go out [on tour]...”

That Abdellah El Gourd was working at Voice of America has more than just ironic import. It was his association with English speakers in this international city that opened the door to a meeting with Randy Weston, for whom Abdellah became, in a sense, the “voice of the Gnawa,” a representative of a link with Africa that, although it had traveled across the Sahara, had not been broken by the Atlantic crossing. That was more than thirty years ago. It was an encounter that changed the lives of both men. Abdellah El Gourd, a ritual musician, became more of an artist or *fannan*, while jazz artist Randy Weston’s career veered toward ritual music. Both men found a common thread in the histories of slavery, for unlike other countries in Africa which were sources for the slave trade, Morocco (like the United States) was a *destination* for slave routes, particularly under the Arab and Berber sultanates who brought conquered people from Timbuktu to Morocco between the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, but also by the Portuguese who

used Morocco as a stopover port from West Africa). The Gnawa culture grew up behind the palace walls and among enclaves of slaves and former slaves in the cities and villages of pre-Independence Morocco.

Exhibit One: Displaying Sound

The soundscape was nothing if not various at Dar Gnawa. Sometimes we would listen to Malian music. Abdellah El Gourd was particularly impressed with the blind duo Amadou and Miriam, who, he told me, overcame hardship and initial rejection by Malian audiences to become well-known international recording artists. We listened to world music compilations with pieces that mixed Celtic and African sounds. One day I arrived to a pulsing Latin beat.

“You listen to salsa music?” I asked, surprised and delighted. Abdellah El Gourd didn’t understand the word “salsa.” “Latin music! *al-musiqa al-latiniyya*,” I clarified. “You like Latin music?”

“*Ma‘lum!* Of course,” he answered. “The origin of that music is Andalusian. *Asl-u andalusi* It’s Andalusian music, *dyal-nah*, it is ours, it belongs to us.” Here the *m’allam* was constructing his identity as a Moroccan more than an African.

The music that Abdellah played in Dar Gnawa did not issue from a homogenous Gnawa aesthetic (the kind of style that is appropriated and recognized in world music, for example), but, echoing the diverse pantheon of spirits, represented a musical polytheism of sorts, or a polymusicalism. I realized that Dar Gnawa exists in part for the dissemination of global sounds to a *local* audience. It is a locale where transnational musics are played, displayed, and consumed. In this musical and very pedagogical space, Abdellah creates links between different musical traditions.

Exhibit Two: Creating Musical History and Heritage in Images

The history of the Gnawa is largely oral. Apart from a corpus of books in French and some articles in English, there is little scholarship on the Gnawa. Even the slave records from that time period are difficult to access. The history is in the songs—all 243 of them according to Abdellah’s count. But even the songs themselves do not recount stories. There is no narrative line in the lyrics, only invocations to the different saints and spirits recognized by the Gnawa: Sidi Bilal, Abdulqadr Jilani, Sidi Musa, Lalla Aisha, Si Buhali, and others. The names of these *mluk* (or possessors) are repeated over and over, their qualities praised, their aid solicited. The spirits of the ancestors are still alive. Why then would they need to be conjured in books when their presence is conjured regularly in the bodies of the entranced, the *majdubin*?

The pantheon of spirits is not represented in any of the images displayed in Dar Gnawa. The images we do see on the wall in Dar Gnawa, however, are somewhat surprising. Abdellah El Gourd refers to them as the “ancestors” (Figure 2).



Figure 2

“*Ha huma an-nass al-qdam*, those are the ancestors,” the *m'allam* remarked when I approached the photographs to read the inscriptions in small print on the bottom. There were pictures of Rahsaan Roland Kirk, Eric Dolphy, Dexter Gordon, Thelonius Monk, Milt Hinton, Roy Eldridge, Johnny Copeland, Ben Webster, Archie Shepp, and, of course, Randy Weston, who is surrounded by pictures of Gnawa masters. How is it that African Americans jazz legends come to define the ancestors in Dar Gnawa? (Figure 3)



Figure 3

Abdellah told me that one could not just decide to “become” a Gnawi (*sbah Gnawi*). A Gnawi endures a long process of induction, initiation, and instruction. On the other hand, he said, there are people who are linked, *martabit*, to saints and spirits of the Gnawa pantheon. “Randy Weston,” said the *m'allam*, “came all the way from Brooklyn *martabat*, or linked, to the spirit Sidi Musa and to the color blue.” Sidi Musa is another name for Moses, who delivered the Jews from slavery in ancient Egypt and into freedom. There are links between the pantheon of spirits in Morocco, who, like Sidi Musa, are ancestors, and the ancestors of jazz. One clear contiguity is between the slaves that went to the Americas and those who stopped earlier in the journey, at the tip of North Africa. Commenting on the lack of a written record of history, Abdellah El Gourd told me that the slaves in Morocco would go through the city singing certain songs, songs known only to them, in order to be reunited with their loved ones that had been separated from them in slavery. “There were no telephones, then,” he said jokingly, “no *portables* (or cell phones). Slaves had their own language in song. When they would come into a new city, they would sing the songs, trying to find their own.” Songs served as auditory icons of identity, as sound “links.” Weston found such a link to Africa in Morocco.

For Weston, Africa is the source (to invoke Abdellah El Gourd’s term), the birthplace of all traditions. Linking his music to Africa is also making a claim to authenticity. Yet, encountering Sidi Musa was also an encounter with the great jazz masters, since when Weston first heard the Gnawa he also heard “the black church, the blues, and jazz all at the same time”. What’s more, it was an opening into a different mode of being in the world. “When I heard this particular [version of] Sidi Musa, after the ceremony I was in trance for about a week. And when I say trance, I was functioning. . . . I was moving, but the music took me to a very high level, it took me to another dimension” said Weston, adding, “I really realized that we’re just little leaves of the branch of mother Africa.”

There is an inversion, as well as a complementarity to the way Abdellah El Gourd and Randy Weston define and pay homage to the ancestors. Both acknowledge the source in Africa itself: Abdellah El Gourd by invoking the *m'allemin* (pl.), the early Gnawa masters who left their legacy to the present in the *bodies and songs* of those who possess *tagnawit* today, and Randy Weston by making frequent reference in his performances and presentations to mother Africa—the place—also defined as the “source” of musical and spiritual tradition. When I asked Randy Weston, for example, what he found so powerful about Moroccan Gnawa music he responded, “It’s like after being away from your parents for a long time, your mother and father, whom who love very deeply. And you know they are there, but you may never see them, or maybe you have seen them but you’ve been away a long time, when you do see them and you realize that what you have they *gave* you; you become very humble.” For Randy Weston, Africa becomes the primary place of return, whereas for Abdellah El Gourd, at least in Dar Gnawa, the ancestors that crossed the Atlantic become primary symbols of genealogical display. As Susan Sontag notes in *On Photography*, “One can’t possess reality, [but] one can possess (and be possessed by) images—as according to Proust, most ambitious of voluntary prisoners, one can’t possess the present but one can possess the past” (1989: 163). The images displayed in Dar Gnawa narrate a story of association, of links between past and present. El Gourd’s photographs create a racial and musical history for the Gnawa in general. This is particularly notable, as it breaks

with Moroccan conventions of display. In Morocco (as in many places in the world), the photographs that usually hang on the walls of homes are those of patriarchs and sometimes matriarchs. (In public places, pictures of the king are *de rigueur*.) In sepia tones and yellowed with age, these photographs represent a kind of ancestor veneration and a document of family origins, “a portable kit of images that bears witness to [the family’s] connectedness” (Sontag 1989: 8). The photographs in Dar Gnawa do bear witness, but not to life narrative so much as to a *genealogy of style and identity*. Not only is the repetition of musical styles (in both directions) paralleled by a repetition of visual practice in the form of a gallery of images, but the genealogy portrayed is also one based not upon bloodline, but upon aesthetic and spiritual links. As Raymond Williams notes, “cultural tradition can be seen as a continual selection and re-selection of ancestors” (Williams 1961). As new genealogies are drawn, different practices and discourses emerge.

Exhibit Three: Possessed by Documentation

There is another way that El Gourd documents his tradition and turns tagmawit, the lived tradition, into heritage (Figure 4).

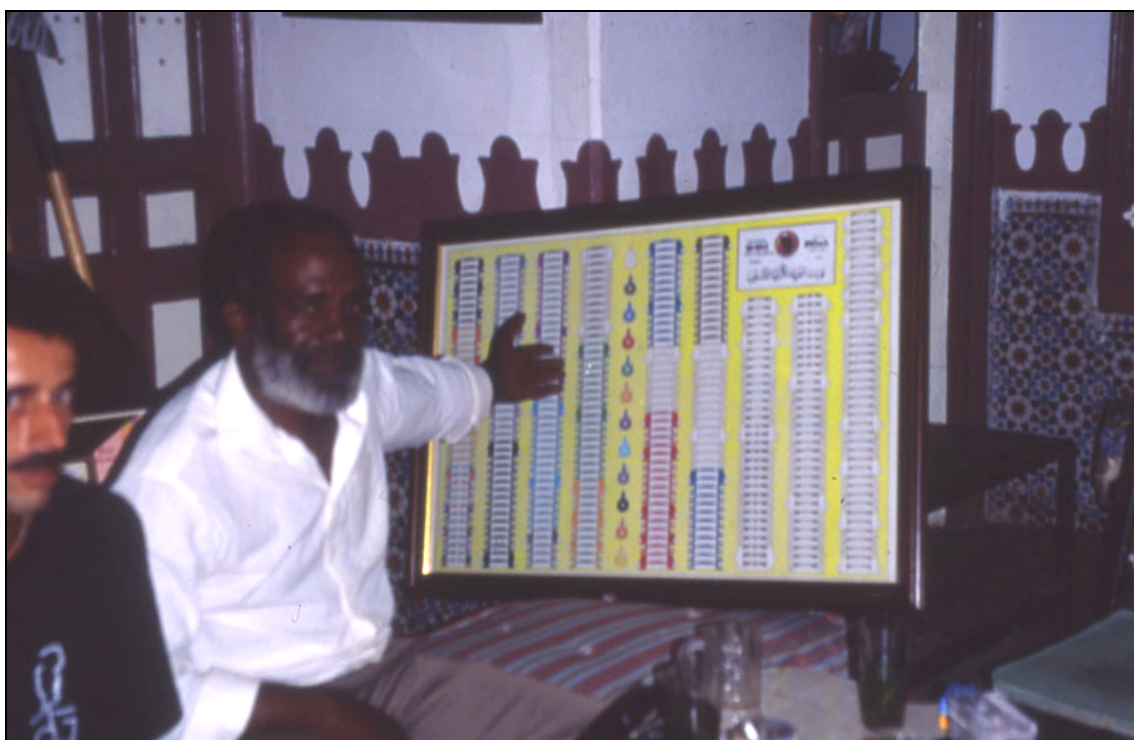


Figure 4

Usually Abdellah El Gourd wakes from his afternoon siesta, gets out his draftsman’s tools—rulers, calipers, stencils—orders a large glass of steaming mint tea from the café across the street, and gets to work on his *luha*. This is a chart where Abdellah El Gourd meticulously records the progression of the *lila*, from the playful songs sung before the ceremony (*l’aba*), through all the spirits. There are 243 *qita’* (“cuts” or segments) in the Tangier *lila*, which, unlike Gnawa ceremonies in other cities, is performed over two days and nights. The chart is coded by color—white, green, black, red, pink, yellow,

violet, and orange. Each spirit is associated with a color. There are several spirits in each group, all sharing the incense burned with that color. Each spirit has their own song, and each color, or group of spirits, has a food or drink associated with it, something that is imbibed or incorporated into the body (Diouri n.d.)

There were three *luhas* in Dar Gnawa when I was there. The *m'alle*m was working on a new one. There was an old one from 1980—he was not pleased with the aesthetic presentation of that—and a half-done *luha* that was, he realized well into his work, short one slot for the songs of the black spirits (each group of spirits has a color that unites them into a class or family). So he started again. Around the edges of the diagram in the older *luha*, Abdellah El Gourd had written the names of the countries where, he said, the Gnawa came from: Mauritania, Senegal, Gambia, Guinea-Bissau, Uganda, Congo, Kenya, Côte d'Ivoire, Zaire, Niger, Sudan, Guinea, Sierra Leone, Malawi, Central African Republic, Chad, Nigeria, and Burkina Faso. Inscribed in a small box on the lower-right-hand corner, he had written the following words, in English (Figure 5):

The Way of the Gnawa

The Ancestor's Heritage composed and ordered by Dar Gnawa

for [its] preservation from dust. Dedicated to all koyatis and Gnawa lovers.

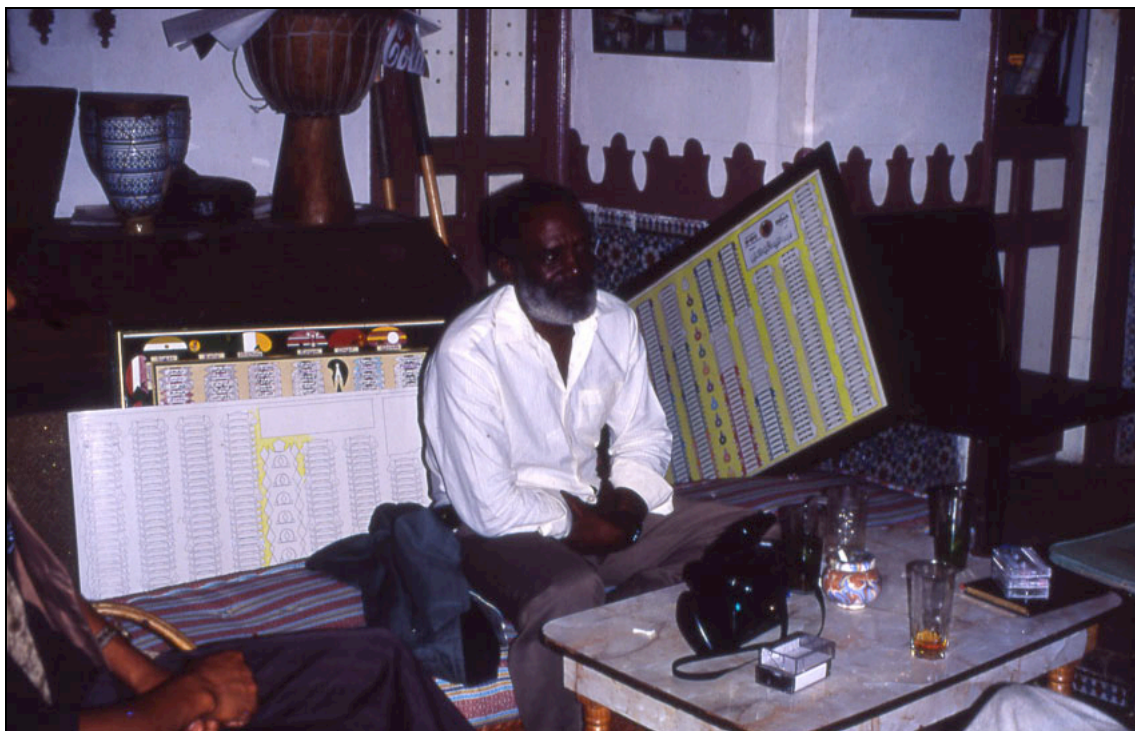


Figure 5

Here was cultural preservation, self-conscious, self-proclaimed—a way to possess heritage and, tellingly, to order it. Abdellah El Gourd was creating precedent by committing the oral tradition to paper and ink, so that it would not turn to “dust” when the bodies of its bearers were no longer present. Ironically and predictably, his efforts come at a time when the *treq lila* (literally the path or progression of the ceremony) is transforming dramatically because of its commodification, both at home and abroad. By consecrating the *lila* to script, Abdellah El Gourd possesses what he calls the “heritage,”

but he is also possessed by the act of documentation. The index that he is creating, much like the “folk maps” that Palestinians make of destroyed villages (Slyomovics 1998: 7), provides a symbolic placement for the Gnawa and their traditions. It is not an index to the imaginary and symbolic geography of an individual, but to what Abdellah El Gourd is careful to delineate as a regional tradition. “This is the Tangier *lila*,” he repeated often. Writing, Abdellah El Gourd is propitiating the spirit that desires to capture tradition before it disappears with the last of its practitioners. Present-day Gnawis, it will be remembered, market the music but have little knowledge of the ritual context from which it sprang. Abdellah El Gourd still remembers. The consecration of this memory to writing creates what Pierre Nora calls a “*lieu de mémoire*,” a symbolic residence for the Gnawa identity (Nora 1989). But El Gourd is also propitiating the spirit of capitalism, of rationality and modernity, entering the tradition-qua-tradition into a transnational index. For what is an index if not a way to locate, to define, and to classify? “While memory is the raw material of history,” Slyomovics reminds us, “a document is what remains” (1998: 18). Much like a map, the index is the objectification of this memory. It “represents the unrepresentable: place and the desire to own it” (Bohlman 2000: 654).

Not surprisingly, with the help of Si Said and his European agent, Jaap Haarlaar, Abdellah has created a website for Dar Gnawa (www.dargnawa.myweb.nl). His preoccupations with the *luha* are intricately related to giving order and—more importantly—public and official recognition to the Gnawa cultural identity.

My reactions were perhaps predictably tinged with eleventh-hour anxiety. I wanted to own this *luha*, to possess the “facts” that I had been trying to “get down” for so long. I wanted to lay claim to that *luha* and to Gnawa culture as I knew it had not been presented or codified before. Nor was I alone in my desire to possess this object. “I wish I could get a copy of that *luha*,” the saxophonist from the Royal Orchestra said to the *m'allam* one night, gesturing to the chart. “No one gets a copy. No copies,” said the *m'allam*. “It’s not ready.”

Abdellah El Gourd would not part with a copy of a *luha* (though he had several from previous years), nor would he allow me to photograph the whole thing. “It’s not ready,” he kept repeating. “*ma zal*, not yet.”¹

Abdellah El Gourd is possessed not just by documentation, but by the creation of heritage. His task is all the more pressing, as he is documenting the ephemeral—music, song, and gestures. He, himself, is creating the “ethnographic object” (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998: 30). If Weston is represented as a musical anthropologist in his liner notes, El Gourd is an ethnographer, researching his own traditions and creating the texts, the museum labels if you will, for the artifacts of Gnawa culture. These “artifacts” are immaterial—like spirits, they cannot be put in a frame or a box. Performances cannot be taken home. They are singular events. Their documentation, then, is always an estimate and a failure of representation. The index, however, does not fail, as it does not attempt to evoke, only to describe. Its limits are clear. It does not pretend to be the thing itself. It is a map, and nothing more.

Conclusion

Ironically, spending time at Dar Gnawa is not an immersion into *taghawit* in the strict sense of the term. Surrounded by images of great jazz musicians, as well as photos of secular Gnawa performances in Spain, France, and the United States, there is no

pervasive feeling of anything resembling “pure” Gnawa-ness. The soundscape is equally diverse. The music of jazz musicians, West Africans, Latinos, and others, fills the space, entering the body through the vibrations created by the high decibels. We might say that Abdellah El Gourd is inhabited by the spirits of the jazz ancestors just as Randy Weston is inhabited by the spirits of the African ancestors. There is little anxiety about cultural loss in Dar Gnawa at the level of image and sound. The history portrayed there is an international one—not just Pan-African, but also one that reaches across the Straits to Andalusia in Spain and across the Atlantic to Brooklyn. Yet the *luha*—as representation of the rational, the literate, the modern—becomes the object that is kept from circulation on the cultural market. It has, for Abdellah, great worth as an item of symbolic capital. Dedicated to the *koyatis*, the Gnawa dancers or apprentices, and to all those who love the culture—the written record of the *luha* exists to save what he calls (in English, it should be noted) the “Ancestor’s Heritage” from dust. It is not the memory of the *ancestors* that he is preserving with the *luha*, for they are remembered perennially in the dances and songs, in the bodies and breath of the Gnawa; it is rather the tradition that they have bequeathed that is being preserved, it is a particular Tangier *practice* that he intends to save by codifying it in print—*tagnawit*. That he is the only one to consign such knowledge to print puts Abdellah in a privileged relation to this genealogy of ancestors. He is both a critic of Gnawa tradition as practiced nationally and a custodian of his particular tradition. The *treq lila*, the path of the ceremony as Abdellah El Gourd learned it, is changing rapidly. In other cities, whole colors are deleted from the *lila* and parts of the ritual once considered essential are dispensed with completely. Abdellah El Gourd’s *luha* is a memorial to a specifically local way of honoring the spirits. Disembodied and consecrated to the *luha*, the spirits would seem to inhabit a new medium in ink, and Abdellah El Gourd comes to possess the tradition. What’s more, El Gourd rewrites the history of racial relations in the African diaspora, making evident the contribution of the Gnawa to African American musical traditions. Whereas African American jazz musicians tell stories of their return to Africa and African aesthetics, El Gourd tells the story from the other direction, a story about common ancestors who transcend time and space. In so doing, he includes himself, and the Gnawa more generally, in a racialized music history already in circulation in the world music market—that of the African diaspora.

Bibliography

- Bohlman, Philip V.
2000 "Music, Race and the End of History in Modern Europe." in *Music and the Racial Imagination*, edited by Radano Ronald and Philip V. Bohlman. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Hell, Bertrand.
2002 *Le tourbillon des génies : au Maroc avec les Gnawa*. Paris: Flammarion.
- Kapchan, Deborah.
2007 *Traveling Spirit Masters: Moroccan Gnawa Trance and Music in the Global Marketplace*. Middletown, Ct.: Wesleyan University Press.
2002 "Possessing Gnawa Culture: Displaying Sound, Creating History in an Unofficial Museum." *Music and Anthropology* 7.

Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, Barbara.

1998 *Destination Culture: Tourism, Museums, and Heritage*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Pâques, Viviana.

1991 *La religion des esclaves : recherches sur la confrérie marocaine des Gnawa*. Rome: Vitalli Press.

Serfaty, Abraham.

1969 "Salut Aux Afro-Américains." *Souffles* no. 15: 32-33.

Sontag, Susan.

1989 *On Photography*. Pbk. ed. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

Slyomovics, Susan.

1998 *The Object of Memory: Arab and Jew Narrate the Palestinian Village*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Williams, Raymond.

1985 *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*. Rev. ed. New York: Oxford University Press,.

Discography

The Splendid Master Gnawa Musicians of Morocco & Randy Weston. "Chalabati." The Splendid Master Gnawa Musicians of Morocco. (Antilles 314 521 587-2, 1994)

Weston, Randy. "Blue Moses." The Spirits of Our Ancestors. (Antilles 314-511 896-2, 1992)