

Black Labor and the Deep South in Hurston's *The Great Day* and Ellington's *Black, Brown, and Beige*

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In the decades following World War I, as a black intellectual and artistic public sphere in New York City was rapidly expanding, several musical representations of a Deep South heritage were staged by artists concerned with performing black history and culture in new ways. Often—as in popular reviews like *Dixie to Broadway* (1924), and concerts like the John Hammond-produced “spirituals to swing” series (1938)—these representations followed a progression, locating an originary cultural moment in the rural South that was shown to “evolve” into the more sophisticated styles of the cosmopolitan North. In other representations, like James P. Johnson's *Yamekraw* (1928), the sound of the South was stylized and stood alone as a reminder of a key reference point for African American life. The Deep South was subject to differing, sometimes competing representations by African American composers and performers—and occasionally concert and record producers—as they created new forms and contexts for their art. Zora Neale Hurston's musical revue *The Great Day* (1932) and Duke Ellington's *Black, Brown, and Beige* (1943) were among the works presenting the Deep South as the ultimate source of black culture, and these two works share another important similarity: both of them locate the laboring body as a vessel through which culture is performed and transmitted.

While Hurston's novels and folkloric writings have long received a great deal of attention, her thoughts on staged performance are coming into clearer view in light of recent scholarship (Kraut 2008; Diamond 2015; Penier 2015). *The Great Day*, which premiered in 1932, chronicles a day in the life of a group of Florida railroad workers, and much of the first act featured a company of dancers singing work songs while simulating the labor of “lining” and “spiking” railroad tracks. Duke Ellington gained widespread fame when his revues at Harlem's Cotton Club were broadcast on national radio, but as his career progressed, he moved increasingly towards writing large scale works, often addressing socially conscious themes. *Black, Brown, and Beige*, premiering at Carnegie Hall in 1943, opened with a “work song” motif, and put into musical form ideas about black labor that Ellington had been developing over the previous decade, often expressed in his poetry and other writings.

Hurston's staging and Ellington's musical and poetic writing place labor in a geographical setting that is both rural and Southern. As they emphasize the role of laborers in transforming Southern landscapes, they foreground a representation that connects the body, culture, and geography in a way that is distinct from other staged performances of the era. While emerging from different intellectual genealogies, Ellington and Hurston positioned their ideas in relation to the contemporaneous New York City art worlds of Tin Pan Alley and the Harlem Renaissance. Tin Pan Alley, a collection of Manhattan-based music publishing houses, closely connected to theater and film productions, had inherited much from the legacy of nineteenth-century blackface minstrel theater and tended to present Southern plantation life through bucolic and nostalgic tableaux and through playful naturally rhythmic dancing black bodies, extracting the practice of labor on these plantations. Many Harlem Renaissance intellectuals were hostile to jazz and cast the concert spiritual as the music best suited to put black cultural actors on equal footing with their white counterparts. Respectability politics, through the mode of the concert spiritual, meant adopting such features as art-song-style arrangements, a bel canto vocal aesthetic, and attention to "proper diction" (Newland 2010). Emphasis on the "soul" drew attention away from the role of the body as the bearer of black culture as writers correlated this music to the "inner longings and millennial expectations of African America" (Anderson 2002, 66). Set against these representations, Ellington's and Hurston's emphases on labor show a desire to re-center bodily practice in conceptions of black culture, while resisting essentialist stereotypes about natural rhythm. By locating the laboring body in the Deep South, these artists involved themselves in the cultural work of reinserting labor that had been erased in previous representations.

Zora Neale Hurston and *The Great Day*

Hurston's interests in theater, ethnography, and literature reflect the circuitous path that led her to the artistic and academic circles of New York. Raised in Eatonville, Florida, an all-black town where her father was mayor and where she would later carry out fieldwork, Hurston dropped out of school and left home as a teenager to work as a wardrobe assistant for a touring company specializing in Gilbert and Sullivan productions. Leaving the company to re-enroll in school, Hurston earned her high school diploma in 1920 at age twenty-nine, then enrolled as an undergraduate at Howard University, earning an associate's degree. She remained in Washington, DC for several years and worked closely with the writer Alain Locke. In 1925, Hurston moved to New York, where she enrolled in Barnard College, Columbia University, completing her BA in Anthropology in 1927 under

the tutelage of Franz Boas, who would continue to advise her fieldwork into the 1930s. Immediately upon arriving in New York, Hurston had become involved with the literary and artistic movement that came to be known as the Harlem Renaissance. One of her stories was published in Locke's important 1925 anthology *The New Negro* and, along with Langston Hughes and Wallace Thurman, she was involved in creating the literary magazine *Fire!!*

Hurston's interest in anthropology and folklore, from her training with Boas, to her fieldwork, to her emphasis on presenting folkloric materials for their own sake, provided her with a distinct perspective among her Harlem Renaissance colleagues. Biographer Robert Hemenway writes of Hurston's role, "the folklorist could become an essential tradition bearer, reconciling the New Negro with the racial past, not as an elite artist interpreting the racial essence, not as an abstract intellectual with a vague and romantic commitment to the spiritual legacy, but as a careful scientist, documenting the techniques of imagination in Black American culture" (1977, 82). Throughout Hurston's career, she resisted any hierarchical model placing "high art" above "folk art" (102). This created a contrast with many of her Harlem Renaissance colleagues, who tended to see African American folklore's value less as a significant artistic achievement itself than as a resource for new works of "conscious art" (Anderson 2001, 13). Between 1927 and 1931 Hurston undertook fieldwork throughout central Florida as well as the Bahamas, New Orleans, and Mobile, Alabama. The research was first sponsored by the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History, then by Charlotte Osgood Mason, a wealthy white septuagenarian patron of many important Harlem-based artists and writers.

Despite Mason's opposition to the form, Hurston signaled her plans for creating a staged revue based on her collected folkloric materials in a 1928 letter to Locke (Kraut 2008, 93). In her 1934 application to Columbia's graduate program in anthropology, written two years after the initial production of *The Great Day*, Hurston further emphasized her view that musical theater was an ideal setting for presenting materials that she collected during her fieldwork, writing, "it is almost useless to collect material to lie upon the shelves of scientific societies. . . . The Negro material is eminently suited to drama and music. In fact, it is drama and music and the world and America in particular needs what this folk material holds" (Hurston 1995, 970).

The Great Day appears early in Hurston's corpus, before any of her published books, although she had written much of *Mules and Men* by the time of its release. Plans for the revue began to materialize in the fall of 1931 when Locke helped to foster a collaboration between Hurston and composer and choir director Hall Johnson. Hurston quickly assembled a

troupe of dancers and began rehearsals (Hurston 1995, 805). After clashing with Johnson, Hurston completed the work along with Wendell “Wen” Talbert and his choir, and in December she moved to secure the John Golden Theater on Forty-Fifth Street, near Broadway, for the debut performance. The one-night-only debut, on January 10, 1932, required Hurston to pour nearly all of her financial resources into the production, even selling her car and radio to help pay the deposit for the theater. Hurston would have versions of the revue performed an additional eight times at different venues over the next three years. In her autobiography, *Dust Tracks on a Road*, she wrote of the revue that, although it ultimately became secondary to her literary endeavors, “I am satisfied in knowing that I established a trend and pointed Negro expression back towards the saner ground of our own unbelievable originality” (Hurston 1995, 808).

The Genesis of *Black, Brown, and Beige*

Black, Brown, and Beige was written for the occasion of Ellington’s Carnegie Hall premiere, taking place January 23, 1943. It was Ellington’s first important performance on a major American concert stage (Feather 1977). Although the suite borrowed bits of material from previous Ellington compositions, and although many aspects had already been conceptualized in Ellington’s sketches of an opera called *Boola* (Cohen 2004), the bulk of *Black, Brown, and Beige* was written in the weeks preceding its debut.

Both Hurston and Ellington had arrived in New York around the same time, just as the “New Negro” movement was beginning to flourish. Yet, even as Ellington operated in close proximity to Hurston, Locke, Hughes, and others, he did not identify with, and has not been generally portrayed as being part of, their artistic and literary sphere. Ellington, in the early part of his career, was establishing himself in an entertainment world that was seldom taken seriously from an intellectual standpoint. He had arrived in New York at age twenty-four in 1923, quickly finding success selling songs to Tin Pan Alley publishers and performing, first at a Harlem nightclub called Barron’s, then soon after as leader of the house band at the Kentucky Club near Times Square. Ellington’s famous Cotton Club engagement began in 1927, and with the club’s live radio broadcasts Ellington could establish himself on a larger scale. His reputation extended nationally and internationally, leading to many touring opportunities.

In the decade preceding the Carnegie Hall concerts, two of Ellington’s projects began dealing with themes that would resurface in *Black, Brown, and Beige*. The first is the short film *Symphony in Black* (1935). The film cuts between scenes of Ellington sitting at the piano in his studio composing a “Symphony of Negro Roots,” a performance of the symphony by Ellington’s



Example 1: “Work” theme from *Symphony in Black*, author’s transcription.

orchestra, and reenactments of, among other things, hard labor, a child’s funeral, and a nightclub dance. During the section of the film depicting hard labor, as workers are shown shoveling coal into a furnace, an echo of the opening work-song motif of *Black, Brown, and Beige* can be heard.

The second precursor to *Black, Brown, and Beige* was a musical revue called *Jump for Joy* (1941), a collaboration between Ellington and a handful of Hollywood writers keen on addressing issues of race in America. The revue began with a number called “The Sun-Tanned Tenth of the Nation” and ended with “Uncle Tom’s Cabin is a Drive-In Now.” The significance of this project, as Ellington would later write, was “the feeling of responsibility” that it engendered, a feeling that Ellington would try to recreate with *Black, Brown and Beige* (Ellington 1973, 180).

“The Dixie Chamber of Commerce Dream Picture” and “Musical Octoroons”

Ellington’s congenial public persona often belied the incisiveness of his private views. In a 1944 *New Yorker* profile, Richard Boyer commented that “new acquaintances are always surprised when they learn that Duke has written poetry in which he advances the thesis that the rhythm of jazz has been beaten into the Negro race by three centuries of oppression” (quoted in Cohen 2004, 1003). With *Black, Brown, and Beige*, Ellington desired to present a conception that stood apart from mainstream representations of African American life. He would do this again in 1946 with his *Deep South Suite*. In this suite, after presenting a movement showing what he called “the Dixie Chamber of Commerce dream picture . . . with beautiful blue skies, Creole gals with flashing eyes, fried chicken, watermelons, and all those good old nostalgic memories,” he went on, in the second movement, to represent “other things that were told about the South, things that were not at all in accordance with the Chamber of Commerce dream picture, things that were at times almost directly the opposite” (Ellington 1973, 184).

This so-called “dream picture” had been a mainstay of popular song for more than a century leading up to Ellington’s comment. The dominant force in nineteenth-century American popular song was blackface min-

strel theater, a field in which images of bucolic Southern landscapes and demeaning depictions of African Americans were omnipresent. Cockrell and Zinck note that minstrelsy's most prolific composer, Stephen Foster, who embraced abolition, "did not challenge important stereotypes: the demeaning dialect is still there, the plantation image holds, slaves continue to be helpless and childlike, music remains their palliative, 'Ole Massa' is kindly and good" (2000, 187).

Musical theater after World War I, drawing mostly from songs published on Tin Pan Alley, had inherited the minstrel legacy. Al Jolson, one of the primary figures in this field, captured many central qualities of minstrel theater in his performance of "Swanee" in the 1945 movie *Rhapsody in Blue*. Jolson, his face darkened with cork, dances jauntily center stage while singing, doing bird calls, and calling out for his "mammy." The backdrop is a plantation set, with regal columns, a lazy river, and white women in white lace dresses.

The African American male and his relation to the Southern American landscape, presented by Foster and Jolson and critiqued by Ellington as the "Dixie Chamber of Commerce dream picture," parallels a trope that Raymond Williams noted in English pastoral poetry. In this trope, nature, on its own, provides an abundance of riches, leaving a population of tenant farmers who are absent from the landscape, except for when they receive charity from the country lord, to whom they are always grateful (Williams 1973, 32). Williams explains this trope in relation to what he calls the "curse of labour," the idea that labor is God's retribution for the original sin. Williams explains:

What is really happening . . . is an extraction of just this curse, by the power of art: a magical recreation of what can be seen as a natural bounty and then a willing charity: both serving to ratify and bless the country landowner, or by a characteristic reification, his house. Yet this magical extraction of the curse of labour is in fact achieved by a simple extraction of the existence of labourers. The actual men and women who rear the animals and drive them to the house and kill them and prepare them for meat; who trap the pheasants and partridges and catch the fish; who plant and manure and prune and harvest the fruit trees: these are not present; their work is all done for them by a natural order. When they do at last appear, it is merely as the "rout of rurall folke" or, more simply, as "much poore", and what we are then shown is the charity and lack of condescension with which they are given what, now and somehow, not they but the natural order has given for food, into the lord's hands. (Williams 1973, 32)

Labor, the same element that had been extracted from the English countryside by the pastoral poets, had been removed from the Southern plantation in the minstrel-derived images of Tin Pan Alley.

Williams's key insight on this pastoral poetry was that a new form of production (early agrarian capitalism) gave rise to new hegemonic representations of the "country." The hegemonic representations supporting the institution of racialized slavery—and the forms of unfree labor that followed it—relied both on ideologies of natural landscape and on those of the racialized bodies. As Cedric Robinson writes, "the creation of the Negro was obviously at the cost of immense expenditures of psychic and intellectual energies in the West. . . . It was an effort commensurate with the importance Black labor power possessed for the world economy sculpted and dominated by the ruling and mercantile classes of Western Europe" (2000, 4). In minstrelsy's representations, black bodies were not only denied the work they did in reshaping the South and producing its commodities, they were also equated with products of nature, objects that could be harvested, sold, transformed, and discarded. In his seminal book on minstrel song, Eric Lott writes: "One notes the relentless transformation of black people into things, as though to clinch the property relations these songs fear are too fluid. . . . [B]lack men are roasted, fished for, smoked like tobacco, peeled like potatoes, planted in the soil, or dried and hung up as advertisements" (1992, 155). An insistence on representing black labor, and showing this labor *as* culture, worked to undo hegemonic discourses that shaped ideas of racialized bodies and the landscapes where they labored. Hurston and Ellington made black Southern labor central to their presentations of African American cultural life, but this move was hardly a characteristic response among the artistic vanguard of the era.

While many Harlem Renaissance figures recognized the discord between popular images and realities of African American life, they often responded by embracing artistic forms meant to undercut stereotypes that presented black culture as standing outside of middle-class norms. "The New Negro," writes Samuel Floyd, would be "one who would attend concerts and operas and would be economically and socially prepared to enter an ideally integrated American society. . . . The 'lower forms' of black music were frowned upon by those of this outlook" (1990, 4). Following W. E. B. Du Bois, many cultural leaders had responded by promoting the concert spiritual as the music best suited to represent the uniquely black contribution to American life. The performance of spirituals by artists ranging from the Fisk Jubilee Singers to Paul Robeson involved carefully arranged harmonies, attention to "proper" English diction, and formal modes of presentation rooted in the European concert tradition. Advocates of the music emphasized how the melodies and lyrics arose from the oppressed soul of black America. Du Bois, for example, wrote that it was through spirituals that "the soul of the black slave spoke to men. . . . [They] tell in

word and music of trouble and exile, of strife and hiding; they grope toward some unseen power and sigh for rest in the End" ([1903] 1982, 210).

But for Hurston, an important aspect of black expression was lost in the presentation of these concert spirituals. In a characteristically blunt assessment, Hurston stated that the "negro music" of the urban elite was "a determined effort to squeeze all of the rich black juice out of the songs and present a sort of musical octoroon to the public. . . . [R]eal negro music is not done for the sake of agreeable sound" (Hurston 1995, 802; see also Hurston 1967).

Ellington and Hurston, like other artists of the era, recognized that the cultural work of creating narratives and worldviews through artistic representation would be important to realizing racial equality in America. Unlike most of these artists, Ellington and Hurston focused on the body. Between Hurston's insistence that the "rich black juice" of music lay in its embodied sounds, including the grunts of laborers, and Ellington's thesis that rhythm was not a racial essence, but a quality that had been "beaten into the Negro race by three centuries of oppression," both artists showed their dedication to addressing the absence of labor in musical theater and black concert music.

The Sound of Labor

The Great Day follows a day in the life of a group of Florida railroad workers, beginning with a brief scene in which the workers are woken up by a "shack rouser," leading into a second scene, "Working on the Railroad," focused on the working portion of the day. While the last three sections of *The Great Day*—"Back in the Quarters: Dusk Dark," "In the Jook: Black Dark," and "In the Palm Woods"—do not directly involve labor, their framing against the narrative action of the labor scene is important. As a whole, the revue gives an understanding of the working day and laboring bodies in relation to periods of rest and play when workers' energies are directed towards recuperative and pleasurable ends.

The printed program for the original performance indicates seven songs performed during the "Working on the Railroad" scene: "Captain Keep a-Hollerin'," "Oh, Lula!," "Can't You Line It?," "Mule on de Mount," "East Coast Blues," "Black Gal," and "John Henry" (Kraut 2008, xiv). "East Coast Blues" is sung during a work break by a female character named Maimie, who walks past the workers and is joined by one of them on guitar. "John Henry" is a well-known song about a worker who falls dead trying to outpace a steam drill. In *The Great Day*, it is sung by a single worker at a moment of rest near the conclusion of the scene, with the captain and the other workers listening carefully. The setting emphasizes the song's ballad-

Cap - n' keep a holl-rin' 'bout the joint a- head. ain't__ said no-thin' 'bout the hog and bread.

5 Hey boys__ can't you line. Hey boys__ just a hair.

9 Ho boys__ line 'em o - ver Hey boys__ just a hair.

Example 2: “Captain Keep a-Hollerin” as sung by Henry Hankins, author’s transcription.

like text and its political message addressing railroad laborers’ plights (Kraut 2008, 127).

The other five songs are identified either as “lining rhythms” or “spiking rhythms,” and were accompanied by dancers simulating railroad work. “Lining” refers to the action of shifting rails into place, either while building track or repairing rails at curved track sections that have been pushed out of alignment by the force of passing trains. Hurston explained to folklorist Herbert Halpert that the workers, standing with their backs to the rail and holding five-foot-long steel lining bars between their legs, would “push the flange of this lining bar under the rail and then pull back on it” (Hurston and Halpert 1939a).

“Captain Keep a-Hollerin,” a lining rhythm, does not seem to appear elsewhere in Hurston’s corpus, but a 1939 recording of the song (released on Lomax 2000), sung by Henry Hankins at Tuscumbia, Alabama, reveals that it follows a common formula for lining rhythms: each verse begins with a rhymed couplet then proceeds with four consecutive three-beat phrases, each of them leaving a beat of rest where workers would presumably pull their lining bars up and toward the track (see example 2).

The pauses for pulling the lining bars up are less frequent in the other two lining songs, “Mule on de Mount” and “Can’t You Line It?” The verses of “Mule on de Mount” begin with two nearly identical phrases, each leaving a space for the physical exertion at the end, followed by another identical pair of phrases sung while the workers rest (see example 3).

Finally, “Can’t You Line It?” features a form similar to “Captain Keep a-Hollerin,” a rhyming couplet followed by four similar phrases. Only here, the second of the four phrases features a cue (the six-beat phrase “shaka-laka-laka-laka-laka-laka”) preparing the worker’s exertion on the seventh beat; there is only one point of exertion in each twelve bar verse (see example 4).

Current Musicology

Cap - n got a mule mule on the mount call him Je - rry "hunh"
 4
 cap - n's got a mule mule on the mount call him Je - rry "hunh" gon' ride 'im
 7
 down lawd lawd lawd gon' ride 'im down

Example 3: “Mule on de Mount” as sung by Hurston (Hurston and Halpert 1939b), author’s transcription.

The Great Day followed the model that Hurston had observed during her fieldwork in Alabama and Florida labor camps, which she described to Halpert (Hurston and Halpert 1939a). There was a designated “singing liner,” a person whose sole job was to accompany the workers with singing. The singing liner had the ability to control the pace and intensity of the labor, and the ability to tailor verse lyrics to different groups of workers according to their preferences. These included verses of anticipated travel north (see example 4, “Can’t You Line It?”), bawdy verses (see Hurston and Halpert 1939b), and verses expressing dissatisfaction with working conditions (see example 2, “Captain Keep a-Hollerin”), among others. The singing liner thus provides these melodies with multiple (sometimes contradictory) meanings, urging the laborers on while simultaneously registering their discontent.

In addition to the lining rhythms, Hurston also included two “spiking rhythms,” “Oh, Lula!” and “Black Gal” (“John Henry,” which Hurston also identified as a spiking rhythm, was performed in the revue as a ballad). These were the songs sung while workers drove the spikes that held

When I get in Ill - in - ois I'm gon - na spread the news a - bout them
 4
 Flori-da boys_ shove it o - ver hey- hey can't you line it? aw
 8
 sha-ka-la-ka-la-ka-la-ka - la-ka-la-ka-"hunh" can't you move it? hey - hey oh can't you try?

Example 4: “Can’t You Line It?” as sung by Hurston (Hurston and Halpert 1939c), author’s transcription.

Oh, Lu - la Oh gal
 5 Want to see you So bad gon-na see my
 9 long haired babe gon-na see my long haired babe Lawd I'm
 13 goin' cross the wa-ter see my long haired babe

Example 5: “Oh, Lula!” as sung by Hurston (in Hurston and Halpert 1939d), author’s transcription. The timing of hammer hits on railroad spikes are represented by x’s.

the newly positioned rails into place. As Hurston explained to Halpert (Hurston and Halpert 1939d), spike drivers worked with a tool called a “spike maul,” similar to a sledge hammer, but with an elongated head, one side longer and thinner than the other. Workers would often pair up on each spike, standing on opposite sides of the rail, each worker hitting the spike in quick succession, first with longer intervals between pairs of hits, then rapidly with each worker swinging the spike maul around on its axis in a windmill-like motion as they drove the spike all the way in the ground. The first phrases of both spiking songs used by Hurston end with two stressed syllables. The stress of these syllables would be echoed by the hammers during a pause at the end of the phrase (see example 5, mm. 1–2). After two or four opening phrases, the singing liner sings a few bars, presumably while the workers rest. Then, at the next pause, they finish driving the spike in with their rapid windmill-like hits.

Hurston’s emphasis on ethnographic detail—including her attention to how melodies coordinate specific laboring activities and to how grunts index the laborer’s exertion—provide a useful starting point for analyzing Ellington’s representations of labor in the first movement of *Black, Brown, and Beige*. Subtling his first piece performed at a major concert hall “Tone Parallel to the History of the Negro in America,” Ellington sought to follow figures such as W. E. B. Du Bois and Frederick Douglass, who highlighted the importance of the black contribution to American (and world) culture through history. Ellington, by opening the suite with the memorable “work song” theme, made it clear that labor was to be considered the central aspect of this contribution (see example 6).

The most obvious parallel between this phrase and the work songs rec-

Current Musicology

Oh, Lu - la Oh gal

5
Want to see you So bad gon-na see my

9
long haired babe gon-na see my long haired babe Lawd I'm

13
goin' cross the wa-ter see my long haired babe

The image shows a musical score in 4/4 time, transcribed for a vocal line. It consists of four staves of music. The first staff begins with a whole rest, followed by a quarter note 'Oh', a quarter note 'Lu - la', a quarter rest, and a quarter note 'Oh' with a long horizontal line underneath. The second staff continues with a quarter note 'gal', a quarter rest, a quarter note 'Want', a quarter note 'to', a quarter note 'see you', a quarter rest, a quarter note 'So', a quarter note 'bad', a quarter note 'gon-na', a quarter note 'see my'. The third staff continues with a quarter note 'long', a quarter note 'haired', a quarter note 'babe', a quarter note 'gon-na', a quarter note 'see my', a quarter note 'long', a quarter note 'haired', a quarter note 'babe', and a quarter note 'Lawd I'm'. The fourth staff continues with a quarter note 'goin'', a quarter note 'cross the wa-ter', a quarter note 'see my', a quarter note 'long', a quarter note 'haired', a quarter note 'babe', and ends with a double bar line. There are 'x' marks above some notes in the second and fourth staves, likely indicating specific rhythmic or articulation details.

Example 6: Opening theme to *Black*, author's transcription.

reated by Hurston is the index of the worker's exertion, heard on the commercially released recording in the coordinated timpani and trombone hit two beats before the melody's entrance ("There's a place for the song and a place to grunt," Ellington explained to the audience just before the piece began; Ellington 1977). During subsequent repetitions of the phrase, an additional accent emphasizes the first beat of the second measure, giving the impression that the measure's opening three-note flourish parallels the worker's energy being transmitted onto the object of labor. Using Hurston's melodies as a model, one may also note the echo of the archetypal "spiking rhythm" in the last two notes of the work-song phrase (compare these notes with the two-note sequence ending the first phrase of "Oh, Lula" that precede the rhythmic hammer hits). Ellington, in the context of this orchestral composition, thus combines multiple details of work songs' body-coordinating capabilities into a single phrase.

Ellington's concern with labor, signaled by its prominent position at the beginning of the suite, can also be inferred through sources external to the music itself. These include an unpublished scenario described in a personal manuscript for an opera called "Boola" that was never realized, but which provided many of the themes for *Black, Brown, and Beige*, as well as Ellington's spoken introduction to the movement (see Cohen 2004, 1005–7). The Boola scenario narrates the actions of its eponymous character, who for Ellington represented a "negro who has performed an outstanding deed or made a noteworthy contribution to the history of his race" (Belle Ayer quoted in Cohen 2004, 1006). The scenario begins with a passage in which Boola proudly looks over a rural American landscape that he has helped to shape:

1700

Boola put down his heavy load and gazed about.
 He'd been looking at this tree-swept land
 Reclaimed by steady swinging of his ringing axe,
 And was proud of what he saw there. Honest toil
 Was not without reward. Had not this toil
 Restored those steel-y muscles rippling
 'Neath the black satin smoothness of his skin?
 Had not the sun erased the mark of cruel, cold hate
 That etched his face the night they brought him
 To this strange and friendless place?
 . . . WORK! WORK! WORK! WORK!
 But to work was to grow strong, and he knew
 Weak men could not survive this test
 Of worthiness to be free! (quoted in Cohen 2004, 1014)

It is easy to imagine this resilient image of the worker in the opening theme. Underneath the “work song” melody, chord accents produce a resounding impact—the “steady swinging of [Boola’s] ringing axe.” The sustain of these chords leaves an impression of a wide open space, perhaps vast hills and valleys—“this tree swept land.” The final vi-IV-V-I cadence over the third repetition of the melody projects triumph and conviction—“And he was proud of what he saw there.” Later in the Boola scenario, Ellington evokes more hostile conditions of slavery:

Boola sang while he worked . . .
 Boola danced away from a boot in the britches . . .
 A song eased his master’s conscience . . .
 Boola reasoned: I’ll sing . . .
 And hide my thoughts from him . . .
 A silent slave was a brooding slave . . .
 A brooding slave was a dangerous slave . . .
 Too many masters found dead
 Or not at all . . .
 So! SING, you black bastards . . . SING! . . .
 (quoted in Cohen 2004, 1014)

Alternate possibilities for hearing the opening passage of *Black* are revealed here. Boola’s “work song” melody is simultaneously a genuine triumph and his way of disguising real thoughts from his master. This dual character of the work song echoes that of the singing liner—who simultaneously helped to satisfy the overseer’s need to produce and registered the laborers’ discontent.

We are reminded of Ellington’s thesis that “jazz has been beaten into the Negro race by three centuries of oppression.” Throughout the first six minutes of *Black*, it appears that Ellington is making this argument musi-

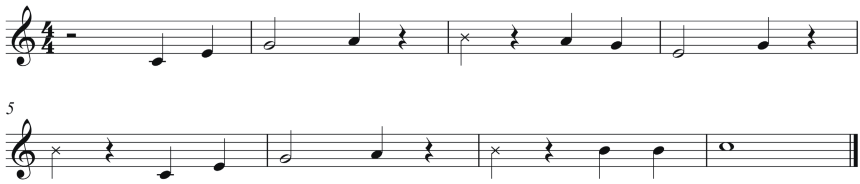
cally by weaving the work-song material through both the iconic opening passage and the more typical big band swing passages that follow (all references are to the LP released as Ellington 1977). The programmatic rendition of the work-song motif occurs three times at regular intervals (1:00, 3:00, and 5:00), with each of these occurrences giving way to swing passages that highlight different textures and techniques of big band composition. For example, in the first “swing” passage, after a brief counterpoint between the saxophone and trombone sections (1:28–1:40), the trumpet section resumes the work song theme then transposes it. Soon after (1:52), the theme is repeated in quick succession by the trombone, saxophone, and trumpet sections. Here, the saxophones and trumpets omit the two-beat rest at the beginning of the theme to create a rhythmic variation where the sections’ entrances alternate from beat three to beat one, then to beat three again. Through the continual reuse of the work-song motif, alternating between symphonic evocations of labor and the varied rhythms and colors of a more typical dance-music style, Ellington shows us how the culture of labor is embedded in big band jazz.

In his spoken introduction, Ellington ties the work song to both the laboring body and the spiritual:

The work song is sung while you work, of course. There’s a place for the song and there’s a place to grunt, you know, and the impact of your work. And, of course, after that comes the spiritual theme, which is the second theme of the first movement. And today we find that the two are very closely related. And so this naturally necessitates developing the two and showing their close relationship. (Ellington 1977)

Just as Ellington had connected the work song to swing in the opening minutes of *Black*, he does so with the spiritual, using a transitional theme played on “Tricky” Sam Nanton’s vocal-style trombone (see example 7). This transition theme shares with the opening theme “the place for the song and the place to grunt.” However, in both of Nanton’s iterations of this theme (7:29 and 8:28), the rhythmic work and impact of the first six measures give way to a softer, less-accented final phrase, with the final note landing against orchestration that foreshadows the background to the “spiritual” theme (first heard on a muted trumpet at 9:23). The songs of the laboring slave now acquire a third meaning. Beyond triumph and disguise, there is also spiritual recuperation that arises from the act of singing.

Ellington’s composition gives a musical indication of the form and motion of the laboring body. In conjunction with the *Boola* material from which the programmatic aspect of the composition derives, it suggests the role of African American labor in transforming the Southern landscapes depicted by others in an idyllic light. As the work-song motif is repeated



Example 7: “Tricky” Sam Nanton’s Theme, author’s transcription.

in different settings, Ellington posits this labor as an important means through which other artistic forms like swing came into being. The spiritual, according to Ellington’s musical and spoken statements, is not simply a matter of the soul and the inner self: it too arises from labor. Finally, with its prominent placement at the beginning of a “Tone Parallel to the History of the American Negro,” labor constitutes Ellington’s opening statement on the African American contribution to American life.

Conclusion

Through labor, human beings transform nature and transform themselves in the process. In *Capital* Marx writes:

Labour is, in the first place, a process in which both man and Nature participate. . . . He opposes himself to Nature as one of her own forces, setting in motion arms and legs, head and hands, the natural forces of his body, in order to appropriate Nature’s productions in a form adapted to his own wants. By thus acting on the external world and changing it, he at the same time changes his own nature. ([1894] 1986, 283)

For Ellington and Hurston, black music had been shaped through the laboring bodies of the African American workers who shaped the South. This labor was shown to have a dual character. On one hand it was brutal, it was resented, it caused pain and separation, it was enforced by “masters” and “overseers.” But on the other hand, labor, rather than being “extracted” in favor of more romantic and nostalgic notions, rather than being set aside in favor of an immaterial, transcendent soul, deserved a central place in the historical memory. The movements and grunts of the laboring body could set black music apart as a mark of an enduring contribution.

The laboring body transforms both geography and culture. “Natural” landscapes are actually the product of those who cleared the land and laid down the railroad tracks that transverse them. The work of clearing the land and laying down the track is imprinted in the bodies of the workers as rhythms, melodies, and movements that transcend the laboring activity. Works rooted in cultural studies often start from the standpoint that the arts have an important role in naturalizing ideas about socioeconomic and

environmental relations. As we saw with Raymond Williams, the realities of environmental conditions can be, and often are, reconfigured with the effect of reifying certain class inequalities: the imagined god-given privilege of the country lord is supported by images that hide the relationship between labor and the natural landscape. For Cedric Robinson, the historical specificity of the transatlantic slave trade, coupled with the industrial and financial advancements of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, created the conditions for a form of capitalism that relied on a dehumanizing construction of blackness (i.e. “racial capitalism”). An understanding of real socio-environmental conditions and real forms of labor leads us to confront necessary moral questions. Against the backdrop of minstrelsy’s long shadow, Hurston and Ellington presented uncharacteristic (for their time) representations of a region built on black labor. In doing so, they undermined dominant ideologies that operated through a particular construction of the relationship between race and nature in imaginings of the Deep South. The possibilities for the advancement of Black America offered by Ellington and Hurston placed artistic value in a culture that was largely derived from the conditions of labor (Ellington’s thesis) and that prized the “unbelievable originality” of the creative achievements of laborers.

Notes

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