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L'auteur & les Éd. Mélanie Seteun

*Sita taka huyu **uchungu** tena na.*

I don't want those **machine guns** again (78) [I don't want this **pain** again (and)].

*Tuna kosa leo **masingira***

The **wildlife** is being polluted (212) [Today our **environment** is no more]

The word for environment is used primarily in reference to reforestation and conservation efforts but having to do with trees, plants and broadly sustainable farming. Wildlife has a different word: *wanyama*; *wanyama wa porini*. Nonetheless, it is interesting to read Kiswahili in its regional grammatical form and colloquial style, which situates the east of Congo nicely on the map of African ethnographies.

Jack Hamilton, *Just around Midnight: Rock and Roll and the Racial Imagination*, Harvard University Press, 2016

By David McCarthy

The history of rock and roll has long provided fertile ground for what the scholar K. Merinda Simmons identifies as a “‘post-black’ rhetorical schema” (2015: 13). As Simmons describes it, this schema advocates access, agency, flexibility, fluidity, mobility, and the ultimate autonomy of the individual, opposing what it asserts is a “problematically dated [...] philosophy,” in particular America’s stark black-and-white racial structure (*ibid.*). From Maureen Mahon’s *Right to Rock* (2004), an ethnographic study of the New York-based Black Rock Coalition, to Elijah Wald’s pithily entitled *How the Beatles Destroyed Rock’n’Roll* (2009), scholars have repeatedly demonstrated that the whiteness of rock has been a pernicious obstacle for musicians and audiences alike. Jack Hamilton’s *Just around Midnight* seeks to answer one of this literature’s most crucial questions: how did a cultural form famously rooted in black music become “another way of being white?”

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Citing a bevy of clippings from rock criticism of the 1960s, Hamilton argues that rock became white precisely to the extent that its black roots appeared as underground roots: outside modern society and embedded in a vanishing, homogeneous past. White folk revivalists could hardly believe that the black musicians they worshipped were still alive. White critics described the recording studio, site of Jimi Hendrix's most utopian hopes, as no place for black bodies. In chapter after chapter, Hamilton demonstrates the pervasiveness of the belief that only white men could play the role of the rockstar as heroic innovator.

Against this problematically dated ideology, Hamilton weaves a counternarrative about "agency," "autonomy," and "mobility" (14, 29, 35). We learn of many musicians, black and white, who did not fit into the categories rock critics had established for them, including Sam Cooke, who took inspiration from Bob Dylan only to see his own

pathbreaking experiments described as inauthentic, the Rolling Stones, who wanted to play rhythm and blues and anything but rock and roll, and Jimi Hendrix, who seemed internally riven by the racial categories he publicly dismissed – an inner struggle to which Hamilton, in a welcome alternative to the conventional "Vietnam did it" narrative, attributes the guitarist's "fascination with violence." (274)

To tell these stories, Hamilton uses two methods. Speaking in terms of authorship and repertoire, compositions and adaptations, influences and innovations, he joyfully examines the "music itself" as imagined by music theorists. And he lends special priority to the working lives of musicians, an approach animated by Charles L. Hughes's landmark *Country Soul* (2015), a history of race in the lives of studio musicians working in Memphis, Nashville, and Muscle Shoals during the 1970s. "Before it was anything else," Hamilton says in a chapter on Aretha Franklin, Janis Joplin, and Dusty Springfield, "soul music was mass culture, performed by professional musicians and marketed by record labels." (174)

Yet in lending such priority to these methods, Hamilton pushes aside interpretative issues, particularly those concerning the question of how rock became white. He announces at the outset, "Rock and roll became white in large part because of stories people told themselves about it." (7) And yet while he repeats these stories in sordid detail, he repeatedly dismisses them, describing the contents of the clippings he has so laboriously collected as nonsense, "tautological," "ersatz," "absurdly overdetermined," and ignorant of the "far vaster, more complicated, and ultimately much

richer subject” Hamilton himself seeks to reveal (35, 252, 182, 194).

His revelations are indeed richer than the clippings as he presents them, but they do not concern rock’s whiteness. As Simmons notes, for the post-black rhetorical schema, race becomes either a prejudiced myth to be debunked or an administrative category loosed of all social grounds and thus capable of infinite modulations (2015: 13). Either way, there is no room for historical interpretation. This makes it impossible to explain why purported nonsense evidently meant so much to so many diverse people, including those who, like Hendrix, claimed to have transcended it.

For Hamilton’s purposes, the question of why race mattered would first of all need to be the question of what “white” meant. Citing a clipping from the *New York Times* in which a critic describes Bob Dylan as the first to mix “the sounds of Negro blues with the twang of country music,” Hamilton quips, “One imagines Elvis Presley canceling his subscription.” (83) The allusion to an injured Elvis demonstrates that rock and roll did not become just another way of being white. It became a uniquely privileged way of being white. Elvis does not appear in the book’s index, with good reason: he is not part of the story of how rock became white, not in the way Dylan is. But this only betrays an unaddressed aspect of Hamilton’s story, the location of rock’s whiteness within an emergent middle-class society.

Just around Midnight can be read as two equally provocative volumes in one: an annotated anthology of “the racial imaginary” in the 1960s, and a richer study of rock music as grounded in the working lives of artists in pursuit of creative freedom. It seems to

me that Hamilton is right to want to weave these two volumes together. Doing so points in the direction of a hermeneutic for which music appears not as something that merely reacts to a context, to Vietnam for example, and not as something that merely transcends a context, escaping racial categories for example, but as something that itself shapes many contexts. Rock and roll produced, among other things, a peculiar way of being white, one that established new grounds for racial terror and capitalist exploitation, but also for a critique thereof.

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