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“He’s Calling His Flock Now”:

Black Music and Postcoloniality from Buddy Bolden’s New Orleans to Sefyu’s Paris

When Buddy Bolden tuned up you could hear him clean across the river!
Clean across the river!
He woke up the working people and kept the easy living.
Call on Buddy Bolden.
Call him Buddy Bolden.

Watch him, he’s calling his flock now.
He’s calling his flock now.
Here they come...¹

“Hey Buddy Bolden,” Nina Simone on *Nina Simone Sings Ellington* (1962)

Nostalgia for Black and White

On the 2006 track “*En Noir et Blanc*” the Senegalese-French rapper Sefyu begins with the sound of a West African shekere moving back and forth through the stereo field. *Right - Left, Right - Left, Right - Left, Right - ...* its dotted rhythm emulating a heartbeat. As we wait for the completion of the next rhythmic dyad a needle is suddenly dropped on an old record. The vinyl scratch completes the pendulum’s anticipated swing left in the stereo field and then sweeps back to the right, obscuring the concluding shekere voice (or is it a maraca?) and briefly suspending the musical flow.

Now a distant sounding piano emerges from the scratchy record. It plays a dirge-like minor key loop wherein the top voice rises and then falls a minor third (D, F, D) and the inner voice descends stepwise (B-flat, A, G). A third voice lurks in a bass ostinato that falls (A, F, E, D) before rising with the other voices (D, F, G) to complete the motive. Based on its voice

¹ Nina Simone, “Hey Buddy Bolden” on *Nina Simone Sings Ellington* (Colpix 1962).

leading and stylistic profile, the lament should be from a Romantic-era art song. Probably German. But it is not.²

The unmistakable and iconic voice of Nina Simone enters on a single, but splintered and echoing phoneme that seems to speak: “when.”³ The note-against-note piano loop continues, establishing a static but now blues-inflected D-minor harmonic environment. Again, the voice declares—or perhaps asks—“when.” The three voices continue to wind towards and away from one another in the repeating loop, moving independently, but bound together by the rules of Western tonal harmony, of “common practice.” Finally, a synthesized and diffuse bass bomb falls in pitch space, again sweeping from left to right, and just after the third beat of the now nearly complete four-bar loop, we hear a new phoneme that seems to make a request: “call.”

Sefyu’s dry baritone enters this musical and rhetorical space with these lines, sung in an agile and staccato hip hop vocal style underlaid with the melodic conventions of Jamaican dancehall.

<i>Mes origines sont en panique.</i>	My origins are in panic.
<i>J'ai fouillé dans toutes les poches du monde,</i>	I've looked in every corner of the world,
<i>Ya' que du trafic.</i>	There's only traffic.
<i>Ben, vas-y-oh!</i>	Well, go ahead yo!
<i>Mon coeur a suivi sa logique:</i>	My heart followed this logic:
<i>Il faut se mélanger.</i>	We've got to mix.
<i>Dans la mixité ya' rien de tragique.</i>	There's nothing tragic in mixing.

² Now would be a good time to grab a good pair of headphones and YouTube this track to give Sefyu a close listen and see what you think. You can purchase the track afterwards. I recommend listening to the original “audio only” album version first, as the video clip version includes an obscuring voice over (that we will examine later). This research was supported by the Berlin Program for Advanced German and European Studies, the Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst, and the American Council of Learned Societies. Thanks also to Jocelyne Guilbault, Rui Cidra, and Jessica Bissett Perea for their comments on earlier drafts of this article.

³ While the present close reading exercise expresses this author’s viewpoint alone, I would like to note that in presenting this excerpt publicly over a dozen times (at conferences and in lectures and seminars) I have never stumped the audience/class as to this sample’s genesis. Hence, it seems “unmistakable” for those even casually familiar with Simone’s work.

“He’s Calling His Flock Now”

Ben, vas-y-oh!
Dans la vie ya tout de pratique,
Moi j’dis que rien est magique.
Et puis le racisme fatigue.
Ben, vas-y-oh!

Well, go ahead yo!
Everything in life can be used,
I’m saying nothing is magic.
And I’m tired of racism.
Well, go ahead yo!⁴

The bass bomb transforms into a bouncing bass line, doubling the inner voice of the piano line two octaves below and further underscoring the dirge’s feeling of descent. String tremolos underscore the tension of the MC’s “panic” as the ghostly piano strains linger in the rafters.

In seventeen seconds, the opening sonic tableau of spatial and temporal shifts of focus and perspective on “*En Noir et Blanc*” establishes the themes of “*trafic*” and “*mixité*” that set the sonic stage for Sefyu’s meditation on France’s nostalgia for simpler, purer, “black and white” times. As Alexander Weheliye emphasizes in his study, *Phonographies: Grooves in Sonic Afro-Modernity*, introductions serve a profoundly important role in the recorded history of black music—setting the stage for dramatic action, establishing genre and laying out musical tropes, and articulating intertextual references.⁵ In this case, Sefyu has provided us with a number of intertextual rabbit holes.⁶

⁴ Sefyu, “*En Noir et Blanc*” on *Qui suis-je?* (Wagram 2006). Lyrics and imaged used with permission. All translations by the author. Thanks to Erwan “Swift” Ali (DJ Dirty Swift), one of my primary contacts in the Parisian hip hop scene, for confirming my translation of “*Ben, vas-y-oh.*”

⁵ Alexander Weheliye, *Phonographies: Grooves in Sonic Afro-Modernity* (Durham: Duke UP, 2005).

⁶ I am borrowing the term “rabbit holes,” in this context, from the Filipino-American artist, MC Geo, of the Seattle-based hip hop act, Blue Scholars. As the intertextual term implies, hip hop lyrics are portals into a network of specialist (often underground) knowledges which can sometimes be disconcerting and/or fantastic (hence the Wonderland implication). During his visit to my 2011 class “Planet Rap: Global Hip Hop and Postcolonial Perspectives” at UC Berkeley, Geo explained how hip hop expects its audience to “do some (interpretive) work.” Using the historic symbolism of a lyric (involving the role of the Colt 45 handgun in the Philippine-American War) as an example, he suggested that good MCs “don’t feed you answers,” but rather pique your curiosity to motivate you to find out the meaning (or *a* meaning) for yourself. Mixing metaphors (as hip hop often does) with the “rabbit hole” point, he explained “I might show you the door, or open the door, but you gotta walk through it yourself.” As such, in the preceding exegesis I am engaging hip hop interpretive practices (in both form and function) that, collectively, are often described in the context of hip hop’s so-called “fifth element”: knowledge. For further explanation, and to situate such praxis within a broader African American musical framework, see the introduction to

Sefyu’s “*En Noir et Blanc*” begins with a signifier of both indigeneity and birth—that simplest of musical instruments, an idiophone: the shaker. But just as we get into the groove, this tradition, this rhythmic heartbeat, is severed (perhaps abducted) from the mix by electronic mediation. In fact, the sonic “origin” of the shaker gesture is neither a West African shekere nor a Caribbean maraca, but a digital sampling synthesizer, a fact that casts into high relief the construction, mediation, and interplay of tradition and diaspora, of origins and traffic. In the shaker’s place a phonographic recording of a highly mechanized European instrument, the piano, performs a functionally tonal death march that is, on further inspection, deeply suffused with blues overtones and nostalgized with the patina of spatializing reverb. Just as the shaker moves us with its heartbeat rhythm and just as the blues dirge marches us onward, the bouncing synth bass and the swing and swag of Sefyu’s hip hop aesthetic make our heads nod and propels us in its own way. Indeed, through its focus on origins, absence, displacement, movement, and mixture, we might say that in this introduction, Sefyu has composed for us—in both lyric and musical sound—a microcosm of the history of “black music.”⁷

Black Music and Postcoloniality

In the following pages, I will perform an excavation of Sefyu’s “*En Noir et Blanc*” with

Houston Baker’s *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory* (University of Chicago Press: Chicago and London, 1987). To borrow a page from Baker (and riff on hip hop’s relationship to the blues) here I must show a willingness “to do more than merely hear, read, or see [hip hop]. I must also play (with and on) [it]” (10).

⁷ See Amiri Baraka’s contentious, but widely influential works *Blues People: The Negro Experience in White America and the Music that Developed from it* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1963) and *Black Music* (New York: W. Morrow, 1968) for some of the basic contours of this well-rehearsed outline and for a critique and historiography thereof, see Ralph Ellison, “Blues People” in *Shadow and Act* (New York: Vintage, 1964), 247-258 and Ronald Radano, *Lying up a Nation: Race and Black Music* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).

Edward Said’s polyphonic model of “contrapuntal analysis” in our ear. Our aim will be to follow Sefyu’s lead in sound, lyric, and image to hear the interrelation of colonizer and colonized resonating in such postcolonial hip hop.⁸ In his 1993 *Culture and Imperialism*, Said stresses the hybridity, contradiction, and paradox of colonial entanglement. Moving beyond “comparative” approaches, his “contrapuntal analysis” attempts to illuminate the *dialectics* of colonial and postcolonial cultural praxis. Said explains: “The point is that contrapuntal reading must take account of both processes, that of imperialism and that of resistance to it.”⁹ But unlike Said’s reading of the Manichean and dichotomous “discrepant experiences” of imperialism, Sefyu’s indictment of “black and white” thinking as a form of colonial nostalgia asks us to admit that note-against-note polyphony, so-called “first species” counterpoint, fails to fully account for the constitutive hybridity and antinomial mixture of postcolonial culture.¹⁰ Indeed, Said admits as much in the final paragraph of *Culture and Imperialism* where he notes: “No one today is purely *one* thing. Labels like Indian, or woman, or Muslim, or American are not more than starting points, which if followed into actual experience for only a moment are quickly left behind.

Imperialism consolidated the mixture of cultures and identities on a global scale. But its worst

⁸ In scholarly discourses, hip hop is first conceived as a postcolonial art form by George Lipsitz in his *Dangerous Crossroads: Popular Music, Postmodernism, and the Poetics of Place* (New York: Verso, 1994). For an introduction to hip hop as postcolonial art form, see George Lipsitz, *Dangerous Crossroads: Popular Music, Postmodernism, and the Poetics of Place* (New York: Verso, 1994), esp. 36. Also see Brij David Lunine, “Genocide ‘n’ Juice: Reading the Postcolonial Discourses in Hip-Hop Culture” in *Postcolonial America*, ed. Richard C. King (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000).

⁹ Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Vintage, 1993), 66.

¹⁰ For a discussion of postcolonial antinomies see Tejumola Olaniyan, “The Cosmopolitan Nativist: Fela Anikulapo-Kuti and the Antinomies of Postcolonial Modernity,” *Research in African Literatures* 32, no. 2 (Summer 2001), 76-89. Olaniyan writes: “A figure of crisis, antinomy describes a contradiction between conclusions or inferences drawn from equally warranted or necessary principles. It marks the radically dispersed heterogeneity of desire, and a reaffirmation of the irrepressible bursting seams of the social in the face of the usually disciplining aspirations of thought, of the knowing subject. A ‘fundamental aporia’ (McCole 295), antinomy is the condition of incommensurability between judgments that seem just as valid, coherent, or essential” (77).

and most paradoxical gift was to allow people to believe that they were only, mainly, exclusively, white, or Black, or Western, or Oriental.”¹¹ Perhaps homophony is, then, a more apt metaphor than “contrapuntal” polyphony after all—a rhetorical space wherein a multiplicity of diverging, converging, and contingent voices nonetheless yields a blended totality of a particular quality at any given point.

In the second chapter of his landmark study *Dangerous Crossroads*, titled “Diasporic Noise: History, Hip Hop, and the Post-colonial Politics of Sound,” George Lipsitz examines the perceived contradictions at the heart of hip hop (think: hip hop as *political consciousness* vs. hip hop as *gangsta bling*). Using Gramscian notions of positionality, he focuses on the interrelation of colonizer and colonized suggesting that hip hop “works through existing contradictions.” He writes: “It draws upon ancient traditions and modern technologies, on situated knowledge and a nomadic sensibility. Generated from communities often criminally short of resources and institutions, it commands prestige from multinational corporations and other bastions of privilege. It flows through the circuits of the post-industrial austerity economy, and yet still manages to bring to light inequities and injustices.”¹² At once the most local and most global, the most politically conscious and most materialistic, the most authentic and most spurious of musical genres, it should come as no surprise that a postcolonial art form such as hip hop would engage those same commercial logics that first engineered racialized structural inequalities in the colonial era. By examining Sefyu’s sonic and historic rhetoric and imagining “*En Noir et Blanc*” as an intertextual node in broader Afro-diasporic musical discourses and practices, I argue in this

¹¹ Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 336.

¹² Lipsitz, *Dangerous Crossroads*, 44.

article that hip hop is both a product of these postcolonial contradictions that continue to hyphenate citizens within their own nations and a form of cultural politics well suited to combat the inequalities inscribed upon those hyphens.

Buddy Bolden’s New Orleans

Sefyu’s musical gestures to Africa, Europe, and America on *“En Noir et Blanc”* establish a multivalent and unstable call and response that spans both continents and centuries. Yet, the track is also anchored in a coherent logic born of the idea of black music and anchored in its history. The sounds of Black Atlantic “traffic” will ultimately be our focus here, but for now Ms. Simone has drawn our attention to another body of water, a deep river whose archive Sefyu has just accessed: the Mississippi.¹³

The Nina Simone loop featured in *“En Noir et Blanc”* is comprised of remixed samples from Simone’s 1962 album *Nina Simone Sings Duke Ellington*.¹⁴ The song is “Hey, Buddy Bolden”—a call into the past to find a legendary figure that Ted Gioia calls the “elusive father of jazz.” Simone’s melancholy reimagining is based on Duke Ellington and Billy Strayhorn’s original from the 1956 musical allegory, *A Drum is a Woman*, which narrates the ways that African rhythm traveled, blended with other musical cultures in the New World, and ultimately “gave birth” to jazz.

¹³ See Paul Allen Anderson, *Deep River: Music and Memory in Harlem Renaissance Thought* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001) and Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (New York: Verso, 1993).

¹⁴ Nina Simone, “Hey Buddy Bolden,” on *Nina Simone Sings Duke Ellington* (Colpix, 1962).

“He’s Calling His Flock Now”

Fig. 1 – The sample source LP, *Nina Simone Sings Duke Ellington*, featuring the track “Hey, Buddy Bolden” and the Duke Ellington Orchestra’s LP *A Drum is a Woman*, on which the song first appeared. Reproduced courtesy of Sony Music Entertainment.

The first lyrical clip in Sefyu’s reformulation of the song comes from the climax of the piece wherein Simone relates the legend of Bolden’s “wide open” trumpet playing. The electronically manipulated “when” that is so fractured and difficult to discern on the Sefyu track rings clear as a bell in Simone’s rendering. Simone sings:

When Buddy Bolden tuned up you could hear him clean across the river!
Clean across the river!
He woke up the working people and kept the easy living.
Call him Buddy Bolden.
Call him Buddy Bolden.

Watch him, he’s calling his flock now.
He’s calling his flock now.

Here they come...¹⁵

Thus, Sefyu’s hip hop examination of “*mixité*” on “*En Noir et Blanc*” goes to the well of New Orleans circa 1900. Using Simone’s voice to access an historic “when,” his track engages an iconic city that stands as an enduring symbol of racial and cultural creolization—a postcolonial nexus of African, European, and American cultural mixture that stands as an exemplar of Black Atlantic “traffic,” in terms of both human and musical commodities, and has profound resonances within hip hop around the world today. By going to this well through the musical contours of contemporary hip hop and by sampling Simone’s Civil Rights Era “call,”

¹⁵ Nina Simone, “Hey Buddy Bolden.” At this point I’d strongly recommend consulting the Simone recording before reading on. The following discussion will make claims about the sonic entanglement of the two tracks that, while articulated in depth here, will be more fully appreciated in close listening. Again, I would encourage you to purchase the track thereafter.

Sefyu accesses an African American archive and further layers the track’s texture, both lyrically and rhetorically.

Dipping even deeper, we find that Bolden’s New Orleans is something of a portal to a yet earlier colonial-era archive—an especially rich symbolic site for the black Parisian, Sefyu. In that city stood the legendary *Place Congo* [Congo Square], a public space occupied by the sights and sounds of African music on Sundays and regarded as the most visible public spaces in which this music was performed in the United States. In his *The History of Jazz*, Gioia writes:

Within eyesight of Congo Square, Buddy Bolden—who legend and scattered first-person accounts credit as the earliest jazz musician—performed with his pioneering band at Globe Hall. The geographical proximity is misleading. The cultural gap between these two types of music is dauntingly wide. By the time Bolden and Bechet began playing jazz, the Americanization of African music had already begun, and with it came the Africanization of American music—a synergistic process... Anthropologists call this process syncretism—the blending together of cultural elements that previously existed separately. This dynamic, so essential to the history of jazz, remains powerful even in the present day, when African American styles of performance blend seamlessly with other musics of other cultures, European, Asian, Latin, and, coming full circle, African.¹⁶

When the first African slaves were brought to the Virginia Colony in 1619, a year before the Mayflower’s more auspicious (for some) arrival, their music rightly was called “African.” Over the course of almost three centuries, however, syncretizing cultural processes moved apace even as the colonial period gave way to the nationalizing efforts that legally encoded racial difference into the American blueprint.¹⁷ In this way, a core of difference was inscribed in the

¹⁶ Ted Gioia, *The History of Jazz* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 5. Indeed, Gioia’s recounting of the legend of Buddy Bolden and of his legendary New Orleans resonates with the story of Sidney Bechet, the epitome of the Creole jazz musician who became a symbol of France’s perceived “ownership” of jazz. For discussions on the French claims on jazz see also, Jeffery Jackson’s *Making Jazz French: Music and Modern Life in Interwar Paris* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003) and Tyler Stovall’s *Paris Noir: African Americans in the City of Light* (New York: Mariner Books, 1998).

¹⁷ Here, I am thinking not only of the ways that the new nation took up (indeed, redoubled) the slave trade and its colonial model of what David Kazanjian terms “racial capitalism” in his *The Colonizing Trick*, but

“American.” The national became the postcolonial in the United States—a seldom analyzed but constitutive feature of American national identity that continues to haunt the American national consciousness.

Following the publication of Said’s landmark *Orientalism* in 1978 and the emergence of a fluid field of inquiry commonly termed postcolonial studies (or postcolonialism) a number of authors have debated whether we should consider the U.S. through the lens of postcolonial theory.¹⁸ While such debates often steer perilously close to reproducing the discourses of American exceptionalism that have served to shield the U.S. from post- and neocolonial critiques for centuries, it is true that there is no shortage of pitfalls, centering around details of settler colonialism vs. exploitation colonialism, varying conceptions of race, internal colonization, and differences in national prerogatives, civic culture, religion, and governance structure.¹⁹ Although literary scholar Jenny Sharpe argues for a cautious application of the term “postcolonial” to the U.S. in her foundational article “Is the United States Postcolonial?: Transnationalism, Immigration, and Race,” she suggests the term can nonetheless be useful for understanding the colonial legacies that structured late 20th-century globalization. She writes: “I want us to define

of specific legalistic frameworks such as the so-called “Three-Fifths Compromise” that quantified racial difference in the U.S. Constitution. Regarding this “redoubling,” estimates for the U.S. slave trade can be found on The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database at <http://www.slavevoyages.org/tast/assessment/estimates.faces> (accessed 22 January 2015). For a close analysis of American “racial capitalism” see David Kazanjian, *The Colonizing Trick: National Culture and Imperial Citizenship in Colonial America* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 35-88. The “Three-Fifths Compromise” was outlined in Article 1, Section 2, Paragraph 3 of the U.S. Constitution. http://www.senate.gov/civics/constitution_item/constitution.htm#a1 (accessed 22 January 2015).

¹⁸ Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Penguin 1978).

¹⁹ For a thoroughly dismissive discussion of postcolonial theory and its application to U.S. contexts see Russell Jacoby, “Marginal Returns: The Trouble with Post-Colonial Theory” *Lingua Franca* 5, 30-37. For balanced debates on debates, application, and terminology, see Robert J. C. Young, *Postcolonialism: An Historical Introduction* (London: Wiley-Blackwell, 2001) and Anne McClintock, “The Angel of Progress: Pitfalls of the Term ‘Post-Colonialism,’” *Social Text* Vol. 31/32, 84-98.

the ‘after’ to colonialism as the neocolonial relations into which the United States entered with decolonized nations.”²⁰

To explain what I mean by “the postcolonial” in this case, let me simply refer to the ways that colonialism’s core machinations of racial subjugation and commercial exploitation continue to resonate today. To understand this enduring reality, we need look no further than Buddy Bolden’s contemporary, W. E. B. Du Bois, who, in 1903, described his experience of postcoloniality thus: “One ever feels his two-ness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body.”²¹ This of course, is Du Bois’s concept of “double consciousness,” and this is where we can begin to build an understanding of hip hop as postcolonial art and practice. Indeed, this is beginning to sound a bit like Said’s contrapuntal “discrepant experience.”

More and more, postcolonial theory has gained traction as a global and insistently historical lens that keeps the drastically diverse details of colonial practice in balance with a wide-angle critique that stresses the continuities between colonialism and contemporary “globalization.” Focusing on the continuities between Du Bois’s work in *The Souls of Black Folk* and Homi Bhabha’s *Location of Culture*, for instance, Kenneth Mostern argues that Du Bois’s theorization of “double consciousness” not only anticipated Bhabha’s postcolonial concepts of doubling, ambivalence, and hybridity but that Du Bois, in fact, expanded his purview to build more wide-ranging anti-colonial solidarities, becoming increasingly involved in global

²⁰ Jenny Sharpe, “Is the United States Postcolonial?: Transnationalism, Immigration, and Race,” *Diaspora* 4 (2) 1995 (181-200). Reprinted in King, ed. *Postcolonial America*, 106.

²¹ W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Modern Library, 2003), 38.

liberation struggles after *Souls*.²² Brij David Lunine, one of the first scholars to take an explicitly postcolonial approach to hip hop, introduced the concept of “postcolonial consciousness” in discussing black militancy and discourses of internal colonization in the work of the Oakland, California hip hop crew, The Coup. Echoing Lipsitz’s work in *Dangerous Crossroads*, Lunine wrote in 2000: “Hip-hop is itself one example of cultural forms that express the history of colonialism and a postcolonial consciousness and aesthetic.”²³ It is this concept of “postcolonial consciousness” that best exemplifies my interests in the present essay. As suggested at the outset, my primary aim here is to follow Sefyu’s lead and it is my contention that in order to engage in the hip hop interpretive work that he has set out for us—and to ultimately build on his work—we must position this consciousness front and center. By following Sefyu down those rabbit holes that he presents us on “*En Noir et Blanc*” we can gain a sense of the contours and dynamics of that consciousness and, perhaps, develop our own sense of double/postcolonial/hip hop consciousness.

Before we go on, let me be clear about one thing: there is nothing fundamentally exceptional about the American experience of postcoloniality. All colonizing nations built their nations, and therefore their senses of nationality, on the backs of their colonies. What is remarkable and unique is the way in which the postcolonial experience in America gained musical form in the contours of African American expressive culture in the colonial period, gained commodity form over the course of the nineteenth century, and ultimately gained a wider audience than any other music in history.

²² Kenneth Mostern, “Postcolonialism after W. E. B. Du Bois” in *Rethinking Marxism* Vol. 12, No. 2 (Summer 2000).

²³ Lunine, “Genocide ‘n’ Juice,” 273.

One of the central paradoxes—or maybe “contrapuntal realities” is better—of such cultural imperialism is that so-called “popular music” is the universalized name for black American music in the commercial realm. Indeed, the colonized are at the core of national identities in very real ways. As the late, great, Stuart Hall famously quipped about the quintessential English cup of tea, shorn of its South Asian tea leaves and Caribbean sugar, that nation’s drink is nothing but hot water—one more instance of how the postcolonial is centered in the national.²⁴ Certainly, when we speak of “American music” (in international popular discourses, if not necessarily within the pages of this journal) we are talking about *African* American music more often than not. By the same token, when we speak of “popular music” we are most often speaking of music that is historically and/or stylistically linked to those musics first developed by Afro-diasporic peoples in the United States.

By imposing the ideological counterpoint of racial difference and extracting material resources and labor from the colonized, colonizing nations were literally constructed by and through their colonies. Through this dialectic we see that double consciousness runs both ways.²⁵ In this mutual dependence, Americanness can never be experienced by whites as whiteness alone just as Americanness can never be experienced by blacks as blackness alone—because the nation was built on a foundational difference. America’s postcolonial condition is thus governed by the master/slave dialectic that lies at the core of all national-racial thinking.²⁶

²⁴ Stuart Hall, “Old and New Identities, Old and New Ethnicities,” 48-49. He writes: “I am the sugar at the bottom of the English cup of tea. I am the sweet tooth, the sugar plantations that rotted generations of English children’s teeth. There are thousands of others beside me that are, you know, the cup of tea itself.”

²⁵ Radano makes this point in *Lying up a Nation*, 284.

²⁶ For a theorization of this point see Étienne Balibar, “Chapter 8: Racism As Universalism” in *Masses, Classes, Ideas: Studies on Politics and Philosophy Before and After Marx* (London: Routledge 1994). (Chapter 8: Racism As Universalism p.p. 191-204). For a historical account of the structural underpinnings of this point see Kazanjian, *The Colonizing Trick*. Kazanjian writes especially of: “the

The colonial entanglements that are constitutive of the United States thus continue to reproduce the current antinomies of postcoloniality wherein both the colonizer and the colonized lay claim to the nation, not despite each other, but through each other.

In a characteristically postcolonial paradox, we see the glaring truth that America would not be America without African Americans. As Ralph Ellison noted: “whatever else the true American is, he is also somehow black.” This is most abundantly clear in the world of black music, as Sefyu seems to know. Black music centers African American culture in American culture. By focusing on human traffic, counterpoint, and mixture on “*En Noir et Blanc*” Sefyu interpolates himself into Ellison’s formula while extrapolating and further complicating its antinomial national-racial logic. On the track, he thus posits the transitive extension: whatever else the true Frenchman is, he is also somehow Senegalese, Algerian, Lebanese, Vietnamese, Polynesian, Guyanese, Martinican.... As Ellison himself notes, this is indeed “tricky magic.”

As I further demonstrate below, in listening closely to how black music encodes racial difference, we can also hear an immanent critique of colonialism’s legacies of racial difference, subjugation, and exploitation. What’s more, we can hear black music’s critique across the river, across the ocean, and ironically—thanks to that set of processes known alternatively as globalization (in its “universalized” forms) and Americanization (in its “particularized” forms)—we can now hear it across the globe.²⁷

paradoxically simultaneous emergence, toward the end of the eighteenth century, of apparently contradictory discursive practices: universal egalitarianism, on the one hand, and the particularistic hierarchies of race and nation, on the other hand” (2).

²⁷ Following a Gramscian train of thought in his landmark “Old and New Identities, Old and New Ethnicities,” Stuart Hall writes: “I think the global is the self-presentation of the dominant particular. It is a way in which the dominant particular localizes and naturalizes itself and associates with it a variety of minorities.” Hall, “Old and New Identities, Old and New Ethnicities,” in Anthony King, ed. *Culture, Globalization and the World-System: Contemporary Conditions for the Representation of Identity*.

Origins and Absence

Sefyu’s “*En Noir et Blanc*” is a catalog of lyrical paradoxes. He enters the musical and rhetorical space laid out above with a refrain beginning: “My origins are in panic.” How can one’s origins be in panic? Origins are stable. They are *original*. Yet, as Sefyu goes on to argue, he’s already “looked in every corner of the world” for his origins and instead found that “there’s nothing but traffic,” movement, and mixture. In the opening tableau, the steady heartbeat of his presumed West African origins are interrupted musically as he voyages from Senegal to New Orleans, another former French colony, to search out *other roots*. Once there, Sefyu must rely on Simone, via Ellington and Strayhorn, to locate Bolden’s clarion “call....” But Bolden’s story is also the stuff of legend in a very real way.

Despite the myriad “scattered and often contradictory accounts” from early jazz musicians about Bolden’s seminal role in the development of jazz—among them Sydney Bechet, the creole jazz musician and, later, a Parisian himself—the trumpeter cannot be located in the early recorded history of jazz.²⁸ He too moved on in the traffic of history. Bolden was diagnosed with dementia praecox (an early diagnosis of schizophrenia) in 1906 and spent the last 24 years of his life in a state asylum. He was only rediscovered as early jazz musicians began telling their stories and recounting their own forebears. Thus, Bolden remains a blaring historical absence at the genesis of jazz. This is another quest for origins that yields absence.

But as Simone’s fittingly spectral voice reminds us in the blues lament (is it a jazz

(Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 67. For an in-depth examination of black music and “Americanization,” see Rollefson, *Musical (African) Americanization in the New Europe: Hip Hop, Race, and the Cultural Politics of Postcoloniality in Contemporary Berlin, Paris and London* (UW-Madison: PhD Dissertation, 2009).

²⁸ Gioia, *History of Jazz*, 33

“He’s Calling His Flock Now”

funeral?), Bolden is still “calling his flock now.” The rhetorical movement and sonic contours of Sefyu’s track provide testimony: “Here they come.” On the Simone recording, a single kettledrum enters after the line “here they come” as the bass ostinato is simplified to the descending, lamenting line D, C, B-flat, A, and repeated while Simone sings, as if to herself: “here they come, here they come....” The descending ostinato resonates throughout the history of black music from Ellington’s own introduction to “It Don’t Mean a Thing if it Ain’t Got that Swing” to perhaps its most recognizable iteration on Ray Charles’s, “Hit The Road Jack.” Bolden is not there but his call remains. Today, it stretches not only across the river but across oceans and continents. And the flock keeps coming.

While we might wonder whether these connections and continuities were in play when Sefyu conceptualized the track with the Belgian production team Street Fabulous, the 2006 album that features “*En Noir et Blanc*” is titled *Qui suis-je?* [Who Am I?], a nod to Simone’s 1970 recording of the Leonard Bernstein song “Who Am I?”

Fig. 2 – Black and white cover art for the Sefyu album, *Qui Suis-Je?* on which “*En noir et blanc*” appears. Photo Credit: Fouad Allaoui. Reproduced with the kind permission of Fouad Allaoui/Fall Design.

In structuring the track around one Simone song, naming the album after another, and creating something of a concept album around the idea of racial origins and absence, we get the distinct impression that Sefyu is deeply invested in Simone’s particular African American project and a more broadly defined Afro-diasporic search for “roots.”²⁹

²⁹ And, of course, the influence extends both ways, in mutual dialogue and traffic. Like countless “jazz expats” before her, Simone settled in France toward the end of her career.

“He’s Calling His Flock Now”

But already in the opening refrain, Sefyu’s search has ended. He has looked everywhere and come to the logical conclusion that there are no pure origins. Tired and resigned to his conclusion, he accepts that “we’ve got to mix.” Furthermore, he notes that “there is nothing tragic in mixing.” As if to reassert a politically oppositional valence into this resigned, yet liberated logic, Sefyu speaks to his incarcerated countrymen in the final lines of the repeated refrain: “From Fresnes to Fleury-Mérogis [prisons] / Even if you’re locked up let me know that you still exist.” Sefyu now understands that he will not know who he is by looking for racial origins, but that he may define who he is through artistic production and political action within what he refers to (in the coming verse) as his postcolonial “Society of prisoners of war”—a gesture to the ways that the French legal and prison systems replicate structures of colonial domination.

In many ways, Sefyu’s conclusions regarding origins and mixture echo the remarks of the prominent Martinican writer and Francophone postcolonial critic, Edouard Glissant, who in 1973 looked hopefully upon Caribbean traffic and hybridity in an essay titled “Cross-Cultural Poetics.” Indeed, the essay speaks directly to *musical* exchange and mixture in the Caribbean as a font of cultural rebirth and renewal. In tracing “a musical history of Martinique,” he writes, echoing Ellington and Baraka’s histories:

Let us first attempt a comparison with the prestigious history of jazz. When the large plantations of the southern United States collapse, the blacks begin the move that will lead them first to New Orleans (bars, brothels, riverboats), then to the great sprawling cities: Chicago or New York, where they will become the proletariat and the lumpen proletariat and have to face the unrelenting industrial world of America. At each of the stages of the process that I outline here, *black music is reborn*. Gospel and blues, New Orleans and Chicago style, Count Basie’s big band, bebop, free jazz. This music progressively records the history of the community, its confrontation with reality, *the gaps* into which it inserts itself, the walls which it too often comes up against. The universalization of jazz arises from the fact that at no point is it an abstract music,

but the expression of a specific situation.³⁰

I cite Glissant’s brief history of black music to highlight the ways that, for him, this music constantly reinvents its origins. But as his mention of “the gaps” suggests, the revitalization of black music in the African American context is most important for him as a model for how postcolonial Caribbean cultures might face the issue of origins and “rootlessness.”³¹ He continues:

In the meantime, a phenomenon occurs in which Martinican musicians, finally abandoning their xenophobic attitudes, have their role to play. A fiercely anonymous Caribbean style is created under the combined influence of jazz, reggae, and salsa. This new hybrid spreads as far as the dance bands of Africa: on both sides of the Atlantic something happens, encouraged by tourists and the distribution of records. Naturally, at the level of night club music.

Thus, because it has been opened to the Caribbean, Martinican music has gained a capacity for renewal...

Glissant concludes: “it is possible that this exposure could permit the creativity and solidarity that will make rootlessness more tolerable, make the present void more negotiable.”

Together, Glissant’s thumbnail history of “black music” as a process of constant relocalization and revitalization jibes remarkably well with the musically performed history that Sefyu has constructed. So too does Glissant’s suggestion that such a paradoxical process of universalization via localization comes from this hybrid music filling the void for an uprooted

³⁰ Edouard Glissant, “Cross-Cultural Poetics” in *Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essays [Le Discours Antillais]*, trans. J. Michael Dash (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1989), 110-112. While we might find fault with his idealization of this “prestigious” history today, his *location* of jazz in 1973 was something very different than ours is in 2015. See William Bares’s article in this issue.

³¹ For a further discussion of Glissant’s theorizations of hybridity, rootlessness, traffic, and “polyrhythmic” approach see Martin Munro, *Different Drummers: Rhythm and Race in the Americas* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010). For a musical discussion of Munro’s work and an analysis connecting Glissant’s “gaps” and “rootlessness” to Brent Hayes Edwards’s “*décalage*,” Stuart Hall’s “articulation,” and Paul Gilroy’s “black Atlantic,” see J. Griffith Rollefson’s review of *Different Drummers* in *Twentieth-Century Music*, Vol. 10, No. 1.

African diaspora. Like Glissant, Sefyu is recording the history of his local community to fill a present void, but doing so through the global sounds and postcolonial consciousness of black music. What’s more, he is doing it through the commercial structures and distribution networks of the global culture industry. From another perspective, this author cannot help but imagine that Glissant, delivering this and other talks across North America in 1973, was vaguely aware of the cultural firmament among Caribbean youth in the South Bronx that was, at that very moment, giving birth to hip hop. For while he might not have been tuned in to the sights and sounds of that particular rebirth of black music, his essay is an uncanny precursor to the bit of hip hop wisdom that describes how those forgotten youth in postindustrial America filled their own void, creating, as the saying goes, “something from nothing.”³²

“The Story of the Wind and the Ember”

Sefyu’s catalog of paradoxes continues on the first verse of “*En Noir et Blanc*” where Sefyu begins his tale in earnest: “*C’est le récit de la brise et d’la braise...*” [This is the story of the wind and the ember]. The poetic imagery posits the two forces in contrast as if it were a fable, but just as the line, already rich in assonance ends, Sefyu throws an audible smooch onto the track and interjects: “*Bise!*” [kiss!] extending the assonant wordplay. This performative and lyrical gesture that sets the verse in motion also adds a crucial, yet contradictory, valence of mutual attraction between the wind and the ember. While the word “*bise*” means “kiss” in French, it also carries a second idiomatic meaning of “north wind.” Thus, the image of “the

³² See, for instance, Ice T’s documentary film titled *Something from Nothing*, Dir. Ice T and Andy Baybutt (2012) and Jeff Chang, *Can’t Stop, Won’t Stop: A History of the Hip-Hop Generation* (New York: Picador, 2005), 111.

wind and the ember” gains a geopolitical valence, playing on personified images of a cold North and a hot South who are enraptured with each other. The gesture ignites Sefyu’s idea that through their interaction the two forces will consume each other. Or rather, that the two will be consumed in flame. He continues the verse with the antithetical construction of a “society of prisoners of war” where “crisis” is a “synonym for peace” and now anthropomorphizes the French body politic as a woman, fantasizing: “if only her dirtiness was cleanliness.” The symbol of Marianne—the embodiment of *la République Française*—is a favorite ideological space for French rappers to reconfigure and project fantasies upon.³³ Although Sefyu does not invoke Marianne here by name, the feminization of his society and critique thereof echoes countless uses (and abuses) of her image in postcolonial French hip hop.

Sefyu’s contradictory wordplay on the verse continues with the illogical constructions “my weariness moved” and “snickering of terror” before he turns to target the pseudo-scientific bio-logics of racial thinking.

<i>La joie de la naissance,</i>	The joy of birth,
<i>Sperme d'une jouissance hémophile.</i>	Sperm of a hemophilic pleasure.
<i>Naissance d'un cocktail humain</i>	Born of a human cocktail
<i>Nos mains ont tous des traits.</i>	Our hands have all the features.
...	...
<i>Confrontez vos cultures.</i>	Confront your cultures.
<i>Amen, c'est amine, même sang.</i>	Amen, it's amino (acids), same blood.
<i>Nostalgie: J'vois en noir et blanc.</i>	Nostalgia: I see in black and white.

Throughout the track Sefyu employs the visceral and bodily imagery of semen and blood to work against racialized thinking and its irrational (white) magic of racial science and eugenics. He underscores the central paradox of “racial science” with the ironic construction “hemophilic

³³ For one such example of a reimagined Marianne, see Rollefson, “*Le Cauchemar de la France*: Blackara’s Postcolonial Hip Hop Critique in the City of Light” in *Native Tongues: An African Hip-Hop Reader*, ed. Paul Khalil Saucier (Trenton, N.J.: Africa World Press, 2011) 211-212.

pleasure” before concluding “*Amen, c’est amine, même sang*” [Amen, it’s amino, same blood]. Interestingly, through the homophone of “*amine*” (French: “amino” and Arabic: “amen”) Sefyu’s word play in this critique calls on science and religion (and their respective “creations”) to make both a moral and ethical case against racial thinking, as if to say: ‘Thank God, we’re all just amino acids. It is our cultures and their racial magics that we must confront—here in the real world we’re all comprised of the same polypeptides.’ What’s more, this foregrounded homophone gestures to another auditory slippage between “*sang*” (blood) and “*son*” (sound) at the end of the line (“same blood”/“same sound”). Sefyu’s performed uncertainty critiques the postcolonial discursive entanglements between blood, sound, and language itself—as simultaneously racially determined and sonically ephemeral in Western metaphysics.³⁴ Indeed, it is this very implication—of “*sang*” and “*son*”—that provides the essential logic of “black music,” a point to which we will return in concluding.

After returning to the chorus of panic, traffic, and mixture, Sefyu elaborates on the cultural workings of race in the track’s second verse. He begins: “Black in a white cloth, or white in a black life,” conjuring up the iconic image of a black Muslim woman in a white hijab—an ideologically charged image in a France struggling to weigh religious freedoms against women’s rights. Notably, at the start of the following verse, this charged religious imagery and the practice of arranged marriage is equated with other in-fact racialized “decisions” about who we love. Sefyu begins: “Forced marriages of religion, ethnicity, or skin.” Here Sefyu collapses a double standard, highlighting the ways that non-Western religious practices are commonly judged to be dangerously conservative while lingering societal disapproval of “racial

³⁴ See Jacques Derrida’s critique of Western metaphysics/logocentrism from Jean-Jacques Rousseau to Claude Lévi-Strauss in his “The Violence of the Letter” in *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), 101-107.

intermarriage” [“forced marriages of... skin”] continues to be socially acceptable. As such, a supposed liberal and egalitarian French culture nonetheless foists an implicit racial thinking on its citizens.³⁵

The rest of the second verse tracks how racial thinking is encoded in the central metaphor of color. The future is white as unspoiled snow, the darkness breeds murder, and as “black fades on white” making grey we see “Métisses neutralisés” [neutralized mixed race children] who live between two worlds. Grey being the color of hurricanes, wars, and rain, these children receive neutral glances from their black and white parents. From here, Sefyu broadens the palette:

<i>La vie au rouge, plus du blanc</i>	The life in red, plus white
<i>Font du rose, arrosé au rosé.</i>	Makes pink, sprinkled with the rosiness.
<i>Le noir plus du rouge font du</i>	Add black to red, you get
<i>rouge foncé.</i>	blood red.

Dancing around the singular *chansonniere*, Edith Piaf’s “*La Vie en Rose*,” Sefyu rehearses the symbolic weight of color and shade. In the wordplay here, whiteness brings to red an innocent pink and privileged life of pleasure, while blackness conjures up connotations of blood when mixed with red. Yet, in the final lines he asks why dark red must be coterminous with danger and blackness.

<i>Le coeur en sang rouge comme toi, elle</i>	The heart in red blood like you, her,
<i>Lui et l'autre, vous, nous, ils.</i>	Him and the other, you, us, they.
<i>T'as le même que celui qui t'votre?</i>	Do you have the same as ours?
<i>Arabes, Africains, Français, Antillais,</i>	Arabs, Africans, French, West-Indians,
<i>Latins, Asiatiques, Haïtiens?</i>	Latins, Asian, Haitian?

³⁵ As I write, the nation is debating the place (and limits) of so-called “free speech” [*la liberté d'expression*] and the meaning of nominal “equality” in the wake of the *Charlie Hebdo* attacks. See Damien Leloup and Samuel Laurent, “«Charlie», Dieudonné... : quelles limites à la liberté d'expression?” in *Le Monde* 14 January 2015 http://www.lemonde.fr/les-decodeurs/article/2015/01/14/de-charlie-a-dieudonne-jusqu-ou-va-la-liberte-d-expression_4555180_4355770.html#16ijWFbeKR1zDghg.99 (accessed 21 January 2015).

It is here that Sefyu first implicates his fellow postcolonial subjects directly. It is they who share this same dark red blood and it is in this rhetorical gesture that the track calls into question the opposition of us and them in the national imaginary.

In the austere black and white video for the track, Sefyu walks through Paris and its ethnically diverse *cités* [housing projects] on the outskirts of the city.³⁶ Sefyu’s rhetorical challenging of racial-national binaries of us and them—and thus his larger statement about the French body politic—is given a visual form toward the end of the track. He looks in the mirror and sees a reflection of his postcolonial nation: himself, two young black hip hop kids, two middle aged Algerian men, a “mixed-race” couple with their young children, himself again, a young black woman in head wrap, a Southeast Asian man with his child resting his head on his shoulder, a young white man, a Middle Eastern kid in the jersey of the French National soccer team—*les Bleus*.

Fig. 3 – Still from the video for “*En noir et blanc*” – Sefyu’s image reflected back as a Southeast Asian man with child in a bathroom mirror.

Far from an original visual effect, the scene is a well-worn trope. But in the context of the track and its visual representation of a mixed France, the gesture has the desired effect. *La France* is not who she thinks she is.

In an earlier scene, an ethnically diverse assemblage of young men and women, boys and girls, approach the camera with anti-racism slogans on their T-shirts. The shirts on the young

³⁶ The black and white video is likely in dialogue with the internationally acclaimed Parisian film *La Haine*, dir. Mathieu Kassevitz (1995). Thanks to Stephen Wilford and my colleagues at the British Forum for Ethnomusicology’s 2014 conference “Ethnomusicology and the City” for noting intertextual nods to the black and white Kassevitz film in another hip hop video clip, which, in turn, helped me realize that *La Haine* was a likely source of stylistic inspiration for this video clip as well.

people echo images from the world soccer federation, FIFA’s ongoing anti-racism campaign “Say No To Racism.” In a prologue statement to the video Sefyu stands, face obscured by a black on white Yankees cap, with Lilian Thuram, the black Frenchman and footballer who was then the face of *les Bleus*. The image is an important one in its embodiment of sport and music—the two circumscribed fields in which the French nation has been most successful in conceiving of (and celebrating) itself as a mixed body politic. This is also tricky magic, and is a point to which we will return.

Notably, in all of his appearances, videos, and promotional materials Sefyu’s face is obscured in solidarity with all those faceless postcolonial subjects living at the margins of the city and in the liminal spaces of the French national imaginary.³⁷ The hypervisibility (and veiled visibility) of the two black Frenchmen, one Guadeloupian and the other Senegalese, speaks volumes about the antinomial continuities between U.S. and French national cultures, wherein black subjects are simultaneously at the core of, and yet marginalized from, national identity. Thuram begins the video’s prologue statement: “History has conditioned us as blacks, whites, Arabs and Asians. It is time to re-educate, so that we are considered primarily as...” and here Sefyu picks up the statement, “men, women, wanting to live in a better world.” The rhetoric simultaneously achieves and undermines its presumed goal of destabilizing the racialized thinking that, in fact, replicates the multicultural ideal embodied, enacted, and given performative materiality in those cultural fields historically most available for black men and women in the American and French national contexts: sport and music. The remainder of the

³⁷ See the above album image and video clip for examples of this eschewal of visage. Following Sefyu’s lead, I will leave further details of his personal identity and origins aside here, focusing on the track and its postcolonial consciousness. Contextual and ethnographic details of how I came to know Sefyu’s music appear in my forthcoming manuscript *European Hip Hop and the Politics of Postcoloniality*.

track’s rich and polysemous wordplay, however, manages to overcome the platitudinous multiculturalisms of this introduction and FIFA’s “Say No To Racism” rhetoric, by focusing, not on the multiplicity of French national culture, but on its traffic, instability, and constitutive hybridity.

“Verlan” Wordplay: Youssef et Mélanie

In the final verse of “*En Noir et Blanc*” Sefyu tells the story of an interracial couple, Youssef and Mélanie. Their mutual love draws them close enough to withstand the taunts and rancor of white supremacists. Again, Sefyu critiques the illogics of racial thinking. In a clever turn of phrase, he here refers such pseudo-science as “black magic.” He counters the racial binary, explaining that “*Le noir et le blanc sont complémentaires, kif-kif*” [black and white are complementary, luv-luv]. At the end of the story Youssef and Mélanie become pregnant and their child is represented as a symbolic explosion of colors: “Blue-white-red, green-yellow-red, black-white-*beur*, black-white-yellow.” Indeed, the term “*kif*” stands as a metonym for cultural mixture. Usually translated as the English slang “luv,” the term entered the French vernacular from the Arabic term for pleasure. To further the idea of miscegenation embodied by the child, Sefyu refers to the pregnancy as “*J’met l’taro dans les pommes*” [I put cocoyam in the (place of) apples]—a construction playing on French idioms, but also introducing an African staple to a symbol of European food culture and, specifically, (white) Judeo-Christian womanhood.

Echoing the “re-education” message of the prologue, Sefyu sternly reminds us to be vigilant against our tendencies to *color* our thinking in racial terms, this time stressing: “*Night and day, confront your cultures.*” His litany of colors is offered simultaneously as a de-centering

of simplistic racial thinking and a reminder that these three-color groupings continue to hold national and ethnic significances. The first triad—blue-white-red—refers to France, Sefyu’s home. The second—green-yellow-red—is Senegal, the birth nation of Sefyu’s parents. The third and fourth are racial-ethnic categories, including the term “*beur*” which is slang for “Arab” in *verlan*, a French inversional street language wherein the phonemes of standard French terms and names are flipped and reformulated.

In this context, the appearance of the *verlan* term “*beur*” reminds us that the name “Sefyu” is itself *verlan* for Youssef—Mélanie’s lover and the artist’s given name, Youssef Soukouna.³⁸ What’s more—and this should give us some sense of how dense Sefyu’s wordplay is—Mélanie is also *verlan* for “*la enemy*” [the enemy].³⁹ As he goes on to clarify: “*En somme, j’ai vaincu l’épée, vaincue par le baiser*” [In sum, I vanquished the sword, overcome by the kiss]. The final verse ends with the concluding lines of the first verse: “Amen, *it’s* just amino acids, same blood,” here with the added implication that “it”—the child—is much less, and much more, than a jumble of racialized colors. The verse concludes: “Nostalgia: I see in black and white” before returning to the chorus, first sung and then spoken in a monotone as Simone’s voice and piano accompaniment fade into the distance and the needle is taken off the record. “Here they come...”

“First Species” Counterpoint and The (Mixed) Body Politic

³⁸ The term “*verlan*” is itself formed of this inversional process—a *verlan* form of “*la inverse*.”

³⁹ It is worth pointing out here that the full text is available online in numerous places and, despite the close reading here, the original is, naturally, even more rich and polysemic.

“He’s Calling His Flock Now”

The final chapter of W. E. B. Du Bois’s *The Souls of Black Folk*, “Of the Sorrow Songs” reflects on America’s history of colonialism and slavery: “Your country? How came it to be yours? Before the Pilgrims landed we were here.”⁴⁰ He recounts the ways that African Americans gave the gift of “story and song” to an “ill-harmonized” land as well as the gift of “sweat and brawn” that laid “the foundations of this vast economic empire.” Thus, argues Du Bois, African American history is encoded into American history both musically and economically. The proof is in the pudding. He continues, “we have woven ourselves with the very warp and woof of this nation,—we fought their battles, shared their sorrow, mingled our blood with theirs....” Indeed, Du Bois simultaneously anticipates and demystifies Ellison’s “tricky magic” asking: “Would America have been America without her Negro people?” Through his national-musical rhetoric, Du Bois’s thus tracks how we can hear the answer resonating in the *mixité* of African American Spirituals, a body of music whose “elements are both Negro and Caucasian,” the first and “sole American music... the most beautiful expression of human experience born this side the seas.”⁴¹

The chapter is thus “of the sorrow songs” and “of the body politic.” Recalling Said’s “contrapuntal analysis,” Du Bois’s poetic conclusion asks us to imagine American music through the bio-logic of musical miscegenation—“first-species” counterpoint. The black and white argument is, of course, of its time. Du Bois’s rhetoric is deeply suffused with the blood and soil logics of racial thinking at the height of global nationalism and its *sine qua non*, colonialism. But his oration comes alive on the written and musically notated page, using those same racial logics to appeal to national pride and reinscribe the African American into the American. In the

⁴⁰ Du Bois, *Souls*, 265.

⁴¹ Du Bois, *Souls*, 253.

end, his goal is not to celebrate a mixed America, but to challenge the nation to live up to its ideals wherein the very idea of a mixed, black and white society would be illogical. In short, a society wherein homophony would be a better metaphor for a national harmony singing in the “same voice” and the musical bio-logics of “first species” polyphony would resonate discordantly.

Despite—or perhaps because of—its age, Du Bois’s insistently historical and postcolonial lens allows us to grasp some of the continuities between this seminal hymn-like yet blues-inflected body of “Sorrow Songs,” Buddy Bolden’s clarion (but disembodied) call, Nina Simone’s soulful jazz lament, and Sefyu’s paradox-laden postcolonial hip hop. Indeed, the postcolonial frame helps us avoid replicating an “eternal ahistorical present,” a space that popular music is uniquely capable of reproducing.⁴² Further, the transnational implications of this frame allow us to escape the short-sighted parochialisms of American exceptionalism. It is only through keeping our focus on the great historical ruptures of colonialism and its racial subjugation at the genesis of this nation that we can understand the musical resonance that keeps the flock coming in search of refuge from—and tools to set against—the enduring, now manifestly global, experience of double consciousness. The double conscious that *is* the postcolonial condition.

⁴² For a discussion of this tendency in popular music see Joshua Clover’s *1989: Bob Dylan Didn’t Have This To Sing About* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009). Thanks to Deborah Wong for the illuminating construction of an “ahistorical present.” In a personal email announcement for the conference, “Improvisation, History, and the Past,” held at UC Riverside on Nov 14, 2011, she writes: “This event will investigate one of the most vexing issues in improvisation as a social practice and as potential site of progressive social change: the relationship of improvisation to history. Descriptions of improvisation as “in-the-moment,” “spontaneous,” and as a type of “flow,” can suggest that the strictures of the past are suspended in some way. We will deliberately push at the theory/praxis binary and will challenge prevailing models in improvisation theory by troubling the eternal (ethnographic), *ahistorical present* assumed by many scholars.”

“He’s Calling His Flock Now”

In that same concluding chapter, Du Bois clarifies, “In these songs, I have said, the slave spoke to the world.”⁴³ As the musical and rhetorical *mixité* of Sefyu’s “En Noir en Blanc” indicates, the world was, and is, listening. Indeed, it has been calling back and going to the well of African American music for over a century. Du Bois concludes with a transcription of the African American Spiritual “Let Us Cheer the Weary Traveler” and adds his own final words: “And the traveler girds himself, and sets his face toward the morning, and goes his way.”

Watch him, he’s calling his flock now.
He’s calling his flock now.
Here they come...

⁴³ Du Bois, *Souls*, 259.