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**Metaphysics in the Dark
Music, Mimesis and the Making of Utopia**

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Metaphysics in the Dark: Music, Mimesis and the Making of Utopia

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Preface

This thesis looks at 20th century African-American music and literature through the prism of historical materialism and the aesthetics of mimesis. This approach pays equal attention to class and 'race' when reading literary works and interpreting and contextualizing black¹ music cultures. The material conditions in which works of literature and music are produced are as important as the themes with which they deal. Periodization is also important, and throughout I note how structural changes in the general mode of production of US capitalism, and the particular dynamics of the culture industry, shape black literary and musical production. Both historical materialists and scholars of African-American culture have theorized mimesis, but without much rigour and rarely at the same time. This two-pronged approach results in three interrelated arguments about African-American music in the 20th century. Chapters 2 and 3 trace the incorporation and commodification of the jazz avant-garde, a process I argue was responsible for kicking off African-American modernism in the early forties, a social formation that served as the model for the varieties of 'popular modernism' in the post war period. In the process, I contrast the utopian promise of popular modernism with that of its Euro-American counterparts. In Chapters 4 and 5 I read Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison and Leroi Jones and others' work in terms of the growing tension between a bourgeois literary tradition and the rising commercial and cultural popularity of black music. In Chapter 6, I argue that popular modernism reaches its apex in the period '67-'79, with the permutation of rhythm and blues into rock, funk, and disco. Finally, in Chapter 7 I argue that by '79, popular modernism had, for a variety of structural reasons, run its course. Authors and genres discussed include Fredrick Douglass, W.E.B. Du Bois, James Weldon Johnson, James Reese Europe, Alain Locke, Duke Ellington, Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, Theodor Adorno, Walter Benjamin, Leroi Jones/Amiri Baraka, Henry Dumas, early blues and jazz, soul, funk, and disco.

¹ I tend to agree with Phillip Tagg that modifiers like 'Negro', 'black', 'African-American' tend to obscure more than they reveal, and to reinforce dubious notions of 'cultural property' and 'cultural appropriation' which seem to me precisely to negate the social value of culture as such. Still, some measure of specificity is required, so I will be employing 'black' but only because most of the time, one syllable is better than seven. Chapter 1 details what I find problematic about overinvesting in 'black' and 'blackness' as concepts. see [<http://www.tagg.org/articles/opelet.html>][Accessed: 7th Feb 2017]

Chapter 1 surveys the scholarship and argues that African-American studies generally suffer from a lack of historical materialist analysis. From ‘signifyin’ to more recent theorizations of ‘blackness’ and the ‘black radical tradition’, the results bear little relation to the history of economic conflict and aesthetic difference *within* black culture, in addition to those stemming from the dominant culture. I then outline the basics of an historical materialist approach to black culture and music in particular. However, I also note its limitations when it comes to the specific phenomena of black culture, and to aesthetics more generally. I therefore suggest mimesis as a useful complementary category. Here I draw from recent forays into the political economy of slave music emergent in the 19th century and the dominance of ‘groove’ in the 20th century.

Chapter 2 explores pre-culture industry currents. I begin with Fredrick Douglass’s comments on slave songs, which provide an overarching set of themes to which we return throughout the thesis, namely, music’s relation to work and to protest. This sets us up to understand how black music has been forged in social relations of domination and exploitation. I read the early work of W.E.B. Du Bois as well as James Weldon Johnson’s *Autobiography of an Ex-coloured Man*, and pay close attention to the ways ‘race’, culture and music are experienced in these works as class problems.

Chapter 3 explores the relationship between ‘black’ and ‘white’ avant-gardes, just prior to the advent of the culture industry. Neither term refers to a monolithic social formation. The ‘white’ avant-garde was divided between those for whom recent European history had to be discarded like dead weight, in order to return to a golden age and secure a glorious future, and those for whom history was the key to understanding the present and building a better future. Likewise, black culture was divided between the ‘affirmative character’ of bourgeois cultural historiography, and an emergent, critical and unruly populism, concentrated in Harlem but present in most major cities, whose energies were harnessed by radio and the nascent recording industry.

Chapter 4 sets the early work of Richard Wright in a constellation with Walter Benjamin and Theodor Adorno. Wright’s ‘aestheticization of violence’ in his first unpublished novel emerges in the context of an increasingly commodified black culture, which Adorno was tracking in his work

with the Princeton Radio Research Project. Meanwhile, Benjamin begins to toy with the concept mimesis, aura and their relation to social revolution, which compels Adorno toward his first thorough critiques of the nascent culture industry and the dominant form of mass-produced music at the time, jazz. Finally, I show how these critiques dovetail with those of contemporary black critics and artists.

Chapter 5 begins with the debate between Ralph Ellison and Leroi Jones/Amiri Baraka, over the connection between music, memory and political consciousness. I then trace the emergence of 'Amiri Baraka' from Jones's early experimental novel and poetry to his classic essay, 'The Changing Same: R&B and the New Black Music'. This essay refers to a short story by Henry Dumas, which itself plays with themes of jazz musician Sun-Ra, both of which I explore, before returning finally to Baraka. In the end, I argue that Baraka reproduces many of the problems that had beset the 'white' avant-gardes of previous decades, and that these are compounded by a racial essentialism that is incompatible with the music and musicians he adores. Baraka and the Black Arts Movement's theory of 'blackness' brings us back to the theoretical concerns of Chapter 1.

Chapter 6 theorizes the music of '67-'79 as popular modernism. First I turn to Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory*, particularly his elaboration of Benjamin's notes on mimesis and its relation to music. I then look at The Chambers Brothers, Jimi Hendrix, Parliament-Funkadelic and Chic to argue that soul, funk and disco were the result of the massive structural changes in African-American life that began with the civil rights movement. What made this period 'the most liberated and open time in music', as Chic's Nile Rogers remembers it? I argue that popular modernism—populist, post-nationalist, technically and technologically advanced, richly historical, playfully ironic, and emphatically utopian—subverted the reification of blackness that had forced jazz to retreat into either noise or nostalgia. One paradoxical effect was the 'queering' of black music, at the same time that black nationalism and the search for a 'black aesthetic' dominated the discourse. At the same time, the death of disco signaled that popular modernism had run its course. Finally, I think through Mark Abel's notion of mimesis in relation to James Snead's theorization of 'repetition as a figure of black culture'.

Chapter 7 briefly suggests why the moment of popular modernism came to an end, or was finally driven underground, where it flourished as house and techno, but never again enjoyed the kind of mainstream success that it had in the seventies. I conclude with some more personal reflections on popular music since the 1980s.

1

‘Blackness’, Music and Mimesis: Ontology and History

This chapter criticizes recent trends in black cultural studies and defends a modified historical materialist approach. In the first part, I review key texts in African-American studies that have attempted to formulate a meta-theory of African-American culture. This work informs more recent efforts to theorize blackness in ontological terms, namely the ‘afro-pessimism’ of Frank Wilderson and Jared Sexton, and Fred Moten’s ‘black optimism’. In the second part, I argue against this ontological turn. In part three, I defend the historical materialist approach pioneered by Stuart Hall among others. This approach incorporates what it can from previous attempts to think Marxism, ‘race’ and popular culture (e.g. Ernst Bloch, T.W. Adorno, W.E.B. Dubois, C.L.R. James, Leroi Jones/Amiri Baraka), but recognizes the limits of even the most detailed conjunctural analyses with regard to the creation, performance, and reception of music. In the final section, I show how the concept of ‘mimesis’ can helpfully expand an historical materialist account of the aesthetics of African-American music in the 20th century.

I. Literary Criticism and Black Music

In the wake of civil rights and the counterculture, there was a renewed interest in African-American cultural history. The freedom to demonstrate the depth, breadth and continued vibrancy of the culture had been hard-won, and much of the history that had been written was documentarian: a strictly recuperative process of gathering and presenting evidence of a complex and distinct cultural tradition, a feat that would ultimately prove that slaves and their descendants were human beings. Leroi Jones’s *Blues People* (1962) brought sociology and history together to argue that black music reflected the distinct identity of African-American people, one that was not static, but shifted with the times (hence the emphasis on the hyphen). Lawrence Levine’s *Black Culture, Black Consciousness* (1977), attempted to grasp the whole of ‘Afro-American folk thought’, including myth and religion, song, folk tales, poetry, and above all music, which Levine rightly portrayed as a kind a filter through which all the other elements had passed and resonated from the Middle Passage to the antebellum period to the present. In these works, demonstrating the resilience and continuity of the cultural tradition was paramount.

The 1980s saw the further consolidation of the field of African-American studies. This coincided with the dissemination of post-war French thought throughout US universities. The relatively new discipline's need for self-legitimation found an ally in the unconventional analytical frames offered by structural linguistics and anthropology, post-structuralism and deconstruction. Rather than merely document cultural history, the aim now was to identify and codify African-American culture as a distinct entity that operated according to its own internal logic, entirely separate from that of the dominant culture. But as the product of a people long-barred from literacy, whose primary expressive means were *mimetic* (music, dance, speech) as well as 'spiritual', African-American culture presented a challenge to these theoretical trends, as they tended to be text-centric and to stress the importance of discontinuity (variously theorized as difference, historical breaks, incommensurability) as an ontological bulwark against the dangers of metaphysics.² Radical skepticism and an aversion to 'presence' of any kind were not the best tools for understanding the history of black culture.

In *Blues, Ideology and Afro-American Literature*, Houston Baker writes that for a decade he had been searching 'for the distinctive, the culturally specific aspects of Afro-American literature and culture', but that the insights of both economics, post-structuralism, and 'the curious force of dialectical thought', quickly lead to a 'shift from a centered to a decentered subject, [and] from an exclusively symbolic to a more inclusively expressive perspective'.³ Baker suggests a relation of continuity between investigator and object, as if the specificity of black culture necessarily calls for an entirely novel style of analysis. Yet Baker's eclectic combination falls short: the materialist analysis that 'dialectical thought' has encouraged never really transpires; instead, we get the idealism of the 'blues matrix (as a vernacular trope for American cultural explanation in general), [which] possesses enormous force for the study of literature, criticism, and culture'. At this point, the author himself disappears (as was the fashion at the time):

I know that I have appropriated the vastness of the vernacular in the United States to a single matrix. But I trust that my necessary selectivity will be interpreted, not as sign of myopic exclusiveness, but as an invitation to inventive play. The success of my efforts would be

² Steven Best & Douglas L. Kellner, *Postmodern Theory* (New York: The Guilford Press, 1991).

³ Houston Baker Jr., *Blues, Ideology and African-American Culture: A Vernacular Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), p. 2.

effectively signaled in the following chapters, I think, by the transformation of my “I” into a juncture where readers could freely improvise their own distinctive tropes for cultural explanation.⁴

1988 saw the publication of two influential texts, Sterling Stuckey’s *Slave Culture: Nationalist Theory & the Foundations of Black America* and Henry Louis Gates Jr.’s *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism*. Stuckey’s work calls back to the traditional histories of the previous decade, but his overarching thesis on the enduring legacy of Africa in African-American culture, particularly in the form of the discourse of black nationalism, is symptomatic of a broad conservative turn. Stuckey posits the ring shout ceremony as crucial for the transmission, preservation and development of African cultural practices, and in time the consolidation of a coherent collective identity. Although Stuckey is clear regarding the limits of his inquiry— ‘even with a theorist who argues a continuing Africanity or its absence, the emphasis here has been on relating such arguments to the governing principles of black culture in slavery rather than to their manifestations since that time’— the book impresses its reader with the notion that the culture’s deep roots in Africa are the ultimate source of its meaning.⁵

Gates’s claims are more ambitious. The book posits ‘troping’ or ‘signifying’, i.e. narrative and linguistic play as the definitive mode of African-American cultural practice, that the many branches all lead back to this penchant for ribald riffing, figurative speech, sign play. Like Baker Jr. and his blues matrix, Gates’s and his subject start to reflect one another: positing signifying as the way black culture always already works, Gates adopts a theory of signification in order to understand its meaning. Gates’s critics have noted the irony that his project is steeped in work that was far removed from African-American experience, and thereby risks reinforcing the hegemony of Euro-American ideas (even if they are ‘radical’ ideas).⁶ More importantly, despite his attempt to isolate the distinctive characteristic of the culture, the theory of signifying proceeds at such high level of abstraction that it becomes hard to distinguish from the more anthropological claim that *all* culture works this way (ceaseless revision, diffusion, translation and intertextuality without

⁴ Baker, *Blues...*, p. 14.

⁵ Sterling Stuckey *Slave Culture: Nationalist Theory and the Foundations of Black America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987) p. vii-x.

⁶ Hazel Carby, *Cultures in Babylon: Black Britain and African America* (London: Verso, 1999), pp. 232-236; Sandra Adell, *Double-Consciousness/Double Bind* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1994), pp. 118-138.

beginning or end). But it is ultimately Gates Jr.'s text-centric approach that is unsatisfying, as it ignores the vast transformations in the social conditions since Zora Neale Hurston first suggested that 'the Negro's greatest contribution to language' is the use of metaphor and simile, double-descriptives and verbal nouns— particularly the rise of communications and televisual media.⁷

The Power of Black Music, by Samuel Floyd Jr., continues in this manner, elaborating Stuckey's account of the ring shout by combining Gates's hermeneutics with traditional musicological methods. Floyd Jr. writes that he 'became interested in black literary theory, and I quickly perceived that this field of study had implications for the study of black music'.⁸ Gates' work had convinced him 'of the usefulness— indeed, the indispensability— of black literary theory for inquiry into black music and for black music scholarship'. As we have seen, the 'blackness' of the theories that Gates had repurposed was arguable. Floyd Jr.'s conservatism is evident in his frequent use of terms like 'African homeland', his emphasis on the 'continuity' of certain forms, and his efforts to pin down the 'nature of black music'. The book contains many insights, not least is the detailed breakdown of the various elements of the ring shout. Relatedly, he aims to 'discover a hermeneutic that is African-American in character and method'. But what Gates's theory of signifying and the method of musicology Floyd Jr. employs have in common is their formalism. In both cases, form (e.g. blues and jazz chord changes) tends to be analyzed in isolation, without recourse to the history and material conditions from which they emerged (e.g. live performance regulations; technological constraints; rural and urban populations). Floyd Jr. writes, 'In tracing African-American music making from its roots in traditional African to its manifestations in the United States, I have focused on the roles of myth, ritual, and the tropes of Call-Response in the continuation of its character'. In the end, the best Floyd Jr. can offer is a Venn diagram, in which African, African-American and Euro-American forms overlap (Venn himself was an Englishman).⁹ While the diagram suggests inter-mixture, it is belied by the thesis that the power of black music stems from its roots in African ritual and myth.

Much of this work presumes that roots can be discovered and clear lines drawn between the cultural traditions of Africa and Euro-America. In their quest for 'a thorough and specific

⁷ Hurston was of course writing outside the confines literary theory. Zora Neale Hurston, 'Characteristics of Negro Expression', in *The Jazz Cadence of American Culture*, ed. Robert G. O'Meally, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998[1934]), pp. 298-9.

⁸ Samuel Floyd Jr. *The Power of Black Music* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 3-13.

⁹ Ibid., p. 265.

aesthetic for the perception and criticism of black music', these authors fix Africa as origin and African-Americans as either faithful tradition-bearers or wayward traitors. Despite their professed debts to post-structuralism, its influence turns out to be negligible, as one is led to conclude that the essence of African-American music, the most powerful expression of African-American identity, is ultimately African. In the following section I survey and critique more recent efforts to theorize black culture in general and music in particular.

II. Afro Pessimism and Black Optimism

Recent theories have taken an ontological turn. Self-professed afro-pessimists Frank B. Wilderson III and Jared Sexton reject the very idea of black culture, positing blackness as always already banished from language as such. Fred Moten's black optimism, on the other hand, affirms the 'black radical tradition' and further conceptualizes the aesthetics and politics of 'blackness' in the manner of Gates *et al.* The materialism that was barely present in their predecessors is now completely absent— these are resolutely 'post-Marxist', anti-dialectical approaches. The former is unapologetically essentialist, while the latter would likely welcome and embrace accusations of idealism/nominalism.

I begin with an exchange between Saidiya Hartman and Frank Wilderson in which we can see the latter's theory begins to take shape. I then move to the writings of Wilderson and Sexton, wherein the concepts and premises that constitute afro-pessimism are staked out more definitively. I argue that these conceptions and positions are ultimately empty, lacking in both analytical scope and political substance. Finally, I suggest that Afro-pessimism may be understood as a reactionary symptom (nostalgia for blackness, black nationalism, Black Panthers, the mid-century moment when black America could confidently claim to represent oppressed people the world over), an attempt to re-center blackness (on the margins).

Pessimism of the Will

I begin with a 2003 conversation between Saidiya Hartman, author of *Scenes of Subjection: Terror Slavery and Self Making in 19th Century America*, and Frank B. Wilderson III, who theorizes afro-pessimism in several essays and eventually the book, *Red, White and Black: Cinema and the Structure of*

US Antagonisms. Hartman says that the occasion for her book was her dissatisfaction with ‘the social revisionist history undertaken by many leftists in the 1970s, who were trying to locate the agency of dominated groups, [and which] resulted in celebratory narratives of the oppressed’.¹⁰ According to Hartman, this work (which would include the texts mentioned in the previous section), problematically presumes the existence of black Africans as subjects or agents, constituted prior to the juridical-legal discourse that historically produced them as fungible commodities. This is the archive to which historians of the period have been limited, and in which we find not glimpses of black agency, but a catalogue of trafficked objects or commodities. For Hartman, then, texts that center the black agency, of, for example, authors or performers, merely echo the liberal humanism that had served to legitimate the slave trade in the first place. Taking her cues from early Foucault and psychoanalysis,¹¹ Hartman urges her readers to rethink slave identity as an *effect* of juridical-legal discourse, and to pay close attention to the fine line between white empathy and narcissism. Can we ever really know the slaves and their culture, not to mention their would-be allies in abolition? If the answer is negative, then we must admit that slave culture has less to do with desires for preserving African heritage, even less for freedom and recognition, than with the deadly consequences of refusing to perform for the master. ‘In many ways’, says Hartman, ‘what I was trying to do as a cultural historian was to narrate a certain impossibility, to illuminate those practices that speak to the limits of most available narratives to explain the position of the enslaved’.¹²

Wilderson and Hartman are anxious about how history functions in the present. Hartman wonders whether historiography that identifies oppositional currents in black culture amounts to ‘an extension of the master’s prerogative’. After echoing Hartman’s reservations, Wilderson shifts gears into the present tense: ‘it doesn’t help us politically or psychologically to try and find ways in which how we live is analogous to how white positionality lives, because... whites gain their coherence by knowing what they are not’.¹³ Hartman’s work has clearly had an impact on Wilderson, as throughout their discussion he speaks as though her book describes his own life. It soon becomes evident that Wilderson is not interested in history as such. Instead, the more

¹⁰ Saidiya V. Hartmann and Frank B. Wilderson III, ‘The Position of the Unthought’, *Qui Parle*, 13.2 (2003), pp. 183-201 (p. 185).

¹¹ Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery and Self-Making in Nineteenth Century America*, (Oxford, Oxford University Press: 1997), pp. 10-14.

¹² Hartman and Wilderson, p. 184.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 187.

speculative dimensions of Hartman's historical meditations will be the impetus for a new theoretical disposition. This entails distilling the complex historical problems having to do with power, exploitation, individual and cultural identity formation, sexuality and aesthetics into schematic, strictly defined concepts and formulae, most important of which is the Manichean distinction between White and Black. 'There is tremendous diversity', he continues, 'on the side of whiteness and tremendous conflict between white men and white women, between Jews and gentiles, and between classes, but that conflict, even in its articulation, has a certain solidarity'.¹⁴ Wilderson replaces Hartman's history with the constitutive logic of identity formation, whereby whiteness emerges as the negation of blackness, an event that occurs above and beyond the particularities of time, place, and experience.

Wilderson takes this analysis further in his book, where he hopes to 'forge a language of abstraction with explanatory power emphatic enough to embrace the Black'.¹⁵ Here he writes that Hartman's work

illustrates how no discursive act by Blacks towards Whites or by Whites towards Blacks, from the mundane and quotidian, to the horrifying and outlandish can be disentangled from the gratuitousness of violence that structures Black suffering. This structural suffering, which undergirds the spectrum of Black life... is imbricated in the "fungibility of the captive body". Black "fungibility" is a violence-effect that marks the difference between Black positionality and White positionality and, as Hartman makes clear, this difference in positionality marks a difference between capacities of speech.¹⁶

In economic terms, 'fungibility' describes how commodities are interchangeable. Note how the passage strains to dispense with all history since Emancipation. While these truths were self-evident to slaves, Wilderson claims they are permanent features of Black identity that continue to pervade the whole 'spectrum of Black life', hence his untimely embrace of essentialism. 'To the extent that

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 188.

¹⁵ Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990).

¹⁶ Frank B. Wilderson III, *Red, White and Black: Cinema and the Structure of US Antagonisms*, (Durham, Duke University Press: 2007), pp. 88-9.

we can think the essence of Whiteness and the essence of Blackness’, he writes, ‘we must think their essences through the structure of the Master/Slave relationship’.¹⁷

In a further refinement of Wilderson’s position, critical race theorist Jared Sexton writes that afro-pessimism serves as a

qualification and a complication of the assumptive logic of black cultural studies in general and black performance studies in particular, a disposition that posits a political ontology dividing the Slave from the world of the Human in a constitutive way.¹⁸

What first seems like a tentative intellectual intervention— ‘qualification’ or ‘complication’— morphs into a solid ‘disposition’, which posits a constitutive divide between the two worlds, and in doing so founds a ‘political ontology’, the aim of which is to *invalidate* ‘the assumptive logic of black cultural studies’. Concepts such as alienation, exploitation, culture, hegemony and coalition apparently bear no relation to black life. Wilderson puts a finer point on it: afro-pessimism poses ‘a problem for cultural studies writ large’; it is an ‘unflinching paradigmatic analysis’ that seeks ‘to deconstruct and humiliate’ scholars whose work assumes ‘(1) that all people have bodies and (2) that all people contest dramas of value. ... [They] police our ability to contemplate how the Slave... is exiled from the drama of value’.¹⁹ (Again, notice the use of the present tense.)

From the perspective of afro-pessimism, then, the constitutive separation between the Slave and the world of the Human means that ‘black culture’ is an oxymoron. Black cultural studies must go back to first principles, hence ‘political ontology’. In addition to Hartman, Wilderson claims Orlando Patterson’s comparative historical sociology, *Slavery and Social Death*, specifically its attempt to identify ‘the constituent elements of slavery’, as a key influence.²⁰ Wilderson argues that Patterson ‘helps us separate experience (events) from ontology (the capacities of power— or lack

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 18. Here Wilderson quotes Hartman, who wonders ‘if [the violence of black suffering] can become palpable and indignation can be fully aroused only through the masochistic fantasy, then it becomes clear that empathy is double-edged, for in making the other’s suffering one’s own, this suffering is occluded by the other’s obliteration’.¹⁷ Hartman’s statement blends several semantic registers- ‘if’, ‘fully’, ‘only’ establish that this is a question about extremes, but the inquisitive frame falls away as ‘it becomes clear’ that empathy is perhaps not so clear, or ‘double-edged’, though we conclude much more clearly with ‘the other’s obliteration’. Hartman’s circumspection allows Wilderson to redefine empathy for his purposes as one-sided narcissism.

¹⁸ Jared Sexton, ‘The Social Life of Social Death: On Afro-Pessimism and Black Optimism’, *Intensions*, 5 (Fall/Winter, 2011), pp. 1–47 (p. 23).

¹⁹ Wilderson, *Red...*, p. 55, p. 249.

²⁰ Patterson, *Slavery*, pp. 1–17.

thereof— lodged within distinct and irreconcilable subject positions, e.g. Humans and Slaves)’— despite the glaring absence of the word ‘ontology’ and its derivatives from Patterson’s book. Wilderson can only justify this interpretation by inflating Patterson’s emphasis on ‘naked might’:

To properly define slavery, Patterson elaborates “three sets of constituent features corresponding to . . . three sets of power.” First, naked might—what I refer to as gratuitous violence. This violence is akin to an ontological first moment—or a point of paradigmatic origin, in that, once inside the paradigm one feels (experiences) its timelessness and its boundless cartography.²¹

According to Wilderson, Patterson proves that labour is not a constituent element of slavery. In fact, Patterson argues that while this holds for nearly all historic slave-holding societies, the modern slave trade, particularly in the US, was the exception. Patterson has more to say about arguments that isolate slavery from its relation to labour exploitation. To the argument that slaves are the *only* human beings ‘who constitute disposable capital’, Patterson cites ‘that whole branch of modern economics known as the study of human capital’. ‘When any firm’, he continues, ‘ancient or modern, invests funds in the training of persons whose skilled labor it later hopes to exploit for profit, it is doing nothing other than investing capital in persons’.²² Nor is it the case that ‘only slaves are capable of being bought and sold’, as Patterson’s examples of professional athletes and African tribal wives attest. Patterson argues that the rhetoric of the ‘raw bodies’ so often used to distinguish the trade in slaves from that in services— refigured in Hortense Spillers’ term ‘captive flesh’ and in turn transposed by Sexton into ‘raw life’— ‘makes no sense in physical or economic terms’.

²¹ Frank B. Wilderson III, ‘Biko and the Problematic of Presence’, in *Biko Lives! Contesting the Legacies of Steve Biko* ed. by Andile Mngxitama, Amanda Alexander and Nigel C. Gibson (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), pp. 95-115. To be sure, Orlando Patterson acknowledges the founding role of force in the institution of slavery, but he does not ontologise it. Nor does he make into it an essential and immutable determinant of black identity. Instead, he cites Marxist scholar of slavery Elisabeth Welskopf, who arrived at her conclusion by way of Sorel and Nietzsche. For Welskopf, ‘naked violence’ indeed constitutes the originary moment of all slave societies. However, as Patterson notes, this part of her argument was not based on analyses of the specific form of US American slavery, and probably would have found it inapplicable to the ‘organised force and authority- what [she] called ‘spiritual force’- of a highly developed slave economy’. see Patterson, *Slavery*, p. 3.

²² Patterson, *Slavery*..., p. 24-25.

When one buys or hires a person's labour, by implication one purchases the person's body for the negotiated period. There is no such thing as a disembodied service, only the discreet willingness to suspend all disbelief in such disembodiment. Present-day employers, it is true, do not demand of potential employees that they stand naked on an auction block being prodded and inspected by the employers and their physicians. But when an employer requires a medical certificate from a worker or professional athlete before hiring him, he is not only soliciting the same kind of information as a slavemaster inspecting his latest cargo of bodies, he is betraying the inherent absurdity of the distinction between "raw bodies" and the services produced by such bodies.

Here the question is what distinguishes the power relations between slaves and masters, and workers and owners. Marx himself was torn on the issue, but his frequent use of the term 'wage-slavery' suggests he took it to be a minimal, or in any case uncomplicated, difference, as Patterson's own comments attest. 'The slavemaster's power over his slave was total. Furthermore with non-slaves, the proprietor's powers, however great, were usually confined to a specific range of activities; with slaves, the master had power over all aspects of his slave's life'.²³ The 'freedom' purchased by a worker's wages was more often than not the freedom to barely subsist. Mobility can serve as an index of their respective and overlapping 'freedoms': slaves were incentivised to work with permission to travel to neighbouring plantations or small towns on weekends to visit friends and family. Meanwhile, the scope of working-class 'freedoms' in terms of travel was constrained to a few blocks of squalid urban tenements, by both prohibitive costs and precarious employment. (This is indeed what Hartman means by 'unspectacular violence'.)

Patterson's distinction between the condition of slavery and wage-slavery is one of degree, not kind: the slavemaster has greater control over the labour-power in his possession than does the factory boss. If the spectre of 'racism' hovers over the many 'first moments' we could surely identify, they are not reducible to it. Although the consequences of this minor difference in power dynamics have been momentous, the similar conditions from which they emerge and with which they develop is precisely the reason why Marx's 'rubric of suffering' cannot be summarily dismissed.

²³ Ibid., p. 26.

Sexton deploys the concept of ‘gratuitous violence’ in a similarly sloppy fashion. Having chided Achille Mbembe for his ‘romantic’ insistence on the oppositional dimension of slave culture, Sexton rejects his ‘regrettably imprecise hypothesis’ regarding the ‘generalized instrumentalization of human existence’, on the grounds that it ‘loses track of the singular commodification of human existence (not simply its labor power) (sic) under racial slavery, that structure of gratuitous violence in which a body is rendered as flesh to be accumulated and exchanged’.²⁴

Though Sexton does not elaborate on the distinction he draws between Mbembe’s ‘generalized instrumentalization of human existence’ and ‘that structure of gratuitous violence in which a body is rendered as flesh to be accumulated and exchanged’, his use of the word ‘singular’ is the giveaway. Mbembe’s suggestion, with its intimations of Marx and Weber, of a contemporary world increasingly governed by a certain political-economic logic presumes a language (e.g. political economy) that can be enlisted in order to understand a variety of forms of suffering. Since the political ontology of afro-pessimism posits the slave and all of her descendants outside of, and at odds with, the very ‘capacity for speech’— a singular phenomenon without compare— none of the existing discourses will do.

Elsewhere Sexton calls on Hortense Spillers’ use of Jurgen Habermas’s insight that a ‘critically mediated knowledge of laws cannot through reflection alone render the law itself inoperative, but it can render it inapplicable.’²⁵ This bolsters Sexton’s disdain for historians and theorists of oppositional black culture, because ‘subversion and resistance at the level of infrapolitics or, better, providing preconditions for effective opposition... does not thereby make [the laws] inoperative—maybe not even a little bit.’ Much like Wilderson’s disingenuous concessions to complexity, Sexton here pulls back from asserting what the rest of the text makes

²⁴ Sexton’s distinction between ‘human existence’ and ‘labor power’ is no more precise; it is a distinction that Mbembe, let alone Marx, never makes. Indeed, the whole of Marx’s critique of bourgeois political economy might be summed up as an objection to that very distinction: ‘labor-power’ refers quite specifically to the ‘commodification of human existence’, what Marx termed species-being, or sensuous social activity. The conjoined term ‘labor-power’ is designed to subvert two pillars of liberalism. On the one hand, because human labor is the source of surplus-value, the concept exposes what wages conceal: that labor, like all other commodities, will undergo progressive degradation as capital cuts costs to increase profits. With the concept of labor-power Marx discovers a form of slavery at the heart of civil society, despite Locke’s assertion that the triumph of free and fair exchange in civil society meant that slavery was logically impossible. On the other, the concept strikes at the heart of liberalism’s construction of the Human subject as possessing ‘property in the person’ which they freely and happily hire out, or alienate, on the labor market. ‘Labor-power’ is the abstract form one’s labor is forced to take if it is to enter the market- the fragmentation, quantification, and commodification of concrete human laboring, which Marx indeed equates with human existence, and which cannot be alienated without alienation. Jared Sexton, ‘People-of-Color-Blindness: Notes on the Afterlife of Slavery’, *Social Text*, 28.2.103 (2010), pp. 31-56 (p. 32).

²⁵ Jared Sexton, ‘People-...’, p. 36.

explicit: that the law's operation is the single determining factor of black existence. Thus 'what appears in the first instance to be evidence of an agency that indexes the law's inapplicability for the slave may upon closer scrutiny reveal a convoluted form of consent'. At this point we know to disregard the tentative 'may': Sexton never specifies which acts reveal themselves as such to his incisive gaze, 'agency' may as well include everything from slave songs to slave revolts.

If Hartman and Patterson's work functions in its own right as an index of complicated *historical* phenomena, the afro-pessimists repurpose them in the service of an emphatically a-historical theory of permanent black subjection (or objectification), which they dub the 'political ontology of race'. As Sexton describes it,

Political ontology is not a metaphysical notion, because it is the explicit outcome of a politics and thereby available to historic challenge through collective struggle. But it is not simply a description of a political status either, even an oppressed or subjugated political status, because it functions as if it were a metaphysical property across the *longue durée* of the pre-modern, modern and now postmodern eras.

Sexton basically echoes Wilderson's contention that antiblackness 'seems invariant and limitless': because the contingency of this complex articulation of racial oppression is 'generally lost to the infrastructure of the Atlantic world', moments of resistance and opposition no longer merit scholarly consideration. The task, then, is not to examine law's theoretical contradictions and expose its contingencies, or even to highlight black artworks and performances that do the same, but to show how that which *seems* to be the case—in Wilderson's words, 'the paradigm one feels (experiences) in its timelessness and its boundless cartography'—actually *is* the case.

If the political ontology of race is not metaphysics, nor simple description of political status, what is it? How and for whom does it 'function as if it were a metaphysical property'? Wilderson's big bang theory of gratuitous violence is oddly self-defeating—the afro-pessimist *knows* that it emerges at a specific point in time, yet in the event's aftermath he *feels* only its 'timelessness and boundless cartography'. The ontology of Afro-pessimism seems to depend on this forgetting, a fatalism writ large.

In a sense, this is inherent to the very discourse of ontology. Franz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* seems to have been the impetus for Wilderson's ontological turn. Afro-pessimists, writes Wilderson,

are theorists of Black positionality who share Fanon's insistence that, though blacks are indeed sentient beings, *the structure of the entire world's semantic field*—regardless of cultural and national discrepancies—“leaving” as Fanon would say, “existence by the wayside”—is sutured by anti-Black solidarity.²⁶

Yet both Fanon and the discourse of ontology are strange choices for a theory that seeks to prioritize the suffering of African-Americans, and to purge every trace of the master's discourse to make way for a wholly new grammar. As the preferred mode of thinking of land-owning aristocrats (Plato), slave-holding scientists (Aristotle), god-fearing theologians (Aquinas) and fascistic philosophers (Heidegger), ontology's record is nothing if not dubious. As the ‘science of being’, classical ontology aspired to nothing more or less than an accurate *description of reality* that would hold good for all time. Only with the clearing away of all merely ‘ontic’ obstacles, can authentic questions concerning the meaning or essence of being qua Being be revealed and puzzled over. The ontologist pursues these pieties by demoting collective articulations of common concern to the demonstratively unreliable realm of the contingent: of matter, women, caves and shadows, ‘idle chatter’, and all the other Others.²⁷ Ontology, in other words, has rarely if ever wanted anything to do with the messy contingencies of politics. Insofar as politics has anything to do with existence, Fanon recognizes ontology as constitutively apolitical. Indeed Wilderson grossly misreads him: ‘Ontology— once it is finally admitted as leaving existence by the wayside— tells us nothing about the being of the black man’.²⁸

Can ontology be politicized? Can the ontologist announce his political agenda without succumbing to merely ontic contingencies? Or is the notion of ‘political ontology’ symptomatic of a refusal of the mundane work of politics and complications of cultural production under white

²⁶ Wilderson, *Red...*, p. 58.

²⁷ For a critique of arch-ontologist Martin Heidegger along these lines, see Pierre Bourdieu, *The Political Ontology of Martin Heidegger* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991).

²⁸ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. by Charles Lam Markmann (London: Pluto Books, 1986), p. 110.

supremacist capitalist patriarchy? If history was the first casualty on the road to Wilderson's all-new and improved grammar of suffering, the second is politics, particularly left wing activism and grassroots coalition building. Until the horrors of the Middle Passage and the Slave Estate are genuinely recognized— until, in Wilderson's words, 'women, natives, immigrants and colonial subjects' recognize themselves as 'junior partners' in the planetary struggle against oppression—²⁹ the afro-pessimist will opt out. In Sexton's words,

how radical a reconstruction you seek relates to how fully you regard the absoluteness of power, whether you conceive of the constituted power of the slave estate as prior or understand it as a reactive apparatus of capture. In short, slavery must be theorized maximally if its abolition is to reach the proper level. The *singularity* of slavery is the prerequisite of its universality. Otherwise, we succumb to the forces of mitigation that would transform the world through a coalition of a thousand tiny causes.³⁰

Perhaps no discourse is truly irredeemable. But perhaps also it is no coincidence that phrases like 'forces of mitigation' sound like Heidegger's frequent invocation of the 'they', those who to his mind have turned away from Being and are condemned to live an inauthentic existence. Meanwhile, the politics of 'reconstruction' described here has a distinctly authoritarian ring to it. In order to theorize 'maximally', to arrive at the one true and authentic description of power and culture, all other theories must be shut down; in order to do politics, all other oppressed groups must be shut up. The ontological need appears in Sexton's demand to think 'the absoluteness of power' *either* as 'prior' or 'reactive'. But absolute power, by definition, cannot be regarded 'more or less fully'; it cannot be qualified; there is no such thing as 'absoluteness'.

Can there be knowledge of a grammar (of suffering), of a structure (of vulnerability)? If so, is it available to articulation, can it be said, or is it an unbearable, unspeakable knowledge? Can it even be experienced as such, expressed, accounted for practically or theoretically?³¹

²⁹ Wilderson, *Red...*, p. 70.

³⁰ Jared Sexton, 'The Social Life...', p. 33.

³¹ Jared Sexton, 'The Social Life...', p. 30.

With every new question, the bar for an adequate ‘analysis of the paradigm’ is raised to an impossible standard. Sexton writes that Afro-pessimism is ‘less interested in pursuing the intramural conversation within its precincts than it is in revisiting the conditions of possibility for that conversation in the contemporary moment’.³² Yet that task is predicated on recognizing a position said to lie *absolutely* beyond the bounds of relation and communicability, a position to which Marxists, feminists, colonial subjects, not to mention those of us who may be somewhat less inclined to identify our own predicament, as bad as it may be, with that of slaves, are utterly unable to relate. The very possibility of that conversation happening is foreclosed at the outset.

To what extent can the cultural history of 19thC US and the sociology of slave societies serve as raw materials for a theory that purports to illuminate the present? If Hartman’s work highlights the problem of the archive (history), Wilderson reads this as a covert mediation on the problem of being (ontology). But how can one refuse to narrate the history and present black agency without enacting the very same extension of the master’s prerogative they set out to avoid? What are the methodological implications of this refusal?

It goes without saying that violence was, and continues to be, a crucial way of maintaining white supremacist capitalist patriarchy. In the aftermath of the Middle Passage, violence was cloaked and mediated by the variety of spectacular and quotidian cultural forms emerging in the context of US American capitalism. As Patterson notes, in the US case, complex relations of interdependency, resulting from low levels of manumission, obviated the need for repeating what Wilderson calls the ‘ontological first moment’. Wilderson’s claim that the ‘violence of the Middle Passage and Slave estate, technologies of accumulation and fungibility, recompose and reenact their horrors upon each succeeding generation of Blacks’³³ refuses to account for how and why violence takes new forms. Positing ‘gratuitous violence’ as a simple repetition of the same ‘point of paradigmatic origin’, imagining ‘its timelessness and its boundless cartography’, allows Wilderson to ignore both the convoluted trajectories of post-Emancipation racism’s institutional and quotidian forms and the expanding purview of African-American consciousness. In sum, the ‘impossibilities’ of 19th century slave culture, narrated and for the most part maintained in their ambivalence by

³² Ibid., p. 41.

³³ Frank B. Wilderson, *Red...* p. 55.

Hartman, leave Wilderson longing for a *pure* expression of black suffering, a language untainted by ‘white theorists and activists’ and their duped black allies.

Perhaps the ‘grammar of suffering’ that so eludes the afro-pessimists finds its expression in the very artifacts of black culture that they exclude from the outset? In the following section, I read the work of Fred Moten, whose series of retorts to afro-pessimism begins by assuming the *intrinsic value* of black culture, and the historic significance of what Cedric Robinson dubbed the ‘black radical tradition’. While I am more sympathetic to this project, I argue that Moten’s ontological turn simply inverts, rather than complicates, his interlocutors’ simplistic positions.

Optimism of the Intellect

Robinson’s *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* outlines ‘the nature of the black radical tradition’, in terms of its drive to preserve ‘the ontological totality’.³⁴ If ‘political ontology’ as discussed in the previous section presumes the impossibility of black culture, ‘ontological totality’ refers precisely to the culture of enslaved Africans in the US, a tradition of resistance that has been preserved and used as a bulwark against the encroachments of the dominant culture. Robinson’s book traces ‘the *continuing development* of a *collective consciousness* informed by historical struggles for liberation and motivated by the shared sense of obligation to preserve the collective being, the ontological totality’.³⁵ Though Robinson is more attentive to history and political economy, his investment in idealized ‘Africanity’ as the source of black cultural value recalls that of Gates, and the conservative turn in the 80s more generally. Robinson presents Africans and Europeans in the Americas as if they inhabited parallel worlds, arguing that it ‘was not, however, an understanding of the Europeans that preserved those Africans in the grasp of slavers, planters, merchants and colonizers. Rather, it was the ability to conserve their native consciousness of the world from alien intrusion, the ability to imaginatively re-create a precedent metaphysic while being subjected to enslavement, racial domination and repression’.³⁶ In other words, the black radical tradition is completely self-contained and self-sustaining. Whereas Wilderson’s slaves have no chance of becoming a collective Subject capable of creating a culture, Robinson’s displaced west Africans

³⁴ Cedric Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (Charlotte: University of North Carolina, 2003[1983]).

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 169-71. My emphasis.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 309.

have a culture that is deep, rich and totally impervious to outside forces- Christianity, Liberalism, Marxism, socialism and the many variants of what Robinson calls ‘white radicalism’. In the centuries since the slave trade began, the essential characteristics of blackness have been preserved. These include the ‘absence of mass violence’, violence ‘turned inward’ (i.e. martyrdom) and a penchant for ‘collective resistance’. Robinson’s brief outline of the ‘nature of the black radical tradition’ not only nearly naturalizes it as intrinsic to African consciousness, but runs into the same problems as Gates’s theory of signifying: namely, that when presented at this level of theoretical abstraction, it becomes hard to see how this ‘freedom drive’ could pertain only to African people, rather than characterizing all oppressed and desperate groups, especially those without easy access to military-grade weaponry.

Robinson’s idealism is a consistent presence in Fred Moten’s work, from his book *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* to a string of essays published over the last several years.³⁷ A short manifesto on black studies entitled ‘Black Op’ condenses some of Moten’s key concepts. Riffing on Robinson, Moten argues that the ‘object’ of black studies is ‘the critique of western Civilization’, and that the aim of black studies is ‘blackness’, or ‘the ontological totality and its preservation’, which Moten describes as an ‘open secret’.³⁸ This certainly contrasts with Robinson’s more hermetic portrayal. Moten stresses that exclusion has never been a property of blackness. ‘Everyone whom blackness claims, which is to say everyone, can claim blackness’.³⁹ And if the notion of the ‘preservation of tradition’ sounds rather conservative, Moten argues that the totality ‘persists only insofar as preservation is transformation’.

Black study thus deals with the relationship between its aim and object, between blackness and Western Civilization, or more precisely with the *concept* of blackness in western Civilization. Moten introduces ‘the “paraontological distinction” between blackness and the people (which is to say, more generally, the things) that are called black’.⁴⁰ In other words, black people are bracketed so that we can think through the concept of blackness. If previous iterations of black study have relied on the conceptual chauvinism of ‘authenticity, essence and experience’, this is because

³⁷ Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013); Fred Moten, ‘Knowledge of Freedom’, *CR: The New Centennial Review*, 4.2 (2004), pp. 269-310; Fred Moten, ‘The Case of Blackness’, *Criticism*, 50.2 (2008), pp. 177-218; Fred Moten, ‘Black Op’, *PMLA*, 123.5 (2008), pp. 1743-47.

³⁸ Fred Moten, ‘Black Op’, p. 1744.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 1746.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 1744.

'blackness's distinction from a specific set of things that are called black remains largely unthought'.⁴¹ In other words, the paraontological distinction puts a barrier between words and their material conditions, theorists and sociologists, freeing the former to reverse the valences of concepts and refine our rhetoric. For example, Moten's rigorous reconceptualization of home and homelessness allows us to see the first as a pernicious illusion and the second as the most radical mode of being in the world.⁴² Likewise, Moten wonders 'what it is to own one's dispossession, to mine what is held in having been possessed', and 'makes it more possible to embrace the underprivileged of being sentenced to the gift of constant escape'. Thinking blackness is no easy task: the black optimist must face a history of thought in which blackness has always figured negatively, and must continue to love thinking despite thinking's tendency to arrive at exclusive conclusions, or what Moten calls 'the antierotic power of summary judgment'.

In other words, we participate in black study not by mimicking the culture of the oppressor, but by fully inhabiting our status on the margin. Otherwise we reflect and reproduce the master's desire to possess power and to dominate. No wonder, then, that such a task demands 'metacritical optimism. Such optimism, black optimism, is bound up with what it is to claim blackness and the appositional, run-away phonoptic black operations- expressive of an autopoietic organization in which flight and inhabitation modify each other- that have been thrust upon it'. Rejecting chauvinistic conceptions of blackness seems to require accepting powerlessness, or recognizing the power that we always already have in spite of everything.

Much like the post-structuralists and afro-pessimists, Moten distances himself from the Marxist tradition. *In the Break* opens with a lengthy attack on Marx's failure to entertain Moten's conceit that 'objects', or commodities 'speak'.

The history of blackness is a testament to the fact that objects can and do resist. Blackness- the extended movement of a specific upheaval, an ongoing eruption that arranges every line- is a strain that pressures the assumption of the equivalence of personhood and subjectivity. While subjectivity is defined by the subject's possession of itself and its objects, it is troubled by a dispossessive force objects exert such that the subject seems to be possessed- infused, deformed-

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 1745.

⁴² Fred Moten, 'The Subprime and the Beautiful', *African Identities*, 11.2 (2013), p. 237-245.

by the object it possesses.⁴³

I say conceit because Moten's whole project, like that of the afro-pessimists, relies on an isomorphism that equates slaves with objects. In other words, Moten takes the masters' point of view, but instead of Wilderson's performative pessimism, he poetically pursues the implications the concept until its meaning is inverted. Moten refers to the famous opening chapter of *Capital*, where Marx, in an attempt to clarify how commodity fetishism mystifies value, imagines

If commodities could speak, they would say this: our use-value may interest men, but it does not belong to us as objects. What does belong to us as objects, however, is our *value*. Our own intercourse as commodities proves it. We relate to each other merely as exchange-values.⁴⁴

Moten draws two conclusions from this passage. First, Marx 'chafes at the notion that value is an inherent part of the object', and thus cannot think 'the possibility of an (exchange-)value that is *prior to exchange*'. For Moten it is this possibility, the capacity for exchange and 'for a literary, performative, phonographic disruption of the protocols of exchange',⁴⁵ that the speaking commodity (the slave) represents. And it is this possibility that Frederick Douglass anticipates in his *Narrative*, when he tells us how his Aunt Hester's screams of protest against physical abuse compelled him to rise up against his master.⁴⁶ Thus what is 'sounded through Douglass is a theory of value— an objective and objectional (sic), productive and reproductive ontology— whose primitive axiom is that commodities speak'.⁴⁷ Secondly, Moten concludes that

what is at stake is not *what* the commodity says but *that* the commodity says, or, more properly, that the commodity, in its inability to say, must be made to say. It is, more precisely, the idea of the commodity's speech that Marx critiques, and this is because he believes neither in the fact

⁴³ Fred Moten, *In the Break*, p. 1.

⁴⁴ Marx distinguishes between use-value, value, and exchange-value. Marx takes the *value* of commodities for granted, arguing that both the use and the price or exchange-value of commodities is entirely a result of social and historical processes. Karl Marx, *Capital Volume 1* (London: Penguin Books, 1990), p. 177.

⁴⁵ Fred Moten, *In the Break*, p. 10.

⁴⁶ Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Fredrick Douglass & Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, (New York: Random House, 2000).

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

nor the possibility of such speech.⁴⁸

This is akin to the critique of intellectual vanguards put forward by various French intellectuals in the wake of '68, which contributed, especially in US universities, to the postmodern populism of the 80s, which detected resistance in every popular cultural commodity. If Marx had listened, Moten implies, he might have empirically verified his early theories on human nature and the kind of subject that would result from the eradication of private property. But Marx was too bourgeois, too essentially European, to understand that 'the commodity whose speech sounds...embodies the critique of value, of private property, of the sign'.⁴⁹

There is a sliver of truth in the argument: despite his early and fervent support of abolition and his remarkably prescient analysis of the Civil War, Marx's main theoretical concerns were capital and wage labor, the ruling class and the proletariat, in the aftermath of the birth of European civil society. It would be naïve to suggest that we could rely solely on Marx for an analysis of US racism, the slave experience, let alone the black aesthetic. However, there are several problems with Moten's reading. These stem from his need to establish the priority of the concept, which is in keeping with his rejection of dialectical thought.

Crucially, Moten's misses the way Marx differentiates between use-value, exchange-value and value.⁵⁰ With that distinction in mind, the passage makes perfect sense, and indeed says the very thing Moten claims it doesn't: the 'intrinsic' value of objects is evident from the fact that they circulate, always have in all human societies and will continue to do so after the revolution. At the same time, value, no less than use-value and exchange-value, is an abstraction. Use and exchange values are socially constructed. Value is deeper and as such is harder to articulate, (it does not, as Marx says, 'stalk about with a label describing what it is'⁵¹)- this is because it is 'immanent' to social activity, 'proven' by the process of social-individual reproduction. Commodities, then, congeal all three aspects of value. In mistaking 'value' for 'exchange-value', Moten misses how Marx presumes

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 9.

⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 12.

⁵⁰ For Marx, then, value is immanent to labor. Put differently, value is 'intrinsic' not to the commodity (labor-power), but to labor as such. Commodities are abstract ensembles of value (socially necessary labor time), use-value, and exchange-value. Thus it is not commodities that speak, but laborers (subjects). It is not the object that shrieks, but Aunt Hester, undoing her objectification. If their speech is distorted it is precisely because of this conflation of labor and labor-power, of the laborer and her exploited capacities. See also David Harvey, *The Limits to Capital*, (London: Verso, 2006), pp. 14-38.

⁵¹ Karl Marx, *Capital*, p. 73.

exactly what he wishes- that the '(exchange)-value of the speaking commodity exists also, as it were, *before* to exchange'.⁵²

Moten wants to retain the notion of slaves as 'objects' because his main conceptual bugbear is the notion of the Subject, or the dominant understanding of subjectivity as 'self-possession' that has served as a 'primitive axiom' for western Civilization, and which rewards itself with the right to possess those who are perceived to lack it. In the manner of Foucault and Deleuze, Moten understands the subject as an irredeemable *effect* of the dominant power. Thus Marx's failure to hear the object's speech must result from his tacit commitment to the notion that speech is the exclusive property of subjects. Marx is but a star in 'the constellation of self-possession, capacity, subjectivity, and speech', whose light necessarily fails to register the slave's speech. Contrary to Marx, Moten 'starts with the historical reality of commodities who spoke- of laborers who were commodities before, as it were, the abstraction of labor power from their bodies and who continue to pass on this material heritage across the divide that separates slavery and "freedom"'.⁵³ But this 'historical reality' emerges only as a result of Moten's own collapsing of commodity and subject. For one might equally say that slaves did not speak *as* commodities or objects, but as commodified, objectified subjects. We might rather think of the object's speech is a testament to the presence of a subject- or whatever we want to call that which the system of white supremacist capitalist patriarchy refuses to recognize. Indeed, rather than 'objects can and do resist', I would prefer the more dialectical proposition, that we are all at once subjects and objects, and second that subjects can and do resist non-consensual objectification.

Moten and the afro-pessimists begin with the premise that slave = object. Where the afro-pessimists prefer to dwell in the purity of blackness as constitutive negativity, Moten attempts to understand that negativity in positive terms. Thus, the capacities of the (European) subject are matched and indeed undone by the capacities of the (black) object; the object 'always already' functions as a disruption of the subject's self-possession, interrupting its reflex for self-preservation. Like Wilderson's 'ontological first moment', Aunt Hester's scream serves as a 'paradigmatic point of origin' of the on-going political power of the black aesthetic, or 'what's at stake in the music: the universalization or socialization of the surplus, the generative force of a

⁵² Fred Moten, *In the Break*, p. 10.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

venerable phonic propulsion, the ontological and historical priority of resistance to power and objection to subjection, the old-new thing, the freedom drive that animates black performances'.⁵⁴

Like Robinson, Moten argues that Marx, and by extension Marxism, is ultimately too Marxist to mean anything to the black radical tradition. Like the previous thinkers, Moten all but naturalizes the propensity for 'theorising' and 'being' communist, and by implication theorising and being black(ness). In arguing that Marx was merely a theorist of communism and not himself a communist (like black-ness or black people?), Moten reinforces the barrier between classes, between theory and practice, bourgeois and (lumpen)proletariat, a move which shores up the continuity between all who would claim blackness, though the latter now resembles a shield rather than a weapon.

Marx liked to point out the incoherence of Proudhon's slogan 'property is theft!' - namely, that the notion of theft implies the existence of private property in the first place.⁵⁵ Proudhon's radicalism is caught within what Moten might call a certain propriety or notion of the proper. But rallying cries like 'the ontological and historical priority of resistance to power and objection to subjection'⁵⁶ are symptoms of a similar confusion. Resistance and objection do not happen in a vacuum. Why this need to weigh either side down with ontological and historical priority, as if the answer to the riddle of the chicken and the egg could be one or the other? Moten describes his work as 'an attempt to describe the material reproductivity of black performance and to claim for this reproductivity the status of an ontological condition'.⁵⁷ What exactly would this status achieve that would not simply redouble or redound into mere description, divorced from material conditions? What would we gain from understanding black performance as an abstract 'material reproductivity'? How is it distinct from the material reproductivity of non-black performance? Are such generalizations any more helpful than the afro-pessimist's declaration that there is 'no such thing as the fugitive slave', or are they simply the optimistic reversal of the latter?

Is it too late to claim blackness and Marxism together? Are the two perspectives simply incommensurable? It would mean rejecting Moten's idealism, which ends up in the same place as Robinson's ontological totality, sealed off from the non-black world. Yet if we are truly concerned

⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 12.

⁵⁵ Paul Thomas, *Karl Marx and the Anarchists* (New York: Routledge, 2012[1980]), pp. 210-232.

⁵⁶ Fred Moten, *In the Break*, p. 12.

⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 18

with the relationship between theory and society, culture and the people that produce it, then ontology, para- or otherwise, is not the way forward. Concepts can't be fully disentangled from the things, or people, to which they refer (nor, on the other hand, should they be permanently fixed to them). One answers the riddle not by thinking through the implications of 'egg-ness', but by referring to complex processes- natural history (evolution) for eggs and chickens, or social re/production (historical materialism) for human beings. Doing so would render the black history (a tangle of radical *and* conservative traditions) vulnerable to critique, would require us to take a position on, say, the 'blackness' of black nationalism, the cost of 'black capitalism', or the more recent intersections of black culture and neoliberalism, many of which crystallized in the figure of Barack Obama. From Moten's perspective, it would seem that reading blackness for all of its lived fissures and political fault lines, would be a capitulation to the discourse on 'black pathology', which is how he understands Fanon and his influence on the afro-pessimists. Criticism, in short, becomes a (European) luxury that blackness can never afford.

We need to understand how the dialectic, the logic of historical materialism, can serve as an antidote to the ontological need. Already in his early writings Marx had moved on from attempting to establish the 'priority' of anything (ontology as a philosophical, more precisely academic, discourse really emerges at the end of the 19th century). Marx presumes that value is *immanent* to the *process* of human reproduction. Value is coterminous with our on-going existence as a species. What appears to transcend that process, or better, what is imposed on that process, in the form of 'use-value' or 'exchange-value' of commodities, or some set of eternal social 'values' is 'always already' historical and contingent. History is all there is, and the future depends on what we do with it.

III. Historical Materialism & Black Culture

On the other hand, let us look at the question in its subjective aspect: only music can awaken the musical sense in man and the most beautiful music has no sense for the unmusical ear, because my object can only be the confirmation of one of my essential

powers, i.e. can only be for me in so far as my essential power exists for me as a subjective attribute (this is because the sense of an object for me extends only as far as my sense extends, only has sense for a sense that corresponds to that object). In the same way, and for the same reasons, the senses of social man are different from those of non-social man.

– Marx⁵⁸

In the previous part I surveyed and critiqued recent efforts to understand black culture. I argued that, despite manifestly opposing sensibilities, both black optimism and afro-pessimism eschew history in favor of ontological speculation. For the afro-pessimists, blackness is an object ‘always already’ barred from ‘Subjectivity’ and its correlate category ‘Human’, and therefore without culture. For the optimists, black culture is the product of objects whose intercourse is ‘always already’ prior to power and positively disruptive / generative / creative / progressive. Both ‘the Black’ and ‘blackness’ are rendered in monolithic, if discretely opposed, terms. And both tend toward a ‘theoreticism’ that subordinates politics and people to concepts.⁵⁹

I have suggested, then, that ontological speculation may be incommensurable with radical historical inquiry. While traditional historians might presuppose a static conception of human nature, identifying the rise and fall of civilizations with some fatal flaw or original sin, historical materialism recognizes the idea of the ‘human’ as both the *product* of a social system and the result of on-going struggle. Spivak has argued that Marx in his own way understood that meaning is generated out of relations of difference and discontinuity.⁶⁰ Hence, the futility of attempting to grant ‘priority’ to a single concept, or of grounding social or aesthetic systems in singular moments or events.

I should emphasize at this point that my criticisms of Wilderson and Moten are not intended to absolve the Marxian tradition of its many sins, nor to reinstate Marx as the only way of understanding culture and society. The same goes for the dialectic, which in Hegel’s hands turned out to be a *telos* that imagined Europe as the culmination of the history. However, in departing so

⁵⁸ Karl Marx, *Early Writings* (London: Penguin Books, 1992), p. 353.

⁵⁹ Robert Paul Resch, *Althusser and the Renewal of Marxist Social Theory* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), pp. 160-4.

⁶⁰ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, ‘Scattered Speculations on the Question of Value’, *Diacritics*, 15.4 (1985), pp 73-93.

decisively from Marx, the work I have been discussing (not unlike a another ‘radical’ tradition in the US), further obscures a long history of black intellectuals and artists for whom Marx’s insights were indispensable— from Du Bois and Robeson, from Archie Shepp to Huey P. Newton to Baraka, from Angela Davis to the authors of the Combahee River Collective Statement. I want to re-engage this legacy of what Stuart Hall called ‘open Marxism’, which includes Adorno and others associated with the Frankfurt Institute for Social Research, Frantz Fanon, C.L.R. James, Sylvia Wynter and Paul Gilroy, many of whom recognized the power of dialectical thought and accepted the basic terms of Marxism’s critique of capitalist society, yet supplemented this tradition with analyses of culture, racism and ideology.

In this section, then, I defend a historical materialism that can think the continuities of black culture in relation to internal and external discontinuities, as the result of on-going struggles to flourish in relation to a balance of forces within the culture industry, which itself shapes and is shaped by broader shifts in global capitalism. I understand black culture in the 20th century as fully imbricated with mass culture and technology during the era of ‘monopoly capitalism’ and well into its ‘post-industrial’ aftermath. To echo Hartman, our knowledge of the black aesthetic is heavily mediated by the dominant culture, especially during the pre- and inter-war period, when black musicians had little say in the way their music was produced (recorded), distributed and consumed, and even less room to express themselves or their sense of the world. In this sense, to rephrase Walter Benjamin: every record of black culture is at the same time a record of domination, exploitation and alienation. These records are themselves symptoms deeper social conflicts over modes of knowledge, expression and representation, waged at various points by class fractions inside and outside the imagined black community, with distinct and often contradictory interests.

What results is a story that is both familiar and rarely taken seriously by cultural studies scholars who, in Adorno’s aftermath, have indeed stressed the agency of cultural producers and consumers over and above the ways in which structural forces shape the production process. I don’t share Hartman’s resignation, not least because musicians, critics and journalists have long recognized those moments when the economic takes precedence over the aesthetic, i.e. the problem of ‘selling out’. There, however, the blame tends to land on individual artists for ‘appropriating’ or ‘being appropriated’ rather than seeing this as the inevitable result of

contradictions between capitalism and cultural production.⁶¹ What is at stake is the possibility of a non-reductive account of culture that can take the various moments of production seriously, while resisting the temptation to reduce the aesthetic to a mere reflection of class position.

The ‘base-superstructure’ model—simplified by Engels after Marx’s death, and subsequently refined into a blunt analytical instrument by the second generation of Marxist intellectuals—⁶² was the first to consider the ways material realities shape aesthetic forms. The ‘strong’ version of this theory misses how, in certain situations, the reverse could be true; that, as Karl Polanyi argued, capitalism might be considered a thoroughly ‘cultural’ phenomenon.⁶³ The question of the role of non-economic forces and relations of production, in particular the struggle between aesthetics, ideology and class-consciousness, was taken up by subsequent two generations of ‘western Marxists’, including Antonio Gramsci, Georg Lukacs, Ernst Bloch, Theodor Adorno, and Lucien Goldmann.⁶⁴

One criticism of this tradition that is particularly relevant and needs to be addressed is its so-called ‘productivism’. This tendency manifests itself across the political spectrum, in ways that bear directly on the cultural politics of music in the 20th century. Quite apart from capital’s reliance on what it valorizes as ‘productive’ labor in a given conjuncture (from manufacturing to services to finance capital), has been the left’s historic emphasis on the inherent dignity of work. This lies at the heart of the US labor movement’s fraught relationship with the decedents of slaves.⁶⁵ Some have argued that this was often underpinned by an ontological argument that human nature is essentially productive.⁶⁶ While such claims may be extracted from his early writings, Marx’s did not imagine utopia as a seamless concord between the dictatorship of the proletariat and its dutiful

⁶¹ Detailed accounts of the early formation of the music industry, which move beyond macro-economic indices (profits, mergers, etc), are few and far between. The *political* economy of the music industry is difficult if not impossible to account for, given corruption from the beginning.

⁶² *Marxism and Art*, ed. Maynard Solomon, (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1974); Perry Anderson, *In the Tracks of Historical Materialism*, (London: Verso, 1983); Lezsek Kolakowski, *Main Currents of Marxism*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981).

⁶³ Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of Our Time*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 2001); Fredric Jameson, *Valences of the Dialectic*, (London: Verso, 2011), pp. 6-8.

⁶⁴ Theodor Adorno et al, *Aesthetics and Politics* (London, Verso); Luckacs, *History and Class Consciousness* (Merlin,); Lucien Goldmann, *Cultural Creation*, trans. Bart Grahl (Saint Louis: Telos Press, 1976)

⁶⁵ cf. Paul Lafargue, *The Right to Be Lazy: Essays by Paul Lafargue*, (Oakland: AK Press, 2011) for an early critique of this tendency, by none other than Marx’s nephew; more recently, see Kathi Weekes, *The Problem With Work: Feminism, Marxism, Antiwork Politics and Postwork Imaginaries*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011).

⁶⁶ Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 2006)

citizens. Indeed the paradox of freedom— that it cannot be determined in advance without recourse to ‘obsolete verbal rubbish’,⁶⁷ a paradox that will return throughout this thesis— meant that Marx barely imagined utopia at all. Instead, real-world occasions such as the Paris Commune of 1871 served as inspiration and impetus for cautious speculation on what a world without private property might look like. The chapter on the working day in *Capital* should dispel any sense that Marx viewed endless ‘productivity’ as aim of revolution. At the same time, one could read Adorno’s fixation on production in the culture industry, according to which production for profit fully determines the way products are consumed, as a derivation of this tendency. The response, however, has been an equally extreme swing towards the productive agency of consumers, and more recently the ‘revolutionary’, ‘democratizing’ effects of digital means of distribution.⁶⁸

I am suggesting instead that we think each moment in the circuit of musical production together, as both necessarily related and ‘relatively autonomous’, affecting each other and at the same time developing according to their own logics. Mass-produced jazz did not make Duke Ellington, though he influenced, and was influenced by, that production process and its results. Such processes never come to an end, each of their moments is mediated by class and its various modalities, including ‘race’, gender, sexuality and so on. As Stuart Hall writes, ‘the historical fact of an almost continuous struggle over the culture of working people, the laboring classes and the poor must be the starting point of studying “popular culture”’.⁶⁹ Thus Marx’s conceptual point of departure— the production, distribution and consumption of commodities— is also our own. What does this entail?

First, it means wrestling with the abstractions taken for granted in such discussions, which often betray a latent philosophical idealism, which asserts the ‘identity of identity and non-identity’ (the ultimate sameness of what appear to be opposites). Marx argued that political economists routinely performed this conceptual sleight-of-hand, positing ‘immediate identities’ between production and consumption, such that each moment is figured as the equivalent of the other:

⁶⁷ Karl Marx, ‘Critique of the Gotha Programme’, in Marx, *Selected Writings*, ed. by David McLellan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 610-16.

⁶⁸ Walter Benjamin, ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproducibility’, in Benjamin, *Selected Writings: 1935-1938*, ed. by Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2006), pp. 101-33.

⁶⁹ Stuart Hall, ‘Notes on Deconstructing “The Popular”’, *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture* (Third Edition), ed. John Storey, (Harlow: Pearson Education Limited: 2006), p. 477.

production entails consuming raw materials, just as consumption has material consequences for production— thus both can be said to be ‘the same’.

$$P = C \text{ (immediate identity)}$$

This formula rather conveniently imputes a kind of natural symmetry to the market and the system as a whole. And while it may be ‘true’ at the level of concepts, material realities paint a different picture. This is akin with those projects that subsume the variety of art forms produced by non-white peoples under the head of ‘blackness’, as well as those that render black music as a sort of practical equivalent of Saussurean linguistics (signifying) or Derridean deconstruction (play, deferral). It also characterizes attempts to equate musicians their and audiences. In practice, these moments are structurally differentiated by all manner of spatial, temporal, ideological and cultural factors. We must recognize these differences without falling back on reductive binaries like ‘active’ and ‘passive’.

Second, it means going beyond functionalism, whereby relations of mutual dependence link production and consumption. In other words, the moments are related, and thus understood, through their differences. Levi-Strauss’s structural anthropology and Saussure’s linguistics exemplified this approach: the meaning of a practice or a word is precisely its difference from every other word, and thus depends on its location within the synchronic totality of the cultural-linguistic field.

$$P \leftrightarrow C \text{ (mediated identity, mutual dependence)}$$

This is also the logic of afro-pessimism, which asserts that ‘whites gain their coherence by knowing what they are not’. It may seem like a more dialectical option than the first, but it brackets the contingencies of history, and the multifarious ways that material conditions shape social meanings and identities in the present. If relations of immediate identity naturalize historically produced circumstances, relations of dependence, while registering domination and subordination, tend to be figured as fixed- within a scheme that rewards those doing the fixing.

My aim, then, is to conceive of the circuit of socio-cultural production dialectically: as a ‘richly differentiated totality’ of distinct processes related in *historical* time, whose shape at any given moment must be understood as the outcome of social struggles on numerous fronts, which themselves depend on a multiplicity of structural causes and social mediations. Thinking dialectically does not necessarily entail accepting Hegel’s Eurocentric philosophy of history. Nor does it give us permission to kick back while the ‘logic’ of capital unfolds and the system implodes under the weight of its own contradictions. On the contrary, it means recognizing how each stage in the process is riddled with contradiction and instability, and that these are precisely what keeps the circuit in motion:

P(C) ↔ C (P) (dialectical relation, ‘an internal connection between two sides, linked by the passage of forms, by real processes through historical time’.)

But this approach implies that, in Hall’s words, ‘production retains the upper hand’. ‘Production’, writes Hall, ‘forms the object, the mode and the need to consume’.⁷⁰ As noted above, insisting on the significance of production in this sense is *not* the same as arguing that mass-production eternally dupes consumers. It is, however, to recognize that capitalist societies are structured in ways that give those with the power to organize the production process the last (or first) word in shaping the kinds of things the rest of us produce and consume. But it also means that culture produced in circumstances of relative autonomy has power too. Hall continues:

Marx gives an ‘over-determinacy’ to production. But how does production determine? It determines the form of those combinations out of which complex unities are formed. It is the principle of the *formal* articulations of a mode... [which] specifies the system of differences, the points of conjuncture, between all the instances of the mode, including which level is, at any moment of a conjuncture, ‘in dominance’.⁷¹

⁷⁰ Ibid., p. 124.

⁷¹ Ibid., p. 128.

Historical materialism thus calls attention to its own formality because it remains speculative ‘so long as practice does not, dialectically, realize it, *make it true*’.⁷² In the same fashion, although production has the upper hand in the circuit, consumption ‘realizes’ the value it produces, and therefore retains the potential to, as it were, ‘falsify’ its dictates. Historical materialism leaves room for politics by insisting that theory alone cannot resolve the contradictions of capitalism, just as cultural production can never *fully* determine the parameters of consumption. This is indeed a reformulation of one of Marx’s central propositions, namely the ‘unity of theory and practice’.⁷³

At a higher level, modes of production form ‘discontinuous structural sets through which history articulates itself’.⁷⁴ The emphasis on discontinuity here is crucial: ‘sets’ do not follow logically from one to the next, nor, taken together, do they develop teleologically in one direction. Rather, each mode contains non-synchronous political, economic and cultural tendencies, whose relative positions can be understood by referring to previous modes. Thus, in what Hall calls a ‘double-fitting procedure’, two axes are established:



The vertical, ‘positional’ axis identifies relations of domination/subordination (and is the more obviously political index), either side of which may contain fractional forces pulling in many directions; the horizontal ‘diachronic string’ charts changes through time from ‘simple’ to more ‘developed’, and here the political valence cannot be determined without recourse to the specifics of the situation or conjuncture, whereupon the ‘simple’ may turn out to be more progressive or reactionary than the ‘complex’, or in other words, each reveals elements of the other that were not apparent when considered in isolation. Again, it is important to remember that material realities are not *reducible* to this formal axis, which is never more than an approximation of social forces, a gauge of tendencies rather than a typology of pre-defined, unchanging, or mutually dependent phenomena. In formal terms, the circuit of production looks like this:

⁷² Ibid., p. 132.

⁷³ Fredric Jameson, *Valences of the Dialectic* (London: Verso, 2011), pp. 10-11.

⁷⁴ Hall, ‘Marx’s Notes...’, p. 134.

Production (Distribution), [Exchange > Circulation], Consumption (= Totality)

We can therefore see how production touches every moment in the process: distribution, exchange, circulation and consumption are necessarily subordinate to its aims, which are themselves more or less vulnerable to competition with other sectors of the economy, and, most importantly, to social and political challenges.

In music, ‘production’ can refer to several distinct processes, from the creation of a piece of music, the recording process or the performance itself, to the professional role of the producer. Adorno’s observations from the late thirties still hold true: ‘the act of production of popular music can be called ‘industrial’ only in its promotion and distribution, whereas the act of producing a song-hit remains at the handicraft stage. The production of popular music is highly centralized in its economic organization, still individualistic in its social mode of production.’⁷⁵

We will pay close attention to the ways technology has impacted various aspects of musical production. At the outset, we can note three important breakthroughs in the recording medium—vinyl, tape and digital— that massively affected every stage in the circuit of production. The first of these modes is fully ‘analogue’; the second mixes residual, ‘developed’ forms from the first with ‘simpler’ forms of the emerging third; while the third is fully digital (and incorporates the previous two in virtual form). Like the musical modes, we can say that each mode of production contains elements of that which preceded it, but these congeal around a new center, or dominant.⁷⁶ A new mode simultaneously diminishes and augments the field of aesthetic possibilities: vinyl brings the possibility of recording, but jazz has to restrain its improvisatory bent in order to fit the record; tape allows multi-track overdubbing, but diminishes fidelity; digitization subsumes, simulates and cheapens everything, but in the process makes it (even more) impossible for musicians to profit from their work. While this refers to the cultural industry in particular, we can see how it roughly

⁷⁵ Adorno, *Current*, p. 286.

⁷⁶ One wonders if Hall’s abiding love for the music of Miles Davis predisposed him for grappling with the finer points of Marx’s method. Davis is renowned for many things, but perhaps most of all was his turn away from conventional jazz composition- improvising over brief, repeated sequences of chord progressions- and towards ‘modal’ composition. The result was a music that no longer revolved around a tonal center of gravity, but could instead convey radical paradigm shifts with just two chords (or no shifts at all).

coincides with three distinct moments of capital accumulation- monopoly, state-regulated, and 'late' or neoliberal. Likewise, our narrative pivots and peaks according to these shifts.

It is important to stress that incorporation into the circuit of production is not necessarily 'bad' for music. For example, early blues and jazz tunes were performed in public or festive settings, where the song, especially the improvised parts, could be extended according to the mood in the room, the players' whim, or whatever else might be happening in the moment. On early seven-inch vinyl records with low fidelity and just three minutes of recording time available per side, we hear something far less raucous and much more streamlined than the 'real thing'. And yet not only did jazz composers begin tailoring their works to take full advantage of the format, resulting in extremely dense, multi-layered bursts of mid-range rhythmic, harmonic and melodic syncopation, but the records themselves became an archive from which new players could learn and take inspiration like never before.

Understanding the circuit of cultural production is one thing, but what about the production of musical meaning? Why was African-American music so significant in the 20th century? If it is not reducible to its 'Africanity', neither is it simply a reflection of sales figures. Michael Denning's 'labor theory of culture' goes a long way towards explaining the social significance of certain musics without reducing the latter to manipulation from above or authentic, unmediated expression from below.⁷⁷ Surveying the trends in post-WWII cultural theory, Denning notes that while the cultural turn foregrounded Marx's dialectical analysis of commodity production and emphasized the complex entwinement of base and superstructure, what receded into the distance was any account of the labor process itself. This relates to Adorno's point above, and the extent to which the musician or songwriter still stands outside of the dynamic of capital and wage-labor. Drawing from Harry Braverman's *Labor and Monopoly Capital*, Denning reminds us that cultural production is work too. As in all forms of creative work, the crucial cleavage is that 'between conception and execution, between, to use a musical analogy, composition and performance'. Denning continues:

⁷⁷ Michael Denning, *Culture in the Age of Three Worlds*, (London: Verso, 2004), pp. 90-6; Harry Braverman, *Labor and Monopoly Capitalism: The Degradation of Work in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1998).

The fundamental aspect of human labor, Braverman argues, is that the unity of conception and execution can be broken in time, space, and motive force; it is this that produces human culture. One person can conceive and another can execute. This is both the power and tragedy of human labor. ... The unity and division between mental and manual labor is thus the starting point of any labor theory of culture.⁷⁸

‘How’, asks Denning, ‘do the rhythms of work become the rhythms of art?’ In Marx’s terms, this partly reflects the difference between ‘formal’ and ‘real subsumption’: the first refers to the early stages of the production process, when the aim is centralization, to bring, say, all of the local weavers or blacksmiths under one roof. Real subsumption occurs when the labor process, having now been surveilled for some time, is reorganized in order to maximize profit. To the extent that a blacksmith could perform all of the tasks necessary to produce his use-value, moving with ease from conception to execution, the capitalist was at his mercy. Real subsumption is the latter’s response to this situation. In other words, the process abstracts or formalizes what was previously ‘immanent’ (implicit or unarticulated) in the labor process, breaking it down into distinct phases or moments, which are then ‘valued’ at lower rates and redistributed in the form of lower wages to the workers. Once we understand cultural work as work, we can understand the dialectic of popular music in the 20th century as a struggle between skilled, non-alienated laborers and unskilled, alienating capitalists. From Mamie Smith to Grandmaster Flash, the victories of skilled independent cultural producers were invariably unforeseen by management, and often prompted massive restructuring of the industry. This is no doubt partly to do with the myth of the rugged individual on which capital relies, and whose unwitting avatars it lavishly rewards— but only partly. To reduce it to this is to overlook the invariably collective character of musical work.

Here, albeit in rough outline, is a way of understanding the culture industry that forgoes either celebrating or denouncing the individuals caught up in the process. Denning’s argument allows us to circumvent the more familiar, reductive accounts that figure such moments as mere reflexes from ‘below’, a pale imitation or naive reproduction of the bourgeois cult of individual genius; symptoms of mass inability to resist art’s auratic power; their displaced need for an author, an authority, a charismatic leader, or their nostalgia for origins, if not for private property itself. To

⁷⁸ Denning, *Culture...*, p. 92.

be sure, the phenomenon cannot be fully disentangled from these tendencies. At the same time, it should not be taken as permission to reduce the complex terrain of struggle to some pure opposition between underground and mainstream, according to which the former will be judged authentic inasmuch as it struggles to distance itself from the systems and spaces of the latter, whose corrupting influence is inevitable. Instead, that conflict is the motive force behind cultural production itself.

III. The Aesthetics of Black Music in the 20th Century

Historical materialism is no analytical panacea. In the few instances that Marxists have taken the problems of art and aesthetics seriously, they have struggled to move beyond the stale presupposition that art reflects class interests, or in its own vocabulary, base (economics) determines superstructure (ideology), or in terms of the previous section, that consumption is wholly determined by production.⁷⁹ As such, the only art worthy of consideration is that which reflects the interests of the proletariat.⁸⁰ As Pierre Bourdieu's work demonstrated, there is an undeniable link between class position and aesthetic preference: classical music tends to be consumed and reproduced by middle and upper-class audiences, popular music by the proletariat and so on.⁸¹ At best, this kind of analysis troubles the claim that certain kinds of art are universally appealing, as well as its postmodern corollary, that taste is an entirely private, subjective matter and, as such, warrants no further discussion. At worst, however, it reifies the very relations it maps out, because it avoids the problem of how specific forms often do appeal to audiences who do not share a class position with those who created them.

Finally, I want to briefly summarize two recent efforts to understand African-American music from the perspective of political economy and historical materialism perspective, which will

⁷⁹ Jacques Attali has inverted this thesis, ascribing a kind of prophetic power to music. While tantalizing, the argument operates at such an abstract level that African-American music is mentioned only in passing. Jacques Attali, *Noise: The Political Economy of Music* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1985), p. 103.

⁸⁰ Marx himself was no stranger to aesthetics, having spent much his undergraduate years as an aspiring poet and novelist. A recent biography notes that "...throughout his life Marx held poets to a different social standard. His daughter Eleanor said Marx called poets "queer fish who must be allowed to go their own ways. They should not be assessed by the measure of ordinary or even extraordinary men". *Love and Capital: Karl and Jenny Marx and the Birth of a Revolution* (London: Little, Brown and Company, 2011), p. 55.

⁸¹ Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1979).

inform the rest of this thesis. One sees the inherent power of black music as an *effect* of its origins in the context of the United States' burgeoning capitalist economy, where it functioned as an inalienable, ineradicable form of 'property' for those who were themselves classed as property. The other isolates 'groove' as the source of its enduring capacity for an aesthetic critique of capitalism. In a recent essay, Ronald Radano notes how previous scholarship has tended to eschew the relation between slave music and political economy.

Whether by situating Negro music as an isolatable, autonomous form existing within the commonsense realities of southern white knowledge, or by claiming for it an ontological separability inextricably linked to a precarious black personhood of broad historical endurance, contemporary scholarship on slave musicality has ironically downplayed its anomalous social and economic character, thereby obscuring a radicalism arising from within the very structures of slave capitalism. This inner radicalism related directly to the economic logic of slave labor, being part and parcel of a value in which exchange identified only one aspect of its complex constitution?⁸²

Instead of flattening black music with the weight of cultural context, or hypostasizing it with the jargon of ontology, Radano maintains its historic specificity by showing how it functioned in the context of capitalist social relations. He argues that, prior to Emancipation, African-American music functioned as 'a peculiar and disruptive labor form'. Slave singing was integral to the labor process: many masters would allow coordinated, collective singing because it just made everything more efficient. Yet there was always something different about this music, just as there was always something different about the people performing it. This difference had to be maintained by the dominant order, so repeated the lie that African-Americans, being closer to nature, were naturally musical. And yet this very process reinforced the music's anomalous and ultimately radical status as a form of labor. As Radano argues, the music's 'uncanny properties of embodiment were the result of its early public formation under slavery- when 'Negro music' assumed a social category whose performance-based inventions ultimately confronted and collided with its own classification as a property of labor'. Because it was so emphatically *theirs*, that is, the property of those were barred

⁸² Roland Radano, 'Black Music and the Animated Properties of Slave Sound', *boundary 2*, 43.1 (2016), pp. 173-208.

from owning property, it was by definition the sound of opposition to existing social relations. In other words, under racial slavery and capitalism, 'Negro music', as a 'quality of black labor', is a contradiction in terms, a contradiction that 'marked the invention of a property-form and economic value existing within and against antebellum market exchange'.⁸³

Radano stresses that black music's uncanny power had everything to do with its entwinement in contemporary capitalist social relations, rather than vestigial connection to an African homeland. 'In these circumstances of work— of slaves performing not only as laborers, but also as *labor as such*— the dominant forms of capitalism's oppression most conspicuously exposed their weakness'.⁸⁴ Thus the related cultural form of blackface minstrelsy can be understood 'in this early period not only as an act of expropriation but also of reclamation, whereby whites sought to reclaim what they saw as an illicit property lost in the sounding bodies of African Americans'.⁸⁵ We might say, then, that Negro music *mimicked*, and made a *mockery* of, white ownership, the on-going scandal of slavery, to which whites eventually responded with their own forms of mimicry. As we will see, this dialectic of humanization and dehumanization, intimately connected to the capitalist mode of production, continued to pervade US culture in the 20th century.

The concept of mimesis can help us understand how black music remained such a powerful force throughout the 20th century, both in the US and around the world. The concept crops up in many of the aforementioned works in relation to African-American music, but rarely gets sustained theoretical attention. In the pioneering 1935 essay 'Characteristics of Negro Expression', Zora Neale Hurston writes that, 'The Negro, the world over, is famous as a mimic. But this in no way damages his standing as an original. Mimicry is an art in itself. ... Moreover, the contention that the Negro imitates from a feeling of inferiority is incorrect. He mimics for the love of it'.⁸⁶ In this thesis, mimesis will serve as a dialectical counterpart to our emphasis on history. As such, it runs the risk of implying some kind of universal characteristic or feature of the 'human'. So be it. This seems to me unavoidable when it comes to music. If historical materialism primarily deals with class conflict in the context of cultural production, then mimesis attempts to grapple with the content of musical aesthetics on a deeper level. On the one hand, a modern process or

⁸³ Radano, p. 178.

⁸⁴ Ibid., p. 204.

⁸⁵ Ibid., p. 206.

⁸⁶ Hurston, 'Characteristics,' p. 298.

system that reinforces domination, exploitation and alienation; on the other, a ancient process that brings and binds people together, and has done for all of recorded history.

According to Stephen Halliwell, the earliest evidence suggests that mimesis designated ‘at least five categories of phenomena’:

first, visual resemblance (including figurative works of art); second, behavioral emulation/imitation; third, impersonation, including dramatic enactment; fourth, vocal or musical production of significant or expressive gestures of sound; fifth, metaphysical conformity, as in the Pythagorean belief, reported by Aristotle, that the material world is a mimesis of the immaterial domain of numbers.⁸⁷

What unites all of these ‘is an idea of correspondence or equivalence- correspondence between mimetic works, activities, or performances and their putative real-world equivalents, whether the latter are taken to be externally given and independent or only hypothetically projectable from the mimetic works themselves’.⁸⁸ Importantly, Halliwell leaves out the word ‘representation’, which, along with the pejorative connotations of the word ‘imitation’ (‘a limited exercise in copying, superficial replication, or counterfeiting of an externally “given” model’),⁸⁹ obscures the original, far more expansive meaning of the term. If re-presenting makes one form stand in for another (text for sounds, images for objects), fixing it in time so that you may apprehend it ‘now,’ mimesis is more an act of *re-presencing*, conjuring the presence of an object existing in time. Egbert J. Bakker argues that mimesis ‘is what people do, not what things are. Thus mimesis originally does not denote a relation between a text (as in a finished product) and its referent, but between an action... and its model’.⁹⁰ We might say, then, that representations presuppose (and reproduce) fixed essences, and more broadly the illusion of permanence, whereas mimetic acts participate in fluidity and ultimate ephemerality of things. Writing and visual art may defer the ultimate consequence of time, death, indefinitely; drama and music happen in time (and require writing to live beyond the

⁸⁷ Stephen Halliwell, *The Aesthetics of Mimesis: Ancient Texts and Modern Problems*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), p. 15.

⁸⁸ Ibid., p. 15.

⁸⁹ Ibid., p. 14.

⁹⁰ Egbert J. Bakker, ‘Mimesis as Performance: Rereading Auerbach’s First Chapter’, *Poetics Today*, 20.1 (1999), 11-26 (p. 16).

mimetic moment). The Greeks used a separate term, *mousike*, to signify poetry (i.e. lyric or epic singing), music and dance at once, and this is perhaps ‘the closest term in Greek to our (polymorphous) “culture”’.⁹¹ Both mimesis and *mousike*, then, give us a sense of the general importance of *performance* in early Greek culture.

As Bonds argues, the Greek tradition (Orpheus, Pythagoras, Plato) is characterized by an essentially instrumental understanding of the way music could ‘change human behavior’.⁹² Music quelled profound anxieties: the Orphic lyric tradition assuaged fear of death, through both the catharsis of collective lamentation and the doctrine of the afterlife; Pythagorean harmonic theory set out to prove there was an underlying order to the cosmos, that one could arrange one’s life in a manner that mirrored the harmony of the spheres. As Hardie argues, the mimetic arts of music and poetry were an extension of the initiation experience, rather than ‘a purely figurative analogue of that experience’.⁹³ In other words, they were the objects of knowledge, not representations or imperfect copies of knowledge. In the transition from the archaic to the classical period, which saw text overtake speech as the means of communication and knowledge production, the mimetic arts become a political problem. This problem ran deeper than Plato’s much remarked distaste for certain musical modes. The deeper conflict between mimesis and writing, as distinct forms of knowledge, is one that persists to this day.

Music’s primary difference from other art forms, discursive and mimetic, is the medium through which it is perceived. Dance, painting, writing, et al rely on our active sense of sight, while music acts on the somewhat more passive sense of hearing. We choose where and when to look and if we look away or close our eyes, the specific object of our gaze is no longer available to our senses. Listening is a far more unwieldy process. Sound waves penetrate our entire body, no matter how hard we might try to stop up the primary channels, our ears. We grace particular objects with our vision, see things happening from our particular point of view. Sound, on the contrary, is something that happens *to* us, over which we have far less control. Likewise, music is a time-based medium. To be perceived it must be performed. As such it reveals something about how its practitioners, and the culture that has produced them, experience time.

⁹¹ Penelope Murray and Peter Wilson, *Music and the Muses: The Culture of Mousike in the Classical Athenian City* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 2.

⁹² Mark Evan Bonds, *Absolute Music: The History of an Idea*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), p. 36.

⁹³ Alex Hardie, ‘Muses and Mysteries’, in Murray and Wilson, *Music...*, p. 37.

A recent attempt to theorize 20th century music and its relation to time from an historical materialist perspective is Mark Abel's *Groove: An Aesthetic of Measured Time*.⁹⁴ We will take up Abel's thesis more thoroughly in Chapter 6. Here I want to introduce his definition. Abel isolates groove as 20th century popular music's distinguishing feature, emanating precisely from the crucible of black America and the time-discipline of racial capitalism. Groove mimics and deforms clock time: its essential elements are strict adherence to a pulse, or constant tempo; syncopation (anticipation and polyrhythm); 'multileveled meter', where one perceives several different interlocking time signatures layered vertically upon each other; and a strong back beat, which serves to bring the previous elements together and without which the groove would unravel.

Drawing from Adorno's scattered comments on mimesis, Abel summarizes:

Mimesis is the element of art inherited from myth; it has its origins in the traditional functions of art in magic, in ritual and religious ceremony, before art achieved its autonomy. To behave mimetically is to 'make oneself like' an aspect of the world, to adapt oneself to one's environment as a means of defense against it. Mimesis is a practice which follows the 'logic of the object' and in the process of reflecting it, one criticizes it, frees oneself from its domination.⁹⁵

Like singing slaves, groove is a way of inhabiting the time of capitalism ironically, as it were: it is not the sound of capitulation, but the very semblance of freedom within the system. Groove is the affective counterpart to slave lyric, which were often steeped in code in order to avoid punishment from overseers. Groove music has the capacity to deform and expropriate time itself, the lifeblood of capital. Later on, groove becomes a tool in a larger social experiment. It creates a safe space in which subjects are free to renounce, refuse and resist our all-too-human tendency to make concrete, particular claims of belonging. Because music undoes the pieties of nation, 'race', family, sex and self, its felt affect is the opposite of estrangement. But the familiarity it evinces is nothing you can point to, because it's like nothing else in experience. 'What, then, is time?', wondered St Augustine, 'If no one ask of me, I know; if I wish to explain to him who asks, I know not'.⁹⁶ From both a performer's and a listener's perspective, whether she is playing, dancing alone or with others,

⁹⁴ Mark Abel, *Groove: An Aesthetic of Measured Time* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2015).

⁹⁵ Abel, *Groove*, p. 166.

⁹⁶ Augustine of Hippo, *Confessiones* lib xi, cap xiv, sec 17 (ca. 400 CE)

singing along or silently contemplating, musicking involves concretely *feeling* one's relation to these abstractions- rhythm, harmony, melody, noise, but most fundamentally, to time. These function as a kind of general currency, the discrete opposite of money-time: immediately binding rather than recursively alienating.

Conclusion

I have outlined three historical materialist perspectives on the origins and on-going power of African-American music. My own argument, as it emerges in the chapters that follow, incorporates and extends these, and unsurprisingly runs against the grain of much of the scholarship on African-American music and cultural studies in music discussed in the first two parts of this chapter. I will suggest that the moment of musical mimesis (groovy performance) is one in which the contingency of identity is revealed and revealed in. This is one of many 'truths' afforded by music, a lesson we learn from countless musicians. To discover or ascribe particular identities, colors or otherwise to music is precisely to miss the point- an attempt to arrest or fix that moment which runs counter to the truth of time's fluidity (and death's inevitability!) that music reveals. The relation between African-American people and groove is contingent, an effect of having been forced to live for so long according to the strictures of measured, clock time and rationalized, ever more 'efficient' labor processes. The culture industry disciplines music precisely by packaging it as a lifestyle accessory for particular groups; scholarship echoes this tendency by claiming it as the property of particular groups, or reducing it to a performance of identity. This is certainly one side or aspect of it, but as I hope to show in the following, this music was so much more at the same time.

2

Ex-Colored Men: Du Bois, Johnson and Class

Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past. The tradition of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living. And just as they seem to be occupied with revolutionizing themselves and things, creating something that did not exist before, precisely in such epochs of revolutionary crisis they anxiously conjure up the spirits of the past to their service, borrowing from them names, battle slogans, and costumes in order to present this new scene in world history in time-honored disguise and borrowed language. [...] In like manner, the beginner who has learned a new language always translates it back into his mother tongue, but he assimilates the spirit of the new language and expresses himself freely in it only when he moves in it without recalling the old and when he forgets his native tongue.

– Karl Marx

There was always a border beyond which the Negro could not go, whether musically or socially. There was always a possible limitation to any dilution or excession of cultural or spiritual references. The Negro could not ever become white and that was his strength; at some point, always, he could not participate in the dominant tenor of the white man's culture. It was at this juncture that he had to make use of other resources, whether African, subcultural, or hermetic. And it was this boundary, this no man's land, that provided the logic and beauty of his music.

– Leroi Jones

Slaves sing most when they are most unhappy.

– Fredrick Douglass

Introduction

In this chapter I explore the relationship between music and work in the period just prior to the advent of the commercial recording, from the perspectives of activist Fredrick Douglass, academic W.E.B. Du Bois, and artist James Weldon Johnson. While these figures are not reducible to these occupations (each could indeed be said to have been all three at once) I think it is not too controversial to suggest that the motivating force in Douglass's life, and where his impact was felt most, was in his activism; for Du Bois, scholarship; for Johnson, the arts. Douglass's reflections on the power of slave music set it squarely in the context of work, and against the literary tradition as such. Du Bois's early writing on culture and music reveals the extent to which he was shaped by his liberal humanist education and his relative distance from black vernacular culture.⁹⁷ Du Bois moved, in other words, from 'high' to 'low' culture. Likewise, Johnson's fictional *Autobiography of an Ex-coloured man* grapples with class and cultural prejudice, from the perspective of its bohemian protagonist. In each case, mimesis emerges as a problematic without a name, vaguely apprehended in the music, which expresses the difference between the material lives of black intellectuals and the people they claim to represent.

As we saw in the preceding chapter, abstract conceptions of blackness tend either to dismiss the vernacular as a site of cultural production, avoiding the inconvenient truths of unwieldy cultural transmission (miscegenation) and systemic degradation (capitalism), the impossibility of origins and the inescapability of work; or to idealize it, mystifying the long history of conflict within the imagined black community. Both of these positions refuse to think African-American culture in relation to labor, in spite of the many black intellectuals who did just that. Three decades after the publication of *Souls...* Du Bois himself placed the black worker at the center of his analysis. This resulted in the monumental *Black Reconstruction in American 1860-1880*, which marks a decisive shift

⁹⁷ W.E.B Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Dover, 1994[1903]).

in his approach to the ‘problem of the color line’ and remains the precedent for thinking through the conceptual paradox at the heart of the black experience after Emancipation: how the *enslaved* person became an *agent* through work.⁹⁸ Du Bois was surely tipping his hat to Hegel’s famous master-slave dialectic, part of the intellectual air he breathed as a graduate student in Berlin. But Du Bois, like Marx, saw how the process was rooted in concrete history that was still unfolding. He writes,

Black labor became the foundation stone not only of the Southern social structure, but of Northern manufacture and commerce, of the English factory system, of European commerce, of buying and selling on a worldwide scale; new cities were built on the results of black labor, and a new labor problem, involving all white labor, arose both in Europe and America.⁹⁹

Figuring African-Americans as workers, whose participation in a ‘general strike’ hastened the Civil War, Du Bois implies that the transition from slave to United States citizen, from unfree labor to wage-labor, while revolutionary, was not necessarily emancipatory. If slaves are completely subject to dictates of their masters, the emancipated join the ranks of those exploited and alienated by the wage-labor system.

It is not hard to imagine how rapidly abolitionist sentiments would have permeated the plantations as signs of the dominant order’s demise became more evident. Yet we must also account for the relative inertia of the previous decades, and we can do so in a materialist way, without reducing it to a mere shift in ‘consciousness’ among the slaves or their ‘allies’ in the sphere of politics. From the moment they arrived, Africans were forced to choose between two ways of living, which could result in different kinds of work. A life imitating their white masters could be exchanged for the small comforts of his house, while life-threatening danger was the price paid for the relative autonomy of working in the field. Thus arose a conflict, famously popularized in Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, between the so-called ‘house negro’ and the ‘field negro’, a primal encounter with the terrifyingly efficient and entirely modern schema of domination, exploitation and production, in which either choice was less a matter of calculation than one of sheer survival.

⁹⁸ W.E.B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America* (New York: The Free Press, 1998[1935]).

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

The psychological and social divisions (re)produced by these forced choices did much to determine the form and content of black culture, particularly music. In his autobiography, Fredrick Douglass surveys the psycho-geography of his former master's plantation:

Few privileges were esteemed higher, for the slaves of the out-farms, than that of being selected to do errands at the Great House Farm. It was associated in their minds with greatness. [...] They regarded it as evidence of great confidence reposed in them by their overseers; and it was on this account, as well as a constant desire to be out of the field from under the driver's lash, that they esteemed it a high privilege, one worth careful living for.¹⁰⁰

Douglass's observations orient us in plantation-space, but also in the *long-duree* of US slavery. What had begun for many as a survival strategy had, by Douglass's day, congealed into an ideology that mystified the atrocity of enslavement with notions of the inherent 'greatness' and 'privilege' of the working in the master's domain, implicitly denigrating the work of those outside it. In recalling this deeply ambivalent image of 'peculiarly enthusiastic' slaves making their way to the Great House Farm, the nerve center of the plantation, Douglass adds:

While on their way, they would make the dense old woods, for miles around, reverberate with their wild songs, revealing at once the highest joy and the deepest sadness. They would compose and sing as they went along, consulting neither time nor tune. The thought that came up, came out- if not in word, in the sound- and as frequently in the one as in the other.¹⁰¹

Douglass's articulation of this inchoate, ambivalent language with the daily grind of labor and the social relations of the plantation suggests that the reality of captivity was reflected in forms and techniques that have come to be recognized as essential elements of African-American music, namely: blurred boundaries between words, sounds and meaning, a tendency toward improvisation, and a unique relationship to measured time. Noting how 'they would sometimes sing the most pathetic sentiment in the most rapturous tone, and the most rapturous sentiment in the most

¹⁰⁰ Douglass, *Narrative*, p. 26.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., pp. 26-7.

pathetic tone’,¹⁰² Douglass attacks the dominant view that slave singing was a sure sign of a simple people, carefree by nature and contented with their predicament. On the contrary, ‘The songs of the slave represent the sorrows of his heart and he is relieved by them, only as an aching heart is relieved by tears’.¹⁰³

I. From Purity to Protest: Western Music in the 19th Century

At the time of Douglass’s writing, the narrow idea that music’s job was to represent the Ideal or the Beautiful was being challenged by a new generation of European composers inspired by Beethoven, particularly Richard Wagner, for whom music was the key to reconciling alienated subjects with the objective fact of oppression. In music, he wrote, ‘without any go-between we understand the cry for help, the wail, the shout of joy, and straightaway the answer in its own tongue. If the scream, the moan, the murmured happiness in our own mouth is the most direct utterance of the will’s emotion, so when brought to us by the ear we understand it past denial as utterance of the same emotion’.¹⁰⁴ Wagner rejected contemplative attitudes towards music: the immediacy of musical perception meant that it could be a tool for revolution, a music of protest that would enervate listeners to overthrow the existing state of things. But the European tradition had long been beholden to the stave, through which its highly trained composers strained for a sort of abstract Cartesian sublime. Wagner’s sophisticated compositions may have expressed something about the man and the life he lived (a committed anarchist, debtor in exile, very possibly queer), but the music was just one element in his *gesamtkunstwerk*, which were also steeped in tradition, folktales, myths and religious history of Europe.

African-American music, on the other hand, developed without a theory, out of lived contradictions— between subjective freedom and objective unfreedom, between conflicting desires for change and security, between the strict rhythms of work, the rituals of the church, and the more distant realms of bourgeois business and decadence, each moment haunted by the prospect of violence, spectacular and mundane.

¹⁰² Ibid., p. 28.

¹⁰³ Ibid., p.

¹⁰⁴ See Richard Wagner, ‘Beethoven’, in *Music and Modernism*, ed. by Daniel Albright (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2003), pp. 255-259.

Distant and distinct as they may seem, music in both cases serves a function similar to that which Fredric Jameson attributes to the novel: what appears as a resolution to social contradictions, despite or in lieu of actual political solutions, conceals a 'political unconscious'.¹⁰⁵ Jameson deals primarily with literature, but also regards film, painting and architecture along these lines. With music, however, the distinction between appearance and essence is more difficult to elicit. For the psychoanalytic and linguistic perspectives on which Jameson draws, words are not only the pathway to the unconscious, but constitute it. Music, however, seems to issue more directly from the source (perhaps it is no coincidence that while Lacan, Foucault and the rest could expound on any number of subjects, music mostly escaped them). That source, however, is a welter of contradictory drives, impulses, emotions, which words serve to sort into deceptively clear and distinct ideas. Frederick Douglass and his contemporaries were all too familiar with the fact that words, governed by reason, could be twisted into logically sound justifications for slavery. Indeed, the meaning or effect of these songs was no less apparent to Douglass for all their visceral ambivalence. He thus speaks directly to the pre-linguistic epistemological power of slave music: 'I have sometimes thought that the mere hearing of those songs would do more to impress some minds with the horrible character of slavery, than the reading of whole volumes of philosophy on the subject could do'. As someone who experienced the materially empowering and spiritually uplifting effects of literacy, Douglass's suggestion that 'merely hearing' the songs could do more to combat slavery than reading the latest arguments against it is startling. His own movement from the killing fields to the great houses of radical abolitionists depended on his hard-won literacy, stolen in brief, fitful moments of respite and patiently accumulated over several years. Still skeptical of the very faculty to which he was indebted for his freedom, perhaps Douglass heard something of his own double bind echoing through his remembered music.

Douglass suggests that understanding the meaning of slave songs depends on whether one is inside or outside 'the circle' (suggesting both the literal ring shout and the figurative inner circle), places where theory and reflection, when they are not being violently repressed, are exchanged for compensatory ecstasy.

¹⁰⁵ Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981).

I did not, when a slave, understand the deep meaning of those rude and apparently incoherent songs. I was myself within the circle; so that I neither saw nor heard as those without might see and hear. They told a tale of woe which was then altogether beyond my feeble comprehension; they were tones loud, long and deep; they breathed the prayer and complaint of souls boiling over with the bitterest anguish. Every tone was a testimony against slavery, and a prayer to God for deliverance from chains.¹⁰⁶

Douglass's distance from slavery and his expanded political consciousness allows him to hear and understand the music in ways that he could not while enslaved. He leaves us with an intractable problem, which will crop up again and again in debates over African-American culture: namely, what is the relationship between political, critical or oppositional consciousness and the production of a potentially radical culture? For Douglass, slave music taps into deeply held reservations about the pre-eminence of reason, revealing the limits of words as weapons in the struggle to overcome inhumanity and extinguish the color line. We encounter a similar skepticism in the margins of Du Bois's early work.

II. Early Du Bois: Music, Fiction and Fatalism

Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folk* is often read as a strident manifesto about the importance of culture, a retort to the then-dominant pragmatism of Booker T. Washington, who argued that that pragmatic, industrial or vocational training, was the best possible course of study for African-Americans. Throughout the book, however, Du Bois's rhetoric oscillates between dense, literate rhapsodies for tolerance and equality, and steely recitations of facts and statistics relating to the African-American predicament. Like the existential conflict and cleavage between house and field, black writing is beset by this dichotomy from the very beginning: the desire to demonstrate one's propensity for art and thereby one's claim to humanity, and the need to plainly set the record straight, to thwart centuries of pseudo-science and pro-slavery propaganda. *Souls'* penultimate and sole fictional chapter, 'Of the Coming of John', suggests that despite his deep commitment to the liberal arts and 'high' culture, Du Bois was partly aware that even the most promising black students, those who might one day count themselves among the 'talented tenth', faced serious,

¹⁰⁶ Douglass, *Narrative*, p. 27.

perhaps insurmountable obstacles along the way. That this story is followed by an extended analysis of slave music and its ongoing development suggests that Du Bois regarded the latter, albeit with cautious optimism, as a source of hope and future possibility, in contrast to the cultural traditions that were very much part of his own upbringing.

The years Du Bois spent in Europe as a postdoctoral student from 1892-4, studying economics, sociology and history in Berlin, had both shattered his fixed view of white people and reinforced his admiration for ‘the best which has been thought and said’ in western culture.¹⁰⁷ During time off from his studies, Du Bois undertook a grand tour of sorts, spending time in Eisenach castle, birthplace of J.S. Bach and one of Richard Wagner’s favorite places to compose. As his biographer writes, in Germany ‘Du Bois felt exceptionally free... more liberated in these years than he would ever feel again’.¹⁰⁸ Published in 1903, *Souls...* bears the weight of feeling ‘in but not of’ the US, as well as the urgency of an author whose privileged position allowed him see beyond the constraints of his culture, travelling to places where the color line was less ferociously policed.

At the same time, the book’s tone is ominous, verging on apocalyptic, as if the turn of the century had led to a fork in the road, and the majority of Du Bois’s peers were already careening down the wrong path. Washington looms largest, but Du Bois checks the momentum of nationalism and socialism throughout, criticizing their worship of ‘the mass’ in the abstract, which comes at the expense of attention to ‘that higher individualism which the centres of culture protect’.¹⁰⁹ Du Bois takes the liberal humanism of the dominant culture at its word. The ‘function of the Negro college’ in the 20th century, then, would be to make good on its promise: to recognize the ‘human soul’ and re-affirm the task set down by the philosophers of classical times (‘to know itself’), the modern bourgeoisie (‘freedom for expansion and self-development’), and the contemporary ideals of the 19th ‘century of sympathy’ (‘love and hate and labor in its own way’). Another chapter ends with the utopian image of Du Bois surrounded by the souls of Great

¹⁰⁷ The phrase comes from Matthew Arnold’s classic statement, ‘Culture and Anarchy’ Stefan Collini (ed), *Culture and Anarchy and other writings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993) pp. 53-211.

¹⁰⁸ David Levering Lewis, *W. E. B. Du Bois, 1868-1919: Biography of a Race* (New York: Owl Books, 1993), p.132.

¹⁰⁹ Du Bois, *Souls...* p. 66.

Western Men, including Shakespeare, Balzac, Dumas, Aristotle and Aurelius, who 'come all graciously with no scorn nor condescension. So, wed with Truth, I dwell above the veil'.¹¹⁰

Yet despite this seemingly wholehearted investment in the idea of culture (or the culture of idealism) this is not the fate that awaits the young protagonist in 'Of the Coming of John'. The story follows a young John Jones on his journey from the fields of the rural South, to the Great Houses of Culture near and far, and back finally to the field from whence he came, where he realizes that his liberal education is no sufficient defense against the realities of US racism.

The story is written from the perspective of an unnamed lecturer at the fictional Wells Institute. John Jones arrives from Altamaha, Georgia, a small seaside town not dissimilar to Atlanta, where Du Bois had lived and taught for several years. Here whites, represented by the local 'Judge' and his son, also named John, live up on a hill while the blacks live closer to sea level. The town's geographic segregation is mirrored in the Manichean worldview of its older inhabitants: 'And yet it was singular that few thought of two Johns- for the black folk thought of one John, and he was black; and the white folk thought of another John, and he was white. And neither world thought the other world's thought, save with a vague unrest'.¹¹¹ If the Judge regards his son's move to Princeton as the most natural thing in the world, the possibility of Jones taking the same trajectory is met with 'vague unrest'- 'it will spoil him'. The prophecy is initially borne out: as the narrator recounts with exasperation John Jones's inability to internalize the codes and customs of university life. Jones was 'never on time' and 'perfectly awkward', 'loud and boisterous, always laughing and singing, and never able to work consecutively at anything. He did not know how to study; he had no idea of thoroughness, and with his tardiness, and appalling good humor, we were sore perplexed'.

Faced with an unruly representative of the people they proclaim to lift up, the talented tenth of the Wells Institute close ranks: for his 'last escapade', the details of which Du Bois leaves out, Jones is suspended. The narrator tells us that 'the first time life ever struck Jones as a really serious thing was when the Dean told him he must leave school'. Perhaps the undertone of steely condescension is a reminder that Du Bois had more in common with the narrator than the student. Raised in relative privilege and protected from the worst excesses of white supremacy, the narrator

¹¹⁰ Ibid., p. 67.

¹¹¹ Ibid., p. 143.

fails to consider the possibility that Jones' lack of discipline might issue not from a fixed, flippant disposition, but from a life lived in close proximity with those who could take it with impunity, that his 'appalling good humor' is precisely the kind of defensive *habitus* that would have been refined over years of fleeting but potentially life-threatening contact with white supremacy.

After a yearlong respite, about which we are told nothing, Jones returns to the Institute and dives head first into all things intellectual, catching

terrible colds lying on his back in the meadows of nights, trying to think out the solar system; he had grave doubts about the ethics of the Fall of Rome, and strongly suspected the Germans of being thieves and rascals, despite his text-books; he pondered long over every new Greek word, and wondered why this meant that and why it could n't [sic] mean something else, and how it felt to think all things Greek.¹¹²

We are left to presume that the pressures of the outside world forced Jones to become a model student. This partly explains why, after four years living the life of the mind, he is filled with a 'nameless dread' at the prospect of returning home to Altamaha, which he had always planned to do upon graduating.

Music offers Jones a way to postpone this eventuality. For not only has he mastered the classics of western history and literature, he has also become a competent singer. He accepts an offer to tour the country as a member of the Institute's prestigious vocal quartet. Once alone amidst New York City's rolling sea of conspicuous consumption, Jones sighs, 'This is the world'.¹¹³ Both enervated and exhausted by the ceaseless flow of strangers, dazzled by conspicuous displays of wealth, Jones abruptly decides to 'see where the world is going' and follows a young couple 'through the high portal of a great building'.¹¹⁴ Without hesitating, he spends the five dollars he had saved up on a ticket. Soon he is 'in dreamland', rapt by the ambient sensorium of the opera house, 'the delicate beauty of the hall, the faint perfume, the moving myriad of men, the rich clothing and the low hum of talking'.¹¹⁵ His reverie is enhanced by the staging of Wagner's 'fairy-tale opera' *Lohengrin*, whose enchanted surfaces conceal a more subversive subtext, one that could not have

¹¹² Ibid., p. 152.

¹¹³ Ibid., p. 145.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., p. 153.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., p. 154.

escaped the theorist of double consciousness.¹¹⁶ Yet Du Bois decides to focus on Jones's experience of Wagner's music rather than the libretto. Wagner's appearance is part of the larger theme running throughout the book, a leitmotiv that reveals Du Bois's own ambivalence about the idea of culture that he inherited, and that his future Negro college would strive to achieve.¹¹⁷

Perhaps this is Jones's first time in a space dedicated solely to indulging sensual pleasures- 'a world so different from his'.¹¹⁸ The worlds he had previously inhabited were related by a logic of sacrifice: from the unwritten, rarely spoken but always followed rules of engagement with white people at home to the repression of impulses and affects necessary for intellectual discipline, from the world he encountered while suspended from Wells to his task at that very moment as a representative of the Institute. In the opera house, Jones is afforded a fleeting respite from all this identity-work, from that sense of homelessness that first manifested alongside his thirst for knowledge.

Then the music starts: the opera's first bars, a delicately passage of sustained violin and wind instruments, playing a melody first in unison, then developing it into thickly woven harmonies, provoke the longing in Jones's heart 'to rise... out of the dirt and dust of that low life that held him prisoned and befouled'. The music quickly excavates a sense of shame that years of higher education did little to assuage. Jones feels his body 'all a-tune' and his thoughts follow suit, he is moved from romantic longing to righteous indignation- from a feeling of pure, ideal beauty to a cry of protest:

If he could only live up in the free air where birds sang and setting suns had no touch of blood!
Who called him to be the slave and butt of all? And if he had called, what right had he to call
when a world like this lay open before men?

¹¹⁶ For an analysis of the political attraction Wagner's libretto might have held for Du Bois, see Russell A. Berman, 'Du Bois and Wagner: Race, Nation, and Culture between the United States and Germany', 70.2 (1997), 123-135.

¹¹⁷ In 1903, Wagner's anti-Semitism was no secret. His views were defended by his epigones soon after his death in 1883. In the same decade, Bayreuth, a small town built by Wagner's most powerful devotee, King Ludwig II of Bavaria for the express purpose of staging his notoriously lengthy and logistically complicated operas, was fast becoming an important meeting place for belligerent nationalists and paranoid anti-Semites of all nations. The broad social strokes of *Das Rheingold* began to blend in with the realities of social Darwinism, scientific racism, and an increasingly disaster-prone monopoly capitalism.

¹¹⁸ Du Bois, *Souls...*, p. 146.

As the ‘infinite beauty of the wail’ swathes Jones’ body, he simultaneously experiences himself as a construct and understands the artifice, the historicity, of white superiority. Music dissolves the sediment of identity and the order of things is no longer ‘natural’. These are indeed not the kinds of lessons one would have learned from mastering the Classics, let alone the European canon, both of which operated with relatively fixed ideas of the good, the true and the beautiful (the texts of socialism having yet to be admitted). Meanwhile, even the most revolutionary Enlightenment texts are forever marred by the persistence of slavery in modernity. With music, sensibility displaces intellection as the primal origin of utopian desire: it works on the body, aims at the corporeal substrate, gets under the skin, and thus turns from a site of abjection and death instincts into a vital instrument of critique.¹¹⁹ This is a way in which, as in Douglass’s musings, aesthetics might precede epistemology.

And yet Jones could not be further from his people, from the of memory forests reverberating with slave music. As he feels ‘with music the movement of power within him’, Jones scans the audience and notes with astonishment that a few spectators were ‘listless and idle’. How could such music leave bourgeoisie audiences paralyzed with sentiment and yet catalyze Jones’s desire for freedom at the same time? He is overcome by acute homesickness. As a ‘soft sorrow’ creeps across the violins, he envisions ‘a far-off home- the great eyes of his sister, and the dark drawn face of his mother’.¹²⁰ Music moves Jones through gendered affects, appealing at once to his desire for heroic flight and maternal return, ‘his heart sank below the waters... only to be lifted aloft again with that last ethereal wail of the swan that quivered and faded away into the sky’. The spell is finally broken when Jones is shocked to discover his childhood friend, the Judge’s son, in the audience, his own past erupting into the present. Suddenly alert to the fact that he does not belong in this world, he flees, anxiously reprimanding himself as a ‘natural-born fool’.

When he returns to Altamaha, all the elements of that ‘low life’ from which the music had promised to deliver him stand out in high relief. He sees the place and the people as ‘dingy’, ‘gaudy and dirty’, ‘dilapidated’, ‘mud’, ‘sordid’ and ‘narrow’. In an ironic echo of the Judge’s ‘vague unrest’, the townspeople respond with justified bewilderment and cynicism. A homecoming ceremony is held at the church, the mood in sharp contrast to that of the opera house. Jones’s speech is

¹¹⁹ Or as Fanon would later plead ‘O my body, always make me a man who questions!’ Fanon, *Black Skin*, p. 206.

¹²⁰ Du Bois, *Souls...*, p. 154.

incoherent, exhorting the crowd with a mixture of Washingtonian uplift, secular condescension, and nebulous universalism, and is rightly met with the 'painful hush' of incomprehension. All those years spent refining soul and expanding sensibility, something crucial nevertheless had been left out, repressed or erased.

And at this point we notice a snag in the literary fabric. Who is telling the story? Du Bois's narrator may have met with Jones and heard about his tour one final time, but he cannot have been present at the events he now describes. Perhaps the slippage suggests Du Bois's own discomfort with the material, or indeed his early difficulty with fiction as such. Or perhaps it was a story heard so often during his years teaching in Atlanta that point of view ceases to matter; the sensitive teacher identifies with naïve student such that they are ultimately 'the same'. Of course, this is a fiction. Though he sympathized with it, Du Bois did not share Jones's experience. But Du Bois, like Jones, lacks a way of communicating across class boundaries. In the silent aftermath of Jones's signifying the church is soon filled with a 'low suppressed snarl', as 'an old bent man' mounts the pulpit with 'the intense rapt look of a religious fanatic'.¹²¹ The old man's performance whips the crowd into ecstatic frenzy, a 'wild shrieking arose from the corners where all the pent-up feeling of the hour gathered itself and rushed into the air'.

John never knew clearly what the old man said; he only felt himself held up to scorn and scathing denunciation for trampling on the true Religion, and he realized with amazement that all unknowingly he had put rough, rude hands on something this little world held sacred.

Once again, the irony is heavy: we might expect Jones to have a delicate touch after years of sophisticated intellectual labor, but his 'rough, rude' hands know not what they have done, while his ears, having readily received Wagner, cannot make out the old man's meaning. Afterwards the embarrassing spectacle, Jones's sister asks him if he is glad to have been educated, to which he responds, 'slowly but positively' in the affirmative.

Meanwhile, the Judge's son receives a warm welcome upon his return from Harvard. The two converge once again, but only in their disgust for their hometown, whose inertial pace pales in comparison to New York City's teeming phantasmagoria. 'In a willful mood', the Judge's son

¹²¹ Ibid., p. 148.

decides to assert his power over his black servant, who happens to be Jones' sister. As he approaches the scene of the rape, Jones says nothing, killing his childhood friend in one fell swoop. Jones walks 'dreamily' back to his house and announces his death sentence. He goes back to the scene of the crime and waits, casting his mind back 'to the gilded ceiling of that vast concert hall, and heard stealing toward him the faint music of the swan':

Hark! was it music, or the hurry and shouting of men? Yes, surely! Clear and high the faint sweet melody rose and fluttered like a living thing, so that the very earth trembled as with the tramp of horses and murmur of angry men.¹²²

As music and memory meld with murder, Jones hums a slightly modified line from *Lohengrin*, 'Joyfully lead, pass along to that place'.¹²³ Substituting 'joyfully' for the original 'faithfully', Jones dies affirming the painful truths of his secular education.

What did the Judge's son, exemplar of the Euro-American tradition, hear that night in the opera house? Presumably he underwent similar cultural training, yet unlike Jones, the Judge's son had some money to spare and knew what he was getting into. For him, music is sublime precisely in its purposelessness, profound in its detachment from society. Beyond good and evil, the fairy tale abstractly reflects and affirms the power of the dominant class. To the extent that it shocks, it serves as proof of their natural right to rule, to possess what social mores might forbid. Meanwhile, music functions pragmatically for Jones, investing him with purpose, with a will to rise above the circumstances into which he has been born. Yet it would seem that while Jones's education attuned him to the 'beauty of the wail', it dulled his sense for what Ralph Ellison would later call the 'lower frequencies' of black social life.

Souls...' brief foray into fiction suggests a truth whose expression in flat factual terms would undermine the aims of the book as a whole: in class society, investment in 'high' culture comes at the expense of any simple return home to its opposite. Indeed for an African-American, alienated social relations are only exacerbated: Jones becomes a stranger to his past and his present, and cannot imagine a future. As men of relative privilege who nevertheless opposed the dominant

¹²² Ibid., p. 152.

¹²³ Ibid., p. 153.

culture, Wagner and Du Bois were eager to prove their personal worth, and the worth of their radical ideas. Yet the will to rise contradicts the desire for equality, just as a desire for purity reproduces the distance between those high on the hill and those closer to the soil. John Jones lives and dies by this contradiction. The old adage that knowledge is power suddenly rings hollow; if power without knowledge regresses into barbarism, knowledge without power can be stamped out in an instant.

Sorrow Songs

In an oft-quoted passage from *Souls...*' final chapter, Du Bois turns historicism against itself, circling back two thousand years to expose the absurdity of its racial theories:

The silently growing assumption of this age is that the probation of races is past, and that the backward races of today are of proven inefficiency and not worth saving. Such an assumption is the arrogance of peoples irreverent towards Time and ignorant of the deeds of men. A thousand years ago such an assumption, easily possible, would have made it difficult for the Teuton to prove his right to life. Two thousand years ago such dogmatism, readily welcome, would have scouted the idea of blond races ever leading civilization.¹²⁴

Decades before Nazism it seems that Du Bois detected the seeds of fascism in the soil of a continent he otherwise remembered so fondly. But seeds are not to be condemned, nor simply conflated with their fruits. In the story, Wagner's music, perhaps in spite of itself, does not bolster, nor merely reflect the ideological context of its production, but transfigures John Jones in the moment of performance, so much so that the memory of fleeting happiness compels him to face his own murderers without fear.

There was a morbid truth to the Judge's prediction- education did indeed spoil John Jones, leaving him in a no man's land, flanked by a past to which he could not return, and a future that he could not inhabit. Thus long before his encounter with Marxist theory, Du Bois seems dimly aware that the forces of class and social position, forces that a well-rounded liberal education alone could scarcely overcome, compounded the color line. Jones's utter failure to uplift and inspire the same

¹²⁴ Ibid., p. 169.

kind of solidarity as the old-time religion tells us something about the limits of liberal humanism theretofore constituted and otherwise endorsed by Du Bois.

Yet by following the tragedy of John Jones with a genealogy of slave music, Du Bois suggests the Negro college might do well to seek out alternative historical routes, find other modes of communication to emulate. Paul Allen Anderson suggests that *Souls...*' final chapter 'appropriated the "sorrow songs"... as conceptual tools with which to burrow into the Southern past and the "soul of the black slave"'. The songs' symbolic power animated a usable past essential to his early vision of black liberation, a liberation that would include artistic self-possession as "co-workers in the kingdom of culture".¹²⁵ The songs constitute a non-verbal epistemology of black folk: they convey a sense of 'hope' 'faith' and 'justice', as well as a quality that we might ultimately want to recognize as truth. But how can we understand the truth of 'music far more ancient than words'?

Admitting his own lack of musicological expertise, Du Bois nevertheless professes to hear in these songs the 'articulate message of the slave to the world'. Echoing Douglass, he describes it as 'the music of an unhappy people... of the children of disappointment; [it tells] of death and suffering and unvoiced longing towards a truer world, of misty wanderings and hidden ways'.¹²⁶ As Anderson shows, Du Bois does not look to contemporary African-American musical forms (the various dances that were then migrating from fields and street corners to ballrooms and salons, the deeply curious admixture of times and places and feelings known as ragtime), but to this 'very particular genre of sacred folk music', which 'best provided anthems, at once elegiac and uplifting, for [his] largely secular vision of black nationalism'. These are the versions whose distinguishing cultural features had been so stripped away, whose syncretic allegorical details had melded into fixed and seemingly eternal archetypes, whose message had been distilled for centuries to its essence, the 'distinctly sorrowful' songs of slaves desiring freedom. Yet Anderson detects an implicit criticism of those 'genres of black sacred and secular music that did not approximate his ideals of elegant militance and 'masculine' emotional restraint'. That is to say, Du Bois's choice reveals a sensibility thus far constrained by class. Because this is operating at a non-linguistic level, a level beyond or prior to identity-formation, 'class' is meant here in a very material sense- not simply

¹²⁵ Ibid., p. 29; Paul Allen Anderson, *Deep River: Music and Memory in Harlem Renaissance Thought* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001), pp. 13-58.

¹²⁶ Ibid., p. 159.

the values and ideals of the bourgeoisie, but its *habitus*, its practical way of living, particularly its modes of aesthetic apprehension. After all, these were songs that already been mediated theoretically and performatively by the peculiarities of the western tradition: recorded and preserved through notation, recited with a dignified, respectful air by lone individuals or small choirs, with a strictness that was at odds with the collective ecstasies of the ring shout, the work song, and the camp meeting.

The sorrow songs carry a message of inevitable future redemption: a new day *will* dawn; we *will* reach the Promised Land. Du Bois's early work is marked by what we might call a more sophisticated version of this notion: the philosophy of history known as historicism, which narrates history as a neat sequence of events leading inexorably toward greater freedom and equality. We can see this when Du Bois sets the songs in a rough timeline: 'The first is African music, the second Afro-American, while the third is a blending of Negro music with the music heard in the foster land. The result is still distinctively Negro and the method of blending original, but the elements are both Negro and Caucasian', and suggests the possibility of a fourth development, 'where the songs of white American have been distinctively influenced by the slave songs or have incorporated whole phrases of Negro melody'.¹²⁷ Setting formally different musics in an evolving sequence exemplified 19th century historicist thought, a narrative gesture that, as we will see, would be repeated, revised and reinterpreted by black critics from Alain Locke to Ralph Ellison to Leroi Jones.

Sandra Adell argues that 'it is in this black peasantry, totally disenfranchised, that Du Bois believes the spirit of (Afro) American culture resides'. Indeed, the title of Du Bois's text itself 'remarks and reiterates the two concepts- soul and folk- that are central not only to Herder's aesthetics, but to that of Hegel as well'.¹²⁸ But despite most the book's tendency toward philosophical idealism and liberal humanism, the final two chapters plot a different path, one that hews more closely to the socialist-communist tradition, which invests its hope for revolution in those most oppressed and exploited by modernity rather than its victors. John Jones's inability to inspire solidarity thus reflects Du Bois's own limits at the time; the story seems to acknowledge the gap between the intellectual class and the masses, such that the message of the music seems

¹²⁷ Ibid., p. 159.

¹²⁸ Adell, *Double-Consciousness...*, p. 22-3.

‘naturally veiled and half articulate. Words and music have lost each other and new and cant phrases have displaced the older sentiment. ...often slight words and mere doggerel are joined to music of singular sweetness’.

Du Bois wants to show that the profundities of the classical (Germanic) tradition are met and perhaps exceeded by ‘heathen melodies’ and proverbial wisdom of the sorrow songs. From our point of view, Du Bois’s use of term like ‘savage’, ‘primitive’ seems as misguided as John Jones’s attempt to uplift the rural congregation. While the language may be dated, rather than dismiss ‘primitive’ poetry as a premature stage on the way to a truly great art, Du Bois demonstrates that the vernacular can stand toe-to-toe with the ‘best that has been thought and said’. The lyrics that he highlights are largely derivations of Old Testament tales, confirming and strengthening a long, covertly maintained bond between the Jewish and African Diasporas.

In the book’s final pages, Du Bois recasts a story from the New Testament, that of the Three Kings or Wise Men, who brought gifts to the new born Christ. This unusual event is a fitting choice, not least because the Kings are foreigners, arriving ‘from the East’, their identities and the significance of their gifts- gold, frankincense and myrrh- shrouded in mystery. Du Bois equates these gifts with those brought to America by black folk-

...a gift of story and song- soft, stirring melody in an ill-harmonized and unmelodious land; the gift of sweat and brawn to beat back the wilderness, conquer the soil, and lay the foundations of this vast economic empire two hundred years earlier than your weak hands could have done it; the third, a gift of the Spirit.¹²⁹

For Du Bois, *hope* is the broad structure of feeling or message captured and reproduced by the sorrow songs. He thus suggests that the music’s function is not to *enlighten*, understood here as intellectual event, but to soothe or *enliven* that which has been deadened by racial capitalism. That the spirit of sorrow could compel such reactions is in keeping with the paradox identified by Douglass, for hope springs as much from the songs of jubilation (in the midst of the world’s horrors), as it does from cries of protest (in opposition to them). In other words, the affirmative and negative aspects of the music are inextricable. Its effect has less to do with abstractions like

¹²⁹ Ibid., pp. 162-3.

‘raising consciousness’ and more with keeping the possibility of conscience alive in a world where success depends on how well you can ignore it. The sorrow songs’ profoundly modest purpose is nothing more or less than to ‘cheer the weary traveler’.

III. The Sellout

If the defining political moment of Douglass’s life was the abolition of slavery, Du Bois and James Weldon Johnson were children of Reconstruction, during which the work of former slaves was commodified as labor-power. James Weldon Johnson’s *Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man*, published anonymously in 1912, is clearly indebted to Du Bois’s text, as well as a confounding departure from it.¹³⁰ In confronting the problem of ‘passing’ for white, Johnson’s protagonist literalizes Du Bois’s notion of double-consciousness, declaring that ‘every coloured man, in proportion to his intellectuality, [has] a sort of dual personality; there is one phase of him which is disclosed only in the freemasonry of his own race’. Later, the ex-coloured man cites ‘that remarkable book by Dr. DuBois [sic], *The Souls of Black Folk*’.¹³¹ The story as a whole is like an extended riff on the latter’s final two chapters.

During the summer of his freshman year at Atlanta University, Johnson taught poor blacks in rural Georgia. Upon graduation, he toured New England with the Atlanta University Quartet. The similarities between John Jones and the ex-colored man end here however; reading the two together reveals something about the gap between middle and working class African-Americans, and the ways in which music, black or otherwise, figured in their lives. Indeed I want to emphasize that the story puts class on an equal footing with ‘race’, although this is much less apparent on the surface of the text. The narrator’s class awareness seems inchoate, in much the same way as Du Bois, for whom the issue required fiction’s distancing effect. For both John Jones and the Ex-Coloured Man, class is an overwhelming presence in daily life, they are able to experience and recognize differences between themselves and their others; yet it remains absent from consciousness as an active category.

Unlike John Jones, the Ex-Colored Man’s relatively comfortable upbringing has allowed him to navigate the white world with some success. Life with his mother is idyllic. She immerses

¹³⁰ James Weldon Johnson, *Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), pp. 21-22.

¹³¹ Ibid., p. 117.

her son in books and music lessons. The symbiosis of mother and music provided ‘the happiest hours of my childhood’.

Always on such evenings, when the music was over, my mother would sit with me in her arms for a very long time. She would hold me close, softly crooning some old melody without words, all the while gently stroking her face against my head; many and many a night I thus fell asleep.¹³²

The ideal image of the mother is only slightly tarnished after an incident at school— the interpolation via racist epithet that features in so many African-American biographies— reveals the extent to which she had withheld certain ugly truths about racism. In reflecting on his boyhood, the ex-coloured man often tells us where he stands vis-a-vis the ‘Negro problem’, and offers a lengthy analysis of the composition of ‘every Southern community’. He is far less likely, however, to elucidate and reflect on the ways in which his own class position has shaped his views. In other words, the value of the sundry privileges that accrue from having been raised ‘a perfect little aristocrat’ is presupposed. Here is a typically oblique passage:

I myself would not have so clearly understood this difference [from white children] had it not been for the presence of other coloured children at school; I had learned what their status was, and now I learned that theirs was mine. I had had no particular like or dislike for these black and brown boys and girls; in fact... they had occupied very little of my thought; but I do know that when the blow fell, I had a *very strong aversion* to being classed with them.¹³³

Instead of pausing to reflect on these feelings from the standpoint of adulthood, they serve as the justification for his relatively solitary adolescence. As the boy continues with music lessons, he discovers that he hates duets because his ‘ideas of interpretation were always too strongly individual’.¹³⁴ Later, reflecting on his ‘first sight of coloured people in large numbers’, he notes that

¹³² Ibid., p. 33.

¹³³ Ibid., p. 39.

¹³⁴ Ibid., p. 43.

their ‘unkempt appearance, the shambling, slouching gait and loud talk and laughter... aroused in me a feeling of almost repulsion’.¹³⁵

The Ex-Coloured Man learns about the world primarily through books: *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* ‘opened my eyes as to who and what I was and what my country considered me; in fact, it gave me my bearing’. When a black classmate delivers a rousing commencement speech, the narrator dreams like John Jones in the opera house:

I felt in me pride that I was coloured; and I began to form wild dreams of bringing glory and honour to the Negro race. For days I could talk of nothing else with my mother except my ambitions to be a great man, a great coloured man, to reflect credit on the race and gain fame for myself.¹³⁶

The motherless only child soon finds himself alone at the mercy of market forces, a challenge he meets with the zeal of Horatio Alger himself. The story now becomes a panorama of the US post-Reconstruction, whose action depends on the particular pre-war moment when jobs were so abundant in the cities that vast numbers of African-Americans migrated across the country. The Ex-Coloured Man holds down a series of odd jobs, and gives music lessons in his spare time. Just as he is about to settle down in Jacksonville, the factory where he works is shut down and he is once again on the move. He heads back to New York City, where he encounters ragtime for the first time and is shocked by the music’s combination of technical audacity and universal appeal.

One thing cannot be denied; it is music which possesses at least one strong element of greatness; it appeals universally; not only to the American, but the English, the French, and even the German people find delight in it. In fact there is not a corner in the civilized world in which it is not known, and this proves its originality; for if it were an imitation, the people of Europe, anyhow, would not have found it a novelty.¹³⁷

¹³⁵ Ibid., p. 57.

¹³⁶ Ibid., p. 51.

¹³⁷ Ibid., p. 81.

Prior to the advent of the record industry, black musicians were often hired to play elite private parties, where they would entertain for hours on end and were encouraged to show off their musical prowess through ‘jazzing’ classical and popular tunes for eager dancers. No mere coincidence, then, that this perfect little aristocrat’s wayward path leads him right into this situation. While playing piano at a night club he impresses a mysterious punter who invites him to ‘furnish the musical entertainment’ for a party at his house. Of his new audience, the Ex-Coloured Man observes:

These were people- they represented a large class- who were ever expecting to find happiness in novelty, each day restlessly exploring and exhausting every resource of this great city that might possibly furnish new sensation, or awaken fresh emotion, and who were always grateful to anyone who aided them in their quest.¹³⁸

These are the children of Wagner and Brahms, the early patrons and practitioners of modernism. In Du Bois’s story, the Judge’s son may have dabbled in music appreciation, following the flow of sophisticates into the cheap seats and whiling away the hours, leaving untouched and returning home unchanged. His barbaric final act marks him a representative of regression in spite of his brush with ‘high’ culture. The Ex-Coloured Man’s ‘millionaire friend’ is a far more peculiar, far more modern enigma.

...I often played for him alone at his apartments. At such times he was quite a puzzle to me until I became accustomed to his manners. He would sometimes sit for three or four hours hearing me play, his eyes almost closed, making scarcely a motion except to light a fresh cigarette, and never commenting one way or another on the music.¹³⁹

There is something Zen-like about the millionaire’s apparent indifference, for whom the music seems to answer needs both practical and mystical, providing visceral relief in the moment, while holding out the promise of long-lasting transformation. At the same time, the asymmetry of the relationship reappears in the stress of his silence and the strain of repetition:

¹³⁸ Ibid., pp. 90-1.

¹³⁹ Ibid., p. 91.

The man's powers of endurance in listening often exceeded mine in performing- yet I am not sure he that he was always listening. At times I became so oppressed with fatigue and sleepiness that it took almost superhuman effort to keep my fingers going; in fact, I believe I sometimes did so while dozing. During such moments this man sitting there so mysteriously silent, almost hid in a cloud of heavy-scented smoke, filled me with a sort of unearthly terror. He seemed to be some grim, mute, but relentless tyrant, possessing over me a supernatural power which he used to drive me on mercilessly to exhaustion.¹⁴⁰

The music thus hangs in the air as a fetish: the millionaire can at once appreciate its power and ignore the source straining to produce it, to keep feeding his seemingly endless appetite. He like most in his day has no language with which to understand or valorize the work of his piano player. But the Ex-Coloured Man hints at something much deeper than a lack of words— feelings of 'unearthly terror' and 'supernatural power' stem from the long history of alienation, the mystification of the oppressive means by which men make their millions, whose false presupposition of a subhuman the music amplifies.

But these feelings came very rarely, besides, he paid me so liberally I could forget much. There at length grew between us familiar and warm relationship, and I am sure he had a decided personal liking for me. On my part, I looked upon him at the time as about all a man could wish to be.

Like the slaves singing on their way to the Great House Farm, the perks of the job allow the Ex-Coloured Man to repress the 'unearthly terror' of the situation. The music forms an ambivalent bond between them. Over the course of more than a year in Europe, their affection for one another grows. "This man of the world, who grew weary of everything and was always searching for something new, appeared never to grow tired of my music; he seemed to take it as a drug".¹⁴¹

When he is not performing, the Ex-Coloured Man spends 'many evenings at the Opera', where the music is 'strangely reminiscent of my life in Connecticut'. One night, he recognizes his father in the audience, with a woman who must be his half-sister. The scene recalls that in Du

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 92.

¹⁴¹ Ibid., p. 97.

Bois's story, but Johnson's narrator does not linger over the consequences. His protagonist leaves immediately, drinks himself 'into a stupor', but is disappointed when soon afterwards his patron announces they will be leaving Paris for Berlin. Where John Jones was devastated, suddenly out of place, the Ex-Coloured Man's stoicism and his millionaire friend allows him to weather this setback with his ambitions intact.

In Berlin, the millionaire throws a party for 'artists, musicians, writers... and a count or two', intending to impress them with his piano player. The exchange that follows is an epiphany, a spark of unmediated cultural transmission: The Ex-Coloured Man plays an intricate rag, which provokes a 'big bespectacled bushy-headed man' to take over the piano.

He seated himself at the piano, and, taking the theme of my rag-time, played it through first in straight chords; then varied and developed it through every known musical form. I sat amazed. I had been turning classic music into rag-time, a comparatively easy task; and this man had taken ragtime and made it classic. The thought came across me like a flash—It can be done, why can't I do it? From that moment, my mind was made up. I clearly saw the way of carrying out the ambition I had formed when a boy.¹⁴²

The Ex-Coloured Man's reaction implies that his own method had been to merely mongrelize 'classic' music's pure forms with the contemporary rhythms of ragtime, while the bushy-headed man seemed to elevate ragtime to a more rarefied status. There is a sneaking irony here, which is only revealed when we learn the Ex-Coloured Man's dismal fate, his failure to carry out his ambitions. Despite his professed love for ragtime, his impulse to privilege classic music without question is a symptom of bourgeois aspiration to ascend the aristocracy and transcend class altogether. 'Classic' is not merely a synonym for 'great' here: classicizing ragtime would involve dressing it up in 'the time-honoured disguise and borrowed language' of the European tradition, weighing contemporary music down with *this* particular past's imagined aura, alienating it from its conditions of possibility in the present, until it becomes a mere reflection of the Ex-Coloured Man and the millionaire's existential situation.

¹⁴² Ibid., pp 102-3.

In this moment, though, he simply sounds like John Jones, a naïve idealist. When he reveals his plan to the millionaire he is shocked to receive a ‘tremendous flow of serious talk’, a heavy dose of realism regarding the plight of black composers and the future prospects of black music in the US. Doubtless he would forfeit all of the privileges he had accrued as a longtime member of the Great Houses of high culture.

What kind of a Negro would you make now, especially in the South? If you had remained there, or perhaps even in your club in New York, you might have succeeded very well; but now you would be miserable. I can imagine no more dissatisfied human being than an educated, cultured and refined coloured man in the United States.¹⁴³

The similarities with Du Bois’s story are clear. Though he sympathizes with the Negro’s plight, the millionaire sees no way out, as such problems are beyond the power of individuals to change (or perhaps beneath the interests of cultured individuals). Instead, he counsels his friend to embrace a hedonistic calculus— to ‘make yourself as happy as possible, and try to make those happy whose lives come in touch with yours...’.¹⁴⁴ Struck by the ‘absolute selfishness’ underlying this position, the narrator is compelled to reflect on his own motives:

[I] found that they, too, were largely mixed with selfishness. Was it more a desire to help those I considered my people, or more a desire to distinguish myself, which was leading me back to the United States? That is a question I have never definitively answered.¹⁴⁵

The two pivotal moments that bookend the narrator’s story are grounded in the sense of shame that arises from this unanswerable question, and which is inextricable from race and class. As we have seen, however, while the narrator has demonstrated his knowledge of the complexities of the ‘Negro question’, his sense of his class position and all that it entails is more inchoate. At the beginning of the story, after being robbed of his savings, and because he can’t bear to face the Dean penniless, he forfeits his place in college.

¹⁴³ Ibid., p 104.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 105.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 105.

Would it not place me in the position of an impostor or beggar? What right had I to worry these busy people with the results of my carelessness? If the money could not be recovered, and I doubted that it could, what good would it do to tell them about it? The shame and embarrassment which the whole situation gave me caused me to stop at the gate.¹⁴⁶

Perhaps this fateful moment is a plot contrivance— it certainly feels like an overreaction, considering the narrator's well-established love of learning and the obvious benefits of a college education— but perhaps Johnson also wants to suggest just how firmly bourgeois ideals like self-reliance and respectability had been impressed upon his protagonist as a child. It is this dimension of whiteness that time and again distorts the young adult's view of his less fortunate black comrades and ultimately leads him to trade music for an undisturbed life. The Ex-Coloured Man's project is finally thwarted when he witnesses the brutal murder of a black man at the hands of a white mob:

I walked a short distance away and sat down in order to clear my dazed mind. A great wave of humiliation and shame swept over me. Shame that I belonged to such a race that could be so dealt with; and shame for my country, that it, the great example of democracy to the world, should be the only civilised, if not the only state on earth, where a human being would be burned alive. My heart turned bitter within me.¹⁴⁷

This is the barrier that Leroi Jones refers to above, the ultimate instance and illustration of white supremacy that forced so many back upon themselves and what little they had, a moment of sheer disillusion and abandonment. For the Ex-Coloured Man, however, the barrier is not absolute.

All the while I understood that it was not discouragement or fear or search for a larger field of action and opportunity that was driving me out of the Negro race. I knew that it was shame, unbearable shame. Shame at being identified with a people that could with impunity be treated worse than animals.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 61.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., pp. 128-9.

Given state of African-American culture when this book published, the decision is symptomatic: between ragtime and emulations of European composers, beyond the salons and the concert hall, the space for black expression was non-existent. Harlem had yet to be reborn and the Cotton Club was still fifteen years away. Thus the Ex-Coloured man could not have considered his personal feelings as raw material for composition— he could not fathom singing his unhappiness. His attachment to black music is has always been one of Kantian disinterestedness— he neither desires the insight into the condition of blackness that it offers, nor does it elicit such desire. Fixed in his memory with the beautiful image of his mother, he has never experienced its other aspect, its dual function as means of expressive protest. Thus lacking an outlet, shame forces him to finally excise the blackness within him.

The murder is the moment author and narrator effectively part ways, and the deep irony of the story is laid bare. By telling the story of a man who did everything he could to avoid the spectacle of racist violence, Johnson himself invites his readers to confront the spectacle head on. By the final chapter, wherein the narrator recounts his life as a white man, we are presented with one sentimental cliché after another, as if in the wake of trauma, the narrator has decided to live like a character from the works of English literature he had revered as a child. He admits to having contracted ‘money fever’:

What an interesting and absorbing game is money making! After each deposit at my savings-bank [sic] I used to sit and figure out, all over again, my principal interest, and make calculations on what the increase would be in such and such time. Out of this I derived a great deal of pleasure. I denied myself as much as possible to swell my savings.¹⁴⁸

Having secured an income and accumulated savings, the ex-coloured man meets a high-society white woman, they fall in love and marry, he reveals the secret of his identity, society tears them apart, they are serendipitously reunited once more and live happily ever after. Over the course of his odyssey, only music seemed to light the narrator’s way home, to make all that had come before meaningful where it had previously seemed random, and promise a genuinely fulfilling future. It

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 132.

was a strange attractor, galvanizing idealists and soothing cynics, at once revealing the divisions between ‘races’ and dissolving them. Life as a white man, however, has changed all this-

My artistic temperament also underwent an awakening. I spent many hours at my piano, playing over old and new composers. I also wrote several little pieces in a more or less Chopinesque style, which I dedicated to her. And so the weeks and months went by.¹⁴⁹

As this rather modest ‘awakening’ makes clear, the artist’s social consciousness has been fully privatized, his great project now ‘a vanished dream, a dead ambition, a sacrificed talent...’. Though his powers of repression are evidently strong, he admits, in the book’s final line: ‘...I cannot repress the thought that, after all, I have chosen the lesser part, that I have sold my birthright for a mess of pottage’.¹⁵⁰

The ‘autobiography’ is best read as a bourgeois comedy of manners with tragic undertones, rather than social realism. To borrow Bergson’s definition of humour, despite the whirl of events around him, the protagonist never *really* changes. If African-African literary aesthetics would in the ensuing decades take an objectivist stance somewhere between Hurston’s anthropology and Wright’s sociology, nothing about Johnson’s book can be taken at face value. Neither an excavation of authentically African tropes, nor a coming-of-age saga expressing the truth about the African-American experience, it is barely autobiography. Though Johnson acknowledges a debt to Du Bois, the latter’s *gravitas* is undermined in the opening paragraph, where the author admits: ‘I think I find a sort of savage and diabolical desire to gather up all the little tragedies of my life, and turn them into a practical joke on society’.¹⁵¹ In the narrator’s frequent and assured analyses of black social classes, his speculations on the ‘Negro problem’, and indeed in his interest in the history and future of African-American music, Johnson satirizes social scientific pretension, introducing a psychological dimension that Du Bois’s book lacked. Ultimately, Johnson’s book suggests that double-consciousness in bourgeois society may just as soon cancel itself out (or, choose whiteness) as lead the way to new more humane futures.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 135.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 140.

¹⁵¹ Ibid., p. 29.

In the end, the Ex-Coloured Man chooses whiteness in exchange for the ambivalence of being black. His aristocratic cast of mind has forbidden him from feeling the deep connection between the horrors of racism and the beauty of Negro music. To recall Jones's argument, his light skin meant that he never encountered the absolute barrier that would have thrown him back upon himself, forced him to reflect and to make something virtuous out of bleak necessity, something that might one day overcome it.

Conclusion

We began this chapter with quotes from Karl Marx and Amiri Baraka (then Leroi Jones). If the first speaks in general terms about the dialectical relation between structure and agency, history and freedom, the second relates to the particular situation of African-Americans in the US. Douglass, Du Bois and Johnson each made history in adverse circumstances, to put it mildly. Yet the works here suggest a shared sense that the tools inherited from the dominant culture, with which they were inextricably bound— language, education, culture— were nevertheless limited in application. On the subject of African-American humanity, past, present and future, music seemed to capture and express something more powerful than speeches, statistics and philosophy about the humanity of African-Americans. For Du Bois, the sorrow songs beat a path between the extremes of European elitism and US pragmatism, 'pure' or absolute culture and no culture at all. Johnson's middle-class protagonist chooses the middle of the road and cannot shake the regret. From opposite ends of the class spectrum, both are caught between shame, rage and quiet desperation. As Baraka argues, the realisation of these limits has been the impetus for black creativity. But in the first decade of the 20th century, black creativity was still largely consigned to appear at the extremes of the socio-economic spectrum, on street corners and in clubs uptown, in ballrooms and salons downtown. All this would change in the aftermath of WWI. This is the subject of the next chapter.

3

'Race' Music: Avant-Garde and Culture Industry

Come, brother, come. Lets lift it;
Come now, hewit! roll away!
Shackles fall upon the Judgement Day
But lets not wait for it.

God's body's got a soul
Body's like to roll the soul
Cant blame God if we dont roll,
Come, brother, roll, roll!

- Jean Toomer.¹⁵²

Introduction

In this chapter I explore the relationship between 'black' and 'white' avant-gardes, just prior to the advent of the culture industry. Neither term refers to a monolithic social formation. The 'white' avant-garde was divided between those for whom recent European history had to be discarded like dead weight, in order to return to a golden age and secure a glorious future, and those for whom history was the key to understanding the present and building a better future. Likewise, black culture was divided between the 'affirmative character' of bourgeois cultural historiography, and an

¹⁵² "The Cotton Song", *Cane*, New Edition (W.W. Norton: London, 1994).

emergent, critical and unruly populism, concentrated in Harlem but present in most major cities, whose energies were harnessed by radio and the nascent recording industry.

The usual narratives of turn-of-the-century avant-gardes and modernism tend to define both as oppositional movements kicking against bourgeois norms, not least its philistinism, while at the same time keeping their distance from the crass materialism of culture industry. That said, neither the avant-garde nor modernism can be pinned down ideologically. Understood solely as aesthetic innovators, restlessly searching for new forms that would more accurately reflect the a contemporary world that was undergoing massive structural shifts, we can include figures of right- and left-wing political persuasions, Wyndham Lewis, Ezra Pound and Salvador Dali on the one hand, Bertolt Brecht, Diego Rivera and Jean-Paul Sartre on the other, and a whole lot more who, as the wars took their spiritual toll, straddled the fine line between pessimism and nihilism (The Bloomsbury Group, Samuel Beckett). But it's because of that starting point *within* the European bourgeoisie that African-American culture is either left out of the story, or cast as an instance of the 'popular' that was always already against 'elitist' modernism. This narrative relies on a facile conflation of modernity and modernism: if the movement out of feudal-monarchic society is inextricable from the Atlantic slave trade, then it follows that slaves and their descendants would at the very least have been reluctant participants (or 'conscripts' as David Scott calls them¹⁵³), if not outright antagonists, of something called modernity. And modernism can at the very least be understood as the critique of modernity, or more precisely, as an attempt to negate the forms of domination on which it has depended since its emergence. Modernism, as Jurgen Habermas once put it, reveals the extent to which modernity remains 'an incomplete project'.¹⁵⁴ Perhaps we can say that the popular modernism of the 20th century reveals the extent to which liberalism is a necessary but insufficient means of completing that project.

In the first part, I summarize a few archetypes of Euro-American modernism and suggest how they may or may not have resonated with African-American writers and musicians. Music's unique place in the west's pantheon of art, and in African-American culture, make it difficult to incorporate into general theories of the avant-garde or modernism, which have tended to focus on the visual, literary and plastic arts. Adorno's philosophy of 'new music', centering on composers

¹⁵³ David Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity* (Duke University Press: Durham, 2004).

¹⁵⁴ Jurgen Habermas, 'Modernity- An Incomplete Project', *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, ed. Hal Foster, (New York: The New Press, 2002), pp. 3-13.

Arnold Schoenberg and Igor Stravinsky, remains a paradigmatic case, placing the former in the context of an earlier German expressionism that pervaded all the arts, and the latter in line with an emergent, neo-conservative primitivism. But Adorno is also responsible for setting subsequent theorists of modernism along this Eurocentric path, which continues through Edgar Varese and makes slight inroads into the US through John Cage, but nevertheless terminates with either Pierre Boulez or Karlheinz Stockhausen. To be sure, I am arguing that the extent to which Euro-American modernists dissented from the dominant order, theories of avant-garde and modernism can be useful for understanding certain elements of African-American culture. But if the previous chapter focused on the aesthetic constraints of the black bourgeoisie, this chapter tracks the emergence of a vernacular counter-discourse or structure of feeling relating to the body. That this discourse was often articulated with racism, economic exploitation and political domination— that is to say, that it was appropriated by elites— doesn't mean we can simply ignore its significance as a social, often socially progressive, phenomenon. From the early twenties to the swing era to rock, rap and the rave generation, the 20th century was the era of moral panics, largely in response to the increasing presence of black culture within the mainstream. If at some deeper level the anxiety had to do with an incoherent stereotype of black sexuality, there was nevertheless something new and liberating about the way black music was produced, performed and received that seemed to be filling a void at the heart of US culture and society.

I. The Noise Vanguard

If music is playing with time, the reverse is true too: it is the time giving voice to itself, a period's proof of its emotional life, a part of its hopes and dreams that can't be captured by the other modes of abstraction. Because of their emphasis on shock, difference and the new, on transforming the very forms or frames of art in ways that would transform audiences at the same time, the art of the avant-garde and modernism is often associated with a discourse of utopia. Yet music is again strangely situated here. Douglass did not so much envision a future as imagine a moment, in which music acts as sufficient proof of black humanity and casts the racist demons from the white man's mind. Music projects Du Bois and Johnson's characters backward and forward, not into worlds,

but into moments, fleeting instants of feeling free from social constraint. Music in itself isn't utopian, it allows the utopian to come into being.

The difference is reflected in Fredric Jameson's ongoing theorization of the aesthetics of modernism and the avant-garde. Jameson distinguishes between utopian projects and utopian impulses. While the former encompasses the texts, constitutions and manifestos of European avant-gardes, the latter '[governs] everything future-oriented in life and culture; and [encompasses] everything from games to patent medicines, from myths to mass entertainment, from iconography to technology from architecture to eros, from tourism, jokes to the unconscious'.¹⁵⁵ Project and impulse both involve 'the desire for a different, better way of being'¹⁵⁶ in the world, but projects are the product of reason, impulses less rational, rooted in the body, to some degree out of our control. *The Souls of Black Folk* and *Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man* can be understood as manifestos. Each stands as a bold statement on the collective history and contemporary experience of African-Americans. Each creates a past and a future for black intellectuals, artists and (more or less tentatively) affirms the significance of black vernacular culture.

Organized vibrations can hasten the moment when 'the expression of the Utopian impulse has come as close to the surface of reality as it can without turning into a *conscious* Utopian project and passing over in to that other line of development we have called the Utopian program and Utopian realization'.¹⁵⁷ Once this threshold is crossed, however, once music is enlisted in the service of a conscious and articulate political project, once music *proscribes*, or specifies what it means, it becomes a place, rather than no place. In this way, music is a concrete demonstration of the paradox of freedom. For the emerging Italian avant-garde, that place looked more like the present than the future.

Italy was badly affected by the crash of 1873-9. When F.T. Marinetti, founder of Futurism, was born in 1876, the country was in crisis, with a majority illiterate population, mass unemployment, riots for bread and bloody military repression. Rapid industrial and agricultural transformation saw living standards plummet for some and skyrocket for others, polarizing rural

¹⁵⁵ Fredric Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions* (London: Verso, 2003), pp. 2-8.

¹⁵⁶ Ruth Levitas, *The Concept of Utopia* (Witney: Peter Lang Ltd, 2011), p. 209.

¹⁵⁷ Jameson, *Archaeologies...*, p. 8.

and urban populations, widening the cultural chasm between North and South, and contributing to unprecedented levels of transatlantic migration.¹⁵⁸

By the 1890s Europe was on the road to recovery, on the verge of what would be regarded in England as the Edwardian *belle époque*. But the fruits of this reconstruction were strange indeed: like its neighbors, Italy's imperialist ambitions were emboldened by the boom. As the century turned, its military forces played a crucial role in developing telegraphy, battleships, automobiles, and aeroplanes and in 1911 Italy's air force, in its continuing war with the Ottoman Empire, earned the distinction of being the first army to drop bombs from planes.¹⁵⁹ Two years earlier, on 15 October 1908, along a dirt road on the industrial outskirts of Milan, Marinetti lost control of his four-cylinder Fiat racer, crashed into a ditch, walked away with a few scratches and the inspiration to start a movement.

Italian Futurism, as Lawrence Rainey observes, catalyzed a 'new type of intellectual formation':

[A] small collectivity, buttressed by publicity and spectacle, that could produce cultural artefacts that spanned the spectrum of the arts and were constructed in accordance with a coherent body of theoretical precepts grounded not just in arbitrary aesthetic preferences, but a systematic reading of contemporary society.¹⁶⁰

The course of the world was increasingly determined by Britain's expanding Empire, whose control over both the material means of development and the flows of finance capital meant that those countries unwilling to borrow its money to buy its exports, while also exporting their share in primary goods like food, would be effectively left behind. Like many of its struggling colonies, Italy's fate was largely determined by the whims of Empire, now driven by a new generation of post-crash capitalists who invested heavily in large-scale machinery and rationalized the labor process accordingly. Rather than reject these tendencies, Marinetti wanted a piece of the action.

¹⁵⁸ See Adrian Lyttleton (ed), *Liberal and Fascist Italy: 1900-1945*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002); Mark I. Choate, 'From Territorial to Ethnographic Colonies and Back Again: The Politics of Italian Expansion, 1890-1912', in *Modern Italy*, 8.1(2003), p. 65.

¹⁵⁹ Ciro Peoletti, *A Military History of Italy*, (Westport, Praeger Security International: 2007), pp. 131-132.

¹⁶⁰ *Futurism: An Anthology*, ed. Lawrence Rainey, Christine Poggi and Laura Wittman (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), p. 1.

Futurist painting, poetry and music would ‘render the spirit of the masses, the grand industrial factories, trains, transatlantic steamers, battleships, automobiles and airplanes’.¹⁶¹

Luigi Russolo, author of a manifesto titled ‘The Art of Noises’, hoped for an expansion of aesthetic sensibility that would bring the body up to speed with its new environment. Life with machinery had acclimated the nerves to withstand random fluctuations in the pitch, amplitude and duration of ambient sound, to the extent that contemporary ears would soon be unmoved by more traditional instrumentation and ‘academic’ modes of expression. ‘Let us go’, he exhorted, ‘like futurists, into one of these hospitals for anemic sounds. There- the first beat brings to your ear the weariness of something heard before, and makes you anticipate the boredom of the beat that follows’.¹⁶² Instead, the music of the future will bring the dead labor of machinery to life, reviving humanity at the same time. ‘Our multiplied sensibility, having been conquered by futurist eyes, will finally have some futurist ears. Thus, the motors and machines of our industrial cities can one day be given pitches, so that every workshop will become an intoxicating orchestra of noises’.¹⁶³

The Futurists held *serates*, evening variety shows that featured their own painting, music, and readings of poetry. A Nietzschean inversion of the Wagnerian ‘art-work of the future’, utterly lacking in narrative resolution and utopian *telos*, tantrum as spectacle backed by the threat of real violence. An evening with the Futurists celebrated a future of endless industry, where men became one with machine in perfect, loveless harmony- ‘a vision of life grounded in eternal strife’. In the words of one historian, this was ‘active propaganda’ designed to browbeat audiences into accepting its place in the new industrial world order.

On 21 April, Luigi Russolo demonstrated his noise-intoners in front of a captive audience at the Teatro del Verme in Milan. Harking backward to a time before industrial production, these enormous boxes full of circular gears, levers and cranks and horns ‘like strange mutations of the ordinary phonograph’, they were the work of an artist as artisan. ‘Playing’ them involved instruments involved turning cranks, pressing buttons and pulling levers. (At a conference in 2014, I had a chance to see a performance featuring reconstructed versions, and they were indeed noisy.) And the prophecy was fulfilled- a riot ensued, setting the precedent for so many premieres of avant-garde music to come. At a review from a performance in London wrote,

¹⁶¹ Quoted in Rainey et al, *Futurism*, p. 84.

¹⁶² Ibid., p. 134.

¹⁶³ Ibid., p. 135.

It must have sounded magnificent to him for he beamed, but a little way back in the audience, all one could hear was the faintest of buzzes. At first the audience did not understand that this was the performance offered them in return for their hard-earned cash, but when they did there was one vast, deep and long sustained 'Boo!'"¹⁶⁴

That all but one of Russolo's noise-intoners were used as firewood by German soldiers fleeing Paris in world war two is one of the great ironies in the history of musical modernism. All that is left of the original material is a few blueprints, some scattered recordings from the early twenties, reviews of various performances, and seven bars of music. Russolo's ingenuity is obvious enough and he deserves credit for his wild idea. Nevertheless,

Fascism remains the wolf outside the door in this discussion. Even at a distance, it complicates any effort to recuperate Russolo's early work, because the same formalism that has allowed some musicians to claim Russolo as something like the Father of Noise Music is also the barricade that has kept the ugly politics of 1913 from contemporary consciousness.¹⁶⁵

In the early eighties, an Italian record label re-issued the original recordings, along with performances by Russolo's brother Antonia and various pieces composed by other Futurists. Listening to the pieces is rather anti-climactic. Based on the rhetoric of the manifestos, all exclamations and wide-eyed onomatopoeia, I expected to hear the clang and clamor of crumpling automobiles, blasting tanks and soaring fighter jets, whistling air raid sirens and locomotive chug. But for all of the futurist's ultra-violent rhetoric, the sounds produced here have a charming, pedantic calm, gently easing the listener into this new world. One is tempted to hear them as a kind of symptom, an unconscious attempt to control an unpredictable acoustic sensorium: the function of 'Crackle' is simply to focus ears that have forgotten how to hear, overstimulated and desensitized.

¹⁶⁴ Quoted in James Hayward's liner notes to *Musica Futurista: The Art of Noises* (Salon Records: 2004).

¹⁶⁵ Benjamin Lord, 'No Ghost Appears: Luciano Chessa's Reconstructions of the Futurist Intonarumori', <http://x-traonline.org/article/no-ghost-appears-luciano-chessas-reconstructions-of-the-futurist-intonarumori/>, [Accessed 25 October 2017]

When Russolo writes with characteristic bellicosity, ‘We must break out of this restricted circle of pure sounds and conquer the infinite variety of noise sounds’,¹⁶⁶ we see a contradiction that marks all early Futurist works: a fierce desire to flee the constraints of a provincial culture coupled with the fear of what lies beyond those boundaries— not to ‘explore’, but to *conquer*— to expand horizons and yet maintain full control over whatever one encounters on the other side, to break not into freedom but into new forms of domination.

The radical left was not music better in this regard. Lenin’s vexed response to a piano sonata by Beethoven captures the apparent incommensurability of music’s effects and the discipline required for revolutionary politics:

At Yekaterina Peshkova’s in Moscow one evening, listening to Isaiah Dobrovein playing Beethoven’s sonatas, Lenin said:

I don’t know of anything better than the *Appassionata*. I can listen to it every day. Amazing, superhuman music! I always think with a pride that may be naive: look what miracles people can perform!

And screwing up his eyes and chuckling he added without mirth:

But I can’t listen to music often, it affects my nerves, it makes me want to sweet nothings and pat the heads of people who, living in a filthy hell, can create such beauty. But today we mustn’t pat anyone on the head or we’ll get our hands bitten off: we’ve got to hit them on the heads, hit them without mercy, though in the ideal we are against doing any violence to people. Hm—hm it’s a hellishly difficult office!¹⁶⁷

If word and images are the raw material of propaganda, music works differently, it affects the nerves. Lenin thus affirms Fredrick Douglass’s question when he confesses that listening to the *Appassionata*— a typically Romantic sonata that oscillates between stately and volatile, spare melodies, cascading arpeggios and hypnotic reiterations of the main theme— literally transforms

¹⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 134.

¹⁶⁷ Lenin, quoted in Fredric Jameson, ‘Pleasure: A Political Issue’, in *The Ideologies of Theory* (London: Verso, 2008), p. 372.

him into a different kind of person, no longer cut out for the hard work of revolution. There are signs that Lenin's libido was elsewhere. As he poured over the finer propositions of Hegel's *Science of Logic* in Swiss exile one hundred years ago, Lenin could barely contain his passion. Hegel's abstruse elaboration of the problem of qualitative (as opposed to quantitative) change had clearly quickened his pulse, his passion spilling over into his marginal notes. In his notes on these notes, C.L.R. James writes,

I was particularly struck by this in Lenin. Hegel is very irritating. He sticks to method. He does not shout. But every single one of his transitions involves a leap. He talks very quietly about impulse, etc. But you can go on reading for a long time and not get the true significance of the leap. I did not emphasize it. He held on to it.¹⁶⁸

Lenin's philosophical views changed completely after his immersion in Hegel, from a crudely Manichean to the many-sided dialectic.¹⁶⁹ Perhaps Lenin found, in the movement of the dialectic, a suitable substitute for the music he could not permit himself even privately to enjoy. Hegel's account of contradiction, he wrote, is 'acute and correct. Every concrete thing, every concrete something, stands in multifarious and often contradictory relations to everything else, ergo *it is itself and some other*'.¹⁷⁰ In the movement, the music, of Hegel's dialectic, Lenin learns to affirm contradiction as a concrete aspect of lived experience.

II. The Jazz Vanguard

19th century realism professed to calmly document and describe in the manner of a scientist or psychologist, and in so doing claimed to represent universal themes or human constants. The avant-gardes responded by registering the shocks of modernization and its transformative potential, which stemmed variously from sudden contact with masses of strangers in commodified urban space (Baudelaire); an unfamiliar and often incendiary use of language (the poetry of Constructivism, Futurism and Dada); an unforeseen juxtaposition of images (Surrealism); or a

¹⁶⁸ C.L.R. James, *Notes on Dialectics: Hegel, Marx, Lenin* (London: Allison & Busby, 1980) .

¹⁶⁹ Kevin B. Anderson, 'Lenin's Encounter with Hegel After Eighty Years: A critical assessment', *Science and Society*, 59.3 (1995), pp. 298-319.

¹⁷⁰ Quoted in Kevin B. Anderson, *Lenin, Hegel, and Western Marxism: A Critical Study* (Illinois: University of Illinois, 1995), p. 45.

dramatic reveal of the means of production (Brecht). Unlike painting, literature and poetry, ‘realism’ is hard to apply to music unless we want to say that music’s raw material is emotion, and that modernism in music amounts to increased accuracy in the composition of emotions. But anguish can be expressed tonally and atonally, in symphony and blues. So that narrative is too simple. Indeed the breaks in music are less dramatic than in the other arts: the transitions from Romanticism into late Romanticism into French Impressionism and German Expressionism, tend to be fairly smooth, say, the shattering of realism into impressionism, cubism and surrealism, the urinal and the readymade. The most dramatic musical breaks in the early decades— an embrace of noise, the first electronic instruments and synthesizers, and the voice of Afro-America— were stalled by limited technological and social development, themselves determined by war and economic crises.

Music stands out of the usual ‘shock’ narrative for further reasons that are particular to the medium itself: its accessibility relative to writing and the visual arts, its archaic roots, and the relative continuity of the human impulses it makes manifest, stemming from somewhere between body and mind, the objective world and the experience of subjectivity. As Michael Chanan and Christopher Small have shown in great detail, the professionalization of music is a recent phenomenon.¹⁷¹ The sharp separation between musicians and non-musicians, and the whole range of professionals and amateurs in between, began with the codification of music in the 12th century, further rationalization in the modern period, and institutionalization thereafter.

For most of human existence, there was little differentiation between performers and listeners. Music, with its close ties to religion, provided a participatory, ecstatic experience that warded off the fear and pain of death (lament), reinforced the identity of the collective (by dissolving the identity of the individual). This is the sense in which Stravinsky’s shock, unlike that of, say, poetry, cinema and painting, was that of the new and the ‘primitive’ at once. Artists and critical theorists have tended to associate the shocks provoked by modernity with heightened critical capacities— shock as an essentially demystifying, enlightening event— whether or not this is true, I would argue that music produces a qualitatively different effect, one that is more akin to hypnosis. This is partly the result of the difference between eye and ear: eyes blink, administering

¹⁷¹ Christopher Small, *Music of the Common Tongue* (London: Calder Publications, 1994); Michael Chanan, *Musica Practica: The Social Practice of Western Music from Gregorian Chant to Postmodernism* (London: Verso, 1994).

necessary ‘shocks’ to the continuity of sight, which we can control. If John Cage taught us anything, it’s that there’s no such thing as silence. We can never turn hearing off completely. Music engages and cultivates our sense of continuity with nature. Music has the capacity to shock, but the shocks are relative to the dominant, hypnotic affect. To be ‘shocked’ by a piece of music is to have stopped listening, to have decided that it is not music, not worthy of your attention. It’s the return of the ego. A canonical example like Stravinsky’s *Rite of Spring* can attest to this: the first polymetric outbursts can only be understood in relation to its hypnotic introduction, which lulls the listener with its pastoral, impressionistic interplay of wind and brass. Meanwhile, the whole composition is tethered to Nijinsky’s ballet, which harks back to folk rituals in which these mimetic arts were used to induce collective states of ecstasy.

In the Platonic tradition, the noise vanguard constrains music to noise. Contrary to shock, music has long functioned as an antidote to alienation. We have already encountered this idea in Douglass and in Du Bois’s analysis of the sorrow songs. I want to establish it as an argument here more firmly because in many ways it conflicts with the essential aims of European vanguardism, and as such will come to conflict with theorists in later chapters. Even at its most modern and extreme, there is always something primal, that is to say both soothing and cathartic, about the sonic arts. Paradoxically, by giving sonorous expression to feelings of separation, it temporarily assuages them: the musician’s pain is experienced collectively as pleasure. Visual and discursive (non-mimetic) arts appeal in different ways, belonging to the eyes and the intellect, require years of effort to master, and their effect is not nearly as direct. Words refer, images represent, but music invokes or conjures what seem to *be* the feelings themselves.

For US listeners in the late 19th century, the ‘shock’ effect of this music would have arrived, if at all, only in the aftermath of listening, with the realization that one had been positively ‘transported’ to another place by a voice previously deemed subhuman, transformed into a different person by a tune played, somehow, by ‘savages’. But these kinds of interactions have always been asymmetrical; especially early on there was a layer of voyeurism that even the most well-intentioned whites couldn’t simply shake off. This can be detected in testimonies of white observers such as this:

Some 'heel and toe' tumultuously, others merely tremble stagger on, others whirl, others caper sideways, all keep steadily circling like dervishes; spectators applaud special strokes of skill; my approach only enlivens the scene; the circle enlarges, louder grows the singing, rousing shouts of encouragement come in; half bacchanalian, half devout... and still the ceaseless drumming and clapping in perfect cadence, goes steadily on. Suddenly there comes a sort of snap, and the spell breaks amid general sighing and laughter ... And this not rarely and occasionally, but night after night.¹⁷²

The white observer had been watching the private ceremony for some time from further away before being welcomed to join in. But the barrier between the cultures was both legal and psychic. Ralph Ellison decodes the typical scene's complex relations of production:

The whites, looking out at the activity in the yard, thought that they were being flattered by imitation and were amused by the incongruity of tattered blacks dancing courtly steps, while missing completely the fact that before their eyes a European cultural form was becoming Americanized, undergoing a metamorphosis through the mocking activity of a people partially sprung from Africa. So, blissfully unaware, the whites laughed while the blacks danced out their mocking reply.¹⁷³

In identifying the immigrant experience of the metropolis as a key factor underpinning and uniting the multifarious modes of avant-garde practice in its pre-war 'first phase', Raymond Williams arrives at conclusions that could apply equally to those swept up in the Great Migration from country to the city, agrarian South to industrial North, and explain the further consolidation of music's place at the center of African-American culture:

Liberated or breaking from their national or provincial cultures, placed in quite new relations to those other native languages or native visual traditions, encountering meanwhile a novel and dynamic common environment from which many of the older forms of were obviously distant, the artists and writers and thinkers of this phase found the only community available to them: a

¹⁷² Sterling Stuckey, *Slave Culture: Nationalist Theory and the Foundations of Black America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 84.

¹⁷³ Ralph Ellison, 'Homage to Duke Ellington on His Birthday', in *Living With Music: Ralph Ellison's Jazz Writings*, ed. Robert G. O'Meally, (New York, Random House: 2001), p. 84.

community of the medium; of their own practices.¹⁷⁴

If ‘the true social bases of the early avant-garde were at once cosmopolitan and metropolitan’, it follows that jazz would have a strong claim to having been a part of, not merely influenced by, a cultural vanguard. Salim Washington makes a strong case ‘entire history of jazz, with its rapid styles and genres, could be understood as an avant-garde movement’.¹⁷⁵ This is the case,

...in at least two ways. Jazz musicians have conducted a continuous search for expansion of the formal parameters available for artistic expression and have often related these breakthroughs in “structures of feeling” to a simultaneous yearning for progress in the concomitant social arrangements of its society.¹⁷⁶

He contrasts the notion of a ‘perpetual’ avant-garde to the ‘permanent’ one, commemorated solely in terms of formal innovation and in its capacity to reflect the ideals of US culture thus lacking ‘spiritual intent, political content, [and] social-aesthetic agency... as long as jazz’s putative political content is confined to a liberal democratic vision that valorizes the triumph of the assertive, ingenious individual, it can be touted as a representative of American ideals’.

Moreover, jazz historiography often unfolds according to a ‘great man’ theory of history, which ‘frames the music as an extension of American modernity and valorizes the heroic individual who sublimates his alienation to create triumphant art that give testament to (usually) his genius’. Washington emphasizes that black musicking operates according to criteria of judgment— ‘for black people- and this is the case for jazz as much as it is for “gospel”— the success of the music/dance/spiritual event is determined by all the participants of the event and not simply the person formally designated as “the artist”’.¹⁷⁷ Of particular importance to black musiciking is maintaining a relationship with history, or what Washington calls ‘communing with the ancestors’. This indeed is of the crucial differences between ‘white’ and ‘black’ avant-gardes:

¹⁷⁴ Raymond Williams, *The Politics of Modernism* (London: Verso, 2007), p. 45.

¹⁷⁵ Washington, ‘All the Things...’, p. 27.

¹⁷⁶ Salim Washington, “‘All the Things You Could Be by Now’: *Charles Mingus Presents Charles Mingus* and the Limits of Avant-Garde Jazz’, in *Uptown Conversation: The New Jazz Studies*, ed. Robert G. O’Meally, Brent Hayes Edwards & Farah Jasmine Griffin (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), p. 28.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid., p. 29.

The historical avant-garde, in its seeking to shake up the foundations of the art world, strove to separate itself from the traditions upon which they were commenting. By contrast, jazz artists- of all stripes- have not tried to flaunt their prestige and artistic standing or mock the sacred aura of the art world, but have instead been preoccupied with attaining the prestige that European art music routinely enjoys.

Another key difference is, as we have already seen, the problem of pleasure, which is rooted in the qualitative difference between music on the one hand, and literature and visual art on the other. Jazz's modernist period is usually restricted to the relatively brief period in the early 1940s when Parker, Gillespie and others developed a new 'difficult', confrontational style called bebop. In *Jazz Modernism*, Alfred Appel Jr. attempts to establish the connection between what he calls 'classic jazz', represented by Louis Armstrong, and modernism, represented by Joyce's *Ulysses*.¹⁷⁸ Yet Appel Jr.'s account is as thorough as it is evasive: while there may be numerous elective affinities between the jazz and modernism's fixation on formal innovation, the book never reckons with the difference between sound and text, between the relative immediacy of Armstrong and Ellington's oeuvre, the extremely mediated quality of Joyce's text, and the different audiences each assumes or calls into being. In short, he elides the structural differences between fields of music, art and literature.

Though Jameson tends to stick to the conventional narrative, there is plenty of historical evidence to suggest that utopian impulses and projects were not restricted to enclaves of bourgeois alienation. Drawing from the music criticism of Ralph Ellison, Craig Werner has theorized black music in terms of three underlying 'impulses':

The blues, jazz, and gospel impulses highlight black music's refusal to simplify reality or devalue emotion. Even when they force you to accept uncomfortable truths, the blues never explain away how things feel. They make you deal with the evil in the world and the evil in your head, help you find the strength to get up and face another blues-haunted day. Testifying to the power of love, gospel gives us the courage to keep on pushing for a redemption that is at once spiritual and political. Gospel reminds us we're all in it together, though the definition of "we" varies. Jazz is innovation; it refuses to accept the way things are, envisions ways of reaching a higher

¹⁷⁸ Alfred Appel Jr., *Jazz Modernism: From Ellington to Armstrong to Matisse and Joyce* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004).

ground we're only beginning to be able to imagine.¹⁷⁹

And as everyone who has heard Louis Armstrong's Hot Five and Sevens knows, searching for some originary break between blues, jazz and gospel in the music itself is fruitless. This already attests to the difference.

Blues presents a philosophy of life, 'a three-step process... (1) fingering the jagged grain of your brutal experience; (2) finding a near-tragic, near-comic voice to express that experience; and (3) reaffirming your existence' - but its rugged 'realism' is strewn with visions of God, Jesus and the Devil'.¹⁸⁰ The gospel of Black Christianity and the practices of the Baptist Church forge a connection between sacred and profane, spirit and body, that is entirely at odds with the puritanical Catholicism and the individualized Protestant's much-celebrated work ethic. The gospel impulse relates to religion in the etymological sense of 'binding', helping 'people experience themselves *in relation to* rather than *on their own*. Gospel makes the feeling of human separateness...bearable'. In practice, the gospel impulse 'consists of a three-step process: (1) acknowledging the burden; (2) bearing witness; (3) finding redemption.' Finally, the jazz impulse is defined as 'a constant process of redefinition. The jazz artist constantly reworks her identity on three levels: (1) as an individual; (2) as a member of a community; and (3) as a "link the chain of tradition"'.¹⁸¹ With jazz, it would seem we have entered into the 'modern', if not modernism— jazz as an expression of Marx and Engels' ambivalent tribute to the profoundly transformative power of capital— 'all that is solid melts into air'.

As George Lewis writes, 'The history of sanctions, segregation, and slavery, imposed upon African Americans by the dominant white American culture, has undoubtedly influenced the evolution of a sociomusical belief system that differs in critical respects from that which has emerged from the dominant culture itself'.¹⁸² In short, the essential differences between 'black' and 'white' avant-gardes stem from their respective relations to history. As the bourgeois vanguard comes to understand its own history— a history of barbarism and its social connection to it— they

¹⁷⁹ Craig Werner, *A Change is Gonna Come: Music, Race, and the Soul of America*, (Edinburgh: Cannongate, 2002), pp. xiii-xiv.

¹⁸⁰ Werner, *A Change...*, p. 28-31.

¹⁸¹ Ibid., pp. 132-6.

¹⁸² George Lewis, 'Improvised Music after 1950: Afrological and Eurological Perspectives', *Black Music Research Journal*, 16.1 (Spring 1996), pp. 91-122.

awaken to the nightmare, it increasingly seeks to break with it or to repress it. As the vernacular comes to understand its own history, a history of resistance, it seeks to recover it and take refuge in it. Far from the suffocating presence it was made out to be by the Futurists and those that followed in their wake, history is a precious resource for the black avant-garde. Recognizing in such histories a fundamental social antagonism is not the same as asserting that these systems have developed in isolation. The boundaries between what Lewis calls the 'afrological' and 'eurological' have been crisscrossed to varying degrees since their very inception, especially at the vernacular level. If a defining feature of the eurological avant-garde is its willful break from tradition:

[The] African-American improviser, coming from a legacy of slavery and oppression, cannot countenance the erasure of history. The destruction of family and lineage, the rewriting of history and memory in the image of whiteness, is one of the facts with which all people of color must live. It is unsurprising, therefore, that from an ex-slave's point of view an insistence on being free from memory might be regarded with some suspicion—as either a form of denial or of disinformation.¹⁸³

III. A Different Europe

We might settle the argument by pointing out that a *literal* avant-garde was responsible for bringing jazz to the world. In the first decade of the 20th century, the black and immigrant populations in the US doubled. Nearly half a million African-Americans migrated from the South to rapidly industrializing cities like St. Louis, Chicago, Cleveland and New York. Meanwhile, in the same year that Russolo published his manifesto, the US government introduced Jim Crow to federal employment regulations, barring African-Americans from all government jobs, save for the military.¹⁸⁴ For many, the fight against fascism overseas became an opportunity to prove their commitment to democracy and equality at home. Moreover, the military afforded basic amenities—food, shelter, and a certain education—that civil society systematically withheld from large swathes of the African-American population. Patriotic black soldiers were thus caught in the same contradiction as their slave ancestors marching to the Great House Farm. At the same time,

¹⁸³ Ibid.

¹⁸⁴ James Smethurst, *The African American Roots of Modernism: From Reconstruction to the Harlem Renaissance*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011), p. 1-26.

however, those that survived the journey returned with knowledge that had until then been reserved for the likes of Du Bois.

‘We had conquered Paris’, recalled James Reese Europe in March 1919:

Everywhere we gave a concert was a riot, but the supreme moment came in the Tuileries Gardens where we gave a concert in conjunction with the greatest bands in the world- the British Grenadiers’ Band, the Band of the Garde Republican, and the Royal Italian Band. My band, of course, could not compare with any of these, yet the crowd, and it was such a crowd as I had never saw anywhere else in the world, deserted them for us. We played to fifty thousand people at least, and, had we wished it, we might be playing yet.¹⁸⁵

The decorated lieutenant also recalled that, when another band attempted to play one of his jazz compositions, ‘the jass [sic] effects were missing’. Although he showed them how it was done, the musicians nevertheless ‘felt sure that my band had used special instruments’. Two months later, Europe’s band the Harlem Hellfighters played to a packed auditorium in Chicago. A reviewer noted, ‘The closing number of the program, “In No Man’s Land”, in which the house was thrown into darkness and all the noises of the battlefield reproduced, furnished a thriller that was a splendid fitting finale to a splendid evening’s entertainment’.¹⁸⁶ In the song, bass and side drums are synchronized with the lyrics, written by Europe and sung by fellow Hellfighter Noble Sissle, which depict a typical evening in the trenches:

look out (bang!)

Hear that roar (bang!), there's one more (bang!)

Stand fast, there's a Very light [flare]

Don't gasp or they'll find you all right

Don't start to bombing with those hand grenades (rat-

a-tat-tat-tat)

There's a machine gun, holy spades!

Alert, gas! Put on your mask

¹⁸⁵ Quoted in ‘A Negro Explains “Jazz”’, in *Keeping Time: Readings in Jazz History*, ed. by Robert Walser (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 12-14.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 15-16.

Adjust it correctly and hurry up fast
Drop! There's a rocket from the Boche
Barrage...

Prior to the war, Europe's band made phonograph recordings of their repertoire, including 'In No Man's Land'. Despite poor fidelity, one can hear winds and brass mimicking sirens and screams, evoking the ambience of the trenches. The beat is still unmistakably marshal, the accent on the one designed to drum up solidarity amongst the servicemen. But one can discern the famed 'jazz effects' in the interstices: in sudden ragged tempo shifts, a strange swooping brass interjection or high whistle, and the occasional break for a solo.

Europe's music was a hybrid of the many disparate streams of Afro- and Euro-American musics— country, blues, ragtime, New Orleans, big band- that were then more or less ignored by the dominant culture, even in the early days of the recording industry. The Hellfighters' tour of Europe galvanized what would continue to be a largely favorable reception of jazz (and black jazz musicians) outside the US, which was soon reinforced by a growing number of recordings and international record labels.

Critics at the time were certainly aware of the correspondences between white and black avant-gardes. In his contribution to Alain Locke's seminal survey of Harlem's art scene, *The New Negro*, J.A. Rogers captures the paradoxes of jazz: 'too fundamentally human, as least as modern humanity goes, to be typically racial, too international to be characteristically national, too much abroad in the world to have a special home'.¹⁸⁷ Rogers notes how the sound of jazz mimics the rapidly modernizing world:

With its cowbells, auto horns, calliopes, rattles dinner gongs, kitchen utensils, screams, clashes, clankings and monotonous rhythm it bears all the marks of a nerve-strung, strident, mechanized civilization. It is a thing of the jungles- modern man-made jungles.¹⁸⁸

¹⁸⁷ *The New Negro: Voices of the Harlem Renaissance*, ed. Alain Locke (New York: Touchstone, 1997[1925]), p. 218.

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 218.

In the same volume, Russian composer Leopold Stokowski praised jazz in terms that would surely have made the Futurists flush with envy: 'The jazz players make their instruments do entirely new things, things finished musicians are taught to avoid. They are pathfinders into new realms'.¹⁸⁹ But Rogers highlights the crucial historical difference: 'Bones, tambourines, make-shift string instruments, tin can and hollow wood effects, all now utilized as musical novelties, were among early Negroes *the product of necessity*'.¹⁹⁰ Which is to say, the music grew out of an absence of culture, the erasure of history, not the choice to break with it.

Europe concluded his recollection of Paris with a provocation: 'I have come back from France more firmly convinced than ever that negroes [sic] should write negro music. We have our own racial feeling and if we try and copy whites we will make bad copies... We won France by playing music which was ours and not a pale imitation of others, and if we are to develop in American we must develop along our own lines'. Unlike Europe, Alain Locke saw no shame in encouraging his readers to aspire to the heights of European aesthetic achievement: folk forms like the spirituals and the blues, despite their originary merit, must be transmuted into those forms that he deems 'universal'. Rogers too note that jazz's particular 'achievement' would consist in becoming 'common property',¹⁹¹ a form that would simultaneously preserve and transcend its historic roots in the particular experience of Africans on American soil, 'At the pinnacle, the paths converge, and the attainment becomes, in the last analysis neither racial nor national, but universal music'.¹⁹²

Reflecting on the relatively brief development of Afro-American music, Locke argued that 'the greatest accomplishment to date, excepting the joy of the music itself, lies in the fact that there is now no deep divide between our folk music and the main stream of world music. That critical transition between being a half understood musical dialect and a compelling variety of world speech has been made'.¹⁹³ But the hopes of early black critics, bolstered by the achievements of the cultural Renaissance in Harlem would only last as long as it failed to ask how that speech would endure in a world system still controlled by those determined to silence it.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid., p. 222.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid., p. 218. My emphasis.

¹⁹¹ Ibid., p. 229.

¹⁹² Locke, *The New Negro*, p. 115.

¹⁹³ Ibid., p. 127.

The multitude perhaps feels as yet only a strange relief and a new vague urge, but the thinking few know that in the reaction the vital inner grip of prejudice has been broken. With this renewed self-respect and self-dependence, the life of the Negro community is bound to enter a new dynamic phase, the buoyancy of within compensating for whatever pressure there may be of conditions from without.¹⁹⁴

In a chapter on 'The Negro Spirituals', Locke professes his debt to Du Bois's chapter and reaffirms the latter's preference for past forms, arguing that the 'Spirituals are really the most characteristic product of the race genius as yet in American'. The proof, for Locke, is simply that they have stood the test of time, persisting through slavery, religious convention and Puritanical repression, 'the corruptions of sentimental balladry, and the neglect and disdain of second-generation respectability'.¹⁹⁵

The same sentiments appear in James Weldon Johnson's Preface to the *Book of Negro Poetry*, published in 1922.¹⁹⁶ Johnson spends much of the Preface celebrating dance and music, not poetry, detailing its intricacies, and even admitting 'not as much can be said for the words of these songs as for the music'. On the page, the lyrics' 'constant iteration and repetition are found to be tiresome; and it must be admitted that the lines themselves are often very trite'. Johnson's text oscillates between national pride and international solidarity. Ragtime is at once the essence of American life, and possessor of 'the vital spark, the power to appeal universally'. At the same time, Johnson's historicism is evident, as when he writes, '[the] dances which I have referred to and Ragtime music may be lower forms of art, but they are evidence of a power that will some day be applied to the higher forms'. Johnson also marks the difference between sacred and profane: 'In the riotous rhythms of Ragtime the Negro expressed his irrepressible buoyancy, his keen response to the sheer joy of living; in the 'spiritual' he voiced his sense of beauty and deep religious feeling'. Should we assume, then, that expressing the 'sheer joy of living' is a 'lower' form? For Johnson, it seems inevitable that the Negro will develop these into higher forms. In a line echoing Douglass and Lenin, Johnson suggests that, 'No persons, however hostile, can listen to Negroes singing this

¹⁹⁴ Ibid., p. 5.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid., p. 199.

¹⁹⁶ James Weldon Johnson, 'Preface', *The Book of American Negro Poetry*, www.english.illinois.edu/maps/poets/g_1/johnson/preface1.htm [accessed 8 August 2016].

wonderful music without having their hostility melted down'. Yet we only have to think about the forms of black expression that were fiercely regulated and often outlawed in the Jim Crow era to see how idealistic Johnson is being- or rather, how partial he is to the spirituals. For the latter, 'higher' forms were far less disruptive of the social order than the carnal, carnivalesque situations for which Ragtime often provided the soundtrack.

Later, Johnson laments the new poets' lessening use of folk dialect, but acknowledges the double bind in which black artists are caught: dialect, for all its authenticity, has become stereotype, which ties him to the 'log cabin amid fields of cotton or along levees', and whose 'very exactness... is an instrument with but two full stops, humor and pathos'. Then a somewhat cryptic prescription:

What the coloured poet in the United States needs to do is... find a form that will express the racial spirit by symbols from within rather than by symbols from without, such as the mere mutilation of English spelling and pronunciation. He needs a form that is freer and larger than dialect, but which will still hold the racial flavor; a form expressing the imagery, the idioms, the peculiar turns of thought, and the distinctive humor and pathos, too, of the Negro, but which will also be capable of voicing the deepest and highest emotions and aspirations, and allow the widest range of subjects the widest scope of treatment.¹⁹⁷

The records that followed rapidly in Smith's wake traded precisely on dialect of the South, fanning white nostalgia for Dixie and reinforcing amongst them the notion that blacks preferred life on the plantation.¹⁹⁸ But it was precisely this barrier between the sacred and the profane, between the talented tenth and black folk, between the somber spirituals and salacious rhythms of the street— between pious visions of a timeless afterlife and the working time of this one— that was breaking down. On the one hand, this was due to the increasing circulation of labor-power and other commodities. On the other, it was a reaction to the prejudices embedded in Locke's anthology, and its reputation as an authoritative 'document' of black identity.

IV. Conclusion: Crazy Blues

¹⁹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁹⁸ Miller, p. 195.

In May 1919, a disgruntled band member stabbed Europe to death after rehearsal. In the summer of 1920, Okeh Records released Mamie Smith's 'Crazy Blues' and changed popular music forever. While a handful of blues records had already been cut, only Smith's became a national phenomenon. Smith's virtuosity is very much on display. Her shout is polished, grain-free, with the controlled vibrato and extreme projection that she would have observed in the singers with whom she shared vaudeville stages for a decade as a dancer. Her voice fills the mid-range of the record's groove, which strains to accommodate the rest of the band. Black singers could do the job. Smith's 'capable vocal recording was notable because it cracked the industry color line, not because it necessarily signaled a significant shift in the sound or meaning of blues recordings...'.¹⁹⁹

This 'crazy blues'—neither jazz, nor folk, universal music— gave birth to the culture industry. 'Music did not really become a commodity until a broad market for popular music was created. Such a market did not exist when Edison invented the phonograph; it was produced by the colonisation of black music by the American industrial apparatus'.²⁰⁰ The era of top-down, fully integrated corporate behemoths was exemplified in the recording industry: Edison, Victor and Columbia records 'held almost every important patent for talking machines and records'.²⁰¹ What distinguished these concerns from those making their fortunes on steel and oil was the unpredictable nature of their raw material, or 'talent' as it was called.

The world of work had been utterly transformed by Fredrick Winslow Taylor's theory of scientific management. Little by little, the profit motive encroached on music production. 'Economically', Chanan argues, 'musicians began to experience recording as a new and contradictory form of exploitation, in which other people were always making more from records than they did, although the rewards to be gained with success often outstripped all other sources of musical money-making; a process that also changed the shape of music publishing and the entertainment business'.²⁰² Distribution also proceeded according to the new model. Andre Millard writes that 'by the early twentieth century, record companies had begun to divide up the audience for recorded sound: comic songs for the working classes, operettas for the middle classes, ballads

¹⁹⁹ Karl Hagstrom Miller, *Segregating Sound: Inventing Folk and Pop Music in the Age of Jim Crow* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), p. 192.

²⁰⁰ Jacques Attali, *Noise: The Political Economy of Music* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1985), p. 103.

²⁰¹ Andre Millard, *America on Record: A History of Recorded Sound* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 65.

²⁰² Michael Chanan *Repeated Takes: A Short History of Recording and Its Effects on Music* (London: Verso, 2000), p. 7.

that appealed to the immigrants, patriotic band music that they hoped would be bought by all good Americans'.²⁰³ Finally, consumption was radically transformed, as 'the separation of listening and performing... the performance becomes disembodied and transportable; this would alter ways of listening'; and changes in consumption fed back into production, as 'musicians were for the first time able to hear themselves as others hear them; this would change the nature of interpretation'.²⁰⁴ Smith's successful debut meant that African-American musicians and their audiences were now at the forefront of these tectonic cultural and economic shifts. 'Until the twenties, the big three made no effort to sell records to those who could not afford them. Hence their artists were dominated by 'good music' that satisfied middle-class tastes- classical singers and vaudeville stars. Fledgling independent labels were thus driven to exploit new markets by necessity alone'.²⁰⁵

Patricia Hill Collins highlights the significance of this event in terms of the conflict between black oral traditions and the culture industry:

The music of the classic blues singers of the 1920s—almost exclusively women—marks the early written record of this dimension of U.S. Black oral culture. The songs themselves were originally sung in small communities, where boundaries distinguishing singer from audience, call from response, and thought from action were fluid and permeable. Despite the control of White-run record companies, these records were made exclusively for the "race market" of African-Americans and thus targeted Black consumers. Because literacy was not possible for large numbers of Black women, these recordings represented the first permanent documents exploring a working-class Black women's standpoint that until then had been accessible to Black women in local settings. The songs can be seen as poetry, as expressions of ordinary Black women rearticulated through Black oral traditions.²⁰⁶

Smith's success encouraged Harry Pace to form the first African-American-owned record company, perfectly titled Black Swan, in 1921. By 1925, black music had an international reputation. French surrealists were embracing jazz, and at least one German critic could claim that 'jazz, when played in some dive, or even when heard on record, is more significant than a half

²⁰³ Millard, *America*, p. 91.

²⁰⁴ Chanan, *Repeated Takes*, p. 7.

²⁰⁵ Millard, *America*, p. 73.

²⁰⁶ Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment (Second Edition)*, (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 106.

dozen run-of-the-mill nights spent in a concert hall. And it is more serious'.²⁰⁷ As African-American critics began debating the merits of the new music, the question of whether to emulate the European legacy, or to take inspiration from within the history of black vernacular forms became paramount.

As Miller shows, in the immediate aftermath of Smith's success, labels rushed to replicate it: virtually overnight, these valiant entrepreneurs discovered that African-Americans quite liked seeing and hearing, and most importantly paying for, the genuine article. Despite this 'earthy' content, then, Smith didn't really figure as folk, and that's perhaps for the better. As Williams argues,

The 'folk' emphasis, when offered as evidence of a repressed popular tradition, could move readily towards socialist and other radical and revolutionary tendencies. One version of the vitality of the native could be joined with this, as witness of the new kinds of art which a popular revolution would release. On the other hand, and emphasis on 'folk', as a particular kind of emphasis on 'the people', could lead to very strong national and eventually nationalist identifications, of the kind heavily drawn upon in both Italian and German fascism.²⁰⁸

As Barbara Foley sums up: 'The folk, in Locke's formulation, do not engage in class struggle; they engage in song'.²⁰⁹ In the next chapter, we continue to explore the problem of pleasure and resistance under capitalism.

²⁰⁷ 'Since we, dear reader, have better things to do than dwell on "decorum" we will talk jazz. The editors note with satisfaction that, when our friends talk about jazz, they are rarely agreed except on one thing: that this evil jazz could mark the beginning of a revolution. And since our journal seeks to track, nay anticipate any obliteration of the conventional, we concur that jazz when played in some dive, or even when heard on a record, is more significant than half a dozen run-of-the-mill nights spent in the concert hall. And it is more serious. For us jazz means – Americans. Rebellious atavistic instincts against a musical culture devoid of rhythm. Image of the times: chaos, machines, noise, highest pitch of intensity – triumph of the spirit that sparks with a new melody, a new colour...'. Paul Stefan 'Jazz', *Musikblätter des Anbruch*, 7.4 (April 1925), <http://papabecker.com/run.htm>, [Accessed 25 October 2017]

²⁰⁸ Williams, *Politics*, p. 45.

²⁰⁹ Barbara Foley, *Specters of 1919: Class and Nation in the Making of the New Negro*, (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2008), pp. 219-220.

4

Richard Wright, Violence and Regression in the Jazz Age

Every work of art is an uncommitted crime.

– Theodor Adorno²¹⁰

In this chapter, I set the early work of Richard Wright in a constellation with Walter Benjamin and Theodor Adorno. We will see how literary modernism, particularly Joyce's *Ulysses* and Elliot's *The Wasteland*, inspired the bleak vision of Wright's early unpublished novel *Land Today!*. Wright availed himself of modernist techniques, but also distinguished himself from that tradition in significant ways. Wright's commitment to literature as a means of communicating the experience of being black in America coincided with the explosive cross-cultural popularity of mimetic arts like music and dance. In Wright's earliest attempt at long form storytelling, there is a war between words and music, rhetoric and substance, thought and feeling, an 'aestheticized violence' that emerges in the context of an increasingly commodified black culture, which Adorno was tracking at the same moment in his work with the Princeton Radio Research Project. Meanwhile, in an increasingly volatile Europe, Benjamin begins to toy with the concept of mimesis, aura, cinema, and their relation to social revolution. These meditations in turn compel Adorno to make his first thorough critiques of the nascent culture industry and the dominant form of mass-produced music at the time, jazz. Benjamin's optimism about mass production and the soviet experiment was matched by

²¹⁰ Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia* (London, Verso: 2005[1951]), p. 111.

Adorno's pessimism about the US culture industry. As critical observers and eventually exiles from Hitler's Germany, their concerns often overlapped with Wright's generation of artists and organic intellectuals, resonances that are overlooked in scholarship that understands modernism and popular culture as white and black, respectively.

I. Richard Wright: Aestheticising Violence

Richard Wright was born in 1908, the year *The Souls of Black Folk* was published. His formative years were those in which black musicians achieved national popularity. Meanwhile, the possibilities opened up by writers, poets, musicians and political activists in Harlem seemed infinite. Despite the roaring momentum of the renaissance, the '30s were an era of containment- after the crash, labels took fewer chances on race records, while the varieties of jazz emerging in New Orleans, Chicago, St. Louis, Kansas City and New York were streamlined and whitewashed for radio and concert hall by Paul Whiteman and Benny Goodman. Duke Ellington's and Count Basie's bands were relegated to whites-only night clubs where they were often forced to perform racial stereotypes in exchange for wages and the space to hone their skills. This was not quite the 'universal music' that Du Bois, Johnson and Locke had seen just over the horizon. For Wright, the moral authority and political force of black culture could not be taken for granted. Meanwhile, fascism was rapidly revealing the limits of liberal humanism to a generation of European critics and artists.

As Du Bois was preparing his monumental history of Reconstruction, Wright was immersing himself in the emerging sociological literature on Chicago's immiserated black population. He was moved by 'the frequency of mental illness, that tragic toll the urban environment that the urban environment had exacted of the black peasant'.²¹¹ Having migrated from his Mississippi birthplace to Chicago in 1927, Wright tasked himself with capturing that disorienting experience in prose. He was a member of the local John Reed Club, which Michael Denning describes as 'an alliance of different kinds of artists and intellectuals- painters, writers, critics, dancers, sculptors, filmmakers and photographers- and they engaged in two kinds of activities: on the one hand, a variety of cultural events including lectures, writers workshops, art exhibits, dance performers, and plays; on

²¹¹ Richard Wright, *American Hunger*, (New York, Harper Collins: 1977), p. 25.

the other hand, support work for labor struggles and political trials, like the Scottsboro case'.²¹² Though Wright like many black writers would spend much of his life in conflict with official Marxism, he was aware of and wrote passionately about the unprecedented privileges and responsibilities afforded by this arrangement:

Why cower in towers of ivory and squeeze our private words when we had only to speak and millions listened? Our writing was translated into French, German, Russian, Chinese, Spanish, Japanese... Who had ever, in all human history, offered young writers an audience so vast? True, our royalties were small, or less than small, but that did not matter. We wrote what we felt.

Having moved from one social class to another, from a family who regarded books with suspicion to a city of aspiring writers and artists, Wright's feelings were indeed complicated. Recalling the trope that would become the basis of his own first novel, Ralph Ellison argued that Wright 'converted the American Negro impulse toward self-annihilation and 'going-under-ground' into a will to confront the world, to evaluate his experience honestly and throw his findings unashamedly into the guilty conscience of America'.²¹³ It is another example of modernism's tendency to seek new possibilities in old, indeed ancient tropes: the journey underground is a trope as old as Homer's *Odyssey* and is elaborated most famously in Dante's *Inferno* (another one of Ellison's favorites and one of several models for *Invisible Man*). But what Ellison is also getting at here- what makes Wright's achievement remarkable, as well as symptomatic of the balance of social forces at the time- has to do with more than literary precedent. In a sense, Wright was born and raised underground. In *Land Today!* we find a writer struggling to express that ugly and often violent past, indeed to exercise certain demons, and make the conversion from underground to mainstream.

As Ellison argues, Wright was keenly aware that 'the movement north affects more than the Negro's wage scale; it affects his entire psychosomatic structure'.²¹⁴ Wright's desire to document these changes rivaled productively with his need for self-expression and his fascination with the experiments of Euro-American modernists. 'I strove to master words', he wrote, 'to make them

²¹² Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (London: Verso, 2010), p. 208.

²¹³ Ralph Ellison, *Living With Music: Ralph Ellison's Jazz Writings*, ed. Robert G. O'Meally, (New York: Random House, 2001), p. 119.

²¹⁴ Ellison, *Living*, p. 112.

disappear, to make them important by making them new, to make them melt into a rising spiral of emotional stimuli, each greater than the other, each feeding and reinforcing the other, and all ending in an emotional climax that would drench the reader in a new sense of the world'.²¹⁵ Wright blends Ezra Pound's famous imperative to innovate with his own particular concern to 'drench' the reader in 'a new sense world' by attending to the emotional, affective dimension of his prose. Though his later work would be praised for expressing the complex realities of America's 'race' problem in naturalistic terms, it is significant that Wright describes his ideal narrative arc- complex emotional tension building toward a world-shattering climax- in essentially romantic terms.

In the interwar years, literary modernism was an unruly mixture of styles, aims and politics: French surrealism's attempt to re-enchant the world vied with the ennui of the Lost Generation; the dislocations wrought by industrial capitalism and imperialist wars facilitated liberal cosmopolitanism and reactionary nostalgia. Déclassé intellectuals and artists searched for new forms of expression, to criticize and to cushion the blows their social and political enemies were administering throughout the world. Their experiments thus appealed to this precocious young black man whose upbringing and formal education were constantly interrupted by the realities of racism and poverty in the South. The modernists, like Wright, 'strove to master words'; its representatives- Eliot, Stein, Woolf, Pound and Joyce- were therefore allies in the struggle to say the unsayable. For all, mastering words involved disassembling the boundary between inside and outside by effacing formal structures like rhyme scheme and quotation, allowing whatever came through to come through.

Proto-modernist composer and notorious anti-Semite Richard Wagner famously inspired Nietzsche and Nazism; less well known is the fact that his convention-defying music also provided the impetus for this new literary technique. 'In its pure state', wrote Eduard DuJardin, 'the Wagnerian motif is an isolated phrase which always carries an emotional significance, but which is not logically linked with those that precede and those that follow; and that is how interior monologue derives from it'.²¹⁶ Joyce cited DuJardin's experimental novel *The Bays are Sere* as the inspiration for *Ulysses*. As one of DuJardin's admirers explained, the books use of interior monologue 'was a movement of frankness such that the coverings which had been forced on the

²¹⁵ Wright, *American*, p. 30.

²¹⁶ Eduard DuJardin, *The Bays are Sere & Interior Monologue*, trans. Anthony Suter (London: Libris, 1991), p. 84, p. 135.

soul from the time of Aristotle to that of the Symbolists had been shaken off. But the language of the ‘soul’ here reveals the limits of bourgeois sensibility, for what had been repressed from Aristotle to the symbolists, and from Aquinas to Descartes, was not so much the soul as the body. If Enlightenment was a victory for Reason over superstition, the former was often invested with the same rarefied power as religion. Modernity was imagined as the final victory of mind over matter. Wagner’s music was on the contrary widely reviled for what critics perceived as its ‘low’ subject matter. His works seemed to revive long-dormant realms of feeling in his listeners. On the surface, *Tristan und Isolde* is a chivalric medieval romance with a plot motivated above all by chastity and chivalry. The music, in one biographer’s words, tells a story of ‘unrestrained sexuality’²¹⁷ After its London premiere in 1882, one critic inveighed against Wagner’s ‘worship of animal passion’:

The passion is unholy in itself and its representation is impure, and for those reasons we rejoice in believing that such works will not become popular. If they did we are certain their tendency would be mischievous, and there is, therefore, some cause for congratulation in the fact that Wagner’s music, in spite of all its wondrous skill and power, repels a greater number than it fascinates.²¹⁸

Wagner’s music was dangerous because it dispensed with conventional notions of harmony and therefore beauty, expanding the parameters of musical expression far beyond what was acceptable in high bourgeois society. In exploring and expressing his subjects’ unrequited longing, he did not arrive at the ‘soul’ (unthinkable for a dedicated student of Ludwig Feuerbach and Arnold Schopenhauer), but the loins.²¹⁹ Music was a cry of protest rooted in the needs and desires of the human body, not some divine kaleidoscope of pure forms.

²¹⁷ Brian Magee, *Wagner and Philosophy* (London: Penguin, 2001).

²¹⁸ quoted in *The Wagner Companion*, ed. Raymond Mander and Joe Mitchenson, (London: W.H. Allen, 1977), p. 120.

²¹⁹ Schopenhauer’s philosophy recuperates the body, not as an inert object extended in space, but as one half of all experience, the very foundation of the will itself: The body is given in two entirely different ways to the subject of knowledge, who becomes an individual only through his identity with it. It is given as an idea in intelligent perception, as an object among objects and subject to the laws of objects. And it is also given in quite a different way as that which is immediately known to everyone, and is signified by the word will. Every true act of his will is also at once and without exception a movement of his body. The act of will and the movement of the body are not two different things objectively known, which the bond of causality unites; they do not stand in the relation of cause and effect; they are one and the same, but they are given in entirely different ways— immediately, and again in perception for the understanding. The action of the body is nothing but the act of the will objectified, i.e., passed into perception. See Arthur Schopenhauer, “The

The organicist metaphor was typical of the time, and had potentially nefarious implications: the protesting body expressed in music might be understood a symptom of extra-musical sickness, of personal disease or social decay. Wagner eventually concluded that Jews were sapping Germany's precious bodily fluids. It is thus telling that Wagner's admirers still spoke of his achievement in terms of the soul; it reveals the degree to which a part of the bourgeoisie were still unwilling to really explore the intersection of the sacred and the profane, preferring instead to dress the latter in the former's clothing.

It was James Joyce and not DuJardin who followed Wagner through while deforming him at the same time, by linking interior monologue to the Jewish hero of his Irish odyssey. Where are the 'souls' of Leopold and Molly Bloom? The 'movements of frankness' Joyce records with this technique are portrayed in scenes of bathing, drinking and eating; in detailed depictions of defecation, masturbation and orgasm that earned the work charges of obscenity in the US. Joyce's interior monologue is not simply a new way of exploring the depths of our inner life, but rather an attempt to register the totality of the physical sensorium as accurately as possible. It is not an expression of the author's private 'conscience', let alone a window to the soul; it is rather an attempt to grasp experience as it blooms and buzzes in real time, the unwieldy obverse of the austere phenomenological method that preoccupied philosophers at the turn of the century. Unlike Husserl and the logical positivists, interior monologue brackets nothing and wants everything that cannot be stated clearly, incorporating and reveling in the inconsistencies, fragments, dissonances.

Moments in *Ulysses* suggest that this new mode of expression might be mastered by decentering our sense of sight, which had dominated western thought since Descartes' search for clear and distinct first principles, and relearning how to listen. 'I am getting on nicely in the dark', mutters Joyce's alter ego Stephen Daedalus in the midst of his meandering sensory experiments at the edges of Dublin's Sandymount Strand.²²⁰ Borrowing the scholastic verbiage of Aquinas's Aristotle, Daedalus wonders whether the 'ineluctable modality of the visible'²²¹ can accommodate the more fluid sense of time suggested by the audible, thereby resisting the seductions of the stasis, of order, stability, and security. When he listens rather than looks for truth, Daedalus hears the

Objectification of the Will', in *Freedom and Responsibility: Readings in Philosophy and Law*, ed. by Herbert Morris (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1961), p. 73.

²²⁰ James Joyce, *Ulysses* (New York: Vintage International, 1990), p. 37. All further references to this novel are given after quotations in the text.

²²¹ Joyce, *Ulysses*, p. 37.

present blur into an endless stream of comings and goings, of proliferating ends and origins- the brush crushed under his languid gait, distant crashing waves, crabs and gulls on the move. Daedalus restages Descartes's withdrawal from spatial extension and into the realm of the mind, but is no longer interested in arriving at first principles. Likewise, Bloom's journey back and forth across Dublin is constantly punctuated by stray sounds, one of the key ways in which Joyce dramatizes Bloom's struggle to stay focused and faithful in the rapidly modernizing and increasingly alienating city. Vision, caught up in illusion of eternity, senses only a solid and immutable 'world without end'- until it ends, it seems, finally and forever. Sound on the other hand reveals something much closer to the scientific truth: that all is in motion, countless processes are underway, natural and social, macro and microscopic, intersecting, colliding and bursting apart, energies neither created nor destroyed.

Lawd Today!

In 1934, the same year that saw the first American edition of Joyce's *Ulysses*, Wright began working on his first novel, *Cesspool*, later retitled *Lawd Today!* That the finished work failed to find a publisher should not be taken as sign that the young author's ambition exceeded his abilities. *Lawd Today!* is a fully realized modernist epic. Yet what is equally clear is that the work's bleak, extremely unflattering depiction of black social life would have confounded even the most generous of its readers, white and black. A long way from the sensationalising visions of Harlem in its heyday, the story is set in Wright's adoptive city of Chicago and loosely based on his brief stint as a postal clerk. Wright had always been an autodidact, though his intellectual proclivities had to be strategically indulged, away from those of his family who saw nothing to be gained from it, and from the white world, for whom the very idea of a black intellectual was an oxymoron. There is therefore a significant social distance between Wright and his fictional protagonist, Jake Jackson. But the latter is not the kind of sociological type calculated to elicit sympathy in spite of himself, as *Native Son's* Bigger Johnson would be. Jake Jackson feels less abstract, more 'there, but for the grace of God', perhaps the portrait of the father Wright never knew.

Wright borrows the temporal, episodic structure of *Ulysses*, depicting twenty-four hours in Jake Jackson's life. Jake's day is divided into three parts, 'Commonplace', 'Squirrel Cage', and 'Rat's

Alley', each preceded by an epigraph and divided into sections identified with roman numerals. The narrative is punctuated by a radio broadcast recounting the glories of Lincoln (the day is his birthday) and the Civil War. The text's many formal conceits— unorthodox punctuation, italicized inner thoughts blended together with third-person observations, bolded and capitalized newspaper headlines, meticulously reproduced full-page advertisements, unannounced stanzas of blues and folk song lyrics, columns showing the spread of a numbers racket, a graphic layout of each player's hand in a game of bridge— feel less like an attempt to wrest meaning from 'a heap of broken images' (Eliot), than an attempt to transmit images of a broken people. Compared with Joyce's tome, the text's brevity is itself a sign of its subject's historical and linguistic poverty. Joyce had the rich history of Ireland and ultimately Europe to delve into, while Wright was working with significantly less material. This is evidenced in the temperament of their respective protagonists. Daedalus and Bloom are different but similarly adrift- the intellectual inwardly wrestling with his humble origins, the outwardly humble everyman whose inner life reveals him to be an organic intellectual. They are wanderers, and Joyce's text wanders right along with them. By contrast, Jake Jackson is more savage than noble; an anti-hero distinguished less by his unfitness for the task, than by his utterly risible behavior. Wright introduces him in the most unflattering terms, daring the reader to sympathize:

Jake struggled out of sleep and propped himself upon an elbow. A pair of piggish eyes blinked at the sunlight. Low growls escaped his half-parted lips and his hands fumbled comically for the runaway sheet. He swallowed several times and his Adam's apple jumped up and down from this chin to his collarbone, like a toy monkey on a string.²²²

The moment he rolls out of bed, Jake is at war with himself and the world. Jake's attempt to flatten every last kink in his hair is described over the course of four pages, in terms of warfare. As Jake reads the newspaper over breakfast, he can barely contain his cynicism. He berates and physically abuses his sick wife Lil. He sympathizes with Hitler and asserts that foreigners, the 'Commoonists and Bolshehicks', are worst of all for presuming to have an insight into his own country's problems.

²²² Richard Wright, *Lawd Today!* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1986), p. 10.

Unlike Odysseus, Bloom, Daedalus and indeed John Jones and the Ex-Coloured Man, Jake Jackson is aggressively anti-intellectual. The depths of Jake's ignorance are scathingly underscored as he peers through the windows of a library and wonders how much it costs to get in. If Eliot lightly satirizes the reactionary mysticism of the ruling classes, Wright shows how it becomes an oppressive instrument: Jake loses money on a 'elaborate kind of lottery' called 'Policy' whose hidden persuaders advise players which numbers will hit by comparing the details of their dreams with '*King Solomon's Wheel of Life and Death Dream Book*'. Jake's world is full of charlatans hawking tonics, herbal remedies and 'surefire treatments' for the impotence, alcoholism and nervous disorder that he and his friends suffer from.

What Wright's novel shares with Eliot's poem is a sensibility that might be called perverse, as both works can be read as extended meditations on futility. Where Eliot wades through the rubble of European culture, Wright's US is a hopeless hellscape. The shocks sustained by readers of both are therefore distinct, but entwined: Eliot's modernism lays high culture low, which surely complicated the idea that there is an ideal artistic standard to which black writers must aspire. Wright can do his own thing. But what else is there? A pre-modern African lineage that cannot simply be reclaimed, sacred traditions and cultural practices deformed into compensatory ritual, a history written by the victors, and a marketplace of crackpot schemes and cheap thrills. Jake Jackson sits on the threshold between hedonism and nihilism. But nihilism itself is a strong conviction that the world lacks meaning, not a lack of conviction altogether; the nihilist secretly holds out for meaning, for something else in spite of himself.

The book opens with Jake in the midst of a dream, and periodically returns to these dreams, which are inchoate, constantly interrupted before they can take shape. But Jake still dreams, still rolls out of bed and reads his newspaper, just as Wright continued writing. The unconscious other of Jake's waking nihilism is tracked through the mechanism of interior monologue, adding a third dimension without which this otherwise violent and childish personae would indeed be a cruel parody. When Jake comes under pressure to explain his domestic quarrels to his bosses, he moves from excuse making to almost eloquent insight - before he is cut off by a friendly phone call that lets him off the hook. When Jake is with his three friends, his pent-up feelings, half-formed thoughts, blocked desires sometimes congeal into a conviction that another

world, another way of living, must be possible. When the pain of his life becomes too intense to bear, Jake bravely stretches the neck of his mind above the precipice, only to find that he is ill-equipped to handle this psychic no man's land. He retreats back into the creature comforts and quick fixes of which there seems to be an infinite supply.

Some of the optimism of the time is reflected in Wright's rendering of the workplace: here Jake cannot openly indulge his baser thoughts and desires (though he somehow manages to make use of the friction and rhythms in his immediate vicinity to pleasure himself). And this goes the other way: while clearly riven by racial prejudice, workplace relations mediate the otherwise unequal relationship between Jake and his white bosses. An altercation arises between Jake and his shift inspector: in a comic scene of bureaucratic petulance, Jake is accused of trying to 'delay the United States mail', and threatened with the possibility of 'two hundred demerits'. The discipline may seem hyperbolic, but the disciplinary effects on Jake's psychosomatic structure are real and, it seems, beneficial.

Part 2, 'Squirrel Cage', further observes Jake and his friends at work. It opens with a third-person caveat that moves beyond the now familiar interior monologue and into uncharted territory:

When they grew tired like this, when most of their workday preoccupations had been drowned in exhaustion, their basic moods would blend and fuse. They had worked in this manner for so many years that they took one another for granted; their common feelings were a common knowledge. And when they talked it was more like thinking aloud than speaking for the purposes of communication. Clusters of emotion, dim accretions of instinct and tradition rose to the surface of their consciousness like dead bodies floating and swollen upon a night sea.²²³

There is a vaguely utopian image here, at the uncommon intersection of physical exhaustion and common knowledge. Wright signifies ego-loss in the text, shedding his characters' subject-pronouns and object-predicates so that the four individuals merge and seem to be feeling and understanding as one. The surprise here is the way Wright describes the contents of this collective consciousness- not living spirits of a suppressed culture but rather 'dead bodies floating and swollen upon a night sea'. In the interwar period, black communication of all kinds entered into

²²³ Ibid., p. 137.

market relations, and relations of work. That surplus of ‘common feeling’ and ‘common knowledge’ had been forged on the plantation, and preserved in early forms of black culture like the ring shout; was sharpened and reinforced during the period of Reconstruction, whose disorienting atmosphere is attested by the complex and protracted demise of the minstrel show; and was greatly expanded and diversified as the United States assumed its role as the new center of the world’s production. But here it begins with a more prosaic feeling- exhaustion:

‘Lawd, I like going to sleep’
‘It’s like slipping off into nothing.’
‘You ever remember going to sleep?’
‘Naw.’
‘You get in the bed sleepy and tired...’
‘...And the first thing you know it’s morning...’
‘...And all the time you’s sleeping your heart keeps right on beating...’
‘...And you living and ain’t thinking about living at all...’
‘Sort of scares you when you think about it.’
‘Yeah, it makes you shaky when you think how little stands between you and death.’
‘Death’s an awful thing!’
‘No matter how you try to figger it out...’
‘...And a man’ll go nuts just wondering about it.’
‘Look like you ought to have more’n one chance at dying...’
‘...Like them cats that got nine lives.’
‘Yeah.’
‘Wouldn’t seem so bad, then.’
‘Naw.’
‘But you can never have a chance like that.’
‘Never!’²²⁴

Feelings of fatigue transition into brief reflections on death, sleep as a kind of living death:

²²⁴ Ibid., p. 137-8.

‘Ever dream you was falling...’

‘...and wake up and find yourself sweating’.

‘Lots of times’.

‘I dreamed about step last night’.

‘Gee, I had a funny dream. I thought I was trying to put out a building that was on fire’.

‘I dreamed about a river, a big, slow moving, deep river. There was a boat running down the middle of it all piled high with cotton.’

‘I dreamed I was out in the woods hunting, just shooting a gun. *Bloom! Bloom! Bloom!*’

‘But I don’t like to dream about dead folks!’

‘Hell, naw!’

‘Say, you ever seen a ghost?’

‘Plenty times!’²²⁵

Leaving their bodies on the sorting room floor, Jake, Al, Bob and Slim then board a phantom train through what might be described as the unconscious of western culture, or more precisely, world culture refracted through the prism of the US history. If the middle passage and the *longue durée* of slavery severed material links to Africa, perhaps the greatest casualty of Northern industrialization, the Great Migration and the ’29 crash was the syncretic Christianity that had that sustained hope in an otherwise hopeless situation. Wright represented a new generation of African-Americans who were not merely indifferent to religion, but came to see it as one of the crucial mechanisms for maintaining the status quo. Yet Wright was not so naive as to portray his own rational skepticism as a hard-won triumph over superstition, or advocate on behalf of simple atheism. Thus the remnants of religion, more specifically of the US’s unique blend of religion and profit-seeking, erupt into the four friends’ makeshift séance.

Jake and his friends come across a piece of mail ‘sent out by a guy what calls himself Saint Paul’. One side of the letter advertises ‘THE EVERLASTING DAMNATION RAILWAY CORPORATION: The Quickest and Shortest Route to the Hottest Depths of *H E L L*’. Stops along the way include ‘Highball Lagoon, Adultery Depot, Greed Mountain, Gambling Pause, Ingersoll Canyon, Evolution Grounds, and Communist Junction’. It is signed, ‘Prince Lucifer,

²²⁵ Ibid., pp. 138-9.

President'.²²⁶ The other side of the letter advertises "THE SALVATION AND REDEMPTION RAILWAY COMPANY, INC.!!!", with stops at 'Meditation Valley, Crucifixion Canyon, Faith Bend, Hope Lagoon, Holy Vineyards, Temple of Joy', and is signed 'Jesus Christ, President'.

Wright's unconscious runs contrary to Cedric Robinson's- it is scarred, corrosive- true.

At various stops along the way this spiritual chaos self-organizes into political grievance, the 'dead bodies' of tradition are suddenly revived and ready confront this strange new world.

'The white folks tricked 'im'

'They giving Joe the same old screwing they gave Jack Johnson'

'The white folks just ain't going to let no black man get to the top'.

'Naw; just when you think you's nearly there they's done tripped you up.'

'You see, they think if they let *one* black man rise that high, then *all* the rest of the black folks'll want to rise'.

'Yeah, the white folks'll treat *one* black man all right, but when it's more'n one they gets hard.'

'They're scared...'

'...and mean.'

'Aw, boy, they's watching us'.

[...]

'I wonder if there is anything a white man won't do?'

'They make us live in one corner of the city'.

'...like we some kind of wild animals...'

'...then they make us make anything they want for the rent...'

'...cause we can't live nowhere but where they tell us!'

'I remember when they use' to run us out of our homes with bombs'.

'Even when you'd dead, they tell you where to go'.

'Land, today! Jim Crow graveyards!'

The voice grows nostalgic for refuge in the South

'Boy, the South's good...'

²²⁶ Ibid., pp 140-1.

‘...and bad!’

‘It’s Heaven...’

‘...and Hell...’

‘...all rolled into one!’²²⁷

At the same time, what the voice says about women reminds us of Lenin’s resistance to the wiles of Beethoven’s music:

‘But old Joe oughtn’t’ve married that dame.’

‘Hell, naw!’

‘That woman’ll make ‘im weak’.

‘You know a woman ruined old Samson’.²²⁸

...

‘And that feeling a woman gives you!’

‘Jeeesus!’

‘Boy, it’s a terrible thing!’

‘It’s like fire!’

‘Like ice!’

‘Like a ‘lectric shock!’

‘It knocks you out!’

‘It gets you all over...’

‘...In your head...’

‘...And legs...’

‘...And thighs...’

‘...Like somebody pouring warm water over you!’

‘It lifts you up and then it lets you down...’

‘...And you want to go to sleep...’

‘...But in a little while you want to go again.’

‘It’s a funny feeling.’

‘It’s the greatest feeling in the world.’

²²⁷ Ibid., p. 149.

²²⁸ Ibid., p. 147.

'Yeah, but a man couldn't stand that feeling for long.'

'Naw, he just couldn't bear it.'

'It'd kill him.'²²⁹

This fear of women, or rather fear of feeling itself, foreshadows the third and final part of the book, 'Rats' Alley'. After work, Jake and his friends visit a brothel, drenching themselves in drink, food, women and music. In the patriarchal world of Homer's *Odyssey*, women are indeed objects of fear and desire. The goddess Calypso keeps Odysseus for her own entertainment and from his home for years; Circe's magic turns men into swine; the Sirens simply devour all who cannot resist the pull of their song. Such settings offered Joyce the chance to revel in Rabelasian play, upending the pompous masquerade of high bourgeois culture in a way that brought Bloom and Daedalus together at last. But it cannot serve the same purposes for Wright. His protagonist's epiphany has already come and gone, in that brief moment of common feeling, which itself was barely conscious of itself. The brothel, like the church, has historically functioned as an incubator for black culture, especially its music. But Wright drains this setting of any convivial atmosphere. Because we know that Jake is in debt and living check to check, that the money in his pocket is not his, the overwhelming sense is instead one of dread. After handing over the last of his loan (plus tip) to the Madame, Jake and his friends join the revelers.

Shouts, laughter, and snatches of song swung through the smoky air. A threepiece jazz band- a coronet, a drum, and a piano- made raucous music in the corner. There were gamblers, pimps, petty thieves, dope peddlers, small fry politicians, grafters, racketeers of various shades, athletes, high school and college students in search of "life", and hordes of sex-eager youngsters.²³⁰

Jake and his friends experience sensory overload, a cornucopia of temptations,

The women were white, ivory, yellow, light brown, medium brown, solid brown, dark brown, near black, and black. They wore red, yellow, brown, blue, and black gowns with V shapes reaching down almost to their waists. Their bosoms were high and bulging, and they dance with

²²⁹ Ibid., p. 162.

²³⁰ Ibid., p. 168.

an obvious exaggeration of motion.

Jake's attempts to liven things up fall on deaf ears, while the muted music taunts them from the next room-

"Let's dance, folks", said Jake in a dead tone.

"O.K. with me," sighed Al.

No one moved. The music in the front room was now going so loud that they heard it even through the partitions. Feet went thrumpthump, thrumpthump, thrumpthump... The house seemed to rock in a vast darkness. The monotonous rhythm was like a thousand fingers tapping the taut skin of a kettle drum in the midst of a deep forest. At intervals the muffled cry of the cornet rose up and died away like the midnight wail of a lovesick tomcat. The piano moaned like a woman in labor.²³¹

After finishing a bottle of whiskey, the four friends

...glided onto the floor in answer to the call of the music. Their limp bodies swayed bonelessly to every tug of the rhythm. The air was heavy and damp. They tightened their arms as the music grew, personal, selfish, sexual. Their eyes became vague and dreamy. Stomach rubbed stomach. Sweat beaded on black temples. Nostrils gleamed. Thick lips grew wet and sagged, trembling when bodies were swung. Now and then a slight moan was heard; it was as though someone had become so charged with emotion that he could contain it no longer. The pounding piano, the incessant shuffling of feet, and the sobbing cornet invoked a spirit of emotional surrender so intense that its driving force manifested itself in the hard, drawn lines of their faces. Feet went thrumpthump, thrumpthump, thrumpthump...²³²

This is not a utopian enclave, but a waking nightmare full of strange apparitions and disembodied wailing, the reanimated corpse of black culture channeling a purer blues shorn of the rugged individual's ironic distance and all unfulfilled pathos:

²³¹ Ibid., p. 173.

²³² Ibid., p. 175.

As Jake danced his head was tilted backward. The expression upon his face was peculiar, paradoxical; it was relaxed and flabby, yet somehow eager and watchful. There was in it a sort of childish trustfulness. The music caroled its promise of an unattainable satisfaction and lured him to a land whose boundaries receded with each step he took. When the music slowed he felt tired, but when it went faster, he went faster. Each time it reached a high of pitch of intensity he verged on the limits of physical feeling, as though beyond this was nothing but sleep, death; but when it sank, quavering, sighing, disillusioned, his muscles slackened, hungering for more.²³³

This is ritualized catharsis without the promise of lasting relief or redemption— catharsis commodified. It culminates in a simulation of sacrifice to the tune of ‘Is it true what they say about Dixie’: a young girl breaks away from her dancing partner, ‘flinging her legs and arms in all directions’,

The rest paused, formed a circle about her and began to clap their hands, each clap falling midway between the beats of the music and creating a sharp and imperious syncopation. The girl’s eyes rolled wildly; her head bobbed back and forth while she flung her limbs heavily as though she were drugged with warm wine. She advanced with the palms of her hands holding hard to her thighs and retreated with the tips of her fingers pressed deep into the soft flesh of her stomach. The dance became slower and slower till nothing moved but the muscles in her hips. Finally she gaped her mouth like a fish out of water and sank to her knees, moaning:

“Lawd... Lawd...”²³⁴

But the climax never comes (or perhaps that is the climax)- the scene reaches a fever pitch just as Jake realizes he’s been robbed. The crowd abruptly turns on them and they are hounded out of the club.

Unlike Odysseus, Jake Jackson cannot rely on a *deus ex machina* that would provide him with the instructions necessary to sail safely past the deadly Sirens. Nor is there any homespun

²³³ Ibid., p. 176.

²³⁴ Ibid., p. 201.

Molly to keep a bumbling Leopold on the straight and narrow. Like Joyce, Wright gives the woman the last word, but it could not be further from Molly's orgasmic affirmation. After subduing a broke, drunk and violent Jake, Lil' mutters to herself, 'Lawd, I wish I was dead'.²³⁵ The line recalls the opening epigraph of Eliot's 'Wasteland', a fragment lifted from the first-century Roman prose-poem *The Satyricon*, in which the immortal priestess Sibyl of Cumae responds to the question of what she wants with what she cannot have: 'I want to die'. Like Sybil, Wright's characters seem suspended in time, undead- the past a heap of fragments, the future non-existent, the relief of sleep and the fleeting charms of song and sex serving only to prolong their misery. The final lines leave no room for hope, 'Outside an icy wind swept around the corner of the building, whining and moaning like an idiot in a deep black pit'.

The structure of the book suggests that any common feeling fostered by a disciplined workplace will be undermined, materially and spiritually, by the informal system of leisure, the vast and intricate nighttime economy waiting to greet them the minute they punch out. There seems to be break in the cycle of impoverishment, no way out of Jake's damaged life, no space-time to dream. The book's overwhelming mood is one of anxiety- it is literally impossible to relax save for the accidental space opened up by time-work discipline. Recreation and music serve only to reinforce the trap and prolong the suffering.

Lawd Today! is darkly comic, but what really sets it apart from Wright's other novels is its contemptible protagonist, and the ambivalence of Wright's relationship with him, as the portrayal veers between unsparing and sympathetic. Yet by the end we understand that Jake Jackson is a product of his material conditions of existence. The book is thus doubly untimely: not only does it disregard the imperative to uplift that black authors took for granted at the time, it also cuts against the tendency to romanticize the working class that prevailed on the left. Indeed what is most unique about the book is its refusal to ascribe automatic redemptive powers to the black cultural tradition. Enslaved ancestors are degraded fodder for a game of dozens between Jake and his friends, which ends abruptly when one laughs so hard he hacks up blood. Warm memories of Sunday church services are overtaken by the sight of an attractive young waitress, or crushed by the inertia of another day's work. When Jake and his friends are awed by the extreme skill of black

²³⁵ Ibid., p. 189.

performers in a parade celebrating a Garveyesque repatriation movement, the moment is undermined by the presence of politicians and thieves.

Wright published novels were never this experimental. But there are signs of the writer he turned out to be- a rationalist whose commitment to intellect and enlightenment comes with a healthy suspicion of the body and pleasure. Wright's pessimism, the recurring motifs of sleep, dreams and death, harks back to Schopenhauer and Wagner's *Tristan*, save for the fact that love can hardly be said to be the reason for Jake and Lil's suffering. Unlike both Homer and Joyce, the suspense of Wright's novel stems not from a love forestalled and under threat (which in Homer is so absolute it could be resumed after decades, while in Joyce it withstands minor infidelity), but rather simply from the harrowing experience of being black and poor in America, a situation in which music is one opiate among many to be indulged while waiting for a day of judgement that never comes.

This was not Wright's final word on the intersection of black music and politics. Nor did he stop experimenting with ways capturing the experience of black America. *12 Million Black Voices*, published in the wake of *Native Son*'s success, takes up another modernist technique, photography and documentary. The images of revelry and conviviality that accompany the following passages provide a stark contrast to the nightmare scenes of *Lawd Today!*

Alone together with our black folk in the towering tenements, we play our guitars, trumpets and pianos, beating out rough and infectious rhythms that create an instant appeal among all classes of people. Why is our music so contagious? Why is that those who deny us are willing to sing our songs? Perhaps it is because so many of those who live in cities feel deep down just as we feel.

We are able to play in this fashion because we have been excluded, left behind; we play in this manner because all excluded folk play. The English say of the Irish, just as American says of us, that only the Irish can play, that they laugh through their tears. But every powerful nation says this of the folk whom it oppresses in justification of that oppression.²³⁶

²³⁶ Richard Wright, *12 Million Black Voices* (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 1941), pp. 127-8.

Wright identifies the city as a hub of modern alienation, where the contagion of black music spreads more readily amongst whites than it does in rural areas, where the myth of blood and soil still offers some immunity against it. He echoes Douglass and prefigures Leroi Jones's argument: Afro-America's penchant for profound play is not natural, but rather the direct result of thwarted aspiration, of coming up against the limits of the culture and being thrown back upon its own devices, but the sad twist is that it also often serves to justify the status quo.

II. Fragments of Walter Benjamin: Aesthetics, Aura and Mimesis

Wright's bleak vision is a product of this specific moment in time- between the wars, after both the stock market crash and the peak of Harlem's prestige- and has much in common with that being developed by Walter Benjamin and Theodor Adorno. The Frankfurt Institute for Social Research also emerged between the wars, and its members came of age during Weimar's unprecedented cultural radicalism. Both associated and sympathized with leftwing movements despite serious reservations about certain philosophical presuppositions- the inexorable logic of history that made communism's victory inevitable- and much disturbing news from Moscow in the aftermath of the Bolshevik Revolution.

Benjamin was steeped in European culture and history, but was inspired by the avant-gardes to experiment with new forms of criticism, art, and what might be called 'consciousness raising'. In 1928, he and Ernst Bloch experimented with hashish. Benjamin took meticulous notes:

I thought with immense pride of sitting here on the street in Marseilles in a hashish trance; of who else might be sharing my intoxication this evening; and of how few actually were. Of how I was incapable of fearing future misfortune, future solitude, for hashish would always remain. The music from a nearby nightclub that I had been following played an extraordinary role in this wholly intermittent stage.

The music, which meanwhile kept rising and falling, I called 'the rush switches of jazz'. I had forgotten on what grounds I had permitted myself to mark the beat with my foot. This is against my education, and did not happen without inner disputation.²³⁷

²³⁷ Walter Benjamin, *On Hashish*, ed. Howard Eiland (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006), p. 54.

Under the influence, Benjamin effortlessly *names* the sounds he hears wafting out of the cafes, but is startled when the music compels his body to move in time, like the automata that appear throughout his work. The contentment he feels is somehow *disturbed* by that movement- a part of Benjamin rejects his body's intervention into the dream state, fears what feels like a loss of control. The music seems to tap into everything his bourgeois upbringing has conditioned him to repress. But the hashish experiments resulted in one of Benjamin's most durable theoretical terms:

Boundless goodwill. Falling away of neurotic-obsessive anxiety complexes. The sphere of "character" opens up. All those present take on hues of the comic. At the same time, one steep oneself in their *aura*.²³⁸

In subsequent work, Benjamin's lengthy speculations about the relationship between aura, the body and utopia would lead Adorno to protest, 'It is as if, for you, the human body is the measure of all concreteness'.²³⁹ Central to these speculations was the concept of mimesis. In a fragment from 1933 titled 'On the Mimetic Faculty' Benjamin argues that mimicry is 'the production of similarities'.²⁴⁰ Nature produces similarities of its own accord, but mankind has the 'highest capacity' for it. 'His gift for seeing similarity', he writes, 'is nothing but a rudiment of the once powerful compulsion *to become similar and to behave mimetically* (emphasis added). There is perhaps not a single one of his higher functions in which his mimetic faculty does not play a decisive role'. Benjamin experienced that primal compulsion under hash's influence, when his foot mimicked, or became similar to, the rush switches of jazz.

Benjamin argues that there are two kinds of similarity, sensuous, which is 'commonplace', and non-sensuous, where we find the mimetic faculty: 'it is nonsensuous similarity that establishes the ties between what is said and what is meant but also between what is written and what is meant, and equally between the spoken and the written'. In other words, sensuous similarity arises when two concrete things clearly resemble each other, which we recognize everywhere in nature. Non-

²³⁸ Ibid., p. 19.

²³⁹ Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings Volume 3, 1935-1938*, eds. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), p. 432.

²⁴⁰ Walter Benjamin 'On the Mimetic Faculty', *Selected Writings Volume 2, part 2, 1931-1934*, eds. Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland and Gary Smith, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005), pp. 720-722.

sensuous similarity has to do with the much more abstract realm of meaning, with how, for example, the words ‘jazz’ and ‘rock’, spoken and written, come to denote specific patterns of vibrating matter. Benjamin further distinguishes between two aspects of language: the written and the semiotic. The semiotic is the ‘bearer’ through which ‘the mimetic element in language can, like a flame, manifest itself:

Thus, the *nexus* of meaning of words or sentences is the bearer through which, like a flash, similarity appears. For its production by man- like its perception by him- is in many cases, and particularly the most important, tied to its flashing up. It flits past.

Meaning is not reducible to word or thing, it’s in the nexus between them, the indescribable moment we realize that some relationship obtains between them, that they are somehow the same despite their differences, a moment whose ‘flashing up’ is sacred, indeed a kind of magic, making something else out of something, like the phantom voice that emerges when singers perform in close harmony. This is the sense in which the mimetic arts, the presentation or play of concrete similarities, are utopian. They are the meeting point of matter and imagination, body and spirit. “‘To read what was never written’”, Benjamin muses, ‘such reading is the most ancient: reading prior to all languages, from entrails, the stars or dances... It seems fair to suppose that these were the stages by which the mimetic gift, formerly the foundation of occult practices, gained admittance to writing and language’.²⁴¹ Mimesis was for antiquity ‘the primal phenomenon underlying all artistic activity’. In another note, Benjamin attempts to break it down:

The mime presents a subject as a semblance. (And indeed, the earliest imitation knew only one material in which to work: the body of the imitator himself.) Language and dance (gestures of lips and body) are the first manifestations of mimesis. The mime presents a subject as a semblance. One could also say that he plays his subject. And here we have touched on the polarity which lies as the root of mimesis.

²⁴¹ Benjamin, *Vol. 2, part 2*, p. 722.

The polarity is dialectical, both things at once- the actor is *acting* best precisely when he seems to cease acting and *becomes* his subject- so what we experience in the presence of mimesis is always two-fold: obvious artifice together with the semblance of naturalness. This also applies to music, provided we change the terms slightly. Music is organized and therefore artificial, but at the same time is most powerful when it suddenly seems to *be* the thing- emotion, affect- itself. One is aware of this in the presence of instrumental virtuosi, who seem to have no barrier between inside and outside, such that their music flows from inside to outside immediately, *like* a force of nature. That white supremacy has at best understood this as a sign of Afro-America's biological propensity for song, at worst as proof of its essentially primitive disposition, and in neither case as the result of years of training, should not deter us from this deeper insight. Benjamin writes that German Idealism, the guiding philosophy of the bourgeoisie, had 'coarsened' antiquity's understanding of 'beautiful semblance', this dialectical sense of mimesis, because it 'forfeited its basis in experience', i.e. it was committed to analytical abstraction as a sole means of discovering truth. 'That experience', writes Benjamin, 'resides in aura'. To experience aura is to apprehend 'the beauty of a veiled object', which it is art's vocation to produce this experience:

Art... is a suggested improvement on nature: an imitation that conceals within it a demonstration [of what the original should be]. In other words, art is a perfecting mimesis. In mimesis, tightly folded like cotyledons, slumber two aspects of art: semblance and play.

A few years later, Benjamin brings these musings to bear on the disintegrating political situation in Europe. He notes that a 'different utopian will... is asserted in revolutions'. This 'first nature' utopian will, he argues, issues from the body and comes into conflict with its other, 'second nature' utopian will, which desires socio-technical advancements and aims at perfect planning. The distinction between concrete and abstract thus unfolds at a higher level, with second nature utopian will forgetting its origin in the needs of the body, and becoming a fetish at the body's expense. This polarity, between *knowledge* of similarity (second nature) and the *play* that produces that knowledge (first nature), also lies at the root of social revolutions, which are

...innervations of the collective- attempts to dominate the second nature, in which mastery of

elemental social forces has become a prerequisite for a higher technical mastery of elemental natural forces. ... a twofold utopian will asserts itself in revolutions. For not only does the collective appropriate the second nature as its first in technology, which makes revolutionary demands, but those of the first, organic nature (primarily the bodily organism of the individual human being) are still far from fulfilled.

A final fragment from 1936 reasserts the importance of aesthetics: 'The knowledge that the first material on which the mimetic faculty tested itself was the human body should be used more fruitfully than hitherto to throw light on the primal history of the arts'.²⁴² We're not far from being able to ground Fredrick Douglass's premonition that aesthetics in some sense precedes epistemology. Benjamin suggests that the latter is in fact rooted in the former, that the faculty that allows us to recognize and produce similarities also underpins language and formal logic. Modernity is another name for the process whereby the faculty of reason becomes untethered from mimesis, hence the 'increasing fragility of the mimetic faculty' in the wake of the industrial revolution and the increasing dominance of capitalism.

This gets at the heart of Benjamin's bent toward metaphysics or mysticism, what in his thinking remains hard to square with Marxism, as well as what is confusing about his widely read 1936 essay on the relation between aesthetics and politics, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproducibility'. Here, aura gets more attention than mimesis, but it is never quite clear where Benjamin stands on its ostensible disappearance as a result of mechanical reproducibility. The very idea of 'the beauty of the veiled object' would have scandalized the likes of Benjamin's friend Brecht, for whom veils were simply ways of mystifying the means of production. In other words, Benjamin seems to be saying that there's something inherently (naturally?) fetishistic about human behavior, that playing with boundary between artifice and nature, delighting in the moment when one appears to be the other, when the part seems quite literally to *become* the whole and thereby the focus of our libidinal energy, is fundamental to our species-being.

'The Work of Art...' imagines the Soviet model of cultural production, seemingly unaware that the latter had been directly inspired by what was happening in the US. Lenin had to speed Russia's transition from a largely agrarian-feudal economy to that of a competitive, industrial

²⁴² Benjamin, *Vol. 3*, p. 253.

powerhouse. Benjamin thus takes ‘mechanical reproducibility’ as the distinguishing feature of the new mode of production, arguing that it will radically diminish the aura that had surrounded art since archaic times, and which the bourgeoisie had learned to exploit for its own purposes. ‘Even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be’.²⁴³ But here, aura is understood simply as an instrument of mystification and oppression; not the ‘heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions’, but merely an ‘opiate of the people’. With mass-produced copies proliferating and circulating around the world, these vestiges of ritual, piety, and power that clung to even the most modern artworks would wither.

In contrast to the ‘aestheticized politics’ of fascism, communism’s ‘politicized art’, such as documentary photography and montage cinema, would enhance the critical powers of the masses, fostering a state of ‘distraction’ that would allow them to both absorb and sustain the shocks of modern life. But if mimesis and aura are in some fundamental sense both cause and effect of art, and as such an essential part of humanity, then their imminent destruction should be cause for some concern. Benjamin had almost nothing to say, here or anywhere else in his vast body of work, about the art of music, despite its importance in antiquity, not only in terms of Greek myth and drama, but also politics and philosophy. The absence of music in such an ambitious essay on the history of aesthetics is quite glaring, leading one to suspect that its inclusion might have undermined some of its central premises. Would mechanical reproducibility have the same impact on music? What indeed would aural art be without its aura? And if it survived, what would that mean for critical apprehension of the masses?

‘The Old-Timer’s Insult’: Adorno in America

One might be tempted to rescue [regressive listening] if it were something in which the ‘auratic’ characteristics of the work of art, its illusory elements, gave way to playful ones. However it may be with films, today’s mass music shows little of such progress in disenchantment. [...] It is illusory to promote the technical-rational moments of contemporary mass music - or the special capacities of regressive listeners which may correspond to these moments – at the expense of a

²⁴³ Benjamin, ‘The Work of Art...’, p. 101.

decayed magic... the technical innovations of mass music really don't exist.²⁴⁴

When Adorno fled Germany 1935, he settled first in Oxford, before moving on to New York in 1938, where he lived and worked until 1941. During this time he was closely involved in both theoretical and empirical research, as a member of the Institute for Social Research and as part of the wide-ranging Princeton Radio Research Project.²⁴⁵ While Benjamin's earliest works were formative for Adorno, late essays like 'The Work of Art...' provided grist for his withering analysis of the emerging culture industry. In looking at Adorno's writing from the late '30s, we must remember that at that point, popular music *was* jazz- or at least jazz-like, more swinging than straight. 'In retrospect', one historian has observed, 'there was very little of what we consider as jazz in the Jazz Age. Ballads, comic songs and songs from Broadway musicals provided the material for the most popular recordings'.²⁴⁶ Professional blackface mimic Al Jolson was billed as 'the world's greatest entertainer', as Paul Whiteman was the 'king of jazz'.

'Jazz' had come to signify 'all popular music with a syncopated beat'. Just as my parents' generation had 'pop-rock' (a.k.a. 'adult contemporary'), and mine had 'pop-punk'— industry-approved copies of the original— Adorno was dealing with pop-jazz. And he was doing so in the context of an increasingly stratified and efficient system of for-profit cultural production. 'In 1938 about 33 million records were sold. The Big Three record companies were RCA Victor, Decca and Columbia/ARC...'. That meant mergers and acquisitions, thus 'the companies involved in making talking machines and records were no longer independent organizations devoted to recording sound but parts of larger businesses that embraced several technologies and manufactured several kinds of products'.²⁴⁷ Adorno was working in the radio division of the National Broadcasting Corporation.

'On the Fetish Character in Music and the Regression of Listening' was written just months after he arrived in the US, in the summer of 1938.²⁴⁸ It thus serves as a culmination of his thoughts on the fate of music in contemporary capitalist society up to that point, and is the beginning of his

²⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 56.

²⁴⁵ Theodor Adorno, *Current of Music*, ed. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009).

²⁴⁶ Andre Millard, *America On Record: A History of Recorded Sound* [Second Edition] (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 106.

²⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 174-5.

²⁴⁸ Theodor Adorno, *The Culture Industry: Selected essays on mass culture*, ed. J.M. Bernstein, (New York: Routledge, 1993).

response to Benjamin that he would carry on for the rest of his career. As we will see, Adorno already had misgivings about aura's disappearance, and his empirical research in the US only reinforced his skepticism, leading him later in his career to develop an aesthetic theory that could genuinely articulate the connection between art, politics and society.

The key discursive distinction during this period was between 'light' and 'serious' musics. The latter was the western art or 'classical' music canon, which vied for airtime with the increasingly jazzy tunes from Tin Pan Alley. For most of the twenties, jazz (that is, 'Negro music' played by a band) went on elsewhere, in Northern nightclubs and on Southern street corners. But it was precisely this difference between serious and light that Johnson's Ex-Coloured Man had tried and failed to reconcile, that James Reese Europe attempted to circumvent after returning from the war. For Adorno, the distinction reflects deep-rooted social contradictions that art alone could not overcome:

The unity of the two spheres of music is thus that of an unresolved contradiction. They do not hang together in such a way that the lower could serve as a sort of popular introduction to the higher, or that the higher could renew its lost collective strength by borrowing from the lower. The whole cannot be put together by adding the separated halves, but in both there appear, however distantly, the changes of the whole, which only moves in contradiction.²⁴⁹

If these writers and musicians still held out for an artful synthesis of 'black' and 'white' musics that would pave the way for a 'universal culture', the culture industry systematically thwarted this possibility. Musicians who lacked the means to resist commodification and disappear into the art world had to leave field, church, corner, club and salon behind for an incorporated entertainment system that reconfigured the latter as aggregates of markets populated not by listeners but consumers.

Adorno's 'On Popular Music' is a far more conventional essay, complete with sections, headers, paragraph breaks and clear and concise explanations of key concepts. It distills and develops much of what the previous essay presumes and passes over too quickly. After two years working with the empirical data collated by the PRRP, Adorno was even more committed to

²⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 35.

certain concepts, namely 'standardization,' 'pseudo-individuality' and its correlate 'pseudo-activity'. Standardization is not as simple as it sounds, however. Adorno's explanation is typically dialectical:

For example, the difference between the spheres [of light and serious music] cannot be adequately expressed in terms of complexity and simplicity. All works of the earlier Viennese classicism are, without exception, rhythmically simpler than the stock arrangements of jazz. Melodically, the wide intervals of a good many hits... are more difficult to follow per se than most melodies of, for example, Haydn, which consist mainly of circumscriptions of tonic triads, and second steps. Harmonically, the supply of chords of the so-called classical is invariably more limited than that of any current Tin Pan Alley composer who draws from Debussy, Ravel, and even later sources.²⁵⁰

Pseudo-individualization conceals standardization, giving the impression of difference where there is none. If people knew they were being given the same thing over and over again, he assumes, they would naturally revolt. But the only guarantee of profits is standardization, so the latter must be hidden. It is precisely 'backward' nature of the creative process that hides standardization- the song appears to be part of the 'natural' evolution of music itself and thus maintains an air of authenticity. This is combined 'pseudo-individualization', or 'endowing cultural mass production with the halo of free choice or open market on the basis of standardization itself'.²⁵¹ In the brief, composed improvisations of the jazz-pop composition we perceive a semblance of autonomy, individuality, difference from the norm which obscures the underlying structure, the same set of chords and progressions that in fact leaves 'very few possibilities for actual improvisation'.

Another key process is 'plugging', which encompasses the various and sundry ways in which popular music must be *repeated* in order to be accepted, from musical forms themselves (verse-chorus-verse-bridge-chorus) to their promotion. Adorno obviously had premonitions of Goebbels' famous 'big lie' theory of propaganda- 'What is repeated again and again accumulates the prestige of social establishment. The listener is led to believe that it is repeated either because it is

²⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 284-5.

²⁵¹ Ibid., p. 288.

particularly good or because so many people like it'.²⁵² And indeed jazz was on the cutting edge of this procedure:

The plugging of certain styles is exemplified in the word 'swing'. The term has neither a definite and unambiguous meaning nor does it mark a sharp difference from the period of pre-swing hot jazz up to the middle thirties. The lack of justification in the material for the use of the term arouses suspicion that its usage is entirely due to plugging- in order to rejuvenate and old commodity by giving it a new title'.²⁵³

Given the status of critical, let alone Marxist, thought at places like Princeton and NBC, it is not surprising that we must return to the earlier essay in order to find Adorno drawing more pointed conclusions, indeed performing his own a variation on Marx:

[All] contemporary musical life is dominated by the commodity form; the last pre-capitalist residues have been eliminated. Music, with all the attributes of the ethereal and sublime which are generously accorded to it, serves in America today as an advertisement for the commodities which one must acquire in order to be able to hear music. [...] To be sure, exchange value asserts its power in a special way in the realm of culture goods. For in the world of commodities this realm appears to be exempted from the power of exchange, to be in an immediate relationship with the goods, and it is this appearance in turn which alone gives cultural goods their exchange value.²⁵⁴

This is the culture industry's key con: the more authentic the product, the more direct or 'immediate' the relation between producer and product appears to be, the more one can charge for it.

This brings us to the concept of the fetish, or, the fixation on the part over the whole. As we have seen, Benjamin's notes on mimesis suggest that fetish-making is an essential part of human experience, the aesthetic roots of language, logic and reason. Adorno is less concerned with origins,

²⁵² Ibid., p. 292.

²⁵³ Ibid., p. 297.

²⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 38.

contending rather than capitalism, like fascism, commandeers and exploits our tendency to fetishize. Popular music fosters and maintains fetishistic listening. The argument presupposes a tight homology between aesthetics and politics: what transpires in the realm of the former reflects and reproduces the latter. The organization of a piece of music as a whole is homologous with the organization of society as a whole. In serious music, the parts enhance and are enhanced by the listener's understanding of the whole structure or system in which they unfold. Bereft of any overarching structure or compositional principle, light music is mere succession of parts designed for maximum sensory stimulation. Just as the products on department store shelves appear to be totally cut off from the relations of domination and exploitation that produced them, commodified music reflects in its very form the receding or repression of this knowledge from consciousness.

...[It] is contemporary listening which has regressed, arrested at the infantile stage. Not only do the listening subjects lose, along with the freedom of choice and responsibility, the capacity for conscious perception of music... but they stubbornly reject the possibility of perception. [...] They are not childlike... But they are childish; their primitivism is not that of the underdeveloped but that of the forcibly retarded. Whenever they have a chance, they display the pinched hatred of those who really sense the other but exclude it in order to live in peace, and who therefore would like to root out the nagging possibility. [...] Together with sport and film, mass music and the new listening help to make escape from the whole infantile milieu impossible.²⁵⁵

Adorno's notion of regression speaks to Wright's exhausted protagonists, who are a far cry from the upstanding, if no less beleaguered, bourgeois race representatives we found in the earlier stories, as well as the atmosphere of enervated horror that pervades the scenes at the nightclub. Adorno also speaks directly to Benjamin's theory of 'distraction'- an emancipated mental state that supposedly emerges after the destruction of 'aura's powers of absorption- but clearly considers this a negative social development. Jake Jackson is what happens when the culture 'makes the perception of the whole impossible' by keeping consumers in a state of content physical tension, whose only relief comes in the form of products that reinforce the system of exploitation. Jake's

²⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 46-7.

frame of mind 'is simultaneously one of distraction and inattention', and this is 'bound to the present mode of production, to the rationalized and mechanized process of labor to which, directly or indirectly, masses are subject. This mode of production, which engenders fears and anxiety about unemployment, loss of income, war, has its non-productive correlate in entertainment; that is, relaxation that does not involved the effort of concentration at all'.²⁵⁶

One often finds Adorno preempting criticisms that he is too deterministic- 'Nobody believes so completely in prescribed pleasure' - only to double down with an insistent reformulation of his main point:

But the listening nevertheless remains regressive in assenting to this situation despite all distrust and all ambivalence. As a result of the displacement of feelings into exchange value, no demands are really advanced in music any more. ... [Ears] which are still only able to hear what one demands of them in what is offered, and which register the abstract charm instead of synthesizing the moments of charm, are bad ears. [...] There is actually a neurotic mechanism of stupidity in listening, too; the arrogantly ignorant rejection of everything unfamiliar is its sure sign. Regressive listeners behave like children. Again and again and with stubborn malice, they demand the one dish they have once been served.²⁵⁷

In listening to light music, you always know where you are and where you're going. The music submits to 'you' and the pleasure derives from all the things you already recognize, even in the newest hits- the brief intro, the subdued verse, the bridge into the explosive chorus, the 'solo', the slight return. By contrast, serious music demands a certain level of submission; it takes you to places you can't anticipate, populated with much you don't recognize. The lack of demanding music, Adorno argues, creates listeners who no longer know how to make demands themselves; the synthesizing capacity of the ear atrophies, leaving a raw nerve that can barely withstand contact with the difference.

We must remind ourselves that when Adorno invokes the 'retarded listeners' of jazz-pop, it is from the perspective of an exile from the Old World, whose headlong slide from republican bohemianism into barbarism he had witnessed first-hand, coping with the shock of the new,

²⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 308-9.

²⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 51.

knowing that modernity was a double-edged sword. What may seem like exaggeration today stems from experience rather than cultural prejudice, serves as a warning against false hope, abstract enthusiasm, the dissolution of the rational individual in the ecstasy of an exclusive, nativist, nationalist collective. From Adorno's perspective, the gyrations of the jitterbug— 'beetles whirring around in fascination'— resemble (or mimic) the fanaticism for the Führer. What began necessarily as a form of resistance, the illicit property of those who were themselves property, has now become part of the dominant culture, and that transubstantiation is not without consequence.

Their ecstasy is without content. That it happens, that the music is listened to, this replaces the content itself. The ecstasy takes possession of its object by its own compulsive character. It is stylized like the ecstasies savages go into in beating the war-drums. It has the convulsive aspects reminiscent of St. Vitus's dance or the reflexes of mutilated animals.²⁵⁸

For Adorno, the regression of listening is a sign of imminent social catastrophe:

Regressive listening is always ready to degenerate into rage. If one knows that he is basically *marking time*, the rage is directed primarily against everything which could disavow the modernity of being with-it and up-to-date and reveal how little has in fact changed. [...] The regressive listeners are in fact destructive. The old-timer's insult has its ironic justification; ironic, because the destructive tendencies of the regressive listeners are in truth directed against the same thing that the old-fashioned hate, against disobedience as such, unless it comes under the tolerated spontaneity of collective excesses.²⁵⁹

When Adorno writes about jitterbugs, I think we can assume he's talking mostly about young white dancers, the self-styled jazz *connoisseurs* or hipsters as they would come to be known. But here he comments on the something closer to the genuine article:

A visitor to a Harlem jazz palace is struck by the changes from frenzy to apathy in the behavior of negro listeners. This behavior has more to do with the modern factory than with the extreme

²⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 53.

²⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 56.

moods of primitives. The aping by jitterbugs of negro strawmen is an apology for relieving boredom by pseudo-primitivism. The jitterbug's primitivity resides in his modernity.

The pattern [of dancing] imitated is supposed to be negro. How far the aboriginal Harlem jitterbug is the legitimate heir to primitive religious ecstasy and to what extent he is a commercial artefact is a question for the anthropologist. It may be taken for granted, however, that the adaptation to this sort of frenzy by whites is a pseudo-morphosis. There is no tradition of idolatrous mass ecstasy surviving after 2,000 years of de-paganization.²⁶⁰

Here Adorno describes the vicious cycle in which Jake is trapped, and the process by which, as we see in *Lawd Today!*'s unsettling climax, black culture itself becomes a fetish.

To escape boredom and avoid effort are incompatible- hence the reproduction of the very attitude from which escape is sought. To be sure, the way in which they must work on the assembly line, in the factory, or at office machines deny people any novelty. They seek novelty, but the strain and boredom associated with actual work leads to avoidance of effort and that leisure-time which offers the only chance for really new experience. As a substitute, they crave a stimulant. Popular music comes to offer it. Its stimulations are met with the inability to vest effort in the ever-identical. This means boredom again. It is a circle which makes escape impossible.²⁶¹

But this is where Adorno overstates his case:

If the commodity in general combines exchange value and use value, then the pure use value, whose illusion the cultural goods must preserve in a completely capitalist society, must be replaced by pure exchange value, which precisely in its capacity as exchange value deceptively takes over the function of use value. The specific fetish character of music lies in this *quid pro quo*.

²⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 311.

²⁶¹ Ibid., p. 310.

'Pure' values of any kind are as fictive and vague as the notion of a 'completely capitalist society'. Yet exaggeration leads to insight, as we discover in the following sentence how cultural commodities frustrate and impede the development of social relations beyond exchange- 'The feelings which go to the exchange value create the appearance of immediacy at the same time that the absence of a relation to the object belies it'- or in other words, just as an opera house may be full of individuals for whom being seen to be listening is more important than listening, a large collection of race records does not necessarily imply a large number of black friends. Once again, Adorno waits until the final paragraphs to offer reasons for hope:

But the closer the will, the decision, the histrionics, and the imminence of self-denunciation in the jitterbug are to the surface of consciousness, the greater is the possibility that these tendencies will break through in the mass, and once and for all, dispense with controlled pleasure. They cannot be altogether the spineless lot of fascinated insects they are called and like to style themselves. [...]

In order to become a jitterbug, or simply to like popular music, it does not by any means suffice to give oneself up and to fall in line passively. To become transformed into an insect, man needs the energy which might possibly achieve his transformation into man.²⁶²

From these works, it is clear that Adorno thought Benjamin's optimism was unwarranted, that he had cast his net too widely (*all* works of art?), and that the ultimate target of his criticism was too narrow (the threat of fascist politics, but not American business). Moreover, the methodology was all wrong: like the masses of workers making widgets for machines they will hardly see let alone possess, Benjamin fixated on one moment- distribution- rather than demonstrating how the latter functioned within a much larger totality, mediated by the demands of production. Indeed such demands were by now global in scope: by 1936, sound had revolutionized the film industry, and the power of Hollywood was such that more conventional, and more profitable, 'realist' narrative techniques quickly became the norm. The techniques favored by Benjamin and pioneered by the

²⁶² Ibid., p. 325-6.

likes of Sergei Eisenstein and Fritz Lang in the silent era would now have to be smuggled into the mainstream by *auteurs* like Wells and Chaplin to avoid being blacklisted.

Adorno leaves us with this impasse, which it will henceforth be the function of commodities, no matter how they are produced or distributed, to shore up. For Adorno, the schema of mass culture was a sure sign that capital could adapt to any situation- that its would be gravediggers would soon enough find themselves absorbed by the phantasmagoria of consumption. While Adorno could agree with Benjamin that the new mode was reconfiguring faculties and experiences that had been crucial to the culture of the Old World, he was at best ambivalent about the prospect.

As with Wright, there is an overwhelming sense with Adorno that the enemy had already emerged victorious. Industrialization had proven utterly anathema to culture as Adorno understood and experienced it. He took Lukacs's theory of reification to its extreme limit, arguing that monopoly capitalism's intensification of the division between mental and manual labor impoverished bourgeois and proletariat such that they are 'torn halves, which, however, do not add up'. The proletariat's status as revolutionary agent could no longer be taken for granted. The structural asymmetry between bourgeois and proletariat 'implies displacement between production and consumption which determines the *status quo* but does not change it, and which appears to be permanent, rather than an inherently unstable situation'.²⁶³ The culture industry was a wasteland, not a new terrain of struggle. The question of whether all that commodified music would do anything other than reproduce the power of capital was a non-starter. On the matter of cultural production, it seems that Adorno's thought comes to a standstill, reified- undialectical. At the same time, as a critic of the process commodification, too often mystified today as 'cultural appropriation', he was far ahead of his time. This applies as much to his lament over the fragmentation of symphonic form at the hands of Hollywood as it does to his notorious critique of Paul Whiteman's 'symphonic jazz'. Adorno's analysis anticipates all the problems that would plague musicians whose very refusal to conform to the status quo's 'standards of intelligibility' became the basis of their popularity.

²⁶³ Gillian Rose, *The Melancholy Science: An Introduction to the thought of Theodor Adorno* (London, Verso: 2014).

If Benjamin's distance from the actual effects of mechanical reproducibility resulted in naïve optimism, Adorno was too close to the culture industry to see beyond it. Yet what emerges from the material in *Current of Music* is an emphatically critical account of an industry in its infancy, still reeling and reshuffling after the '29 crash and more than a decade away from the dominant, globe-straddling position it came to occupy in the second half of the century. Despite Adorno's premonition that the worst had already transpired, this was a moment of transition, where power was dispersed. Here he reflects on how working in the US transformed his thinking:

In America I was freed from culture-bound naivety, and acquired the ability to see culture from the outside. To give an illustration of what I mean: for me, in spite of all social criticism and consciousness of the predominance of the economy, the absolute relevance of spirit [*Geist*] had always been self-evident. That such self-evidence no longer had any validity at all was something I was apprised of in America, where there was no tacit respect for anything to do with spirit [*Geist*], unlike in Central and Western Europe across the so-called educated classes: the absence of this respect induced the spirit towards critical self-determination.²⁶⁴

But the process of commodification he witnessed was really the first of its kind, the first time an industry systematically extracted the formula, abstracted from concrete aesthetic experience, and repackaged it for the white majority, and he simply didn't stick around long enough to catch the resistance it brought into being. Bebop was indeed also a first, the first 'underground' music to eventually storm the barricades of mainstream taste. And if the effects of mechanical reproducibility on music ran precisely counter to both Benjamin's hopeful forecast and Adorno's baleful premonitions, this had everything to do with the *content* being mass produced and distributed. The spirit-aura of black art had been induced from vastly different metaphysical presuppositions and historical experiences- a metaphysics of the middle passage, commodification of the whole psycho-somatic structure.

Adorno left New York City just as these culture wars were beginning. If he hadn't, perhaps he would have witnessed the way spirit survived in music and the politics of culture survived the process of commodification. And yet, though he is referring to his modernist peers, Schoenberg

²⁶⁴ Quoted in Max Paddison, *Adorno's Aesthetics of Music* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 9.

and Webern, 'Regression...' concludes with a fitting description of the artists who would soon reclaim black music from the culture industry's grip.

Their music gives form to that anxiety, that terror, that insight into the catastrophic situation which others merely evade by regressing. They are called individualists and yet their work is nothing but a single dialogue with the powers which destroy individuality – powers whose 'formless shadows' fall gigantically on their music. In music, too, collective powers are liquidating an individuality past saving, but against them only individuals are capable of consciously representing the aims of collectivity.²⁶⁵

Conclusion: The Black Critique of Jazz-Pop

Returning now to contemporary discussions among leading black critics and musicians, we can see Adorno was not alone in his critique of jazz-pop. Unlike Adorno, however, black critics were naturally in two minds when considering the subject publicly, divided by their desire to affirm the music's very existence and widespread popularity, and to criticize the appropriation and exploitation of both artist and music on which, as we saw in the previous chapter, the industry's profits had depended since its inception. In *The Negro and His Music*, published in 1936, Alain Locke writes, 'We have to reckon with two types of worthwhile jazz, as distinguished from the trashy variety'.²⁶⁶ He notes the difference 'between "mere surface jazz" and the real solid variety. The one is a mere set of musical tricks by which any tune whatsoever can be "ragged" or "jazzed"; the other is an organic variety of jazz rhythm, harmony and creative improvisation. Surface jazz is the cheap alloy of 'Tin Pan Alley.' Indeed it seems that for Locke, 'The Jazz Age' was already a thing of the past. 'Commercialisation' has 'borne with ever-increasing blight upon the healthy growth of this music'. Like Adorno, Locke saw that by the mid-'30s, jazz was firmly established within totality of the United States' particular brand of modernisation. He thus speculates on the larger implications of its popularity:

²⁶⁵ Adorno, 'Regression...', p. 60.

²⁶⁶ Alain Locke, *The Negro and His Music* (Ayer Co Publishing, 1936), pp. 82-83.

Then there is the theory of emotional escape, seemingly contradicting this first theory of emotional rejuvenation. Jazz, according to these theorists, was a marvelous antidote to Twentieth Century boredom and nervous exhaustion, a subtle combination of narcotic and stimulant; opium for the mind, a tonic for the feelings and instincts echoing the quick nervous tempo and pace of the hectic civilisation of ours, which had originally caused neurasthenia and disillusionment. It would be a curious fact if jazz really was such a cultural anti-toxin, working against the most morbid symptoms of the very disease of which it itself was a by-product.²⁶⁷

To bolster his claim that capitalism had ruined jazz, he cites none other than Louis Armstrong, then 35 years old:

We can now look back and see the mistakes and see about where jazz got sidetracked. Jazz lost its originality and freshness and stopped growing. It stopped early. Jazz went down the easiest road where the big money was... [For] the most part, the new songs that have been coming out of 'Tin Pan Alley'...are not really new at all. They are the same old melodies and rhythms just twisted around in a different way and with different words. Coarse beats or sticky-sweet phrase, and all that, year after year. It makes good musicians tired, for they are the ones who are doing the most to break up these worn-out patterns... [In] the early days, when jazz was born, it wasn't that way at all.²⁶⁸

²⁶⁷ Locke, p. 96.

²⁶⁸ Alain Locke, *The Works of Alain Locke*, ed. Charles Molesworth, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 146.

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I think the majority of musicians are interested in truth, you know – they, well, they’ve got to be because a thing, a *musical* thing, is a truth. If you play and make a statement, a musical statement, and it’s a valid statement, that’s a truth right there in itself....so in order to play those kinds of things, to play truth, you’ve got to live with as much truth as you possibly can.

– John Coltrane

Introduction

I begin this chapter with a debate between Ralph Ellison and Leroi Jones/Amiri Baraka over the connection between music, memory and political consciousness. I then trace the emergence of ‘Amiri Baraka’ from Jones’s early experimental novel and poetry to his classic essay, ‘The Changing Same: R&B and the New Black Music’. In its restless quest for what Werner Sollors calls ‘populist modernism’, Jones’s early drama and prose self-consciously mediates between race, class and western literary canon. The first leg of our journey terminates in his first and only novel, *The System of Dante’s Hell*. Like Wright, Jones ditched the more experimental trappings of modernism early on for a more sociological style, documenting the present through the prism of concrete history of black culture, especially its music. The figure of Amiri Baraka emerges in his

now-classic essay ‘The Changing Same: R&B and the New Black Music’. The essay is significant for the way it weaves aesthetic theory, autobiography and history- Euro, African, and African-American- around the polarities of the sacred and the profane. As theorized by Jones, rhythm and blues and the ‘New Black Music’ (the most experimental jazz of the time) parallel mimetic traditions stretching back to the earliest clashes between Western culture and its others.

Baraka’s essay refers to a short story by Henry Dumas, which itself plays with themes articulated by jazz musician Sun-Ra, which I pursue further, before returning finally to Baraka. In the end, I argue that Baraka reproduces many of the problems that had beset the ‘white’ avant-gardes of previous decades, and that these are compounded by racial essentialism and nationalism that is incompatible with the music and musicians he adores. Baraka and the Black Arts Movement’s theory of ‘blackness’ brings us back to the theoretical concerns of Chapter 1. Baraka’s critical position rarely reflected the views of the musicians themselves, signaling a fundamental discontinuity between discursive and mimetic practices, which will be taken up further in later chapters.

I. Ralph Ellison: Music, Memory and Political Consciousness

Salim Washington presents the parameters of cultural practice in the period just after World War II: ‘Both the culture of respectability and the defiant militancy that black political activists observed during the 1940s and 1950s had its analogue in the bebop musicians, who were at once transgressive and bourgeois. At this juncture, the jazz world experienced a great bifurcation between modern jazz (bebop) and black popular music (rhythm and blues)’.²⁶⁹ In *Black Talk*, Ben Sidran argues that ‘traditional notion of thirties as the “swing era”... appears one-sided’.²⁷⁰ In fact, ‘a rift opened up in the lower-class black community as the more sophisticated members- those who had become “world-wise” during the urban secularisation process- gravitated towards the jazz idioms and the more *country* members congregated around rhythm-and-blues’. The mainstreaming of swing resulted in music that was ‘less dynamic, less improvisatory, less blues-inflected and, on the political level, a containment of black mobility, a containment of the

²⁶⁹ Washington, “‘All the Things...’”, p. 31.

²⁷⁰ Ben Sidran, *Black Talk* (Edinburgh: Payback Press, 1981), p. 86.

economic and the social advances that might accrue to black artistic innovation', thus occurred in tandem with the self-conscious formation of a 'black underground'.²⁷¹ The depression, too, saw the color line aggressively redrawn. Black musicians' sense of empowerment evaporated as soon as they stepped off the bandstand, as they still faced lower pay, less recording opportunities, racism from the police and so on. Such 'status disparity', Sidran argues, heightened resentment and reinforced desire to turn their backs on the mainstream. If like all black musics jazz began underground and out of white earshot, it soon enough found itself caught within a structure of feeling that had been set in the past, but whose promise of freedom seemed to be coming true in the present. Like Romantics in the aftermath of the 1848 revolutions, jazz's 'own vocation for aesthetic change and for new and more radical artistic practices [found] itself powerfully reinforced and intensified by the dawning conviction that radical change is simultaneously at large in the social world outside'.²⁷² Through its relation to blues, spirituals and work songs, big band jazz had preserved the experience of emancipation after slavery, and had therefore served as an antidote to alienation throughout the '30s. But by the end of that decade it was quickly becoming a thing of the past, thanks in no small part to its commodification, which affected everything from the sound to the spaces in which it was performed. The Harlem Renaissance had had little effect on official race relations; in the late thirties, the Cotton Club was still extremely segregated. Meanwhile, Paul Whiteman and Benny Goodman both played Carnegie Hall in 1938, while Duke Ellington would have to wait until 1943.

Between swing, bebop and rhythm and blues, there was Ralph Ellison. In an essay on Richard Wright, Ellison argues that Wright 'saw his destiny – that combination of forces before which man feels powerless – in terms of a quick and casual violence inflicted upon him by both family and community. His response was likewise violent, and it has been his need to give that violence significance which has shaped his writings'.²⁷³ With the publication of *Invisible Man* in 1952, Ellison provided the light to Wright's dark early missive— what if that pit was preferable

²⁷¹ Nathaniel Mackey, 'Other: From Verb to Noun', in *The Jazz Cadence of American Culture*, ed. Robert G. O'Meally, (New York: Columbia University Press: 1999), p. 266.

²⁷² Fredric Jameson, *A Singular Modernity* (London: Verso, 2003), pp. 134-138.

²⁷³ Ralph Ellison, 'The Golden Age, Time Past', in *Living with Music: Ralph Ellison's Jazz Writings*, ed. Robert G. O'Meally, (New York, Modern Library: 2001 [1958]), p. 107.

to the idiotic world above ground? What if the varieties of intoxication and relief on offer are the very portals to history and tradition and nature that the sobriety of the real world seeks to efface?

Ellison's music writing brings us back to the problem of consciousness as it relates to the intersection of aesthetics and politics, or in Benjamin's words, the problem of 'politicized art'. For Ellison, music and memory are coterminous, as he illustrates in *Invisible Man's* Prologue, in which the protagonist takes a weed-induced journey back into the mists of black history, to the pentatonic blues of Louis Armstrong's '(What Did I Do To Be So) Black and Blue'.²⁷⁴ Memory, like culture, is no mere luxury, but a *necessity* (the unhappy singing slave). Ellison therefore scoffs at the idea that culture and political consciousness could coincide. There is indeed a sense in which the protagonist of that book never really comes to political consciousness as we understand it.

In 'The Golden Age, Time Past', Ellison reflects on his time spent in the place of bebop's birth:

Most of them, black and white alike, were hardly aware of where they were or what time it was; nor did they wish to be. They thought of Minton's as a sanctuary, where in an atmosphere blended of nostalgia and a music-and-drink-lulled suspension of time they could retreat from the wartime tensions of the town. The meaning of time-present was not their concern; thus when they try to tell it now the meaning escapes them. For they were caught up with events which made that time exceptionally and uniquely *then*, and which brought, among the other changes which have reshaped the world, a momentous modulation into a new key of musical sensibility- in brief, a revolution in culture.²⁷⁵

A 'revolution in culture' is therefore rarely *conscious* of itself as such. For black city-dwellers in particular, music as a social event had never simply followed from 'consciousness raising'. Quite the contrary, from the Clef to the Cotton to Minton's, the night club 'a sanctuary, where in an atmosphere blended of nostalgia and a music-and-drink-lulled suspension of time they could

²⁷⁴ Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (London, Penguin: 2001).

²⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 53.

retreat from the wartime tensions of the town'.²⁷⁶ Ellison reflects on the 'central figure of the cult' of bebop, Charlie 'Bird' Parker. Parker's playing 'was characterized by velocity, by long continued successions of notes and phrases, by swoops, bleats, echoes, rapidly repeated bebops- I mean rebopped bebops- by mocking mimicry of other jazzmen's styles, and by interpolations of motifs from extraneous melodies, all of which added up to a dazzling display of wit, satire, burlesque and pathos'.²⁷⁷

All told, the meaning of those moments was not present in the moment; it can only be grasped in hindsight:

Afterward the very effort to put the fragments together transformed them, so that in place of true memory, they now summon to mind pieces of legend. They retell the stories as they have been told and written, glamorized, inflated, made neat and smooth, with all incomprehensible details vanished along with most of the wonder- not how it was as they themselves knew it.²⁷⁸

Ellison then telegraphs his own complicated relationship with Marxism, in a riff on an oft-quoted passage from the Marx's Preface to *A Critique of Political Economy* ²⁷⁹:

Later, it is said, the boppers became engrossed in solving the musical problems which they set themselves. Except for a few sympathetic musicians, it was they who best knew the promise of the Minton moment, and it was they, caught like the rest of us in all the complex forces of American life which come to focus in jazz, who made the most of it. Now the tall tales told as history must feed on the results of their efforts.²⁸⁰

²⁷⁶ Ibid., p. 54.

²⁷⁷ Ibid., p. 68.

²⁷⁸ Ibid., p. 52.

²⁷⁹ 'No social order ever perishes before all the productive forces for which there is room in it have developed; and new, higher relations of production never appear before the material conditions of their existence have matured in the womb of the old society itself. Therefore mankind always sets itself only such tasks as it can solve; since, looking at the matter more closely, it will always be found that the task itself arises only when the material conditions for its solution already exist or are at least in the process of formation.' From the 'Preface to *A Critique of Political Economy*', in *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*, ed. David McLellan (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), pp. 389-90.

²⁸⁰ Ellison, *Living*, p. 64.

Thus what arises out of sheer necessity is later misremembered as a moment of self-consciously political social engineering: the utopian impulse is remembered as a utopian project, its participants politically *conscious* from the start. It is an origin fantasy where impulse and project perfectly coincide, one that too easily dispenses not only with the ‘complex forces of American life which come to focus in jazz’, but indeed on a deeper level with time as such. Ellison suggests that nobody knew better, or rather that it was not a matter of knowledge, but of need. Bebop, as he described it, was simply the sound of that confused moment.

Usually music gives resonance to memory (and Minton’s was a hotbed of jazz), but the music in the making here then. It was itself the texture of fragments, repetitive, nervous, not fully formed; its melodic lines underground, secret and taunting; its riffs jeering- “Salt peanuts! Salt peanuts!”- its timbres flat or shrill, with a minimum of thrilling vibrato. Its rhythms were out of stride and seemingly arbitrary, its drummers frozen-faced introverts dedicated to chaos. And in it the steady flow of memory, desire and defined experience summed up by the traditional jazz beat and blues mood seemed swept like a great river from its old, deep bed.

For most of those who gathered here, the enduring meaning of the great moment at Minton’s took place off to the side, beyond the range of attention, like a death blow glimpsed from the corner of the eye, the revolutionary rumpus sounding like a series of flubbed notes blasting the talk with discord.²⁸¹

Ellison’s prescient comments in the same essay about the significance of the new wave of soul and R&B, genres that lacked the didactic sense of purpose that jazz had fast accrued in tandem with the civil rights movement, and which emerged from the need to *forget* painful circumstances rather than be reminded of them. For Ellison, the notion of the ‘golden age’ obscures the truth of music used primarily as *relief* from the burden of political consciousness- from the politics of daily life and work to local, national and global modes of formal participation. Thus *Invisible Man*

²⁸¹ Ibid., p. 55.

‘offers its audience not the chance to transcend their condition but the capacity to cope with life’s unconditional onslaught’.²⁸²

Ellison once again recalls Marx, but sound remarkably similar to Benjamin too:

Man cannot express that which does not exist- either in the form of dreams, ideas or realities- in his environment. Neither his thoughts nor his feelings, his sensibility nor his intellect are fixed, innate qualities. They are processes which arise out of the interpenetration of human instinct with environment, through the process called *experience*, each changing and being changed by the other. Negroes cannot possess many of the sentiments attributed to them because the same changes in environment which, through experience, enlarge man’s intellect (and thus his capacity for still greater change) also modify his feelings- which in turn increase his sensibility, i.e., his sensitivity to refinements of impression and subtleties of emotion. The extent of these changes depends upon the quality of political and cultural freedom in the environment.²⁸³

As W. T. Lhamon Jr. writes, for Ellison ‘the idea was to return to the sustaining lore and traditions that preceded and- he demonstrated against the grain of his time- *were succeeding* modern despair’.²⁸⁴

Tracing the path from bebop to what Leroi Jones called the ‘New Black Music’, Kimberley W. Benston theorizes African-American modernism on the basis of the multi-disciplinary work of The Black Arts Movement, founded by Jones and fellow artists/critics in the 1960s. They understood ‘blackness’ as ‘a term of multiple, often conflicting, implications which, taken together, signal black America’s effort to articulate its own conditions of possibility’.²⁸⁵ Benston contrasts the previous generation, as represented by Ellison, and for whom there is simply no way around the mediation of language, with Jones’s milieu, whose blackness emanates from somewhere beyond discourse or representation. While Ellison accepts the estrangement

²⁸² W.T. Lhamon Jr., *Deliberate Speed: The Origins of a Cultural Style in the American 1950s* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), p. 50.

²⁸³ Ellison, *Living*, p. 112.

²⁸⁴ Lhamon Jr., *Deliberate*, p. 66.

²⁸⁵ Kimberley W. Benston, *Performing Blackness: Enactments of African-American Modernism* (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 3.

between experience and language, Baraka longs for an event or act that would reconcile the two. Put differently, he is searching for a theory that could articulate the sense of reconciliation between (free) subject and (oppressed) object that black music seemed to enact.

As we have seen, for Ellison music is essentially therapeutic, serving as powerful psychosomatic reminder of the rich legacies of resistance and overcoming in the face of oppression. He is therefore not interested in abstractions like 'blackness', nor is he much taken with the notion that African-American music could be instrumentalized to serve revolutionary purposes, in part to consolidate notions of 'black' and 'white' identity. In his cutting review of Jones's *Blues People*, Ellison writes, 'Jones sees bop as a conscious gesture of separatism, ignoring the fact that the creators of the style were seeking, whatever their musical intentions- and they were the least political of men- a fresh form of entertainment which would allow them their fair share of the entertainment market, which had been dominated by whites in the swing era'.²⁸⁶

Ellison's criticism of Jones's reductive class analysis, which sees the urban patrons of the blues as inevitably corrupted and corrupting and authentic blues rooted in the country, is worth quoting at length:

One would get the impression that there was a rigid correlation between color, education, income and the Negro's preference in music. But what are we to say of a white-skinned Negro with brown freckles who owns sixteen oil wells sunk a piece of Texas land once farmed by his ex-slave parents who were a blue-eyed, white-skinned, redheaded (kinky) Negro woman from Virginia and a blue-gummed, black-skinned, curly-haired Negro male from Mississippi, and who not only sang bass in a Holy Roller church, played the market and voted Republican, but collected blues recordings and was a walking depository of blues tradition? Jones's theory no more allows for the existence of such a Negro than it allows for himself, but that "concord of sensibilities" which has been defined as the meaning of culture allows for much more variety than Jones would admit.

²⁸⁶ Ibid., p. 126.

Technique was then, as today, the key to creative expression. Thus, Jones's theory to the contrary, Negro musicians have never, as a group, felt alienated from any music sounded within their hearing, and it is my theory that it would be impossible to pinpoint the time when they were not shaping what Jones calls the mainstream of American music.

Ellison's review was published in the New York Review on February 6th, 1964- three days before the Beatles played their own pop-rock-and-roll to 73 million people on the Ed Sullivan show.

Ben Sidran's characterization of bebop's conditions of possibly has much in common with Jones's. For both it was 'the cultural exclusivity, the *self-conscious* separation from mainstream America of black music and black culture that gives leverage to the notion of a black underground and to the conception of the underground as a potential base for social action'.²⁸⁷ Here the black music scene *prefigures* or anticipates the political scene: their 'ability to act as a group, politically, was to a certain extent predicated on their ability to act as a group *culturally*'. Shut out of work in the culture industry, fledging black musicians 'turned their rejection into an assertion of identity'.²⁸⁸ As the saccharine swing of Whiteman and Goodman oozed from the radios, underground music 'was becoming more non-Western because there was a need for an outlet for more primary black social aggression'.²⁸⁹ In contrast to the embourgeoisified ritual of a swing concert (sit still, listen and watch the conductor do his thing), the nascent underground offered a stark alternative in the stripped down form of rhythm-and-blues. Throughout the thirties, the ritual had fulfilled 'the need for a peculiarly black outlet of social activity, the 'ethnically singular' voice expressed through group catharsis'.²⁹⁰

Mimesis is a key concept in Benston's theorization of African-American modernism. In particular, Benston relates this to the collective or audience, which he describes as '...the central player in African-American modernism's drama of transformative consciousness'.²⁹¹ Second, he argues that the Euro-American tradition routinely sets itself 'in opposition to the intricate burdens of history and the sinuous responsibilities of remembrance'. For Benston, 'anti-

²⁸⁷ Sidran, *Black Talk*, p. 79.

²⁸⁸ Ibid., p. 82.

²⁸⁹ Ibid., p. 90.

²⁹⁰ Ibid., p. 93.

²⁹¹ Benston, *Performing*, p. 18.

theatricalism' is common to the cultural forms of both the Middle Ages and the Enlightenment. Moreover, 'the Enlightenment's evisceration of the performative sphere [occurs] alongside a pervasive concern with otherness and a compensatory fetishization of writing as foundation of authentic selfhood'.²⁹² Thus, the Euro-American avant-garde has no tradition of 'methexis'-participatory or collective practice.

By contrast, 'African-American modernism... augurs a sacramentalized performative present in order to redeem, not deny, the promissory notes of historicized subjectivity. The freedom it seeks dwells within, not beyond, collective resources of memory and desire.'²⁹³ The audience thus becomes a 'sense-altering body' in the 'complex interplay between mimetic aspiration and its continuous subversion, qualification, or transformation by performative 'rewriting' is, as we have seen, characteristic of African-American theatre, music and poetry in their shared quest for a mode of self-realization that is both transgressive and integral, for a site of being that is both revolutionary and rudimentary'.²⁹⁴ The phenomenology of the black modernist performance and reception can indeed become 'supra-mimetic', to the extent that it imitates or dramatizes black experience at the same time that it expresses of a desire to transcend it.

But Benston's many theoretical insights come at the expense of historical specificity. His theorizing sometimes mirrors Coltrane's constant revisions, or 'sheets of sound', succeeding aesthetically when they start to founder analytically. This becomes evident when he draws a line straight from the radicalism of the Black Arts Movement to the 'auto-critography' of post-structuralist theorists of the vernacular culture like Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Houston Baker Jr., whom we encountered in Chapter 1. Here the similarities are less marked than the differences.

Can we understand African-American modernism in a more grounded, historical fashion? In *A Singular Modernity*, Fredric Jameson historicizes European aesthetic modernism and specifies its changing *modus operandi*.²⁹⁵ He sees two 'moments' in modernism, linked by an increasing self-reflexivity. The pre- and inter-war period- the various avant-gardes from Dada to

²⁹² Ibid., p. 19.

²⁹³ Ibid., p. 21.

²⁹⁴ Ibid., p. 249.

²⁹⁵ Fredric Jameson, *A Singular Modernity* (London: Verso, 2003).

Futurism to Surrealism, Joyce and the Bloomsbury group, Schoenberg, Bartok and Stravinsky etc.-is characterized by its relatively lack of both popular and institutional support. On the whole, these movements did not overtly resist mass-culture, but, as we have seen, their potential audiences tended to be distracted by jazz and cinema.

Jameson further distinguishes between modernity, modernization and modernism and suggests that what is usually implied if not obfuscated by each term today: respectively, capitalism, 'development' (i.e. rationalization) and innovation. As a whole, then, modernism was more less hostile to the forces of 'progress' unleashed by the industrial revolution; was initially open to contact with peripheral cultures and, at least by the end of the century, was no longer convinced that the European culture was an ideal to which all others should aspire. As Jameson argues, given that so much of this art can be affirmed as a protest against the prevailing conditions of its day, it does no good to simply equate modernism with innovation for its own sake, to reduce it to a mere reflection of the irrational core of capitalist reproduction, what Marx called 'accumulation for the sake of accumulation'. Instead,

we should think of the quintessential modern gesture as one of taboo rather than discovery; or rather, that what look like innovations are, in the modern, the result of *a desperate attempt to find substitutes for what has been tabooed*. It is a model and a restructuration that shifts the burden of proof from the future to the past: modernism is seen as originating in an ever keener *distaste for what is conventional or outmoded*, rather than an exploratory appetite for the unexplored and undiscovered.²⁹⁶

In negating taboos, the modernist musical gesture provokes the negative response- *this is not supposed to happen; this is not music; this is not how you are supposed to play*. At first, everything about it feels 'wrong'. Yet as- or if- one carries on with it, it begins to feel like revelation of some ancient secret, for *whoever has the power and courage to break that taboo must know something we don't*. Lhamon describes listening Charlie 'Bird' Parker:

²⁹⁶ Ibid., pp. 126-127. My emphasis.

One first heard his speed and nimble chaos, the sound of someone extraordinarily attentive to the present moment. Then the structure supporting the music's surface discombobulations gradually appeared. Finally one realized the moving- even mortal- risks Parker took circumventing limits others accepted.²⁹⁷

One might argue that Jameson's theory is still too bound to the Hegelian movement of the concept, by which perception neatly glides into consciousness, consciousness into self-consciousness, self-consciousness into some sort of absolute knowing- just as his theory of utopia relies on a movement from inchoate impulse to articulate manifesto.

This would be too hasty. 'History', after all, 'is what hurts'.²⁹⁸ African-Americans were for centuries systemically denied access to the secular-Enlightenment tradition- a complicated, internally contradictory tradition toward which they would remain ambivalent. As our readings of Du Bois, Johnson, Wright and Ellison illustrate, long after emancipation, the double bind of full participation in the dominant culture was often too much to bear, especially when the music beckoned from the below. Literacy- the barrier of entry to the oppressor's culture- was hard won. Self-understanding in the master's discourse would always be seem compromised, fragile and conditional. But accepting that belated (and still incomplete) admission into the Great House of Culture allows us to note the astonishing rate at which 'the people who are called black' caught up with and went one better than their masters. Furthermore, it allows us to write the history of the black aesthetic 'into' a critical history of modernity.

Jameson's emphasis on negation and taboo rather than discovery and innovation is key, as it restores the sense of struggle to a history of suffering in which the *need* to express the inexpressible becomes paramount. This is precisely what is lacking in those post-structural anachronisms that project an abstract matrix of 'blackness' or a fully autonomous black aesthetic so far back in time that it becomes a-historical, an 'always already' and endlessly generative- ultimately, *instinctual*.

²⁹⁷ Lhamon Jr., *Deliberate*, p. 31.

²⁹⁸ Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca: Cornell University, 1981), p. 102.

By the late thirties, the taboo that needed breaking was that which prohibited black musicians *from being musicians*, which typecast them forever as entertainers (a taboo that Ellison’s cynical comment certainly reinforces). In Jones words, “These musicians seemed no longer to want to be thought of merely as “performers”, in the old Cotton Club-yellow hiney sense, but as musicians’.²⁹⁹ Benston argues that it is precisely the performative dimension of black modernism that differentiates it from the slavish reliance on the monolithic ‘work’ of composition, and the dictatorial relation between composer and orchestra and audience, that is the hallmark of the European tradition. It reminds us that the scene of performance always been vexed, only conditionally cathartic. To become a *musician* meant freeing oneself from the constraints of entertainment, determined as they were by the gaze of the overseer.

The System of Dante’s Hell, Leroi Jones’s first novel, was published in 1965. Like *Land Today!*, it is deliberately experimental, or Jones’s words, his ‘most self-consciously ‘arty’ text’³⁰⁰. Like *Invisible Man*, it takes Dante’s canonical text as its model, but is far less reverential. The first page shows us the structure of hell, the circles and the types of sinners that belong to them (and also serves as the table of contents).

	Neutrals
	Circle 1. Virtuous Heathen
	Circle 2. Lascivious
Incontinent	Circle 3. Gluttons
	Circle 4. Avaricious and Prodigal
	Circle 5. Wrathful
	Circle 6. Heretics*
	(1) Violent against others
Violent	Circle 7. (2) Violent against God, nature, and art

²⁹⁹ Leroi Jones (Amiri Baraka), 'Minton's', in *Black Music*, (New York, Akashic Books: 2010[1962]), p. 29.

³⁰⁰ Leroi Jones, *The System of Dante’s Hell*, in *The Fiction of Leroi Jones: Amiri Baraka* (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 2000).

...And so on. In the asterix, Jones notes that, unlike Dante, he puts heretics 'in the deepest part of hell', for it is 'heresy, against one's own sources, running in terror, from one's deepest responses and insights... the denial of feeling... that I see as the basest evil'.³⁰¹ So it is clear from the outset that Jones is using Dante to refine his own moral compass, to exercise demons, purify himself. As he describes it:

What I was trying to do was break away from European influences and the strong influences of many white poets who had affected my work. ... I was trying to find a voice, my own, and I needed to oppose myself to the European influence. Dante was an attempt to illuminate all the elements of myself to myself against the backdrop of European form.³⁰²

The protagonist, named Roi, puts the classics as well as the modernists on the firing line:

The first guy (he spoke to me grinning and I said my name was Stephan Daedalus. And I read Proust and mathematics and loved Eliot for his tears....

Please, you don't know me. Not what's in my head. I'm beautiful. Stephan Daedalus. A mind, here where there is only steel. Nothing else.

Thomas, Joyce, Eliot, Pound, all gone by & I thot agony at how beautiful I was. And sat many times in latrines fingering my joint.

Werner Sollors argues that Jones holds literature 'responsible for alienating the writer from his Black identity, [thus] it is not surprising that literature, though not Black music, is ultimately

³⁰¹ Ibid., p. 17.

³⁰² Jerry Gafio Watts, *Amiri Baraka: The Politics and Art of a Black Intellectual*, (New York: New York University Press, 2001), p. 88.

rejected as a form of masturbatory narcissism in a world demanding commitment'.³⁰³ Jones finds himself at a dead end, surrounded by lethargic, mumbling spirits whose aid could no longer be counted on in the face of these new realities.

Not long after his novel was published, Jones would declare that 'New Black Music is this: find the self, then kill it'. Sollors notes that in Baraka's early experiments in poetry:

The scream functions in a 'populist' as well as in a 'modernist' context: it is the scream of the oppressed and of the expressionist painting of Edvard Munch, the scream of political anger and artistic rebellion.³⁰⁴

Initially, the scream is leveled against the values of the black middle-class, epitomized by Ellison among others. Eventually, as the scream incorporates the whole history of oppression, black music becomes 'the jewel center of inspiration for Baraka's poetry of populist modernism'.³⁰⁵

II. The Changing Same: Jones/Baraka

In an essay from 1966, 'The Changing Same (R&B and New Black Music)', Baraka blends the content of *Blues People* with the condensed, telegraphic style of his early fiction and poetry.³⁰⁶ As well as a history and theory of the black aesthetic, the essay carries an autobiographical charge. Jones's analysis of black music lives in the tension between its sacred and profane dimensions, the different and conflicting consequences of race and class-consciousness, the need for a tradition and the desire to break from all traditions. It revolves around the fundamental problem of translating black music into writing, which necessitates thinking it as either 'one thing' capable of definition like any other (the typical assumption of the white critic), or as some thing beyond determination, a singular 'force', 'impulse' or 'spirit', as well as how these competing assumptions, when put into writing, are then related to the larger question of black identity.

³⁰³ Sollors, Werner, *Amiri Baraka/Leroi Jones: the quest for a "populist modernism"* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978), p. 146.

³⁰⁴ Ibid., p. 89.

³⁰⁵ Ibid., p. 90.

³⁰⁶ Leroi Jones (Amiri Baraka), 'The Changing Same (R&B and the New Black Music)', in *Black Music*, pp. 205-41.

Jones writes that religious and/or ritual purpose 'is always at the root in Black art, the worship of spirit- or at least the summoning of or such by force'. If the music's spirituality is abstract, this is a direct consequence of the systematic erasure of concrete black cultural forms:

The slave ship destroyed a great many formal art traditions of the Black man. The white man enforced such cultural rape. A "cultureless" people is a people without a memory. No history.

This is the best state for slaves; to be objects, just like the rest of massa's possessions.³⁰⁷

In a situation of systemic censorship, black culture was forced to adapt and develop in ways that both accommodated and resisted the force of white supremacist capitalist patriarchy.

The stripping away, gradual erosion, of the pure African form as means of expression by Black people, and the gradual embracing of mixed Afro-Christian, Afro-American forms, is an initial reference to the cultural philosophy of Black People, Black Art.³⁰⁸

That is to say, to understand 'Black People, Black Art', one must begin not with pure forms, but with this motley *bricolage* of beliefs systems and their corresponding aesthetic idioms. Jones imagines black music as an expression of a 'total environment' that is 'Black America'. But where are the boundaries of Black America and what passes through them? For Jones, black music collapses the distinction between form and content; the sound and the message 'are both mutually expressive of the whole. And they are both equally expressive... each have an identifying motif and function. In Black music, both identify place and direction. We want different contents and different forms because we have different feelings. We are different peoples'.³⁰⁹ The transition from description to declaration here is key, for what Jones describes is a music that is meaningful and expressive in every possible sense (a sort of perfect music), and one that nevertheless reflects the different, particular desires and feelings of its makers. By what means does black music attain such perfection? Jones writes that music 'makes an image',

³⁰⁷ Ibid., p. 207.

³⁰⁸ Ibid., pp. 207-208.

³⁰⁹ Ibid., p. 211.

referring to a short story by the young writer Henry Dumas, which appeared in the *Negro Digest* that same year.³¹⁰ The plot of ‘Will the Circle Be Unbroken?’ could be said to dramatize the contradiction articulated by Clay in Jones’s own *The Dutchman*:

Charlie Parker? Charlie Parker. All the hip white boys scream for Bird. And they sit there talking about the tortured genius of Charlie Parker. Bird would've not played a note of music if he just walked up to East 67th Street and killed the first 10 white people he saw. Not a note!³¹¹

In Dumas’s story, the music is no longer a means of sublimating the instinct to vanquish the oppressor- as it had been in *Land Today!* Nor is it a place of solitary refuge and stoned insight, as it was for the Invisible Man. As Jones reads it, Dumas’s surreal fantasy of a horn with the power to kill white people allows us to ‘understand the implications of music as an autonomous *judge* of civilizations’.

The short story is an oblique revision of the last episode in the Old Testament’s Book of Judges, the story of Samson, the last judge of Israel, which is itself rather challenging to decipher. Samson is immaculately conceived to deliver the Israelites from the Philistines. As a young man, he learns that he can channel the vengeful power of Yaweh at will. On his way to propose a Philistine, he effortlessly slays a lion. On his way to his wedding, he discovers the beast’s hollowed out carcass filled with bees and delicious honey, which he takes as a treat for himself and his parents. God has clearly touched Samson. But at his wedding, he courts doom: surrounded by Philistines, he recounts his double feat with the lion in the form of a riddle, promising riches to anyone who could solve it. As there were no other witnesses, the riddle cannot be solved, and seems a deliberate obfuscation. Insulted, the Philistines demand to know Samson’s secret, so they threaten his wife and her father with their lives to get their answer. Samson kills everyone in attendance. Later, he meets Delilah who cuts off his dreadlocks and

³¹⁰ Henry Dumas, ‘Will the Circle Be Unbroken?’, in *Dark Matter: Reading the Bones*, ed. Sheree R. Thomas, (New York, Aspect: 2005), pp. 105-110.

³¹¹ Leroi Jones, *Dutchman*, <http://faculty.atu.edu/cbrucker/Engl2013/texts/Dutchman.pdf> [Accessed 25 October 2017].

betrays him to the vengeful Philistines. As Samson is lead in chains through their Temple, he leans with all his might on its pillars and brings the edifice tumbling down, killing himself and everyone around him.

Probe, the protagonist of Dumas's story, has returned from exile with an 'afro-horn' that some whisper kills white people. It is a rare artefact, 'only three in the world', and not everyone can tap its powers. Probe has been practicing ever since he obtained it from a mysterious 'black peddler'.³¹² Others don't believe the hype, including an old white friend of Probe's who, with another white couple and the help of the Irish security guard, crash Probe's gig, which had been unofficially reserved for 'brothers and sisters only'. As Probe's playing grows more intense, the circle around the band tightens and transforms into a 'womb' being prepared for the afro-horn.

The blanket of bass rippled and the fierce wind in all their minds blew the blanket back, and there sat the city of Samson. The white pillars imposing... but how easy it is to tear the building down with motives. Here they come. Probe, healed of his blindness, born anew of spirit, sealed his reed with pure air. *He moved to the edge of his circle, rested his sax, and lifted his axe...*

By semantic and imagistic confusion, the passage above conveys the climax of Probe's performance as a surreal sensory overload - circle, womb, the bass as a *blanket*, but the *wind* (a gust or an instrument?) in 'all their minds' (performers or audience?) blows this bass-blanket *back* (from?) to reveal (where?) the 'city of Samson'... In this convoluted fantasy, music becomes autonomous *only* when it judges-

When he fell, his case hit the floor and opened, revealing a shiny tenor saxophone that gleamed and vibrated in the freedom of freedom.

³¹² Henry Dumas, 'Will the Circle Be Unbroken?', in Sheree R. Thomas (ed), *Dark Matter: Reading the Bones*, (New York, Aspect: 2005).

But the enigma of the story is this: is Probe a modern-day Samson at war with the uncomprehending Philistines? Dumas tells us that Probe's 'dark, full head' is the source of his power. Samson was raised according to the ascetic Nazirite oath, according to which he was forbidden to cut, and even comb, his hair. Dreadlocks are reported amongst ascetic sects of many religions in Egypt and the Horn of Africa (Ethiopia, Somalia, Eritrea and Djibouti). Is Probe Samson reincarnated, or is the child, immaculately conceived? Or is Probe the vengeful Philistine, set on destroying the city of Samson? It is hard not to read the 'imposing' 'white pillars' of the 'city of Samson' as the three white people in the audience. Jan, Ron and Tasha are called 'invaders' as they make their way into the club. Thus the correspondences to the original tale are there, but they don't line up. What gives?

In the same year these two pieces of writing were published, Dumas interviewed Sun Ra at Slug's Saloon, a 75-seat capacity jazz club on the Lower East Side of Manhattan, where the Arkestra would play from March through to late '67.³¹³ What's interesting is the tug-of-war between Ra's cosmic slop and Dumas's more earthly concerns. Dumas probes Ra on why humanity seems to have a death wish, and Ra refers to recent elections, which is about as conventionally political as the conversation gets.

Everyone has to be what they really are. That's what I really am. Somewhere else. I don't consider myself as nothing on this plane of existence cause it isn't anything here. It just looks like it is but it's not. ... What's the next act for planet earth? The finale. Will music be part of it? Music is gonna be the bridge... just the finale to traditional things. The traditional things got some meaning in 'em but... comes a time when you need something else. Or you might say you go out to buy some food and cook it, and you have to have some pepper and salt too, you have to have some seasoning.

Ra's certainly an alien, alienated from his musical peers and even his own band.

The musicians don't really know the extent of what I'm doing. If they did they would have to give credit, but they don't know that yet. Black Musicians? None of them, the white musicians are just beginning to stir in

³¹³ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pYyDguXs0Qk> [Accessed 7th Feb, 2017]

their sleep. But none of them really know the extent of what I'm doing, not even the fellas in my band. Every now and then they wake up a little bit but... it's because it's dealing with infinity, and it's kinda hard to expect a musician to deal with that when he hasn't been taught anything like that. He can't be taught it. The only way he can know about it is for it to be demonstrated... and that's the eternal thing.

Dumas wants in on the secret, he wants to know how this eternal thing relates to the current spiritual and political impasse, but Ra relates it all back to him- or whatever it is he thinks he represents:

What do you think is the problem with the black man? Well, the problem is that um... the problem is that he doesn't see me yet. He has one problem now, he doesn't see me. He has to see me first. He has to see that what I'm talking about is the bridge to, if he wants to go back to the past to be what he was- that's alright- and if he wants to go the future to be something greater than he was, that's alright too. It really doesn't make any difference, in infinity, it doesn't matter which way you go.

Do you think the black man is having blocks now, to keep him from seeing, blocks in front of his eyes... *Oh yeah he's had them, not just now, he's had them setup for him a long time, what they call God set it up for him, see that's God's job, to block people.* Now you're contradicting a lot of what so-called poets and writers and artists are saying, they're saying that, it's the white man that's blocking the black man's progress, what do you have to say about that? *The white man is Man, and Man is made in the image of God, so he can only do what God does. ... What does man have to do? He has to set up his camp to fight against God. [Man is the devil, and he's never fought back] He needs to get himself together and the only way to fight back against God is to fight the God in himself... get that straight... then they can do something.* Would you say the Negro in America is a dead soul? Yes...

Again, Ra flits between the esoteric and the crude:

I'm painting pictures of the things I know about, the things I feel... I'm painting pictures of another plane of existence, of something that's so far away that it seems to be non-existent.... it's a world of happiness... which people been looking for or say they want. But they haven't been able to achieve it... All their minds, their

intellects, some very intelligent men but they weren't able to do anything. And this planet is getting in a worse condition every day.

You come out of the Negro heritage, do you think that your music would touch Negroes first, before white people, do you think they're in more need of it than white people, or...? *Well, they aren't really in need of anything cause they're complete over in the world of the dead.* How do [...] people that are dead? *Some people might not be in need of rain and it rains, when there's a force of nature. That's what's going to happen, because you can't wait til they feel they needs something, when a force of nature is supposed to do something, it does it. And you might say I'm a force of nature, representing all the forces of nature. [So Adorno.] ... but people don't know anything about that... some people might... I saw in one book it said that when man reaches a state where he can't move forward, a force of nature inclines among them and achieves what they can't do. It's an African doctrine or African statement that that happens, that it always happens like that. It could be the wind, the sun, the rain, whichever force of nature is needed.* Why is it that the Africans now are in a state of turmoil, is this a transitory stage or... do you think this will change? *People still reap what they sow and the African put the so-called American Negro in slavery... Among these so-called American Negroes there were some people that's very valuable to this Being I'm talking about... and they all down in there, mixed up in there, and the world's never gonna have any peace until they've gotten out, away from white people, Negroes, wherever they are... they don't belong over in there.* As a representative, are you allow to give the name of the being? *Phone rings...*

There is more than a hint of despair in Ra's responses, and I think it reflects the state of the New Black Music at the time. Indeed it echoes that of the European avant-gardes, but the burden is much heavier, because the stakes are higher. Like their avant-garde predecessors, like Du Bois's John Jones, Ra and his young protégés were elite with no audience, a class of top-class artists with access to secrets that nobody else seemed to care about. Years of collective and solitary practice had landed them in empty bars. On the way to finding themselves, they lost their connection to the people. Is Probe's autonomy, then, a tragedy?

In the context of both the Book of Judges and the Bible as a whole, the story of Samson is entirely anomalous.³¹⁴ He is no upstanding character, either generally as a Jewish hero or an Israelite Judge; he was a child of god, yet born to parents who had not wanted children; nothing of his parents' backstory is divulged in any detail and his own name 'verges on anonymity. He is named by his unnamed mother. The nameless messenger of God does not suggest a name, and etymologically speaking, 'it may not be too farfetched to consider the text to be deriving the name "Samson" from the word for "name:"' 'Samson is virtually cut loose from any specific lineage. He has no progeny to continue his line, and he is buried by unnamed kinsmen'.³¹⁵ Perhaps this is link that attracted Dumas- Samson as motherless, homeless, cultureless child.

'It's true. It's true...' the astonished members of the audience remark. In one sense, 'it' is the rumor that had been circulating about Probe's axe; in another, 'it' is the music itself. Here Dumas thus concludes his story with the issue of musical verisimilitude, the 'truth content' of the musical statement. A music that manages to capture and express the authentic truth of African-American experience will destroy the uninitiated. Thus music's relation to death doubled- it now has to power to create and destroy life. Music's truth is synthetic- rooted in and verifiable only with regard to experience, unconstrained by logical necessity. Reading Dumas, said Jones, allows us to 'understand the implications of music as an autonomous *judge* of civilizations'. But what is the price of that autonomy? For the sake of his freedom, Samson brings the whole world crashing down.

In Dumas's story, music is a sort of vanishing mediator: the sax appears only to disappear, quietly substituted with the axe, which will rend the circle of oppression, the constitutive relations of domination between blacks and whites. Through this sleight-of-hand, Dumas shows how black music is and black music ain't, how the moment it dissolves into ether is simultaneously a radical intervention in reality. Dumas's posthumously published novel *Jonah and the Green Stone* was set to be part of trilogy entitled *Visible Man*, an bold retort to Ellison's *Invisible Man*, whose unnamed protagonist finds himself in situation after situation without quite knowing how he got there, until he ends up right where he started, alone and underground.

³¹⁴ Edward L. Greenstein, 'The Riddle of Samson', *Prooftexts*, 1.3 (1981), pp. 237-60

³¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 240.

Dumas's wager seemed to be that blackness, with all the pasts, presents and possible futures it entails, would make its world-historical appearance through the vehicle of black music, whose truths (and judgments) are unassailable.

Returning to Jones's essay, it is perhaps not surprising that he heard himself and his own struggles in the new black music. In the mid-fifties, the various strains of social revolution were converging. Not least of these were black struggles for civil rights and cultural recognition, both of which had to reckon the benefits and costs of broadcasting the message on television.

Jones oscillates between the poles sameness and difference: if the 'song and the people is the same',³¹⁶ the new black music and R&B nevertheless reflect very different classes of black people. Being 'extremely conscious of self', the New Black Music 'is presented as a consciously proposed learning experience', one that is both pedagogical and anagogical.³¹⁷ Still several years away from becoming a committed Marxist-Leninist, Jones nevertheless posits strict correlations between class and taste. Yet he is equally idealistic on behalf of blackness, concluding that such differences as expressed in the various genres are ultimately 'artificial, or they are merely indicative of the different placements of spirit', and offering a utopian image of a New Absolute Music:

For instance, use of Indian music, old spirituals, even heavily rhythmic blues licks (and soon electronic devices, by new music musicians point toward the final close in the spectrum of sound that will come. A really new, really all-inclusive music. The whole people.³¹⁸

Later he is more specific:

The return to collective improvisations, which finally, the West-oriented, the whitened, say is chaos, is the *all-force* put together, and is what is wanted. Rather than accompaniment and a solo voice, the miniature "thing" securing its "greatness". Which is where the West is.³¹⁹

³¹⁶ Jones (Baraka), 'The Changing...', p. 213.

³¹⁷ Ibid., p. 214.

³¹⁸ Ibid., p. 215-6.

³¹⁹ Ibid., p. 222.

It is clear that for Baraka, in the struggle between the (black) force of collective improvisation and bourgeois form of 'accompaniment and a solo voice', the former 'is what is wanted'. Further, he sets the word in opposition to the real, to truth itself, in much the same way that Daedalus perceived the implications of different sensory registers: 'Literary Negro-ness, the exotic instance of abstract cultural resource, say in one's head, is not the Black Life Force for long if we are isolated from the *real* force itself, and, in effect, cooled off'.

For all its profound oneness, that source now appears to Jones in bifurcated form. R&B is about love in the profane sense ('spiritual but no religious'), which is to say, it summons the traumatic legacy of enforced separation that has shaped the sociality of black America. R&B is about the fraught nexus of love and power, or the love of new found powers (The Jordans, the Promised-Lands, now be cats and women-flesh, and especially, dough'.³²⁰ The New Black Music stems from a different set of desires, where sophisticated experimentalism is placed in the service of a new spirituality. Jones writes: 'The meeting of the practical God (i.e. of the existent American idiom) and the mystical (abstract) God is also the meeting of the tones and moods, of the knowledge, the different musics and the emergence of the new music, the really new music, the all-inclusive whole'. Yet the very next line contradicts this universal with the particular: 'The emergence also of the new people, the Black people conscious of all their strength, in a unified portrait of strength, beauty and contemplation'.³²¹

Baraka writes in this tension between dualism and monism, between a theory of black and white 'worlds' of music running in parallel development, and a monistic theory of 'one' musical substance in constant development, catalyzed by the situation of black oppression and opposition. In the theory of parallel worlds, which calls forward to Gates Jr.'s theory of 'signifyin', being is playing: you simply play what and who you are. Thus the European scale 'will get only the sounds of an order and reason that patently deny most colored peoples the right to exist. To play their music is to be them and to act out their lives, as if you were them'.

³²⁰ Ibid., p. 217.

³²¹ Ibid., p. 220.

Ironically, Baraka's gestures towards a theory of black authenticity, of a blackness without *mimesis*, mediation, auto-generative, chthonic, are less strident when he considers the views taken by the musicians themselves: Archie Shepp's Marxism comes off as well-meaning if ultimately vain; Cecil Taylor is clearly far too in love with the 'West', 'but his music is moving because he is still Black...' ³²²; and Ornette Coleman is the noble savage bringing 'the elemental land change, the migratory earth man, the country blues person of old come in the city with a funkier wilder blues.' ³²³ Likewise, Baraka ignores Ayler's color-blind mysticism; the substance of Coltrane's spiritual ascent and Sun Ra's intergalactic spaceways are vaguely glossed as a mutual interest in 'spiritual evolution'- rather than the sustained engagement and principled critique with the heterogeneous political and aesthetic traditions of the West that they were. This is precisely when Baraka's rhetoric devolves into relatively banal abstractions:

But the content of the New Music, the New Black Music, is toward change. It is change. It wants to change forms. From physical to physical (social to social) or from physical to mental, or from physical-mental to spiritual. Soon essences.

Change

Freedom

and finally Spirit (but spirit makes the first two possible. A cycle again?)

What are the qualitative meanings and implications of these words?

There is the freedom to exist (and the change to) in the existing, or to reemerge in a new thing.

Essence³²⁴

Perhaps the question is not the 'blackness' or the essence of the new black music (Coltrane, Ayler, Ra, Coleman and Taylor), but rather what attracted these four African-American musicians to the variety of musical-cultural forms that sustained them throughout their most intense

³²² Ibid., p. 224.

³²³ Ibid., p. 226.

³²⁴ Ibid., p. 227.

periods of creativity (respectively, Indian raga and free jazz, traditional American folk songs, Egypt and dissonance, harmonologic universalism, and clustered ‘unit-structures’)- in other words, why, in this heated historical period, did they follow the musical material in *these* directions?

More generously, we might say Baraka is born out of momentary purging of Jones’s critical faculties. In letting down his defenses and submitting to the changing same, he words no longer analyze, they *become like* the music. But—

In comparison to signifying language, music is a language of a completely different type.

Therein lies music’s theological aspect. What music says is a proposition at once distinct and concealed. Its idea is the form [*Gestalt*] of the name of God. It is demythologised prayer, freed from the magic of making anything happen, the human attempt, futile, as always, to name the name itself, not to communicate meanings.³²⁵

Jones gets some good swipes at the Beatles and Bob Dylan and the white-controlled music business, but his musings on black music start to resemble Ra’s alienated, spaced-out idealism, where everything is everything, it’s all infinity, energy— except for some reason, that energy is black, emanates from blackness— and if you don’t get it, so much the worse for you.

It is an ominous world all right. You can say *spiritual*. You can say *Freedom*. But you do not necessarily have to be either one. If you can dig it. White, is abstract. A theory. A saying. A being... the verb... the energy itself, is what is beautiful, is what we want, sometimes, are.³²⁶

Towards the essay’s end, Jones defines black music ‘as the consciousness, the expression of where we are’. R&B and the New Black Music are ‘the same family looking at things differently’, on their way to a true ‘unity music... a social spiritualism...’ Maybe this held true for the black power generation, but the 80s would further fracture any familiar sense that had united the ‘black

³²⁵ Theodor Adorno, ‘Music, Language, and Composition’, in *Essays on Music*, ed. Richard Leppert, (Berkeley, University of California Press: 2002[1958]), p. 114.

³²⁶ Ibid., p. 239.

community'. If it is hard to imagine the music of 'James-Ra and Sun Brown', it is much harder to imagine the two living together.

Unsurprisingly, Jones signs off not with a point but with a chant:

That growth to include all the resources, all the rhythms, all the yells and cries, all that information about the world, the Black ommmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmm, opening and entering.³²⁷

Halfway through the sixties was the turning point for Jones, and indeed for a significant fraction of black America. When the essay appeared in 1966, Jones, on the verge of becoming Amiri Baraka, emboldened by his generation's 'perceived failure of the Harlem Renaissance and the 'integrationism' of the 1950s'.³²⁸ The Black Arts Movement was explicitly opposed to 'white aesthetic', and 'art for art's sake', that is, aesthetics divorced from ethics. Baraka and the Black Arts Movement attempted 'to forge an unbreakable link between artistic production and revolutionary politics', but as bell hooks writes

The black aesthetic movement was fundamentally essentialist. Characterized by an inversion of the "us" and "them" dichotomy, it inverted conventional ways of thinking about otherness in ways that suggested that everything about black was good and everything white bad.³²⁹

Though both R&B and the New Black Music were touched by black nationalism, the thrust of the music was away from reified notions of identity. The heavy weights of the new sounds were searching far and wide for new material. Coltrane's eastern orientation was well established by the mid-sixties,³³⁰ and when asked about the sad state of the world, he responded that the 'problem ... is not at the racial level but at the individual level. I don't know any criteria that can

³²⁷ Ibid., p. 241.

³²⁸ James Robinson, 'The Challenge of the Changing Same: The Jazz Avant-Garde of the 1960s, the Black Aesthetic, and the Black Arts Movement', *Critical Studies in Improvisation/Etudes critiques en improvisation*, 1.2 (2005), pp. 29.

³²⁹ bell hooks, 'An Aesthetic of Blackness', *Lenox Avenue: A Journal of Interarts Inquiry* (1; 1995), pp. 65-72.

³³⁰ Val Wilmer, *As Serious As Your Life* (London: Quartet Book, 1977).

differentiate a white musician from a black one; in any case, I don't believe they exist...it has nothing to do with questions of skin color.”³³¹

Ironically, the rise of the gospel impulse, the return of spirit to rescue a music that had outstayed its welcome (the cunning of mimesis and history), revealed another significant fracture within the ‘black community’. The New Black Music had lost its way, like John Jones returning from the Great House of Culture, having forgotten how to speak to the people. And so many of the musicians had that melancholy, the despair that education and class mobility can foster. There’s plenty of truth in ‘The Changing Same’, but it’s a kind of manic truth, a truth of transition and its attendant confusion, perhaps even fear that the coming insurrection would undermine the esoteric secrets Baraka and his peers had fought so long to acquire and were still determined to share. On the relation between critical theory and art, Adorno writes,

If thought is in any way to gain a relation to art, it must be on the basis that something in reality, something back of the veil spun by the interplay of institutions and false needs, objectively demands art, and that it demands an art that speak for what the veil hides. Though discursive knowledge is adequate to reality, and even to its irrationalities, which originate in its laws of motion, something in reality rebuffs rational knowledge. Suffering remains foreign to knowledge; though knowledge can subordinate it conceptually and provide means for its amelioration, knowledge can scarcely express it through its own means of experience, without itself becoming irrational.

In this chapter, we have considered Jones’s theorization of the black aesthetic as a ‘changing same’ and the ‘implications of music as a judge of civilizations’. The tension between an essentialist theory of blackness and the anti-essentializing praxis of the new black musics, whether esoteric jazz or worldly rhythm and blues, between the desire for an authentic black identity signified by the newborn in Dumas’s story and the sound of its constant dissolution in the music itself, led us to regard that possibility ambivalently. Baraka himself was between identities, and his criticism in this period is evidence that the politicization of art is no simple

³³¹ Chris Devito (Ed.), *Coltrane on Coltrane: The John Coltrane Interviews*, (Chicago, Chicago Review Press: 2010).

task. In the postwar era, the sacred and profane become inextricable, the distance between the country and the city, the church and the nightclub, diminished. These are the conditions for the popular modernism that is the subject of the next chapter.

6

Night Time is the Right Time: Popular Modernism, '69-'79

It is on the face of it perverse not to hear the great modernist evocations of subjectivity as so much longing for depersonalization, and very precisely for some new existence outside the self, in a world radically transformed and worthy of ecstasy. - Jameson

Works of art can fully embody the *promesse de bonheur* only when they have been uprooted from their native soil and have set out along the path to their own destruction. - Adorno

Introduction

In this chapter I theorize the music of '67-'79 as popular modernism. First I turn to Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory*, particularly his elaboration of Benjamin's notes on mimesis and its relation to music. I then look at The Chambers Brothers, Jimi Hendrix, Parliament-Funkadelic and Chic to argue that soul, funk and disco were the result of the massive structural changes in African-American life that began with the civil rights movement. What made this period 'the most liberated and open time in music', as Chic's Nile Rogers remembers it? I argue that popular modernism—populist, post-nationalist, technically and technologically advanced, richly historical, playfully ironic, and emphatically utopian—subverted the reification of blackness that

had forced jazz to retreat into either noise or nostalgia. One paradoxical effect was the ‘queering’ of black music, at the same time that black nationalism and the search for a ‘black aesthetic’ dominated the discourse. But the death of disco was also a sign that popular modernism had run its course. To be sure, ‘Golden Ages’ are always fictions, and this period in particular is haunted by the deep state- assassinations, surveillance and undying forces of US reaction. But the fact remains the aftermath of those struggles coincided with a period of unprecedented material prosperity for African-Americans (relatively speaking), which the culture of the decade came to reflect. Where jazz had been branching off in the late fifties, now genres like soul and rhythm and blues, whose conventions had crystallized by the late sixties, were also being taken to their outer limits, the themes with which they dealt became planetary, their scope universal. At the same time, there is coursing through all of this music and its producers a sense that freedom, in the US, is limited and fleeting, or at least not everything it’s made out to be.

In the fifties, the music industry was still organized along industrial lines: musicians experienced the same kinds of repetitive boredom during the recording and touring as those stuck in the factories. The stars of the sixties and seventies were not overnight successes; they were veterans of this system. So they were subject to, or subjectivated by, the bourgeois habitus at the level of the psyche, but the working class forms of drudgery. In addition, several of them had done brief stints in the military. As Washington notes, ‘During the 1960s the largest wave of black migration out of the South occurred, and, not surprisingly, the social and cultural changes that took place during this time were perhaps on a grander scale’.³³² Washington relates this to the emergence of free jazz, but I think it also account for jazz’s ultimate demise, the wholesale substitution of swing with groove that occurred in the late sixties. By the late sixties, the (rhythm &) blues and gospel influences had slowed jazz’s forward motion. As ever, Miles Davis’s work from the period takes its temperature: ‘Bitches Brew’ is both symptom and statement from the jazz titan that that the music’s distinguishing feature, swing, was out and groove was in. In considering this rapid ‘cycle of death and rebirth in black music’, Nelson George quotes the co-founder of Atlantic Records, Ahmet Ertegun:

³³² Washington, “‘All the Things...’”, p. 31.

Black people tend to think about the future more. Black musicians don't like to play in an old style; they prefer to play in today's or tomorrow's style. If you go down to New Orleans, you'll find some young white kids who play Dixieland; it is part of the heritage of that area. But it's very hard to find black people who play Dixieland today, unless they're very old. Because the young blacks have heard Miles Davis and Charlie Parker. They're thinking of what's next.³³³

George can't decide whether this is due to the dumbing down of 'black America' or the inherent contradictions of the culture industry— 'The black audience's consumerism and restlessness burns out and abandons new styles, whereas white Americans, in the European tradition of supporting forms and style for the sake of tradition, seem to hold styles dear long after they have ceased to evolve... Blacks create and then move on. White document and then recycle. In the history of popular music, these truths are self-evident'— but there is a kernel of truth in his claim.³³⁴ But George's take has been skewed by his patient attention to economic detail: too often he treats black and white audiences as segments of the market, the music as a kind of cultural property. He forgets that for the culture of the late sixties, especially for the young, black and white alike, boundaries of all kinds were breaking down. I would argue that from the late sixties and throughout the seventies, there is a sense in which black music and black politics were antithetical. While post-civil rights politics was increasingly governed by the search for stable black identity, the music was somewhere else. If the twentieth century can be characterized as an 'age of extremes', the period between Woodstock and Reaganomics unfolded, thanks to innovations in mass media, as a condensed series of utopian and dystopian projections. It was the peak of mass culture and a US public sphere that had begun with broadcast radio in the thirties, expanded with television in the fifties, and started to erode in the eighties with the advent of cable. In the seventies, culture was a terrain of struggle whose rules of engagement were still being rewritten with every new release, where victories meant previously unheard messages and voices and sounds broadcast throughout the nation, and by virtue of US hegemony, the world.

³³³ Nelson George, *The Death of Rhythm and Blues*, (New York: Omnibus Press, 1989), p. 93.

³³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 108.

Before looking at this moment, I want to return to Adorno's contemporary theorizations of the relationship aesthetics and politics- which is to say, the fate of modernism and the mimetic impulse in capitalist societies- in order to illuminate the ways modernism, under the right conditions, can lend itself to popular art.

I. Adorno: Mimesis and Music

I think we can separate Adorno's critical, largely negative and comparatively formulaic evaluations of the actually existing cultural mainstream in which he was immersed in both Germany and the US, and his speculative theoretical aesthetics of modernism, which he begins to pursue in earnest after he moves to Hollywood in 1944, as he was entering middle age. Apart from some characteristically harsh comments about the Beatles on German radio, Adorno seems to have engaged even less with contemporary culture after he returned to Germany. And yet *Aesthetic Theory* reflects Adorno's commitment to understanding the function and fate of radical art in capitalist societies- the very problems with which the new black musics were confronting at the time. Adorno's theorization of 'mimesis' allows us to think about the power of music as such, about performance and its relation to 'metaphysical experience' or simply 'damaged life' in the belly of late capitalism, and finally, to music's 'enigmaticalness'- its necessarily 'imageless' but nevertheless utopian anticipation of other times, spaces and social relations. Thus several decades after Benjamin's fragmentary reflections on the mimetic faculty and the work of art, Adorno collected his thoughts on aesthetics and politics together in massive manuscript that was left unfinished when he died suddenly in 1969. *Aesthetic Theory* is a palimpsest that certainly bears Benjamin's imprint, but is worked over with Adorno's own theoretical and aesthetic predilections (the critique of philosophy *Negative Dialectics* and the preference for music), as well as his experience as an exile in the US, and his return to Germany in the aftermath of the Third Reich. Though he uses examples from literature, poetry and the visual arts throughout, I think it's safe to assume that music serves as a, if not quite *the*, primary referent for 'artwork'. Adorno's interests ranged widely, but he was an experienced composer and music clearly occupied a large part of his theoretical mind (his debt to Schopenhauer, perhaps the first philosopher to really

extract the *spirit* of music from the clutches of religion, thus preserving it for modernity, is evident). This is not to say that *Aesthetic Theory* is reducible to a theory of musical aesthetics; rather that many of the text's more abstract theoretical formulations can be made concrete by relating them to musical forms (and would seem, therefore, to emerge from them). Adorno wants us, like Marx, to think of everything in motion, as process: art, like society, is not set in stone. Visual and discursive works are not static entities, but indices of social and historical forces 'at a standstill'. With mimetic (embodied, transient, temporal) forms like music, this demand to think artworks as processes, as the unfolding of contrasting forms (or 'antagonisms') in time, is much easier to meet. Thinking this way, Edgard Varese's famous definition becomes unacceptably abstract: more than 'organized sound', music is an accumulation of a variety of deeply historical rhythmic, melodic and harmonic forms. Eschewing both the formalism of his 19th century predecessors and that of his neo-classical and modernist peers, Adorno takes a much longer and deeper view, arguing that form is 'sedimented content'.

The aim of *Aesthetic Theory*, then, is not to develop a general theory of cultural production, an exhaustive, value-free typology or linear history of artistic forms. On the contrary, *Aesthetic Theory* presumes two key theses, that capitalist society is 'false' (it is an oxymoron, capitalism undermines the conditions for society), Artworks (as opposed to artworks) are the antithesis of society. The latter ring 'true' to the extent that they reveal what is false about contemporary life. Thus 'the concept of an artwork implies that of its success. Failed artworks are not art: Relative success is alien to art; the average is already the bad'.³³⁵ Just as Marx historicized Hegel's abstract conception of alienation, 'artwork' for Adorno is not an empty anthropological category- it implies modern, progressive and critical as opposed to reactionary, regressive, reflective of, or capitulating to, the status quo. *Aesthetic Theory* is not anthropology of art, or more precisely, it is wholly concerned with the persistence of the human in modernity.

Modern art thus participates in truth. The 'truth content' of an artwork 'is historical right into its innermost cell', and becomes so by 'the objectivation of correct consciousness in the

³³⁵ Adorno, *Aesthetic*, p. 247.

work'.³³⁶ It seems we are again dealing with a fundamental tension between the aesthetic and the political, body and mind (or consciousness). Consciousness and the truths it expresses are not 'always already' the case (Adorno is not taking the anthropological route here), but rather rooted in modernity- 'ever since freedom emerged as a potential, correct consciousness has meant the most progressive consciousness of antagonisms on the horizon of their possible reconciliation'.

What does not simply reiterate given procedures is itself historically produced in accord with Marx's comment that each epoch solves the tasks that are posed to it; in each epoch the aesthetic forces of production, the talents, emerge that- as if by second nature- correspond to the level of technique and by a sort of secondary mimesis drive it further; the categories that are held to be extratemporal natural endowments are just so temporally mediated....³³⁷

Just as there is no such thing as absolute freedom, there is no such thing as absolute novelty. What appears as 'new' is historically produced against the grain of the 'given procedures'. It also appears as 'natural' and outside of time, but is in fact thoroughly historically mediated. Whether we think of the situation that led Schoenberg to pursue atonality or that which drove Bird to bebop, the point is the same: the new has a history, and arrives as the culmination of aesthetic practices and techniques hitherto achieved.

As the antithesis to existing society, truth is not exhausted according to society's laws. Rather, truth has its own laws, which are contrary to those of society; and in real history it is not only repression that grows but also the potential for freedom, which is unanimous with the truth content of art.³³⁸

What does this have to do with mimesis? Richard Leppert argues that '[the] enigmatic nature of the artwork is a direct outgrowth of its mimetic character, to the extent that artworks, while mimetic, are not conceptual. Artworks are produced by rationalized labor, but they act against

³³⁶ Ibid., p. 251.

³³⁷ Ibid., p. 253.

³³⁸ Ibid., p. 256.

instrumentalized reason, the ultimate tool of the domination of nature, of all that stands outside and against the subject'.³³⁹ If *Dialectic of Enlightenment* narrates the emergence of modernity as a triumph of conceptual thought over mimetic practice, or in Benjamin's terms, 'second nature' (technique) over 'first nature' (the body), *Aesthetic Theory* argues that modernism is where spirit is preserved. In their extended meditations on the concept, Adorno and Horkheimer write that 'mimesis had its origin in primitive magic, in the shaman's imitation of nature. When magic disintegrated, mimesis survived as a principle of artistic representation'.³⁴⁰

The superseding of the old diffuse notions of the magical heritage by conceptual unity expresses a condition of life defined by the freeborn citizen and articulated by command. The self which learned about order and subordination through the subjugation of the world soon equated truth in general with classifying thought, without whose fixed distinctions it cannot exist. Along with mimetic magic it tabooed the knowledge which really apprehended the object. Its hatred is directed at the image of the vanquished primeval world and its imaginary happiness.³⁴¹

There are truths that can't be accessed by 'classifying thought', knowledge of a qualitatively different kind, its connected to the past as far back as recorded time. The primal history of the arts – dance, song, mimicry- is the primal history of civilization. Jameson writes that Adorno conceives of mimesis as 'sheer activity', which 'is bounded on the one side by sheer mimicry and on the other by Frazer's concept of 'sympathetic magic'...'; that is, from a kind of unconscious faculty for 'becoming similar' to more conscious efforts to control nature. As Martin Jay puts it:

Conceptual thought can be understood as an act of aggression perpetrated by a dominating subject on a world assumed to be external to it; it subsumes particulars under universals, violently reducing their uniqueness to typifications or exemplars of a general or essential principle. Mimesis, in contrast, involves a more sympathetic, compassionate, and noncoercive

³³⁹ Quoted in Theodor W. Adorno, *Essay on Music*, ed. Richard Leppert (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), p. 90.

³⁴⁰ Susan Buck-Morss, *The Origins of Negative Dialectics*, p. 87.

³⁴¹ Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic...*, p. 45.

relationship of affinity between nonidentical particulars, which do not then become reified into two poles of a subject/object dualism.³⁴²

Conceptual thought fixes things in their place (the drama of violence), while mimesis participates in dynamic sequence of events (the drama of the unknown), such that 'a deep affinity can be established between what we call narrative and what [Adorno] reserves the word mimesis for'. Even the most minimal forms of mimicry tend to tell a story, but narrative carries confusing textual connotations, so I prefer story telling as it refers us back to the oral cultures of our ancestors. Jameson adds,

Mimesis thus displaces metaphor as a fundamental category of Adorno's thought, and can be said often to function as a more adequate substitute for the primal relationship of subject and object.

The turn of so-called Western science will be seen as a result of the anti-mimetic taboo and of anti-mimetic regression- that is to say, the passage from a perceptual 'science' based on the senses and on quality to notations and analysis based on geometry and on mathematics.³⁴³

Schopenhauer thought that art provided 'a way of viewing things independent of the principle of sufficient reason',³⁴⁴ that is, of a kind of experience that brackets relations of cause and effect, resists the temptation to adduce implications, to intuit not what must without contradiction necessarily follow from this or that form, proposition or state of affairs. Aesthetic experience thus understood takes us away from logic, narrative and history altogether, and toward an intuition of an all-together that lies behind and generates what the Vedic literature called 'maya'- the shadow-world of representations:

³⁴² Martin Jay, 'Mimesis and Mimetology: Adorno and Lacoue-Labarthe', in *The Semblance of Subjectivity: Essays in Adorno's Aesthetic Theory*, ed. Thom Huhn and Lambert Zuidervaat (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1997), p. 32.

³⁴³ Fredric Jameson, *Late Marxism: Adorno, or the Persistence of the Dialectic*, (London: Verso, 2007), pp. 104-5.

³⁴⁴ Schopenhauer, *The World...* p. 257.

The metaphysical aspects of the sublime experience of music, which were probably the result of a transference from the religious (and especially mystical) experience to the aesthetic experience, remained important beyond the direct exploitation of the effects of the sublime in, for example, painting and literature'.³⁴⁵

[There] can be no doubt that music as a language achieves- as no other art does- a pure objectification of the mimetic impulse, free of any concreteness or denotation; nothing but the gesture, codified and placed above the physical world, yet at once sensual. The art of the inner sense imitates the gesture of spirit.³⁴⁶

Music preserves and taps into part of our primal past, and persists as a measure of everything beyond words, aspects of experience that resist discursive thought. The scientific method steps out of time in order to abstract and classify aspects of nature; mimesis reproduces nature in the fullness of space-time, 'playing' the universe instead of subduing it. A few more interpretations will help fill in the constellation and how it relates to music in particular. Max Paddison identifies 'three main aspects of the concept of mimesis':

(1) that the performance is the purest manifestation of the mimetic impulse, free from any need for denotation (2) that in an essentially score-based tradition such as that of Western art music, it is what he calls the 'neumatic' aspect of notation (as opposed to what he labels the 'mensural' and the 'idiomatic' aspects) that retains the otherwise suppressed mimetic element within the context of the reification of music that the score represents, and (3) that it is the work as image that the performer seeks to represent- to imitate- beyond the score as such.³⁴⁷

The emphasis on performance is here crucial, particularly to counter the frequent perception that Adorno fetishizes the 'work', i.e. the score, in the manner of traditional musicology. If that were the case, his insights would indeed have little to offer the study of vernacular music. Indeed, as the second point makes clear, the score is reified music, a representation of reason's victory over

³⁴⁵ Paddison, *Adorno's Aesthetics*, p. 131.

³⁴⁶ Quoted in *Ibid.*, p. 135.

³⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 138.

mimesis. 'Neumic' is Latin version of *pneuma*, the Greek word for breath or *spirit*, and refers us to the earliest forms of notation, which represented the voice. As such, the neumic aspect of notation, as opposed to the mensural (measuring) and the idiomatic (style), marks spirit's passage into modernity, referring directly to pre-modern practices, the great majority of human history in which musicking did not rely on music theory.³⁴⁸

Paddison further notes, 'mimesis belongs also to the opposing dialectical pair *mimesis* <-> *ratio*, the mimetic and rationalizing impulses, a pair that corresponds to the constitutive distance between art and society more generally. As Paddison writes, 'Artworks, and the activities that are an intrinsic aspect of art, like performance in music, are characterized by the mimetic impulse, and the dialectic of *mimesis* and *ratio* within art transforms both in their mediation, although not through some kind of balance of the two, but rather through the one being mediated through the other'.³⁴⁹ That mediation is not a sterile academic exercise, but the symptoms of real social forces, such that 'mimesis is always threatening to regress to its magical and cultic origins, while rationality, the aspect of construction and form-giving that provides the work with its separate, unified and autonomous existence (however illusory), threatens to stultify the work through reification'. In Adorno's words,

The aporia between regression to real magic and surrender of the mimetic impulse to thinglike rationality helps formulate art's law of movement; this dilemma must not be done away with.

The process which every work of art represents is as deep as it is because mimesis and rationality are irreconcilable.³⁵⁰

Paddison argues, 'following Walter Benjamin, that mimesis can be seen as an *impulse*, a mode of 'identifying with' rather than necessarily as 'imitation of' or 'representation of' something external to itself'. Music, then, 'oscillates between its own internal rationalized constructional <-> unrationalized mimetic moments, and that the experience of its 'expressivity' arises from what

³⁴⁸ Max Weber, *The Rational and Social Foundations of Music* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1958).

³⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 139.

³⁵⁰ quoted in Ibid., p. 140.

could be called this internal ‘force-field’.³⁵¹ Paddison suggests that ‘the notion “mimetic impulse” carries with it the idea of an embodied, biological and physiological impulse...’, and that mimesis ‘in this sense may be regarded as a pre-rational, or not-yet-rationalized, mode of behavior, with an affinity towards the sensuous and embodied, non-conceptual re-enactment of cognitive processes’.³⁵² Elsewhere, Adorno is clear about the qualitative difference between language and music (which are in so many respects similar), which has everything to do with the latter’s mimetic aspect:

To interpret language means: to understand language. To interpret music means: to make music. Musical interpretation is performance, which, as synthesis, retains the similarity to language, while obliterating every specific resemblance [in its abstraction]. This is why the idea of interpretation is not an accidental attribute of music, but an integral part of it. To play music correctly means first and foremost to speak its language properly. This calls for *imitation of itself, not a deciphering process*. Music only discloses itself in mimetic practice... a comparable act in the languages of intention... would have to be the act of transcribing a text, rather than decoding its meaning.

The ‘play’ of music is play with logical forms as such, of positing, identity, similarity, contradiction, whole, part, and the concretion of music is essentially the power with which these forms articulate themselves in the material, in the notes. The threshold between music and logic does not therefore lie with the logical elements, but rather with their specific logical synthesis, the judgment. Music does not know judgment, but rather a synthesis of a different kind, a synthesis which constitutes itself purely from the constellation [i.e., the particular configuration of musical material], not from the predication, subordination, subsumption of its elements. The synthesis also stands in relation to truth, but to a completely different truth from apophantic truth. . . The reflections would have to terminate in a definition like ‘Music is the logic of judgementless synthesis.’³⁵³

³⁵¹ Max Paddison, ‘Mimesis and the Aesthetics of Musical Expression’, *Musical Analysis*, 29.i-ii-iii(2010), pp. 126-148 (p. 127).

³⁵² Ibid, p. 135-6.

³⁵³ Theodor Adorno, *Quasi Una Fantasia: Essays on Modern Music*, (London: Verso, 2011), pp. 3-4.

Finally, a Benjaminian flourish from *Aesthetic Theory*: ‘the survival of mimesis, the non-conceptual affinity of the subjectively produced with its unposited other, defines as a form of knowledge and to that extent as “rational”’. It’s a feeling you get from art that you are part of the world in spite of yourself, the feeling that affected Lenin’s nerves and compelled him to compassion, the beat with which Benjamin’s feet were forced to move in sympathy and against his upbringing.

In sum, music affects us somewhere between our general, pre-linguistic perception shared by all and the specificity of our subjectivity, between the chaos of bodily sensation and the semblance of control maintained by individual consciousness. Music is an extension of body language, and as such the very foundation of discursive thought. If musical forms can be said to *say* anything, the latent message contained within its ‘statements’ always takes the affirmative-circular form- to use phrase that crops up often in Adorno, ‘that is the way it is’.³⁵⁴ Such a statement has no determinate content; it is an observation without observer, just barely a judgment. If this is all music can say, then we might say that for Adorno musical form is objectifies and amplifies life’s irreducible complexity, which it is powerless to change of its own accord, or without taking linguistic form and thus ceasing to be music. And it is precisely this powerless power that is music’s fundamental ‘truth content’. And yet the *feeling* it produces, the *sense* of a phrase like ‘that is the way it is’, indeed has a visceral quality similar to that which is felt in the aftermath of a judgment: a kind of fleeting but emphatic contentment or ‘sudden rightness’- ‘*this* is the way it is, *and no other*’. So is music, in fact, a parody of judgment?

Paddison’s emphasis on biological embodiment and performance makes sense with black dance music not because of some natural propensity for rhythm on the part of the producers, but across all of the varied genres, but especially in their initial stages, the music is deeply entwined with the movement of bodies at a unique moment in space and time. This is where aura resides, not merely the experience of objects, but in the total social space, when crowds themselves are performative as the performers. But just as there is nothing inherently

³⁵⁴ Theodor Adorno, ‘Music, Language and Composition’, in Leppert (ed), *Essays*, p. 115.

progressive about music, there is nothing in inherently liberating about the mimetic faculty. It lies at the root of aesthetics; but it is also vulnerable to exploitation, as Benjamin warned:

The growing proletarianization of modern man and the increasing formation of masses are two aspects of the same process. Fascism attempts to organize the newly created proletarian masses without affecting the property structure, which the masses strive to eliminate. Fascism sees its salvation in giving these masses not their right, but instead a chance to express themselves.

He cites Marinetti's Futurist manifesto-

War is beautiful because it establishes man's dominion over the subjugated machinery by means of gas masks, terrifying megaphones, flame throwers, and small tanks. War is beautiful because it initiates the dreamt-of metalization of the human body. War is beautiful because it enriches a flowering meadow with the fiery orchids of machine guns. War is beautiful because it combines the gunfire, the cannonades, the cease-fire, the scents, and the stench of putrefaction into a symphony.³⁵⁵

The persistence of the occult from Theosophy to New Age to the Sun-Ra Arkestra to today's conspiracy theories, can be understood as reactionary forms of mimesis- all end up winding their way back to dubious notions of roots, nations, and the social Darwinism of states of awareness. These formations- a sort of pop-elitism, the alienation and resentment of the disposed- can be counterposed to popular modernism.

II. Popular Modernism

We are now in a good position to return to Mark Abel's theory of groove, and to think about mimesis in relation to the rise and proliferation of new forms of rhythm and blues at the end of the sixties and throughout the seventies. Abel summarizes Benjamin,

³⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 334.

Mimesis is a ‘making oneself like’ an aspect of the world in order to make it less threatening, to control it. Mimetic representation is not simply a mirror to the world, but a mediation between subject and object which results in an interpenetration of the two, diminishing the polarity between them. In the mimetic act of making oneself like the object, the object is humanized.³⁵⁶

I think we can apply this more broadly to the social situation of the period. In the late sixties, the culture industry’s relationship to its most exploited commodity changed. African-American musicians born during WWII spent their earliest years under Jim Crow, their adolescence during the first phase of the civil rights movement, and their early adulthood with the possibility of unprecedented success. That’s a lot of change to endure, and their music reflects that. Moreover, the power of the music and the sheer size and scope of the industry forced musicians and audiences on both sides of the color line *to become like each other*. Whites heard subjects where their parents saw objects; and blacks saw that whiteness was not absolute. This disrupted the *telos* of modernity, the arrow of time and the ideology of progress. Suddenly, the future had arrived. And you can hear time breaking down in the music.

What is the neumatic aspect of time? The various forms of measurement correspond to the mensural and the various cosmologies are the idioms, but is there an equivalent to the spirit behind its inscription in the score? What is the *sense* at the bottom of time, if not life itself? Life is the feeling of time passing. It is not that time flies when you’re having fun; fun, or more concretely, play, brings you into direct contact with time; drudgery is not *feeling* but rather *knowing* that time is passing. The abstract, empty time of modernity is the motor of capital. ‘Time is money’. Capital introduces drudgery, the repetition of tasks toward an end that is not yours. Drudgery is the result of the illusion of mastered time. It is endured because we are led to believe, often rightly, that we will die if we don’t. What one *feels* during drudgery is boredom; anxiety is debilitating boredom. At the same time, the boredom of repetition induces us to create.

³⁵⁶ Abel, *Groove*, p. 175.

In this period, the locomotive swing of jazz and the assembly-line stomp of Motown are replaced with groove. In what follows we will look at lyrics for the first time, and what's really interesting about this brief period is, this is the first generation who had the courage to really go beyond the standard lyrical tropes of gospel, blues and soul. While it would be inaccurate to attribute this to top-down standardization, I would suggest that the weight of the black conservative tradition (religion and patriarchy) is what held these tropes in place. This is what makes popular modernism different that which preceded it. Ray Charles may have broken a taboo by replacing God with a Woman in 1955, but it was a prohibition that was largely internal to Afro-America. In *Blues People*, Baraka writes 'I mean, that until that time when you have sufficient ideas about this new country to begin making some lasting moral generalizations about it- relating your experience, in some lasting for in the language of that country, with whatever subtleties and obliqueness you bring to it- you are merely a transient'.³⁵⁷ George Lipsitz has argued that 'having specific class roots means that rock and roll contains specific class imagery, with biases towards specific class ideologies. Artists themselves may no longer be part of the working class when they achieve success as musicians, but the dialogue from which they emerge, and the one they maintain with their fans, prevents them from becoming completely detached from their class backgrounds'.³⁵⁸

Instead of the regular beat that measured time by the clock, working-class musics embraced polyrhythms and irregular time signatures as a way of realizing in culture the mastery over time denied workers in the workplace [Rock-and-roll wins an audience] by inverting the icon of the clock and using it to measure out doses of pleasure instead of units of labor.³⁵⁹

In 1967, The Chambers Brothers recorded and released 'Time Has Come Today'. The band started as the church choir in Mississippi. Up until roughly the mid-sixties, jazz and R&B

³⁵⁷ Jones, *Blues People*, p. xiii.

³⁵⁸ George Lipsitz, *Time Passages: Collective Memory and American Popular Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990), p. 109.

³⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 113.

were recorded fairly traditionally. That same year, The Beatles pioneered the use of the recording studio as an instrument. The Chambers Brothers used it to write a song that dramatizes an acid trip. ‘Time Has Come Today’ isn’t very groovy, but it presages the breaking up of time that was coming. It begins with a cowbell’s impression of a ticking clock, which is sustained throughout the song’s thirteen minutes. The tune is four chords in a simple progression that starts and finishes with the tonic, thus emphasizing ‘home’ (it reappears on Jefferson Airplane’s 1969 song ‘Volunteers’). The lyrics call time on the past and the future- the time is here, now, and you can’t go home again:

Time has come today (Time!)
Young hearts can go their way (Time!)
Can't put it off another day (Time!)
I don't care what others say they say (Time!)
We don't listen anyway (Time!)
Time has come today, hey!

The room has changed today
I have no place to stay
I'm thinking about the subway
My love has blown away
My tears have come and gone
Oh, Lord I got to run
I got no home no,
I have no home

Now the time has come nowhere to run
Might get burned up by the sun but I'll have my fun
I've been loved, pushed aside
I've been crushed
By tumbling tide

And my soul has been psychedelized
Now the time has come
There are things to realize
Time has come today
Time has come today

Then the music cuts out, the clock slows down and then begins to echo, catching up the space between the seconds, marking the unmarked time, before building back up into a strikingly dark two-chord jam. Like *Invisible Man*, what they discover under the influence is simultaneously comforting and terrifying. The acidic guitar solo glides off into stoned, noise-damaged variation on the tune of 'The Little Drummer Boy', and accompanied by ghastly screams, maniacal laughter, animal howls and sirens and squelching feedback. Then the clock returns- all fucked up, before locking back into the main groove.

Jimi Hendrix was the alchemist of rhythm and blues; he expanded what the Chambers Brothers were doing into an entire genre. Along the way found a way to make funk groovy. His best songs are his grooviest songs, and his grooves often transmute violence into sex, war into love. 'Foxy Lady's verses are a shotgun aimed straight for the hips. 'Manic Depression's relentless 6/8 stomp is near-perfect melding of lyric, melody and groove- the rare instance of a song that is instantly recognizable by its beat. In other words, to play the beat is the play the song itself. That melody is anchored by the sustained octaves that cap each line of the verses. The solo is even more off the rails. Indeed everything on top of Mitchell's lock step is woozy. 'Fire' is the same: you couldn't borrow that beat without sounding exactly like this song. (Led Zeppelin's 'Immigrant Song' will never not sound like 'Little Miss Lover'.)

Band of Gypsy's is by all accounts Hendrix at his grooviest, and here he manages what so many can't: poly-metric groove. The Gypsy's groove is funk with the edges gently rubbed off. If funk hits the one and leaves the rest of the bar to be filled willy-nilly, 'Who Knows' comes down hard on the one and the two (and the three and the four). But it's Buddy Guy's ride cymbal, which fills the high mid-range with a hazy yet propulsive cloud of noise, alternates with

the cutting hi hat...It's groovy head music. 'Machine Gun' shapes the impromptu mimicry of Woodstock's 'Star Spangled Banner' into a lengthy discourse ongoing the Vietnam War. This is the sound of politicized art. Hendrix thus personalizes time, and the personal is indeed political, the construction of new times. Jimi's soul is dirty.

Sly and the Family Stone's beat- a funky up version of Motown's implacable 4/4- powers 'Dance to the Music', but this song's demand feels empty, its funk perfunctory, made-to-order for the potential cross over dollars. Slowing Motown down a few clicks and the beat goes straight from the upper body to the hips. The beat is there, but everything else spins in and out of sync around it.

The funk of 1968's 'Higher' is jaunty and arid, the chorus predictably ascends up the scale, the break feels bored. By contrast, 'I Want to Take You Higher' is a revelation. Sly's best songs are patchwork quilts, bars stitched together featuring certain singers or instruments, oddly-time vocal phrases that overlap with instrumental solos, choruses and verses never repeat the same way twice, linked together by that persistent, metronomic beat, which doesn't so much groove as it does cajole the listener into dancing, poking you in the same spot until you have to get up and get down. The vocal phrasing was honed on their second record in the interests of mass appeal- of course in this particular moment, what appealed to the masses what anybody's guess.

Listen to the Woodstock version to get a sense of that bass line, which absolutely roars. And that's the thing- Sly brings the shouting preacher, but metes that task out to everybody. Everybody shouts. Cynthia Robinson's relentless trumpet stabs and blasts ride the groove. I'm afraid there's no more sophisticated way of putting it: a funky groove lends so much power to simple melodic lines, lines that would otherwise be a drag to play, which instead become part of this total field of musical force whose center of gravity is of course the One.

Sly's beats are metronomic, but what's sly is the time signature, or more accurately, the phrase length. It's the freedom of the bluesman to extend the length of a verse just slightly beyond the lyric, filling the time with an emphatic instrumental flourish, but here it is built-in,

composed. Of course, the music purely devotional, if we mean the devotion of the camp shouts. 'Don't Call Me Nigger, Whitey', slows that same metronomic beat, mimicking the way time seems to slow down during a conflict, but picks it right back up for a wordless chorus and solo, or not quite wordless, as Sly's improvises in falsetto with the beat doubles and builds into a crescendo:

[Freddie:] Feeling's gettin' stronger

[Larry:] Music's gettin' longer too

[Rose:] Music is flashin' me

[Sly:] I want to take you higher

Baby, baby, baby, light my fire.

[All:] Boom shaka-laka-laka Boom shaka-laka-laka

[Freddie:] Feeling's nitty-gritty

[Larry:] Sound is in the city too

[Rose:] Music's still flashin' me

[Sly:] Don't ya want to get higher

Baby, baby, baby, light my fire.

[All:] Boom shaka-laka-laka Boom shaka-laka-laka

[Freddie:] Feeling that should make you move

[Larry:] Sounds that should help you groove

[Rose:] Music still flashin' me

[Sly:] Take your places

I want to take you higher

Baby, baby, baby, light my fire.

[All Repeated:] Boom shaka-laka-laka Boom shaka-laka-laka, Higher!

Harmonica, guitar, trumpet, bass, sax- everyone gets a solo (except the drums, no need to break up the groove). That 'Higher's chorus lands with the rudely distorted bass (synth) line is one of several ironic contrasts in the song. The intro features the harmonica, the harmonica solo, one of the most down-to-earth instruments. It's a song that prods you into dancing.

Coming from a mixed-race band and going out to mixed-race audiences, 'Sex Machine's frankness is unprecedented. starts off with a tease, a tickle before relaxing into a mid-tempo blues in 6/8, topped again with Sly's vocoder. 'You Can Make it If You Try' is another tease- in case the previous track didn't work, the band coaxes, coaches the listeners to 'make it'. Their unique sound reemerges in 'Everyday People', which would be forgettable were it not for the rhythm section, blissfully hypnotic (to help you really get the message) like a leisurely drive on a sunny day.

Art's spirit is the self-recognition of spirit itself as natural. The more art integrates into itself what is nonidentical, what is immediately opposed to spirit, the more it must spiritualize itself. Conversely, spiritualization for its part introduced into art what is sensually displeasing and repugnant and what had previously been taboo for art; the sensually unpleasant has an affinity with spirit.³⁶⁰

P-Funk smashed the boundary between sacred and profane. In particular, Clinton and the gang brought Sun-Ra's mythologizing down to earth. Ra believed what he said: he looked back to and longed for a time when black Egypt was the pinnacle of civilization. He developed his ideology pre-space race, that's why it wreaks of Roswell, and really in the belly of Jim Crow, that's why it wreaks of elitism, desires hierarchy.

On the record's closing track, 'What is Soul', over top of strange echoes and synthesizers, Clinton intones:

Behold, I am Funkadelic

³⁶⁰ Adorno, *Aesthetic*, p. 257

I am not of your world
But fear me not
I will do you no harm
Loan me your funky mind
And I shall play with it
For nothing is good
Unless you play with it
And all that is good is nasty

One answer to the question: 'Soul is the ring around your bathtub'.

George Clinton made all this up, but it reflected the space-faring spirit of the times. Often reduced to party animals, P-Funk were that but much more- for every invocation to get down, there were jaded, ironic and despairing reflections on both contemporary black life and the broader geopolitical situation. In short, their music was affirmation and protest at once. Like Dumas's story, the P-Funk mythology features an ancient weapon, but this one, the Bop Gun, that makes people dance, and thus threatens the whole rigid structure of western civilization. P-Funk discourse is an affront to 'serious' writing. Every sentence from the liner notes of *Standing on the Verge of Getting it On!* is crammed full of puns and neologisms.

On the Eighth Day, the Cosmic Strumpet of Mother Nature was spawned to envelope this Third Planet in FUNKADELICAL VIBRATIONS. And she birthed Apostles Ra, Hendrix, Stone, and CLINTON to preserve all funkiness of man unto eternity... But! Fraudulent forces of obnoxious JIVATION grew; Sun Ra strobed back to Saturn to await his next Reincarnation, Jimi was forced back into his basic atoms; Sly was co-opted into a jester monolith and... only seedling GEORGE remained! As it came to be, he did indeed begat FUNKADELIC to restore Order Within the Universe. And, nourished from the pamgrierian mammaristic melonpaps of Mother Nature, the followers of FUNKADELIA multiplied incessantly!

The song lyrics are often so outlandish they seem designed to reveal the meaningless or triviality of words in the face of the funk. There was certainly a message here, but it tends to be anti-message: shut up and dance, ain't nothing but a party. of course, the great contradiction is the lengths the band went to produce something that seemed much, much more than just a party. or better, to raise the party, unfettered sociality, to a (meta)physical ideal, the funk as a means of attaining it. In this sense, the visual aspect of p-funk is a symptom: for these are indeed alien ideas in liberal capitalist society. P-funk were not afro-futurists- their shows weren't set in the future. It was all happening right now. and uncovering the secrets past was just as important, not least the fact that the inhabitants of ancient Egypt, those who built the pyramids, were dark-skinned. At the same time, P-Funk is a symptom of the failure and defeat of the left in the USA. The myth is a story about the vital need to get together and defeat a common enemy, but what is crucial is that p-funk suggest that this can, indeed must, be fun.

To reduce this narrative to an allegory of return to African motherland does P-Funk a disservice, assuming as it does that African-Americans, in the aftermath of the moon landing and LSD, had little interest in exploring space, outer and inner, in themselves. One could laugh at 'Whitey on the Moon' and at the same time marvel at possibilities for humanity in general. As *Motor Booty Affair's* opening tune declares:

Mr. Wiggles the Worm here

Sayin' this is an underwater story in the fields of your mind

We're swimmin' past a clock who has its hand behind its back

On past reality, he ain't lookin' for a moment.

'Wars of Armageddon' takes us way back to the Hellfighters' 'In No Man's Land', its funky groove dubbed over with the sound of explosions, sirens, crowds protesting, laughing, coo-coo-clocks, airplane motors, train whistles, demagogic nonsense, women screaming, and a series of deep, long, wet farts- and Hazel's wah-controlled solo weaves its pinched-licks and damaged chicken scratch through every corner of the stereo image, all held together with a cowbell. The jam abruptly cuts out, the brief silence is broken by the unmistakable sound of an exploding

hydrogen bomb. This too cuts off and is replaced by a heartbeat, the jam recommences and fades out. Like a cockroach, the funk survives the worst of mankind.

But with Parliament's *Mothership Connection*, the progenitors of funk veer into self-parody. The restless searching is over, they've settled in. The narrative no longer seems like an organic outgrowth of the jam session, but concocted and bolted on. It's captured in the refrain to 'Supergroovalisticprosifunkstication (The Bumps Bump)', 'Give the people what they want, when they want, and they wants it all the time', delivered without irony- that they repeat it with 'need' substituted for 'want' simply underscores that the difference- a key ideological fault line between the culture industry and the avant-garde- no longer means much. Not even the funk is immune to hubris, and Parliament's claim to have figured out what people want is premature. Indeed 'Give Up the Funk' gives the game away- the lyric attempts to 'prove' what was previously suggested in bad faith, 'we want the funk, give up the funk'. This is what happens when the Funk severs its connection to spirit, to the ring around your bathtub, and becomes Funk-for-Funk's-sake. Funk had reached the end of its tenure. People needed a new groove.

III. *Geist* in the Machine: Disco, Chic and Eclipse of Blackness

The History of the World is not the theatre of happiness. Periods of happiness are blank pages in it, for they are periods of harmony- periods when the antithesis is in abeyance. -
Hegel

The generation gap is another evil plan. The result of which divided the family structure, therefore creating a halt to the flow of wisdom from the wise to the young, and stifling the energy of the young which is the equalizer to wisdom and age... Being of truth and understanding of all things, we must recapture the family structure- Mother, Father, Sister, Brother- and give respect to everyone. Remember the family that prays together, stays together. Put 'Unity' back into the family'. - Philadelphia International Records mission statement

This statement by disco independent label Philly International is important because it highlights the way black music works as opposed to white music. Black music works through mimesis- the sublation of a history of violence and a tradition of resistance. White music works through ratio- the break with tradition. The question of the late sixties and early seventies is what happens when these tendencies collide.

‘I tried to create a system where there was no economic inequality’.³⁶¹ For David Mancuso, a private invitation system and low-to- non-existent door fee ensured the right mix of young, old, rich, poor, any combination of creed and colour. Mostly comprised of gays, African-Americans, Hispanics, this tight knit community grew in numbers by the year. This was not merely a re-run, another youth culture exploiting a new batch of commodities cooked up by a calculating culture industry: there was something different about this particular movement of people and things. At Mancuso’s Loft, *sound* was on display and it was consumed in a simultaneous sensory-affective space-time. New polyrhythmic beats and timbral combinations coalesced, pressing bodies into new states of being-together.

The formula soon spread to other spaces. For their ability to listen to the crowd, massaging the mix until certain songs became hits on the dance floor, DJs in the mould of Mancuso started garnering attention from the mainstream music industry. Soon ‘disco’- the people, music, venues, decorations and dances- would crystallise into the familiar commodity form. Yet never before had the entertainment industry had to depend so much on what people on the ground were responding to- an instant, unpredictable, in the moment, process of valuation. Tom Moulton, one of the first people paid to remix a record for a club (as opposed to radio), recalls the reaction of the chart editor for *Billboard* magazine when he took him on a tour of New York’s underground in 1975. “‘I can’t believe people react to music like this, and it isn’t even being played on the radio!’ I said, “‘That’s riiight!’”³⁶²

It is telling that during this period, the music criticism dries up. Or rather, this was a period in which critics and activists were retreating into blackness, while the music was exploring the extremes of experience, beyond ‘race’. In short, the ‘blackness’ of the music began to

³⁶¹ Tim Lawrence, *Love Saves the Day* (Charlotte: Duke University Press, 2003), p. 22.

³⁶² Lawrence, *Love*, p. 147.

dissolve. The broad church could no longer be claimed for blackness, and relatedly, easy assertions to white co-optation could not be sustained, the imagined community of black nationalism broke down.

Following Hegel, we might say that for a brief moment in the late seventies, ‘art’ become unnecessary. Society seemed to have arrived, or at least, there were places to go, places to be, social— utopias were made and sustained in relation to work. The balance was right- Studio 54 wasn’t the only gig in town, you could get away from that scene with a quick trip uptown. In a sense Chic embodies that balance- sophistication without excess, joy at nobody’s expense, play without power.

Western culture, or western power, has always regarded musicians as insufficiently masculine. In *Symposium*, Plato criticizes Orpheus for this. If the model for the soul singer was the preacher, Sly, Hendrix and Clinton blew that model apart.

Groove deploys a reproduction of an abstract temporal continuum, a web of instants, organize hierarchically in relation to a system of time measurement. The effect of such temporal organization, contrary to the accusation of predictability, is to impart a heightened significance to the present, or in practice, to the articulation of each beat of the groove.

This gives each event/beat the character of intense, pregnant presentness- a nowtime- which is lacking in the narrative-style art music tradition. And the inherently collective nature of groove, produced as a result of its practical instantiation by human bodies in space, guarantees that the experience of successive ‘nows’ is verified intersubjectively, in a way which does not depend on a purely internal, subjective time-consciousness... ³⁶³

In of the few pieces of contemporary critical writing, Richard Dyer argued,

Disco is characteristic of advanced capitalist societies simply in terms of the scale of money squandered on it. It is a riot of consumerism, dazzling in its technology (echo chambers,

³⁶³ Abel, *Groove*, p. 242-3.

double and more tracking, electric instruments), overwhelming in its scale (banks of violins, massed choirs, the limitless range of percussion instruments), lavishly gaudy in the mirrors and tat of discotheques, the glitter and denim flash of its costumes.

Disco's combination of romanticism and materialism effectively tells us - lets us experience - that we live in a world of materials, that we can enjoy them but that the experience of materialism is not necessarily what the everyday world assures us it is. Its eroticism allows us to rediscover our bodies as part of this experience of materialism and the possibility of change.³⁶⁴

After some controversy over the lyric, Rogers decide that 'in future any deeper meanings would be covert, not overt

That was the bargain between Bernard and I – Mr Black Panther was never going to be politicizing our music... That mean that the lyric writing had to be clever as hell. There's no way I could write a song that could be blatantly "Dance Dance Dance" and that was the end of the story. It doesn't work for my soul. That's how Chic was supposed to work. It pains me that people don't understand the intellectual content of our lyrics after how hard we worked on a song.³⁶⁵

Nile Rogers was uniquely positioned to understand the complexities of African-American history and politics and the power and purpose of aesthetics. Chic's 'Good Times' is at once engaged and aloof, 'don't be a drag... participate', yet reminding us that time will go without us regardless. The implication of course is that we'll live to regret repressing our bodily impulses. The mid-tempo groove would languish were it not propelled by Edwards' goading, gut-punch of a bass line and the Roger's chicken scratch.

³⁶⁴ Dyer, 'In Defense...', p. 23.

³⁶⁵ Quoted in Daryl Easlea, *Everybody Dance: Chic and the Politics of Disco* (London: Helter Skelter, 2004), p. 93.

Chic are one of the last popular black guitar bands. Their classy image was entirely self-cultivated, in the sense that it reflected the history and desires of its members. It's a startling, seemingly unsustainable contradiction- making the freak, or the act of freaking out, *chic*. Debauchery with an elegant soundtrack. But it's not so different from Clinton's strategy of making the profane sacred, of investing the body's funk with cosmic significance.

A rumor has it that it's getting late
Time marches on, just can't wait
The clock keeps turning, why hesitate
You silly fool, you just can't change your fate.

With Chic, the space between the notes- the end of "Dance Dance Dance", the break in 'You Can Get By'- reveals how crowd becomes a moment in the composition. The silence forces you to imagine, or remember, a night with your adopted family on the dance floor, and keeps you coming back. The ballads remind us that revelers need a break every now and again. This becomes obvious on 'Chic Cheer', which begins with a cheering crowd.

I like to think that a visit to the Paradise Garage would have forced Adorno to revise his assertion that, after Mozart's *The Magic Flute*, it was never again possible to force serious and light music together'.³⁶⁶ For half a decade, the culture industry poured its cash reserves into genre until it became a popular phenomenon the world over. As Alice Echols argues, history has been unfair to *Saturday Night Fever*: the film is far from a straightforward co-opting of the subculture. But its obvious neglect of 'race', coupled with its massive success, has lead most to read it as the epitome of the period's shallow excesses. This lack, however, is what is most interesting- like 'YMCA', it's a testament to how far the culture had permeated and subverted the so-called silent majority.

And then the bubble burst. What happened at Comisky Park in 1979 was not simply mass rejection of slap bass and swooping strings- it was by many accounts a violent outburst of white middle-American resentment. '[The] attacks on disco gave respectable voice to the ugliest

³⁶⁶ Adorno, *The Culture Industry*, p. 32.

kinds of unacknowledged racism, sexism and homophobia', writes Craig Werner. 'Driving disco from the charts, the alliance also succeeded in destroying the last remaining music scene that was in any meaningful sense racially mixed'.³⁶⁷ Indeed, the music industry reacted swiftly, closing down the dance departments of radio stations and record labels. The assumption seemed to be that, after witnessing a crowd set fire to a pile of disco records on television, people would never want to dance again. It was 'just a fad'- though a fad that the industry certainly had a large part in creating. Popular modernism was forced back underground, where it percolated for most of the eighties, before reemerging in an entirely different form.

Disco is black music's most decisive break from the European avant-garde. It is gay. It is female. It does not require sacrifice to enjoy. It is intoxicating, body music. There is no vibrant black criticism on the subject (it was largely ignored by intellectuals). For these reasons, disco also marks the eclipse of 'blackness' as such. Or perhaps it means, simply, that the avant-garde was never black, that the notion of the cutting edge may be a nice metaphor for what goes on in the underground, but it doesn't capture the music's actual social function. Formally, its being-for-other is inflated; yet the *social* situation of disco finally resists all of the strictures of reified identity. Yet even in its more 'authentic' guises, disco's manifest gospel impulse is at the same time a sign of resignation.

IV. Will the Circle Be Unbroken?

Cultural production within capitalist society is, then, founded on two pro-found contradictions - the first between production for profit and production for use; the second, within these institutions whose job it is to regulate the first contradiction. What all this boils down to, in terms of disco, is that the fact that disco is produced by capitalism does not mean that it is automatically, neces-sarily, simply supportive of capitalism. Capitalism constructs the disco experience, but it does not necessarily know what it is doing, apart from making money.³⁶⁸

³⁶⁷ Warner, *A Change...*, p. 211.

³⁶⁸ Richard Dyer, 'In Defense of Disco', *Gay Left*, 8 (Summer 1979), pp. 20-23.

Thus ‘what is different about the temporality of popular music is very much the product of developments that have taken place in the urban centers of the advanced capitalist world, rather than the effect of influences from other parts of the world’.³⁶⁹

For James Snead, the alchemy of Hegelian historicism conceals what turns out to be a deep-seated fear of *repetition*. The concept of repetition is indeed archaic, mediating between the Nature and Consciousness, linking the motion of the stars, planets and seasons, the regular rhythms of our respiratory and circulatory systems, the sensory experience of walking upright and sexual intercourse, and the continuous cycle of life and death, and Mind, which moves in a more linear direction. One thinks here of music, of rhythm’s role in ritual, whether sacred or profane- of the way Orpheus announces the ceaseless cycle of souls, while the Homeric entertained through repetition with differences, and indeed the privileged role accorded to music in African and African-American culture. As Snead ingeniously argues, ‘what recent Western or European culture repeats continuously is precisely the belief that there is no repetition in culture but only a difference, defined as progress or growth’.³⁷⁰

Yet where Plato’s *Republic* restricts music’s power in such a way as to guarantee the endless repetition of the same (the reproduction of the Republic), Hegel’s dialectic sees repetition as a necessary stage in the dialectic of Enlightenment. With the concept of repetition, Snead seeks to highlight what has made black culture so rich in its own terms, and so radical in a context where the ideology of progress is deeply imbricated with the idea of culture. But to present this as a struggle between the cyclical temporality of black culture and the forward march of post-Kantian thought is too simple. The initial problem for Snead is that the accusation was often leveled at Hegel himself. As Adorno writes:

Idealistic dialectics was also an ‘origins philosophy’. Hegel compared it to a circle. By its return to the starting point of the motion, the result is fatally annulled; this was supposed to bring about a continuous identity of subject and object. The epistemological instrument of this

³⁶⁹ Ibid., 185.

³⁷⁰ James Snead, ‘Repetition as a Figure of Black Culture’, in O’Meally *et al*, *The Jazz Cadence*, p. 63.

dialectics was called synthesis.³⁷¹

With Kant, ‘synthesis’ refers to the faculty of judgment, whose most basic form is the copula- ‘is’, a judgment that spontaneously shapes the chaos of the phenomenal realm into distinct, perceptible entities. With Hegel, synthesis becomes Idealism’s ‘guiding and supreme idea’, the mechanism that will bend the circle of repetition into a spiral, along which all historical particulars are swept up into the universal history of Spirit. At the very least, one must say that with Hegel, progress necessitates repetition.

For Snead, Hegel ‘was almost entirely correct in his reading of black culture, but what he could not have guessed was that in his very criticism of it he had almost perfectly described the ‘there’ to which European culture was ‘headed’.³⁷²

Conclusion

As this chapter has argued, the period from the late sixties to the early seventies was special in precisely this way- Euro-American culture seemed to have arrived, to speak with the voice of the people, and to be taking us somewhere else- nearly every year there was a new utopia in the making. However, Snead makes the same mistake many of the idealistic historians and theorists of black culture made before him- in the desire to affirm the power of black music and culture, he overlooks its vulnerability to power.

In effect, Snead argues that we must embrace Hegel’s rigorous prejudice as an unconscious admission that another world is possible, that black culture’s distinctive approach to temporality is the basis of its utopian promise. Yet Snead’s eternal return of the same is only half the story. It is not that black culture has a kind of built-in resistance to the idea or ideology of progress, or indeed that Euro-American culture forms have never deployed the power of repetition in the service self-criticism. In both cases repetition and progression have been marshaled as cultural means to achieve political ends, sometimes within the same period, sometimes within the same single work. Both have been committed to progress and skeptical of

³⁷¹ Theodor Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B Ashton (London: Continuum, 2007), p. 156.

³⁷² Snead, ‘Repetition’, p. 67.

the dominant consensus as to the means of achieving it, and both have wavered by way of repetition between an aesthetics of commitment, affirmation and joy, and one of resignation, nihilism and despair. Its existence and the extent of its power is in no way guaranteed or inevitable. This is because, in Abel's words, 'Capitalism inaugurates a truly historical time, eradicating all vestiges of cyclical time and imposing a generalized time across the whole globe'.³⁷³

It is of course the case that time is not entirely a social phenomenon; it has ontological roots in the movements of planets and the stars and the effects of those movements on the nature of the earth- diurnal, tidal and seasonal rhythms. Pre-capitalist time-as-measure is little more than the social acknowledgement of the rhythms of universal or 'natural' time.³⁷⁴

Groove's 'focus on the present does not involve a withdrawal or escape from 'ordinary' time, from temporal succession, or an occluding of memory and expectation, but rather highlights the unique significance and potential of each of the series of presents which comprise temporal continuity... To use Edward T. Hall's distinction, whereas other modernist musics seek a non-worldly 'sacred time', groove music is an aesthetic of 'profane time', which 'marks the minutes, hours, the days of the week, months of the year, years, decades, centuries- the entire, taken-for-granted system which our civilization has elaborated'.³⁷⁵ In 1979, neoliberalism caught up with the culture. The material gains of the '60s started to evaporate. Black music was forced back underground.

³⁷³ Abel, *Groove*, p. 254.

³⁷⁴ Ibid., p. 250.

³⁷⁵ Abel, *Groove*, pp. 244-5.

7

Conclusion

The second half the 20th century was a unique cultural moment. I think a real part of the subversive pleasure of liking these musics in that moment had to do with the fact that it was channeled through a mass medium. Suddenly people like me, people like us, people from below, were commanding a national, sometimes global stage. Their very presence was political. And musicians weren't the same as athletes or actors because music is in the ether, repeated on radio or in your head if it's any good. That is to say, *the power of popular music* derived equally from the music and the context in which it was performed. African-American music functioned for a century as the 'political unconscious' of the USA. Persistent, haunting and transformative, the 'sound of the woods' became the sound of the street and the city, and was the country's conscience. Indeed from the late sixties to the late seventies, African-American music, now the product of people whose movement from relative poverty to success had been facilitated by the culture industry and whose audiences were the most educated and affluent they had ever been, set the direction and pace of the culture at large, nationally and internationally. Many things contributed to the end of that movement, which the Disco Demolition crystallized. From Hendrix's electric church to P-Funk's planetary humanism, as these musicians came to inhabit their identities as black, they also exposed the fiction of identity as such. Perhaps this was a glimpse of 'complete' modernization, at the very moment when preparations were underway for neoliberalism, changes which culture did not begin to reflect until the mid-eighties.

In 1982, the year I was born, *Thriller* was released, the big budget mini-film video rotated endlessly on MTV. Meanwhile, rap was percolating in the Bronx. Black music was bifurcated by two techniques- synthesis and sampling (or break beats). The 80s were mostly dominated by synthesists (Quincy Jones, Jimmy Jam and Terry Lewis). But compare techno- famously defined by Derrick May as what would happen if P-Funk and Kraftwerk got stuck in an elevator- with Dre's g-funk. While the former enacts a machinic, combinatory mimesis on the previous form, sampling allows Dre to simply extract the best, most stimulating parts from the original songs and string them together into what can only be called pastiche. Thus it was not simply the bracing and lurid 'realism' of gangsta rap's lyrical content that guaranteed sales, but also a production style that tapped into a generation's nostalgia for the seventies. Meanwhile, we might say that NWA are what would happen if Jake Jackson and Bigger Thomas got stuck in an elevator with a canny A&R man. Their single 'Express Yourself' is a strange case in point: it retrofits civil rights tropes together with images and stories from inner cities decimated by drugs and guns, presenting the latter without critical comment, indeed as a mode of 'expression'. But it's not a message- it's a report: just compare the way Grandmaster Flash relates 'The Message' to the glee with which Dre, Easy and the rest seem to take in their own destruction. It reminds us of Benjamin's warning. This signals the beginning of postmodernism in black music.

The fact that these dance musics had to migrate from Detroit, Chicago and New York to cities like Manchester, London, Berlin and Ibiza in the late eighties find their footing is a symptom of the declining influence of the black radical tradition on US culture as a whole. At the same time, if house and techno were conscious responses to the flashy excesses of disco, they were incompatible with MTV. When dance fanatics re-converged at the margins of Chicago, Detroit and New York in the mid-eighties, they had new influences, ideas and technologies. 'Disco' may have died but clubs now filled warehouses and the music sounded distinctly electronic, futuristic. House producer William Jefferson recounts:

'Acid Tracks' was an accident, man. When you get an acid machine, you don't pre-programme, you just hit some notes on a machine, man. DJ Pierre, he was over and he was

just messing with this thing and he came up with that pattern, man. You know dah-dah-dah-gwon-gwon-gyown-ga-gyown. So we were listening to it, getting drunk man. 'Hey this is kinda hot, man. This is a great mood, man. Let's put it out. What the fuck? You know? We played it at the Music Box, man, and everybody was flipping.

DJ Pierre's acid tracks crossed the Atlantic to England, where they were mixed with an increasingly disenfranchised young population, a new hallucinogen-stimulant called MDMA, and the wide-open pastures of the countryside. 'Acid house' was born. The explosion of generic forms and subcultural styles- hardcore, jungle, drum-n-bass, raga, gabba, trance, garage, 2-step is well known. Parties went from exclusive urban club nights, to all-inclusive, free weekend festivals. While there was certainly money being made, it seemed this time not to emanate from the entertainment-industrial complex. From the mafia to the 'massive', nobody was really sure who was controlling this movement. Perhaps that is why it was the government saw fit to step in put a stop to the festivities for a second time. Hence the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act [1994], whose explicit prohibition of 'outdoor gatherings' with 'sounds wholly characterised by the emission of a succession of repetitive beats', represented 'a direct attack on rave culture in its most self-consciously political manifestations'.

From this perspective, they argue convincingly that dance culture, particularly its UK apotheosis acid house and the free party scene it spawned, stages a near-total rebuke to most destructive prejudices embedded in the dominant discursive practices of the west, not to mention the specific legacy of Puritanism in Anglo-American culture.

A crowd of people immersing themselves in a collective experience of the materiality of music, each individual losing themselves in shared ecstasy whose medium is bass and rhythm; an experience of music not at all as an object of rational contemplation but as affect itself, whose chief mode of expression is a wordless cheer; there could hardly be any more direct refusal of logocentric imperatives.³⁷⁶

³⁷⁶ Jeremy Gilbert and Ewan Pearson, *Discographies* (London: Routledge, 1999).

The consequences of philosophical thinking from Plato to Hegel amounts to ‘an attempt to suppress the materiality and physicality of music’. In this story, popular dance music, located in the body and the perceived authenticity of Barthes’ ‘grain of the voice’, improvisation and dance, the irresistible sound and smell of funk, sweat and tears are a catalyst for a well-nigh millennial return of the repressed.

Derrida famously centered his critique of western metaphysics on the unique experience of ‘*bearing oneself speak*’, thus experiencing a wholly unmediated self-presence, being at one with oneself.³⁷⁷ My ‘inner voice’ grants me an inner life, providing a (literal) sense of certainty, rightness and truth, that other forms of expression like writing could never provide, precisely because their sources lies ‘outside’, at a distance from this primal voice, where they are open to manipulation. The comforting presence of our own voice is the source of notions of ‘authenticity’ or ‘significance’, and provides the criteria against which we judge the world outside. ‘Metaphysics’, then, is the philosophical discourse that would defend this conception of an immaterial (metaphysical) subject, against the messy uncertainties of the material world. Music presents a problem for, and indeed an opportunity to overcome, such habits of thought. Unless your only source of musical pleasure is your own voice, music largely comes to you from elsewhere, and so dissolves the false boundaries drawn (by the mind) between subject and object. At the same time, music’s affective quality, our sense that, even when it comes from the outside, it touches something ‘inside’ of us, reinforces that boundary.

The philosophical discourse of metaphysics would rather not deal with such destabilizing force, particularly as it manifests in affective qualities like rhythm and timbre, and the discourse of music in the form of European musicology has been a victim of that repression. In short, ‘metaphysical discourse, in defending the integrity (the *propriety* of the unified and self-present subject, must seek to close off that space of exteriority which music partially exists in’.³⁷⁸ Indeed, strict binary classifications like ‘high’ and ‘low’, ‘art’ and ‘popular’, the one corresponding to a pure inner life, the other to the degraded physical world, were not much modified by the arrival of popular music. The Beatles’ retreat from touring to the inner sanctum of the studio coincides

³⁷⁷ Ibid., p. 57.

³⁷⁸ Gilbert *et al*, *Discographies*, p. 59.

with rock criticism's increasingly vocal plea that its object be regarded as 'art' in the finest European tradition.

Gilbert and Pearson's points are well taken, but if we adhere too strongly to the binary they set out- Western metaphysics versus all the embodied physicality of experience that it would repress itself and suppress in others- then we miss two things. First is the extent to which Afro-American musicking, from its very beginning, was working with and out its own version of metaphysics (if we take that term to mean something more than it means in the philosophical discourse, something more mundane, like a belief in a soul, a spirit world, redemption in an afterlife, or indeed here on earth; or more simply in the Wittgensteinian sense of *meaning*, which is precisely that which lies outside of language), a hybrid Afro-Christian system of values and practices developed over the period of American slavery. Second, and worse, adhering to this binary risks reinforcing the stereotype that sees mind as white and body as black and segregates accordingly. As we have seen, black music had its own ways of dealing with that body-mind dichotomy, its own cosmology in which a place for both manifested in different spaces and was more or less open to modifications from outside. Plato may have prioritized pure forms, but the Greeks had their *orgia*, not to mention the whole subsequent history of the *dionysiac* tradition that will never be written.

The limits of Gilbert and Pearson's frame can be seen when they identify what is radical about the more populist forms of dance music with their capacity to 'present themselves as musics which have no other purpose other than to be *used*'.³⁷⁹ Of course, musics that can be reduced to purely utilitarian functions are that much easier for neoliberal capitalism to capture and exploit. Dancing and club nights become part of the leisure industry, while the music itself becomes the ambient soundtrack to everyday life in consumer society. Music as a technology of bodily expression, as a mode of resistance to a dominant regime that prioritizes contemplation over movement, ascetic ideals over Dionysian abandon, all too easily relinquishes this critical core in neoliberal capitalism. Drawing on John Gill's queer theory and Julia Kristeva's conception of *jouissance*, Gilbert and Pearson provide another description of rave's revolutionary social ferment:

³⁷⁹ Ibid. p. 79.

[Everything] about the contemporary music-drug experience is organized around the pursuit of a certain kind of ecstasy: waves of undifferentiated physical and emotional pleasure; a sense of immersion in a communal moment, wherein the parameters of one's individuality are broken down by the shared throbbing of the bass drum; an acute experience of music in all its sensuality.³⁸⁰

But why this emphasis on ecstasy 'of a certain kind'? Strictly speaking, ecstatic experience goes both ways, its Greek roots denoting the feeling of going *outside* of one's physical self. A profound sense of ambiguity with regard to the boundaries between self and other might be a better way of registering its primary affects. Gilbert and Pearson seem aware of this tension, but, in order to figure rave as a perfect revolt against deeply held philosophical, cultural and political prejudices, their argument takes on a functionalist veneer- the pleasures of *immanence* erupting after centuries of repression. What it leaves out, or else implicitly criticizes as misguided escapism or the condescension of vanguardist modernism, is the *transcendent* aspect of the music-dance-drugs- precisely the other half of desire called metaphysics.

Even so, I can't help thinking that Derrida's grand philosophical gesture- asserting the priority of the text, of writing and *différance* over the apparently false consolations of speech and its associated fantasies of closure or consensus- has served to obscure much that was significant about the birth and development of black dance musics. To put it perhaps too harshly, it has rendered the specific contributions of black Atlantic musics- their historical, political and aesthetic *r/outes* in oral cultures and hybrid religious cosmologies, for instance, not to mention the double-articulation of pleasure and *critique*- invisible.

According to Gilbert and Pearson, such assumptions have governed popular and academic discussions of European music throughout the modern period. The discipline of musicology itself it marred by its over-attention to the purely formal dimensions of European art music, as reflected in the form of the score, its straight lines and grid-like form reflecting, and so appealing primarily to, the rational *cogito*.

³⁸⁰ Ibid., p. 64.

Socrates was famously suspicious of the written word, preferring to engage in open discussion with any would be philosophers. Orality was crucial to Greek culture, as the example of Homer attests. Plato obviously had more faith in the medium. And this gets to the heart of the problem. If Socrates was the gadfly to Greek culture's comfortable certainties, music continues in this vein.

Gilbert and Pearson acknowledge as much when they note that any attempt to give an account of some aspect of reality 'can never hope to completely step *outside* of metaphysics, attacking it from without, as we are all to some extent always already *within* metaphysics, *within* the western tradition of reason'.³⁸¹ Emphasizing our *ineluctable* inclination towards something like the 'metaphysical', not to mention the particular historical trajectory that valorizes it allows us, I hope, to develop the concept in a critical way. UK raving managed to forge a real 'chain of equivalences' under the empty signifiers of instrumental electronic music, dance and drugs: hence the heady mixture of pastoral and urban decay, the open field and the warehouse, an older generation of travellers, hippies, punks and rastas mixed with footballers and city boys, moving to music largely created by and for gay black Americans and rooted in ecstatic gospel tradition of the black Baptist church.

With raving, the work-week suddenly contracted, weekends stretched from Friday (spent in anticipation) to Monday (spent finding your way back home, coming down). The possibility of contact with others of entirely different backgrounds, with entirely different occupations, was dramatically increased. The desexualized atmosphere on the dance floor, due to copious amounts of ecstasy and very little booze, meant that woman in particular could party free from the scopophilic gaze of the opposite sex. Rave's most dramatic triumph was the conquest of space for free parties in the English countryside. That it took this form in the UK, where, some two hundred and fifty years prior, the enclosures act signaled the beginning of bourgeois domination.

This collective challenge to work and leisure, but above all private property, was the final straw: CJA [1994] also dramatically increased police powers: it divested those arrestees of their right to silence, allowed police to take and record intimate body samples, enlarged powers of

³⁸¹ Ibid., p. 57.

unsupervised stop and search, withdrew aid and protections for gypsy and traveller communities, and criminalized previously civil offences (like collective trespass).

It took awhile for the crucial macro-economic decisions that were made in the early seventies, and paved the way for neoliberalism, to catch up with black culture. Culture is always out of sync with, or semi-autonomous from, the base. The general trend has been a move away from collective to the individual, from the group or band to the producer, dj or singer; in other words, the spirit of collaboration has given way to the singular auteur. Technological progress reflects and reproduces this: now we can all do everything from our bedrooms.

It was a common trope in writing on electronic dance music at the end of the millennium: with the rise of the DJ, the audience themselves become the show, no longer mere spectators; they are now active participants, indeed creators themselves. It's another weird application of literary theory to a very non-literary phenomenon: Barthes' 'What is an Author?' and so on.

MTV was, for about a decade, the zenith of mass culture. But by the mid-nineties it was revealed to be the first in an endless series of niches (Adorno- 'something for everyone, so nobody complains'). The hour-long block (forty minutes with commercials) of videos dedicated to black music- 'Yo! MTV Raps'- suddenly became a whole channel, BET. There were attempts, in the very early nineties (Lollapalooza) to rekindle the spirit, a bevy of 'freaks', one 'alternative nation' under a groove, but these sensitive souls, Reagan-era causalities, were driven by the spectacle to self-destruction. Those who survived- Puff Daddy, Jay-Z- went corporate and the war was over.

Mimesis and Music in the Age of Digital Niche Production, For-Profit Prisons and Zero Hours Contracts

Then Napster hit and everything changed completely- my own ambition to become a musician evaporated as quickly as music's market value. It was already a precarious commitment to have made, but now it was looking impossible. At the same time, my tastes were no longer

constrained by artificial scarcity. All the music I ever dreamed of hearing was there at my fingertips.

Music's pride of place in oppositional culture now seems quaint, competing as it does with a plethora of other forms in the digital landscape. This is a direct effect of music's devaluation in the wake of filesharing, the mp3 format, and now streaming services. There is no living to be made from simply being a musician. Musical skills are one small part of a whole package. One could argue we live in a mimeticist matrix- an age of digital reproduction that has finally consigned 'aura' to the dustbin of history. The new means of communication/production/distribution has us all absorbed in distracted, horizontal consumption. Literacy rates are rising, sharpening the population's critical apprehension. Information- knowledge- is being democratized.

Not long after the death of high-profile death of grunge, rap and rave, digitization and the Internet permeated popular culture, upending the culture industry, and irrevocably transforming the dynamics of class, race and cultural production as it propped up the new regime of finance capital and flexible labor, not to mention the prison industrial complex, hi-tech surveillance and securitization. The privatization of sense has continued apace.

Ever newer and cheaper technologies coupled with the legitimation of raving as a viable business model meant that clubs of all sizes, along with legal weekend festivals whose sponsorships ranged from web start-ups to long-established brands, were booking superstar DJs and 'bedroom producers' back to back. With networks of production and consumption now thoroughly decentralized, 'mainstream' signified little more than 'independent'. Indeed, his crucial observation was that the two had become symbiotically linked. While the ideological tensions- 'urban-underground' versus 'provincial-mainstream', keeping it real versus selling out- remained on the surface, things looked rather different behind closed doors. In 1998, sociologist David Hesmondhalgh wrote:

The varieties of 'partnership' between corporations and 'independents' include a range of licensing, distribution, ownership and financing deals. Many small companies are distributed

though a multinational corporation, although there are many independent distribution companies, offering alternative routes. Some distribution deals involve financing, whereby the major company will put money up for development costs, such as touring and recording. The small company can also license its recordings to a particular company for release overseas, and going with a major means that such releases might be better coordinated.³⁸²

Further, Hesmondhalgh argued, the dance community's 'contradictory attitudes toward *popularity* itself' kept this dialectic in motion.³⁸³ While independent artists gained much of their credibility by positioning themselves outside of the mainstream market for music, the desire to reach *as many people as possible* persisted. The independent community of loosely affiliated labels, genres and artists that resulted thus became a sort of 'research and development' wing for the big labels- much like DJs had been in the '70s. In exchange for the appearance of independence, the majors were always able to have their eye on the 'next big thing'.³⁸⁴

We're surrounded by terabytes of incidental indie musics whose primary purpose is to add value to the brands with which they must associate in the absence of the record industry, which can't afford the risks it took on the black aesthetic; anodyne musics that cocoon work commutes across privatized cityscapes, the ambient soundtrack of the neoliberal order that compresses our work-lives into a single unit, infinitely exchangeable without suffering, our sense of having now overwhelmed by the sense of being had.

Of course, we could never have expected any music to overthrow private property all by itself. Popular modernism was, like all utopias, premature- and this why it's the various forms that it took were routinely trivialized, domesticated, crushed and contained by the postmodern media machine. Contemporary music, left to circulate its own hyper-individualized digital devices, without sensuous appropriation by a suffering-acting-passionate collective, whispers empty consolations- as Adorno was fond of saying, it says, 'that is the way it is...' - that of course being the suffering made natural by its inability to think alternatives to the on-going catastrophe

³⁸² David Hesmondhalgh, 'The British Dance Music Industry: A case study of independent cultural production', in Andy Bennett, Barry Shank and Jason Toynbee (Eds.), *The Popular Music Studies Reader* (London, Routledge: 2005).

³⁸³ Ibid., p. 240.

³⁸⁴ Ibid., 246.

of 'life' under capitalism. Postmodern suffering awaits an expression equal to the challenge posed by populist modernism and the black aesthetic's protracted 'labor of the negative', whose passionate affirmation of suffering as a kind of self-enjoyment, was a true and 'ruthless critique of everything existing'.

We can be certain that there is nothing certain about the social situation of music in the wake of digitization. As its exchange value tends towards zero, musicking articulates that uncertainty- it expresses and subtends the generalization of precarious life. Where it reflects the pleasures afforded to scenes freed from the constraints imposed by industrial production and consumption patterns, the specific social content of those pleasures beyond mere consumption becomes unclear.

Musicians can no longer demand living wages for their music alone, let alone do so while at the same time having 'something to say' about the new world in which they ply their trade. The commercialization of the web has betrayed the utopian fantasies of its earliest champions, who were, to be sure not wholly averse to capitalism in the first place. Responding to the demands of a neoliberal consensus whose effects extend to business and government, science and the creative industries, the web is further intertwined with everyday life, and indeed remains stratified by class, gender, race, age and disability.

If music no longer provokes the kinds of moral panics last seen in the rave moment, this is in part because the anarchic social spaces that provoked them have all but disappeared. Individual styles and signatures seem to appear in inverse proportion to possibilities for social emancipation; new forms multiply as opportunities to freely and collectively explore new modes of being together dwindle. Music is finally and fully reconciled with corporate cosmopolitanism: no longer a magnet for the disenfranchised, classic house provides the soundtrack for every city's gay village; fussy, glossy techno clings to BBC station-ids; dubstep sells you Wheatabix. Corporate giants write checks in exchange for 'cool' by association- and what young musician today could turn them down?

Meanwhile, there are uprisings, soundtracked by the caustic casualties of pop history, grime, jungle, techno, and the intoxicated shouts of NWA's immortal refrain 'Fuck tha police'.

As riotous messages were spread via Blackberry, liberals of every political stripe soberly decried the spectacle on Twitter, evoking images of less fraught colonial pasts by enjoining each other to 'keep calm and drink tea' and, later, to 'clean up' the streets.

Streets made safe for shopping, sterilized and empty after hours, are of course at the heart of cities shorn of manufacturing and rebuilt for tourism, and local dance clubs suffer for it. In Shoreditch, Plastic People (200 capacity) recently introduced image-capture technology to better monitor its patrons, while the constant presence of security guards on the door and the tiny dance floor security guards add a thick layer of unease to every night. Festivals in the park or countryside retreats compensate for this dismal situation, but are a far cry the holiday camps of the post war period, catering to a niche consumer market. Light-touch regulation inside results being walled-in; the forbidding barrier at sites like Glastonbury and Victoria Park granting those who've paid the hundred-plus pounds for a ticket, are willing to pay more bottled water (uncapped at the bar to prevent refills) and consume only Red Stripe, permission to let loose and enjoy sets that last just as long as it takes to find an adequate place to stand.

Otherwise, music adjusts itself to the shrinking interstices of the work-life continuum, providing the ambient soundtrack for morning grooming, commuting or relaxing before sleep. For individuals whose senses have become the site of ceaseless competition amongst content providers, music becomes one more potential irritant among others; or rather, music becomes noise. 'Attention', 'connection' and 'reputation' are the ephemeral currency of the creative economy- and will not put food on the musician's or the listener's table. 'Network sociality' will not sustain artists systematically cut into competitive monads by the political rationality of neoliberalism or exiled by gentrification and the transformation of city centers into theme parks for the global-mobile elite. Day jobs become a necessity and today that means working more for less, whether that be wages or free time. Music becomes the preserve of the well-to-do, while the rest produce work for weddings, advertisements, video games and the sundry other web-related media ventures that continue their weak assault on everyday life.

While it appears as though the value of musicking is no longer determined by the market, that music has experienced a kind of decommodification, freed from the false

fluctuations of exchange-value and an illusory, diminished use-value, this could not be further from the truth. The value of musicking today is simply the degree to which it links up to the brand, and that can be either the company that fronts the funds or the musician themselves, forced to package and promote all facets of their activity as much as possible so that it fits in and adds value to the 'space of flows'. In a recent issue of *Wire*, the experimental electronic musician James Kirby writes that there 'is an invisible pressure on artists to behave this way. We are being led to believe that we need to be constantly visible to connect, and if we drop out of view then people will forget about us. To maintain interest, we're told, we have to give people more and more'. Music is still a commodity, but where in the past it appeared as the burning focal center of a social and politicized scene, at best in tension with the market on which it relied, today it conforms to the larger tendency toward 'individualization', whereby people 'increasingly have to become their own micro-structures, they have to do the work of the structures by themselves, which in turn requires intensive practices of self-monitoring or 'reflexivity'. For musicians- 'in effect, dependent sub-contracted suppliers'- this means above all keeping aesthetics and politics at arm's length.

And after-hours, in the dedicated club/networking space, with free vodka on tap all night thanks to the sponsorship of the big drinks companies, who dares to ask 'uncool' questions about the minimal representation of women and non-white young people, about who the big clients are and what they do with the product, and about the downside of the 'talent-led' economy? In an atmosphere of businesslike conviviality overseen by accomplished 'PRs', the emphasis on presentation of self is incompatible with a contestatory demeanour. It's not cool to be 'difficult'. Personal angst, nihilism or mere misgivings must be privately managed and, for the purposes of club sociality, carefully concealed.³⁸⁵

It is interesting that McRobbie uses the term 'difficult' here to describe an attitude that would inveigh against political and economic constraint, if only it could. This of course is one of the

³⁸⁵ Angela McRobbie, *Be Creative: Making A Living in the New Culture Industries* (Cambridge, Polity Press: 2016).

canonical features of the aesthetics and politics of modernism, as embodied in the critic, the artist, or, the ideal, the artistic-as-critic. And while the euphoria occasioned by creative-corporate partnerships spurns 'angst, nihilism or mere misgivings' for economic reasons, so too has several decades of cultural studies railed against the 'elitism' such a stance apparently implies. Better to focus on the 'easy' pleasures afforded by the popular, which seems to have been whatever topped the charts. This methodological imperative to focus on the myriad forms of resistance by ordinary consumers was reacting to Adorno and Horkheimer's account of the culture industry, in which rationalization, standardization and the pursuit of profit could only mean compliance and regression in its faithful customers. But to argue that people are subjected to affective manipulation by profit-seeking industries on a daily basis is not the same as saying they are all the time falling for it, eternally duped. Skepticism, resistance or simple indifference are also facts of everyday life. Nevertheless, enlightened postmodernism has tended to throw the baby out with the bathwater. It is not only that, as a result of neoliberal imperatives, today's 'sped-up' worlds of cultural production allow little room for critique, for fear of alienating its corporate paymasters; cultural studies itself has done little to foster the 'contestatory demeanour' necessary for that critique to take shape. In classrooms dedicated to parsing the polyvalent pleasures of the commodity, it's not cool to invoke the specter of Adorno. This would be immaterial were it not for all those facts of recent history that have proven his varied and far-sighted analyses correct.

Ernst Bloch's commitment to Marxism, music and utopia meant that human suffering, whilst humanly natural, could also be the generative source of a revolutionary utopian impulse. His philosophy of hope privileged music for its capacity to express suffering because unlike other art forms, whose mediating stages are far more elaborate, sound directly conveyed the desire for a better life. As the repository of what he called 'anticipatory consciousness', the best music prepared the senses for a great transformation, placing them on the threshold of a new world whose modes of consciousness and social relations had yet to be set in stone. For Bloch, as for Marx, music is utopian precisely because it breaks us out of individual, solitary forms of

enjoyment, revealing an objective reality of ever-developing needs and sufferings, activities and passions.

But Bloch's memory of happiness, much like Adorno's, remained stubbornly attached to the art musics of the Vienna and Weimar. Written nearly simultaneously and during their authors' exile in the US in the 1930s, Adorno and Horkheimer's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and Bloch's *Principle of Hope* are utterly antithetical in terms of method and outlook- where the former saw an unstoppable movement of progress-as-regression to barbarism, the latter hopefully sought out keys to the society of the future. The books nevertheless share their skepticism towards the musics of the then burgeoning culture industry. Whereas Bloch simply ignores them, save for a few shallow remarks about 'repetitiveness', Adorno's analyses, especially in several key essays written at this time, are unsparing. The standardized products of the culture industry promise the kind of life they can never fully give without themselves ceasing to matter; as such they are anathema to true enjoyments.

[True enjoyment] would burst asunder that concept of the person as an autonomous, self-possessed being that degrades its own life to that of a thing, and which deludes itself into thinking that it will find pleasure in full possession of itself, whereas in reality that pleasure is frustrated by the fact of self-possession.

In spite of everything, 'Regression' is bookended by two expressions of hope. In the first, Adorno summarizes what 'great music' does and thus what popular music fails to do:

In the multiplicity of stimulus and expression, its greatness is shown as a force for synthesis. Not only does the musical synthesis preserve the unity of appearance and protect it from falling apart into diffuse culinary moments, but in such unity, in the relation of particular moments to an evolving whole, there is also preserved the image of a social condition in which above those particular moments of happiness would be more than mere appearance.³⁸⁶

³⁸⁶ Ibid., p. 32.

Light finally shines through the essay's penultimate paragraph:

Perhaps a better hour may at some time strike... one in which they may demand, instead of prepared material ready to be switched on, the improvisatory displacement of things, as the sort of radical beginning that can only thrive under the protection of the unshaken real world. Even discipline can take over the expression of free solidarity if freedom becomes its content. As little as regressive listening is a symptom of progress in consciousness of freedom, it could suddenly turn around if art, in unity with society, should ever leave the road of the always-identical.³⁸⁷

I hope the foregoing has shown that the orthodoxies of literary theory and Marxism don't quite hold up in the face of music culture. At the very least, music is a reminder that no matter how hard we might want to demystify, to fully secularize self and world, the mystic or ineffable part of our experience is impossible to eradicate completely. It's important to emphasize that contemporary music is as interesting as it's ever been. It's *popular* music that's suffering from what Simon Reynold's has called 'retromania', and the reasons for this are reducible to a failure of nerve on the part of musicians. The reasons are pretty much entirely economic. I chose the phrase 'metaphysics in the dark' because it imagines metaphysics (ontology) not as an abstract philosophical discourse, but as a concrete practice whereby poetry, music and drama are tools for constructing and maintaining a relationship between self (subject), history, and nature (object). Indulged collectively and at a distance from official politics, as they were throughout the previous century, such practices can speak truth to power.

³⁸⁷ Ibid., p. 59.

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