Imagining Home


Sounds Authentic: Black Music, Ethnicity, and the Challenge of a Changing Same

Paul Gilroy

My nationality
is reality

Kool G Rap

Since the mid-nineteenth century a country’s music has become a political ideology by stressing national characteristics, appearing as a representative of the nation, and everywhere confirming the national principle . . . Yet music, more than any other artistic medium, expresses the national principle’s antinomies as well.

T. W. Adorno

The basic labours of archaeological reconstruction and periodisation aside, working on the contemporary forms of Black expressive culture involves struggling with one problem in particular. It is the puzzle of what analytic status should be given to variation within Black communities and between Black culture. The tensions produced by attempts to compare or evaluate differing Black cultural formations can be summed up in the following question: How are we to think critically about artistic products and aesthetic codes which, though they may be traceable back to one distinct location, have been somehow changed either by the passage of time or by their displacement, relocation or dissemination through wider networks of communication and cultural exchange? This question serves as a receptacle for several even more awkward issues. They include the unity and differentiation of the creative Black self, the vexed matter of Black particularity and the role of cultural expression in its formation and reproduction. These problems are especially acute because Black thinkers have been unable to
appeal to the authoritative narratives of psychoanalysis as a means to ground the cross-cultural aspirations of their theories. With a few noble exceptions, critical accounts of the dynamics of Black subordination and resistance have been doggedly monocultural, national and ethnocentric.

The transnational structures which brought the Black Atlantic world into being have themselves developed and now articulate its myriad cultural forms into a system of global communications. This fundamental dislocation of Black cultural forms is especially important in the recent history of Black musics which, produced out of the racial slavery which made modern western civilisation possible, now dominate its popular cultures. In the face of the conspicuous differentiation and proliferation of Black cultural styles and genres, a new analytic orthodoxy has begun to grow. It suggests that since Black particularity is socially and historically constructed, the pursuit of any unifying dynamic or underlying structure of feeling in contemporary Black cultures is utterly misplaced. The attempt to locate the cultural practices, motifs or political agendas that might connect the people of the Pan-African diaspora with each other and even with Africa is therefore dismissed as essentialism or idealism or both.

The alternative sketched below offers a tentative rebuke to this position, which I regard as a careless and premature dismissal of the problem of theorising Black identity and Pan-Africanism. I suggest that weighing the similarities and differences between Black cultures remains an important element of some urgent concerns. This response relies crucially on the concept of diaspora (Glissant 1989; Drake 1987), which I believe is still indispensable in focusing on the political and ethical dynamics of the unfinished history of Blacks in the modern world.

The dangers of idealism and pastoralisation associated with this concept ought, by now, to be obvious but the very least that it offers is a heuristic means to focus on the relationship of identity and non-identity in Black political culture. It can also be employed to project the plural richness of Black cultures in different parts of the world in counterpoint to their common sensibilities – both those residually inherited from Africa and those generated from the special bitterness of New World racial slavery. This is not an easy matter. The baseline concept of Pan-Africanism, that is, the proposition that the post-slave cultures of the Atlantic world are in some significant way related to each other and to the African cultures from which they partly derive, has long been a matter of great controversy capable of arousing intense feeling that goes far beyond dispassionate scholastic contemplation. The situation is rendered even more complex by the fact that the fragile psychological, emotional and cultural correspondences that connect diaspora populations in spite of their manifest differences are often apprehended only fleetingly and in ways that persistently confound the protocols of academic orthodoxy.

There is, however, a great body of work which justifies the proposition that some cultural, religious and linguistic affiliations can be identified even if their contemporary political significance remains disputed. There are also valuable though underutilised philosophers who have formulated stimulating conceptions of the relationship between identity and difference in the context of advancing the political project of female emancipation (Flax 1990; Harding 1988; Butler 1990; Spelman 1988).

Precisely because some of the most idealised constructions of Blackness, Africana and Pan-Africanism have ironically relied upon an absolute contempt for the lived complexities of Black vernacular culture in the New World, I want to propose that the possible commonality of post-slave, Black cultural forms be approached via several related problems that converge in the analysis of Black musics and their supporting social relations. One particularly valuable pathway is afforded by concern with the distinctive patterns of language use which characterise the contrasting populations of the modern African diaspora (Baugh 1983). The oral focus of the cultural settings in which diaspora musics have developed presupposes a distinctive relationship to the body – an idea expressed with exactly the right amount of impatience by Glissant (1989, p. 248):

> It is nothing new to declare that for us music, gesture, dance are forms of communication, just as important as the gift of speech. This is how we first managed to emerge from the plantation: aesthetic form in our cultures must be shaped from these oral structures.

The distinctive kinesis of the post-slave populations was the product of these brutal historical conditions. Though more usually raised by analysis of sports, athletics and dance it ought to contribute directly to the understanding of the traditions of performance which continue to characterise the production and reception of diaspora musics. This orientation to the specific dynamics of performance has a wider significance in the analysis of Black cultural forms than has so far been supposed. Its strengths are evident when it is contrasted with approaches to Black culture that have been premised on textualism and narrative rather than say dramaturgy, enunciation and gesture – the pre- and anti-discursive constituents of Black meta-communication.

Each of these areas merits detailed treatment in its own right (Farris Thompson 1983, 1990). All of them are marked by their compound and multiple origins in the mediation of African and other cultural forms sometimes referred to as ‘creolisation’. However, my concern here is less with the formal attributes of these syncretic expressive cultures than with the
problem of how critical (anti)aesthetic judgements on them can be made and with the place of ethnicity and authenticity within these judgements. If, for example, a style, genre or performance of music is identified as expressing the absolute essence of the group that produced it, what special analytical problems arise? What contradictions appear in the transmission and adaptation of this cultural expression by other diaspora populations and how will they be resolved? How does the hemispheric displacement and global dissemination of Black music get reflected in localised traditions of critical writing and, once the music is perceived as a world phenomenon, what value is placed upon its origins in opposition to its contingent loops and fractal trajectories? Where music is thought to be emblematic and constitutive of racial difference rather than just associated with it, how is music used to pinpoint general issues pertaining to the problem of racial authenticity and the consequent self-identity of the racial group?

UK Black

Born and Raised this way
Is a different game bi-culturally
Fresh Direction, new ideas
Opening our eyes and ears.

Caron Wheeler

All these questions have acquired a special historical and political significance in Britain. Black settlement in that country goes back many centuries. Indeed, affirming its continuity has become an important part of the politics that strive to answer contemporary British racism. However, the bulk of today’s Black communities are of relatively recent origin dating only from the post-World War II period. If these populations are unified at all, it is more by the experience of migration rather than the memory of slavery and the residues of plantation slavery. Until recently, this very newness and conspicuous lack of rootedness in the ‘indigenous’ cultures of Britain’s inner cities conditioned the formation of syncretic racial subcultures that drew heavily from a range of ‘raw materials’ supplied by the Caribbean and Black America. This was true even where these subcultures also contributed to the unsteady equilibrium of antagonistic class relationships into which Britain’s Black settlers found themselves inserted as racially subordinated migrant labourers but also as working-class Black settlers.

The musics of the Black Atlantic world were the primary expressions of cultural distinctiveness which this population seized upon and sought to adapt to its new circumstances. It used the separate but converging musical traditions of the Black Atlantic world if not to create itself anew as a conglomeration of Black communities, then as a means to gauge the social progress of spontaneous self-creation, which was sedimented together by the endless pressures of economic exploitation, political racism, displacement and exile. This musical heritage gradually became an important factor in facilitating the transition of diverse settlers to a distinct mode of Blackness. It was instrumental in producing a constellation of subject positions that was openly indebted for its conditions of possibility to the Caribbean, the United States and even to Africa. It was also indelibly marked by the British conditions in which it grew and matured.

It is essential to appreciate that this type of process has not been confined to settlers of Afro-Caribbean descent. In re-inventing their own ethnicity (Sollors 1989), some of Britain’s Asian settlers have also borrowed the Sound System culture of the Caribbean, the soul and hip hop styles of Afro-America, as well as techniques like mixing, scratching and sampling as part of their invention of a new mode of cultural production with an identity to match. The experience of Caribbean migrants to Britain provides further examples of cultural exchange and of the ways in which a self-consciously syncretic culture can support some equally novel political identities. The cultural and political histories of Guyana, Jamaica, Barbados, Grenada, Trinidad and St Lucia, like the economic forces at work in generating their respective migrations to Europe, are widely dissimilar. Even if it were possible, let alone desirable, their synthesis into a single Black British culture could never have been guaranteed by the effects of racism alone.

Thus the role of external meanings around Blackness drawn, in particular, from Afro-America become important in the elaboration of a connective culture which drew these different ‘national’ groups together into a new pattern that was not economically marked in the way that their Caribbean cultural inheritances had been. Reggae provides a useful example here. Once its own hybrid origins in rhythm and blues were effectively concealed it ceased, in Britain, to conceal an exclusively ethnic Jamaican style and derived a different kind of cultural power both from a new global status and from its expression of what might be termed a pan-Caribbean or Creole culture.

The style, rhetoric and moral authority of the Civil Rights movement and of Black Power suffered similar fates. They too were detached from their original ethnic markers and historical origins, exported and adapted with evident respect but little sentimentality to local needs and political climates. Appearing in Britain through a circulatory system that gave a central place to the musics that had both informed and recorded Black
struggles in other places, they too were re-articulated in distinctively European conditions. How the appropriation of these forms, styles and histories of struggle was possible at such great physical and social distance is in itself an interesting question for cultural historians. It was facilitated by a common fund of urban experiences, by the effect of similar but by no means identical forms of racial segregation as well as by the memory of slavery, a legacy of Africanisms and a stock of religious experiences defined by them both. Dislocated from their original conditions of existence, the sound tracks to this African American cultural renaissance fed a new metaphysics of Blackness elaborated and enacted within the underground, alternative public spaces constituted around an expressive culture that was dominated by music.

The inescapably political language of citizenship, racial justice and equality was one of several discourses which contributed to this transfer of cultural and political forms and structures of feeling. A commentary on the relationship of work to leisure and the respective forms of freedom with which these opposing worlds become identified provided a second linking principle. A 'folk historicism' animating a special fascination with history and the significance of its recovery by those who have been expelled from the official drama of civilisation was a third component here. The representation of sexuality and gender identity, in particular the ritual public projection of the antagonistic relationship between Black women and men in ways that invited forms of identification strong enough to operate across the line of colour, was the fourth element within this vernacular cultural and philosophical formation reproduced by and through the music of the Black Atlantic world.

The conflictual representation of sexuality has vied with the discourse of racial emancipation to constitute the inner core of Black expressive culture. Common rhetorical strategies developed through the same repertory of 'enunciative procedures' have helped these discourses to become interlinked. Their association was pivotal, for example, in the massive secularization that produced soul out of rhythm and blues and persists today. It can be observed in the bitter conflict over the misogynist tone and masculinist direction of hip hop. The most significant recent illustration of this is provided by the complex issues stemming from the obscenity trial of the 2 Live Crew. This episode is also notable because it was the occasion for an important public intervention by Afro-America's best known cultural critic, Henry Louis Gates, Jr. Gates went beyond simply affirming the artistic status of this particular hip hop product, arguing in full effect that the Crew's material was a manifestation of distinctively Black cultural traditions that operated by particular satirical codes in which one man's misogyny turns out to be another man's parodic play. In dealing with the relationship of 'race' to class it has been commonplace to recall Stuart Hall's suggestive remark that the former is the modality in which the latter is lived. The tale of the 2 Live Crew and the central place of sexuality in the contemporary discourses of racial particularity points to an analogous formulation: gender is the modality in which 'race' is lived. Experiencing racial difference through particular definitions of gender has been eminently exportable. The forms of connectedness and identification it makes possible cannot be confined within the borders of the nation-state. They create new conceptions of nationality in the conflictual interaction between the women who reproduce the Black national community and the men who aspire to be its soldier citizens.

These links show no sign of fading out, but the dependence of Blacks in Britain on Black cultures produced in the New World has recently begun to change. The current popularity of Jazzy B and Soul II Soul, Maxi Priest, Caron Wheeler and Mieza Love in the US confirms that during the 1980s Black British cultures ceased to simply mimic or reproduce wholesale forms, styles and genres which had been lovingly borrowed, respectfully stolen or brazenly hijacked from Blacks elsewhere. Critical space/time cartography of the diaspora needs therefore to be readjusted so that the dynamics of dispersal and local autonomy can be shown alongside the unforeseen devours and circuits that mark the new journeys and new arrivals, which in turn prompt new political and cultural possibilities (Said, 1983).

At certain points during the recent past, British racism has generated turbulent economic, ideological and political forces that have seemed to act upon the people they oppressed by concentrating their cultural identities into a single powerful configuration. Whether these people were of African, Caribbean or Asian descent, their commonness was often defined by its reference to the central, irreducible sign of their common racial subordination – the colour Black. More recently, though, this fragile unity in action has fragmented and this self-conception has separated into its various constituent elements. The unifying notion of an 'open' Blackness has been largely rejected and replaced by more particularistic conceptions of cultural difference. This retreat from a politically constructed notion of racial solidarity has initiated a compensatory recovery of narrowly ethnic culture and identity. Indeed, the aura of authentic ethnicity supplies a special form of comfort in a situation where the very historicity of Black experience is constantly undermined. These political and historical shifts are registered in the cultural realm. The growth of religious fundamentalism among some Asian-descended populations is an obvious sign of their significance, and there may be similar processes at work among peoples of Caribbean descent, for whom a return to ethnicity has acquired pronounced generational features. Their desire to anchor themselves in racial particularity is
not dominated by the longing to return to the ‘Victorian’ certainties and virtues of Caribbean cultural life. However, in conjunction with the pressure of economic recession and populist racism, this yearning has driven many older settlers to return to the lands in which they were born. Among their descendants, the same desire to withdraw has found a very different form of expression. It has moved toward an overarching ‘Afrocentrism’, which can be read as inventing its own totalising conception of Black culture.

This new ethnicity is all the more powerful because it corresponds to no actually existing Black communities. Its radical utopianism, often anchored in the ethical bedrock provided by the history of the Nile Valley civilisations, transcends the parochialism of Caribbean memories in favour of a heavily mythologised Africanity that is itself stamped by its origins not in Africa but in a variety of Pan-African ideology produced most recently by Afro-America. This complex and frequently radical sensibility has been recently fostered by the more pedagogic and self-consciously politicised elements within hip hop. The ‘college boy rap’ of groups like X Clan and Brand Nubian represents one pole in the field that reproduced it, while the assertive stance of hip hop’s ‘five percenters’ (artists whose raps make explicit demands for support on behalf of the Nation of Islam) represents the other.

This political change can be registered in the deepening splits within hip hop over the language and symbols appropriate for Black self-designation and over the relative importance of opposing racism on the one hand, and elaborating cultural forms of Black identity on the other. These necessary tasks are not synonymous or even coextensive. (This issue merits far more detailed treatment than I can give it here.) What is more significant for present purposes is that in Afrocentric discourse the idea of a diaspora tends to disappear somewhere between invocations of an African motherland and powerful critical commentaries on the immediate, local conditions in which this music originates. These complexities aside, hip hop culture (which is not neatly reducible to its Afrocentric components) is simply the latest export from Black America to have found favour in Black Britain. It is especially interesting then that its success has been built on structures of circulation and inter-cultural exchange established long ago.

---

### Sounds Authentic: Black Music and Ethnicity

**From the Jubilee Singers to The Jimi Hendrix Experience**

The Hendrix Hando, frizzy and bountiful, was viewed by many cultural onlookers as one of the most truly remarkable visual revolts of London.

_David Henderson_

The distinctive patterns of cross-cultural circulation on which the rise of Afrocentric rap has relied precede the consolidation of coherent youth cultures and subcultures in the post–World War II world. They can be traced right back to the beginnings of Black music’s entry into the public domain of late-nineteenth-century mass entertainment. The worldwide travels of The Fisk Jubilee Singers provide a little-known but nonetheless important example of the difficulties that, from the earliest point, attended the passage of African-American ‘folk’ forms into the emergent popular-cultural industries of those overdeveloped countries. At that time, in the late nineteenth century, the status of the Jubilee Singers’ art was further complicated by the prominence and popularity of minstrelsy (Toll 1974; Boskin 1988).

One review of the earliest performances by the group was headlined ‘Negro Minstrelsy in Church: Novel Religious Exercise’, while another made much of the fact that this band of Black minstrels were, in fact, ‘genuine negroes’ (Silver 1989). Doug Scroff (1990, p. 4) quotes another contemporary American review of a concert by the group: ‘Those who have only heard the burnt cork caricatures of negro minstrelsy have not the slightest conception of what it really is’ Similar problems arose in the response of European audiences:

> From the first the Jubilee music was more or less of a puzzle to the critics; and even among those who sympathised with their mission there was no little difference of opinion as to the artistic merit of their entertainments. Some could not understand the reason for enjoying so thoroughly as almost everyone did these simple unpretending songs. (Marsh 1875, p. 69)

The role of music and song within the abolitionist movement is an additional and equally little-known factor which must have pre-figured the Jubilees’ eventual triumph (Dennison 1982). The choir, sent forth into the world with economic objectives that must have partially eclipsed their pursuit of aesthetic excellence in their musical performances, initially struggled to win an audience for Black music produced by Blacks from a constituency that had been created by fifty years of ‘Blackface’ entertainment. Needless to say, the aesthetic and political tensions involved in establishing the credibility and appeal of their own novel brand of Black cultural ex-
Imagining Home

pression were not confined to the concert halls. Practical problems arose in the mechanics of touring when innkeepers would refuse the group lodgings having mistakenly assumed that they were a company of 'nigger minstrels' (that is, white). One landlord did not discover that 'their faces were coloured by their creator and not by burnt cork' (Marsh 1875, p. 36) until the singers were firmly established in their bedrooms. He still turned them into the street.

The choir's progress was dogged by controversies over the relative value of their work when compared to the output of white performers. The Fisk troupe also encountered the ambivalence and embarrassment of Black audiences unsure or uneasy about serious, sacred music being displayed to audiences conditioned by the hateful antics of Zip Coon, Jim Crow and their ilk. Understandably, Blacks were protective of their unique musical culture and fearful of how it might be changed by being forced to compete on the new terrain of popular culture against the absurd representations of Blackness offered by minstrelsy's dramatisation of white supremacy. The Fisk singers' own success spawned a host of other companies who took to the road offering a similar musical fare in the years after 1871. The meaning of this movement of Black singers for our understanding of Reconstruction remains to be explored. It will complement and extend work already done on representations of Blackness during this period [Gates 1988] and promises to go far beyond the basic argument. I want to emphasise here: Black people singing slave songs as mass entertainment initiated and established new public standards of authenticity for Black cultural expression. The legitimacy of these new cultural forms was established precisely through their distance from the racial codes of minstrelsy. The Jubilee Singers' journey out of America was a critical stage in making this possible.

Almost one hundred years after the Jubilee Singers set sail from Boston for England on the Cunard ship Batavia, another Black American musician made the same transatlantic journey to London. Jimi Hendrix's importance in the history of African American popular music has increased since his untimely death in 1970. The European triumph which paved the way for Hendrix's American successes represents another interesting but rather different case of the political aesthetics implicated in representations of racial authenticity. A seasoned if ill-disciplined rhythm and blues sideman, Hendrix was re-invented as the essential image of what English audiences felt a Black American should be. Charles Shaar Murray quotes the following diagnosis of Hendrix's success by the rival guitarist Eric Clapton:

You know English people have a very big thing towards a spade. They really love that magic thing. They all fall for that kind of thing. Everybody and his

Sounds Authentic: Black Music and Ethnicity

brother in England still think that spades have big dicks. And Jimi came over and exploited that to the limit ... and everybody fell for it. (1990, p. 68)

Sexuality and authenticity have been intertwined in the history of Western culture for several hundred years. The overt sexuality of Hendrix's own 'minstrel' stance seems to have been received as a sign of his authentic Blackness by the white rock audiences on which his pop career was solidly based. Whether or not Hendrix's early performances were parodic of the minstrel role or simply confirmation of its enduring potency, his career points to the antagonism between different local definitions of what Blackness entails and to the combined and uneven character of Black cultural development. The complexity of his relationship to the blues and his fluctuating commitment to overt racial politics extend and underscore this point. The creative opposition in his work between blues-rooted tradition and an assertively hi-tech, futuristic spirituality distils a wider conflict not simply between pre-modern or anti-modern and the modern but between the contending definitions of authenticity which are appropriate to Black cultural creation on its passage into international pop commodification.

Music Criticism and the Politics of Racial Authenticity

That [The 2 Live Crew situation] ain't my problem. Some people might think it's our problem because rap is one big happy family. When I made this tape, I lay it out. I don't say nothing. I can't stand up for, 'cause I seen one interview, where they asked him [Luther Campbell] a question and he started talkin' all this about Black culture. That made everybody on the rap tip look kinda dense. He was sayin', 'Yo this is my culture.'

That's not culture at all.

Rakim

The problem of cultural origins and authenticity to which these examples point has persisted and assumed an enhanced significance as mass culture has acquired new technological bases and Black music has become a truly global phenomenon. It has taken on greater proportions as original, folk or local expressions of Black culture were identified as authentic and positively evaluated for that reason, while subsequent hemispheric or global manifestations of the same cultural forms got dismissed as inauthentic and therefore lacking in cultural or aesthetic value precisely because of their distance (supposed or actual) from a readily identifiable point of origin. The fragmentation and subdivision of Black music into an ever-increasing
Imagining Home

diversification of styles and genres has also contributed to a situation in which authenticity emerges as a highly charged and bitterly contested issue. The conflict between trumpeters Wynton Marsalis and Miles Davis is worth citing here. The former insists that jazz provides an essential repository for wider Black cultural values, while the latter insists upon prioritising the restless creative energies that can keep the corrosive processes of reification and commodification at bay. Marsalis's assertive, suit-wearing custodianship of 'jazz tradition' was thus dismissed by Davis as a 'safe', technically sophisticated pastiche of earlier styles. This was done not on the grounds that it was inauthentic, which had been Marsalis's critical charge against Davis's 'fusion' output, but because it was felt to be anachronistic:

What's he doin' messing with the past? A player of his calibre should just wise up and realize it's over. The past is dead, Jazz is dead - Why get caught up on that old shit? ... Don't nobody tell me the way it was. Hell, I was there - no one wanted to hear us when we were playing jazz - Jazz is dead, God damn it. That's it, fini! it's over and there's no point aping the shit. (Davis interviewed by Kent, 1986, pp. 22-3)

There are many good reasons why Black cultures have had great difficulty in seeing that displacement and transformation are unavoidable and that the developmental processes regarded by conservatives as cultural contamination may be enriching. The effect of racism's denials not only of Black cultural integrity but of the capacity of Blacks to bear and reproduce any culture worthy of the name are clearly salient here. The place prepared for Black cultural expression in the hierarchy of creativity generated by the pernicious metaphysical dualism that identifies Blacks with the body and whites with the mind is a second significant factor, one that has roots in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century discussions of aesthetics. However, beyond these general questions lies the projection of a coherent and stable culture as a means to establish the political legitimacy of Black nationalism and the notions of ethnic particularity on which it has come to rely. This defensive reaction to racism can be said to have taken over its evident appetite for sameness and symmetry from the discourses of the oppressor.

European romanticism and cultural nationalism contributed directly to the development of modern Black nationalism. It can be traced back to the impact of European theories of nationhood, culture and civilisation on elite Afro-American intellectuals in the early and mid nineteenth century. Here, Alexander Crummell's endorsement of Lord Beaconsfield's views on the primary importance of race as 'the key to history' should sound a cautionary note to contemporary cultural critics who would give artists the job of refining the ethnic distinctiveness of the group or who are tempted to use the analogy of family to comprehend the meaning of race and the mechanics of racial identification:

Races, like families are the organisms and the ordinance of God: and race feeling, like family feeling, is of divine origin. The extinction of race feeling is just as possible as the extinction of family feeling. Indeed race is family. The principle of continuity is as masterful in races as it is in families - as it is in nations. (1891, p. 46)

Today's absolutist varieties of Black nationalism have run into trouble when faced with the need to make sense of the increasingly distinct forms of Black culture produced from various diaspora populations. These are often forms that have deliberately reconstructed the cultural heritage of the Black Atlantic in novel ways that do not respect the boundaries of discrete nation-states or the supposedly authentic political communities they express or simply contain. My point here is that the unashamedly hybrid character of these Black cultures continually confounds any simplistic (essentialist or anti-essentialist) understanding of the relationship between racial identity and racial non-identity, between folk cultural authenticity and pop cultural betrayal.

Pop culture has been prepared to endorse the premium on authenticity. It supplements the appeal of selected cultural commodities and has become an important element in the mechanism of the mode of 'racialisation' necessary to making them acceptable items in the pop market. The discourse of authenticity has been a notable presence in the mass marketing of successive Black folk-cultural forms to white audiences. The distinction between rural and urban blues provides one good example of this, though similar arguments are still made about the relationship between authentic jazz and 'fusion' styles supposedly corroded by the illegitimate amalgamation of rock influences or the struggle between real instruments and digital emulators. Similar issues arise in the sale of so-called 'World Music' as a subgenre of pop. Paul Simon's borrowings from African, Latin and Caribbean sources have, for example, been licensed by the discourse of cultural authenticity as much as by simple commercial considerations. In all these cases, it is not enough for critics to point out that representing authenticity always involves artifice. This may be true, but it is not helpful when trying to evaluate or compare cultural forms, let alone in trying to make sense of their mutation. More important, this response also misses the opportunity to use music as a model that can break the deadlock between the two unsatisfactory positions that have dominated recent discussion of Black cultural politics.
Imagining Home

Soul Music and Anti-anti-essentialism

Rather than seeing [the modern soul] as the reactivated remnants of an ideology, one would see it as the present correlative of a certain technology of power over the body. It would be wrong to say that the soul is an illusion, or an ideological effect. On the contrary it exists, it has a reality, it is produced permanently around, on, within the body by the functioning of power that is exercised...

Michel Foucault

Critical dialogue and debate on these questions of identity and culture currently stages a confrontation between two loosely organised perspectives which, in opposing each other, have become locked in a symbiotic, and entirely fruitless relationship of mutual interdependency. Both positions are represented in contemporary discussions of Black music and both contribute to staging a conversation between those who see the music as the primary means to critically explore and politically reproduce the necessary ‘ethnic’ essence of Blackness and those who dispute the existence of any such unifying, organic phenomenon. Wherever the confrontation between these views is staged, it takes the basic form of conflict between a tendency focused by some variety of exceptionalist claim (usually though not always of a nationalist nature) and another more avowedly pluralistic stance which is decidedly sceptical of the desire to totalise Black culture, let alone to make the social dynamics of cultural integration synonymous with the practice of nation building and the project of racial emancipation in Africa and elsewhere.

The first option typically identifies music with tradition and cultural continuity. Its conservatism is sometimes disguised by the radical nature of its affirmative political rhetoric and by its laudable concern with the relationship between music and the memory of the past. It currently announces its interpretive intentions with the popular slogan ‘It’s a Black thing; you wouldn’t understand.’ But it appears to have no great enthusiasm for the forbidding, racially prescriptive musical genres and styles that could make this bold assertion plausible. There has been no contemporary equivalent to the provocative, hermetic power of Dub, which supported the radical Ethiopianism of the 1970s or the anti-assimilationist unintelligibility of BeBop in the 1940s. The usually mystical ‘Afrocentrism’ which animates this position perceives no problem in the ‘internal’ differentiation of Black cultures. Any fragmentation in the cultural output of Africans at home and abroad is only apparent rather than real and cannot therefore forestall the power of the underlying racial aesthetic and its political correlates.

Elitism and contempt for Black popular culture are common to both this exceptionalist position and to the would-be postmodern pragmatism which routinely and inadequately opposes it. Something of the spirit of the second, ‘anti-essentialist’ perspective is captured in the earlier but equally historic Black vernacular phrase ‘Different strokes for different folks.’ This notion of pluralism is misleading. Its distaste for uncomfortable questions of class and power make political calculation hazardous if not impossible.

This second position refers performatively to the first as ‘racial essentialism.’ It moves towards its usual and arrogant deconstruction of Blackness while ignoring the appeal of the first position’s powerful, populist affirmation of Black culture. The brand of elitism, which would, for example, advance the white noise of Washington, D.C.’s Rasta thrash punk band The Bad Brains as the last word in Black cultural expression is clearly itching to abandon the ground of the Black vernacular entirely. This abdication can only leave that space open to racial conservationists who veer between a volkish, even proto-fascist sensibility and the misty-eyed sentimentality of those who would shroud themselves in the supposed moral superiority that goes with victim status. It is tantamount to ignoring the undiminished power of racism itself and forsaking the mass of Black people who continue to comprehend their lived particularity through what it does to them. Needless to say, the lingering effects of racism institutionalised in the political field are overlooked just as its inscription in the cultural industries which provide the major vehicle for this exclusively aesthetic radicalism passes unremarked upon.

It is ironic, given the importance accorded to music in the habitus of diaspora Blacks that neither pole in this tense conversation takes the music very seriously. The narcissism which unites both standpoints is revealed by the way they both forsake discussion of music and its attendant dramaturgy, performance, ritual and gesture in favor of an obsessive fascination with the bodies of the performers themselves. For the unashamed essentialists, Nelson George (1988) denounces Black musicians who have had facial surgery and wear blue or green contact lenses, while in the other camp Kobena Mercer (1986) steadily reduces Michael Jackson’s voice first to his body, then to his hair and eventually to his emphatically disembodied ‘parodic’ image. I want to suggest that even though it may have once been an important factor in shaping the intellectual terrain on which politically engaged analysis of Black culture takes place, the opposition between these rigid perspectives has become an obstacle to critical thinking.

The syncretic complexity of Black expressive cultures alone supplies powerful reasons to resist the idea that an untouched, pristine Africanness resides inside these forms working a powerful magic of alterity in order to repeatedly trigger the perception of absolute identity. Following the lead established long ago by LeRoi Jones, I believe it is possible to approach the
music as a changing rather than an unchanging same. Today, this involves the difficult task of striving to comprehend the reproduction of cultural traditions not in the unproblematic transmission of a fixed essence through time but in the breaks and interruptions which suggest that the invocation of tradition may itself be a distinct, though covert, response to the destabilising flux of the post-contemporary world. New ‘traditions’ are invented in the jaws of modern experience and new conceptions of modernity produced in the long shadow of our enduring traditions – the African ones and the ones forged from the slave experience which the Black vernacular so powerfully and actively remembers. This labour also necessitates far closer attention to the rituals of performance that provide prima facie evidence of linkage between Black cultures.

Because the self-identity, political culture and grounded aesthetics that distinguish Black communities have often been constructed through their music and the broader cultural and philosophical meanings that flow from its production, circulation and consumption, music is especially important in breaking the inertia which arises in the unhappy polar opposition between a squeamish, nationalist ‘essentialism’ and a sceptical, satirical, pluralism which makes the impure world of politics literally unthinkable. The pre-eminence of music within the diverse Black communities of the Pan-African diaspora is itself an important element in their essential connectedness. But the histories of borrowing, displacement, transformation and continual re-inscription that the musical culture encloses are a living legacy that should not be reified in the primary symbol of the diaspora and then employed as an alternative to the recurrent appeal of fixity and rootedness.

Music and its rituals can be used to create a model whereby identity can be understood neither as a fixed essence nor as a vague and utterly contingent construction to be re-invented by the will and whim of aesthetes, symbolists and language gamers. Black identity is not simply a social and political category to be used or abandoned according to the extent to which the rhetoric that supports and legitimises it is persuasive or institutionally powerful. Whatever the radical constructionists may say, it is lived as a coherent (if not always stable) experiential sense of self. Though it is often felt to be natural and spontaneous, it remains the outcome of practical activity: language, gesture, bodily significations, desires. These significations are condensed in musical performance, though it does not, of course, monopolise them. In this context, they produce the imaginary effect of an internal racial core or essence by acting on the body through the specific mechanisms of identification and recognition that are produced in the intimate inter-action of performer and crowd. This reciprocal relationship serves as strategy and an ideal communicative situation even when the original makers of the music and its eventual consumers are separated in space and time or divided by the technologies of sound reproduction and the commodity form which their art has sought to resist (Gilroy 1982, 1987). The struggle against commodity status has been taken ever into the very forms that Black mass cultural creation assumes. Negotiations with their status are revealed openly and have become a cornerstone in the anti-aesthetic which governs these forms (Gilroy 1980). The aridity of those three crucial terms – production, circulation and consumption – does scant justice to the convoluted transnational processes to which they now refer. Each of them, in contrasting ways, hosts a politics of ‘race’ which is hard to grasp, let alone fully appreciate, through the sometimes crude categories that political economy and European cultural criticism deploy in their tentative analyses of ethnicity and culture.

**Some Black Works of Art in the Age of Digital Simulation**

Like law (one of its models), culture articulates conflicts and alternately legitimises, displaces or controls the superior force. It develops in an atmosphere of tensions, and often of violence, for which it provides symbolic balances, contracts of compatibility and compromises, all more or less temporary. The tactics of consumption, the ingenious ways in which the weak make use of the strong, thus lend a political dimension to everyday practices.

Michel de Certeau

Hip hop culture grew out of the cross-fertilisation of African-American vernacular cultures with their Caribbean equivalents, the immediate catalyst for its development being the relocation of Clive ‘Kool DJ Herc’ Campbell from Kingston to 168th Street in the Bronx. The syncretic dynamics of the form were complicated further by a distinctly Latin input into the break dance moves, which helped to define the style in its early stages. But hip hop was not just the product of these different, though converging, Black cultural traditions. The centrality of ‘the break’ within it and the subsequent refinement of cutting and mixing techniques through digital sampling, which took the form far beyond the competence of hands on turntables, meant that the aesthetic rules which govern it are premised on a dialectic of rescuing, appropriation and recombination that creates special pleasures and is not limited to the technological complex in which it originated.

The deliberately fractured form of these musical pieces is worth consid-
Imagining Home

craig for a moment. It recalls the characteristic flavour of Adorno’s remarks in another, far distant context:

They call it uncreative because it suspends their concept of creation itself. Everything with which it occupies itself is already there . . . in vulgarised form; its themes are expropriated ones. Nevertheless nothing sounds as it was wont to do; all things are diverted as if by a magnet. What is worn out yields plainly to the improvising hand; the used parts win second life as variants. Just as the chauffeur’s knowledge of his old second-hand car can enable him to drive it punctually and unrecognised to its intended destination, so can the expression of an up beat melody . . . arrive at places which the approved musical language could never safely reach. ([1938] 1978, p. 127)

Acoustic and electric instruments are disorganically combined with digital sound synthesis, a variety of found sounds: typically screams, pointed fragments of speech or singing, and samples from earlier recordings – both vocal and instrumental – whose open textuality is RAID in playful affirmations of the insubordinate spirit that ties this radical form to one important definition of Blackness. The nonlinear approach which European cultural criticism refers to as montage is a useful principle of composition in trying to analyse this. Indeed it is tempting to endorse the Brechtian suggestion that some version of ‘montage’ corresponds to an unprecedented type of realism, appropriate to the extreme historical conditions which form it. But these dense, implosive combinations of diverse and dissimilar sounds amount to more than the technique they employ in their joyously artificial reconstruction of the instability of lived, profane racial identity. An aesthetic stress is laid upon the sheer social and cultural distances which formerly separated the diverse elements now dislocated into novel meanings by their provocative aural juxtaposition.

Ronnie Laws’s recent instrumental single release ‘Identity’ is worth mentioning here. Produced in a low-tech setting for an independent record company, the record is notable not just for its title, but as an up-to-date case of the more radical possibilities opened up by this new form of the old genre, which demands that the past is made audible in the present. The architect of the tune (the eccentric Californian guitar player Craig T. Cooper) has utilised an ambient style that recalls the oversmoked Dub of the Upsetter’s Black Ark studio at its peak. The track combines a large number of samples from a wide range of sources: a sampled fragment from the chorus of the Average White Band’s ‘Pick Up the Pieces’ (already a Scottish pastiche of the style of James Brown’s JB’s) struggles to be heard against a Go-go beat, half audible screams and a steady, synthetic working-rhythm reconstructed from the sampled sound of The Godfather’s

Sounds Authentic: Black Music and Ethnicity

own forceful exhalation. Having stated an angular melody and playfully teased out its inner dynamics, Laws’s soprano saxophone embellishes and punctuates the apparent chaos of the rhythm track. His horn has been phrased carefully so as to recall the human voice trained and disciplined by the antiphonal rituals of the Black church. ‘Identity’ is the product of all these influences. Its title offers an invitation to recognise that it can be experienced fleetingly in the relationship between improvisation and the ordered articulation of musical disorder. The chaos which will rear this fragile rendering of Black identity apart is forestalled for the duration of the piece by the insistent, inhuman pulse of the digital bass drum.

It bears repetition that the premium which all these Black diaspora styles place on the process of performance is emphasised by their radically unfinished forms - a characteristic which marks them indelibly as the product of slavery (Hurst, 1933a). It can be glimpsed in the way that the basic units of commercial consumption in which music is fast frozen and sold have been systematically subverted by the practice of a racial politics that has colonised them and, in the process, accomplished what Baudrillard refers to as the passage from object to event:

The work of art - a new and triumphant fetish and not a sad alienated one - should work to deconstruct its own traditional aura, its authority and power of illusion, in order to shine resplendent in the pure obscenity of the commodity. It must annihilate itself as familiar object and become monstrously foreign. But this foreignness is not the disquieting strangeness of the repressed or alienated object; this object does not shine from its being haunted or out of some secret dispassion; it glows with a veritable seduction that comes from elsewhere, having exceeded its own form and become pure object, pure event. (1990, p. 118)

From this perspective, the magical process whereby something like a twelve-inch single, released from the belly of the multinational beast, comes to anticipate, even demand, supplementary creative input in the hidden spheres of public political interaction that it requires to keep the faith. The twelve-inch appeared as a market innovation during the late 1970s. It was part of the record companies’ responding to the demands placed upon them by the dance subcultures coalesced around the Black genres – Reggae and rhythm and blues. Those demands were met halfway by the creation of a new type of musical product that could maximise their own economic opportunities, but this had other, unintended consequences.
Imagining Home

The additional time and increased volume made possible by the introduction of this format became powerful factors impelling restless subcultural creativity forwards. Once dubbing, scratching and mixing appeared as new elements in the deconstructive and reconstructive scheme that joined production and consumption together, twelve-inch releases began to include a number of different mixes of the same song supposedly for different locations or purposes. A dance mix, a radio mix, an a cappella mix, a dub mix, a jazz mix, a bass mix and so on. On the most elementary level these plural forms make the concept of a changing same a living reality.

Record companies like this arrangement because it’s cheaper to go on playing around with the same old song than to record more tracks, but different creative possibilities open out from it. The relationship of the listener to the text is changed by the proliferation of different versions. Which one is the original? How does the memory of one version transform the way in which subsequent versions are heard? The components of one mix separated and broken down can be more easily borrowed and blended to create further permutations of meaning. The twelve-inch single release of LL Cool J’s current rhythm and blues/hip hop hybrid hit ‘Round the Way Girl’ comes in five different versions. The LP cut, built around a sample from The Mary Jane Girls’ 1983 Motown pop soul hit ‘All Night Long’, and several re-mixes that extend and transform the meaning of the original rap and this first sample by amexing the rhythmic signature of Gwen McCrae’s ‘Funky Sensation’. This funky Southern soul record from 1981 was an original B. Boy cut, used by the old school DJ’s and rappers who originated hip hop to make breaks. These borrowings are especially noteworthy because they have been orchestrated in pursuit of a means to signify Cool J’s definition of authentic Black femininity. The record’s mass appeal lies in the fact that his authenticity is measured by vernacular style revived by the Afrocentrics as pre-conscious because it doesn’t conform to the stately postures expected of the African queen, but also disavowed by the Black entertainment industry, in which bizarre, white-identified standards of feminine beauty have become dominant. To be inauthentic is, in this case, to be real:

I want a girl with extensions in her hair
Bamboo earrings at least two pair
A Friendly bag and a bad attitude
That’s what it takes to put me in a good mood.

The hybridity which is formally intrinsic to hip hop has not been able to prevent that style from being used as an especially potent sign and symbol of racial authenticity. It is significant that when this happens the term

Sounds Authentic: Black Music and Ethnicity

hip hop is often forsaken in favour of the alternative term ‘rap’, preferred precisely because it is more ethnically marked than the other. These issues can be examined further through the example of Quincy Jones, whose personal narrative has recently become something of a cipher for Black creativity in general and Black musical genius in particular. The figuration of Black genius constitutes an important cultural narrative which tells and re-tells not so much the story of the victory of the weak over the strong but explores the relative powers enjoyed by different types of strength. The story of intuitive Black creative development is personalised in the narratives of figures like Jones. It demonstrates the aesthetic fruits of pain and suffering and has a special significance because musicians have played a disproportionate part in the long struggle to represent Black creativity, innovation and excellence. Jones, an entrepreneur, pre-eminent music producer, record company executive, arranger of great skill, sometime Be-bopper, fundraiser for Jesse Jackson’s campaigns and currently emergent TV magnate, is the latest ‘role model’ figure in a long sequence that stretches down the years from slavery.

He is untypical in that he has recently been the subject of a biographical film supported by a book, CD/tape soundtrack and single. In all these interlocking formats the ‘Listen Up’ initiative seeks to celebrate his life, endurance and creativity. Most of all, it affirms Black participation in the entertainment industry, an involvement that Jones has summed up through a surprising invocation of the British Broadcasting Company’s distinctive corporate code: the three Es, ‘Enlightenment, Education, Entertainment’.

The process which culminated in this novel commemorative package was clearly encouraged by Jones’s growing involvement with TV as producer of The Fresh Prince of Bel Air and The Jesse Jackson Show. But it began earlier with the release of his 1989 LP Back on the Block. This set made use of rap as its means to complete the circle of Jones’s own odyssey from poverty on Chicago’s South Side through Seattle, New York, Paris and thence to L.A. and Mogulhood. The positive value of Back on the Block is its powerful and necessary argument for the seams of continuity which lie beneath the generational divisions in African-American musical culture. However, there were other, more problematic and even insidious elements at large in it. One track, a version of Austrian-American Joseph Zawinul’s ‘Birdland’, typifies the spirit of the project as a whole by uniting the talents of old- and new-school rappers like Melle Mel, Kool Moe D, Ice T and Big Daddy Kane with singers and instrumentalists drawn from earlier generations. George Benson, Dizzy Gillespie, Sarah Vaughan, Miles Davis and Zawinul himself were among those whose vocal and instrumental input was synthesised by Jones into an exhilarating epic statement of the view that hip hop and Bebop shared the same fundamental spirit. Jones puts it like this:
Imagining Home

Hip hop is in many ways the same as bebop, because it was renegade type music. It came from a disenfranchised subculture that got thrown out of the way. They said, 'We'll make up our own life. We'll have our own language.'

Rap provided this montage (it is tempting to say mélange) with its articulating and framing principle. Rap was the cultural and political means through which Jones completed his return to the touchstone of authentic Black American creativity. Rapping on the record himself in the unlikely persona of 'The Dude,' he explains that he wanted the project 'to incorporate the whole family of Black American music...everything from gospel to jazz that was part of my culture.' Brazilian and African musical patterns are annexed by and become continuous with his version of Afro-America's musical heritage. They are linked, says Jones, by the shared 'traditions of the African griot storyteller that are continued today by the rappers. The delicate relationship between unity and differentiation gets lost at this point. Old and new, east and west, simply dissolve into each other or rather into the receptacle provided for their interaction by the grand narrative of African-American cultural strength and durability. However compelling they may be, Jones's appropriations of Brazilian rhythm and African language are subservient to a need to legitimate African-American particularity. The promise of a truly compound, diaspora or even global culture that could shift understanding of Black cultural production away from the narrow concerns of ethnic exceptionalism recedes rapidly. The potential signifyed in the inner hybrity of hip hop and the outer syncretism of musical forms that makes Jones's synthesis plausible comes to an abrupt and premature end. It terminates in a portrait of the boys, back on the block where they ride out the genocidal processes of the inner city through the redemptive power of their authentic racial art.

Young Black Teenagers Then and Now

The times are always contained in the rhythm.

Quincy Jones

Assuming for a moment that most Black cultural critics do not want to simply respond to 'the death of innocent notions of the Black subject' with festivities—whether they are wakes or baptisms: Do we attempt to specify some new conceptions of that subjectivity that are less innocent and less obviously open to the supposed treason that essentialism represents? Or do we cut ourselves off from the world where Black identities are made—even required—by the brutal mechanics of racial subordination and the varieties of political agency which strive to answer them?

As a child and a young man growing up in London, Black music provided me with a means to gain proximity to the sources of feeling from which our local conceptions of Blackness were assembled. The Caribbean, Africa, Latin America and above all, Black America, contributed to our lived sense of a racial self. The urban context in which these forms were encountered cemented their stylistic appeal and facilitated their solicitation of our identification. They were important also as a source for the discourses of Blackness with which we located our own struggles and experiences.

Twenty years later, with the soundtracks of my adolescence reincarnating in the exhilaratingly damaged form of hip hop, I am walking down a street in New Haven, Connecticut—a Black city—looking for a record shop stocked with Black music. The desolation, poverty and misery encountered on that fruitless quest force me to confront the fact that I have come to America in pursuit of a musical culture that no longer exists. My scepticism towards the master narrative of family, race, culture and nation that stretches down the years from Grummell's chilling remarks means that I cannot share in Quincy Jones's mourning over its corpse nor his desire to rescue some democratic possibility in the wake of its disappearance. Looking back on the adolescent hours I spent trying to master the technical intricacies of Albert King and Jimi Hendrix; fathoming the subtleties of James Jamerson, Larry Graham or Chuck Rainey; and comprehending how the screams of Sly, James and Aretha could punctuate and extend their metaphysical modes of address to the Black subject, I realise that the most important lesson music still has to teach us is that its inner secrets and its artistic rules can be taught and learned. The spectral figures of half-known or half-remembered musicians like Bobby Eli, Steve Cropper, Tito Drummmond, Andy Newmark, John Robinson and Rod Temperton appear at my shoulder to nod their mute assent to this verdict. Then they disappear into the dusk on Dixwell Avenue. Their contributions to rhythm and blues leave behind a whispered warning that Black music cannot be reduced to a fixed dialogue between a thinking racial self and a stable racial community. Apart from anything else, the globalisation of vernacular forms means that our understanding of antiphony will have to be changed. The calls and responses no longer converge in the patterns of secret, ethnically encoded dialogue. The original call is becoming harder to locate. If we privilege it over the subsequent sounds that complete with each other to make the most appropriate reply, we will have to remember that these communicative gestures are not expressive of an essence that exists outside of the acts which perform them and thereby transmit the structures of racial feeling to wider, as yet uncharted, worlds.
Imagining Home

Notes

I would like to thank Vron Ware, Jim Clifford, Hazel Garby, Robert Reed Parr, bell hooks, Kathy Jones, Robert Forbes, Rigo Vaquero and the members of my Yale graduate seminar during the fall of 1990 for the conversations that helped me to put this together. The staff of Integrity in Music in Wachusett, Connecticut, were of great help to me. Long may they stay in the vinyl business.

1. These processes have been explored in Garinder Chadha’s film I’m British But (BFI, 1998). The adaptation of these forms by Hispanic hip hoppers in L.A. should also be recognized. Kid Frost’s absorbing release ‘La Raza’ borrows the assertive techniques of Black nationalist rap, setting them to work in the construction of a Mexican-American equivalent.

2. The field of cultural forces that comprises this movement is triangulated by three sets of coordinates that can be ideal typically represented by Kool G Rap and Dj Polo’s release ‘Erase Racist’ (Gold Chillin), the calculated and utterly insubstantial defiance of NWA’s ‘Hooded Menace (Ruthless) and the programme jive of King Sun’s ‘Be Black’ (Profile).

3. Soffer’s research lists over twenty choirs in the period between 1871 and 1878.

4. The musical authenticity of the Jubilee Singers has been explicitly challenged by Zora Neale Hurston, who refers to their work as ‘a trick of style’ of ‘misconception of Negro Spirituals’.

5. This apparently serious insult was laced with some fraternal acid and gently lobbed in my direction by Koblee Mercer. It appears in his 1990 Third Text article criticizing my earlier attempts to discuss Black culture through the concept ‘populist modernism’. My response to his position is formulated here, though I wish to emphasize that his reconstruction of my position fails to represent my thinking accurately.

Bibliography


Sounds Authentic: Black Music and Ethnicity


Discography


King Sun (1990) ‘Be Black’. Profile PRO 7318A.


116