

A Dialogics of Rhythm: Dance and the Performance of Cultural Conflict

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This article examines mid-twentieth century North American dance forms as communicative performances structured in the multiple and conflictual intersections between African American and European American cultures. The analysis of these forms illustrates the value of historicized critical investigation in challenging the unity of any culture, the singularity of any practice, and the productivity of rigid dualisms in critical communication studies. Understanding of cultural processes occurs through an investigation of the fractures and dialogues within a particular practice, not through the construction of an idealized "purity."

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In the contemporary debates over multiculturalism, cultural forms such as language, music, theater, and dance have become increasingly politicized. Discussions of these forms, therefore, reveal attitudes toward the nature and value of cultural diversity. The 1993 PBS series *Dancing*, for example, celebrates the diverse yet universal forms of dance and music in cultures from around the globe. The opening title segment of each episode uses stylized and stereotypical cultural imagery to evoke the wonders of diversity while computer animation and sound editing allow each mobile image to flow into the next, creating a seamless continuity from Kabuki to ballet. In the final episode, entitled "Dancing in One World," viewers are presented with cultures (Native American, Hawaiian, and Australian Aboriginal, among others) whose dances had been previously repressed by Western colonizers but who can now share them openly at an arts festival in the "first global society" that is Los Angeles. Peter Sellars, the festival director, characterizes such cultural sharing as "the only thing that can make a breakthrough" to avoid a catastrophe caused by the boundaries "of language, race and economic ghettoization"

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(*Dancing*, 1993). In an earlier episode about African American dance entitled “New Worlds, New Forms,” the roles of slavery and resistance are highlighted, but viewers are instructed to understand the richness and vitality of African American dance forms and the music of rock and roll as “what happens when people reach across barriers of pride, fear and racial prejudice” (*Dancing*, 1993).

Dancing manifests a binary opposition pervasive in contemporary North American discussions of cultural diversity and intercultural communication. Cultural exchange is constructed as intrinsically beneficial because it allows for tolerance, understanding, and innovation. Cultural conflict is constructed as intrinsically negative because it emphasizes our differences instead of our similarities, negates differences through hierarchical arrangement, and hence limits human potential.

Critical approaches to communication reject the positive, pluralist interpretation of cultural exchange that forms the first side of this binary. Such an idealized model ignores the realities of contemporary social structures—namely, the profoundly disproportionate distribution of cultural authority and material wealth—and the ways past events influence contemporary social relations. In short, it obscures the existence, operation, and consequences of power (Fiske, 1991; Lipsitz, 1994).

Not only do critical and cultural approaches to communication make sense of cross-cultural interaction through a model of unequal power and conflict, but practitioners of these approaches often perpetuate the dualistic logic of cultural relations by demonizing the dominant cultures and idealizing the subordinate cultures involved. The popularity of notions such as “otherness” and “difference” has moved marginalized cultural texts and practices to center stage (Fleming, 1995; Mani, 1992). The cultural forms of colonized, ghettoized, female, and non-white peoples are analyzed and frequently held up as examples of “nonlinear,” “resistant,” or “counterhegemonic” practices (e.g., Cixous, 1989; Fiske, 1989; Scott, 1990). Joni Jones (1993), for example, examined Yoruba performance practices for “alternatives to linear plot construction and proscenium production techniques” in American theatre (p. 249). She highlighted one African performance trait, improvisation, as central to the revision of theatrical performance paradigms:

Improvisation is a fundamental survival strategy and artistic technique of African-Americans. In a society which systematically bars African-Americans from hegemonic positions of power and constrains the development of an African-American cultural and political reality, learning to improvise in a hostile environment over which one has little control becomes a survival tool of the highest order. (p. 235)

Critics challenge various canons of cultural forms and, among other outcomes, liberals, leftists, and “radicals” purge their guilt by valorizing the margins (Frith, 1992).

bell hooks (1990), among others (Fleming, 1995; Mani, 1992; Tagg, 1989), challenged these moves, questioning whether in this “inclusionary” process the structure and function of the discourse of “the Other” is undermined or perpetuated—whether the binary structures that associated “Western” with mind, rationality, and civilization and “the Other” with body, affect, and barbarism have been genuinely deconstructed or simply have had their polarities reversed. To dismantle stereotypes and essentialist definitions used to justify the oppression of blacks, hooks called for

black critics “to subvert static notions of black identity” (p. 21). Yet she found that project extremely difficult given the white avant garde’s appropriations of those same static notions as liberatory ideals. These white critics, hooks charged, treat “African-American culture as though it exists solely to suggest new aesthetic and political directions white folks might move in” (p. 21).

This impulse is manifested by David Byrne, formerly of the band Talking Heads, in this way: African and African American music “seemed to me a way out of the dead end, the one-sided philosophical blinder, that Western culture has gotten itself into” (Thompson, 1988, p. 44). For pluralists, this may seem like a paradigmatic case of the advantages of cultural exchange: cultural respect and individual enlightenment. For critics such as hooks (1990) and Fleming (1995), this “celebration of the margins” often treats culture as if it were a resource, a treatment that, placed in historical context, smacks of instrumental ideology and imperialist economics. Ultimately, Byrne and like-minded cultural critics singularize both traditions and treat them as essential, a priori categories.

Historicizing Performances of Ethnicity

How can cultural critics and theorists meaningfully discuss different historical and ethnic traditions without oversimplifying or, more important, perpetuating systems of dominance and exploitation? How can the interventionist critic’s role in uncovering, (re)articulating, and promoting resistance to various social orders be enhanced instead of undermined by perpetuating existing structures of sense-making? One answer, I believe, is to make greater efforts to historicize interpretations and criticisms of cultural and communicative processes, to examine them in their particularity—not to support grand generalizations and reinforce rigid binaries, but to understand cultural processes in a more grounded fashion. Such an approach would, I believe, allow for a better sense of how various cross-cultural articulations (exchange, sharing, conflict, domination, resistance) can and do come into existence through positioned communicative performances; such knowledge can, in turn, be used to further a critical project of potentiating resistance.¹ As Houston Baker (1984) argued, “writing the culturally specific is coextensive with discovering vernacular inscriptions in American culture. . . . If one is dedicated to discovering such vernacular faces, one must acknowledge . . . that all fixed points are problematic” (p. 200).

The general focus of this article is the struggle over social orders and worldviews via rhythmic performance. Specifically, I analyze African American and European American music and dance forms from the middle of the twentieth century to emphasize not only the (relative) historical specificity of the cultural exchanges, fusions, and conflicts involved, but also the centrality of rhythm (as manifested in music and bodily movement) in those struggles. Amy Koritz (1996) articulated the value of dance studies by pointing out that instead of focusing on the abstraction commonly referenced in critical and cultural theory as “the body,”

Dance scholars’ tools for analyzing and communicating about bodies might help feminists and those working in cultural studies clarify and understand the cultural uses of bodies in various contexts. . . . Historicized studies of dance that attempt to

locate the theory, practice and reception of codified bodily movement in the context of problems, events, and ideologies of significance beyond the realm of dance alone may have a great deal to tell us about how social relations are both enacted and produced through the body. (pp. 91–92)

To work toward such understandings involves an examination of, for example, an African American dance or musical form within its heteroglossic context, not for its imagined purity or its idealized resistance but for its contradictions, tensions, fragmentations, and specific struggles. In this sense, I take my methodology from Mikhail Bakhtin's (1981) conception of the utterance:

Every concrete utterance of a speaking subject serves as a point where centrifugal as well as centripetal forces are brought to bear. The processes of centralization and decentralization, of unification and disunification, intersect in the utterance . . . ; it is in fact an active participant in such speech diversity. . . . It is possible to give a concrete and detailed analysis of any utterance, once having exposed it as a contradiction-ridden, tension-filled unity of two embattled tendencies in the life of language. (p. 272)

Questioning the accuracy and ideological function of categories such as “European” and “African” through this type of critical praxis destabilizes the parallel binaries of dominant and subordinate, oppressive and resistant, hegemonic and counterhegemonic. These concepts can and should be viewed as useful critical and theoretical tools but not as fixed, singular, and essential categories. To clarify the centrality of the critique of singularity and essentialism² in my analysis, I review Bakhtin's dialogic theory of language use.

Dialogics

Bakhtin, a Russian literary critic and philosopher of language, grounds his conception of language in the fundamental *positionality* of all utterances. Language manifests itself only in its *embodiment*, its concrete and contextual performance in specific utterances. Bakhtin opposes structuralist views of language as an abstract system of rules and forms; the result is a shattering of the illusion that a language such as English is a singular, unified entity. Language “is unitary only as an abstract grammatical system of normative forms, taken in isolation from the concrete, ideological conceptualizations that fill it” (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 288). Within any abstractly unified national language there exists “a multitude of concrete worlds, a multitude of bounded verbal-ideological and social belief systems” (p. 288). A language, therefore, “is heteroglot from top to bottom: it represents the co-existence of socio-ideological contradictions . . . all given a bodily form” (p. 291).

A “national language” such as English is composed of a multitude of languages (i.e., discourses), each representing the worldview of a social group. Any “language” is heteroglossic: composed of multiple views, voices, and discourses, each of which enacts and embodies a social position amidst the polyphony of other voices that share the “same” (abstract) national language:

All languages of heteroglossia . . . are specific points of view on the world, forms for conceptualizing the world in words, specific world views, each characterized by its own objects, meanings and values. As such they all may be juxtaposed to one another, mutually supplement one another, contradict one another and be interrelated dialogically. As such they encounter one another and co-exist in the consciousness of real people. . . . these languages live a real life, they struggle and evolve in an environment of social heteroglossia. (Bakhtin, 1981, pp. 291–292)

Bakhtin does not, in his rejection of structuralism and other universalist conceptions of language, descend into “individualistic subjectivism.” Individuals do not have their own personal languages and their own worldviews. Language, by definition, exists only in between people, as a social entity, because to enter language an object or meaning must have interindividual significance. The individual consciousness exists in an environment of heteroglossia and is therefore faced with a multitude of possible languages, each of which carries socio-ideological affiliations. In this sense, the individual consciousness is faced with “the necessity of *having to choose a language*” (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 295).

This “choice,” perhaps better termed an *appropriation*, is fraught with social significance and, perhaps, conflict. If various groups, many of which exist in antagonism (e.g., class conflict), enact and embody their worldviews by speaking different languages, they nonetheless may share the same “national” language and thereby draw from similar (though not identical) pools of semiotic materials, forms, and genres. “As a result, differently oriented accents intersect in every ideological sign. Sign becomes an arena of the class struggle” (Volosinov, 1973, p. 23).

As a result of the work done by all these stratifying forces in language, there are no “neutral” words and forms—words and forms that can belong to “no one;” language has been completely taken over, shot through with intentions and accents. . . . Each word tastes of the context and contexts in which it has lived its socially charged life; all words and forms are populated by intentions. (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 293)

Bakhtin described the dialogic nature of the sign. Any utterance is socially positioned and therefore implicitly or explicitly in dialogue with other utterances and languages. In this sense, any utterance engages an external dialogue. However, because an utterance is composed of signs that are populated with the intentions of other languages, it is also internally dialogic. Not only is a national language multiple and heteroglossic, but any utterance is necessarily multiple: fragmented, multiaccidental, populated with the intentions (social accents) of its speaker as well as those of the past and present users of the same signs and discursive forms. Hence, any word “is a little arena for the clash and criss-crossing of differently oriented social accents. A word in the mouth of a particular individual person is a product of the living interaction of social forces” (Volosinov, 1973, p. 41).

LeRoi Jones’s (1963) discussion of the transformation of Africans into African Americans illustrates Bakhtin’s (1981) model:

Until the time when you have sufficient ideas about this new country to begin making some lasting *moral* generalizations about it—relating your experience, in some

lasting form, *in the language* of that country, with whatever subtleties and obliqueness you bring to it—you are merely a transient. There were no formal stories about the Negro's existence in America passed down by any pure African tongue. The stories, myths, moral examples, etc., given in African were *about* Africa. When America became important enough to the African to be passed on, in those *formal* renditions, to the young, those renditions were in some kind of Afro-American language. And finally, when a man looked up in some anonymous field and shouted, "Oh, Ahm so tired a dis mess, / Oh, yes, Ahm so tired a dis mess," you can be sure he was an American. (L. Jones, 1963, p. xii)

This passage demonstrates a number of important implications of Bakhtin's approach. Identity and worldview are matters of language. The process of speaking a language is not a passive one, but an active appropriation, a filling of existing signs and forms with the accent of a social group, its values, ways of sense-making, life experiences, and conditions. This appropriation does not merely add a semiotic-ideological accent (i.e., shift the "connotation" of a sign), but transforms, reworks the signs and forms of the language: accent manifests itself materially, as a "dialect." This dialect is not mere surface change but the creation of another language and, hence, worldview. As Bernice Johnson Reagon put it,

A lot of times when I think about black people and our survival I think about confiscation. You have to perceive us as confiscating, and putting all sorts of things together, in order to make whatever it is that comes out of us ours. (*Dancing*, 1993)

Reagon's use of the term *confiscation* emphasizes the often-conflictual nature of the dialogic relations between languages. Although "all socially significant world views have the capacity to exploit the intentional possibilities of language through the medium of their specific concrete instancing," this capacity operates "in proportion to their social significance" (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 290)—that is, a group's cultural authority (which is connected to its access to the material resources for ideological production) and the affiliations or articulations created through the appropriations made between various groups. In other words, the nature of the internal dialogue involved in any appropriation can be supplementary, playful, celebratory, and/or hostile, depending on the homologies or antagonisms between the relevant social groups—their life experiences, histories, ideologies, and socioeconomic status. These and other factors imply that the success of any appropriation of a sign is by no means guaranteed in advance:

Not all words for just anyone submit equally easily to this appropriation, to this seizure and transformation into private property: many words stubbornly resist, others remain alien, sound foreign in the mouth of the one who appropriated them and who now speaks them; they cannot be assimilated into his [sic] context and fall out of it; it is as if they put themselves in quotation marks against the will of the speaker. (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 294)

Disproportionate influence on the accents of signs not only results from disproportionate access to cultural and other resources but also serves to perpetuate those inequalities. A dominant class or ruling bloc maintains its hegemonic position

precisely by passing off its social accent, its worldview, as the only accent, the only worldview. Creating the illusion of monologic discourse—singular, unified, consistent, unpositioned—allows ideology to pass itself off as the truth. Only through heteroglossia can the “absolute bonding of ideological meaning to language” (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 369) be destroyed, the dominant ideology relativized as one language among many.

Bakhtin’s (1981) approach can be applied to the realms of music, dance, and rhythm (for an application to music, see Edwards, 1991). Various types of cultural and semiotic forms—including rhythmic patterns, bodily movements, and instrumental and vocal styles—can be understood as enactments and embodiments of worldviews that are actively appropriated among and between different groups, each appropriation adding to, revising, or negating the previous meanings and ideological accents infused into these forms. As L. Jones argued in *Blues People* (1963), African American musical forms were created by appropriating and working within musical frameworks provided or imposed by European Americans. “Negro music is the result of certain more or less specific ways of thinking about the world. Given this consideration, all talk of technical application is certainly after the fact” (L. Jones, 1963, p. 211). Technical discussions of musical styles are useful in a dialogic approach insofar as they reveal ideological affiliations, appropriations, struggles, and multiplicities occurring within a heteroglossic social context.

The examination of rhythm through Bakhtin’s (1981) linguistic philosophy is important as well insofar as it counters the hegemonic position of “the word,” of *logos* over other forms of discourse. As Michael Ventura (1985) explained in the context of his review of shifts in the dance of white youths in the late 1950s and early 1960s,

In most cultures that we honor enough to study, the dancing that everyone does—not just the dancing that the few do—has been considered of paramount, even religious, importance. If our anthropologists had discovered the same sort of change in a non-Western culture, many books would have been written about it by now. Only in a culture like ours, a culture that tries to put everything in its mouth, thinking nothing important unless it can be said—only in such a culture would such a fundamental change go virtually unheralded by the “intelligent” voices of the time. (p. 46)

Although in recent years there has been a significant increase in dance scholarship in general (Morris, 1996a) and critical/cultural dance studies in particular (see the collections edited by Morris [1996b] and Gere [1995]), little attention has been paid to dance by communication scholars per se (significant exceptions include Hamera, 1994) or even to dance as a communicative phenomenon (except Hanna, 1979, 1992).

Struggle

The PBS series *Dancing* (1993) compares and contrasts dance forms from around the world. The episode “New Worlds, New Forms” focuses on African American dance forms in Brazil and the United States. As indicated previously, the framing narration of this episode characterizes these forms as the result not just of “cultural fusion” but of “what happens when people reach across barriers of pride,

fear and racial prejudice to try on each other's dances." Despite this attempt to make the narrative a peacefully pluralistic one, many of the scholars and dancers interviewed in the episode emphasize the conflictual character of such fusions.³

Joao Jorge Santos Rodriguez claimed that "dancing and music were the main fields of resistance" for Africans brought to the "new world" (*Dancing*, 1993). A number of complex reasons can explain or justify such a claim. As Reagon argued, drums can be banned, but drumming exists in the heart and soul of the drummer. African slaves, particularly in the Catholic context of Brazil, were able to find European ritual forms in which to "hide" their own practices. River baptisms, which resembled a Yoruba ceremony, were used for worshipping their goddess of water, and various Catholic saints (in the case of the water goddess, the virgin Mary herself) became placeholders for African deities. Because of the ban on African dance, religion, and culture (DeFrantz, 1996), Africans imported to the Americas disguised their rituals in the trappings of Christianity. Amidst the puritanism of North America, finding rituals that allowed music and dance was more difficult, but forms such as the ring shout were developed that allowed both dancing, disguised as a circular walk, and drumming, transformed into polyrhythmic clapping and stamping. These examples demonstrate that African American cultural forms not only are aptly characterized by Reagon's use of the term *confiscation* but also are structured to their core in heteroglossia and inequality. The internal dialogues and accents in these forms are radically conflictual, as the Africans performed their indigenous culture and identity as well as their resistance to slavery through covert appropriations of the cultural forms imposed on them by Europeans.

As these examples make evident, separating and identifying what exactly is European American and what is African in these African American forms can be exceptionally difficult as a result of the complexity and multiplicity of the fusions over time as well as the covert nature of some appropriations (cf. Scott's [1990] discussion of "hidden transcripts"). Nonetheless, a close examination of such forms yields some understanding of the concrete struggles taking place within and between African American and European American cultures and reveals how rhythm—in the form of dance and music—became a means of social struggle in and on the body. This is particularly evident in the case of dances in the northern cities of the United States between the 1920s and the early 1960s, the primary focus of the *Dancing* (1993) episode's discussion of Africans in North America.

The Lindy Hop and the Jitterbug

In the early twentieth century, millions of southern blacks migrated to northern cities. Their dance traditions fused with the European tradition of formal ballroom dancing, and out of this fusion came the Lindy Hop. The center of these new dance forms was Harlem, and the center of dancing in Harlem was the Savoy ballroom. In the 1920s whites began to flock to Harlem to learn these dances.

Understanding the implications of this dialogue while avoiding simple platitudes (e.g., the binary of cultural pluralism vs. theft) begins with Reagon's explanation of the importance of dance in African American life

In terms of what we had to go through to eke out a survival. And so when black people go out on a Friday night or Saturday night they are celebrating life and a release. . . . When black people go to juke joints or Saturday night fish fries you are walking sacred territory. (*Dancing*, 1993)

This sacredness is multiple—in part because of the cultural heritage of West Africa, wherein deities manifest themselves in and through dance, and in part because of the nature of the dance hall as a primary site for social interaction outside the church, in which African Americans addressed the often harsh conditions of life in the United States.

Given the sacredness of the space and practice of dancing, the mingling at dance halls like the Savoy was highly ambivalent for some African Americans: They felt pride in their dance forms and the whites' desire for them, feared losing those spaces and forms, and genuinely desired interracial interaction. For example, Norma Miller, a dancer from Harlem, talked about the Savoy:

It was *our* ballroom that opened in the heart of Harlen. This was our social center, our community center. And of course I didn't know it in those days, but when those doors opened in 1927, blacks walked through that door like whites. Whites came to *our* ballroom. (*Dancing*, 1993)

At this point, Miller exhibits not only a clear sense of pride but also an acute sensitivity to the power relations and a pleasure taken in the reverse of those relations. Then, immediately, she shifts to the more pluralistic reading of this event called for by the ideology that dominates so much of the discussion of race relations in the United States: "So consequently there was a mixture and mingling of black and white at a social level that had never existed before" (*Dancing*, 1993).

This mingling was not merely a positive cultural contact. Although Miller does not express opposition to whites coming to the Savoy or learning black dances, she is acutely aware of the other consequences of such contact: appropriation, a threat to her ownership of her cultural forms. She does not hear this interaction solely as an example of "reaching across barriers of pride, fear and prejudice" but interjects her understanding of the conflicts involved:

Of course a lot of people wanted to do this dance. But, you see, we had an edge, we felt like we had an edge and that's the way we danced. "This will be something you will not do better than me, I don't care who you are. . . ." It was always a battle because we didn't want [whites] taking our dance. They had everything else, so we couldn't allow them to take the Lindy Hop. . . . We sweated for that, we busted our butts to get that the way it was and that's ours, we created it. It came out of the blood and sweat of Harlem. (*Dancing*, 1993)

As the last lines make clear, these dance forms are discursive genres that enable the production of utterances. The dancers enacted and embodied the worldview, values, and experiences of the social group that produced them.

Ernie Smith, a European American dancer who came to the Savoy to learn new dances, states that the Lindy was a black dance, even when danced by whites, because it arose from black culture and experience. However, when whites *formally* adopted the

Lindy, as in the dance studios where white middle-class youth were instructed, *it was no longer the Lindy*. Smith explained that as the Lindy moved into white communities (as opposed to whites going into black communities to learn and to dance it) it was no longer a “cool” dance (*Dancing*, 1993)—in Bakhtin’s (1981) linguistic terms, it put itself “in quotation marks against the will of the speaker” (p. 294). The smooth, horizontal, sensual movements of the Lindy became the jerky, rigid, vertical movements of the Jitterbug. The sensuality of the Lindy, understood through puritanical sensibilities as the demonic force of unbridled sexuality, was altered to conform to the mechanistic and controlled sensibilities of the dominant forces in white society. A cultural and ideological dialogue was occurring without words as the Lindy was appropriated and infused with European American meanings, accents, mores, and “styles of the flesh” (themselves, following Bakhtin, multiple and conflictual).

The phrase “styles of the flesh” comes from Judith Butler’s (1986) discussion of the distinction between sex and gender and helps bridge the gap between linguistic approaches to discourse and the analysis of nonlinguistic utterances such as dance.⁴ Butler, working from Simone de Beauvoir’s dictum that “one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman,” argued that “gender must be understood as a modality of taking on or realizing possibilities, a process of interpreting the body, giving it cultural form” (p. 36). Analogous to an understanding of gender as a “style of the flesh” would be a sense of the *embodiment of ethnicity* as opposed to *racial heredity*, a distinction that helps avoid essentialism in discussions of cultural forms. Theoretically, a “white” body could perform a “black” dance; however, the profound embodiment of cultural style would make it difficult for a European American subject to produce an African American dance with his or her deeply enculturated body without significant alteration to the dance’s “accent” or sensibility. Eradicating traces of one’s “native” culture in and on one’s body would be an intense process. Layering the “style of the flesh” of another culture on top of a native one is possible, but the underlying style would tend to bleed through; utterances “are always particular to interwoven relationships between an embodied life and historical circumstance” (Rockwell, 1996, p. 70; for a discussion of cross-ethnic performances of dance, see Manning, 1996). In Bakhtin’s (1981) terms, any appropriation takes the form of a concrete utterance, which is inevitably positioned and carries *multiple accents*. Given a dialogic approach, concepts such as “purity” and “authenticity” (concepts strongly affiliated with essentialism) become problematic.

If the Jitterbug is understood as the European American appropriation of the Lindy, its broad, cultural message could be interpreted as similar to the message Frantz Fanon (1967) sensed from whites in response to his attempts to reclaim the grandeur of his African heritage:

Lay aside your history, your investigations of the past, and try to feel yourself into our rhythm. In a society such as ours, industrialized to the highest degree, dominated by scientism, there is no longer room for your sensitivity. One must be tough if one is to be allowed to live. . . . Oh, certainly, I will be told, now and then when we are worn out by our lives in big buildings, we will turn to you as we do to our children—to the innocent, the ingenuous, the spontaneous. . . . Let us run away for a little while from our ritualized, polite civilization and let us relax, bend to those

heads, those adorably expressive faces. In a way, you reconcile us with ourselves.
(p. 132)

Fanon highlighted dynamics central to European American culture(s) of the first half of this century, dynamics embodied in the Jitterbug: the importance of subsuming one's rhythms (body, sensuality) to the needs of industrialization (uniform, discrete, mechanical) and the need to avoid too much body, to locate it elsewhere to maintain the integrity of "polite civilization" while also claiming the right to access it at will (through dance, music, and other cultural forms).

Yet the Jitterbug was no more a "purely" white dance than the Lindy was a "purely" black dance: Both drew from the forms of other (sub)cultures, both grew and developed amidst a multiplicity they could not help but enact.⁵ As Ventura (1985) traced the history, black music arose primarily out of black churches, and "in those churches the African metaphysic and the Western metaphysic would blend, clash, feed and battle each other" (p. 134). In other words, *these rhythmic forms performed conflicting forms of organization* in North American industrial society. Music and dance were sites for a dialogue, both antagonistic and cooperative, between European American and African American "theories of the flesh" (Madison, 1993)—between different epistemologies, spiritualities, rhythmic sensibilities, and forms of order and organization. These dialogues occurred not only between blacks and whites but also *within* African American and European American cultures. Insofar as these conflicts were cultural, not racial (Hanna, 1992), they could affect anyone (though admittedly in different ways):

By 1930, African rhythm—not African beats, but European beats transformed by the African—had entered American life to stay. Which is to say, the *technical language* and the *technique* of African metaphysics was a language we were all beginning, wordlessly, to know. America was excited by it. America was moving to it. America was resisting it. American intellectuals were pooh-poohing it. But the dialectic had been joined. (Ventura, 1985, pp. 147–148; see also Gottschild, 1995)

The impact of these forms and the threat they posed can be heard loud and clear in the intense criticism of jazz and other African American musical forms during this period. Critics linked jazz to crime, suicide, nervousness, "cannibalistic rhythmic orgies," and evil in general. It was African, barbaric, animalistic, and would undermine Christian civilization. As one anonymous critic wrote, jazz "tends to unseat reason and set passion free" (quoted in Merriam, 1964, p. 243). This created difficulties because "the exaltation of passion cannot be reconciled with the timed movements of productive motions connected with the most perfect automatism" (Gramsci, 1971, p. 305). Placed in the context of industrialization—by the 1920s the assembly line and its principles extended throughout much of the production process—the popularity of jazz can be attributed in part to how it addressed the conditions experienced by many Americans. The increasing discipline (and thus repression) in production, brought about by Taylorism and Fordism, created a heightened pressure requiring release. The prevailing mode of production provided, in part, the basis of jazz's appeal and defined the nature of its threat.⁶

Rock and Roll

Although Rodriguez was speaking of the context of slavery, his argument that “dancing and music were the main fields of resistance” (*Dancing*, 1993) resonates in twentieth century North America. L. Jones (1963) argued that “only in music has there been any significant Negro contribution to a *formal* American culture” (p. 130). Still connected with the lower classes of African Americans, the emotional vitality of the music remained, and it resisted, to a greater degree than many other areas of art and culture, dilution by mainstream (white) and black middle-class culture. Although Jones found much of the supposedly “black” music of the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s—such as popular ragtime, Dixieland, big-band jazz, and swing—to be nothing more than “the debris, in a sense, of vanished emotional references” (p. 221), other forms retained their emotional power.

Rock’n’roll is usually a flagrant commercialization of rhythm & blues, but the music in many cases depends enough on materials that are so alien to the general middle-class, middle-brow American culture as to remain interesting. Many of the same kinds of cheap American dilutions that had disfigured popular swing have tended to disfigure the new music, but the source, the exciting and “vulgar” urban blues of the forties, is still sufficiently removed from the mainstream to be vital. For this reason, rock’n’roll has not become as emotionally meaningless as commercial swing. It is still raw enough to stand the dilution and in some cases, even to be made attractive by the very fact of its commercialization. Even its “alienation” remains conspicuous; it is often used to characterize white adolescents as “youthful offenders.” (pp. 222–223)

This vitality results not from cultural purity or authenticity; in the terms of Volosinov’s (1973) statement, the “inner dialectical quality of the sign comes out fully in the open only in times of social crises or revolutionary changes” (p. 23). When the hegemony of the ruling bloc is stable, the multiaccentuality of signs is submerged by the univocal (centralizing, homogenizing) force of the dominant ideology. What was happening around the time of the rise of rock and roll that allowed it to maintain its vitality—that is, its multiplicity—more than other, previous hybrid forms (e.g., the commercialized versions of swing, ragtime, and jazz)? Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat; Martin Luther King, Jr., began his rise to national leadership; and the Supreme Court’s *Brown* decision mandated school desegregation. The modern civil rights movement was gaining momentum.

In his essay “Convalescence,” Eldridge Cleaver (1968) rewrote desegregation and the *Brown* decision as a story of Mind and Body reconnected, and the media for this reconnection were African American forms of music and dance. Cleaver understood the dynamics of this reconnection through a class-based, sexually divided, and historically contingent semiotic schematic of white–black relations. In a class society, Cleaver argued, sexuality fragments because of the alienation of Mind from Body. Men of the upper classes usurp the administrative roles in society, and hence become primarily thinkers, Omnipotent Administrators. They become alienated from their bodies, relegating all Brute Power functions to the working classes, the Supermasculine Menials. As a result of this alienation, the Omnipotent Administrators despise the Body and lose the associated traits, including virility,

strength, and physical beauty. In short, they become effeminate. Virility and strength, therefore, become associated with the lower classes. Given that these class divisions are strongly racial, the development by whites of stereotypes about the sexual potency and uncontrollable desires of blacks, especially black men, is not surprising.

The effeminacy of the Omnipotent Administrators problematizes the role of upperclass women (Clever, 1968). To retain the illusion of the Omnipotent Administrators' masculinity by contrast, upperclass women must project an image of hyperfemininity. The Ultrafeminine, therefore, also rejects bodily elements. To appear beautiful she must stamp out all traces of strength in her body: Female strength becomes, by definition, ugly. To accomplish this disembodiment, she hands the physical aspects of the Domestic Function to women of the lower classes, who become more physical, more masculine—hence the Amazon, the strong black woman, the matriarch.

Although Cleaver (1968) proceeded to lay out the resulting sexual dynamics among these four groups (and in the process revealed his misogyny and homophobia), the basic alienation of Mind from Body suffices for understanding his argument concerning the effects of African American musical forms on whites. “Condemned” by the race and class structures of North American society to their bodies, African Americans developed forms of dance and music, senses of rhythm, and styles of the flesh that were profoundly different from those of European Americans, who abandoned the Body in their upward socioeconomic climb. Yet even Cleaver, in his class-driven reading, recognizes that whites fled from their bodies not only for economic reasons but also “for puritanical dreams of escaping the corruption of the flesh” (p. 193), and African Americans were not simply *condemned* to their bodies by an oppressive class structure, but as a result of their African heritage *embraced* the body. As Ventura (1985) explained, the Yoruba and other African cultures “shared with pre-Christian Europe . . . the conviction that religious worship is a *bodily* celebration, a dance of the entire community. . . . To meditate was to dance” (p. 109). The Body was not something to be transcended but was instead the crossroads, the intersection of the human and the divine.

For both Cleaver (1968) and Ventura (1985), then, desegregation sent an electric shock throughout the nation because the Body was reuniting with the Mind, and the site of that linkage, the source of that shock, was far more cultural than political or legal.

The Twist was a guided missile, launched from the ghetto into the very heart of suburbia. The Twist succeeded, as politics, religion, and law could never do, in writing in the heart and soul what the Supreme Court could only write on the books. The Twist was a form of therapy for a convalescing nation. The Omnipotent Administrator and the Ultrafeminine responded so dramatically, in stampede fashion, to the Twist precisely because it afforded them the possibility of reclaiming their Bodies again after generations of alienated and disembodied existence. (Clever, 1968, p. 197)

In Ventura's (1985) terms, rock and roll was “a music, in all its forms, that would reject Puritan America. Even at its mildest it would have a beat, and in that beat would be everything that denied the split between the mind and the body” (p. 138).

Rock and roll was, quite simply, an attack on the European American, ascetic, Christian world—its institutions, its philosophies, its styles of the flesh. Take Elvis, for example: “Nobody had ever seen a white boy move like that. He was a flesh-and-blood rent in white reality. A gash in the nature of Western things” (Ventura, 1985, p. 153).

However, even Elvis’s “bumpgrinding” was “mechanical, alienated” (Clever, 1968, p. 202). White dancers could not overcome their bodily training overnight, “swinging like pendulums, mechanical like metronomes or puppets on invisible strings being manipulated by a master with a sick sense of humor” (p. 199). But it was nonetheless a breakthrough, the sons and daughters of Omnipotent Administrators and Ultrafeminines “discovering new aspects of the Body, new possibilities of rhythm, new ways to move” (p. 199). “Condemned as a sign of degeneracy and moral decay,” the appeal of these rhythmic, bodily forms “was actually a sign of health, a sign of hope for full recovery” (p. 200). Rock and roll carried “the metaphysical antidote that would aid many a twentieth century Westerner from both the ravages of the mind–body split codified by Christianity, and the onslaught of technology” (Ventura, 1985, p. 120).

Of course, conservative white intellectuals and critics were well aware that rock and roll and other African-influenced musical forms threatened their sacred institutions and beliefs. They saw similar processes as those discussed here but interpreted them through their own evaluative lens. For example, the Reverend David Noebel, dean of the Christian Crusade Anti-Communist Youth University, published *Rhythm, Riots and Revolution* in 1966. In this exhaustively documented and paranoid work, Noebel claimed that much children’s music, folk music, and rock and roll were the intentional products of a communist conspiracy to destroy “the mental and emotional stability of America’s youth through a scheme capable of producing mass neurosis” (p. 12). Although that argument may be open to debate, Noebel was nonetheless clued in, on some level, to what was going on: “The noise that millions of our youth call music . . . is invigorating, vulgarizing and orgiastic. It is destroying our youth’s ability to relax, reflect, study and meditate and is in fact preparing him for riot, civil disobedience and revolution” (p. 21). Rock and roll *was* “invigorating, vulgarizing and orgiastic” insofar as that was the only sense mainstream, puritanical Christianity could make of what Ventura (1985) described as “the first time in the world of the Western white [that] there was a *social form* that enabled us to be in our bodies, watch other people be in their bodies, even talk to each other through our bodies” (pp. 46–47). Rock and roll *did* destroy the “ability to relax, reflect, study and meditate” insofar as those activities were defined in a way that denied that we exist in bodily form and that such existence has value. Rock and roll *was* “preparing him for riot, civil disobedience and revolution” insofar as it proposed a metaphysic rejection of the values underlying European American institutions.

Jazz and rock’s potentials were staggering, and only the strength of deeply repressed human drives (combined with a healthy dose of opportunistic capitalism) could overcome—to some degree, for some length of time—all the fear-driven attacks directed against them by the powers that be. As mainstream North American culture continued to move farther away from sensuality and multiplicity, toward disembodied existence, hyperscientism, and singularity, there arose a coun-

termovement within that culture, and these alienated, European American, middle-class subjects—exemplified, at least initially, by the beats—turned to one of the few sources for an alternative sensibility they knew: African Americans. Cleaver (1968) put it this way:

These observers were not equipped to either *feel* or *know* that a radical break, a revolutionary leap out of their sight, had taken place in the secret parts of this nation's soul. It was as if a driverless vehicle were speeding through the American night down an unlighted street toward a stone wall and was boarded on the fly by a stealthy ghost with a drooling leer on his face, who, at the last detour before chaos and disaster, careened the vehicle down a smooth highway that leads to the future and life; and to ask these Americans to understand that they were the passengers on this driverless vehicle and that the lascivious ghost was the Saturday-night crotchfunk of the Twist, or the "Yeah, Yeah, Yeah!" which the Beatles high-jacked from Ray Charles, to ask these Calvinistic profligates to see the logical and reciprocal links is more cruel than asking a hope-to-die Okie Music buff to cop the sounds of John Coltrane. (pp. 193–194)

As Cleaver's (1968) metaphor indicates, the dialogues taking place via rock and roll and related dance forms cannot be interpreted simply as an infusion of black culture into white culture, or as a simple theft or taking by whites of what they needed or desired from blacks. But the dialogue can be understood in terms of the historical forces in play. Both Ventura (1985) and Cleaver (1968) explained how white culture laid the groundwork for this interchange in its long-term religious denial of the body, the pressures of industrialization, and the particular culture of repression in the 1950s (on the latter, see also Pratt, 1990). In turn, black culture had the advantage of remnants of African spirituality as well as an embodied tradition of resistance to elements of European American culture (Lipsitz, 1994); they had things to gain as well, such as the (imagined) advantages of integration and cultural pride. However, while emphasizing the importance of the struggles taking place in and through these cultural forms, these interpretations risk perpetuating the difficulties with which I began this article: the construction of black culture as the savior of white culture and the move toward untenable categories of cultural singularity.

Critical Essentialism, Critical Imperialism

Popular music scholar Philip Tagg (1989) "deconstructed" the use of terms such as *African music*, *black music*, *Afro-American music*, *European music*, and *white music*. He based his objections in part on the empirical sloppiness of associating certain traits (e.g., polyrhythmic and improvisational) with "African music" and their opposites (e.g., monorhythmic and rigidly structured) with "European music." "African American" music, in turn, is mechanistically understood in terms of these rigidly dualistic categories.

Tagg's (1989) strongest critique is motivated by his political project of ending the hegemony of classical Viennese musicology. He noted the irony that when he

and others who shared this project use the term *European music*, especially in contrast to *African* or *Afro-American music*, its

meaning coincides with the most reactionary, élitist, bourgeois, conservative and non-dynamic view of European music imaginable. What seems to be implied is a weird caricature, not of European music, but of a small part of one out of several hundred important European music traditions. (p. 292)

Tagg refers here to the characterizations of Western music as having four beats to the bar, self-controlled and strait-laced audiences, and fixed and immutable scores. “The curious thing is that many of us, professing to be in opposition to such ignorant élitism, seem nevertheless, when talking of ‘Afro-American music,’ to have opted for a mindlessly élitist view of the music of our *own* continent” (p. 292). In the rush to idealize African musical traditions, nondominant European musical traditions have been erased or at least overlooked. The classical Viennese school of musicology retains its position of authority by proffering and perpetuating the illusion that “the European musical tradition” is synonymous with its particular tradition, that “Europe” has a *singular* tradition (recall Bakhtin’s [1981] discussion of univocality). Oppositional music scholars, by reducing the entire European tradition to the hated enemy, perpetuate this same illusion and neglect the polyphonic richness of the European tradition. These oppositional scholars, as a result, direct their efforts toward caricaturing another tradition, that of the African, instead of researching their own oppositional traditions.⁷

The “European” tradition, however, is not the only one affected. Caricatures of “African” and “Afro-American” music enact their own damage, again contrary to the goals of these oppositional scholars.

Indiscriminate use of such terms falls right in line with historical falsifications of the old European cultural patriarchy and credits Blacks with everything corporeal and spontaneous in today’s popular music while attributing nothing corporeal or spontaneous to us Whites. . . . By disowning responsibility for our own musical corporeality we force black people into absurd court jester positions and use music we imagine to be little or none of our own doing as a corporeal panacea for [our] own problems of subjectivity, powerlessness and alienation. (Tagg, 1989, p. 294)

In their “oppositional” zeal, these scholars are complicitous in the essentialist discourse of racism and imperialism (McPhail, 1991).

To identify what is African and what is European in European American and African American music would require an enormous historical and empirical project. What musical traditions were transported from what parts of Europe to what parts of the Americas? What musical traditions were transported from what parts of Africa to what parts of the Americas? What kind of musical traditions developed in the Americas prior to the importation of large numbers of Africans? What role did Native American music play in the development of these traditions?⁸ Yet these questions rely on a continental and national conception of ethnicity, a configuration challenged by Gilroy (1993) in his development of the idea of “the Black Atlantic.” Such questions imply that culture is a matter of discrete places, “things” that come to be mixed, instead of culture, communication, and meaning as always, in Bakhtin’s (1981) terms, “in between.”

Multiplicity

Examples demonstrating the multicultural nature of African American music abound, making any clear, generalized identification of what is African and what is European (or European American) in “Afro-American” music next to impossible. Take L. Jones’s (1963) description of “northern Negro pre-jazz music”:

Ragtime was a Negro music, resulting from the Negro’s appropriation of white piano techniques used in show music. Popularized ragtime, which flooded the country with songsheets in the first decade of this century, was a dilution of the Negro style. And finally, the show and “society” music the Negroes in the pre-blues North made was a kind of bouncy, essentially vapid appropriation of the popularized imitations of Negro imitations of white minstrel music, which, as I mentioned earlier, came from white parodies of Negro life and music. (pp. 110–111)

In addition to these North American multiplicities, the assumption that “European” forms are free of African influence is belied by, for example, the (generally forgotten) origins of the seventeenth century French court dance the *sarabande*, which came into France from Spain, where it first appeared in the sixteenth century. The Spanish *sarabanda* has been traced by different musicologists, in turn, to an African dance brought to Spain by Arabs, an African American dance from Cuba, and a Native American dance from Mexico (Jahn, 1961). At the same time, “African” musical forms are not free from European influence; in his overview of African musical traditions Nketia (1974) demonstrated the influence of Middle Eastern and European music on that of Africa—not merely since colonization, but over the past 1500 years.

To take a contemporary situation, much of the “world music” coming from Africa today is represented or presumed to be “authentically” African. Yet a great deal of that music is not only constrained by the Western music industry’s system of recording and marketing, but it also embodies strong influences by African American musicians, such as James Brown, who have profoundly affected contemporary African music. So James Brown—representing some mixture of African and European styles and instrumentation, combined in and with elements uniquely North American and African American—influences African musicians, who in turn influence European and European American musicians such as Peter Gabriel, David Byrne, and Paul Simon (Goodwin & Gore, 1990).

As mentioned earlier, African slaves brought to the Americas were forbidden the worship of their deities, and as a result they disguised many of their religious ceremonies, as in the use of river baptisms to enact a Yoruba ceremony for worshipping their goddess of water. Centuries later, this ceremony was echoed in the late 1960s soul tune “Take Me to the River” by Al Green and Mabon Hodges. This song was, in turn, picked up by the European American “new wave” group Talking Heads in the late 1970s, who recorded it on their second LP (1978) and performed it for a national audience on *Saturday Night Live*. In 1984 it was again recorded by the expanded version of the same group, then composed of five African Americans and the original four European Americans, in the concert film *Stop Making Sense*. In the intervening years, the group’s music had been influenced by African music, increasing its polyvocality.

“Take Me to the River” was also recorded by the Commitments for the 1991 film of the same name about a band of working class Dublin youths in the early 1990s. The affiliative logic provided in the film’s dialogue goes as follows: The Irish are the blacks of Europe, Dubliners are the blacks of Ireland, and northside Dubliners are the blacks of Dublin; hence it makes sense that these folks have an affiliation with soul and rhythm and blues. The polyphony of cultural, spiritual, and ideological accents—Yoruba and Christian, African and American, African American and Irish, black and white, gospel and soul, soul and new wave—involved in any contemporary performance of this tune is astounding and, following Bakhtin (1981), could account for its continued energy and appeal.

The complexity, multiplicity, and circularity of these Irish / African American renditions and articulations are complicated even further by revelations made by Ventura (1985) in his essay about the history of rock and roll entitled “Hear That Long Snake Moan.” He argued that as many as 80,000 Irish were sold into slavery to the West Indies in the 1650s, that many Irish women were mated with African slaves, and that the impact of the Irish on African American culture can still be heard in the West Indian accent and seen in the use of a gaily painted centerpost in West Indian voodoo. This centerpost resembles the maypole, a descendent of a Celtic / pagan tradition—which points up another key factor: The Irish sold into slavery by their British colonizers were more likely to be those holding to their pre-Christian traditions. After presenting the available historical evidence, Ventura concluded:

Virtually every account of Voodoo notes, at some point, how similar are its sorcery practices to the practices of European witchcraft, but no one has, to my knowledge, mentioned the connection to the Irish slaves. We will never have [definitive] evidence, but nevertheless we have a good case: practicing pagans from Ireland infused their beliefs with the Africans, mingling in Voodoo two great streams of non-Christian metaphysics. (p. 119)

In the context of North America, further Irish / African articulations are evident. According to Richard Long (1989), in the mid-nineteenth century black dancers performed for combined audiences of African Americans and Irish Americans. William Henry Lane, a prominent black dancer of the time, learned Irish dances. “A cultural interchange took place between Blacks and Irishmen at this point, accounting for the incorporation of the Irish jig and clog-dancing in a Black tradition which eventually produced tap-dancing” (p. 11). Amidst such multiplicity and cross-fertilization, to say that the accuracy of generalizations about “African,” “European,” and “African American” music is questionable is an understatement.

Some African Americans, however, may not be overly pleased to hear their musical forms once again being appropriated by whites to their ends and their profits. Although the imagined purity of any cultural tradition can be dismantled through patient historical research and / or poststructuralist machinations, it is nonetheless difficult to deny that cultural appropriations often take place within structures of power and oppression. Although culture cannot be reduced to economics, and the implications of cross-cultural fertilization cannot be reduced to who makes the profit, such appropriations are nonetheless implicated in exploitation. The mixing of cultures cannot be understood solely through the lens of a naive pluralism, as

proof of the interconnectedness of all human cultures. It must also be seen in terms of conflict, oppression, and resistance, but not through the oversimplified binaries to which cultural critics (such as myself) are sometimes drawn. As Gilroy (1993) argued, rejecting essentialism “involves the difficult task of striving to comprehend the reproduction of cultural traditions not in the unproblematic transmission of a fixed essence through time but in the breaks and interruptions” (p. 101).

Rhythm as Communicative Performance

This analysis, in its focus on music and dance forms, demonstrates that rhythm should be taken seriously as a form of communication, a performance of particular meanings, sensibilities, epistemologies, and social relations. Rhythm can be understood as communicative in a variety of ways. Rhythms can be representational (signs referring to something outside of themselves) or instructive (behavioral commands). A more productive understanding of rhythm is, I believe, to hear it as a discursive system and power-knowledge formation (Foucault, 1972). Music and dance embody social meanings (Hanna, 1979, 1992)—meanings performed in part, though not entirely, through rhythm. Within a particular cultural context, rules exist that constrain and enable what rhythms can be produced, determining what counts as music as opposed to noise, order as opposed to chaos (Attali, 1985). These rules and the performances they constitute, in turn, reflect and enact values and assumptions about the social and natural worlds.

Rhythm can therefore be heard as a crucial element in social organization (as the materialization of temporal organization). For example, a dominant rhythmic sensibility of modern Western culture was concisely stated by music theorist Howard Hanson (1944): “Equal divisions of time constitute the raw material of rhythm. . . . All written music presumes division of time into *equal* pulses or beats” (p. 364). For Hanson, no other definitions of rhythm exist, which, not coincidentally, naturalizes mechanistic metaphors and clock-based social and economic organization. The bias for discrete, quantifiable units and a single system of order manifests itself in music and other temporal systems structured by the hegemony of logic and science. Performances of alternative sensibilities, therefore, question the monologic claim to truth Hanson made. The enactment of contrary orders challenges claims to singularity and thereby questions the legitimacy of affiliated social structures.

The distinctions between music and noise, order and anarchy, are not given a priori but are determinations, productions of a (common) sensibility. A culture’s rhythms are both representations and performances (Turner, 1982) of that culture’s means and modes of organization. Rhythm, as non-word, is the “order-word” par excellence (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987): It does not primarily or even necessarily represent or signify, it *enacts* an order, a particular form of organization. As with other discursive systems, these rhythms and their corresponding organizations both constrain and enable and are open to being undermined by the performance of alternative rhythmic sensibilities (Attali, 1985). As this analysis demonstrates, rhythm serves as a site of struggle over how we organize, interpret, and evaluate our existence.

Critical Reflections

To categorize is to select, to emphasize similarities, and to filter out differences to maintain the legitimacy of the category. Any categorization is a fiction—such is the lesson Friedrich Nietzsche and others have provided and with which vast new areas of epistemological, ideological, and practical implications have been opened. At the same time, fictions have real effects insofar as they are taken as truth and used as the basis for actions. Therein resides the potentialities and difficulties I work through in this article. As social, collective creatures our behavior cannot be understood solely in terms of our “individuality.” As culturally diverse creatures our behavior cannot be understood in terms of universal human attributes. Cultural critics and theorists must work in the tension between the reality of cultural differences on the one hand and the unclear boundaries and multiplicity of influences that characterize any particular culture on the other.

An emphasis on cultural differences can promote tolerance and even a celebration of human diversity—this is the pervasive ideology that forms one side of the binary with which I opened this article. At the same time, a recognition of the systems of power within which such differences exist and through which their relations are structured can lead to understandings of cultural domination and resistance and therefore to an awareness of the exploitations that “celebrations” of diversity can enable and obscure.

The recognition of the polyvocality and multiplicity of any culture, of the somewhat arbitrary nature of cultural boundaries, can lead to greater understandings of the processes by which domination and resistance are enacted while simultaneously calling into question essentialist binaries. These binaries, as illustrated throughout this article, are not only empirically untenable but also politically naive in their tendency to associate oppression with the dominant side and liberatory potential with the subordinate side. Only through careful, contextualized analysis can we avoid reinforcing the binaries and instead discover the potentialities offered by critical investigation into cultural practice.

The position I advocate here risks engaging some not-so-old debates and, given my positioning as a European American, those engagements leave me with more than a little disease. African Americans, women, and other members of historically marginalized groups have criticized the poststructuralist project of decentering or deconstructing “the subject” at precisely the historical juncture when some kind of self-defined subjectivity is being (re)claimed (see, e.g., Gates, 1992). My argument concerning the multiplicity and contingency of cultural categories is open to similar critiques insofar as culture is understood as a foundation for identity and, ultimately, political action. However, as Angela McRobbie (1992) argued in her critique of recent trends in cultural studies, “incompleteness, fragmentation and the pluralities of emergent identities need not mean loss of political capacity. Instead, they can point the way to new forms of struggle” (p. 723). Stated more forcefully, “we have little option but to work within the confines of the contingent and historically specific processes which are constitutive of our positioning” (p. 724). Indeed, I argue that through such contingencies and multiplicities cultural critics can discover new possibilities instead of reinforcing old dualities.

Claims of racism or sexism, of domination or resistance are, undeniably, politically useful. I do not think, however, that in and of themselves they are particularly insightful or transformative. Insight and transformation are more likely to arise from the examination of *how* something exploits or resists, and that can be understood only through a particular practice. As Raymond Williams (1977) explained hegemony, “the relations of domination and subordination, in their forms as practical consciousness, [are] in effect a saturation . . . of the whole substance of lived identities and relationships” (p. 110). The polyvocality of lived reality makes hegemony a fluid process in which consent is constantly being reworked. Gramsci’s (1971) concept of hegemony, along with Bakhtin’s (1981) dialogism, points to the fractured nature of any practice and therefore to the possibility of resistance. An examination of African American musical forms demonstrates both the possibility of different social orders and the actuality of the struggles between those orders.

Notes

¹Following Michel Foucault (1972) and others, I hold that criticism can and should be less about empirical knowledge than about creating possibilities for intervention in the social world. For a discussion of the critic as interventionist and the project of “critical historicism” in the context of communication studies, see Strine (1991). For an example of a dialogic approach to communication and its role in social transformation, see Fiske (1991).

²Essentialist ideologies posit fixed, deterministic, and universal categories (e.g., race and sex) to explain and justify human behavior and social structure. For more elaborate reflections on essentialism, see Butler (1986), Gilroy (1993) and McPhail (1991).

³For a methodological discussion of the tensions, conflicts, and benefits involved in the cross-cultural understanding of dance, see Ness (1996).

⁴For an application of Butler’s theory of gendered performance to dance, see Morris (1996c).

⁵For example, blues is held up by L. Jones (1963) and others as a pure African American musical form, but it is nonetheless both African and American, and hence European as well. In contrast to indigenous African music, the emphasis in blues lyrics on the individual marks it as Western. In addition, Jones argued, “the whole concept of the *solo*, of a man playing or singing by himself, was relatively unknown in West African music” (p. 66). Similarly, Jahn (1961) argued that dancing in couples is rare in Africa and hence dances such as the Lindy are European to the degree that they are performed by individual couples.

⁶For extended discussions of the role of rhythm and music in relation to industrialization, see Kracauer (1989) and Rogers (1994). For a parallel argument about the appeal of black musical forms, see Lipsitz (1994).

⁷For a parallel argument made in the context of European appropriations of Native American cultural forms, see Churchill’s (1994) essay “Indians Are Us?”

⁸See Holloway (1990) for an example of the difficulties in tracking the demographic makeup and cultural influences of African slaves in just one area of the “new world” (South Carolina).

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