

"Jewels Brought from Bondage": Black Music and the Politics of Authenticity

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

O black and unknown bards of long ago,
How came your lips to touch the sacred fire?
How in your darkness, did you come to know
The power and beauty of the minstrel's lyre?
Who first from midst his bonds lifted his eyes?
Who first from out the still watch, lone and long,
Feeling the ancient faith of prophets rise
Within his dark-kept soul burst into song?

Heart of what slave poured out such melody
As "Steal away to Jesus"? On its strains
His spirit must have nightly floated free,
Though still about his hands he felt his chains.
Who heard great "Jordan Roll"? Whose starward eye
Saw chariot "swing low"? And who was he
That breathed that comforting melodic sigh,
"Nobody knows de trouble I see"?

James Weldon Johnson

THE CONTEMPORARY debates over modernity and its possible eclipse cited in the last chapter have largely ignored music. This is odd given that the modern differentiation of the true, the good, and the beautiful was conveyed directly in the transformation of public use of culture in general and the increased public importance of all kinds of music.¹ I have suggested that the critiques of modernity articulated by successive genera-

tions of black intellectuals had been anchored in a continued proximate experience. I argued that this critical complicity of racial terror with modernity has constituted some black Atlantic political culture. Now a slightly different direction by openness to the ineffable terrors of slavery in ritualised, social forms. This chapter further in Chapter 4, where my argument begins to be complemented by modernisms.

The question of racial terror and modernisms are discussed because imagination is a central experience. This focus is refined into the era of imperialism where terrors were not inexpressible, and residual traces of their necessarily historical memories inscribed and in the Atlantic cultural creation. Thinking of black musics—requires this ineffable.

Through a discussion of music to clarify some of the distinctive are both modern and modernist marked by their hybrid, creole struggles to escape their status as cultural industries it specifies, and whose understanding of their own of the role of art in mediating is shaped by a sense of artistic power reluctantly or happily divorced from

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tions of black intellectuals had their rhizomorphic systems of propagation anchored in a continued proximity to the unspeakable terrors of the slave experience. I argued that this critique was nurtured by a deep sense of the complicity of racial terror with reason. The resulting ambivalence towards modernity has constituted some of the most distinctive forces shaping black Atlantic political culture. What follows will develop this argument in a slightly different direction by exploring some of the ways in which closeness to the ineffable terrors of slavery was kept alive—carefully cultivated—in ritualised, social forms. This chapter begins a shift that will be developed further in Chapter 4, where my concern with black responses to modernity begins to be complemented by an interest in the development of black modernisms.

The question of racial terror always remains in view when these modernisms are discussed because imaginative proximity to terror is their inaugural experience. This focus is refined somewhat in the progression from slave society into the era of imperialism. Though they were unspeakable, these terrors were not inexpressible, and my main aim here is to explore how residual traces of their necessarily painful expression still contribute to historical memories inscribed and incorporated into the volatile core of Afro-Atlantic cultural creation. Thinking about the primary object of this chapter—black musics—requires this reorientation towards the phatic and the ineffable.

Through a discussion of music and its attendant social relations, I want to clarify some of the distinctive attributes of black cultural forms which are both modern and modernist. They are modern because they have been marked by their hybrid, creole origins in the West, because they have struggled to escape their status as commodities and the position within the cultural industries it specifies, and because they are produced by artists whose understanding of their own position relative to the racial group and of the role of art in mediating individual creativity with social dynamics is shaped by a sense of artistic practice as an autonomous domain either reluctantly or happily divorced from the everyday lifeworld.

These expressive cultural forms are thus western and modern, but this is not all they are. I want to suggest that, rather like the philosophical critique examined in Chapter 2, their special power derives from a doubleness, their unsteady location simultaneously inside and outside the conventions, assumptions, and aesthetic rules which distinguish and periodise modernity. These musical forms and the intercultural conversations to which they contribute are a dynamic refutation of the Hegelian suggestions that thought and reflection have outstripped art and that art is opposed to philosophy as the lowest, merely sensuous form of reconciliation between nature and

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finite reality.² The stubborn modernity of these black musical forms would require a reordering of Hegel's modern hierarchy of cultural achievements. This might claim, for example, that music should enjoy higher status because of its capacity to express a direct image of the slaves' will.

The anti-modernity of these forms, like their anteriority, appears in the (dis)guise of a premodernity that is both actively reimagined in the present and transmitted intermittently in eloquent pulses from the past. It seeks not simply to change the relationship of these cultural forms to newly autonomous philosophy and science but to refuse the categories on which the relative evaluation of these separate domains is based and thereby to transform the relationship between the production and use of art, the everyday world, and the project of racial emancipation.

The topos of unsayability produced from the slaves' experiences of racial terror and figured repeatedly in nineteenth-century evaluations of slave music has other important implications. It can be used to challenge the privileged conceptions of both language and writing as preeminent expressions of human consciousness. The power and significance of music within the black Atlantic have grown in inverse proportion to the limited expressive power of language. It is important to remember that the slaves' access to literacy was often denied on pain of death and only a few cultural opportunities were offered as a surrogate for the other forms of individual autonomy denied by life on the plantations and in the barracoons. Music becomes vital at the point at which linguistic and semantic indeterminacy/polyphony arise amidst the protracted battle between masters, mistresses, and slaves. This decidedly modern conflict was the product of circumstances where language lost something of its referentiality and its privileged relationship to concepts.³ In his narrative, Frederick Douglass raised this point when discussing Gore, the overseer who illustrates the relationship between the rationalism of the slave system and its terror and barbarity:

Mr Gore was a grave man, and, though a young man, he indulged in no jokes, said no funny words, seldom smiled. His words were in perfect keeping with his looks, and his looks were in perfect keeping with his words. Overseers will sometimes indulge in a witty word, even with the slaves; not so with Mr Gore. He spoke but to command, and commanded but to be obeyed; he dealt sparingly with words, and bountifully with his whip, never using the former where the latter would answer as well . . . His savage barbarity was equalled only by the consummate coolness with which he committed the grossest and most savage deeds upon the slaves under his charge.⁴

Examining the place of music in the black Atlantic world means surveying the self-understanding articulated by the musicians who have made it,

the symbolic use to which writers, and the social relations of a unique expressive culture in a foundational element. I want to explore post-slave, black cultural forms which converge in the analysis of these relations. One particularly distinctive patterns of language and relations of the modern, western cultural settings in which a distinctive relationship to a right amount of impatience for us music, gesture, dance as the gift of speech. This plantation: aesthetic forms and structures."⁶

The distinctive kinesics of these brutal historical conditions of sports, athletics, and dancing standing of the traditions of the production and reception specific dynamics of performance black cultural forms than is evident when it is contrasted with premised exclusively on the enunciation, and gesture—black metacommunication.

Each of these areas means they are configured by the of African and other cultures. However, my main concern of these syncretic expressive evaluative, axiological, (and and with the place of ethnicity. What special analytical prominence of music is identified the group that produced it, and how will they be ment and global dissemination traditions of critical writing phenomenon, what value

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the symbolic use to which their music is put by other black artists and writers, and the social relations which have produced and reproduced the unique expressive culture in which music comprises a central and even foundational element. I want to propose that the possible commonality of post-slave, black cultural forms be approached via several related problems which converge in the analysis of black musics and their supporting social relations. One particularly valuable pathway into this is provided by the distinctive patterns of language use that characterise the contrasting populations of the modern, western, African diaspora.⁵ The oral character 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: "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."⁶

The distinctive kinesics 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 exclusively on textuality and narrative rather than dramaturgy, enunciation, and gesture—the pre- and anti-discursive constituents of black metacommunication.

Each of these areas merits detailed treatment in its own right.⁷ All of them are configured by their compound and multiple origins in the mix of African and other cultural forms sometimes referred to as creolisation. However, my main concern in this chapter is less with the formal attributes of these syncretic expressive cultures than with the problem of how critical, evaluative, axiological, (anti)aesthetic judgements on them can be made and with the place of ethnicity and authenticity within these judgements. What special analytical problems arise if a style, genre, or particular performance of music is identified as being expressive of the absolute essence of the group that produced it? 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, particularly if they

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tic of pity and guilt which, especially among oppressed people, has so often governed the relationship between the writing elite and the masses of people who exist outside literacy. I also want to ask whether for black cultural theory to embrace or even accept this mediated, tactical relationship to the unrepresentable, the pre-rational, and the sublime would be to sip from a poisoned chalice. These questions have become politically decisive since these cultural forms have colonised the interstices of the cultural industry on behalf not just of black Atlantic peoples but of the poor, exploited, and downpressed everywhere.

The current debate over modernity centres either on the problematic relationships between politics and aesthetics or on the question of science and its association with the practice of domination.¹⁰ Few of these debates operate at the interface of science and aesthetics which is the required starting point of contemporary black cultural expression and the digital technology of its social dissemination and reproduction. These debates over modernity conventionally define the political instance of the modern social totality through a loose invocation of the achievements of bourgeois democracy. The discrete notion of the aesthetic, in relation to which this self-sustaining political domain is then evaluated, is constructed by the idea and the ideology of the text and of textuality as a mode of communicative practice which provides a model for all other forms of cognitive exchange and social interaction. Urged on by the post-structuralist critiques of the metaphysics of presence, contemporary debates have moved beyond citing language as the fundamental analogy for comprehending all signifying practices to a position where textuality (especially when wrenched open through the concept of difference) expands and merges with totality. Paying careful attention to the structures of feeling which underpin black expressive cultures can show how this critique is incomplete. It gets blocked by this invocation of all-encompassing textuality. Textuality becomes a means to evacuate the problem of human agency, a means to specify the death (by fragmentation) of the subject and, in the same manoeuvre, to enthrone the literary critic as mistress or master of the domain of creative human communication.

At the risk of appearing rather esoteric, I want to suggest that the history and practice of black music point to other possibilities and generate other plausible models. This neglected history is worth reconstructing, whether or not it supplies pointers to other more general cultural processes. However, I want to suggest that bourgeois democracy in the genteel metropolitan guise in which it appeared at the dawn of the public sphere should not serve as an ideal type for all modern political processes. Secondly, I want to shift concern with the problems of beauty, taste, and artistic judgement

so that discussion is not circumscribed by the idea of rampant, invasive textuality. Foregrounding the history of black music making encourages both of these propositions. It also requires a different register of analytic concepts. This demand is amplified by the need to make sense of musical performances in which identity is fleetingly experienced in the most intensive ways and sometimes socially reproduced by means of neglected modes of signifying practice like mimesis, gesture, kinesis, and costume. Antiphony (call and response) is the principal formal feature of these musical traditions. It has come to be seen as a bridge from music into other modes of cultural expression, supplying, along with improvisation, montage, and dramaturgy, the hermeneutic keys to the full medley of black artistic practices. Toni Morrison eloquently states her view of this important relationship.

Black Americans were sustained and healed and nurtured by the translation of their experience into art above all in the music. That was functional . . . My parallel is always the music because all of the strategies of the art are there. All of the intricacy, all of the discipline. All the work that must go into improvisation so that it appears that you've never touched it. Music makes you hungry for more of it. It never really gives you the whole number. It slaps and it embraces, it slaps and it embraces. The literature ought to do the same thing. I've been very deliberate about that. The power of the word is not music, but in terms of aesthetics, the music is the mirror that gives me the necessary clarity . . . The major things black art has to have are these: it must have the ability to use found objects, the appearance of using found things, and it must look effortless. It must look cool and easy. If it makes you sweat, you haven't done the work. You shouldn't be able to see the seams and stitches. I have wanted always to develop a way of writing that was irrevocably black. I don't have the resources of a musician but I thought that if it was truly black literature it would not be black because I was, it would not even be black because of its subject matter. It would be something intrinsic, indigenous, something in the way it was put together—the sentences, the structure, texture and tone—so that anyone who read it would realise. I use the analogy of the music because you can range all over the world and it's still black . . . I don't imitate it, but I am informed by it. Sometimes I hear blues, sometimes spirituals or jazz and I've appropriated it. I've tried to reconstruct the texture of it in my writing—certain kinds of repetition—its profound simplicity . . . What has already happened with the music in the States, the literature will do one day and when that happens it's all over.¹¹

The interment movement anticipates the line of ships. Lines are created and established between others. Antiphony, as Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* uses the term, is beyond the

There is a true jazz. Each true challenge (like the individual tradition) finds it

This quote themselves expressive of an aesthetic might look like a consideration of self-expression and advantage. This comes from the best feature of the intellectual world, repeated living and less than. The aside, involves

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The intense and often bitter dialogues which make the black arts move-
ment move offer a small reminder that there is a democratic, communitar-
ian moment enshrined in the practice of antiphony which symbolises and
anticipates (but does not guarantee) new, non-dominating social relation-
ships. Lines between self and other are blurred and special forms of plea-
sure are created as a result of the meetings and conversations that are estab-
lished between one fractured, incomplete, and unfinished racial self and
others. Antiphony is the structure that hosts these essential encounters.
Ralph Ellison's famous observation on the inner dynamics of jazz produc-
tion uses visual art as its central analogy but it can be readily extended
beyond the specific context it was written to illuminate:

There is in this a cruel contradiction implicit in the art form itself. For
true jazz is an art of individual assertion within and against the group. ✕
Each true jazz moment . . . springs from a contest in which the artist
challenges all the rest; each solo flight, or improvisation, represents
(like the canvasses of a painter) a definition of his [*sic*] identity: as
individual, as member of the collectivity and as a link in the chain of
tradition. Thus because jazz finds its very life in improvisation upon
traditional materials, the jazz man must lose his identity even as he
finds it . . .¹²

This quote offers a reminder that apart from the music and the musicians
themselves, we must also take account of the work of those within the
expressive culture of the black Atlantic who have tried to use its music as
an aesthetic, political, or philosophical marker in the production of what
might loosely be called their critical social theories. Here it is necessary to
consider the work of a whole host of exemplary figures: ex-slaves, preach-
ers, self-educated scholars and writers, as well as a small number of profes-
sionals and the tiny minority who managed to acquire some sort of aca-
demic position in essentially segregated educational systems or took
advantage of opportunities in Liberia, Haiti, and other independent states.
This company spreads out in discontinuous, transverse lines of descent that
stretch outwards across the Atlantic from Phyllis Wheatley onwards. Its
best feature is an anti-hierarchical tradition of thought that probably cul-
minates in C. L. R. James's idea that ordinary people do not need an intel-
lectual vanguard to help them to speak or to tell them what to say.¹³ Re-
peatedly, within this expressive culture it is musicians who are presented as
living symbols of the value of self-activity.¹⁴ This is often nothing more or
less than a question of style.

The basic labours of archaeological reconstruction and periodisation
aside, working on the contemporary forms of black expressive culture in-
volves struggling with one problem in particular. It is the puzzle of what

analytic status should be given to the variation within black communities and between black cultures which their musical habits reveal. 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 changed either by the passage of time or by their displacement, relocation, or dissemination through 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. This impoverishes modern black cultural history because the transnational structures which brought the black Atlantic world into being have themselves developed and now articulate its myriad forms into a system of global communications constituted by flows. This fundamental dislocation of black culture 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. In the name of anti-essentialism and theoretical rigour it suggests that since black particularity is socially and historically constructed, and plurality has become inescapable, 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 dispersed and divided blacks of the new world and of Europe with each other and even with Africa is dismissed as essentialism or idealism or both.¹⁵

The alternative position sketched out in the rest of this chapter offers a tentative rebuke to that orthodoxy which I regard as premature in its dismissal of the problem of theorising black identity. I suggest that weighing the similarities and differences between black cultures remains an urgent concern. This response relies crucially on the concept of diaspora,¹⁶ which will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 6. For present purposes I want to state that diaspora 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 a heuristic means to focus attention in black political culture on the richness of black cultures in their common sensibilities and those generated from their differences. This is not an easy matter because the Atlantic world are in dialogue with the African cultures of the continent of great controversy, beyond dispassionate scholarship, even more complex by the time and cultural correspondences of their manifest differences in ways that persistently challenge. There is, however, a great deal of some cultural, religious, and their contemporary political values though underpinning political thinkers, cultural stimulating conceptions of the context of advancing

UK Blak

The issue of the identity of a special historical and political that country goes back to become an important part of the history of British racism. However, relatively recent origin, due to these populations are united more by the memory of their common origin. Until recently, this very notion of "indigenous" cultures of the racial subcultures which developed by the Caribbean and other subcultures also contributed to the class relationships into which they were inserted as racially subordinated black settlers.

The musics of the black

in black communities reveal. The tensions among black cultural formations. How are we to think of which, though they have been changed either by migration, or dissemination, or change? This question raises issues. They include the vexed matter of identity in its formation and because black thinkers have drawn on psychoanalysis and their theories. With the politics of black subordination, national, and ethnic history because the Atlantic world into being and had forms into a system. This fundamental disjunction in the recent history of the world which made modern black cultures.

The proliferation of black cultures has begun to grow. In this it suggests that since the 1960s, and plurality has become a dynamic or underlying force is utterly misplaced. The social or political agendas of the new world and the world has dismissed as essentialism.

The rest of this chapter offers a view as premature in its conclusion. I suggest that the concept of diaspora, ¹⁶ remains an important concept. For present purposes focusing on the political and cultural of blacks in the modern world associated with this

concept ought, by now, to be obvious, but the very least that it offers is an 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 proposition that the post-slave cultures of the Atlantic world are in some significant way related to one another and to the African cultures from which they partly derive has long been a matter of great controversy capable of arousing intense feeling which goes far beyond dispassionate scholastic contemplation. The situation is rendered even more complex by the fact that the fragile psychological, emotional, and cultural correspondences which 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 leads to be found in the work of the feminist political thinkers, cultural critics, and philosophers who have formulated stimulating conceptions of the relationship between identity and difference in the context of advancing the political projects of female emancipation.¹⁷

UK Black

The issue of the identity and non-identity of black cultures has acquired a special historical and political significance in Britain. Black settlement in that country goes back many centuries, and 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 than by the memory of slavery and the residues of plantation society. Until recently, this very newness and conspicuous lack of rootedness in the "indigenous" cultures of Britain's inner cities conditioned the formation of racial subcultures which 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