

# MUSIC AND THE RACIAL IMAGINATION

EDITED BY  
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*For those voices silenced by racism*

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## 13

Hot Fantasies: American Modernism  
and the Idea of Black Rhythm

RONALD RADANO

At the turn of the twentieth century, American public culture openly embraced a radically new conception of black music that gave special emphasis to qualities of rhythm. While rhythm had always been associated with African and African-American musical performances, it now seemed to overtake other aspects, identifying what many believed to be the music's vital essence. Black music's propulsive and seductive "hot" rhythm—a term linked etymologically to forms of excess—seemed at once underdetermined and saturated with context-specific meaning.<sup>1</sup> As a conflation of musical and racial discourses, it brought together two primary realms of otherness: those "unspeakable things unspeakable" that consumed as they were denied by modern white America (Morrison 1988). Among African-Americans, moreover, hot rhythm frequently perpetuated the same racial myths while providing a means of affirming positive identities in an egregiously racist, national environment. The primitivist orthodoxy of "natural rhythm" afforded a new sense of racial pride that was ironically reinforced by white supremacist assumptions of a bestial Negro instinct. This exalted hotness in turn supplied the creative and economic basis of an emerging urban subculture of black professional musicians, whose traditional proclivities toward performance were soon marketed as expressions of a racially inherited rhythmic gift. For better *and* worse, then, hot rhythm, in its multiple varieties, traced the meanings of African-American music across the twentieth century, from the swing sensibility of early jazz to the funk and groove of hip hop. It is precisely this facility to convey a complexity of frequently paradoxical meaning that has made hot rhythm so vital to

modern American culture and, in particular, to the ontology of "blackness" itself.

In this essay, I will offer an interpretation of hot rhythm's sociocultural formation as part of the overarching development of modern American ideologies of race. I want to argue against the prevailing view of African-derived rhythmic impulse, not to deny the significance of African retentions, but to reveal the peculiarly American historical framework on which this powerful notion is grounded. As a critique of normative interpretations, then, this essay provides an elaboration on Kofi Agawu's seminal study "The Invention of 'African Rhythm,'" while shifting focus here to specifically American musical circumstances (Agawu 1995). Unlike Agawu, however, whose outline of hegemonic Western representations (in the spirit of V. Y. Mudimbe's influential *The Invention of Africa*) affirms dichotomies of colonialist fictions and inaccessible African realities, I want to observe the black rhythmic construct not as an invention so much as something part and parcel of a cross-racial American cultural experience. The idea of hot rhythm depended on the material existence of traditional African-American performance practices that were ultimately commodified as "black form" through a transnational interplay of romantic and colonialist writing. More than a minor expression within a larger historical process, these texts provided a key means of both articulating and engendering social transformations that anticipated the modern age. Accordingly, black rhythm may be seen as a patently modern construct crucial to our historical understanding. As a key trope of twentieth-century discourse, it has enabled individuals and communities to negotiate the challenges of America's racial fantasies and to establish a sense of place within its contested and contradictory terrain.

My reading of the formation of hot rhythm relies on two overlapping analytical figures that speak directly to black music's "unspeakability." The first figure, the temporal concept of *descent*, refers to the evolutionary myth of origins, which had cast black music as a primordial cure for the ills of a civilized and increasingly mechanized modern society (Lutz 1991, Sollors 1986).<sup>2</sup> The classical association of musical origins and rhythm takes on special significance around this time, building on a hybrid of mid-century romantic and slave interpretations of African-American music as a pre-discursive, "spiritual" resonance. The second figure, the spatial concept of *displacement*, explains how primal black difference emerges as a racial threat. It refers above all to the fear of a migratory black population entering into social, economic, and discursive spaces previously controlled by whites. Cast as an elusive presence

exceeding the norms of harmonically oriented European musics and figured in a hybrid rhetoric that reworked "descent" modes within the frames of blackface minstrelsy and the African travelogue, black rhythmic displacement provided a compelling metaphor for an African-American populace seemingly "out of place." The mediations of black music through print, recording, and public performance exacerbated this sense of threat, as a white populace contended with a newly constructed, African diasporic "origin" now based in and seemingly overtaking the United States (Gilroy 1991, 1993).

Through descent and displacement, then, African-American hot rhythm articulated a pairing of racialized extremes, one temporally preceding and the other spatially exceeding the plain view of white common sense. What had already challenged the limits of white comprehension now threatened to remake the everyday world through a process of mediation and exchange that paradoxically amplified the discernible sound of uncivilized black absence. As a result of these racial and musical mystifications, hot rhythmic music would command enormous social and cultural power, to the point of transcending the specifics of music as such. As modernity's grand, racially sounding other, the trope of a rhythmically "hot" black music would be written across American culture, informing everyday discourses with its infecting, dark resonance.

## I

References to the bodily affecting power of hot rhythm consumed the attention of reporters and readers alike with the rise of the modern era. The depictions of "coon songs" in the 1890s, for example, already suggested an impetus engendering fears of a new racial menace (Dorman 1988, Linn 1991: 50). In this grotesque extension of the minstrel stage, the Sambo figure of the mid century gave way to a prefigurative version of Richard Wright's Bigger Thomas, a razor-wielding male beast whose violence was expressed musically as propulsive rhythm.<sup>3</sup> With the emergence of ragtime and ragtime song, moreover, popular cross-racial genres, public enthusiasm for the new "black" sound heightened concerns that a dark terror, figured in terms of a metric difference ("syncopated rhythm"), was seducing an unsuspecting white populace. If the white verities of ragtime song were taken as positive signs of urban progress—"the perfect expression of the American city with its restless, bustling motion"—so did they communicate the worst of modernity's consequences, commonly portrayed in a xenophobic rhetoric that linked immigration, disease, and race: "infection," "epidemic," "craze" (Leonard

1985: 103, Lutz 1991, Kraut 1994).<sup>4</sup> Such determinations would attain a grand scale in the 1910s and 1920s, to the point of defining an entire era as "The Jazz Age."

The double logic of white public responses to black music has a historical basis in the American construction of racial difference. Once blackness had been conceptualized as a quality exterior to whiteness (yet ironically deriving from the sameness of cross-racial social experience), it would outline an oppositional relation, expressing something both desirable and threatening to (because it was simultaneously reflective of and different from) the white, civilized self. In the modern era, this double logic becomes through the effects of mass mediation more visible, more real, amplifying a conceit that extends from nineteenth-century depictions of slave authenticity. As black music circulated within an emerging economy of global popular culture, its projections of racial and musical authenticities grew in direct proportion to its repetition. Constructed as an elusive and resistant "natural force," black music epitomized the outer limits of white common understanding to define the excesses to which both blackness and modernity, in all their uncertainty, were linked. The power and "truth" of hot rhythm related above all to these qualities of intangibility and difference. As a racialized "black essence," hot rhythm arose inexorably from modernity's primordial wellspring—the American market—to project an illusory folk authenticity, what Theodor Adorno named "second nature" (Paddison 1995). Through the socially constituted "naturalness" of hot rhythm, white Americans would dance around the unspoken truths of its racial condition to engage, however obliquely and indirectly, the other realms defining a hybridized national self.

Seen this way, the idea of black rhythmic music emerges from a peculiar historical circumstance bound up with the dialectics of racial ideology in an emerging modern era. This musical concept was profoundly and intimately connected to the idea of modernity itself: it not only reflected society but infiltrated the very texture of American social existence. When J. P. Wickersham Crawford, a University of Pennsylvania professor of Romance languages and literature decried the scourge of "jazz thinking," he ascribed a musical signature to a racially determined, irrational condition that was influencing the perception and behavior of urban whites (*New York Times* 1925). When Edmund Wilson spoke of "The Jazz Problem" in *The New Republic* (1926: 217–19), he invoked a metonymic relation that conflated an insidious music with an enduring social condition, commonly characterized as "the Negro Problem." References to black rhythm's "infectious" nature in an era of epidemic

diseases are particularly revealing, for they focus specifically on fears of material (human) transmission through the immateriality of sound. Entrancing and seductive, hot rhythm emerged as a version of the invisible "airborne menace"—a sonic simulation of Don DeLillo's "White Noise." As a metaphor of contamination, moreover, hot rhythm concretized fears of the "immigrant menace," whose ethnic habits, genetic makeup, and characteristically "hot blood" had purportedly caused a series of epidemics around the turn of the century (Kraut 1994).<sup>5</sup> When cast in the discourse of prohibition, finally, this hot musical menace threatened to intoxicate multiple generations of the American populace. As one writer observed, black music would "get into the blood of some of our young folks, and I might add older folks, too." It would make white America, like the "Negroes dancing in a Harlem cabaret . . . drunk with rhythm" (*New York Times* 1922, Nelson 1934: 13).

The modern figure of hotness seemed to conflate all these qualities of excess, from drunkenness to fever to sexual promiscuity and frenzy; together, they outlined a matrix of extremes that specified the dislocations of white physical and psychological certainty. Correlations between blackness, bodily violation, and aberrant "hot sound" had already appeared by mid century, when George G. Foster described a trumpeter at the New York watering hole, Dickens's Place, whose "red-hot knitting needles spirited out . . . [to] pierce through and through your brain without remorse" (1850: 72–73).<sup>6</sup> By the 1910s and 1920s, fears of racial transmission through sound had overtaken other dimensions of social life. For some, hot jazz marked the moral decline of civilization, as in the "fall of jazz"; for others, the popular "rhythm" tunes of the era expressed the pulse of the machine age, giving creative voice, as in the song by Fields/McHugh, in "Futuristic Rhythm" (1929) to an ethos of speed and "pep" that defined the modern era (Iichi 1987: 232, Crawford 1993).<sup>7</sup> From our late twentieth-century perspective, the first decades of the modern seemed consumed with a rhythmicized blackness whose dynamic properties provided a key, causal element in the constitution of modernity. Hot rhythm may very well be, in essence, a sonic articulation of what we are, bringing into relief the profound significance of Ralph Ellison's seemingly innocuous comment that "the real secret of the game is to make life swing" ([1970] 1986: 110).

## II

If the power of rhythmic hotness develops from peculiarly modern determinations of racial difference, so does it relate to prior, pre-modern

(and, in the United States, typically antebellum) constructions of blackness. Among Europeans, physical differences had long served as a way of determining the category of the outsider, from Medieval specifications of Orientalism to Colonialist references to African and Pacific "savages" (Said 1978, Appiah 1985, Bohlman 1987). With the emergence of modernity and the Enlightenment, these racial features had come to signify what Hayden White calls "the interiorization of the wilderness": qualities of intuition, emotional excess, irrationality, and naturalness repressed to the point of silence in the civilized self (1978: 154). Africans in particular were commonly determined by the "wild man" figure, which reinforced emerging European assumptions of Negro inferiority. By the eighteenth century, what had merely indicated the ignorance of a culturally undeveloped people now revealed an irreversible intellectual limitation. The African, according to Hegel, was "naturally inferior . . . no ingenious manufactures amongst them, no arts, no sciences" (Pieterse 1992: 41). White Americans, moreover, embraced similarly fixed determinations, particularly as a way of justifying white racial privilege and a southern slave economy. As David Roediger (1991) observes, antebellum racial categories provided an otherwise beleaguered northern, white working class with a semblance of social privilege, associating their superiority with the fact of whiteness itself. Yet such formations of difference came at a price, distinguishing a perceived white civility from parallel constructs of an authentic, natural world. In the romantic imagination of race, what blocked "the civilized" from its primal origins was the construct of civilization itself (Fredrickson 1971, Lott 1993).

Around 1830, the American idea of "black music" emerges as both a reflection of and an informing influence on white determinations of African-American behavior. As a concept, a discernible "black music" contradicted prior assumptions about Negro creative incapacity while also affirming romantic visions of a natural "folk." Whereas eighteenth-century observers credited an otherwise barbaric African sensibility—noise makers, or "*bruite* beasts"—with an uncanny ability to imitate European musical models,<sup>8</sup> nineteenth-century writers introduced a new idea that attributed to the slaves inimitable, racially determined qualities of expression (Pieterse 1992: 40, Radano 1996). African-American musical practices now revealed a natural creativity that stemmed from a pre-conscious, intuitive level. If the conception of black artistic genius had little to do with rational intelligence, it nonetheless ascribed to slaves special talents increasingly thought to surpass those of the "colder race" of Anglo-Saxons ("Songs of the Blacks" 1856: 51). Later in the nineteenth century, black musical expression would become admired

particularly in intellectual, artistic, and religious contexts as the new height of a sublime, romantic expression. As a matter of course, it would grow correspondingly more familiar and different. Toward the end of the century, its increased visibility through public performance and mass media heightened its distance from the perceived normalcy of a civilized, unemotional, and hence inauthentic white populace.

Alongside antebellum depictions of a sublime slave music were the expressed fears of a "growing evil" sometimes attributed to black music's rhythmic character (Watson 1819: 62–63). These early commentaries may be seen as anticipations of the modern dynamic of hotness cast upon a trans-cultural topos equating music with bodily danger (Rouget 1985). Jean-Jacques Rousseau's neoclassical depictions of vocal stress and strain revived Platonic notions of physicality that were commonly associated with dark-skinned foreigners. A similar sentiment appears in Herder's *Kalligone*, in which he speculates on the bodily consequences of music's rhythmic effect: "Since the tones of music are *temporal* vibrations, they animate the body, the rhythm of their expression expresses itself through its rhythm. . . . Strongly moved, natural man can not abstain from it; he expresses what he hears through appearances of his countenance, through swings of his hand, through posture and flexing" (Lippman 1985: 36). For Hegel, moreover, such "temporal vibrations" merely revealed once again the baseness of the African sensibility. The musicality of blacks, he suggested, amounted to little more than "barbarisms of a uniform rhythm [that produced] sluggishness to the point of gloom and depression" (ibid. 117). If Hegel's comments represented the normative view of black moral and creative inferiority, they also affirmed a growing relation between rhythm and expressions of excess that would appear increasingly through the nineteenth century.

One of the most compelling anticipations of modern hot rhythm appears in the body of American literary expressions that responded to escalating fears of slave rebellion. Published in the wake of the emancipation of Haiti, the Nat Turner insurrection, and the rise of abolitionism, Edgar Allan Poe's "Tale of the Rugged Mountains" (1844), a parable of a slave uprising, begins with a direct reference to rhythmic threat: "very suddenly my attention was arrested by the loud beating of a drum" (Widmer 1993). In *Benito Cereno*, moreover, Herman Melville employs the clamour of hatchets as a leitmotif to foreshadow a slave mutiny (Melville 1854). Significantly, Melville's rhythmic depictions may have subsequently informed related images in Henry Didimus's (Henry Edward Durrell) biography of Louis Moreau Gottschalk, the New Orleans pianist and composer of *Bamboula!* (a Caribbean drum). As Edward

Widmer observes, the biography "included an enraptured description of Congo Square and its 'saturalia', with particular praise for the drummer, [who] . . . 'beat with two sticks, to a strange measure incessantly, like mad, for Hours'" (Widmer 1993).

If the formation of black musical difference specified an increasingly tangible threat, however, it remained, prior to Emancipation at least, something accommodating to white public listeners. In fact, most mid-nineteenth-century representations of black music-making cast its features in ways that affirmed the norms of European musical practice. In "black music," white antebellum observers heard familiar musical qualities: qualities of melody, lyric, and harmony that together transformed a prior construct of bestial "noise" into the work-oriented object, "Negro song." The slave spirituals epitomized the best of these black songs, expressing powers of glory and uplift that called to mind Rousseau's ordinary voice. When rhythmic features were mentioned, they appeared typically as oddities cast along the margins of singing practices that could only be comprehended within the frames of sacred melody. Even in the more sordid imaginations of blackface, rhythmic features remained far from the center of presentation. While minstrel groups employed non-harmonic instruments (fiddle, banjo, bones, and tambourine) and, judging from published sources, featured syncopated rhythms and rhythmic playing, these elements served mainly as sidelights to a more centrally located melodic emphasis. Compared with the hot fantasies that emerged fifty years later, the rhythmic character of "De Nigger's Banjo Hum" and "De Rattle de Bones" referred above all to the disciplining of racial difference and the containment of African-American slaves, whose hopes of "Bobolashum" (abolition) were subjected to repeated stage parodies of black on white (Gumbo Chaff 1848).<sup>9</sup>

### III

The slave song as site of wholes and origins becomes increasingly important after the Civil War as a way of aiding the larger social program of resolution. Of all the determinations that might explain the enormous appeal of the postwar "jubilees," none is more significant than aristocratic northern culture's belief in the healing properties of black "spiritual" sound (Radano 1996). Working against the background of a similarly constructed minstrel discourse and a legacy of ecstatic revivalism (Lott 1993, Bruce 1974, Hatch 1989), white listeners commonly heard in black sacred singing the key to a national revitalization of culture. They would enact through descent into this dark musical past what Nina Silber

calls "the romance of reunion" (1993). In Europe, moreover, scholars had begun their own quest for a racial reunion of sorts, one that would link modern civilization to its evolutionary origins. Interestingly, this search for origins also involved a musical aspect that was articulated in a new version of the speech/music speculations of Enlightenment thought (Thomas 1995). Seminal discussions of rhythm by British evolutionists appear to have spawned an active investigation of "primitive music" in hopes of locating a living vestige of originary musical practices. By the 1870s and 1880s, the treatises of African colonization provided these theorists with a crucial source of ethnographic data. The data, of course, were hardly pure, unmediated presentations but rather were heavily informed by discourses stemming above all from American blackface parody. Accordingly, the musical imaginations of descent, while developing from well-intentioned scientific inquiries, had been inevitably pre-cast in a pervasive and infecting transnational, minstrel rhetoric. What finally emerges as the new expression of origins in hot rhythm would re-inforce these stereotypes as they paradoxically inspired performer and audience enactments of racial crossing.

In his influential essay "The Origins of Music," which appeared as part of a larger study of *Illustrations of Universal Progress* (1854), Herbert Spencer paid tribute to the place of music in European philosophical thought. While best known for postulating music as an extension of heightened speech, Spencer also theorized primitive communication as a tritone of integrated, dynamic expression: "Rhythm in speech, rhythm in sound, and rhythm in motion, were in the beginning parts of the same thing, and have only in process of time become separate things. Among various primitive tribes we find them still united" (Allen 1939: 115). Charles Darwin, in his turn, reversed Spencer's formula, proposing that primal sound preceded a more advanced speech practice. As did Spencer, however, Darwin also drew from a legacy of music/speech theory that magnified rhythm's significance. Evoking historical commentaries on the libidinous habits of birds, Darwin theorized that the origins of music could be found in the musical notes and rhythms of mating rituals: in "the drumming of the snipe's tail, the tapping of the woodpecker's beak, the harsh trumpet-like cry of certain water-fowl" (Darwin 1874, chap. 13; Van Orden 1995). Significantly, Darwin's ornithological references also betrayed sympathies for prevalent racialist views around the time. As Robert Lach observed, Darwin (*ibid.*) compared these primordial sexual utterances with the speech patterns of "excited Negroes," exercising a minstrel figuration that was already common to American discussions of slave singing (Allen 1939: 206-7).

By the 1870s and 1880s, the idea of a dynamic, native rhythm had emerged as the informing trope of black music, representing what Thomas Seward, the official transcriber of the Fisk Jubilees, called the “first peculiarity” of a previously melodic slave practice (Marsh 1880: 122). While American field researchers pursued transcription projects that sought to capture these “peculiarities” in song, European scholars increasingly focused their attention on a new scientific exploration of musical origin, working from Hans von Bülow’s famous *a priori* claim, “in the beginning was rhythm.” Frederick Rowbotham’s theory of a primordial “drum stage” (1885, chap. 1) and Karl Bücher’s Marxian reading of labor extending from musical play and work songs (1896) both conceived of rhythm as a marker of human beginnings. For Willy Pastor, moreover, who theorized the soporific and hypnotic effects of “primitive” rhythms, and Richard Wallaschek, who contended that “the origins of music must be sought in a rhythmical impulse in man,” the ultimate source of this primordial impulse was the unchanging sound world of black Africans (Allen 1939: 197, 225n; Wallaschek 1893: 230). Wallaschek in particular underscored this connection by beginning his highly influential global survey, *Primitive Music*, with a discussion of the African propensity for rhythmic playing. The essence of sound, once associated with pure melodic affect, now traced backward to rhythmic impulses revealing a discernibly “colored” origin.<sup>10</sup>

Crucial to the hyperbolic character of this emerging discourse were the aforementioned colonialist literatures that narrated Europe’s conquest of Africa. In the accounts of travellers, missionaries, and military expeditions, readers encountered vivid tales of jungle darkness and danger that helped to shape the modern concept of the primitive. While a systematic comparison has yet to be undertaken, a first look suggests that these colonialist texts, composed in the face of hostile conquest and against the background of a highly popular American minstrel commentary, tended to amplify the racial caricatures showing up already in eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century accounts. What was once a vivid, descriptive language had evolved into an exaggerated racist rhetoric that stressed in mock-tragic style images of savagery, cannibalism, and noise set against the superior intellectual powers of white, masculine reason (Bogdan 1988: 106, Pakenham 1991).

Musical discussions in these sources appeared in a variety of guises, from impressionistic accounts of performance practices to detailed reviews of instrument types. Most notable, however, were the projections of racial exoticism commonly associated with drumming practices. In *The Land of Fetish* (1883), for example, A. B. Ellis offers a portrait of a

West African world laced with vivid images of war, ritual, and cannibalism: “wattle racks . . . [of] innumerable human skulls . . . sacrificed to the Ju-ju, or fetish” (117). While his references to music are initially sporadic and diverse (they begin with an overview of common instruments), the most elaborate depictions draw relations between “death drums” and the gruesome violence of human sacrifice: “screams, the most horrible, the most blood-curdling . . . the most despairing—, it made my blood run cold, [and] was repeated; and then we heard the noise of the beating of drums . . . [as] night closed upon a wild scene of madness and intoxication” (170–71). Similar references to threat carry over into otherwise innocuous musical discussions. Complaining about the annoyances of Yoruba fifes, Ellis invokes images of violence: instruments “shreiking” (269) against a “diabolical rhythm”; the “torture rapidly grew worse and worse. . . . By 10 a.m. one of our number was down with fever” (270).

The famous adventures of Henry M. Stanley (1872), whose “search for Livingstone” was recounted in regular dispatches to the *New York Herald*, were central to the emerging hot fantasies about black music. While showing little interest in the daily lives of American-born blacks, a white readership zealously consumed Stanley’s depictions of an exotic world of wild animals, native warriors, and spearhucking heathens, cast in the language of blackface. In Stanley’s Africa, the threat of darkness is repeatedly overcome by the superiority of white mastery. It is a world in which Anglo-Saxon masculinity reigns, as if to mourn the passing of the American slave order. Stanley portrays himself in the image of the conqueror-hero, whose command over the jungle and its natives strangely parallels projections of white supremacy in many slave narratives.<sup>11</sup> When he turns to music, Stanley employs figures of rhythmic threat that anticipate late-century depictions yet without engaging the sense of anxious concern that commonly informs those same depictions. In a diary entry from 12 March 1872, for example, he recalls the ritual ceremony marking the end of his visit with Livingstone by juxtaposing tools of violence—axes, spears, guns—with images of “warlike music” and the “appalling energy and thunder of the drums” (Stanley 1872: 621). These are offset by patronizing, minstrel-based references to “my braves” and the “chorus-loving children of unyamwezi” (622).

The associations between “dark Africa” and blackface minstrelsy would become increasingly common in turn-of-the-century commentaries on black music. In this new phase, references to bestiality in minstrel songs of “Cannibal Love” (1909), presentations of Dahomey drummers at the World’s Columbian Exposition in Chicago, and historical



accounts of bans on slave drumming (in which the absence of drums paradoxically reveals the presence of a slave threat) all contributed to the rise of public displays of black music as a kind of "Negro oddity" or excess.<sup>12</sup> What had come to blacken the face of a minstrelized African and to Africanize depictions of African-America ultimately cycled back into the heart of darkness, creating an escalating tautology of transnational, primitive discourse that intensified fantasies of racial encounter. By the early 1910s, moreover, homologies of blackness had commonly informed popular depictions of African and African-American musics. Behind Du Bois's image of the "rhythmic cry of the black slave" lurked the cannibal savage; beneath the surface of Henry Krehbiel's engaging depictions of African song was the trope of pathetic slave suffering that traced from Frederick Douglass's autobiographies to Du Bois's own "sorrow songs" (Du Bois 1903, Krehbiel 1914, Douglass 1845). As a hybrid discourse of primitivism grew in direct proportion to black music's appeal, Americans became consumed with a hot fantasy of racialized sound that inspired enactments of simian-like "animal dances" and celebrations of a "savage" jazz animated by "jungle rhythms."

Serving, finally, as a kind of textual "missing link" between late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century depictions was Edgar Rice Burroughs's best-selling Tarzan series, which commenced with the publication of *Tarzan of the Apes* in 1912. As Marianna Torgovnick (1990) and Gail Bederman (1995) have shown, this novel played a crucial role in the formation of the modern primitive idea, as it affirmed newer "tribal" projections of white American manhood specific to a colonialist era. Musical references appearing at a crucial moment in the novel suggest ways in which these masculinist themes could reinforce hot rhythmic desire among a schoolboy readership. In chapter 7, "The Light of Knowledge," Tarzan appears at the center of an ape ritual, the dum dum, through which he is welcomed into the tribe. The dum dum becomes a pathway toward tribal belonging, the journey that enables Tarzan to descend from (white) civilization into the black wholeness of jungle Apes. Significantly, what triggers the transference is "the noise of the drums" (61). These black jungle rhythms accompany a "fierce, mad, intoxicating revel" that unites a civilized English boy with his primordial origins and enables his re-emergence as "King of the Apes" (88).<sup>13</sup>

#### IV

Descent alone, however, does not explain why rhythm would become so centrally located in black musical experience and command such fear

among the white populace. For this, we need to turn to the tangible, real-life threats that give new significance to what might otherwise be dismissed as a kind of minstrel-based comic relief. In the figure of displacement, one may observe such a musical-social correspondence. Employed here, the term refers to the profound social and racial instabilities that were constituted rhythmically toward the end of the nineteenth century. As African-Americans began increasingly to leave their homes in search of jobs, to acquire an education, or simply out of hope for a better life, they inevitably challenged the codes of black behavior that had grown ever more precarious since Emancipation. Such transgressions could only further destabilize an already tenuous racial balance in which "blackness" variously signified threats to the social order, from foreign immigrations to infectious diseases to a broadscale economic failure. African-American music seemed particularly powerful in specifying these threats. Of course European concert music had also revealed its own kind of cultural power, accorded through romantic discourses of transcendence and an orchestral tradition of composer dominance over passive listeners. Yet black music translated absolute music's aesthetic violence into more palpable forms of terror, which were fueled by the "romantic racialisms" of primal descent (Fredrickson 1971). Assuming the form of hot rhythm, modern black music would be recast as a seductive yet diabolic force whose deformations of European musical mastery embodied both the white desire of difference and white fear of Negroes "out of place." For African-Americans, moreover, hot rhythm quickly emerged as an enabling force that combined local concepts of dynamic performance with these same racial fantasies. Soon the racialist myths challenged and ultimately complicated traditional black beliefs, particularly as a migratory population informed and embraced the urban sensibilities of modern America. Echoing forth from a ghostly, dark wholeness, these elusive hot rhythms articulated a new kind of black existence, a certainty in (white) uncertainty that has since been celebrated repeatedly in literary monuments from *The Souls of Black Folk* to *The Signifying Monkey* (Du Bois 1903, Gates 1987, Radano 1995).

**K**nowing one's place was a cardinal rule of survival among blacks in the post-Reconstruction "New South." "Place" referred to the severe constraints on black conduct that African-Americans were expected to honor, for fear of violent white reprisal. Yet so did "place" specify more overarching limits imposed on African-American life, determining opportunities of employment, forms of public speech and manners, places of residence, and modes and range of travel. The idea of place, as James

Grossman observes (1994), was where class and racial categories intersected. "Place" provided the means of extending the commodification of black labor beyond slavery, a practice justified on racial grounds.

In place and race, then, we locate two certainties of post-Civil War Southern public culture: together they articulated a social code whose import and influence reached far into northern locales. When these certainties appeared to be transgressed, whether in real terms or not, whites lashed back swiftly and through the most heinous forms of violence, epitomized in the increased incidence of lynchings across the South from the 1880s. Even indirect challenges were disciplined, as witnessed in the escalation of organized Klan terror, which sought to contain the perceived displacements of an increasingly mobile and threatening African-American population. As blacks moved steadily from towns and rural areas to urban locales, the perception of a "New Negro" on the loose began to consume the white imagination, contradicting earlier assumptions of Sambo docility in favor of a vivid, modern incarnation of "the Negro as Beast" (Fredrickson 1971). This intensification of the theme of African-American bestiality becomes part of a larger perception of tumultuous social displacement that would characterize the modern era. In the new social climate, racial, ethnic, and political others—blacks, Irish, Italian, and Chinese immigrants, and white labor radicals—were held responsible for a broad pattern of social and economic instability, for a new and uncertain future that left the United States "standing at Armageddon" (Painter 1987).

The modern American conception of black rhythmic difference, which finally emerges around 1890, powerfully communicated the threat of displacement. Whereas the jubilees had come to express a kind of benevolent spiritual and melodic ecstasy—songs of human perfection linking civilization and barbarism, reason and intuition—hot rhythm revealed blacks' "true," monstrous nature. In "The Bully Song" (ca. 1895) popularized by May Irwin, for example, the instability of elusive rhythm signified for many whites the dangerous behavior of the urban black male, who serves as both the perpetrator and victim of razor-inflicted violence. Ragtime in particular materialized the nightmare of new Negro licenses, as displacement and public access were committed to synopated sound. The appropriation of ragtime by white composers such as Irving Berlin may have obscured somewhat the threat of black musical displacement. Yet in the end, this new repertory of "Nigger song" could only reinforce the reality of an encroaching darkness in an America "falling prey to the collective soul of the Negro" (Leonard 1985: 107,

Hamm 1994). For many Americans, indeed, coon and ragtime songs, whether composed by whites or blacks, were capable of vast, destructive potential. Likened variously to "menace," "poison," and "Black Death," they threatened to remake American civilization in black sound (Leonard 1985: 107). "A person inoculated with the ragtime-fever is like one addicted to strange drink," moralists claimed. "It poisons the very source of your musical growth [and] eventually stagnate[s] the brain cells and wreck[s] the nervous system" (ibid.). Elusive, displaced migratory black music, named variously according to its rhythmic character as ragtime, blues, syncopated music, jazz, and swing, revealed America to be displaced—a dissed place whose center had been re-sounded as dynamic and elusive black absence.

The absence of hot rhythm epitomized the white conception of racial difference: it articulated precisely what white presence was not. As Euro-America's blackened musical other, hot rhythm signified the antithesis of civilized artistic practice. It was a dimly lit soundworld of indiscernible dynamism set apart from the harmonic norms of civilized classes. Despite the appeal of hotness, most educated white Americans still believed harmony to represent the high point of Euro-Western civilization and to be the ultimate musical sign of colonial superiority. European harmonic music identified the pinnacle of a natural, evolutionary process, having developed according to the outlines of the overtone series.<sup>14</sup> From "the savage, who for the first time in our world's history knocked two pieces of wood together" (Rowbotham, 1: 2) to the grand orchestrations of Beethoven, Wagner, and Brahms, the evolution of music traced in its materiality the history of human development, positioning Europe over the rest. Africans and African-Americans, in their base inferiority, had simply failed to achieve such heights: "The wild music of these people is scarcely to be brought within the regular rules of harmony" (Thomas Edward Bowdich in Southern 1983: 12); "Hottentots and Negroes . . . have readily become excellent musicians, although they do not practise in their native countries anything that we should esteem as music" (Charles Darwin in Bujic 1988: 317).

Yet according to the same racial logic, the difference of hot rhythm also revealed in its baseness the impossibility of Western completion. As a vestige of human sound prior to civilization's development, it made audible an originary sound world that had existed prior to the emergence of "music" as such. Echoing forth from its pre-civilized and accordingly pre-musical origins, hot rhythm assumed an absence that also ironically destabilized the certainty of European-based presence. Constituted as a

threat that formed the basis of white desire, it became recognized and named as it also resisted the assimilationist pull of common-time categories of reason and comprehension. Hot rhythm's absence, then, was also audible, heard; and in its incommensurability, it unhinged the West's cultural logic. As one observer put it, hot rhythm was "syncopation gone mad" (Lutz 1991: 149).

To be sure, the quality of black absence was something more than the mere silence that Frantz Fanon (1952) imagines for a pan-African humanity in *Black Skin, White Masks*. It placed into relief the "noise" that had confounded eighteenth-century white comprehensions of "Negro sound," turning up the volume to produce what Ralph Ellison calls in *Invisible Man* a "poetry out of [the] invisible." Having first been constituted in the ironic discourses of slave transcendence, spirit, and freedom, black music now revealed a second, supernatural power, a "second nature" specified by late-century discourses of descent and displacement. At once invisible and beguiling, its rhythm commanded a palpable form of terror, as if the swift and silent predatory apes of Tarzan's jungle—"intoxicated with wild rhythm"—had assumed their place in modern America (Burroughs 1912, chap. 7 [1990: 61]).

Such imagined instabilities of an infecting and affecting hot rhythm suggest that the figurations of contagion were to be taken quite literally. The vast repetition of references to black music as a fever, drug, disease, and intoxicant indicate that the threat of black music related above all to fears of miscegenation, through which hot rhythm becomes a metonym of the black male body and, specifically, Negro semen or blood. According to American racism's one-drop rule, the merest hint of blackness would disgrace the sanctity of white sameness (Fields 1982). Hot rhythm proved extremely dangerous since, as a sonic force, it could make racial transferences simply through audible recognition. Over time, these infecting capacities of modern black music would grow even more powerful, "louder," as the myth of folk authenticity circulated in a highly mediated modern public culture. Hotness gave to rhythm an elusive power directly related to its mass projections of racial difference. In its elusive dynamism, one could hear a kinship of "Body and Soul," to name a famous Harlem anthem, as the noise of a previously "uncreative" people now advanced the power of blackness across America: "the greatest music born this side of the seas" (Du Bois 1903). Accordingly, hot rhythm's most famous progenitors—James Reese Europe, the band leader, who, like the character in "The Bully Song," fell victim to a rhythm master's blade; Bessie Smith, the raucous singer of tales of violence, intoxication, and womanly sexuality; Al Jolson, the ethnically and

racially hybridized "Jazz Singer"—were certainly more than mere entertainers enlivening America's popular world. They may be likened quite correctly to conjure figures whose dynamic black magic effectively resounded the countenance of a nation.

## NOTES

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1. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, hotness was commonly equated with displays of anger, passion, and sexual desire. An angry person voiced "hot words"; the lustful were "red hot" or "in heat." By the 1890s, the term had also identified positive attributes ("hot art"), together with extremes of physical display and self-indulgence: hotness evoked images of violence, suffering, danger, and intoxication. See definitions and exemplifications of "hot" in *The Oxford English Dictionary* and *Dictionary of American Regional English*, vol. 2. See also Dennison 1982: 409–10.

2. Sollors uses "descent" in a more conventional, anthropological way, referring to blood lines and generations. But this usage also shares important relationships with my own.

3. For a discussion of razor images, see Gaines 1993.

4. Such associations between black music and infection appear in the 1850s, as in John Sullivan Dwight's observation that Stephen Foster's "Old Folks at Home" "breaks out now and then, like a morbid irritation of the skin" (Leonard 1985: 106).

5. In *Afro-American Folk-Songs* (1914), Henry Edward Krehbiel reports that Lafcadio Hearn proposed a study of the effects of African physiology on African American music. Hearn speculated that the vocal cords of blacks were longer than those of whites and were "capable of longer vibrations." Hearn also believed "that the blood of the African black 'has the highest human temperature known'—equal to that of the swallow—though it loses that fire in America" (39).  
6. Foster also noted a similar heat emanating from another rhythm maker, his "frightful mechanical distortions of the bass-drummer as he sweats and deals his blows on every side, in all violation of the laws of rhythm (72–73)."

7. Dorothy Fields and Jimmy McHugh published "Futuristic Rhythm" in 1929. George Gershwin's "rhythm" tunes included "Fascinating Rhythm" (1924) and "I Got Rhythm" (1930). The latter soon became standard in the jazz repertory and the basis for many other tunes. Duke Ellington, with Irving Mills, published among others, "Rockin' in Rhythm" (1930) and "It Don't Mean a Thing (If It Ain't Got that Swing)" (1932). In his poem, "Lenox Avenue," Langston Hughes claimed "The rhythm of life is a jazz rhythm."

8. A nineteenth-century observation provides insight into this lingering

rhetoric of "noise." In a review of the transcription project published as *The Slave Songs of the United States* (1867), an anonymous writer remarked: "We do not believe that the negro, in his native state, knows what music is. . . . He loves music dearly, however, when he hears it, and readily appropriates a portion of it when he has been brought within its sphere. But does he ever reach excellence in it? Have not all the colored musicians we have known been of mixed blood?" *Lippincott's* (March 1868): 342. Moreover, the negation of black music as "noise" may explain colonialists' strange silence about slave performances, which, unlike parallel performances in the dense African populations of the Caribbean, went for the most part unrecorded. For a discussion of this absence, see Epstein 1977.

9. *The Ethiopian Glee Book*, by "Gumbo Chaff." The titles appear in book 3; the reference to abolitionism appears in book 1. In *Yesterday's* (1979: 116–17), Charles Hamm discusses the emphasis on melody in minstrel song particularly in the nineteenth century. Eric Lott, in contrast, argues for a more subversive reading of the rhythmic character of minstrelsy, focusing on its early expressions. Lott suggests that white musicians had already recognized black music as rhythmic form and proceeds with an imaginative analysis that links black rhythm with Adornian notions of repetition. While it is true that minstrels emphasized nonmelodic and percussive instrumentation associated with southern slaves, and occasionally involved rhythmic ideas in the songs themselves, it is also true that the main feature of emphasis was melodic form and song form. It seems more appropriate, therefore, to observe blackface as a step in the formation of the modern discourse of black rhythm rather than as its full-blown expression (see Lott 1993: 171–95).

10. An overview of the commentaries cited in this chapter appears in Allen 1939; see also Glyn 1913. It is noteworthy that Wallaschek's views of African musical significance did not carry over to the African-American slave songs. These New World practices, he argued in his lead chapter, were merely weak imitations of white singing.

11. One striking parallel is the drawing of Stanley aiming a pistol as an African can cross a river with Stanley's supplies. The caption reads: "Look out, you drop that box, I'll shoot you" (Stanley 1872: 643). The image recalls Frederick Douglass's tale of Covey shooting a slave in the water in chapter ten of *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (1845).

12. It is no coincidence that writers at this point began to reconceptualize the history of African-American music with increasing emphasis on the drum bans to suggest an uncontaminability of black essence. Rhythm becomes certifiably constituted as a threat in scholarly discourse, signifying in sonic form the seeds of inexorable black rebellion. See, for example, Krehbiel 1914.

13. Tarzan is welcomed into the tribe after having killed the "bully" who attacked his surrogate mother. He was victorious through the help of his deceased father's knife, which he had found, without knowledge of its origins, in his father's abandoned house. As such, Tarzan embodies a unity, combining primal strength and civilized cunning—"The Light of Knowledge" that names the chapter. Only then can he descend into his dark past, finding his way through the ordinary light of ape drumming. Rhythmicized civilization becomes the ultimate

agent of regression, the tool by which the rational-minded, when encountering the black (whole), gets hot.

14. The common perception of the overtone series as a metaphor for the development of harmonic complexity was already in place by the 1920s. In his *Harmonielehre* (1922), for example, Arnold Schoenberg writes: "What today is remote can tomorrow be close at hand; it is all a matter of whether one can get closer. And the evolution of music has followed this course: it has drawn into the stock of harmonic resources more and more of the harmonic possibilities inherent in the tone" (21). Two decades later, Schoenberg recalls, "In my *Harmonielehre* I presented a theory that dissonant tones appear [historically] later among the overtones, for which reason the ear is less intimately acquainted with them" (1941: 216). I thank Brian Iyer for calling these references to my attention.

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# PART IV

## History/Modernism