

“THE KANGAROO AND THE DIDJERIDU:” DUKE ELLINGTON’S  
ENGAGEMENT WITH WORLD MUSIC IN *THE AFRO-EURASIAN  
ECLIPSE*

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## ABSTRACT

Laurie McManus: “The Kangaroo and the Didjeridu:” Duke Ellington’s Engagement with World Music in *The Afro-Eurasian Eclipse*  
(Under the direction of David Garcia)

Duke Ellington’s world music suite the *Afro-Eurasian Eclipse* (1970) has been relatively overlooked in the community of jazz scholarship. This may be due to the historiographical contexts that privilege Ellington as a composer of art music or Ellington as a champion of black cultural awareness vis-à-vis his more famous musico-political works such as the *Black and Tan Fantasy* (1933) and the *Black Brown, and Beige* suite (1943).

Closer investigation reveals that an increasingly active political climate and growing awareness of globalization in the later 1960s combined with Ellington’s travels and personal experiences to inspire him to adopt a more transnational attitude about music and culture. The genesis and musical content of the *Afro-Eurasian Eclipse* demonstrate that Ellington’s expression of musical identity and his role in the jazz community had changed from the early years. Accordingly, scholars should reformulate the historiographical constructs to accommodate Ellington’s later engagement with world music.



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## Chapter I Ellington as Two Different Heroes

“It is an American idiom of African roots – a trunk of soul with limbs reaching in every direction, to the frigid North, the exotic East, the miserable, swampy South, and the swinging Wild West.” – Duke Ellington on jazz<sup>1</sup>

Duke Ellington’s music has appealed to people of varying musical preferences. From the early years onward he held sway over his audiences, and he continually reinvented himself, delving into areas of art music and world music. Today he remains one of the iconic figures of jazz, sometimes represented in popular biographies as the ‘father of jazz.’ His prolific musical activities helped to perpetuate the idea of a jazz musician who had his hands in every aspect of the world, and throughout his life his music cut across boundaries of style. Even in the above quotation he presents his view of jazz as something all encompassing, something that cuts across not only stylistic boundaries, but physical geographic ones as well, as Paul Austerlitz has more recently argued.<sup>2</sup> The idea of jazz as a music for many people can be conflated with the icon of Ellington himself, and indeed Ellington has become in some circles a representation of jazz itself.

Ellington’s comment about jazz and its wide-reaching limbs also represents his life-long ambivalence toward a music that could be both empowering for black Americans and inclusive of multiple ethnic types. Throughout his career, Ellington tried to reconcile the

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<sup>1</sup> Edward Kennedy Ellington, *Music is My Mistress* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1973) 436.

<sup>2</sup> Paul Austerlitz, *Jazz Consciousness: Music, Race, and Humanity*, (Middletown, Conn. : Wesleyan University Press, 2005).

expression of black national identity with the more universal appeal of jazz, at times distancing himself from the very word “jazz.” Ellington’s circumlocutions serve as a critique for the discursive formations concerning jazz, formations that still inform the scholarship and its views of Ellington today.

Ellington’s iconic status in the popular realm is mirrored in his significant presence in jazz historiography. Famous in his day, Duke Ellington remains one of the most written-about figures in jazz literature. Exploring the historiographical status of Ellington, however, will reveal a divide in the literature and a recurring set of questions concerning Ellington’s music and his meaning for history as a leading black musician. Following popular conception, Ellington is portrayed as a great jazz composer, with emphasis on harmonic and formal innovations in his solo and ensemble-writing. On the other hand, some scholars prefer to explore the social context of Ellington’s music as it relates to African-American expression of identity. That these differing interpretations of Ellington flourish in the literature demonstrates the wide scope of writings on Ellington, though closer investigation reveals an ambivalence toward some of the man’s later music.

As the Ellington literature focuses on musical innovations or the purely social meaning of his music, it eschews his interest in world music that inspired some of his multi-movement jazz suites from the 1960s and early ‘70s. By focusing on one of these suites the *Afro-Eurasian Eclipse*, I will argue that the historiographical tropes should be revised to adjust for Ellington’s engagement with other musical cultures during a period of jazz history in which he has been overlooked.

## Historiography

Within the academic community, Ellington scholars have taken basically two approaches to his place in jazz history and its sociological implications. Their writings include a variety of issues, for instance focusing on historical and social context or dealing more directly with his music and the meaning of jazz performance practice. These two approaches may be divided generally into what Kevin Korsyn calls “privileged contexts.”

According to Korsyn, privileged contexts

...constitute various ways of framing compositions to create historical narratives; they are privileged because historians rely on a limited number of contexts, preferring certain types of frames to others, so that the series of contexts becomes stereotyped and predictable, limiting the questions that we ask about music.<sup>3</sup>

Thus the privileged contexts close the discourse and limit it to a few specific frames of reference. The discursive formations remain confined to a smaller realm of exploration. For Ellington scholarship, this phenomenon manifests itself through the contexts of Ellington as a jazz composer and Ellington as a black nationalist musician.

The concept of Ellington the jazz composer finds its roots in the sheer range of music written by Ellington – from musical to ballet to fantasies and blues – as well as the views of the white community toward jazz in general. If some of Ellington’s music may be heard as bridging the gap between jazz and more traditional Western art music, some scholars have made him one of the founding fathers of the jazz canon and even taken this a step further. Gunther Schuller’s work on early jazz even compares Ellington to Beethoven, though in the end Schuller decides that Ellington was a classicist: “The fact that Ellington was able to

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<sup>3</sup> Kevin Korsyn, “Beyond Privileged Contexts: Intertextuality, Influence, and Dialogue” *Rethinking Music*, eds. Nicholas Cook and Mark Everest (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999) 67-68.

infuse these stereotyped forms with such life and – by the late 1930s – such seamless continuity, is one of the measures of his genius as a composer.”<sup>4</sup> Making a parallel that explicitly links Ellington with the most famous composers in the art music canon helps legitimize him as an acceptable source of music for those listeners more comfortable with Western art music.

Other scholars take less of an absolute approach; in the recent collection of essays in *Duke Ellington und die Folgen*, scholars explore Ellington’s harmonic language, his style of piano-playing, and the aesthetic ideals represented in his compositions.<sup>5</sup> Compared to Debussy for his harmonic palate, Ellington is lauded for his subtle playing and his compositional contributions to American music history. The implications are manifold: Ellington has been appropriated as a non-black composer, one of ‘absolute’ music whose appeal to later generations is timeless and not bound to social context. This approach privileges Ellington the composer as a solo creator, and undermines the intellectual and creative contributions of the musicians working with him, not to mention Billy Strayhorn.

A more subtle approach is that of Ken Rattenbury, whose work *Ellington: Jazz Composer* focuses on musical analysis and compositional process. Rattenbury’s research allows for the two-way interaction between composer and players, but still emphasizes aspects of music that are associated with the Western art music canon. Rattenbury works from the premise that Ellington’s individual voice developed as an extension of earlier styles, such as ragtime and Tin Pan Alley; the argument is very work-oriented, and it essentializes

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<sup>4</sup> Gunther Schuller, *Early Jazz* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968) 348.

<sup>5</sup> See Bill Dobbins: “Mood Indigo Die harmonische Sprache Duke Ellingtons;” Franz Krieger, “Piano in the Foreground?” Zum Klavierstil Duke Ellingtons;” and Wolfram Knauer, “Reminiscing in Tempo” Tradition und musik-ästhetische Ideale in Ellingtons kompositorischem Oeuvre” all three in *Duke Ellington und die Folgen*, ed. Wolfram Knauer (Hofheim: Wolke Verlag, 2000).



these previous styles, implicitly suggesting that they were merely building blocks for the more complex compositional language of Ellington. In a similar way, Rattenbury argues, Ellington's music successfully mixes both 'black' and 'white' elements, though he does not draw any connection between Ellington's modern complexity and race. But for its purported awareness of these social connections, the argument really divorces the music from its contexts and contributes to the sense of timelessness often associated with music of the Western art canon.

The approach of viewing Ellington as a composer thus has its implications for jazz historiography in general. Ellington the composer does not exist as an island of jazz composition in a sea of unknown improvising musicians; rather, jazz itself becomes transformed into a high art with its own series of big names, big bands, and cohesive and chronologically tight stylistic movements. This is due partly to the popular writings on jazz hailing it as "American's Classical Music" in addition to the marketed discography that focuses on certain performers and even certain aspects of individual performers' work.<sup>6</sup> Ellington the composer fits into this canon as one of the leading figures, because like the valued art music composers, he can be considered musically traditional and innovative.

Recently another category of jazz scholarship has emerged in which the canonization of jazz itself has undergone scrutiny. In his work *Reading Jazz*, David Meltzer argues that "jazz as mythology, commodity, cultural display is a white invention."<sup>7</sup> In addition, musicological analyses that explore the relation of jazz to social context, especially in regard

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<sup>6</sup> See for example, Grover Sales, *Jazz: America's Classical Music* (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1984).

<sup>7</sup> David Meltzer, ed. *Reading Jazz* (San Francisco: Mercury House, 1993) 4.

to race, have become more frequent, partly as corrective to the canonization movements found in other writings and the popular conception of great jazz performers.

For Ellington research this means another privileged context has arisen; that of the black Nationalist. This context focuses on the ability of music to be a mode for political expression, specifically that of the advancing black-rights movement. Ellington's statements, both spoken and musical, from the first half of the century are used to represent his entire worldview, often to the exclusion of music that does not support the construct.

One representative example of this approach is Samuel A. Floyd's *The Power of Black Music* which includes an interpretation of Duke Ellington hailing him for his powerful expression of black identity. The underlying premise of Floyd's book is the idea that African-American music derives its power from a shared cultural memory of an African village culture, including the ring ritual and the themes of African mythology. For example, trumpet calls in Ellington's *A Tone Parallel to Harlem* reflect Ellington's cultural awareness of village African trumpeters who "called" the names of their ensembles.<sup>8</sup> Floyd also likens Ellington, along with other giants of the jazz canon, to Esu the god-trickster figure of African mythology. In terms of the signifying potential in jazz performance, these musicians created, imitated, revised, and signified on both black and white musical traditions while subtly resisting the dominant culture of white music. By manipulating and adding new layers of meaning to existing material they occupy a trickster role that is defined by its ability to preserve power and comment on surroundings. Floyd also sees the inclusiveness of jazz performance, with audience participation through clapping and bodily movement, to be another example of African cultural memory, though his approach does not take into account the ability of white audience members to interact in a similar way. In general Floyd's work

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<sup>8</sup> Samuel A. Floyd, Jr., *The Power of Black Music* (New York: Oxford, 1995) 169.

focuses on the power of black musicians to communicate with black audience members, and he concludes by arguing that while Ellington may be a “composer,” he is not esteemed in black culture above “noncomposers” such as Count Basie.<sup>9</sup>

Floyd and others rely on the premise of social constructedness, while also borrowing from the literary-race theory of Henry Louis Gates, Jr. In his seminal work *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African American Literary Criticism*, Gates argues that African ideas of ritual and myth survived across the Atlantic, and that African-American hermeneutics include the reformation of oral tradition through the process of signifying.<sup>10</sup> Scholars such as Samuel Floyd and Ingrid Monson have applied Gates’s literary theory to music, especially jazz and its ritualized prominence of improvisation. For Floyd, this means that certain jazz figures tap into the African collective understanding of the trickster figure: Ellington is a prime example, with his ability to signify on white and black musical tropes.

An interesting aspect of the Ellington black Nationalist construct is its emphasis on the first half of his career, until about 1945. Mark Tucker’s work on the early years of Ellington’s career focuses on the Harlem Renaissance and its meaning for the early music. Numerous shorter articles also deal with Ellington’s music as being representative of larger racial movements and expression of identity. For example, in an article on the “Cultural Dynamics of Afro-American Music,” German jazz historian Günther Lenz plays up the trope of the “Harlem Airshaft” as representing both the squalor and community-building environment of the close New York living. This trope can represent an individual’s experience (Ellington’s) living there, yet also can be related to a greater sense of the black

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<sup>9</sup> Floyd, 151.

<sup>10</sup> Henry Louis Gates, *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).

community in America.<sup>11</sup> In his article on Ellington's *Black, Brown, and Beige* Kevin Gaines argues for Ellington's music as a more general series of political statements regarding race.<sup>12</sup> Whereas Floyd's representation of Ellington is part of a larger construct of Ellington as timeless conveyor of a black aesthetic, Gaines's work and others' grounds the music of Ellington in more of its historical context. All of these approaches focus on the positive interpretation of Ellington as a champion of black rights, either by limiting their area of interpretation to a short period of Ellington's career (Harlem years to 1945), or by reducing the nature of his musical discourse to one kind of musical communication (overt black political statements).

In contrast to the composer construct, these analyses focus on the historical implications of Ellington's music and its meaning for a growing cultural awareness of blacks in America. They define Ellington's music as black and rely (either explicitly or implicitly) on Gates's idea of African-American ritual, and also on the concept of the changing same. The appeal of the changing same is the purported ability of a music to be transformed in different circumstances but also to retain an identifiable sameness. Amiri Baraka articulated this concept in relation to black music of the 1960s, but it has been applied more broadly to diasporic cultures.<sup>13</sup> In relation to Ellington, scholars include only a limited number of works, such as the *Black and Tan Fantasy* (1932), the *Creole Rhapsody* (1937), and *Black, Brown and Beige* (1941). These are all roughly from the same general period, and Ellington

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<sup>11</sup> Günther Lenz, "Die kulturelle Dynamik der afroamerikanischen Musik. Duke Ellingtons Kulturbegriff und seine Bedeutung in der afroamerikanischen Literatur und Kritik," in *Duke Ellington und die Folgen* ed. Wolfram Knauer, (Hofheim: Wolke Verlag, 2000), 177.

<sup>12</sup> Kevin Gaines, "Duke Ellington, *Black, Brown, and Beige*, and the Cultural Politics of Race" in *Music and the Racial Imagination*, eds. Ronald Radano and Philip Bohlman (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000) 585-602.

<sup>13</sup> See Amiri Baraka, *Black Music* (New York: W. Morrow, 1967), and Paul Gilroy, "Sounds Authentic: Black Music, Ethnicity, and the Challenge of a 'Changing' Same" *Black Music Research Journal* 11 (1991): 111-136.

the early pioneer for black musicians' rights becomes an historical entity limited to the pre-war years, since after the war bebop and other movements become leading bearers of the black rights movement. Ellington thus becomes a fossil of the historical record, to be admired for his early work which, according to this rhetoric, paved the way for more radically outspoken musical-historical moments. This is one effect of the periodization of jazz in general, but it also conforms to the privileged context of Ellington the black Nationalist musician. Unfortunately, this line of research ignores Ellington's later work, or else consigns him to the timeless role of symbol for the black musicians' movement in general, as Floyd has argued.

Reviewing the literature on Ellington shows how the privileged contexts of Ellington as a jazz composer and Ellington as a black musician have influenced the wider range of scholarly discourse on jazz. Ellington the composer is a standard of the jazz canon, with its emphasis on solo creators and cohesive stylistic movements. By focusing on Ellington's compositional process and musical language, scholars implicitly or sometimes explicitly (in the case of Gunther Schuller) connect him with the art-music tradition. At a further level of abstraction this connection may be equated with white critics' attempts to justify white interest in a musical tradition seen as black. By assimilating black jazz into a concept of white American art music, critics could guiltlessly enjoy the music while claiming progressive racial attitudes, as some did even in the 1940s.<sup>14</sup>

These levels of racial interaction also inform the historiography of jazz in general. As Scott DeVeaux argued in his 1991 article "Constructing the Jazz Tradition: Jazz Historiography," the essence of jazz is this historiographical connection to ethnicity as well

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<sup>14</sup> For more on white reception of bebop and swing, see Benard Gendron "Moldy Figs' and Modernists" in *Jazz Among the Discourses*, ed. Krin Gabbard (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995): 31-56.

as the art/commercialism debate.<sup>15</sup> The views of Ellington as composer and black musician contribute to these two broader categories as well: Ellington the composer feeds into the art/commercialism debate through its appeal to stereotypes of the artist working for the sake of art, possibly even as a mode for transcending race. On the other hand, Ellington the black musician deals more directly with the issues of ethnicity.

To summarize the problems associated with each of the privileged contexts: the composer construction implicitly undercuts the autonomy of jazz as an independent artform by defining its value in terms of a different art music tradition; the black musician paradigm often simplifies the music into a series of politicized statements, sometimes excluding non-representative examples of Ellington's music. Both of these theories become more difficult in light of Ellington's experiments with world musics in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Ellington also presents a particular problem because his long life spanned many different musical and political periods that affected him. He was not a timeless composer working in a vacuum, or a trickster-god continually touting eternal values of his ethnicity. And although it offers wider historical and social context, the Ellington black musician construct usually presumes a black-white dichotomy in which the black musician finds subtle musical expressions of resistance and affirmation of identity. The equation is altered with the introduction of musical material that is not "black or white," as was the case with Ellington's later music.

How then are we to understand the black musician's incorporation of other world music into his or her vocabulary? Some examples are Dizzy Gillespie's collaboration with Cuban musician Chano Pozo in the 1940s or Art Blakey's incorporation of African

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<sup>15</sup> Scott DeVeaux, "Constructing the Jazz Tradition: Jazz Historiography," in *Black American Literature Forum*, 25:3 (1991): 525-560.

drumming styles into his work in the 1950s. Scholars such as Mark Anthony Neal, Paul Austerlitz, and Ingrid Monson have interpreted these admixtures of musical cultures as mostly positive phenomena. Building off the concepts of Floyd and Gates, Monson argues that Art Blakey occupied the trickster role, and that his mode of musical signification is not denotational, but rather “indexical,” suggesting of deep diasporic connection.<sup>16</sup> Such work shows an optimistic ideal of black unity within the diaspora and views hybrid types as products of beneficial cultural exchange.

For the most part, Duke Ellington’s experimentation with world music has been overlooked in the body of literature dealing with these hybrid forms. Are the late suites such as the *Togo Brava Suite* (1973), the *Far East Suite* (1965), the *Latin American Suite* (1969) and the *Afro-Eurasian Eclipse* (1970) problematic for this kind of interpretation simply because they involve non-diasporic music, or is there a deeper reason belying their underrepresentation in the literature?

For one, the periodization of jazz history has resulted in the classification of Ellington with the pre-bop generation. The jazz discography and popular writings have played no small part in the creation of his image as big band leader. For example, the Ken Burns Jazz CD of Ellington includes the most famous big band numbers such as “Cottontail,” “Take the ‘A’ Train,” *Mood Indigo* and also favorites of the black nationalist camp such as the *Creole Rhapsody* and *Black, Brown and Beige*. Significantly, not a single movement from one of the late suites is included.<sup>17</sup> It would seem that Ellington the song writer and swing leader of the 1930s could not be responsible for world-music suites from the late 1960s. Again this

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<sup>16</sup> Ingrid Monson, “Art Blakey’s African Diaspora” *The African Diaspora: A Musical Perspective*, ed. Ingrid Monson (New York: Garland Publishers, 2000) 348.

<sup>17</sup> Duke Ellington, *Ken Burns Jazz*, Legacy Recordings Columbia 61444, 2000.

feeds into the vein of scholarship that reads Ellington as legendary figure, constructing him in terms of the music that has proven to be his most popular.

At the same time the privileged context of Ellington the composer also seems to have downplayed the later works with non-Western musical inspiration. There are a few studies of the late suites in which the context does appear, however. The composer portrayal is manifest in Stefano Zenni's research on the *Togo Brava Suite*, in which he identifies the various versions of the suite, arguing that an ideal order of movements was eventually reached.<sup>18</sup> Ellington is only briefly mentioned in one of the main texts on jazz and world music. His *Far East Suite*, Martin Pfeleiderer contends, should be understood as touristic impressions of the musical landscape where alterity is represented with "stereotypical orientalist music."<sup>19</sup> No one has explored the nature of musical signification in these suites, a glaring omission that suggests they do not fit squarely into the construction of Ellington as black musician. The omission should be explored, as it may reveal further aspects of the historiographical categories and of the music itself.

Of the late suites, the *Afro-Eurasian Eclipse* (1970) is the last and the most ambitious in scope, thus providing a good case study for Ellington's work with world music. In its recorded form of 1971, the *Eclipse* includes eight movements, each representing a different musical cultural idea. Ellington even claimed that the inspiration for the suite was his own travels and the growing awareness of globalization and identity-loss. The suite can demonstrate Ellington's musical interpretation of these issues, and its reception can reveal

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<sup>18</sup> Stefano Zenni, "The Aesthetics of Duke Ellington's Suites: The Case of *Togo Brava*," in *Black Music Research Journal* 21 (2001): 1-27.

<sup>19</sup> Martin Pfeleiderer, *Zwischen Exotismus und Weltmusik* (Hamburg: Coda, 1998) 58.



not only how others interpreted Ellington's meaning, but also his role in the music community in the early 1970s.

The musical, biographical, and social background of the suite will form the content of chapter two, and should provide a richer contextual starting point for analysis than the usual privileged approaches to Ellington historiography. Indeed, an in-depth historical analysis of Ellington's late suites has not been conducted, nor has the scant musical analysis of Ellington's late suites been contextualized within the Ellington literature. The context provided in chapter two, however, will constitute a background for further detailed exploration of the musical rhetoric and reception of the suite itself.

A closer look at the social trajectory of Ellington's life, with his rise from middle-class no-name to leader of night clubs to cultural ambassador, suggests that it is too simplistic a reduction to paint him as a black musician whose musical goal was always to express a civil-rights platform. With his band traveling around the world in the 1960s, he became exposed to the music of foreign countries in a kind of diplomatic musical exchange. His engagement with musical sources from China to Australia express an interest in more than African-American nationalist concerns.

Ellington claimed that the *Afro-Eurasian Eclipse* was inspired chiefly by Canadian Professor of mass media and popular culture Marshall McLuhan, who had famously stated that "the world is going Oriental."<sup>20</sup> McLuhan's ideas about media types and "the global village" bear closer investigation for the analytical context they may offer to an interpretation of the music.

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<sup>20</sup> Duke Ellington's spoken introduction to *Afro-Eurasian Eclipse* recording. Duke Ellington, *The Afro-Eurasian Eclipse*, Fantasy OJCCD-645-2, 1991. (Previously released as: Fantasy F-9498, 1975.)

At the same time, the musical context for the *Afro-Eurasian Eclipse* is important to explore because it helps expand the parameters of Ellington's musical output. For Ellington it must have been difficult to lead a jazz band in the 1960s--with the Beatles craze, the emergence of soul, and the extension of jazz and rock boundaries. Placing the *Afro-Eurasian Eclipse* in relation to the experimentation and jazz fusion of the late '60s and early '70s shows that, while Ellington was not on the cutting edge of innovation, his musical language could still assimilate and comment on the contemporary stylistic explorations.

Musically, the suite may be problematic for both privileged contexts of Ellington scholarship. The suite is a collection of individual movements written for Ellington's orchestra, each movement representing a different musical culture. Because of its musical structure with traditional alterations of chorus and improvisational sections, the suite does not immediately lend itself to an analysis of the art music-innovation sort that attracts the Ellington-Composer scholars who focus on play with form. In spite of this, one such scholar has argued that the organization of movements in the suite constitutes an intentional narrative structure along symphonic lines.<sup>21</sup> However, Ellington's tendency to perform individual movements at concerts tends to undermine this static conception of one unchanging musical suite.

At the same time, the *Afro-Eurasian Eclipse*, with its employment of non-Western musical tropes, is problematic for an interpretation of Ellington the black Nationalist. The nature of its musical signification is not similar to that found in the diasporic music of Dizzy Gillespie and Art Blakey, which may explain the lack of attention to the suite in the literature. For example, by relying on stereotypical signifiers of foreign music cultures such

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<sup>21</sup> Stefano Zenni, "The Aesthetics of Duke Ellington's Suites: The Case of *Togo Brava*." Full discussion in chapter 3.

as parallel fourths in the “Chinoiserie” movement, Ellington aligns himself with dominant musical rhetoric of exoticism.

In addition to the musical rhetoric of the suite, Ellington’s introductory remarks to the suite provides another layer for interpretation. His own statements about his music and his life have formed a large part of the basis for understanding the music, despite the troubles associated with taking an historical figure’s comments at face value. Ellington spoke about the *Afro-Eurasian Eclipse* specifically in his autobiography and in his spoken introduction to the recording (as well as at live performances). These statements and the critical reception of the *Eclipse* will help form another layer of analysis in chapter three.

By analyzing the historiographical treatment of Ellington, the historical and musical context for the *Afro-Eurasian Eclipse*, and the rhetoric of the suite (both musical and spoken), I shall argue for a reappraisal of Ellington’s musical placement in the early 1970s as well as for a reinterpretation of his musical signification. At the same time, by understanding jazz musicians and musical styles as contemporaneous not evolutionary, the analysis will offer a critique of jazz historiography’s tendency to periodize. The Ellington black Nationalist construct may need revision as it has avoided dealing with the problem of Ellington’s musical statements about other cultures. Ellington’s late suites employ musical signification in a way that illustrates a changing life philosophy and a different attitude towards the possibilities of musical expression of identity.

## Chapter II

### The Social and Musical Contexts of the *Afro-Eurasian Eclipse*

The ambiguity in Ellington scholarship is reflected in Ellington's own statements and experience within the jazz community. His view of himself as a composer, a black musician, and as a cultural ambassador who could appeal to the universal--all tempered his public statements both verbal and musical. This fluidity of identity partly explains the appeal of McLuhan's statements to Ellington, and also ties into his struggles with self-presentation while negotiating those identities. His music, especially the late suites, are expressions of this continual negotiation. Reassessing Ellington's long life span and the musical and social influences to which he was exposed should offer some background for interpreting the late engagements with world-music influences, especially the ambitious *Afro-Eurasian Eclipse*.

Understanding Ellington's social environment in the formative years of his youth and later jazz experiences can elucidate the later development of his musical works in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Born in 1899 to a middle class family in Washington D.C, he grew up in one of the most well-to-do communities for black families in the early twentieth century. Many details of these early years are supplied by Ellington himself in his autobiography *Music is My Mistress*, published in 1973. As a successful, world-famous musician looking back years later on these formative experiences, Ellington recreates his life with Romantic wide-sweeping brush strokes, even joking about the social prejudices of the time. He claims that early attempts to desegregate schools were protested by "the proud Negroes of Washington, who felt that the kind of white kids we would be thrown in with

were not good enough.”<sup>22</sup> Thus through the lens of humor, he makes a statement of black pride and social criticism at once. Throughout his autobiography, Ellington maintains a tone of pride mixed with a similarly bilateral stance toward other world musics.

Mark Tucker’s research on the early years has helped to put Ellington’s own descriptions into perspective. He balances the positive conditions of Washington’s black suburb, such as the prestigious Dunbar high school, with the stark reality of racism and snobbery within the community. Tucker comes to a similar conclusion, however:

Ellington’s experience growing up in a segregated and stratified community may have been one factor behind his later aversion to categories and labels, applied to himself or his music. He tried to avoid the word “jazz,” preferring the terms “Negro” or “American” music. He wrote pieces like *Black, Brown, and Beige* (1943) and *My People* (1963) that celebrated the common heritage of all African-Americans.<sup>23</sup>

Ellington’s ambivalence toward “jazz” and any labels helps explain his interest in the idea that such boundaries were disintegrating in the 1960s. Tucker, however, casts this ambivalence and Ellington’s political expression in terms of the black-nationalist construct.

The Harlem years (1927-33) of Ellington’s jazz experience contained his first commercial musical breakthrough, as well as his revelation about black society and culture. It is often these years that jazz scholars and cultural theorists pinpoint for their formative effects on Ellington’s musical politics. In general, scholars have emphasized the growing awareness of black cultural independence in this period, and the Harlem Renaissance as a whole is often isolated as the catalyst in black self promotion.<sup>24</sup> In terms of the Harlem Renaissance’s effect on jazz, the oral tradition recreated by black pride may have influenced

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<sup>22</sup> Ellington (1973) 17.

<sup>23</sup> Mark Tucker, *Ellington The Early Years* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1991) 6.

<sup>24</sup> See any number of writings on the Harlem Renaissance; for example: Henry Louis Gates, Jr, “Harlem on Our Minds” *Critical Inquiry* 24 (1997):1-12, and Samuel Floyd, *Music of the Harlem Renaissance* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1990).

improvisatory aspects of musical developments. Similar to how a storyteller improves upon tropes and traditions, a jazz improviser plays with and manipulates musical material.

For Ellington specifically, the experience in Harlem may have been liberating on both an ideological and pragmatic level, as his break at the Cotton Club in the late 1920s was what launched him into national and international fame. The club was one of Harlem's premiere entertainment spots, frequented by wealthy whites and staffed by blacks. Ellington's orchestra was only part of the spectacle designed to entertain white audiences in an enclosed space, but nightly transcontinental radio broadcasts helped him achieve national fame and musical authority. As McLuhan would later point out, the technological advantage for Ellington's generation helped creators reach a larger audience. Transgressing physical boundaries by playing music for the whole country represented a significant step forward in Ellington's development as a musician and as a socio-musical commentator. As if to confirm his musical presence outside of New York, Ellington made his first European tour with his orchestra in 1933.

Once secure with a popular backing and a steady stream of gigs, Ellington could turn his attention to particular political issues in his music, a point that has been seized upon by scholars. The 1940s were a particularly strong decade for Ellington's contributions to musical politics, and for others' as well. Jazz historiography pinpoints the early 1940s as a period of intense re-examination of black cultural values. The bebop movement is often isolated as the progressive musical response to the changing social climate; though, as Eric Porter points out in his work on bebop historiography, scholars focus on the social meaning of bebop while paradoxically de-emphasizing intellectual contributions of the musicians themselves. But while Dizzy Gillespie and Charlie Parker were expanding the realm of

improvisatory jazz, Ellington was channeling some of his creative energies into other strategies of musical politics.

Scholars who cast Ellington as the black Nationalist focus mainly on works such as the *Black, Brown and Beige* suite (1943) or the musical *The Beggar's Holiday* (1947), which had clear programmatic resonances with the black rights movement. Ellington himself described *Black, Brown, and Beige* as a “tone parallel to the history of the American Negro,” a point which has contributed to the work’s popularity among scholars.<sup>25</sup> This programmatic nature of the work, its motivic development across movements, its purely instrumental “symphonic” design, as well as its implications for a “black composer” have made it a prime subject for analytical discussion. However, the preeminence of *Black, Brown and Beige* in Ellington literature does not accurately reflect his output of music in the 1940s. Another work from the period the 1941 musical *Jump for Joy* represented an attempt “to correct the race situation in the U.S.A. through a form of theatrical propaganda.”<sup>26</sup> The musical related a story of interracial dating and starred Alfred Drake; it was rather controversial at the time. But Ellington relates an anecdote in his autobiography that reveals his particular brand of political criticism: he had advised the comedians not to use cork on their faces, explaining that “I think a statement of social protest in the theatre should be made without saying it, and this calls for the real craftsman.”<sup>27</sup> Ellington’s change from black musician in the white Cotton Club (as spectacle) to creative co-writer of a musical with political themes reflects not only his increasing power in the commercial music industry, but also a growing confidence in expressing his views in music and negotiating his own professional trajectory. At the

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<sup>25</sup> Ellington 181.

<sup>26</sup> Ellington 175.

<sup>27</sup> Ellington 180.

same time, his comment about craftsmanship suggests that his views were tempered by a certain diplomacy. Of course Ellington's memory of the event may have been influenced by twenty-some years of change, but already by the 1940s, he had taken his orchestra on tours out of the country, most notably to England, and his role as cultural ambassador was only to expand in the coming years: for Ellington, diplomacy and understatement were a preferred mode of communication, if not a necessary one.

At the same time back in America, intellectual shifts that started in the 1940s such as the black Islamic and black rights movements as well as the growing public awareness of mass media contributed to a jazz culture that at once embraced acceptance and flaunted its African heritage. During the 1940s when Ellington was working on the *Black, Brown, and Beige* suite and the musicals *Jump for Joy* and *Beggar's Holiday* musicals, Dizzie Gillespie and Chano Pozo in New York had been working to assimilate music of African diasporic groups (namely Afro-Cuban) into their performances. Gillespie and Pozo's "Cubano-Be Cubano-Bop," with its focus on continuous drumming, helped suggest diasporic connection to an African heritage. Art Blakey the leader of the Jazz Messengers even traveled to Africa in the mid-1940s, where he learned African styles of drumming. Upon his return to the United States, he incorporated what he considered to be African and Afro-Caribbean elements into his music as a means of black-nationalist expression.<sup>28</sup> Retrospectively such musicians as Gillespie have emphasized the positive expression of racial identity in such movements as these, though the critical disputes about the social meaning of bebop were not all rosy.

Duke Ellington, with his public persona and his role as international musical ambassador, took greater care to couch his political beliefs in accessible terms. While he

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<sup>28</sup> See Monson "Art Blakey's African Diaspora."



would proudly refer to Africa as the source of jazz, he would also speak of the “universal” in music. To the *Christian Science Monitor* he had explained in 1930 “I had a kind of harmony inside me, which is part of my race, but I needed harmony that has no race at all but is universal.”<sup>29</sup> Ellington would certainly have been aware of the more radical currents in the jazz community, but his public statements suggest that he was interested in maintaining a middle-ground stance that would appeal to a large and diverse audience.

During the 1960s, Ellington’s orchestra traveled on State Department tours, which effectively made them United States musical ambassadors during the cold war era. Ellington’s group was not the first to embark on such excursions; the earliest State Department tours had begun in 1957 with Dizzy Gillespie’s band. These tours around the world to countries of the first, second, and third world suggest that wordless jazz was recognized as a means of communication across cultural boundaries. Ellington’s autobiographical travel journals offer an optimistic picture of musical exchange whereby his band played music for ambassadors, political bigwigs, and intellectuals, and at the same time were treated to performances of traditional musics in the particular country they were visiting.

In his autobiography, in which Ellington records series of anecdotes from the world travels, he relates an experience in Delhi:

We are invited to the music department of the university, where they demonstrate all the indigenous Indian instruments. Then they take us to a dance recital still within the university, where they do first a small ballet, and then a full complete one. There are four major schools of dancing in India, three being in a sense counterparts of Western ballet. Folk ballet is quite different. In another part of the university, they

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<sup>29</sup> *Christian Science Monitor*, 13 Dec. 1930 quoted in *The Duke Ellington Reader*, ed. Mark Tucker (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

demonstrate some rarer instrument, and we learn a good deal about the music itself. We are also given manuscripts, drums, a sitar, and a tabla.<sup>30</sup>

Ellington's travel reminiscences include no full-blown analyses of the music he hears; and he remarks that he and Billy Strayhorn preferred to let the music sink in before they incorporated it into their own music.

### Globalization and Marshall McLuhan

Ellington's appeal to the universal was also mirrored in contemporary social awareness of growing globalization in the 1960s, especially in the work of Marshall McLuhan. In his introduction to the recorded *Afro-Eurasian Eclipse* (1971), Ellington explains that he had heard McLuhan state that the "whole world is going Oriental," and that this spoke to the many experiences of his travels. McLuhan was a Canadian professor of English at the University of Toronto who had become well-known to the Canadian and American public in the mid-1960s. His theories dealt with the dissemination of ideas through different media-types. His preference for pithy catch phrases and press interviews helped to make the bare outlines of his ideas accessible to a wide range of people, though it also produced a good deal of confusion as to what he meant. This fame and obtuseness may have caused him some unpopularity with other scholars, not to mention the inducements (including a \$100,000 grant) he received from Fordham University to join the faculty for a one-year Schweitzer chair in 1967.<sup>31</sup> But whatever his scholarly reception, the dissemination

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<sup>30</sup> Ellington 312.

<sup>31</sup> Philip Marchand, *Marshall McLuhan the Medium and the Messenger* (Cambridge, MIT Press, 1998) 204.

of his ideas through newspapers and magazine and TV interviews provided him with a certain authority in the public's eye.<sup>32</sup>

The main ideas pertinent for Ellington are those that were most popular in the late 1960s and early '70s. Since the publication of *The Mechanical Bride* in 1951, McLuhan had been exploring the interaction of medium and user; in that book he argued that meaning is created by the user discovering the medium's potential. In subsequent writings including the *Gutenberg Galaxy* (1960) and *Understanding Media* (1964) he theorized about the nature of different media types, coining the terms "hot and cold" media to distinguish the high- and low-definition media as well as to capture the sense of user-participation.

McLuhan's attention turned to the subject of globalization in the late 1960s, and this was the aspect of his work particularly relevant for Ellington and his travels. The influence of electric technology, McLuhan argued, had transformed the world culture from oral or alphabetic to post-literate. The new technology sets the stage for exchange of ideas, and he considered the new wave to be a "global village" in which old national identities would become irrelevant and a new tribalism would grow between all people.<sup>33</sup> Today McLuhan has been criticized for not foreseeing the rise of capitalist centers around the world, the argument being that his global village is really a collection of "fiscal malls."<sup>34</sup> The naïve

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<sup>32</sup> Recently McLuhan's ideas have experienced a revival in popularity, this time in the scholarly world. The philosophical background and implications of famous McLuhan phrases such as "the medium is the message" are finally being given due attention and consideration. A recent surge in literature on McLuhan also helps to contextualize his ideas and make them accessible for a larger portion of the academic realm.

<sup>33</sup> See McLuhan, *War and Peace in the Global Village* (New York: Bantam Books, 1968).

<sup>34</sup> For full critique of the global village, see Brian Fawcett "What McLuhan Got Wrong about the Global Village and Some Things He Didn't Foresee," in *At the Speed of Light There is Only Illumination: A Reappraisal of Marshall McLuhan*, eds. John Moss and Linda M. Morra (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 2004): 207-222.

optimism is often accorded to McLuhan's strong Christian faith, though it may also be a product of the general North American optimism of the 1960s.

What resonated with Ellington were precisely these ideas of identity-loss and the global village. In his autobiography he claims that he heard McLuhan give an interview on December 31, presumably in 1969. Ellington had already met McLuhan at a dinner in Toronto in the late 1960s. They remained friendly acquaintances and Ellington would dedicate performances to McLuhan and his wife when he visited the city. McLuhan even sent Ellington a congratulatory letter when he read in the *Toronto Star* that he had been awarded a doctorate from Columbia University in 1973.<sup>35</sup> During this period McLuhan was at the height of his fame in the U.S.A., thanks largely to an influential interview with *Playboy* magazine in March 1969.<sup>36</sup> McLuhan's omnipresence in the American media continued into 1970; in December of that year he appeared on the Dick Cavett show, discussing issues similar to those Ellington mentions in his autobiography: "TV is driving us eastward, and just as the east goes west, we go east. It deprives the Western world of much of its identity. The loss of identity is very disturbing."<sup>37</sup>

Ellington's own musical experience seemed to reflect such a global village. Not only did he travel to many parts of the world, but he did in many cases hear the music of these foreign cultures through diplomatic "exchange." In his description of the 1966 Japan tour, however, he relates how he heard "some cats playing jazz at the Tokyo Hilton who are too much. They play really well. That is why Japan sometimes frightens me, because they have

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<sup>35</sup> *Letters of Marshall McLuhan*, eds. Matie Molinaro, Corinne McLuhan, William Toye (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1987) 477.

<sup>36</sup> A simple search of the *New York Times* on-line archives reveals that Marshall McLuhan was mentioned 83 times in the paper during 1969 and 1970.

<sup>37</sup> Marshall McLuhan interviewed on The Dick Cavett Show (1970) <http://www.ubu.com/sound/mcluhan.html>

the ability here to do things better than the originals.”<sup>38</sup> He had witnessed the movement of jazz out of America and its acceptance elsewhere, but the loss of an American jazz identity seemed a threat to him. Again the global village brought a sense of ambiguity for Ellington; indeed music could be a tool of cultural exchange, but at what cost?

While Ellington performed and heard jazz around the world, his fellow American jazz musicians were exploring possibilities of musical expression and stretching the bounds of what was considered jazz. The 1960s saw an explosion of experimental music in both art music and jazz styles. The growing influence of electronic music and world music helped determine a new quest for expressive musical capabilities in terms of technology and musical language. Miles Davis professed interest in the music of Karlheinz Stockhausen and a general awareness of avant-garde musical styles may have been partly responsible for the scope of musical experimentation in the late ‘60s.<sup>39</sup> Earlier expansion of scope, form, and dissonance with the free jazz of Ornette Coleman and Albert Ayler combined with rock cross-over sounds to produce a post-modal, post-bop environment in music. Davis’s *Bitches Brew* of 1969 may be one of the most famous examples of the new technology-inspired “fusion” sound, a musical analog to McLuhan’s theories about the exchange of information and blending of identities into something new. With the benefit of hindsight, some scholars have argued that the fusion movement was unsuccessful; as Radano contends, “the jazz crossroads [of the early 1970s] offered varieties of indirection, of negation, of neither/nor.”<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Ellington 334.

<sup>39</sup> Julie Coryell and Laura Friedman, *Jazz-Rock Fusion, the People, the Music* (Milwaukee, Hal Leonard Co, 2000) 61.

<sup>40</sup> Ronald Radano, “Critical Alchemy: Anthony Braxton and the Imagined Tradition,” in *Jazz Among the Discourses*, ed. Krin Gabbard (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995) 189.

But whether or not fusion succeeded as a coherent stylistic movement, the early '70s was still a time of experimentation and opportunity in jazz.

### Ellington's *Afro-Eurasian Eclipse*

Ellington's most ambitious contribution to the new musical 'village,' part inspired by McLuhan's ideas and part inspired by his own travels around the world, was the *Afro-Eurasian Eclipse*. He had written other suites inspired by his encounters with other musical cultures, such as the *Latin American Suite* (1969), but this latest one created a tour across multiple continents. According to Ellington in his autobiography, the *Afro-Eurasian Eclipse* was written for the Monterey Jazz Festival in September 1970. However, the *Eclipse* was not the only piece that occupied Ellington during this period. In the early summer he and the orchestra recorded the controversial ballet *The River* in New York. Another multi-movement work with inspiration from world music was *The Togo Brava Suite*; in fact, the genesis of the *Afro-Eurasian Eclipse* and *The Togo Brava Suite* is interconnected, as Stefano Zenni has demonstrated in "The Aesthetics of Duke Ellington's Suites: The Case of *Togo Brava*."<sup>41</sup> During 1970, Ellington had composed and copyrighted *The Afro-Eurasian Eclipse* as a suite in twelve movements, but both *The Togo Brava Suite* and the shorter, recorded version of *The Afro-Eurasian Eclipse* were to derive from this.<sup>42</sup> Zenni argues that Ellington's inclusion or exclusion of movements in either suite represents an attempt to create a narrative disposition of movements based on a "symphonic model," although Ellington's final choice of eight movements for the *Eclipse* recorded in 1971 may be a pragmatic decision based on

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<sup>41</sup> Zenni, "The Aesthetics of Duke Ellington's Suites: The Case of *Togo Brava*."

<sup>42</sup> Zenni, 16.

the overall recording time available on two twenty-minute sides of the LP.<sup>43</sup> Given that the Ellington orchestra performed some of the movements individually in concert in 1970, it may even be difficult to speak of a definitive “final” version of the *Afro-Eurasian Eclipse*. Nor does such a “fluid” conception of the musical work challenge the validity of studying the suite. Indeed, a suite subject to change in performance almost better reflects a microcosmic musical ‘being,’ parts of which are constantly in flux, and it certainly stays true to the nature of improvisatory jazz.

Ellington’s social background and his role as a cultural ambassador influenced his expression of political attitudes, but he was also aware of producing diplomatic musical statements in an ever-changing musical and social community. The *Afro-Eurasian Eclipse* was one such statement about the rapid change in these communities. Ellington’s appropriation of the McLuhan ideas about the world-going-east was helped couch the music in terms of a modern and altruistic worldview. The next chapter will provide an in-depth investigation of how the influence of McLuhan’s idea contrasts with the musical realities and influences of the *Eclipse*. For the purposes of this project the 1971 recorded version of the *Afro-Eurasian Eclipse* and Ellington’s promotion thereof will provide some limited scope for the analytical study.

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<sup>43</sup> Zenni, 21.

## Chapter III

### *Afro-Eurasian Eclipse as Musical Signification*

One of the main themes of Ellington's musical career was his interest in appealing to the universal. His ambivalent views toward the meaning of 'jazz' and the place of the black rights movement in jazz also demonstrate the paradoxical desire to remain an individual performing within a racialized musical tradition while expanding the reach of expression to people outside that tradition. Ellington's turn to world-music influences in the 1960s represents another vein in this ongoing struggle for identity. His inspiration from Marshall McLuhan and his own world travel experiences provided the catalyst for an ambitious suite that represented musical realms from Australia to Europe. The fact that jazz could now be used for commentary on the loss of identity across the globe is a significant change from the musical setting in which Ellington developed his skills. As a man who had just turned 70, Ellington could look back over the years and create a musical statement about his own identity as a black jazz musician, a world traveler, and a social being who was up-to-date with the fast changing world around him. Even if his role in the jazz community had changed from innovative hotshot to patriarchal symbol, he still engaged with musical currents and influences from outside and within the jazz tradition.

Ellington's *Afro-Eurasian Eclipse* forms the highpoint of his engagement with world music, and it came at a time in his career when he was still an active participant on the musical stage. Despite his time spent out of the country on state department tours, he



received in 1970 a commission from the American Ballet Theater to write a ballet for choreographer Alvin Ailey. The piece caused somewhat of a furor with its mix of jazz and art music elements, and its expansion of dissonance. It is ironic that Duke Ellington, the old big band leader and song writer, was still capable of causing a scandal. The *Eclipse* itself was less of a problem, because its genre was not high-art music, and its performance venue was the same traditional jazz festivals that Ellington had always attended. Ellington and the orchestra took the *Eclipse* on tour throughout 1970 and 1971, performing individual movements or groups of movements. Though he was not part of the cutting-edge avant garde musical scene, Ellington was still a presence, and he was well aware of the roles expected of him as an older-generation jazz icon.

By the time the suite was recorded for Fantasy Studios in 1971, Ellington and his orchestra had been performing and reworking the pieces for about a year. According to the LP liner notes, Ellington had also been performing an introductory speech for the suite as well. Ellington seemed ready to incorporate McLuhan's ideas into his presentation of the work. His introductory speech explicitly mentions McLuhan, identity, and a rather ambiguous bit of circumlocution by Ellington:

Mr. McLuhan says that the whole world is going Oriental and that no one will be able to retain his or her identity, not even the Orientals. And of course we travel around the world a lot, and in the last five or six years we too have noticed this thing to be true. So as a result we have done a sort of a thing – a parallel or something – and would like to play a little piece of it for you... We have adjusted our perspective to that of the kangaroo and the didjeridu; this automatically throws us either “down under” and/or “out back,” and from that point of view it's most improbable that anyone will ever know exactly who is enjoying the shadow of whom.<sup>44</sup>

Ellington's provocative comments about identity challenge the listener to make judgments about the nature of musical hybridity in the *Afro-Eurasian Eclipse*. His tone also suggests a

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<sup>44</sup> For the full text, see Appendix part I.

certain irony, and the way he allows the phrase “who is enjoying the shadow of whom” to roll off his tongue is almost parodying the problem.

In addition, Ellington’s identification with the didjeridu and the kangaroo is an interesting choice: he is distancing himself from standard “East/West” conventions by associating with the outsider from far away—but not the Far East or Africa; Australia is one step farther removed from the work he has done in his other “foreign” musical suites. Even the kangaroo is a step removed by virtue of being an animal: a creature of Nature whose political views, one might guess, are negligent. Is Ellington suggesting that one may avoid the identity loss by claiming a “remote” identity as that of the kangaroo or the didjeridu-playing Aborigines who reside down under? There may also have been a Romanticized element in Ellington’s experience with them; as he describes in his autobiography, “In Australia, we encountered not only the kangaroo, but the didjeridu, too, a long, tubular instrument played by a beautiful black man, an aborigine.”<sup>45</sup> If Ellington’s mention of the didjeridu and the beautiful Australians may be construed as an interest in the exotic, it is also interesting to note his identification of the aborigine first as a “black man,” a distinction that offers a connection even while he remains the Other observing.

Certainly one contemporary critic heard Ellington’s suite as a statement of individual identity. Gary Giddons, reviewing the record when it was released in 1976, wrote that Ellington’s “music is not only broad-based enough to encompass the rhythms, melodies, and harmonies of other musics, but can retain its own identity in the process.”<sup>46</sup> Even the title of the review “Duke Eclipses the Didjeridoo,” while a clever play on words, also suggests that

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<sup>45</sup> Ellington (1973), 203.

<sup>46</sup> Gary Giddons, “Duke Eclipses the Didjeridoo,” *Village Voice* (5 April 1976), 104-105. reproduced in Mark Tucker, ed. *The Duke Ellington Reader* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993) 379-381.

Ellington had incorporated the basic musical idioms of his foreign influences and stamped his own identity on them. Surely the “identity” reviewers were hearing was the careful balance between solo and group performance, and the characteristic orchestral scoring in chorus sections that Ellington and his players had crafted over the years.

Critical reception was not uniformly positive, however. Reviewing in *Downbeat* in August 1976, John McDonough wrote dismissively: “This is really not important Ellingtonia. The writing serves mainly to provide the necessary hooks on which the few remaining soloists of consequence can hang their playing.”<sup>47</sup> But this provides another clue for interpreting the performance of this music: jazz finds an easy connection with some types of world music; rather than emphasizing the all-encompassing power of the creator, jazz can create a sense of community and shared experience through both group and individual expansion of material. As Stefano Zenni has noted, building off the literary work of Henry Louis Gates, “In African-American music, composition and improvisation produce a continuous signifyin(g) of reality as a strategy for appropriating, commenting on, and resignifying experience.”<sup>48</sup> But McDonough’s criticism seems to dig at the heart of this idea: Ellington’s writing is merely a “hook” on which soloists may hang their playing; this suggests that it not only lacks substance as music and the expression of meaning, but that it creates an excuse for showing off. Improvisation becomes an empty exercise when basic musical inspiration is lacking, that is, when the group has nothing on which to discourse. In this case, the critic’s comments do not even touch upon Ellington’s discussion of identity and world music; they do not need to: whether or not its inspiration was drawn from the

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<sup>47</sup> John McDonough, review of *Afro-Eurasian Eclipse*, *downbeat* (August 1976) 42.

<sup>48</sup> Zenni, 25.

experience of musical difference, he implies the *Afro-Eurasian Eclipse* fails because it lacks a meaningful statement of musical identity.

Also implied in McDonough's review is the search for collectible masterpieces. With Ellington's death in 1974 the commemorative efforts began, and Fantasy Studios saw the opportunity to release "new" Ellington music. The project to remix the *Afro-Eurasian Eclipse* for release was overseen by Duke's son Mercer in 1975. Thus McDonough's review helps direct the Ellington-collector away from the unimportant "Ellingtonia" and toward the valuable pieces of Ellington the composer.

Even by the late 1960s' Ellington's role in the jazz establishment had changed from innovator to old patriarch, a reminder of the past times when the swing sound was the rage. Ellington's popularity had waned in the late 1940s, but was resuscitated in the mid 1950s with his group's performance at the Newport Jazz Festival in 1956. In the following decade he traveled regularly, around the world and the US, but he was not one of the cutting-edge jazz players by any stretch. If his recent ballet had caused some trouble with critics, it was partly because his music now bridged the gap between Ellingtonia and non-Ellingtonia, not because it was shocking compared to the work of other experimental jazz musicians. Ellington's role in the musical community was that of the older and static force of jazz history, but as evident in the *Afro-Eurasian Eclipse*, he still had a few aces up his sleeve.

The *Afro-Eurasian Eclipse* itself speaks to an assimilatory stance through the heterogeneity of its musical materials while simultaneously projecting a quality of unity. While Ellington's suites have been criticized for their lack of motivic unity, there are other unifying factors than the recurrence of motives across movements. In this case, it may be superfluous to search for such relationships between movements because it is not a cyclic

mass or classical symphony, which raises the larger question of whether imposing the standards of European art music on jazz is acceptable or fruitful; a question which has yet to be agreed upon. The unity of the *Afro-Eurasian Eclipse* may lie in such obvious factors that it may seem silly to state: written by the same musician played and improvised by the same forces, inspired by non-American musical sources. In addition, some pieces in the suite have similar musical parameters; the repeating bass lines and stable harmonies of “Didjeridoo,” “Chinoiserie,” and “Afrique” create a sense of modal jazz. The orchestration and choice of solos consistently reflects an emphasis on reeds and rhythm section. Ellington’s sparse piano accompaniment and motivic play provides a strand of commentary through many of the individual movements. Last but not least, the baritone sax “theme” of “Didjeridoo” returns in “Afrique” and “Gong,” suggesting that (at least at the recording session), there was some conceptual continuity even in the realm of the oft-mentioned motivic unity.

Not only does the music reflect Ellington’s traveling experiences with world musics, it also speaks summarily for his experience in the realm of American jazz. The suite includes such standard jazz designs as song form (“Chinoiserie”), blues structure (“Gong,” “Acht O’clock Rock”), and modal structure (“Didjeridoo”). At the same time, non-jazz influences from American music act in much the same way as the foreign influences. Again quoting John McDonough in his 1976 review on “Didjeridoo:” “[it] adds an almost contemporary sounding rock beat to the more customary trademarks...” For Ellington to tap into the “contemporary sounding rock beat” was at once a means of keeping up with the times while incorporating American musics into a suite of world music. His ability to signify on musical elements from both abroad and home suggest that he considered some of the contemporary jazz-fusion trademarks to be equal fodder for an *Afro-Eurasian Eclipse*.

To categorize the stylistic influences of the *Afro-Eurasian Eclipse* is already difficult, but even labeling the music as “jazz” becomes problematic in the light of Ellington’s own ambivalent statements on the subject. In a late interview he explained:

“Jazz”? We don’t use the word “jazz.” As a matter of fact we haven’t used it since 1943. We believe that everything is so highly personalized that you just can’t find a category big enough, and jazz certainly isn’t big enough a category to combine so many wonderful people.... We can’t depend on it [word jazz]; we can’t depend on anything. You just have to go out and *do a performance* and [if] the performance is believable they respond; if it’s acrobatic they respond; if it’s sensuous they respond, and that’s all we can depend upon.<sup>49</sup>

His concept of music as performance resonates with one of the most recognized characteristics of jazz; namely, improvisation. But it also suggests that in his world tours, Ellington found that spoken language and the designation of “jazz” were not as effective at communicating meaning as the musical performance itself. By linking jazz to 1943, he also makes a statement about the history of jazz, marking the beginning of the bebop movement as the “end” of jazz. The circumvention of the word “jazz” ties especially well into discussion of the *Afro-Eurasian Eclipse*, since the search for musical identity seems to lead in tenuous circles from “Australian” to “African” to “American rock” to “modal jazz.” To lose the over-arching designation of “jazz” would dovetail perfectly with Ellington’s opening quote about not being able to tell “who is enjoying the shadow of whom.”

The performance aspect of this music cannot be overlooked. In approaching the *Afro-Eurasian Eclipse* it is important to keep in mind that Ellington is both a performer as well as composer. Analyses of Ellington the composer may sometimes overlook the performative

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<sup>49</sup> From a video interview in *A Duke Named Ellington*, 1988 documentary biography for Public Broadcasting Service (U.S.), prod. Terry Carter, 120 minutes. I have been unable to find the exact recording information for this particular clip, but it appears to be from the late 1960s or after.

act itself while focusing on the recorded or written musical product. Ellington's showmanship and his own views on jazz as performance should help scholars revise the privileged context of Ellington the composer working in abstractions. While he may distance himself from the suite as its "omnipotent" composer taking an outsider stand and associating himself with the "down under" Australian kangaroo and didjeridu, he is at once included in the suite by being a performer and continually reworking and commenting on his own musical ideas.

The musical ideas are organized into shorter individual movements in the *Eclipse*, each with a particular connotative title. The table in example one provides the full lineup of movements as they were produced on the LP recorded by Fantasy Records in 1971.

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| Example I. The 1971 recorded version of the <i>Afro-Eurasian Eclipse</i> . Fantasy Records |
| Chinoiserie  |
| Didjeridoo   |
| Afrique  |
| Acht O'clock Rock  |
| Gong   |
| Tang   |
| True   |
| Hard Way   |

Many of the movement titles are evocative of a foreign influence rather than denotational. Why "Chinoiserie?" The French word indicates merely a Chinese influence—often related to crafts--and it implies the viewpoint of both the outsider(the Chinese) and the insider (the artist or craftsman who creates objects for European or American consumption). The title raises the question whether Ellington's movement reflects Chinese influence. What constitutes "Chinese" or even "Asian" influence? Such questions as these have become the subject of lively debate in the realm of ethnomusicology, where any suggestion that "parallel

fourths” or “pentatonic scales” are Asian musical building blocks could be dismissed as essentialist. In the case of Ellington’s “Chinoiserie” the very idea may be that it is difficult to pin down any one point of reference. This would certainly coincide with McLuhan’s statement that “the world is going Oriental,” which Ellington singled out explicitly in his comments. Perhaps the choice of French title suggests the time-old European fascination with the exotic, but Ellington’s self-description as “taking the perspective of the kangaroo” seems to thwart such a simple meaning; indeed, the conflation of different nationalities as well as group vs. individual interpretation of musical material serves to create a kind of intertextual mosaic.

“Chinoiserie” is the opening and longest movement of the suite, and it was the one Ellington’s orchestra had been performing without the others for months in 1970. It plays the introductory role for suite, and provides a good case study for the musical signification and assimilatory principles of the *Eclipse*. The rhythm section has an extended introduction, with Ellington’s “rikki tikki” over a harmonically stable, repeating bass figure. His sparse accompaniments are very dialogic, rhythmically angular--typical of his playing in the suite and elsewhere. In this way, he opens the movement, and the suite, with a musical statement of individual and group identity: while his chord choices may be typical of his individual style, the sonic spaces he creates between them invite others to join in. The group enters in unison chorus; the main musical material is in a type of song form, with a vague AABA structure, although the B may be divided into B and C. The A sections are in ten bars, really the typical eight with two-bar extensions; but the bridge extends for another twelve bars (“C”) after the standard eight bars of B. Harold Ashby’s tenor solo does not begin on the reprise of the A section, but rather on B. This arrangement plays with the standards of song



form, although such innovations were nothing new by 1970. To an experienced jazz listener, this structure would be recognizable, even if the content may have evoked ideas of foreignness with its parallel fourths and b7 modal suggestions.

Music Example 1. Tune of “Chinoiserie,” *Afro-Eurasian Eclipse*.

The musical score is presented in three systems, each with a grand staff (treble and bass clefs). The key signature is three flats (B-flat, E-flat, A-flat), and the time signature is 4/4. The first system (measures 1-5) shows a melody in the treble clef with parallel fourths and a bass line with a steady eighth-note accompaniment. The second system (measures 6-9) continues the melody with some chromatic movement and a more active bass line. The third system (measures 10-13) shows the melody ending with a final chord and the bass line continuing its accompaniment.

These characteristics are not only signifiers for Asian music, but also connotational of a long American popular tradition of hackneyed tropes that appeared in Tin Pan Alley songs and earlier experiments with non-Western music. In an article on one of these examples of musical orientalism, Charles Garrett explores the lasting impact of oriental tropes such as parallel fourths.<sup>50</sup> Perhaps the tropes offer the intended jazz audience an immediate

<sup>50</sup> Charles Hiroshi Garrett, “Chinatown, Whose Chinatown? Defining American’s Borders with Musical Orientalism.” *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 57 (2004): 119-73.

recognition of exotic elements and make the opening movement of Ellington's *Eclipse* function as a musical-rhetorical introduction.

Another movement with strong connotational language is *Afrique*, produced third after "Chinoiserie" and "Didjeridoo." Unlike "Chinoiserie," "Afrique" has no strong distinctly melodic chorus. The five-minute movement is underpinned by a continuous drum roll; the opening solo draws attention to it before the other players start adding dialogic points. The orchestration, with sparse brass lines and punctuated accents from Ellington's piano, eventually gives way to the inevitable drum solo in the last minute. The harmonic stasis also contributes to its minimalist feel. This movement seems so sparsely orchestrated that the room for improvisation is diminished. The only player with the solo spotlight is Rufus Jones, the drummer.

Focusing the spotlight on the drummer in a movement called "Afrique" taps into a tradition of African-inspired jazz music, from the beginnings of "jungle music" in the Harlem night clubs where Ellington played, to the self-conscious incorporation of African drumming styles in the 1950s. While Ellington took an ambivalent stance on "jazz" it may have had to do with the strongly perceived connection of jazz to African roots. Ellington's experience in the jazz world began in the 1920s when the new commodity appealed on account of its exoticism, but he lived through the upheavals of the 1940s, 50s, and 60s, when other black jazz musicians started to experiment with jazz as defiant expression of racial identity. Jazz had always been a point of contention between the races, but the explosion of different styles and the stretching of boundaries during the late 1960s might have led to a shift in emphasis from race to genre itself. The proliferation of styles and the increasing white participation may have helped to create new modes of expression, but it helped undermine any exclusivity

for black ownership of the genre. In fact, the genre itself came into question, and with this shift, the site of mainstream black musical expression moved to the more popular and clearly defined Motown and soul styles.<sup>51</sup> The sense of an African “jazz” tradition, then, could be evoked with musical signifiers from the early “Jungle” style or the Afro-Cuban craze of the late 1940s, such as the constant drumming. For Ellington, “Afrique” may be a nostalgic recollection of a specific type of black jazz expression that had become lost in the late ‘60s and early ‘70s. While McLuhan’s discussion of identity-loss focused on transcendence of the East-West divide, this similar structural shift was taking place in America in the realm of racial identity in jazz. Ellington’s “Afrique” is a comment on one perceived African tradition in American music as well as on global issues of expression in a changing world.

The movement that pertains to Ellington’s comments about the Australian elements is “Didjeridoo,” which, though lacking the obvious musical signifiers of “Chinoiserie” and “Afrique,” creates an equally foreign sound world. There seems to be no attempt to recreate realistically the sounds of a didjeridu, even though Ellington had mentioned that he heard the instrument played by a ‘beautiful black man.’ In addition, there is no stock barrel of Australian musical signifiers for Ellington to rely on. Instead, the musical soundscape is created with basic Western tropes of musical space. The repeating bass line again sets up a minimalist background for Ellington’s comping. The fourth jumps in Ellington’s opening and the open fifths in Harry Carney’s baritone saxophone riff create a sense of space, possibly representing the outback. However impressionistically the musical soundscape can be interpreted, there is a strong rock beat driving the music forward as some of the critics noted. This is more akin to McLuhan’s East and West meeting, but also can be read in terms

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<sup>51</sup> For more discussion of politicization of black musics in the early ‘70s, see Guthrie Ramsey *Race Music* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).

of old tropes of foreignness meeting the new rock beat, or one musical inspiration being transformed by the sounds of modernity. Whatever the simplicity of the source, the music becomes rooted firmly in the late '60s and early '70s thanks to the signifiers of rock music.

The remaining movements are shorter and rely on fewer stereotypical signifiers of musical otherness. "Acht O'Clock Rock," for example, incorporates a more traditional blues structure i-iv-i-V-i, and this harmonic motion, however typical in the realm of jazz, provides contrast to the harmonic stasis of the preceding two movements. The 12-bar structure and the improvised solo by Paul Gonsalves, "Acht O'Clock Rock" sounds more traditional, and its title with the incorporation of a German word also brings the *Eclipse* closer to the West and its comfort zone.

Ironically, "Acht O'Clock Rock" does not borrow any musical tropes from the German-speaking or western European tradition, but "True," described as a "waltz" in the liner notes, does. The swinging waltz is the only movement in the suite in triple meter, and it also taps into a tradition of American jazz incorporating tropes of Western art music. With "True," Ellington and the group are signifying not on the waltz as a trope, but the waltz-in-jazz as a trope. In the previous decade, Dave Brubeck's quartet had made jazz popular to a wider college audience with some similar hybrid numbers like "Blue Rondo a la Turk" and "Kathy's Waltz." Ellington's capitalization on waltz music in jazz as another source for musical signification shows his willingness to deal even-handedly with both Western and non-Western musics.

The *Afro-Eurasian Eclipse* represents an experimental output of an aging jazz musician who still wished to communicate effectively in a changing world. Unlike some of the other "foreign" suites, which were inspired by a particular country or region of the world,

this suite forms a unified whole paradoxically by virtue of its heterogeneous make-up. Ellington's appropriation of McLuhan's world-gone-Oriental as inspiration for the suite suggests that he was expanding his global outlook, making a musical statement of broad horizons that could speak to people of diverse backgrounds and varying experience with American "jazz." The inclusion of musical signifiers from all around the world, the dynamic of group and individual interaction, and the super-imposed outsider perspective of the kangaroo and diderjidu combine to make the suite an intertext of global proportions. Coming from Duke Ellington, the jazz musician who has been so often associated with the musical "blackness" and/or "Americanness," the *Afro-Eurasian Eclipse* challenges scholars and listeners to reconsider Ellington's work as a response not only to distinctively American racial issues in jazz, but also to the growing globalization and the construction of transnational identity.

## Conclusion

The two privileged contexts of Ellington the jazz composer and Ellington the black Nationalist emphasize certain aspects of Ellington's life and music while downplaying others. Of these under-studied aspects is Ellington's engagement with world music, a result of his increasing travels on State Department tours in the 1960s and changing perspective on the role of jazz. They may be dismissed as touristic impressions of a foreign culture, or as unimportant "Ellingtonia," but the suites invoking world music (including the *Afro-Eurasian Eclipse*) provide an important gateway for a more-nuanced interpretation of Ellington and his meaning for jazz and black cultural studies.

Further research both on Ellington and on jazz in broader terms should explore the phenomenon of the older jazz musician composing and performing in the changing music world. Especially relevant for Ellington is the changing social context for his musical performances; being an African-American jazz musician in different periods could have different meanings, as Ellington himself demonstrated. The co-existence of various generations of jazz musicians at different points in their careers also bears investigation on the basis of musical interaction and also because of the finer distinctions it lends to jazz reception history.

Ellington reception and historiography are still interconnected, and both tropes of Ellington the composer and black Nationalist have their roots in the historical circumstances of Ellington's own experiences and interactions with his audience and critics. These

relationships and their implications for racial interactions and musical performances should receive more attention in the jazz literature. Ellington's *Afro-Eurasian Eclipse* is only one small example of how a musical product can result from an aging musician's interaction with foreign cultures and his own experience in a politically-charged, changing musical community.

## Appendix I

### **Ellington's spoken introduction to the recorded version of *Afro-Eurasian Eclipse*.**

“Ah, this is really this Chinoiserie. Last year, eh, we about this time - we premiered a new suite titled *Afro-Eurasian Eclipse*, and of course the title was inspired by a statement made by Mr. Marshall McLuhan from the Univeristy of Toronto. Mr. McLuhan says that the whole world is going Oriental and that no one will be able to retain his or her identity, not even the Orientals. And of course we travel around the world a lot, and in the last five or six years we too have noticed this thing to be true. So as a result we have done a sort of a thing – a parallel or something – and would like to play a little piece of it for you. In this particular segment, ladies and gentlemen, we have adjusted our perspective to that of the kangaroo and the didjeridoo; this automatically throws us either down under and/or out back, and from that point of view it's most improbably that anyone will ever know exactly who is enjoying the shadow of whom. Ah, Harold Ashby [tenor sax] has been inducted into the responsibility and the obligation of scraping off a tiny bit of the charisma of his chinoiserie immediately after our piano player has completed his rikki tikki.”



## Appendix II

### A list of some of Ellington's major multi-movement suites.

|                                |        |
|--------------------------------|--------|
| <i>Black and Tan Fantasy</i>   | 1929   |
| <i>Black, Brown, and Beige</i> | 1943   |
| <i>Idiom '59</i>               | 1959   |
| <i>The Far East Suite</i>      | 1965   |
| <i>Virgin Islands Suite</i>    | 1965   |
| <i>Latin American Suite</i>    | 1969   |
| <i>Afro-Eurasian Eclipse</i>   | 1970-1 |
| <i>Goutelas Suite</i>          | 1971   |
| <i>Togo Brava Suite</i>        | 1973   |

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