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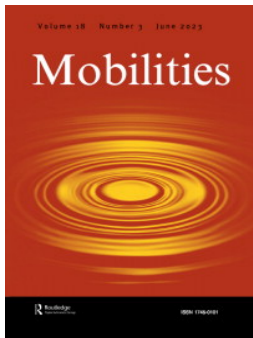
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The rhythm of place and the place of rhythm: arguments for idiorhythmy

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the relationship between rhythm, place, and race. It argues that Roland Barthes' concept of idiorhythmy is useful for understanding the politics of rhythm in relation to race. The paper explores how rhythm has been used to think about the interrelatedness of place and mobility – adding dynamism to place. I analyze reactions to the performance of Stravinsky's *Le Sacre du Printemps* to demonstrate how rhythm has been culturally and politically encoded through discursive and conceptual links to geographical imaginaries of place. The paper also explores how rhythm has been used to locate Black people in White western thought, and how it has been mobilized in Black and anti-racist thought. The concept of idiorhythmy is used to suggest the radical possibility of places of other rhythms, outside of the dominant rhythms of the world. Throughout the paper, it is argued that an understanding of rhythm is useful for delineating the interplay between place, race, and power.

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Introduction

The purpose of this essay is to explore how rhythm has been coded and classified through reference to place and race. More specifically, I argue for the utility of Roland Barthes' notion of idiorhythmy in delineating a place-based politics of rhythm in relation to race (Barthes 2013). As part of this special issue I use rhythm as a concept that links place and mobility and therefore addresses one of the central problematics of the contemporary social sciences and humanities – the question of how ideas and actualities of place and mobility are interrelated. Rhythm, I argue, can fruitfully be explored through the lens of place.

This focus is not new. Rhythm has long been used to think about the ways mobility is related to place (Seamon 1980; Jirón 2010; Buttimer 1976; Simonsen 2010; Mels 2004; Crang 2001). A concern with rhythm adds dynamism to place – it makes us think about the ways places are made and remade minute by minute, hour by hour and day by day. David Seamon, for instance, described how people perform time-space routines as they make their way through days and how these time-space routines add up to place-ballets – a combination of physical environment and the regular movements of people creating a varying tempo of movement and stasis as bodies move, rest and encounter each other (Seamon 1980).

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More recently, geographers have sought to explore urban spaces in particular through their rhythmic choreographies – choreographies which help to unfix place from a sometimes overly static framework of rootedness and boundedness (Mulíček, Osman, and Seidenglanz 2016; Simonsen 2010; Crang 2001; Jirón 2010). Such work shows how mobility is part of what makes a place what it is. It reveals what Anne Buttimer called the ‘dynamism’ of the lifeworld (Buttimer 1976).

To record behavior in an isometric grid representing space and time is only an opening onto the horizons of lived space and time. Neither geodesic space nor clock/calendar time is appropriate for the measurement of experience. The notion of rhythm may offer a beginning step toward such a measure. Lifeworld experience could be described as the orchestration of various time-space rhythms: those of the physiological and cultural dimensions of life, those of different work styles, and those of our physical and functional environments. On a macrolevel one is dealing with the synchronizations of movement of various scales, taking a sounding, as it were, at the particular point where our own experience has prodded us to explore. (Buttimer 1976, 289)

Buttimer’s plea for attention to rhythm is broadly conceived. It is not just human rhythms she is asking us to consider, but the rhythms of non-humans too. An understanding of rhythm means paying attention to experience as much as it does tracing bodies through abstract notions of space.

Since Buttimer’s paper there has been a rich body of work focused on how rhythm can be used to understand the choreographies of place (Edensor 2010; Mels 2004). There has been a good deal of work on the rhythms of particular places (Nash 2020; Reid-Musson 2018; Mulíček, Osman, and Seidenglanz 2016), and work on the conceptualization of rhythm in general (Cheyne, Hamilton, and Paddison 2019; Henriques, Tiainen, and Väliäho 2014; Edensor 2010). There is also a body of work that has sought to explore the way ideas about rhythm and place have been discursively mobilized to account for forms of political and material difference – particularly in regards to race (Snead 1981; Fanon 1969; Golston 2008).

To put it another way, in addition to work that thinks about places and power in terms of their various rhythms, work mostly inspired and informed by Lefebvre’s rhythmanalysis (Lefebvre 2004), there is a literature that thinks through rhythm itself as something that has been given specific meanings in Euro-American culture in ways that are tied to social, cultural, and political difference. While this literature certainly mentions place, place is not central to its arguments. In this paper, I consider these literatures side-by-side, linking rhythm, place, and the politics of difference. The purpose of this paper, in other words, is to explore some of the ways that rhythm has been culturally encoded through discursive and conceptual links to geographical imaginaries of place. In this essay I focus on race in particular, but there are similar and connected stories to be told about gender, class and sexuality – each of which has been coded through rhythm historically.

At the outset, it is important to point out that the conceptualization of rhythm comes from many different realms, from urban theory (Lefebvre 2004) to poetry (Golston 2008), to music and dance (Henriques 2010). It has been analysed both through the concept of affect (McCormack 2013) and as a social and cultural invention (Agawu 1995). I refer to these different domains and approaches throughout this paper despite the fact that sometimes they seem to be about entirely different things. I believe that seemingly metaphorical and seemingly material/political versions of rhythm arise from a common ground and that there is little to be lost by learning from disparate approaches. At the very least, these authors use the idea of rhythm in ways that suggest that there is at least some commonality in the things that they are naming – repetition in space and time. In mobility terms, a sequence of ordered and repeated movement and rest.

The first stop in this exploration is an analysis of the reactions to the first performances of Stravinsky’s *Le Sacre du Printemps* (*Rite of Spring*) to show how a generalized scandal of rhythm was delineated through reference to specific places. Second, I explore some of the ways rhythm has been used in racist ways to locate Black people in White western thought. Third, I consider

the role of rhythm, resistance, and place in anti-racist and Black thought before introducing Barthes' idea of idiorhythm as a productive way of thinking about emancipatory links between rhythm, race, and place.

The scandal of rhythm in Stravinsky's *Le Sacre du printemps* (*Rite of Spring*)

One of the most transformational moments in the history of music was the first performance of Igor Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring* in Paris on 29th May, 1913. The audience was scandalized by both the music, that put rhythm on the same footing as melody and harmony, and the dancing of Vaslav Nijinsky and the Ballets Russes. There are stories of things being thrown at the stage, of the police being called, of someone being challenged to a duel. Stravinsky based the music on folk traditions but made them completely modern. He uses rhythm in a way that reflects the context of a rapidly changing Europe, and particularly Russia, in the early 20th Century.

While urbanization was well underway, large parts of the continent were still predominantly rural. Automobiles were still a rare site. 1913 was the year of the first Ford Model T. The music, and particularly the rhythms, capture a clash of older folk ways and the emerging order of machines. The percussion section, and particularly the timpani and bass drum, were given unheard of prominence. They were both extremely loud and harsh and played in unexpected ways. At one point – *The Ritual of the Rival Tribes* – the music plays at two rhythms at the same time at a ratio of 3:2.

T.S. Eliot wrote admiringly that the music transformed 'the rhythm of the steppes into the scream of the motor horn, the rattle of machinery, the grind of wheels, the beating of iron and steel, the roar of the underground railway, and the other barbaric cries of modern life; and to transform these despairing noises into music' (Eliot 1921). What is notable here is the way Eliot resorts to sonic geographies to enable the reader of his review to imagine the new piece. The rhythm of one kind of imagined geography – that of the Steppes—is hashed against the rhythm of another, the modern (for 1921) city. Sound is mixed with mobility too. The sounds of the city are sounds of things moving which have their own rhythms in time and space. It was this combination of rhythm and volume, which Eliot so admired, that scandalized the audience and other, less generous, critics.

Clearly rhythm was a core component of all music up to the *Rite of Spring* – but, in the classical tradition at least, it was essentially background upon which melody and harmony could unwind. Rhythm was like the taken-for-granted nature on which the refinements of culture could be built. Stravinsky put rhythm front and center – and made it very loud. But he also played with rhythm to such an extent that the Scottish composer and critic, Cecil Gray, wrote that:

'Strip the music [of "*Sacrificial Dance*"] of the bar-lines and time-signatures, which are only a loincloth concealing its shameful nudity, and it will at once be seen that there is no rhythm at all. Rhythm implies life, some kind of movement or progression at least, but this music stands quite still, in a quite frightening immobility (Gray 1924, 140)'.

Theodore Adorno saw the machinic rhythms of the piece as an expression of capitalist modernity and, for different reasons to Gray or the conservative audience of the premiere, was also critical:

Rhythm is underscored, but split off from musical content. This results not in more, but rather in less rhythm than in compositions in which there is no fetish made of rhythm; in other words, there are only fluctuations of something always constant and totally static—a stepping aside—in which the irregularity of recurrence replaces the new (Adorno 1973, 154–5).

There were, in other words, a number of reactions to the *Rite of Spring* that focused on rhythm. The first complaint was that rhythm itself was not in its appropriate place – while it should be background it had become foreground. This complaint plays on a rhythm as a cultural signifier that is often missing from the work of geographers and urbanists on rhythm. Rhythm,

based as it is on repetition, has been coded as primitive and lacking in any sense of progress by Hegel (see below) and others. It has even been described as outside of history, or, anti-historical. Melody, on the other hand, has something like a linear sense of beginning, middle and end. Rhythm always points to what goes beyond it and what precedes it – a sense of the infinite. So, when Stravinsky has the strings, and sometimes the whole orchestra, playing as one big rhythm section, it subverts the expectations of the western musical canon. In James Snead's influential essay, *On Repetition in Black Culture*, he remarks how the *Rite of Spring* has similarities with music in the African tradition.

In *Le Sacre du Printemps*, exact repetition within and across sections exceeds anything which came before it. Moreover Stravinsky has developed the use of the 'cut', varying the cue-giving instrument. Interestingly, both Stravinsky compositions resemble black musical forms not just in their relentless 'foregrounding' or rhythmic elements and their use of the 'cut', but also in being primarily designed for use in conjunction with dancers (Snead 1981, 150).

This linking of rhythm with Africa and with Black bodies positions rhythm and repetition as outside of and against European culture. Hegel, Snead reminds us, used this contrast to describe Africa as ahistorical – not progressing but simply repeating.

In this main portion of Africa there can really be no history. There is a succession of *accidents and surprises* ... What we actually understand by 'Africa', is that which is without history and resolution, which is *still* fully caught up in the natural spirit, and which here must be mentioned as being on the threshold of world history (Hegel, 1955, quoted in Snead 1981, 146).

Part of the politics of rhythm is to think about what rhythm has been made to mean in the wider sense. Rhythm has been located in the body, as something carnal, as something outside of history and against progress. Rhythm has been posited as something against reason and rationality. So, we have to ask what this means for our wider use of rhythm to study the interactions of place and mobility in a more-than-human world.

The foregrounding of rhythm in the *Rite of Spring*, however, is only one reason that the audience at the debut were so scandalised. It was not just that there too much rhythm but that it was the wrong kind of rhythm. As T.S. Eliot notes, the *Rite of Spring* fuses rhythms that have origins in the folk traditions of Europe with the rhythms of modernity – the rhythms of machines. And it is this latter set of rhythms that led Gray to suggest that the piece had no rhythm at all – that it was static, or 'nude'. Stravinsky played with the expectations of meter in the piece. Western audiences are used to particular beats being accented in such a way that they are expected. Stravinsky defies these expectations – accenting beats at irregular and unexpected intervals. It was not only that rhythm was being foregrounded but that the rhythms themselves played around with audience expectations in unnerving ways.

The reactions to the role of rhythm in the *Rite of Spring* illustrate a geographical cultural coding of expectations about rhythm. Rural and urban, primitive and modern, 'folk' and machine are counterposed either to applaud Stravinsky's achievement or to damn it. Rhythms from one place hashing against rhythms from another produces, in Lefebvre's terms, *arrhythmia* – a disturbance in the system. Rhythm had its place(s) and Stravinsky had disturbed this equilibrium.

Rhythm. Race. Nation. Body

The sense that places might have particular rhythms, sets of repeated practices that form a 'place ballet' or assemblage of practices, can have its own politics. Indeed, the linking of place and rhythm has historically been used for xenophobic, racist, and fascist ends – as a core component in processes of cultural othering. On the other hand, the logics of rhythm have been mobilized for emancipatory ends, particularly within black scholarship (Fanon 1969; McKittrick,

O'Shaughnessy, and Kendall 2018; Wynter 1989; Woods 2017) but also, notably, by Roland Barthes (Barthes 2013).

The racist mapping of rhythm onto place, bodies and ideas of nature was particularly prevalent in the early decades of the 20th Century. Jaques-Calcroze, the founder of eurhythmics, for instance, clearly believed that every rhythm marked a fundamental relationship between people and place.

It is obvious that the influence of climate, customs, and historical and economic circumstances must have produced certain differences in the rhythmic sense of each people, which are reproduced and perpetuated in such a way as to imprint a peculiar character on the dynamic and nervous manifestations at the root of every original corporeal rhythm. (Jaques-Dalcroze 1930, 320)

Here, rhythm gets mingled with factors from the climate to the economy to produce a kind of moral rhythmic geography – a sense of the right rhythm for the right place. In the thinking of Jaques-Dalcroze and others, ideas of nature, rhythm and place quite quickly get configured as an expression of the folk bound into a homogenous nation. Prefiguring the rise of Hitler, Jaques-Dalcroze believed that future 'genius' leaders would be successful in uniting the people 'in a single mighty rhythm' (Jaques-Dalcroze 1921, 183) which expresses the 'true' nature of the folk.

Golston has linked the thinking of Jaques-Dalcroze to a host of other thinkers in the inter-war period who sought to understand rhythm in relation to sense of the folk and the connection to place, ranging from Ezra Pound to Carl Jung (Golston 2008). Jung, for instance, wrote that 'It would be difficult not to see the coloured man, with his primitive motility, his expressive emotionality, his childlike directness, his sense of music and rhythm, his funny and picturesque language, has infected the American 'behaviour'" (quoted in Golston 2008, 39).

Wagner, meanwhile, believed Jews had lost their national racial sense of rhythm due to their displacement and lack of native soil, a belief that mapped easily on to anti-Semitic Nazi ideology (see Mosse 1966). Likewise, the anti-Semitic, white supremacist historian and philosopher, Oswald Spengler, wrote in *The Decline of the West* how national-racial cultures were mutually incomprehensible and that 'when our rhythm is juxtaposed with that of alien life, we find the discordance intolerable' (Spengler 1932, 238). This discordance recalls the way critics reacted to Stravinsky in 1913 the sense that a juxtaposition of rhythms, as 'natural' and racialized expressions of particular places, produces discordance.

The affordances of rhythm as an object of ideology are derived, in part, from its connection to what we might broadly call nature. To designate something as 'natural' suggests that it is beyond the reach of the social and, therefore, just the way it is. Rhythm as part of nature also enrolls rhythm in a form of ideological work based on the binary of inferior nature and superior culture that has been mapped on to gender, class, age, and sexuality as well as race, which is my focus here (Ortner 1974).

Claims to nature often move quickly from what might seem reasonable and common-sense to narratives that enroll nature in ideological storytelling (Eagleton 1991; Cresswell 1996). The claims to nature in the case of rhythm come from the observation that rhythm can be sensed and observed in diverse elements of the natural world across scales from the movements of planets around the sun, to the progress of the seasons through the year, and the division of day and night. At the level of the body, we can think of the beat of the heart, the experience of breathing or the rhythm of steps as we walk. Our speech too, is marked by rhythmic patterns that vary depending on what language we are speaking of what mood we are in. We live in a complex web of interconnected rhythms that originate from beyond our own volition and beyond the world of representation (McCormack 2013; Henriques 2010).

In his paper on Jamaican dance hall music, for instance, Julian Henriques considers the materiality of waves and vibrations which carry the rhythm of the dance hall between bodies. He describes how rhythm is felt, embodied, and shared, as a kind of affect (Henriques 2010). Drawing on this experience of rhythm, Henriques' larger project is to 'propose a vibrant cultural

studies, working and thinking through vibrations themselves, rather than a cultural studies of vibration. It is a vibrational – rather than a social – construction of the senses that is pursued' (Henriques 2010, 58).

The non-representational aspects of rhythm, however, make them particularly amenable to discursive enrollment in cultural politics and the very process of social construction that Henriques seeks to avoid. The rooting of rhythm in nature was observed, for instance, by Thaddeus Bolton in his influential doctoral thesis on rhythm published in 1893, in which he linked rhythm to philosophies of motion in general:

Natural phenomena very generally, if not universally, take a rhythmic form. There is a periodic recurrence of a certain phenomenon, sometimes accompanied by others, going on continuously in all that pertains to nature. Motion, whether in the broader field of the universe or upon the earth, is very generally periodic. Light, heat, sound, and probably electricity, are propagated in the form of waves. A falling body does not follow a straight line, neither does a rifle bullet describe a simple curve which is the resultant of the combined forces of gravity and the initial velocity. Mr. Herbert Spencer has treated this subject in his 'Principles of Philosophy' at considerable length, and has left but little that can be said here. Although he does not say so in so many words, he seems to hold that it is the only possible form of activity; continuous motion is an impossibility (Bolton 1893, 3).¹

Bolton's thesis moves through various 'natural' mobilities before arriving at 'The Emotional Effect of Rhythm Upon Savages and Children' where he embarks of a list of people identified as 'savages' noting their peculiar propensities for rhythm and their inability to control themselves in the face of rhythm, making them both part of the natural world, and close to being children. This is where we move from the world of nature into ideological storytelling.

There is no more striking fact in the whole world of rhythm than the emotional effect which rhythms produce upon certain classes of people, savages and children. Attention has already been called to the psychological phenomenon of accompanying the changes of intensity in a series of sounds by muscular movements. So strong is its impulse in all classes of people that no one is able to listen to music in which the rhythm is strong and clear without making some kind of muscular movements. With some people these movements tend to increase in force until the whole body becomes involved and moves with the rhythm. The accents in the rhythm have the effect of summated stimuli, and the excitement may increase even to a state of ecstasy and catalepsy. (Bolton 1893, 19)

Rhythm, in Bolton's logic, provides a primordial base which the refinements of culture have to overcome. The list ends with an account of the role of rhythm in the black church.

The negro preacher often resorts to recitative speaking to produce the desired emotional state in his hearers, which is generally known as the 'power'. He selects some short sentence, often unimportant, such as 'Moses went up into the mountain', and repeating this, at first softly, he gradually raises his voice to the highest pitch, at the same time increasing his gesticulations. The more excitable of his audience are thrown into a paroxysm; the contagion spreads so that sometimes the whole audience is involved. (Bolton 1893, 20–1)

There are a number of ways in which rhythm is coded in these varied works. First, rhythm itself, and in general, is coded as part of nature and thus linked to the body and the animal – a primordial level below that of consciousness and culture that is thus suspect, inferior, and in need of control. The work of culture is, in some ways, the work of suppressing the forces of rhythm. Second, these writers create a link between specific rhythms and particular places, making rhythm part of the deeply problematic and sedentarist suppositions of particular racialized groups being rooted in and mapped onto particular spaces (Africa, the American South, the black church). Thus, forms of rhythmic mobility are seen to be characteristic of particular places.

The account of rhythm in Bolton is mirrored in the history of musicology and what Kofi Agawu has called the invention of 'African Rhythm'. Noting both that a singular kind of rhythm for a continent as large and diverse as Africa is unlikely, and that there are, anyway, similar poly-rhythmic traditions in Europe and the Americas, Agawu outlines the ideological work done by naturalizing rhythm in African bodies through geographical partitioning of forms of rhythm

To 'set [Africa] off as a musical culture area dominated by [the] concept [of rhythm], ... , is necessarily to imagine other "culture areas" in which rhythm plays a less decisive or less significant role; it is to embrace the kind of mythology that allows some Europeans to claim harmony and deny it to the Africans, or some Asians to claim elaborate melody and deny it to the Africans. For such comparisons to have force, we need to do more than casually allude to the other term in the binary framework. In practice, however, a comparative framework, although logically presupposed, rarely leads to explicit comparison. Instead, one side of the opposition is given short shrift, conveniently silenced, suppressed, ensuring that writers' initial prejudices reemerge as their conclusions'. (Agawu 1995, 385–6)

'African rhythm', Agawu insists, 'is an invention, a construction, a fiction, a myth, ultimately a lie' (Agawu 1995, 387). It is a lie based on the mapping of forms of spatiality and temporality – forms of mobility – on to places. Rhythm is understood through its alleged geographies and places are understood through their alleged rhythms.

Idiorhythm: Rhythm's other places

Less well known than Lefebvre's account of rhythmanalysis (Lefebvre 2004), idiorhythm is an idea Roland Barthes expanded on his lectures at the Collège de France not long before his death and published in cryptic note form in English in 2013 as the book *How to Live Together* (Barthes 2013). Unlike Lefebvre, Barthes is not immediately concerned with society as a whole but, rather, with small monastic communities – micro-utopias that exist outside of mainstream society. This is where the term 'idiorhythm' comes from – the Greek *idios* meaning 'particular' and *rhythmos* meaning 'rule'. Idiorhythmic monasticism thus means living by one's own rules.

More expansively, this idea points towards the kind of community, or, perhaps, society, where each could live according to their own rhythms rather than succumbing to dominant or established rhythms formulated through law – linking perhaps to the suggestion of a poetics of rhythm outside of the *universel généralisant*. Just as Lefebvre illustrates his conception of rhythmanalysis through describing a scene from a window above a square in Paris, so Barthes illustrated the politics of rhythm by looking down on the street below.

From my window (December 1, 1976), I see a mother pushing an empty stroller, holding a child in the hand. She walks at her own pace, imperturbably; the child, meanwhile, is being pulled, dragged along, is forced to keep running, like an animal, or one of Sade's victims being whipped. She walks at her own pace, unaware of the fact that her son's rhythm is different. And she's his mother! -> Power – the subtlety of power – is effected through disrhythm, heterorhythm (Barthes 2013, 9).

It is worth noting that Barthes chose to focus on the rhythm of a mother and child to make his point here. Like race, gender has been coded through rhythm. Historically, women have been linked to nature through narratives of rhythm such as the menstrual cycle which has been used to place women closer to the animal and further from reason – a logic that is thoroughly intertwined with logics of race. His choice of illustration is thus unfortunate. Like Lefebvre, Barthes insists on the foundational role of rhythm in the operations of power.

Before anything else, the first thing that power imposes is rhythm (to everything: a rhythm of life, of time, of thought, of speech). The demand for idiorhythm is always made in opposition to power... . *Rhuthmos*: a rhythm that allows for approximation, for imperfection, for a supplement, a lack, an *idios*: what doesn't fit the structure, or would have to be made to fit (Barthes 2013, 35).

Rhuthmos means a form for flow to be distinguished from *schema* – the form of an object that is more or less static. Barthes' discussion of *Rhuthmos* (ῥυθμός) owes much to etymological analysis of the word rhythm given by Emile Benveniste in his *Problems in General Linguistics* originally published in 1966. He was convinced of the importance of the idea of rhythm but unconvinced by many of the ways the word had been used.

The notion of "rhythm" is one of the ideas that affect a large portion of human activities. Perhaps it even serves to distinguish types of human behaviour, individual and collective, inasmuch as we are aware of durations and the repetitions that govern them, and also when, beyond the human sphere, we project a

rhythm into things and events. This vast unification of man nature under time, with its intervals and repetitions, has had as a condition the use of the word itself, the generalization, in the vocabulary of modern Western thought, of the term *rhythm*, which comes to us through Latin from Greek'. (Benveniste 1971, 281)

Benveniste traces the transformation of the meaning of ῥυθμός from something resembling 'form' in the 7th Century BC to a more specific sense of a shape of something as it is experienced – a shape that was different before it was experienced and will be different afterwards. While the first, Platonic, version of form is seeming ideal or eternal, the latter is more phenomenological and dependent on the senses. It is, in other words, a term used to describe 'the particular manner of flowing ... 'dispositions' or 'configurations' without fixity or natural necessity and arising from an arrangement which is always subject to change' (Benveniste 1971, 286).

Barthes takes from Benveniste the necessity of separating the general notion of rhythm from the idea of 'meter' – separating a general idea of a regular ordered sequence of movements (and rests) and replacing it with a particular way of flowing. While rhythm as meter brings with it the sense of regularity and calculation, the fuller sense of rhythm is both varied and lived. This distinction, in turn, brings to mind Lefebvre's play on the tension between linear imposed rhythms and the cyclical rhythms of the body and of nature. Barthes' focus on small monastic communities makes it hard to generalize out to wider social possibilities. But like Foucault's 'other spaces' (Foucault and Miskowiec 1986), there is a radical possibility in the sense of rhythms beyond meter – particular places where rhythm is self-directed rather than part of someone else's rhythmic project.

A similar logic is at play in Clyde Woods' book, *Development Arrested* (Woods 2017). Woods contrasts a spatial order based on the plantation, with its imposed rhythms, with an epistemology rooted in the blues. The blues, Woods argues, grew out of the experience of enslaved Africans forced to work on these plantations but able, nonetheless, to produce their own ways of knowing and being rooted in oral tradition. Woods reflects on the literature on the blues as a political form of Black culture with origins in Africa and formed in the experience of slavery. Rhythm, here, is not seen as the natural expression of Africanness, but, rather, as a socially and cultural learned form of time-space specific to the structures of power in existence in the American south.

Woods cites the musicologist and jazz musician, Ben Sidran, who underlines the way rhythm is part of a wider culture linking music, language and movement:

The essential nature of communication through rhythm is an unknown quantity due primarily to a lack of interest on the part of Western science. Rhythm ... is the cultural catharsis Fanon has suggested is necessary to black culture ... it simultaneously asserts and preserves the oral ontology ... it is on this basis that black music can be seen ... as a source for black social organization (Sidran 1971, 11).

As Sidran notes here, Frantz Fanon, in *The Wretched of the Earth*, repeatedly writes of power in terms of rhythm. White colonialism is described as an imposed rhythm and the colonial representation of the African is one that describes the African in ways that use rhythm to designate the less than human.

Those hordes of vital statistics, those hysterical masses, those faces bereft of all humanity, those distended bodies which are like nothing on earth, that mob without beginning or end, those children who seem to belong to nobody, that laziness stretched out in the sun, that vegetative rhythm of life – all this forms part of the colonial vocabulary (Fanon 1969, 32–3).

Decolonization, for Fanon, meanwhile 'brings a natural rhythm into existence, introduced by new men, and with it a new language and a new humanity' (Fanon 1969, 36). Fanon's reference to 'natural rhythm' here poses a problem as, at first glance at least, he replicates the rooting of rhythm in nature which is prevalent in racist and colonialist account of 'African rhythm'. This problem is offset by the idea of bringing such a rhythm 'into existence' as things that are 'natural' are generally thought of as in some sense eternal and always already existing.

This sense of a new nature (along with ‘new men’, a ‘new language’ and ‘new humanity’) is very different from racist versions of ‘nature’. As ‘nature’ is often conflated with both the ‘normal’ (common-sense) and the morally right, Fanon’s new nature suggests an entirely new common-sense on which to build his ‘new humanity’. Here, rhythm is mobilized as a tool for decolonization and the production of new men.

Nevertheless, there remains a problem with Fanon’s appeal to rhythm in his arguments for decolonization – the problem of ‘strategic essentialism’ recognized by Vivek Dhareshwar, who points out that the critique of essentialism can sometimes undermine identities associated with resistance such as ‘woman’ or ‘Black’ and that this has been countered by strategic forms of essentialism. ‘The problem with that concept’ he argues, is that ‘[w]hatever argument is going to justify strategic essentialism should be available to the nonstrategic version as well, unless one constructs a version of essentialism to which no one is likely to subscribe’ (Dhareshwar 1989, npn).

Keeping this reservation in mind, it is still the case that there is a clear political difference between a dominant group ascribing essentialized characteristics to a marginalized one, and marginalized groups ascribing such characteristics to themselves. Fanon’s use of rhythm and Spengler’s use of rhythm are not the same thing despite their superficial similarities.

The specificity of a particular rhythm in a particular place is also developed by Sylvia Wynter in her ruminations on Glissant’s archipelagic ‘poetics of relation’ (Glissant 1997).

Against the *universel généralisant* of the Word of Man (and its variants: Proletarian, Woman), the central countertheme that will be enacted again and again in Glissant’s work is that of the anti-Universal, the theme of the claim to specificity, of the claim to ‘rester au lieu’ (the remaining-in-place) in the specific *oikumene* of the Antilles, in the specificity of its ‘mode of the imaginary’. This countertheme of specificity extends from the Antilles as an Other America to that of the Creole languages themselves, of their syntax, sound and poetics of rhythm, and confronts their orality to the written nature of the ‘official languages’, to the specificity of the Antillean landscape, of its nonorderly seasons as explosive as the flame tree and the poinciana. (Wynter 1989, 639)

Here Wynter links the ‘poetics of rhythm’ to the power of particularity and specificity – the power of ‘remaining-in-place’ that stands against versions of the universal including ‘official languages’. This poetics of rhythm is specific to the Antilles, part of the landscape as much as the ‘flame tree and the poinciana’. This focus, like Woods’, inverts the racist mobilization of rhythm to suggest an altogether more emancipatory mapping of place and rhythm.

In her collection of essays and interventions, *Dear Science, and Other Stories*, Katherine McKittrick draws on the work of Sylvia Wynter to consider the radical potential of rhythm (configured as ‘groove’) for black radical theory and practice (McKittrick 2021). In *Black Metamorphosis*, Wynter writes that ‘rhythm is “the aesthetic/ethic principle of gestalt” and thus central to the constitution of black life’ (Wynter quoted in McKittrick 2021, 166). As McKittrick writes:

Music waveforms allow us to glean that reinventing black life anew is bound up in cognitive schemas that envision, and feel, black sound outside normative structures of desire. This is to say that in order to be newly human, one does not only rebelliously *site* and *make* black cultural inventions and sounds and ideas and texts, deeply and enthusiastically, in order to affirm humanity: one grooves *out* of the logics of racism and *into* black life (McKittrick 2021, 164).

To McKittrick, O’Shaughnessy and Kendall, rhythm is a form of collaborative praxis, which combines, rather than separates, the body and the mind, intellect and the senses.

Rhythm does not privilege singular ways of being but rather insists, in advance, that collaborative engagement is necessary to who and what we are. As we groove—even if alone—we collaborate with tunes, poetics, and styles, fusing the ostensible disconnect between science (sound vibrations, physiological movements, flesh and blood) and narrative (musical score, lyric, cultural text). Rhythm might be conceptualized as one way to invite collaborative worlding; rhythm lays bare not only emotions and imaginations but also their scientific underpinnings (McKittrick, O’Shaughnessy, and Kendall 2018, 870).

Here, rhythm becomes a way of hybridizing science and narrative, bringing people and things together to undertake ‘collaborative worlding’. In McKittrick’s writing in particular, there is a sense of a different rhythmic world that is irreducible to some dominant narrative, or in Glissant/Wynter’s terms ‘*universel généralisant*’. The use of rhythm in all of these works, as well as in Henriques’ account of Jamaican dance hall music and dance (Henriques 2010), points to a place beyond either the imposed rhythms of external order or the linking of rhythm to essentialized forms of difference. They can be thought of, instead, as instances of Barthes’ concept of the idiorhythmic – linking rhythm back to place in specific emancipatory ways.

Conclusions

In this essay I have chosen to interpret the theme of this special issue – place as a unit of analysis for studying mobility – in a broad and speculative way. I have focused on rhythm as a theme that connects place to mobility historically outlining how rhythm has been understood in racialized geographical ways across a range of sources.

Using Stravinsky’s *Rite of Spring* as a starting point, I have attempted to illuminate some elements of a politics of rhythm that are, themselves, components of a larger politics of mobility. This exploration has included reflection on the general scandalous place of rhythm in white western thought and the specific connections between rhythm and place that help to create the scandal of rhythm. Rhythm is both part of the imposition of the social into and onto the body and a form of resistance to this imposition – occasionally a source of improvisational joy that forms its own shape in idiorhythmic places.

Lefebvre’s well-known account of rhythm analysis does not linger on forms of embodied intersectional difference. Nothing is said about how class, gender, race, sexuality or age increase or decrease the likelihood of being arrhythmic. Recent work on rhythm has begun to fill these quite general observations with social and cultural content within specific empirical contexts (Lager, Van Hoven, and Huigen 2016; Spinney 2010, 286). Rhythm plays particular roles in relation to social markers such as class, gender, race and age and the idea of ‘intersectional rhythm analysis’, suggested by the geographer Emily Reid-Musson has much to offer (Reid-Musson 2018).

In this essay I have sought to explore the general discursive construction of rhythm in ways that are often (but not always) racialized and given meaning by being located – ascribed to a place. I have shown how this construction of rhythm within White western thought has been accomplished through the constitution of imagined geographies of rhythm where places are marked by their rhythmic mobilities.

Finally, I have suggested that Barthes’ concept of idiorhythmy – particular forms of rhythmic ordering outside of the dominant rhythm – is useful for understanding other kinds of rhythmic places such as Woods’ spaces of blues epistemology or Henriques’ Jamaican dance hall spaces.

Note

1. I am indebted to the work of Michael Golston for drawing my attention to Bolton’s thesis (Golston 2008).

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