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"Music, Real Abstraction, and Growth in the Black Atlantic"

Abstract

This dissertation places the circulation and globalization of African and Afro-diasporic musics at the center of a new approach to the music concept. Through four case studies that range around the Black Atlantic from the sixteenth century through the present, it argues that our globalizing musical modernity has been characterized by a tendency toward the constant expansion of "music" and that this expansion has been especially negotiated in relation to Black and African musics. As the expansionary drive of modern, global racial capitalism has spurred music to grow in both practice and theory, the contradictory meanings ascribed to Black musics under the ideology of race have been crucial to the process. Framed, on the one hand, as the quintessence of musicality, Black sonic practices have repeatedly furnished sounds, techniques, strategies, and possibilities that have broadened "music's" ambit. At the same time, however, racial ideology has also treated Black musics as the ultimate in noise, or otherwise as "music's" negation, leading to repeated disavowals of the intimacy of Black musics and music writ large. This contradiction has served as an engine for music's growth as it constantly re-produces a frontier across which music can iteratively expand. Drawing on recent critical theory, this dissertation theorizes the emergence of modern music in this way as an instance of "real abstraction:" the production abstract entities through increasingly dense relations between diverse elements.

At the heart of this process—and this project's examination of it—are the ways that particularly situated social actors in different contexts across the modern period have contested such shifting figurations of musical sameness and difference. Each of the case studies that make up this dissertation therefore listen in on moments in which the meanings of music and modernity were at stake—in other words, moments of particularly acute and consequential growth in music. Together, the four cases afford a long-range view of this process, as well as four opportunities to engage more closely with particular facets of the project's theory of abstraction and growth.

Chapter One is set in early-modern Spain and Portugal, where the development of Atlantic trade routes between Iberia and coastal West Africa inaugurated processes of exchange that gave rise to musical modernity. While at this early stage music's abstraction and growth were only partial and halting, the terms of abstraction established in this period would come to shape the subsequent character of music's growth. In particular, this chapter discusses the activities of the numerous African and Afro-descendant musicians active on the Iberian peninsula from as early as the fifteenth century. It traces their abstracting influence in items from the sixteenth-century "dance song" repertoire such as the *canario*, *chacona*, and *zarabanda* that draw on techniques shared by early-modern African and European musics to adumbrate key qualities of modern music. This chapter also draws on the work of Sylvia Wynter to illustrate how an emerging discourse of race linked the abstraction "music" to new abstract notions of the "human."

Chapter Two moves forward in time and across the Atlantic to visit mid-nineteenth century Cuba and Puerto Rico, then sites of significant musical growth. Whereas previous research has theorized music in the colonial Caribbean through the frameworks of "hybridization" and "creolization," this chapter instead develops an account of "musicalization:" the process through which non-music becomes music. It illustrates musicalization via the example of *contradanza* and *danza*, dance music styles derived from western European contredanse varieties that were closely associated with middle-class black and mixed-race musicians and dancers. As these "free people of color" sought civic recognition, they promoted new approaches to dance and music that demonstrated the commensurability of African and European musics, in the process making African music audible *as music* even within colonial regimes of listening. This provoked attempts on the part of elite whites to control and recuperate contradanza and danza—attempts that ironically only cemented their musicalization and their status of signs of modernity. Thus, this chapter locates music's tendencies toward abstraction and growth within larger conflicts over social reproduction.

Chapter Three offers a survey of the thought of several musical intellectuals active around the moment of Nigerian political independence in 1960. For these thinkers, "music" was a fraught category: in part associated with the cultural impositions of colonialism, it had also become germane in colonial Nigeria through forms of Black Atlantic popular music such as calypso, *son*, and jazz. As Nigerian musical intellectuals theorized cultural forms that could meet

the challenges of independence and post-colonial nationhood, “music” was at once a sign of the loss of traditional culture and a powerful means for earning international cultural recognition. In this way, they exemplified what this chapter calls “discontent” with music’s growth—a common response to growth’s destabilizing effects. Yet despite their discontent, independence-era intellectuals nonetheless embraced the category of music. This chapter thus shows how, through strategies such as the “ethnographic modernism” of Akin Euba and the “Africanist humanism” of Fela Sowande, these thinkers advocated for music’s growth via the abstraction of traditional and modern forms.

Chapter Four remains in Nigeria to consider music’s predicament in the present, as growth seems to be coming up against limits in both aesthetic and economic terms. It argues that one answer to this crisis is contemporary Nigerian “Afrobeats,” a style of popular music that has developed since the turn-of-the-millennium by drawing on a range of Black Atlantic styles, from hip-hop through dancehall to reggaetón. Aesthetically, Afrobeats is characterized by what this chapter calls a “poiesis of plenty,” a strategy of endless recombination and reference that solves music’s exhaustion of possibility by doubling-down on what already exists. In economic terms, Afrobeats is the name for the transnational music industry’s increased interest in Nigeria not—as many suspect—in order to secure music for export, but rather to secure a market for intensified exploitation. These aesthetic and economic analyses join ethnographic insights to represent Afrobeats as a form of capitalist realism for the end times.