In “Voice of the Origins” I will discuss perspectives, methodologies and first results of the project ROTVOSCIAME (The Role of Traditional Vocal Styles in Reshaping Cultural Identities Related to African Diaspora in America and Europe, http://www.colum.edu/CBMR/digest/2012/spring/chiriaco.php) started in July 2012 as a partnership between the University of Salento (Lecce, Italy) and the Center for Black Music Research (Columbia College, Chicago).

PERSPECTIVES

The investigation considers the voice, especially the singing voice, as a vehicle of a complex variety of messages. Not all these messages are related to the language, as many of them relay a more articulated heritage. Following Paul Zumthor’s definition of vocality (“the entirety of values and activities which are peculiar to the voice, independent of the language”) it could be inferred that a vocality related to African diaspora expresses, through the values and qualities of voices, a memory of Africa. Nevertheless, the vocality evolve by passing through new contexts, new social relationships, new religious ideas, new technologies, etc. The analysis focuses on the vocal expressions of this cultural memory and on the way they have been evolving as a characteristic “afro-vocality”.

The project includes both archival exploration and field research among contemporary vocal performers. In its first part ROTVOSCIAME, merging analysis of written sources and interviews with contemporary performer, aims to investigate the historical development of African-American vocality. The investigation looks at vocal practices within the African-American context in order to search distinct symbolic and expressive origins of different vocal styles. However, an African-American vocal performer always combine values, attitudes, qualities and techniques in order to create an original performance. The performer draws upon a
range of vocal devices that is as wide as possible. The way in which the combination takes place is of specific interest for the research.

**METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES**

Adriana Cavarero’s work reminds us that, dealing with vocality, the word and the voice which carries out the word should not be distinguished, as the voice is the locus where individuality and relational scopes are intertwined. Meanwhile, she propose an interpretation of its role, from a philosophical perspective, as a way to look at the importance of the voice in strengthening connections inside communities of any kinds.

Within the sphere of voice studies and their use for musicological purposes, it seems that two different tendencies emerged. On the one hand, studies focused on performances tend to consider the individual voice as a mark of uniqueness. The focus seems to be on vocal practices rather than on vocal theories. On the other hand, a different approach – from what could be defined as a philosophical and phenomenological standpoint – tends to underscore the relational qualities of the voice. The two tendencies will be discussed.

The project ROTVOSCIAME considers the “voice as a kind of primacy in the formation of true communities of men, groups of individuals constituted by shared awareness” (Walter Ong). A relational approach seems therefore more coherent to the research. At the same time, the role of the practices in defining new modalities and new approaches to vocal styles need to be taken in serious account. The various meanings that a vocal performer assigns, both consciously and unconsciously, to the African-American vocal heritage and to his/her personal (sometimes idealized) idea of Africa are significant aspects of the analysis.

Meanwhile, the research deals with the possibility of using written sources in order to find information which could be relevant to musical analysis. Carlo Ginzburg’s research and Peter Burke’s theoretical attempt are identified as guidelines for a historical research that aims to explore popular culture. Roger Abrahams, in his “Singing the Master: The Emergence of African-American Culture in the Plantation South” had undertaken an analysis of written accounts from 19th
century for an anthropological study of the highly ritualized performance of corn-shucking within the slave culture. Relying on the same documents and ex-slave narratives alike, Shane White and Graham White had depicted, in “The Sound of Slavery: Discovering African-American History through Songs, Sermons and Speech”, the sonic scenario of the bondage. The possibility of using these approaches to define the vocality within the black culture will be discussed.

**FIRST RESULTS: FIELD HOLLERS AS A CASE STUDY**

In my paper at 2012 SEM Conference, “Filling the Space: Field Hollers and the Social Role of Singing in African-American Communities,” I investigated field hollers as a specific case study within the framework of ROTVOSCIAME. Although prominent experts are skeptical about their influence on blues, hollers have been commonly deemed as a distinct repertoire from which blues originated. I argue that, placing these vocal expressions into a symbolic, contextualized and melismatic frame, hollers would reveal themselves as a “vocal style” rather than a crystallized musical form.

As a vocal style, the holler had distinct vocal characteristics, definite typologies of uses, expressive goals and specific peculiarities recognizable by the entire community. Hollering was also a symbolic expression of “advancing movement” to an African-American slave. An advancing movement that must be interpreted both as the advancement of the entire community and as the personal affirmation of the most talented individuals. Furthermore, the talented hollering singers who were acknowledged could gain advantages through their voices. In Abrahams’ words: “These figures were first among equals in the organization of the activity.” So that, the holler itself was simultaneously a means of communication and a tool of individual expression and achievement.

In any case, the main goal of the hollering practice was to establish (and reshape) spatial relationships in three different directions: with the acoustic environment, with other human beings, and with a symbolic evocation. In search of the legacy of field hollers in contemporary vocal performances, we should probably look for similar attempts to establish (and reshape) spatial relationships through vocal sounds. Relevant examples will be discussed.
THE AFRICAN DIASPORA IN EUROPE: AN INTRODUCTION

During my research as a graduate student, I have approached the moresca songs. They constitute a cycle of almost unknown vocal compositions from the second half of the 16th century, whose characters define themselves as gente negra (black people). My original interest as well as my personal ambition were determined to see morescas as the very first example of black music in Europe. After a short period of time, I found myself looking at morescas as a peculiar representation of the presence of African people (and African musicians) in Southern Italy. I realized that moresca should have been investigated as a musical expression of the perception of African people within Renaissance culture.

A preliminary field research in the city of Lecce suggests that the perception of African people still plays a significant role in the negotiation of mutual positions between African musicians and European listeners. Interviews with musicians who migrated from Africa and European producers who have worked with them seem to underline two different ideas. Producers’ desire to hear African musicians expressing an idea of Africa which is coincident with their (European) idea of Africa. Simultaneously, producers demand that African musicians act as European professional musicians. On the other hand, African musicians proudly express their own idea of Africa. They probably use their idea of Africa in order to refuse European values of loyalty to the job (to music as a job), and to affirm different values. Apparently, the result is an incomplete (maybe impossible) integration. How the singing voice and the vocal performances have been used as a negotiation of the two different ideas, as well as a tool to reshape the presence of African musicians in Southern Italy, will be the main goal of the European section of the project ROTVOSCIAME.