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Ghetto Voyeurism?

Cross-racial listening and the attribution of sociocultural distance in popular music

L'écoute trans-raciale et l'attribution d'une distance socioculturelle dans les musiques populaires

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Ghetto Voyeurism?

Cross-racial listening and the attribution of class difference in popular music

by

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Abstract: This article argues that the racial politics of music could be reconsidered by focusing on social relations rather than musical objects. In that context it explores the situated politics of reported listening. What can an analysis of classic accounts of listening at the birth of music genres tell us about the changing shape of US race relations? It argues that abstract, “innocent” listening is an ontological fiction that has facilitated the perpetuation of assumptions about racial difference. Abstracted descriptions of listening function to naturalize social differences between subjects of different races. The idea that popular music begins with discovery of found sounds also acts as an alibi to transmit these assumptions. Various historical examples show that racial difference is *musically* deemed interesting when it is connected to *class* distinction. I tentatively label this a “ghetto voyeurist” assumption and suggest that it has tacitly helped to reproduce social hierarchies.

Keywords: *listening – race – class – folk – voyeurism – found object – popular music*

Résumé : Cet article soutient que la dimension raciale de la musique pourrait être reconsidérée à partir d’un déplacement, des objets musicaux vers les relations sociales. Dans ce contexte, il explore la politique située d’écoutes rapportées. Que peut nous dire une analyse de propos tenus sur l’écoute au moment de la naissance de genres musicaux sur les mutations des rapports raciaux aux États-Unis? Ensuite, elle défend l’idée que l’écoute « innocente » est une fiction ontologique qui a pour but de naturaliser des différences sociales entre des sujets de « races » différentes. L’idée que les musiques populaires naissent avec des sons trouvés sert également d’alibi à la transmission de telles préconceptions. L’analyse de plusieurs exemples historiques démontre que la différence raciale n’est intéressante musicalement que dès l’instant où elle est liée à une distinction de classe. J’appelle ceci « ghetto voyeurism », et je suggère qu’il a tacitement aidé à reproduire des hiérarchies sociales.

Mots-clés : *écoute – race – classe – tradition – voyeurism – objet trouvé – musiques populaires*

What can an analysis of classic accounts of cross-racial listening tell us about the constitution of US race relations in popular music?¹ This article proceeds in three stages. The first considers the limitations of existing arguments by examining the critical debate over Steve Reich's composition piece "Come Out." Here I argue that attention to the musical object, even in its historic context, has limitations because it cannot offer firm empirical ground to assess the politics of race. In the second section, I make a case for examining accounts of listening as an alternative way to assess race relations. In particular, I argue that abstracted, "innocent" listening deflects attention away from the situated nature of social encounters. I then expose a shared assumption that I tentatively call "ghetto voyeurism": the reassertion of social distance in accounts of cross-racial listening through the expression of hierarchical distinctions between classes. To extend this section, I begin to frame "ghetto voyeurism" within its historical context, considering its relationship to folk sensibilities and the idea of found sound. In the third section I examine a small series of accounts that recall genre-founding moments of listening with the aim of assessing their cultural work. My connecting argument in this piece is that apprehending music as an alienated object can *block* our understanding of its role in racial politics. To more fully understand the relationship between music and race, we must transcend both notions of the musical object and the fiction of "innocent" listening.

"Come Out" and the Limitations of Music as Object

At the height of the civil rights era, the avant-garde composer Steve Reich created a provocative cross-racial composition called "Come Out" (1966). This sound collage was structured around a repeated tape loop that featured the voice of Daniel Hamm, a black youth who had been accused of murder in the Harlem riot of 1964. "Come Out" was designed as part of the soundtrack to a benefit event supporting justice for Hamm and the rest of the Harlem Six. For Reich, it was an exercise in revealing and intensifying the "natural" meaning of a black subject's utterance. According to the composer, "By using recorded speech as a source of electronic or tape music, speech-melody and meaning are presented as they naturally occur" (Reich 2002: 19). No music is "natural," however; "Come Out" was a carefully contrived composition. Its phase-shifted structure created a mesmerizing sonic architecture that arguably displaced attention from Hamm's words towards an indeterminate sound pattern that primarily highlighted the process of its own repetition.

How, then, might we begin to assess the racial politics of any piece? Popular music research has produced a variety of answers to such questions. The adoption of music styles beyond their once segregated genres has traditionally been discussed using three types of argument. The first – reflected in common phrases such as "stealing the blues" – is that relations between different races have played out as moments of cultural appropriation. Underlying this is the assumption that music

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has at some level become *de facto* racial property – an assumption that is actually a widespread in the literature. For instance, social historians have examined the racial dynamics of popular music as *collective cultural product or form of communication* (Kelley 1998; Neale 1999). Others have considered race in relation to creativity (George 2008/1988), industrial practice (Schur 2009) or genre conventions (Rose 1994; Quinn 2004). Notions of the “trickster” in some of this work have associated music making with resistance and a refusal to be appropriated (see Perry 2005).

In its more sophisticated variants, the appropriation argument is associated with the idea that whites unconsciously perceive that they lack certain characteristics expressed in styles traditionally associated with black musicians. Timothy Taylor, for instance, described how black music supposedly appealed to white musicians as a “transgressive” form:

Because of the historical oppression of African Americans, most black musics are assumed to be transgressive, and so the aesthetic qualities these musics – such as vocal quality, vocal style, and approaches to time – have taken on anti-hegemonic significations which were seized upon by [white] rock musicians and are maintained in countless ways. (Taylor 2007: 169)

Sumanth Gopinath (2011) locates Reich’s hypnotic tape loop of Hamm’s voice as a form of “radical” or “avant-garde” minstrelsy. Studying blackface, Eric Lott (1995) has also argued that intercultural performance could be a self-conscious way of constructing *whiteness* through a process of racial burlesque. Both Lott (1995: 55) and Simon Frith (1998: 131) have tentatively extended this idea to

rock and roll. While it is a strong argument, especially applied to blackface, ideas of burlesquing require us to *infer* the intentions of performers as racial subjects. Analysing “Come Out” this way, for example, would mean asking what seemed to be missing from Reich’s conception of whiteness that necessitated his focus on Hamm’s words.

A second kind of argument could be called “integrationist.” Its key premise is the notion that rather than simply appropriating black sounds, white performers have led the way to racial integration. For example, Sam Phillips explained:

Until rock and roll music came along the grossest of all racial discrimination in America was in music. You had pop music – which was for a certain type of people; you had country and western music, which was supposedly for another class, and you had what we called in those days “race” music. So if you’re talking about segregation there was no better example of it than in music, and I just hope that I played some part in breaking that down in some way. (Sam Phillips in Connolly 1973: online)

If music is not racial property in a strict sense (Tagg 1989), it is also true, however, that genre traditions can mean that audiences have learned to associate particular sounds, styles and genres with specific races. One challenge to this argument is that it seems to view black music as a freely available social resource and therefore ignores its history as a form of racial heritage.

Recent scholars have radically reconsidered the appropriation and integrationist arguments by pursuing an empirical music history approach. Their work has shown the hybridized roots and dialogic nature of many popular music forms (see, for example, Tosches 2002; Leland 2004;

Miller 2010). They have also demonstrated that white agents associated with music recording and distribution projecting *their own* concerns on to commercial culture by contributing to the segregated marketing of recorded music (Hamilton 2007a). Their work reminds us that popular music is a dialogic form that has a racial politics beyond the categories of the record industry.

Cross-racial music making evokes controversy, however, and cannot be neatly summarized by appropriation or integrationist or empirical arguments. Both music and race are complex historical and cultural fields. Unilateral arguments about their relationship are therefore rarely amenable to conclusive treatments. More specifically, the traditional focus on sounds or their contexts of production is highly problematic, a core issue being that each point of reference is inherently polyvalent. One perspective on “Come Out” is that Reich erased the vocal presence of his African-American subject. In that context, commentators such as Morris (2004: 63) have challenged his idea of “naturally occurring” meaning. Yet by itself Reich’s inherently mutable text cannot tell us how to perceive his stance on race. Arguments about music are weak because they do not operate on the terrain of definitive, solid and specific empirical evidence. Questions of racial property, intercultural burlesque, musical influence, sampling or financial exploitation are matters of interpretation, subject to change depending on the perspective taken by the researcher and where he or she draws boundaries around the object. Empirical data cannot answer whether we should, for example, see Reich and Hamm purely as individuals, as rep-

resentatives of their respective races, or both. Our understanding is also shaped by our perspective on Reich’s artistry and authorial intent, Hamm’s agency (or relative lack of it), and, indeed, “Come Out’s” historical context. The composition’s racial politics change significantly depending on how one interprets both its music form, historical context, and the merits of “avant-garde minstrelsy.” Part of the problem here stems from putting the focus of attention on the music as a kind of object or property, rather than a mediating factor in a web of social relations. Other kinds of analysis are needed.

One way to understand the racial politics of “Come Out” is therefore to examine its maker’s accounts of *cross-racial listening*. According to Jacques Attali (1985), music represents a relationship between people. Christopher Small (1998) has also suggested that music is not a “thing” at all but a social activity, something that people *do* in various ways together. Like these authors, my own position is to consider music not as an *object* passed or spread between races, but rather as a focal point in the ongoing renegotiation of race relations. Whiteness has sometimes been studied as a form of social identity that is organized through its “unmarked” quality. Avant-garde artists like Reich have been accused of taking up positions that erase the markers of their own racial subjectivity and of expressing their whiteness through a preferred association with “nothingness” (see, for example Whitesell 2001). What little they have to say about their practice of listening contributes to this perception because it so rarely highlights their situated or embodied identity. Not only do

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they refrain from discussing artistic intentions; they also displace their listening as a practice, relocating their personal agency as something that is subsumed under the neutral operation of music technology or determined by sound.

Discussing the origins of “Come Out” Reich explained, “... I would do it on one condition, and the condition was that if I found something in all this mass of tape that I wanted to make a piece out of, that he would let me do that” (quoted in Gopinath 2011: 127). Reich’s listening is referenced only indirectly here, as a practice that enables something that might be useful in his own artistic project: the discovery of a fragment of found sound. Though the composer constructs a social relation with Hamm by making his voice public, he also uses the alienated medium of the sound carrier (tape) as a way to *deflect attention* away from their relationship. Any evidence of race relations enacted by Reich’s approach is therefore displaced on to a terrain that cannot reveal very much. As an avant-garde performer, Reich was well aware of that concern. At one point, he actually explored the proposition that “I am a second tape recorder” as part of his composition process (quoted in Zukerman 2002: online).

Beyond Abstract Listening

Attention to the politics of reported listening can offer a fresh and productive perspective on the question of music and race. Much of the literature on listening has tended to frame it as an abstract – and abstracted – physiological or musicological

practice, not part of a situated encounter. Sometimes listening is described as an innate capacity organized around a natural, passive act of reception (hearing) that can, nevertheless, be modified, tutored or trained. Following in the wake of Adorno (1938/1991), who discussed what he saw as a generalized mode of “regressive” listening, writers in popular music studies have tended to connect listening with various forms of social critique. Anahid Kassabian, for instance, writes:

Those of us in industrialized settings (at least) have developed, from the omnipresence of music in our daily lives, a mode of listening dissociated from specific generic characteristics of the music... the term “ubiquitous listening” best describes the phenomenon I am discussing. (Kassabian 2002: 137)²

While I do not wholly disagree, “ubiquitous listening” and similar perspectives consistently portray listening as a series of *human responses or approaches to sound* open to analysis primarily in relation to either physiology (questions of loudness, arousal, pain), psychoanalysis (selection, pleasure, plenitude, *jouissance*) or questions of agency on the part of a generalized listener (selection, attention, activity, labour). In such work, generalized “modes” of listening are defined and understood (for example “quotation listening,” “background listening,” “acousmatic listening” or “atomized listening”). At worst, this diverse corpus of work is in danger of reductively suggesting that either the usage of playback technology or the musical object itself will *determine* how we listen. For example, introducing a section on listening in their academic reader, *Audio Cultures*, Christopher Cox and Daniel Warner (2004: 65) explain, “Radio

and sound recording radically changed the act of listening to music, and altered the very nature of music as well.” In their view – which I think is representative of much of this field – listening is generalized (“the act”) and never located in relation to the actual racial identities of the listener and performer.

Accounts of listening are always performances of social identity. The common idea of abstract listening (“the act”) has itself therefore helped to blind us to the way that reports of listening can enact social relations.³ The interracial dynamic of popular music is played out not only through the creation of sounds, but by mediating acts of cross-racial listening. Shifting focus from Reich’s composition itself to *his account of how he heard Hamm’s words* may help to assess the perception of race that shaped music. Unfortunately, such accounts about “Come Out” are collapsed by the composer into his discussion of the musical product itself, portraying Reich as a silent listener and editor, not a speaker. While popular music, in comparison, has sometimes been associated with racial politics that are equally unclear, its participants are less cryptic and more open in their discussions of listening.

Although music has been celebrated as a laboratory for new forms of social unity, it is, as a social encounter – more often than we might like to admit – a residue of *existing* relations. We can talk about being physically pained by sounds. We can talk about being disgusted by a musician’s ideological stance or questionable claim to authenticity. There are, however, no words to describe the way that accounts of listening

contribute to the reproduction of existing social relations. From that perspective, listening is not “innocent,” abstract, general, purely sonic or technically determined. Instead it is socially situated, constitutive of the way that social relations are organized and pursued. The flood of musical sounds is inevitably framed by a listener’s predispositions, and in that sense *in each act of listening* individuals *project* sociocultural interpretations on to what they hear. When musical experiences are publicly discussed, the widespread *perception* that listening is an “innocent” activity (either an abstract practice or matter of individual autonomy) itself does cultural work in facilitating an obfuscation of pre-existing cultural identities and social relations. To highlight this, I suggest using the term “innocent” listening. “Innocent” listening is not a *mode* of listening, but a *way of understanding and reporting* what is heard which comes with its own set of assumptions. Chief amongst these is that it is acceptable to recount listening as a generalized or abstract practice rather than explicitly thinking about the social identities of all participants.

In the context of cross-racial encounters, “innocent” listening can be a pretext for “ghetto voyeurism.” By suggesting this term, I mean the tendency of white listeners to construct their accounts of listening experience in ways that re-inscribe social distance *often despite a sense of cross-racial empathy*. “Ghetto voyeurism” is not an individual predilection, but a set of larger ideological assumptions expressed in accounts of listening that use race as a pretext for social difference and hierarchy. Although, a set of assump-

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tions about music and race, “ghetto voyeurism” was *first* applied to performances from rural places – as Jennifer Ryan (2011) has suggested, for example, appreciation for the Delta blues is often characterized by a fetishization of poverty – perceptions of race as an “urban problem” meant that it almost inevitably shifted to focus on music made in poor inner city areas. I am not using the term “ghetto” to talk about musical objects.⁴ I am also aware that it is a slang term often wielded as a weapon against impoverished black communities in the USA. In contrast, I use it as a charged term to register discomfort and critique the way that accounts of listening have exoticized the abject poverty that has emerged from racial oppression.

In effect, “ghetto voyeurism” reflects the distancing assumptions behind cross-racial listening discussed within the context of a folk sensibility, an accepted notion of found sound, and a discourse of “innocent” listening. By the term “folk” here I do not simply mean a changing type of music. Rather, it in its full sense – and, ironically, despite its own universalist claims – folk can be seen as an ontological formation premised on a particular paradigm that divides society into different social groups that are supposedly classifiable on a scale from early to modern culture. Folk authenticity has an ideological function because its *listeners* have indirectly claimed a *different* social standing from its performers. Advocates of folk music have traditionally professed a concern to preserve a disappearing culture and to support social equality. My argument here is that modern society has also developed a notion of the *found sound* – for

instance, the field recording – that has, in turn, allowed people to express social difference in an indirect and therefore more accepted way.

“Ghetto voyeurism” rests on the use of folk assumptions to structure accounts of cross-racial encounters. The folk blues offers classic example. In the decade between 1920 and 1930 the rate of urban migration doubled amongst the African-American population, ushering in the era of what Alaine Locke (1925) called the “New Negro.” America’s black population was increasingly urbanized and aspiring to middle class status. In effect, the folk blues paradigm tended to deny African-Americans symbolic participation in high modernity by focusing attention on the subaltern remainder of the community. Consider Dorothy Scarborough, for instance, who wrote about black folk song in 1925. According to Marybeth Hamilton (2007a: 52), “The more she read, the more convinced she became. African-Americans’ too-enthusiastic embrace of modernity, in the form of education, factory labour and migration to cities, were [sic] eradicating what one commentator described as the Negro’s ‘highest gift, his spontaneity.’” Equally, when the folk music expert John Lomax recorded the black performer Leadbelly in Angola State Penitentiary, Louisiana, in 1933, he was listening for “the Negro who has had the least contact with jazz, the radio, and with the white man” (quoted in Filene, 2000: 51). “Ghetto voyeurism” can be viewed as a response to the prospect of racially integrated modernity: white subjects’ extended attempt to assert social difference. John Lomax’s communication assumed a hierarchical set of race

relations and put the assumption on open display, but more recent claims to “innocent” listening have made it in much less obvious ways.

Looking at Listening: Accounts of Genre-founding Moments

Complicating the idea of folk as lost rural music is the fact that the sensibility has, in modernity, informed the ideological foundations of several mainstream commercial genres. Although it was used to frame musicians from places such as the Mississippi Delta, the folk sensibility has also been adopted to promote music reflecting abject poverty in urban areas. In this section I compare several accounts of listening from the history of popular music that correspond roughly to the birth of rock and roll, hip-hop, and the YouTube era.⁵ My aim is not to consider how different agents arrived at their particular musical interests or to explore the full complexity of different musical and social realms. The analysis is couched as a chain of moments precisely to show the cultural work of founding accounts. What unites these recalled moments of listening is the continued adoption of a kind of aural “gaze” that has emphasized social difference in the context of changing technologies and cultures.

Sam Phillips is a central figure in any cross-racial history of popular music. Unable to sing or play an instrument, Phillips made his living first as a DJ on WREC in Memphis, then from 1950 onwards as owner of the Memphis Recording Service. From his base at Sun Studio on Union

Avenue, he recorded a series of black singers, then fostered the careers of a young Elvis Presley and a stream of rockabilly musicians. Sam’s self-reported fascination with the folk side of the blues placed him closer to John Lomax than his reputation as a racial assimilator might suggest. After all, he recorded black convicts (the Prisonaires) for Sun and was interested in hearing “genuine untutored negro” music made by men “with field mud on their boots and patches on their overalls ... battered instruments and unfettered techniques” (quoted in Guralnick 1994: 6). In other words, at Sun Records he was listening for musical sounds that would locate local African-American performers as subjects at various stages of departure from metropolitan modernity. As he claimed during a *Radio Times* interview in 1973, “I didn’t want anyone trying to sound like Nat King Cole or something they weren’t” (in Connolly 1973: online). In an era of racial segregation, Sam was unusual for his willingness to offer ordinary African-American performers material opportunities and enthusiastic support. Yet, *as a folk blues fan*, he also listened to their voices with the aim of evaluating them as something distinct from modern society. When he first listened to Elvis, however, his approach switched from a folk style to something less obvious:

Now, keep in mind that I heard something in Presley that intrigued the hell outta me... I couldn’t approach anything that I had in mind to do between black Southern music and white Southern music, the thing that I grew up on, and white and black Southern religious music. I was looking for these things and the kinship there. I don’t know exactly how I expected it to take place, I really do not, but it’s just like a scientist

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in a lab with some test-tubes and a little acid here and whatever else, y'know. (Phillips in Cajiao 1997: 29)

In the case of both the black artists that he recorded and of Elvis, Sam used his listening skills in a commanding, editorial way, to search for found sounds that he could sell commercially. With Elvis, however, his listening oscillated between *hearing* (listening to) the young singer and actively *listening for* something new (in effect *envisioning* something through his listening). While his pre-emptive listening reportedly rated black performers on their folk credentials (their Southern working class departure from a smooth modern style), he evaluated his young white singer on an ability to bring white and black vernacular traditions together. In other words, while Sam wanted all his charges to “be themselves,” when recording black artists he acted as a “ghetto voyeurist” listener, pushing for a more arcane style of performance, but when he recorded a young artist of his own race he listened for a more updated, racially integrated sound. Indeed, in 1997 Phillips even claimed that rather than using Scotty Moore, he had initially considered pairing Elvis with the black guitarist Floyd Murphy (Burke and Griffin 2006: 12). His aim with Elvis was to represent forward-thinking youth and *modernize* vernacular traditions by integrating them. When Jim Denny first decided not to put Elvis Presley on *The Grand Ole Opry* after deciding he would spoil the radio show’s traditional style, Sam countered, “The world has changed, Jim, we got jet airplanes!” (Phillips in Cajiao 1997: 33)⁶ In terms of his listening, Sam is therefore a complex figure: consistent in his desire to capture soul (“feel”) as an authentic expression

of the human spirit, but also positioned as a participant in a “ghetto voyeurist” history of popular music by his pre-emptive practices of listening to black musicians. My aim here is not to judge on Sam or any other individual, but rather to register the socio-cultural distance established by the folk paradigm itself within which he and many others operated. His particular case shows the way that a “ghetto voyeurist” ontology can manifest itself even within the context of a profound cross-racial empathy.

In late 1980, Malcolm McLaren came to New York to put on a live concert with his post-Pistols pop project, Bow Wow Wow. Looking for an opening act, he met up with Michael Holman, a filmmaker who had previously performed on stage with The Tubes. For a BBC documentary, McLaren recalled:

I was really stuck for a responsible, interesting and exciting kind of opening act... A friend of mine introduced me to a guy, who I met on the street somewhere on the street down on Fifth Avenue, who told me about an incredible scene that was happening, not in Manhattan, but out in the suburbs, known as the South Bronx. He said if I liked I could come down on a Saturday night where they were holding a big party and I would see something that couldn’t possibly have ever existed in England ... The party was actually out in the open, in a wasteland surrounded by these huge fired-out condominiums. There in the midst of it was about a thousand kids. I couldn’t believe it. I was very very worried, being the only white guy there, and the cab driver giving me the signal that I should put my dollars in my socks... I got to the decks, where the music was coming from, and shook hands with this huge fat guy, who later became known to me as Afrika Bambaataa. What I witnessed was ... the

sound coming out was totally inarticulate: a load of rough noises... the sound I realized was coming from how they are messing around with their hands on the decks, moving records backwards and forwards... The crowd was extremely volatile and it times would jump into pitched battles...⁷

As a “ghetto voyeurist” moment, everything is on the surface in McLaren’s account. It both highlights his race and follows a kind of Conradian “Heart of Darkness” narrative. McLaren explains how he ventures across the “wrong” side of a racial, geographic and class divide to explore a musical culture that he sees as folk in its form (“rough noises”), exotic (“totally inarticulate”) and savage (“the crowd was extremely volatile”). Central to the account is also the idea that McLaren – who stuck out at the time as he was dressed in a pirate suit – was risking his wellbeing by getting closer to the source of this music. The sound of the Bronx was not something *overheard*, or *listened for* (as in Phillips’ account) but instead *sought out for* its sense of difference and otherness.

New York’s hip-hop culture evidently preceded its “discovery” by McLaren. Yet it became the basis of a whole field of recorded music organized through found sound and black creativity which – at least since Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five released “The Message” in 1982 – catered, in part, to a white audience by representing the desperate predicament of an African-American urban underclass.⁸ Speaking on the same BBC documentary, McLaren continued his description of the newly-publicized hip-hop culture by merging stereotypical notions of race and class with his perspective on a collective struggle for self-esteem:

I think hip-hop is being in control of your body. That’s the whole art of it: actually understanding that you are much bigger than you are – it’s a demonstration of your prowess. If you haven’t got a dime in your pocket, the one thing you can do on Madison Avenue is spin on your head and show all the white honkies moving out of the Chase Manhattan bank on a lunch time, to say, “Well, hell. Beat that. And if you can’t, here’s my cap: give me a few dollars.”

Statements like this seem loaded with the bluntest stereotypes: black masculinity as a demonstration of physical prowess; the “classing” of black performance as a form of begging to upper class white New Yorkers; joining the white order by controlling the black body. Yet McLaren’s engagement with hip-hop was largely welcomed and respected. During his New York trip he screened Holman’s 1981 film “Catch A Beat” as the opening act for Bow Wow Wow at the Ritz, then hired Holman to create a hip-hop collective that included DJ Afrika Bambaataa and the Rock Steady Crew. Two years later McLaren released the single “Buffalo Girls” with the World’s Famous Supreme Team, which became part of his *Duck Rock* LP – a multi-racial album that featured input from a mixture of musicians of different nationalities. When it was reformulated in 1998 as *Buffalo Gals Back to Skool*, KRS-One, Rakim and De La Soul all volunteered their services. In other words, despite his status as an archetypal “ghetto voyeurist” listener, Malcolm McLaren, like Sam Phillips, popularized a musical form and allowed its practitioners to find support from a wider marketplace. *Duck Rock* shrewdly explored “ghetto voyeurism” at the beginning of a genre that squarely played upon it.

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My final example comes from a recent parodic reworking of a genre that seems most obviously associated with “ghetto voyeurist” assumptions, gangsta rap. At 3.10am early one Wednesday morning, late in July 2010, a black woman named Kelly Dodson, from Huntsville, Alabama, awoke to find an intruder and potential rapist in her bed. Her assailant escaped, and when WAFF-48 television news came to interview her family about the incident, Dodson’s brother Antoine performed a warning: “You don’t have to confess you did it. We are looking for you. We gonna find you. I’m letting you know now so you can run and tell that, homeboy.” (See Gentle 2010: online) Almost immediately a video clip of the footage featuring this rather theatrical warning was uploaded to YouTube and it started to go viral.

Delivered with a certain air of camp, Antoine Dodson’s admonition formed the centerpiece of a filmed performance that seemed risibly ineffective. Two days after it first appeared online, the Gregory Brothers – who had already gained a reputation for their humorous auto-tuned re-workings of news reports (a phenomenon that became known as “unintentional singing”) – released a version of Dodson’s tirade called “Bed Intruder.” By August the *Wired* magazine reporter Eliot Van Buskirk claimed, “It’s not just a meme, it’s music – perhaps *the* music of our time. Hundreds of other artists of all stripes – everyone from acoustic folk duos to marching bands – have already covered the song.” (see Van Buskirk 2010: online) Evidently, he was right: “Bed Intruder” broke over seven million views in ten days, prompted more than 2,000 YouTube responses with perfor-

mances of the song in different genres, including a marching band version. Its single also made the Billboard Hot 100 (see Chace 2010). At the Black Entertainment Television Award ceremony in 2010, a version featuring Dodson rapping with Gregory on keyboards was introduced by a presenter who mugged a news report: “Just in: a crime was committed on the 500 block of Western Drive. We have an eye-witness on the scene now...”

Michael Gregory explained to *Wired* that Dodson would get half the revenue from the song as its unintentional lyricist. He located his own cross-class, cross-racial listening *purely in musical terms*:

I really wanted to listen to the contours of [Antoine Dodson’s] voice, and the way that he was emoting. I’ve done this enough so that when I heard him talk, I could hear the melody, and that melody kind of changes connotation depending on what key I put it in. Then I do the instrumental track and put it on top... We’re really breaking “unintentional singing” ground, so we’re trying to set precedents by making it so that Antoine, or whoever that artist might be in the future, has a stake not only as an artist but as a co-author of the song. (Van Buskirk 2010: online)

Like Steve Reich and Sam Phillips, Gregory was evidently *listening for* something in what he heard. It is relevant to contrast his words to Reich’s earlier claim to represent Daniel Hamm’s “speech-melody” as it “naturally” occurred. Both Gregory and Reich used their listening to find meaning in black subjects’ voices. In interview, however, Gregory highlighted his agency in finding melody and being able to shape meaning. By listening carefully, he could take Dodson’s linguistic cues (“home-

boy”) and turn his already performative speech into auto-tuned comedy hip-hop. “Bed Intruder” marks an era in which found sound comes from the internet (see Miller 2008). Indeed, a similar YouTube clip exploded in 2012 that showed Kimberley “Sweet Brown” Wilkins explaining to KFOR-4 news in Oklahoma City how she escaped from an apartment fire. It was transformed into an auto-tuned mix called “Ain’t Nobody Got Time For That” and received over 107 million YouTube hits within two years in both its original and auto-tune versions.¹⁰ The issue here is not one of *racial ownership* (which individual as a representative of his respective race *owns* “Bed Intruder” or “Ain’t Nobody Got Time For That”), *financial exploitation* or *musical influence*; diverse agents are leveraging a shared set of genre expectations to create a new strain of comedy records. Beyond any issue of Dodson’s or Brown’s complicity in aestheticizing black poverty, what “Bed Intruder” indicates is that the “ghetto voyeurist” aural gaze has become so entrenched that it almost invariably structures public perceptions of African-American culture.

For a century and more, US popular music has constantly negotiated issues of race and identity. Each new genre has eventually come to signify

both a particular musical idiom and an associated field of race relations. Drawing on a series of different accounts, my argument in this piece has been that genre formation since the blues has been constantly characterized by the assumption that music performed by African-Americans is frequently deemed interesting only when it reflects class difference. This unexamined assumption structures accounts in a way that promotes the reproduction of social distance. Attention to it alone cannot adequately represent the whole field of music and race relations, but it does provide a unique perspective, suggesting that each new genre has emerged with an updated version of socio-cultural distance built-in since accounts of its founding moments are active *formulations* of social relations. Consequently, rather than historicizing reported moments of listening as instances of musical novelty, racial appropriation (as if music was stolen property) or cultural assimilation, we might instead productively begin to consider how accounts of listening strategically place social identities. There is a social politics of *reported listening*. As racial subjects we have much to say, and inevitably we say it – even when recalling our listening experiences.

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Notes

1. A longer version of this paper was uploaded on Volume's website: www.cairn.info/revue-volume-2013-1.htm [editor's note].
2. See the review of two of her recent books, in this issue [editor's note].
3. While ethnomusicologists have understand the practice of *making* music as a social encounter, and some pop biographers and others have begun to perceive the musical recording as a form of social encounter, far fewer researchers have discussed listening specifically as social encounter (see Small 1998 and Brady 1999).
4. Kier Keightley (2011) has proposed the idea of the "song network" to describe the emergence of groups of songs in specific media that have related titles or lyric themes. The "ghetto" song network emerged at a time when music became more directly politicized by the severity of racial struggle across the USA. Starting with Sarah Gorbey's *Songs of the Ghetto* LP, a range of tracks appeared within the two year period after 1966, by artists including Eddie Gale, the Jive Five featuring Eugene Pitt, the Staples Singers and of course Elvis Presley. By that point, however, ghettos had been a social problem in some of the bigger cities for nearly two decades.
5. I accept that this is not an exhaustive list of cross-racial encounter moments that have shaped perceptions of race in popular music. The birth of rock, for example, may require further analysis.
6. Deny's decision here was based only on hearing the 45rpm single "That's All Right"; he relented and Elvis did get one shot on the show.
7. Taken from the BBC documentary *Beat This: A Hip-hop History*, available online, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vwqQQraQ4MI>
8. Perhaps this is why the archetype of the "trickster" has been so readily applied to exponents of the genre (see Perry 2005).
9. From the 1984 BBC documentary *Beat This: A Hip-hop History*, available online: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vwqQQraQ4MI>
10. The total reflects combined hit counts from three video uploads: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N-h7UgAprdpM>
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bFEoMO0pc7k>
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=udS-OcNtSWo>

