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THEORIZING THE BODY IN AFRICAN-AMERICAN MUSIC

SUSAN MCCLARY AND ROBERT WALSER

The body has not been a prestigious topic among scholars of the arts. Aesthetician Roman Ingarden (1986, 46) has written: "We may doubt whether so-called dance music, when employed only as a means of keeping the dancers in step and arousing in them a specific passion for expression through movement, is music in the strict sense of the word." In this passage, Ingarden appears merely to be establishing objective criteria for what counts as music; yet he relies on the dismissal of the body that recurs consistently throughout Western culture. As we shall see, such attitudes have distorted the ways we tell the history of European music, but they have especially warped Western reactions to African-based musics—musics that often strive to animate the body in dance.

The most notorious of these reactions are the censorious yet prurient accounts of African music and dance that appear in records of European colonizers. To explorers, traders, and missionaries accustomed to particular codes of physical propriety, the bodily gestures in African ritual often seemed clear evidence of savagery; the performances they observed appeared to confirm the absence of culture among these people whom the Europeans were all too ready to exploit. Such reactions have been carefully documented in studies of black culture by scholars such as Lynne Emery (1972), and the labeling of dance rhythms as "primitive" continues to plague the reception of African-American musics even today—in dismissals of disco or rap, for example (on Europeans' misperceptions of other cultures, see also Pratt [1992]).

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There is another widespread attitude toward African-based music that looks far more sympathetic at first glance. As recent political theorists of the body such as Randy Martin (1990) and Bryan Turner (1984; 1991) have demonstrated, the last two centuries have witnessed a succession of oppositional movements that have sought to rescue the body from the tyranny of institutionalized reason as it operates to secure the foundations of capitalism. The turns toward exorcism in nineteenth-century culture and primitivism in the early twentieth proceeded from the belief that civilization had stifled the feelings of physical pleasures that ought to be the birthright of all human beings (for critiques of this fantasy, see Foster [1985] and Torgovnik [1990]). Liberation of the body—more specifically, the sexualized body—thus becomes a crucial theme for philosophers such as Nietzsche, who confronted Wagner with what he perceived as the uninhibited “African” quality of Bizet’s *Carmen*, or Freud, who speculated about civilization, its discontents, and the “primitive” instincts that lie just below the surface in the unconscious, or Jack Kerouac, who envied the depth of experience to which he believed only black people had access.

Those who have accepted such theories have often embraced African and African-American musics as sites where the body still may be experienced as primordial, untouched by the restrictions of culture. Yet although such attitudes may sometimes contribute to cross-over and to promoting the appreciation of black music, the cost is enormous. For in such accounts, the mind and culture still remain the exclusive property of Eurocentric discourse, while the dancing body is romanticized as what is left over when the burdens of reason and civilization have been flung away. The binary opposition of mind and body that governs the condemnation of black music remains in force; even when the terms are inverted, they are always ready to flip back into their more usual positions.

The first step away from this trap of polarities is to recognize that black music is not the universal unconscious or the primitive body projected by romanticists of various stripes but rather a highly disciplined set of practices. Scholars such as Olly Wilson (1985), Sterling Stuckey (1987), Samuel A. Floyd Jr. (1991), and Portia Maultsby (1990) ground their research in part in the relationship of African-American musics to their roots in African cultures. Within these cultures, the body figures not as the desired-yet-dreaded other of the cultivated mind but rather as the indispensable medium that links the physical world with the spiritual, that facilitates the internalization and reenactment of communal beliefs. This very different way of organizing the world serves as the basis of a complex cultural fabric that is no less intricate, no less intellectually

mediated than the Hellenic/Christian heritage that gave rise to European cultural forms.

Thus Stuckey traces how the ring shout recurs in African-American music, from the accounts of forced dancing on ship decks during the Middle Passage, through church revival meetings, to Thelonious Monk's curious habit of dancing counterclockwise in the course of his performances. Wilson and Floyd demonstrate the centrality of bodily movement to the various genres of African-American music and begin to devise ways of grappling analytically with the resulting rhythms. This work makes extremely important contributions to the discipline of music theory, which has notoriously neglected rhythm in favor of abstract patterns associated with pitch and form, and it is crucial if we are ever to account for the specific details that constitute the artistry of much African-American music.

We might add here that such work is of tremendous value to the study of European music as well. For disavowals and projections notwithstanding, European musical procedures likewise are steeped in images of the body. One of the ways of collapsing the old dichotomy that assigns intellect to European music and physicality to African-based styles is to reveal the ways both mind and body are drawn upon in each repertory. Accordingly, some of our work (McClary 1991) concentrates on how the body enters into the premises of European music: not only in the dance-based culture of Louis XIV's Versailles but also in the gestural vocabularies used to delineate affect and in the constructions of desire and erotic pleasure that abound even in the so-called Absolute music of the German canon.

By the same token, scholars also have found it crucial to investigate the more intellectual aspects of African-American music, acknowledging its rhythmic power yet revealing how formal procedures and evocations of spirituality operate in these repertories. Thus, Eileen Southern (1983) and Rae Linda Brown (1987) examine the history of black composers of art music; Olly Wilson (1983) writes on "Black Music as an Art Form"; Samuel A. Floyd Jr. (1991) and Gary Tomlinson (1991) illuminate various kinds of African-American music by means of Henry Louis Gates's (1988) model of Signifyin(g); Tricia Rose (1989; 1994) examines the technological wizardry of rap producers; Lewis Porter (1985) analyzes the formal intricacies of Coltrane's solos; and Robert Walser (in press) demonstrates the formal and semiotic complexities of Public Enemy's grooves, refuting those who would hear such rhythmic patterns as mindless noise.

At times, given the pejorative attitude of the dominant culture toward the body, it almost seems as though it might be better to pursue more or

less exclusively these lines of research, minimizing discussion of the kinetic aspects of much black music. That is, given the ongoing struggle to have black music perceived *as* music, black culture recognized *as* culture, black people respected *as* people, it is tempting to pursue projects of legitimation that treat the body as a stumbling block in the way of full appreciation of black artistic achievement. As understandable as this attitude might be, it would be unfortunate if questions concerning the body were to disappear from writing about African-American music, especially at this moment in cultural studies. For during the last few years, the body has become the focus of much of the most important work in the humanities and social sciences. Feminist theorists, who have worked to untangle conventional mappings of mind/body onto gender (see Ortner and Whitehead 1981; Lloyd 1984), Michel Foucault's history of sexuality (1979) and his accounts of the disciplining of behavior in bourgeois society (1980), and recent theorists of performance as a category of political action (Butler 1990; Martin 1990) have all made the body visible as a matter of paramount intellectual concern.

Moreover, we would argue that one of the most significant factors in the twentieth-century history of the Western body is what Cornel West (1993, 84) calls its "Afro-Americanization"—largely the legacy of black music. Yet African-American culture is almost never mentioned in these studies. For instance, in his book *Performance as Political Act*, Randy Martin (1990, 73) argues that dance is perhaps the arena in which the potential for self-empowerment is most evident; but his examples all come from the so-called avant-garde. He does mention break dancing, but only to lament its appropriation by the culture industry and to give Twyla Tharp credit for having realized how to take the vocabulary of this element of hip hop culture and use it to progressive ends. Once again we have the familiar pattern of African Americans developing an expressive form but having it register as significant for others only when it is picked up by "genuine" artists with aesthetic know-how and non-profit integrity.

Part of the problem, of course, is that the extraordinary impact of black music on world culture has come about precisely because of its presence within the culture industry. Without the tools of mass mediation and its profit-based motivation, most of the inhabitants of the globe would not have been exposed to rags, jazz, blues, rock, soul, or rap—all of which have influenced profoundly the ways we experience our bodies. Susan Cook (1991) has demonstrated, for example, how white middle-class women in the 1920s threw off their corsets and claimed the right to dance like Irene Castle, who learned her moves from James Europe. And Hazel V. Carby (1990) and Daphne Harrison (1988) have

shown how expressions of female sexual subjectivity entered the public sphere through the music of the blues queens of the 1920s. The fanaticism and hysteria that have greeted each new African-American dance in the last hundred years attest to the centrality of this music in contestations over the body. And the dances invariably triumphed over whatever opposition they faced, even if they were toned down somewhat in the transition. It is this music, these dances—not the hot-house experiments of the avant-garde—that have shaped us, body and soul, throughout this century.

And yet the fact of commercial mediation prevents many cultural critics from recognizing the political significance of this powerful infusion of sensibilities from a group that is otherwise mostly silenced. When theorists from the left have noticed it at all, black dance music has been read as a commodity, its compelling rhythmic practices interpreted as the manifestation of commercial homogenization. The ability of African-American music to bring into being or to enhance community is surely one of the reasons it has appealed so strongly to those who are repelled by the isolationism of modernist culture. But under the terms of an aesthetic that values only radical individuality, this ability to cement community is regarded as a trap set by the powers that be, luring listeners toward docile conformity (see, especially, Theodor W. Adorno's [1981] discussions of jazz).

To be sure, African-American music—however much it owes to its African heritage—cannot be explained simply in terms of oral traditions and the sedimented memories of particular communities. It has also been shaped profoundly by its contact with mass mediation: the musicians who are promoted to stardom, the images that are given license to circulate, all have passed through the hands of industry pundits who decide what to sell. Consequently, critics such as bell hooks (1992) have voiced their concerns about how stereotypes of black sexuality and gangsterism attract so much attention, while other aspects of African-American culture consistently are marginalized. And many scholars have rightly called for increased attention to the achievements of black art music composers such as William Grant Still, Florence Price, and Olly Wilson as a corrective to the exclusive focus on popular genres.

Yet it is in the arena of popular, mass-mediated music that black culture truly has revolutionized contemporary sensibilities—and mostly on the terrain of the body. Stuart Hall (1992, 27) has written that African-American musicians “have used the body—as it if was, and it often was, the only cultural capital we had. We have worked on ourselves as the canvases of representation.” Hall fully realizes that this music has been made the focus of commodity culture, that the sedimented memories,

collective experiences, and liberatory potentials it embodies are inextricably mixed with market pressures. But, he concludes, "black popular culture, like all popular cultures in the modern world, is bound to be contradictory, and this is not because we haven't fought the cultural battle well enough" (Hall 1992, 26). And indeed, most of the essays in the recent collection *Black Popular Culture* seek to reclaim—especially within commercial culture—what Gina Dent (1992) identifies as the joy, the pleasure, and even (as Audre Lorde [1984] uses the word) the *erotic* power of black music.

In response to the historical situations and theoretical problems we have described, we would like to highlight two large-scale critical agendas that are crucial to theorizing the body in African-American music and that could animate a broad range of other projects. The first is to work toward recognition among music scholars of the fact that physicality and sexuality are tremendously complex discursive fields. That is, to discuss the erotic or bodily aspects of cultural texts or performances is not to *reduce* them; for, as in cultural criticism more generally, we need to produce accounts of historical and social interaction that are rich and nuanced enough to support detailed critical readings.

One obstacle to such understanding is the set of myths about black sexuality that helps keep all discussion of physicality and sexuality impoverished. Such myths are often projected by whites onto African Americans in a complex mechanism of denial and desire—a mechanism analyzed brilliantly by Nathan Huggins (1971, 244–301) in his account of the minstrel show. And many African Americans have internalized repressive attitudes about the body (from Protestant Christianity and Plato), leading them to disavow the bodily aspects of black culture. On the one hand, black music is held to be *only* body and, on the other, to have nothing whatsoever to do with the body. Yet for reasons already offered, we believe it necessary to study the intersections between the body and African-American music and also the influence of the body on European and other musics. As philosopher Mark Johnson (1987) has shown, the culturally mediated body serves as the basis for all human discourses, and the task of coming to understand the embodiedness of *all* culture remains a crucial endeavor.

The second major agenda is to revise prevalent understandings of "the commercial." The precious "free space" provided by art music has led many with such allegiances to denigrate artists and audiences who interact elsewhere. But this art/popular dichotomy is an oversimplification that rests upon some serious misunderstandings of music history. As Ellen Rosand (1991) has shown, seventeenth-century Venetian opera was a ruthlessly commercial enterprise, and audience demands helped

shape not only opera's penchant for dramatic intrigue and erotic scandal but also the conventions of tonal form. Those wishing to avoid commodities would have to bail out of music history in the sixteenth century, with Josquin, before the printing press began to influence musical tastes; once Italian printers discovered that sex sells, the madrigal cornered the market with its graphic depictions of desire, pleasure, and pain.

Musicology is just beginning to awaken from a kind of collective amnesia concerning the commercial and bodily dimensions of "classical music." Lawrence Levine (1988) has analyzed the "sacralization of culture" and the "taming of audiences" that was accomplished in the latter part of the nineteenth century. Since that time, the institutional and ideological spaces of art music have allowed relatively little room for issues of the body to be addressed directly. By contrast, the relentless stimulation marketed by our postwar media culture has pushed such issues to the forefront of popular culture and increasingly allowed critical and alternative formulations to be articulated, circulated, and experienced.

Thus, at the same time that we work to reform our theoretical and analytical practices so as to deal more adequately with all types of culture, it is imperative that we also notice the tremendous accomplishments of black popular musicians themselves. One thinks of MTV's racist beginnings in the early 1980s, of how the music and images of Prince and Michael Jackson were too powerful to exclude, and of today's widespread emulation of black style. As Greg Tate (1990) has pointed out, the fact that there are so many white rap fans is, in many ways, something to celebrate: perhaps never before have so many young white people chosen black people as their cultural heroes, and many of them are led by their respect for rap artists to repudiate their parents' racism and to form friendships with African Americans. Cornel West (1993, 84) stresses that listening to Motown or rap may not lead white people to think critically about the sexual myths about black people that are still endemic and corrosive but it may bring white fans in closer contact with their own bodies and produce "a shared cultural space where some humane interaction takes place."

Within that cultural space, Michael Jackson's strained negotiations of gender, sexuality, and race are an ambiguous example. Jackson often presents his virtuosic performances within misogynist video narratives, and his triumphs of talent and fame are, for many people, tainted by the strange surgical transformations he has wreaked upon his own body. However, the fact that Queen Latifah's combination of rhetorical power, intelligence, and dignity has found a large popular audience is an auspicious

cious sign of the times. And when Prince blurs the polarized oppositions that still organize notions of race and gender (i.e., white/black, male/female), he destabilizes the signs that bind desire in channels established by white patriarchy, an act that suggests that changing desires is at least as important as changing minds.

Many more examples could be cited—each fascinating, complex, and consequential. The important point, however, is that black popular musicians have long been dealing with the cultural contradictions of the black body in creative and rhetorically powerful ways, even if some of them would not describe their artistic concerns in such terms. Their accomplishments have been primarily to enact recodings of desire through music and images rather than critiquing them through language. We as scholars and critics need to address African-American music in ways that hold in tension its roots in African spirituality and ritual, its physical and intellectual aspects, and its relationships with the culture industry without ever reducing the music to any one of these. The challenge is to assess the international impact of African-American articulations of the body without falling into the usual traps—neither undervaluing physicality as a complex artistic terrain nor celebrating it as a site where one pushes reason aside to come in contact with (fantasies of) universal primal urges. Now, when the politics of the body are of such concern to scholars across the humanities, black music and dance need to be given their due in history and contemporary culture.

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