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Race, Music, and the Ravages of History Response, Responsiveness, and Responsibility

By Ronald Radano & Philip V. Bohlman

“Those abandoned to a city ravaged by Hurricane Katrina would have been rescued had they not been black, poor, and elderly.”

“We have lost the soul of American music.”

Losing America’s Musical Soul

A deafening counterpoint arose from the destruction of New Orleans by Hurricane Katrina on 29 August 2005, and within that counterpoint race and music undeniably became the dominant voices. We write these lines not yet in the aftermath of the wasting of New Orleans, but in the wake of Katrina when the city’s own wakes have not yet begun. The racialized images of New Orleans’s citizens struggling to survive appear against the backdrop of a history of poorly managed relief attempts. The American racial imagination has been stripped bare: To see the survivors clinging to their rooftops or aimlessly wandering the streets of New Orleans is to witness what Cornel West has called in a recent commentary, “Exiles in America.” The gaze of the world fixes upon these images of a nameless, anonymous, nearly invisible population, whose dark complexions eventually disrupt the color blindness of the news commentaries. What becomes cruelly apparent is the remarkable economic and social disparities that endure in the United States. New Orleans reveals a nation divided. Its tragedy forces us to confront our racial myopia—the utter blankness of public recognition of race and poverty, of the enduring conditions of those poor and black.

How different what we hear in the wake of New Orleans’s destruction is from what we see. The counterpoint shifts modes, from the invisible to the audible; as the sight

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of nameless neighborhoods renders its populations absent, we hear the sounds of an undeniably African American past well up. Blackness sounds in the music of Bourbon Street and Preservation Hall, in the singing of Aaron Neville, and in the commentaries of Kanye West and Wynton Marsalis, whose artistic authority grants them public credibility as social critics.¹ (Could we imagine similar authority being granted to musicians in the aftermath of 9/11?) New Orleans's musical heritage becomes the means by which African Americans acquire significance in what is otherwise a denial of humanity. Suddenly, the film footage witnessed by the world is not of African Americans wandering the streets of the city, but of the famous brass bands celebrating a funeral by parading through the French Quarter.² Yet when not singing or dancing, black New Orleans seems to disappear from the realm of public awareness.

Even before the musicians themselves had been rescued, the loss of music was widely being mourned; history was far outstripping the present before the present had even been reached. The nostalgia for musics that were about fall silent, should New Orleans not return from the flood waters, could not have been louder, and in its din it amplified the qualities of race so commonly attached to the legacies of jazz, rhythm 'n' blues, soul, zydeco, cajun, and so on. Nostalgia for the loss of the city where "jazz was born" revitalized a public keening for mythical origins, even as the progeny of those inventors of jazz, who gave to modern U.S. culture its musical birthright, endured the very real, horrific circumstances of New Orleans as it endured today.

There is a certain, provocative *strangeness* to all of this, a pattern we have seen time and again. The history of race and music in the United States plays out a tale of musical celebration disconnected from the social realities that undergird the appeal of black music as national sound. The slave songs produced within an economy of slavery became, as "spirituals," symbols of interracial uplift and "freedom"; down home

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performances of rural blacks would be claimed by white northerners to articulate a musical version of urbanity and cosmopolitanism during “The Jazz Age”; radical hip-hop authenticities of street culture would morph into accompaniments of high-fashion glamour, as the real is transformed into fetishized being. As black originality assumes a public stature as national voice, so does the humanity of African America, the visible personhood of black culture, fade into the background. Tragedies, ruptures, catastrophes disrupt this logic, forcing the naked realities of race and poverty onto the center stage. And so we witness the surreal media spectacle of historic clips of New Orleans musical “preservation” while the city’s black residents struggle to survive Third-World conditions.

European Unity 2005 – Racial Redux

The convergence of race and music accompanying the devastation of New Orleans by Hurricane Katrina might too easily be dismissed as an isolated historical moment in the summer of 2005. Isolating historical events is one of the means whereby denial takes place, for it shifts race to the domain of the unknowable and the uncontrollable, and it excuses inaction by suggesting that action would have been of no consequence. The devastation of New Orleans, however, was no more a “catastrophe of biblical proportions,” as many with power have piously claimed, than the populist denial of a constitution for the European Unity in the summer of 2005 revealed a belief shared by many Europeans that there was a need to save European civilization—their civilization—from the forces that would undermine its historical accomplishments, indeed, the very victory of the Enlightenment as the beacon of Europe’s racial imagination.

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Admittedly, we modulate here rather abruptly, from the American South to the European East, but we do so also deliberately, admitting to the conjunction and disjunction, consonance and dissonance, that form the borders of denying race itself. In the summer of 2005, European unity and, in the words of many, the “history of European civilization,” were put to the test of referenda in France and the Netherlands, whose citizens were asked to approve the EU Constitution. Political leaders in both countries staked their political fortunes on approval, but in June 2005, first France and then the Netherlands soundly rejected the Constitution. The two referenda represented public opinion in two European nations with large foreign populations, particularly large Muslim populations, which sustained a postcolonial continuity with former colonies in Muslim North Africa and Southeast Asia.

The referenda confronted the European Union on one of its most delicate—and invisible—issues, the growing presence of Islam in Europe, which, as we examined in the “Introduction” to *Music and the Racial Imagination*, has historically determined one of the most visible facets of the European racial imagination. The dual processes of unification and integration within the European Union threatened a Europe whose identity was defined as culturally Christian and racially white.³ In the summer of 2005, the moment to deny race had drawn nigh. Only a year earlier, in May 2004, the EU had expanded into Eastern Europe, encompassing ten new member states along the eastern periphery. Through expansion, the EU had also drawn itself to the borders of Turkey, which had for years actively campaigned to join the EU.⁴ Turkey’s potential inclusion, however, would make it the largest single member, and as Muslim nation it would open the political floodgates. The moment to deny Islamic entrance into Europe had arrived, yet again, in the twenty-first century.

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For many Europeans, confirmation of that moment arrived within a month after the rejection of the EU Constitution, with the July 7th bombings in London. Arguably, Britain had followed a rather complex process of denying race in its postcolonial history. Cultural and ethnic differences characterized West Indian and South Asian populations in the United Kingdom, and these differences, presumably, mapped onto the class differences that otherwise pervaded British society. Postcolonial Britain had managed to contain its growing populations of Muslim Others, from Africa and from Pakistan, but the July 7th bombings changed all that. Shockingly for many, the “terrorists” largely came not from without, but from within. It was not they who had crossed borders to threaten England, but rather their ancestors. The dilemma that emerged was just how to distinguish the new enemy within, how to make the invisible Muslim a visible terrorist. British politicians and police alike responded quickly to the dilemma: They instituted a program of racial profiling. Unable to fathom how “Islamic terrorists” could grow up in a society that had provided them with so much, the British government racialized them.

In *Music and the Racial Imagination* we remarked on the ways in which the sound of Islam fills Europe’s public sphere in the historical present. Since 2000, when the book was published, but even more since many Western nations—not just “the coalition of the willing” in Iraq, but NATO as the military arm of Europe in Afghanistan—have entered into global war with Islamic political, ideological, and religious enemies. Islam, as Europe’s racial Other, has been made audible through sound and music. Its rejection of head scarves and the EU Constitution notwithstanding, France cannot deny the audibility of *rai*, the popular music of former North African colonies that fills the airwaves of the Parisian center. If Turkey’s entrance into the European Union could be postponed indefinitely in December 2002, the Turkish entry in the Eurovision Song Contest, Sertab Erener’s “Every Way That I Can,” could claim victory five months later in May 2003.

There can be no denying the global racialization of Islam and its music since the publication of *Music and the Racial Imagination*. What had been invisible is now audible; the culture that had been local in its otherness, is now global in its selfness. To deny the racialization of Islam in the wake of the European Enlightenment or in the wake of 9/11 and the July 7th London bombings would be to deny history itself.

Music History and the History of Race – Riffing and Rapping, Response and Responsibility

The responses to *Music and the Racial Imagination* that Wayne Bowman has gathered for this issue of *ACT* reveal clearly that the book's call has not remained isolated. We could not welcome those responses more, for they demonstrate richly and provocatively that our call for engagement is not going unheeded. They celebrate the seriousness of MRI's subject, which is to say, they accept the call to join in an interventionist scholarship by themselves responding. Equally as critical, it seems to us, these responses emerge as important new voices in the historical counterpoint we strove to unleash in the book. As such new voices respond to the racial imagination sound through music, they, too, call forth history as a response and invest musical scholarship with responsibility.

As we read these responses to MRI, we recognize that their witness to the history and music historiography of the racial imagination assumes very different forms. Surely, those diverse forms are inevitable, for each response confronts the questions of denial directly, from musicologist Naomi André's announcement that the book would not appear as her grandmother's or her mother's musicology, to music educator Eric Akrofi's remapping of D. A. Masolo's Kenyan landscape on the whole of Africa. The music history of the racial imagination further assumes multidimensional forms, following the

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observations of the authors that MRI freed that history from the divide between black and white. History thus stretches across clearly racialized territories in the “research on music and anti-racism education” that drew Deborah Bradley into music education or in the dominance of hip hop in the “post-Civil Rights Music” that resonates through Rinaldo Walcott’s essay. We regard as extremely important the dimensions opened by Elizabeth Gould’s invitation to deny the silence accorded the lesbian imagination. Ultimately, the new historical voices that emerge from the responses are those of silence-in-history, the silence, as Wayne Bowman states in his editorial, “that has historically posed the greatest danger to confronting the insidious destruction of racism.”

That we turn to the present essay as a response to the responses should be evident in the title and subtitle of this section, which we intentionally load with historical tropes. Riffing and rapping, response and responsibility, connect past to present in distinctive ways that couple the musical and the racial, and in so doing they metaphorically join subject and subjectivity in a music scholarship and music education of engagement in some distinctive ways. The destruction of New Orleans by Hurricane Katrina, considered from the historiographic perspective of scholars studying music and race, confronts us with a case of having witnessed the invisibility of race before. The point is clearly not one of history’s repeating itself, that banal adage of those who refuse to attribute agency to themselves, for example, George W. Bush’s dismissal of racism by claiming that Katrina was “color blind.” The responses in *ACT*, in contrast, seize upon the subjectivity that can no longer be denied when one recognizes agency in history. The responses act historically by drawing us into many and different presents, above all those in which music and race have multiple meanings (André and Bradley), and insist on their presence in places that are unsettling because they allow music to act in ways far more political and ideological than the threadbare aesthetics of contained musical works has permitted (Walcott and Gould). Historical agency demands a diligence that not only recognizes that

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the racial imagination includes racism and racial discrimination, but that music scholarship and education incorporate that recognition into what it is that our research and teaching accomplish. What it accomplishes is change, and change is the path that history follows when it does not repeat itself because it cannot repeat itself.

Beginning Again

A concern for time pervades the responses to *Music and the Racial Imagination* gathered by our colleagues for this issue of *ACT*. There is a recognition of urgency, that the time for critical concern for music and race is long overdue; there is a perceived need to recapture lost time, thereby retrieving it for a more critical assessment of the ethnographic present; there is the timeliness of this issue of *ACT*, which bears with it the charge to act in the historical present wrought by the destruction of New Orleans and the baring of America's musical soul. Music, so relentlessly accompanying and articulating time, pleads with us not to deny time. At the same moment, in the same beat, it pleads with us to witness—visibly and audibly—race.

The concern for time that arises from these responses to *Music and the Racial Imagination* brings us in closing to the similarly trenchant concern for time that runs like a leitmotif through the writing of Ralph Ellison, writing that insistently riffed on the counterpoint between race and music. For Ellison time assumed many and diverse forms—the lifetime of his eponymous invisible man, the historic and historical meaning of *Juneteenth*, the rhetoric of his jazz criticism (Ellison 1947, 1999, and 2001). We witness time returning again and again, in the rhythm of music that makes race sonically visible. We close our response to these responses in *ACT* by returning to Ellison and to his call to action, returning as did he near the end of *Invisible Man*, where we hear what we do not see: the very cry to begin again.

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The street lay dead quiet in the light of the lately risen moon, the gunfire thin and for a moment, distant. The rioting seemed in another world. For a moment I paused beneath a low, thickly leaved tree, looking down the well-kept doily-shadowed walks past silent houses. It was as though the tenants had vanished, leaving the houses silent with all windows shaded, refugees from a rising flood. Then I heard the single footfalls coming doggedly toward me in the night, an eerie slapping sound followed by a precise and hallucinated cry—

*“Time’s flying
Souls dying
The coming of the Lord
Draweth niiiigh!”*

—as though he had run for days, for years. He trotted past where I stood beneath the tree, his bare feet slapping the walk in silence, going for a few feet and then the high, hallucinated cry beginning again.

(Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 553-54)

Notes

¹ Rapper, The Legendary K.O., quickly sample Kanye West’s commentary and mixed into “George Bush Doesn’t Care about Black People”: “Swam to the store, tryin’ to look for food / . . . Got what I could but before I was through / News say the police shot a black man trying to loot.”

² The media have played a major role in racializing the images of New Orleans residents in search of food and other necessities for survival. African Americans are far more often depicted as “looters” than are white residents, who instead are provided with captions calling attention to them immediately after they have “found” food and provisions. See, e.g., Clarence Page’s editorial in *The Chicago Tribune*, 4 September 2005; cf. an even more recent commentary, Page, “We’re Still 2 Nations after All These Years,” *The Chicago Tribune*, 14 September 2005.

³ There has been a concerted by several largely Catholic EU member states, for example, to include language in the EU Constitution to acknowledge Europe as Christian, hence transforming the Constitution into a weapon that would fend off Islam.

⁴ To make this point even clearer we draw the reader's attention to the fact that Cyprus was one of the new EU member states admitted in May 2004, but indeed it was only Greek Cyprus, not Turkish Cyprus, that was allowed to join.

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