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AFRICAN DISCOURSE IN BLACK MUSIC PEDAGOGY AND ANALYSIS

by Guthrie P. Ramsey, Jr.

I DISCUSS BRIEFLY IN THIS PAPER a manifestation of what I am calling the discourse of Africa in black music inquiry and cultural production in the United States. In the present discussion, this discourse is restricted to the ways in which Afro-Americana's African cultural heritage has been used to explain the development of musical cultures throughout the African diaspora. This topic in the literature usually appears under the rubric "Africanisms." I will first identify some of the parameters of the topic and then discuss their implications for the pedagogy and analysis of black music. In a planned expanded version of this paper, I will treat another area involving the rhetorical use of references to "Africa" in the lyrics and the use of non-vocal musical gestures that musicians intend to signify to listeners the African past of African-American culture.

I

In the early 1960s, ethnomusicologist Richard A. Waterman published a brief essay in the journal *Ethnomusicology* titled "On Flogging A Dead Horse: Lessons Learned from the Africanisms Controversy."[1] Waterman expressed his impatience with the persistent debate about what he called "the importance of the African cultural background for certain present-day characteristics of the music and the folklore of the American Negro." Anyone conversant with the literature, Waterman argued, should agree with the positions forwarded by Melville Herskovits. Before Herskovits, Waterman explains, writers staked out one of two positions—that enslaved Africans either parroted the music of the non-black cultures surrounding them, completely abandoning African musical sensibilities—or that they collectively created a new musical language from scratch.

The resolution of this stalemate, according to Waterman, was achieved because of at least five developments: 1) a deeper understanding of the anthropological concept acculturation; 2) a growing first-hand knowledge of the music of West Africa; 3) the abandonment of African-American exceptionalism and the development of the diaspora concept that linked black cultures in the United States, the Caribbean, and South America; 4) the repudiation of essentialist thinking that claimed notions of "racial music talent"; and 5) a broader understanding of the cultural and social work achieved by musical practice.

WATERMAN PUBLISHED THIS ARTICLE at a crucial historical moment. While I cannot claim that a direct line of influence or connection existed, the 1960s saw—especially within the circle of artists, cultural critics, and activists associated with the Black Arts Movement—an intensified interest in the African cultural legacy of African-Americans. It is difficult to generalize the views articulated on the role of Africa in the cultural theories of this movement; they were clearly varied. Yet the notion of Africanisms and Africa became an important point of discussion and a lynchpin in their political rhetoric.

Writer LeRoi Jones (a.k.a. Amiri Baraka), for example, employed the rhetoric of "Africa" in his theories of the Black Arts Movement. His thinking, however, quite ironically embodied some of the conflicts of the Africanisms debate outlined by Waterman. On the one hand, Jones wrote that slavery eradicated cultural memory. On the other hand—and in the same essay—he appeared to argue for a retention model of Africanisms:

> The slave ship destroyed a great many formal art traditions of the Black man. The white man enforced such cultural rape. A "cultureless" people is a people without a memory. No history. This is the best state for slaves; to be objects just like the rest of massa's possessions.
>
> Black music is African in origin, African-American in its totality, and its various forms (especially the vocal) show just how the African impulses were redistributed in its expression, and the expression itself became Christianized and post-Christianized.[2]

In the 1980s, scholars working in black literary studies forged new theoretical directions for that field, distancing their ideas from the theories and political rhetoric of the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s and 1970s. These developments in literary study became foundational for work on black expressive culture in many academic disciplines, including musicology. And they would have an impact on the way in which the African cultural background figured into scholarship on African-American expressive culture. Importantly, the collective body of criticism that emerged used interpretive strategies that included semiotics, structuralism, rhetorical analysis, feminist critique, Marxism, poststructuralism, and symbolic anthropology, among other methods. Taken together, these strategies of inquiry ushered black cultural studies beyond the somewhat narrowly defined (but powerful) sense of what it meant to be "political" and into its most recent profile.[3]

INSPIRED by the described above "reconstructionist" moment in 1980s black literary criticism, contemporary music scholars have responded with a new black music criticism. Criticism of black music attempts to explain the cultural work that music performs in the social world. This musico-cultural criticism ultimately seeks to explain what various styles and gestures mean and suggests how they achieve their signifying affect. It exposes some of the critical spaces left by earlier models and analytical methods, first by identifying a work's significant musical gestures and then positioning those gestures within a broader field of musical rhetoric and conventions. These musico-narrative conventions can then be theorized with respect to broader systems of cultural knowledge such as the historical contexts in which a musical text or style appeared and the lived experiences of audiences, composers, performers, dancers, and listeners. Thus, the new black music criticism treats every aspect of the musical process—creation, mediation, and reception. This analytical project provides alternative ways for scholars of black music history to access and discuss some of the historically and socially contingent meanings generated by a musical style and its surrounding practices.

THE SO-CALLED "OBJECTIVE" (or better, "objectivitifying") science of early anthropological discourse on African retentions gave way to the politically-charged idea of Africa in the Black Arts Movement. Recent critical theories of black music interpretation attempt to strike a balance between these two ideals by stressing the meanings derived from the rhetorical use of Africa's (transformed) musical presence in the West. Samuel A. Floyd's study *The Power of Black Music* represents a case in point.[4] This book draws considerable inspiration from developments in black literary studies, cultural studies, and from various strains of contemporary theory. It is modeled largely on Henry Louis Gates's theory of black literary criticism as outlined in his *The Signifying Monkey* and on Sterling Stuckey's book *Slave Culture*.[5]

"Musical Signifyin(g)," a short-hand term for Floyd's analytical model, consists of the use within a musical work of key "figures" and gestures that he associates with an African heritage. Some of these gestures include: calls, cries, hollers, call-response devices, additive rhythms, polyrhythms, het-

erophony, pendular thirds, blue notes, bent notes, elisions, hums, moans, grunts, vocables, oral declamations, interjections, off-beat phrases, parallel intervals, constant repetition, metronomic pulse, timbral distortions, musical individuality within collectivity, game rivalry, melismas, and musical forms like 12-bar blues.[6] As Gates wrote of literary and oral Signifyin(g), the rhetorical use of these musical devices "epitomizes all of the rhetorical play in the black vernacular. Its self-consciously open rhetorical status, then, functions as a kind of writing, wherein rhetoric is the writing of speech, or oral discourse."[7]

Importantly, Floyd's thinking is not based on notions of "race" but on culture, experience, and cultural memory. While African-Americans certainly share a great many of the same attitudes and sensibilities as other Americans, their collective "American experience" has also been a specific one, producing subjective cultural memories that have reciprocal and powerful relationships with cultural forms such as black music. As Floyd argues, "all black-music making is driven by and permeated with the memory of things from the cultural past and that recognition of the viability of such memory should play a role in the perception and criticism of works and performances of black music."[8] How do these observations shape how we perceive various musical works? I now turn to two musical examples that demonstrate a couple of different approaches to this issue.

II

A large part of my occupation as a music historian concerns teaching what we call in the business, not too innocently, music appreciation courses. While the history of such courses in the academy reveals a shameless "taste-making" thrust, recent acts of deconstruction have challenged various cultural biases and they forwarded a more ecumenical and contingent view of what is valuable in a musical expression. Nonetheless, one goal has remained a prevalent directive: to teach college students how to become more perceptive and informed listeners. Teaching how meaning is generated in these stylistic traditions has unfortunately not been a central concern among instructors and authors in the musical appreciation agenda.

In Mark Gridley's popular undergraduate textbook *Jazz Styles: History and Analysis* we have an example of how the author fulfills this agenda vis-à-vis the Africanisms question. A typical strategy in the music appreciation textbook is the establishment of a "tradition," usually based on some idea of familial relationships that are present among a set of musical gestures and genres. In the accompanying compact disc to his text, for example, Gridley establishes a familial relationship based on similar approaches to melodic invention, timbral distortions, social organization, ostinato bass patterns, a heterogenous approach to sound, call and response patterns, and other formal qualities. Let's hear the six examples:

[Editor's note: the following were played at the University of Pennsylvania conference.]

Street cries of Charleston of a male vendor
Fisherman, Strawberry, and Devil Crab" from Miles Davis's *Porgy and Bess* recording of 1958
"Hunter's Dance" music from Mali
"One Day," a gospel recording from the Angelic Gospel Singers, the Dixie Hummingbirds and pianist
"One o'clock Jump" 1942 Count Basie band
"Birdland," a jazz fusion piece[9]

The disparity in the social, historical, and cultural contexts and content of these recordings is striking. To consider any kind of connection among them in today's scholarly environment will most certainly draw critiques of "essentialism"—that any such link is falsely (and even maliciously) based on the "race" of the performers. One cannot miss that a strong similarity exists in these various approaches to music making on the conceptual level. However, when one situates these kinds of musical gestures into historically- and context-specific performance situations, it brings into higher relief what these traits might mean to audiences and performers.

III

THE LATE ANTHROPOLOGIST Walter Pitts has identified in religious ceremonies

throughout the African diaspora a "binary structure," in which two metaphoric frames combine to provide a ritual syntax.[10] He writes that "African-American [religious] rituals have a universal predisposition to flow from a formal, tightly structured, constraining, European frame toward an emergent, less constricted expression of the African-self . . . the outward shell gives way to the inner being as emotional intensity increases"[11] (328). Morton Marks calls this technique "switching," a cultural transaction prevalent among societies where two cultures have come in contact, especially in situations involving trance induction.[12] Before moving on I must take issue with Pitt's portrayal of an apparently essentialized "African self" that emerges from the confines of a European shell. At the same time, however, we can view the flow present in these rituals as performance rhetoric—as expressive choices made by individuals and groups to convey a particular socialized sensibility.

We experience this flow, together with a full complement of other performance techniques in the approximately two minutes of a vocal performance of "I Won't Complain" by gospel singer Karen Clark-Sheard.[13] After the pianist's brief introduction containing hints of the melody and establishing the key center of C major, Clark-Sheard enters singing the beginning of the refrain softly: "God has been good to me." This is an immensely popular song within black Pentecostal circles. A simple, reflective statement of Christian faith in the face of adversity, the tune belongs to the compositional legacy of Charles Tindley, Lucie Campbell, and most notably Thomas A. Dorsey, dubbed the "Father of Gospel Music":

Line 1. God has been good to me
Line 2. He's been so good to me
Line 3. More than the world could ever be
Line 4. He's been so good to me
Line 5. He dried all my tears away
Line 6. Turned my darkness into day
Line 7. I'm gonna say "thank you, Lord"
Line 8. And I won't complain

MERELY IDENTIFYING THE TROPES, figures, and gestures that organize musical forms with respect to Africanisms does not realize the full potential of cultural analysis. In order to understand how meaning is generated we must cast these gestures within a broader field of performance rhetoric and delivery mechanics. We must also explain other contingencies such as history, gender, audience dynamics, modes of production, geographic location, and generational dialogics.

Although Clark-Sheard's performance serves as introductory material to a more upbeat composition written for choir, it presents a set of demanding musical requirements and challenges for Clark-Sheard. She is what I call a "soul coloratura." She must set the stage for the subsequent choral material and, at the same time, inscribe her virtuosity within the framework provided by the eight brief lines of the chorus. Her work is a model of emotional compression in this regard. Clark-Sheard's mastery of several aspects of gospel singing deserves attention: timbral variation, melismatic runs, asymmetrical phrasing, bodily gestures, and textual invention. All of these parameters stack up to dramatize the lyrics, to demonstrate her spiritual commitment, and to self-consciously establish her command over the tradition in which she is participating.

THE FIRST LINE OF THE SONG draws a concerted response from the audience as they recognize the tune and appreciate Clark-Sheard's tone and timing. This is her set-up. Her timbre is sweet, somewhat breathy, and understated; she takes a breath between the words "God has" and "been good to me." She will "take her time," as the old adage of exhortation states. In line 2, Clark-Sheard again breaks the brief statement in half with a breath but not before melodic invention on the long "o" vowel sound of the word "so." The crowd talks back immediately with sporadic applause and various exhortations: "sing, Karen" "alright," and "yes." Line 3 contains an arpeggio spanning a tenth. Again, Clark-Sheard separates the idea with a breath between the words "more than the world" and "could ever be." The word "could" is a high (g), one half-step below the highest note in the song. She sings it with a breathy tone, tossing off another

melismatic phrase on the words "ever be." Clark-Sheard pauses after line 4's "He's been," taking a breath before a downward melodic flourish on the word "so" that contains 4 basic asymmetrical units. The remainder of the phrase—"good to me"—is almost thrown away because after a quick breath, Clark-Sheard launches into an ascending line on the word "He," which textually belongs to line 5. The quick melodic phrase complements the secondary dominant (C7) underpinning it perfectly: her inclusion of the ninth scale degree (d) suggests a sophisticated harmonic sense. Moreover, the inclusion of the phrase in line 4, red flags it as rhetorically significant.

LINE 5 IS LOADED with musical/semantic content and marks a transitional moment in the emotional trajectory of Clark-Sheard's performance. Standing in contrast to the truncated "He" in line 4, she stretches out this "He dried." Her held note on the word "dried" contains two sounds: the long "i" in dried and a long "e" which she achieves by closing the throat and producing a very nasal quality. During the melodic invention on this same word, Clark-Sheard shifts back and forth between the two vowel sounds, exploiting their timbral affect. Juxtaposed to this vowel contortion, she sings a descending line on the word "all" that can only be explained as hollow, stylized growl with a slight flutter. The crowd, which has been drawn gradually into this spectacle, roars its approval to line 5's rhetoric. Line 6 contains another harmonically rich statement on the word "darkness," which Clark-Sheard sings over the pianist's F^{13}-sharp^{11}chord, riffing on the chord's extensions with all of the skill of a bebop instrumentalist.

One of the key phrases of the solo occurs within a kind of suspension of time created by a brief cadenza-like move. As the pianist shifts harmonically between A7-flat 9 and an E-flat11-sharp 13 chord, Clark-Sheard executes a much longer than practical melodic passage on the word "I." Several aspects of this particular passage make it important to the overall force of the performance. Again, she exploits and exaggerates the diphthongs in order to maximize the emotive content of line. The Clark Sisters patented this type of execution, but it also indicates a regional trait among native Detroit singers. Aretha Franklin, Vanessa Bell Armstrong, and CeCe Winans –all hailing from Detroit are among those who have also perfected this style. The passage shows-off her vocal range but also the intricate, melodious, instrumental-like conception of the entire performance.

SOME FORTY YEARS after Richard Waterman noted that black cultural analysis had benefited from a "diaspora" point-of-view, we can certainly see how such thinking has benefited scholarship in this area. Diaspora knowledge informs a good deal of the work that emerged in the 1990s, and numerous studies on music, on political, social, and cultural theory, and on film, for example, demonstrate the richness of this strategy in research. In both musical pedagogy and musicological analysis specifically, inquiry about Africanisms explains how black musics in the New World exists not so much as a coherent system of social communication but as a family of musical systems with common sensibilities and conceptual frameworks.

At the same time, however, the fact of an African cultural heritage should be considered less important than the cultural work that the conceptual musical approaches identified with this legacy achieves for its practitioners and audiences. As I have attempted to show in my analysis of the Clark-Sheard example, other issues such as, the mixing and matching of various stylistic idioms like blues, jazz, and gospel and the collapsing of virtuosic, secular spectacle and sacred reverence also bring powerful meaning to the performance. As Hans A. Baer and Merrill Singer argue, "the current importance of these African elements derives not from their possible source but in the part they have played and continue to play in the crafting of special mechanisms for social survival, emotional comfort, and transcendent expression under the harshest of physical circumstances."[14]

Endnotes

1. Waterman, Richard, "On Flogging a Dead Horse: Lessons Learned from the Africanisms Controversy," *Ethnomusicology* 7 (1963): 83. Space does not permit my addressing the entire historical trajectory of the Africanisms debate. For more on this issue, see: Olly Wilson, "The Significance of the Relationship between Afro-American Music and West African Music," *The Black Perspective in Music* 2 (Spring 1974):3-22; Portia K. Maultsby, "Influences and Retentions of West African Musical Concepts in U.S. Black Music," *The Western Journal of Black Studies* 3 (Fall 1979): 197-215; Dena Epstein, "A White Origin for the Spiritual? An Invalid Theory and How it Grew," *American Music* 1 (Summer 1983): 53-59; and Maultsby, "Africanisms in African-American Music," in *Africanisms in American Culture*, Joseph E. Holloway, ed., (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990) 185-210.
2. Jones, LeRoi, "The Changing Same (R&B and New Black Music)" in *The Black Aesthetic*, Addison Gayle, Jr., ed. (Garden City, New York: Anchor Books) 113-14.
3. For useful essays on various critical developments in black literary study since the 1960s see: Houston A. Baker, Jr., *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984) 64-112; "Black Arts Movement" and "Criticism" in *The Oxford Companion to African American Literature*, William L. Andrews, Frances Smith Foster, and Trudier Harris, eds., (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997) and Angelyn Mitchell, ed., *Within the Circle: An Anthology of African-American Literary Criticism From the Harlem Renaissance to the Present* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994).
4. Floyd, Jr., Samuel A., *The Power of Black Music: Interpreting Its History from Africa to the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).
5. Gates, Jr., Henry Louis, *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988) and Sterling Stuckey, *Slave Culture: Nationalistic Theory and the Foundations of Black America* (New York: Oxford University Press 1987).
6. Floyd, *The Power of Black*, 6.
7. Gates, *The Signifying Monkey*, 1988, 53.
8. Floyd, *The Power of Black Music*, 10.
9. Gridley, Mark C., compiler, *Jazz Classics Compact Disc* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall and New York: Sony Music Entertainment, 1997).
10. Pitts, Walter, "Like a Tree Planted by the Water: The Musical Cycle in the African-American Baptist Ritual." *Journal of American Folklore* 104 (Summer 1991): 318-19.
11. Pitts, "African-American Baptist Ritual," 328..
12. Marks, Morton, "Uncovering Ritual Structures in Afro-American Music," in *Religious Movements in Contemporary America*, Irving I. Zaretsky and Mark P. Leone, eds., (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1974) 61-62.
13. *Twinkie Clark-Terrell Presents The Florida A&M University Gospel Choir* (Detroit: Crystal Rose, 1997).
14. Baer, Hans A. and Merrill Singer, *African-American Religion in the Twentieth Century: Varieties of Protest and Accommodation* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1992) 3.