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Marsalis and Baraka: an essay in comparative cultural discourse

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Abstract

In 1963, Amiri Imamu Baraka, a.k.a. LeRoi Jones, launched an Afrocentrist attack on the American white establishment that has been sustained, with variations, for forty years. He made a powerful case that the white commodity industry had systematically exploited and then debased authentic African-American music. In the meantime, a new kind of Afrocentrism has appeared, associated with the meteoric rise of Wynton Marsalis at New York's Lincoln Center. With the help of rhetoric similar to Baraka's, Marsalis has showcased and expanded the kind of black jazz he regards as authentic. However, the two men represent overlapping but also divergent points of view on the cultural politics of African-American music. This study compares these perspectives in detail, suggesting that behind the revealing differences between the two, both suffer from a formally similar outmoded essentialism.

Introduction

Generalised discussions of race in jazz and related forms of American popular music were not new when Imamu Amiri Baraka, a.k.a. LeRoi Jones, published *Blues People* several decades ago. Before that time, however, the topic was mainly the property of white jazz journalists. Baraka forced people – black and white – to pay attention to how African-Americans might feel about the matter.

Baraka is primarily a literary figure, Marsalis, a musician. However, Baraka is also a performer. Marsalis not only performs, but also writes and speaks about his views. Baraka's bold statements about music made possible the kind of bluntness we find expressed in the actions, statements and policies of Wynton Marsalis a few decades later. However, Marsalis's vision of what American jazz should be was not forged in Baraka's workshop. A consideration of each in the reflected light of the other reveals much, not only about these two men, but also about larger issues.

Baraka was a figure to contend with prior to and independently of his work on music. The vivid *Autobiography of LeRoi Jones* (1984) joins the tradition of black biographies that includes those of Frederick Douglass, W.E.B. Du Bois and Malcolm X. At first glance, it also seems easy to place his name alongside that of Ralph Ellison. Both settled in Harlem, Ellison before the war, Baraka after. Both draw inspiration from black music, particularly jazz. But their views about the relationship between the races moved in very different directions.

From about 1957 to 1962, Baraka was known primarily as an editor and author of poetry of the 'Beat' period in New York. Poets such as Allan Ginsberg helped him shape his idea of a poem as open and exploratory in form. During this period, he won an award from the *Village Voice* for his off-Broadway play, *Dutchman*. About the time

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Malcolm X was assassinated in 1965, Baraka moved from Greenwich Village to Harlem and began honing his version of a 'Black nationalist' perspective on social issues. While Ellison was speaking of a blending of black and white culture, Baraka was busy drawing a line between the two. In *The Legacy of Malcolm X and the Coming of the Black Nation*, Baraka cites Frantz Fanon, Marcus Garvey and others in support of the thesis that the solution of the 'Black Man's problems will come only through Black National Consciousness' (Baraka 1991, p. 166). Baraka's collection of poetry, *Black Magic* (1969), traces his painful exit from the white into the black world.

Baraka's major statement about race and music, *Blues People*, which appeared in 1963, makes a case that black music in America has been systematically raided and corrupted by white interests. In trenchant prose, he details what he regards as the exploitation by the white music business of African-American music in the production of an inferior product. Baraka sums up his history of American popular music as a 'Great Music Robbery' – words he uses for a 1987 chapter title (Baraka and Baraka 1987, pp. 328–32). By Baraka's lights, the 'corporate dilution' of original black music has proceeded according to a pattern. Originally, African-American people employed their own modes of expression. This music was then etiolated and degraded by white imitations. Finally, the enfeebled results were sold back to African-Americans. As a result, subsequent forms of African-American music became less and less able to express African-American life authentically.

Barely approaching middle age, Wynton Marsalis has made a name for himself as a brilliant player of jazz and classical trumpet, a composer, and the leader of the impressive Lincoln Center Jazz Orchestra. Because of his race, youth and charm, Marsalis has been able to campaign against what he regards as the flattening of musical culture by the commodity industry without coming across as an embittered representative of an older generation. Furthermore, he has taken on heavy issues about the political and social relationship between African-American and the larger American culture. This is reflected in his tenure as leader of the LCJO, whose repertoire has been devoted to the African-American music of such figures as Jellyroll Morton, Dizzy Gillespie and Duke Ellington. For years, the sole white name to turn up in LCJO's promotional literature was George Gershwin. Journalists were quick to notice that the musicians who staffed LCJO were mainly black.

Marsalis's musical politics were a major influence on *Jazz*, Ken Burns's third American cultural epic for public television in the United States.[1] A Barnes & Noble advertisement in *The New Yorker* describing the musician as 'the pre-eminent figure' in the Burns documentary signalled Marsalis's importance in the Burns film.[2]

In the nine-part series, Marsalis was a dominant talking head. However, his mentors, authors Stanley Crouch and Albert Murray, also loomed large. (Marsalis has been more than willing to identify his intellectual influences [Marsalis and Steward 1994, pp. 116–17; Wiley 1996, p. 205].)

Of course, omissions in the Burns jazz project were inevitable. But critics were quick to fault the series' seemingly selective emphases. While it is understandable that the names of Louis Armstrong and Duke Ellington would loom large, many commentators thought it unreasonable that so many white figures should be passed over. In this regard, Marsalis's perspective on white jazz has paralleled Baraka's.

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Correspondences

Comparing Marsalis with Baraka, a qualification is in order. Although most of Baraka's critical essays are about modern jazz, he casts a broader historical net in *Blues People*, which ranges over ring shouts, early jazz, blues and soul. However, both treat jazz as something privileged within the sphere of African-American music. Let us further detail similarities.

First, Baraka has no problem being blunt about what he regards as an inauthentic 'white' jazz sound. White musicians, he says, can be 'impressive' but their mastery of mere forms is not sufficient to give them the 'right' sound (Baraka and Baraka 1987, p. 319). Baraka does not systematically characterise the components of the kind of sound he regards as authentic. However, we can glean from his writings a family of qualities – blue tonality and inflections, patterns of musical call-and-response, phrasing closely reflecting speech, spontaneity or improvisation, an emphasis on individualised style, a willingness to foreground emotional intensity, and a range of characteristic rhythmic effects.

The status of putative markers of blackness in music is a complicated matter, as an important study in the pages of this journal illustrates (Tagg 1989). It is hard to avoid the strong possibility that supposedly black markers in music can be found in non-black cultures. But – first – although he may not be entirely consistent on the matter, Baraka is not interested in highly general markers of this type. As he likes to say, the 'Negro' he wants to talk about is not an African 'Negro' but an *American* 'Negro' (Baraka 1963, pp. ix–xii). Of course, the issue can be re-opened in regard to *those* supposedly distinctive features. Still, evaluating such data is beset with methodological puzzles. A characteristic slurred note might have a cultural signification in American blues that is absent from that of an acoustic counterpart in a different population. Further, such traits might function, not as cultural atoms, but as members of families. If so, we would have to re-open the question about the overall webwork of such features. However, we cannot pursue this important issue further here.

For his part, Marsalis has not been shy about airing views similar to Baraka's; but he focuses on quality rather than on fine-grained stylistic features. In response to the loaded question, 'Why are the best jazz musicians black?' Marsalis replied, citing Stanley Crouch for support, that black people invented the music and that 'people who invent something are always the best thing at doing it'. If you 'celebrate less accomplished musicians . . . you cheat yourself' (Marsalis and Steward 1994, pp. 142–5).

A second similarity is that both Marsalis and Baraka think of the music they address as an *expression* of a people, rather than as a commodity. Baraka sticks to the comparatively severe view that authentic versions of jazz and its related forms are – or ought to be – expressions of *African*-America. Marsalis sometimes tones down this Afrocentrism, as we shall note shortly. Still, for each, music has the potentiality of expressing the feelings, values and ideas of a people. For each, this potentiality is deformed by the commodity industry, which systematically ignores or distorts it.

A corollary of the foregoing point is that both figures regard authentic African-American music as something distinct from merely popular amusement. Thus Baraka complains about the degradation of African-American music into something 'professional', a form of show business (Baraka 1963, pp. 86–90). In a

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similar vein, Marsalis often rails against much of our popular music – hip-hop, for instance,[3] or so-called 'world' music – and against the cultivation by mass media of what he regards as adolescent musical tastes. In conversation, Marsalis has stated that popular music is 'always improved by jazz'. Jazz, he adds, is 'a very intellectual thing'. It is 'art music' (Mandel 1999, pp. 18–19). Gene Lees finds Marsalis asserting rather incautiously that jazz 'was [never] a popular music – it was not evolved as dance music' (Lees 1994, p. 228).[4] With such words, note, Marsalis takes some steps away from Baraka's position.

A third similarity qualifies the foregoing. Both men oppose a presumed dominance of European musical culture in American life. Marsalis complains that the 'intellectual community was always trying to imitate European music' (Milkowsky 2000, p. 35). And, in response to critics who noticed that white composer-arrangers, such as Gil Evans or Gerry Mulligan, were unlikely to get much attention at Lincoln Center, Marsalis declares that such arrangers are 'too European' (Lees 1994, p. 231).[5] Marsalis recommended that every conservatory in America should change its curriculum, start including American music, but quit using people like Aaron Copland as their true example of what American music is like (Mandel 1999, p. 105).

As we can already see, there are shadings of difference between the views of these figures; and matters become more complicated when we amplify the picture of Marsalis's agenda.

Jazz as classical music

The first concerts at Lincoln Center in 1987 were framed under the rubric 'Classical Jazz' (Gourse 1999, pp. 186, 199). In the 1990s, Marsalis's name became 'inextricably linked with the notion of jazz as an indigenous *classical* music' (Davis 1997, p. 60, my emphasis). He sometimes characterised jazz as the 'ultimate 20th century music'.[6] But it was the 'America's classical music' formula that stuck and best served his purposes. Discussions of this fashionable-sounding theme even reached the floor of the US Senate.[7]

Whether there is any substance in this use of 'classical' has been discussed elsewhere (Brown 2002). Clearly, part of its function in the present context is to signal a certain *kind* of jazz as *authentic* – a matter to which we shall return in due course. Our present question is this: Given Marsalis's hankering for music that would be *classical*, what do his complaints about the European dominance of American music amount to? After all, he is also a brilliant classical musician who often speaks warmly about the European concert tradition. He has described both classical music *and* jazz as expressing 'concepts about humanity and brotherhood'.[8] Things fall partly into place if we presume that one of the markers of a *classical* musical form is that it is *indigenous.* (Consider indigenous forms of music outside the European tradition, e.g. 'Iranian classical music'.) It might be argued, further, that jazz *is* the music that has been dredged from a 'single experience of the consciousness of *black* people into a *national* music that expresses' it (Taylor 1985, p. 21). But why does the music that qualifies have to be *African*-American? Here, a theme that runs through the Burns jazz film helps: American struggles about race are definitive of Americans *as an entire people*. Hence, the conclusion: The music played on a typical 'classical' radio station in the United States is not *American* classical music.

It must be noted that in the Burns film, Marsalis tends to stress the role of jazz as an expression of something more general, which he equates with the American

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democratic spirit. However, we must not lose track of our issue: In staking out his programme, is Marsalis in danger of falling back into the perspective he wanted to repudiate? The question can be addressed with the help of two examples – and a comparison of Marsalis's with Baraka's views of them.

Billing himself as the 'King of Jazz' in the 1920s, Paul Whiteman – who *was* a white man – tried to turn what he regarded as unruly music into genuine concert fare. In his famous words, he intended to 'make a lady of jazz' (Ward and Burns 2000, p. 99). The problem is that Marsalis's 'jazz-as-classical music' theme sounds uncomfortably similar to Whiteman's. Marsalis would undoubtedly respond that Whiteman's jazz was objectionably white in character. However, the problem doesn't disappear, as we can see if we shift to the case of Duke Ellington, whose music has taken the place of honour at Lincoln Center.

Two points seem clear about Ellington. First, it is hard to impeach his African-American credentials – at least at first glance. Second, unlike many great jazz figures, Ellington was a professional composer. In fact, he was nominated in 1965 for the American Pulitzer Prize. It was widely regarded as a scandal that he did not win. (Ellington was finally awarded the prize, posthumously, in 1999.) When Marsalis won a Pulitzer for himself in 1997 for his oratorio *Blood on the Fields*, he surely must have seen himself as making up for an earlier injustice. Critical response to this new work takes us to an interesting feature of Marsalis's perspective.

Blood on the Fields did not meet with unqualified success.[9] Some critics regarded it as unimpressive – indeed, as devoid of genuine musical relevance to African-American life (Gourse 1999, pp. 266–7, for instance). Its quality is not to be decided here. Note, however, that those negative commentators would hardly have objected to Ellington's music. In fact, they might have gone on to register a difference between the master and the disciple. Quite apart from their comparative compositional merits, Ellington's pieces were devised with the specific jazzmen of his band in mind – and they included some of the most individualised players of all time. As fine as his players were, Marsalis's musicians seemed more like skilled pasticheurs, whose jazz credentials had more to do with technical schooling than with real stylistic individualism.[10]

But this fits the fact that Lincoln Center jazz was planned to look and sound well schooled. This even determined matters of dress. It's not incidental that when Lincoln Center players trooped out on stage, they sported natty three-button suits, in marked contrast to the garb of typical post-1960s jazz players. These apparently irrelevant matters of fashion underscore Marsalis's agenda – to reconceptualise jazz as genuinely serious, largely *written* music. The first manifestations of this agenda were felt in the late 1980s, when contacts between Lincoln Center and Marsalis were made by Alina Bloomgarden, who records having heard about Marsalis's 'vision for the classicism of jazz, for wearing suits and jackets and dignifying performances' (Gourse 1999, p. 192). As Lincoln Center's Chairman of the Board George Weisman saw things, this would be in keeping with the image of the centre 'as a place where classics were presented' (Gourse 1999, p. 191).

Now, let us consider the cases of Whiteman and Ellington a second time around, but from Baraka's point of view. Baraka has no trouble seeing Paul Whiteman as a paradigm white musical robber baron busy turning out an inauthentic product (Baraka 1963, pp. 100, 143–4, 148–9, 152, 155, 206, 214). More to the point, Whiteman's stress on arrangement and composition at the expense of improvisation represents the Europeanism that Baraka said must be eschewed. (It

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was Whiteman's orchestra that premiered Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue*, featuring the composer at the keyboard). Furthermore, to the extent that it is modelled on concert music, we would not expect Marsalis's presentation of jazz to meet with Baraka's approval.

Baraka's position on Ellington is more complicated. He has no problem privileging Ellington's music over what he considers the watered down imitations of jazz by white big band leaders such as Benny Goodman and Tommy Dorsey (Baraka 1963, p. 163). Nevertheless, he regards the less polished music of the early Count Basie as closer to the music's roots than Ellington's (Baraka 1963, pp. 158, 183–4). Baraka describes Ellington's music as 'basically Europe-American', a type of 'entertainment' catering largely to 'sensual white liberals' (Baraka 1963, pp. 159, 161). It is mistakenly indentured, he says, to the 'considerations and responsibilities of high art' (Baraka 1963, p. 222). Indeed, Baraka sees Ellington's music in terms not unlike those of the English critic, Constant Lambert, who analogised Ellington's music with that of concert composers such as Ravel (Lambert 1967, pp. 178–88). The difference is that, for Baraka, the similarity is no compliment to Ellington.

Baraka could hardly be impressed, then, by the Lincoln Center jazz scene, where supposedly authentic black music draws primarily white customers into fancy concert halls. In other words, when Baraka proposes that African-American music be demarcated from 'show business', he obviously does not mean that it should become concert music in the European sense. From Baraka's point of view, Marsalis could not cultivate his 'jazz as classical music' theme without compromising the principle that jazz should distance itself from 'European' musical agendas – or, at least that's what we must conclude on the basis of Baraka's classic statements. We shall return to the matter.

We can deepen the contrast between Baraka and Marsalis by considering the other side of the coin of Marsalis's approach, namely his views on the importance of improvisation in jazz. It is a rare theorist who takes the position that jazz is essentially compositional, not improvisational.[11] But Marsalis – a splendid improviser in his own right – has made the striking prediction that in the future, improvisation in jazz will indeed take a back seat. Instead, 'there will be more emphasis put on presentation and composition' (Milkowsky 2000, p. 35).

On this matter, Marsalis has run foul of fellow musicians. Jazz pianist Brad Mehldau, for instance, has suggested that Marsalis's wish to convert jazz into *written* music ironically puts him back on the European side of his original dichotomy. The 'language Marsalis uses', Mehldau says, is dependent on the very European ideals he supposedly rejects. Marsalis, he adds, uses historical speculations to 'legitimatize his agenda, even to predict the future', and that his 'approach is very Hegel/Marx, very European' (Mehldau 2000, p. 18). Baraka might well have concurred with the sour judgement of this white musician.

Of course, what Marsalis says in theory is not fully reflected in his practice. Both he and his Lincoln Center musicians do plenty of improvising. And it is worth noting in this context that the issue about Ellington and the Pulitzer Prize denied is more complex than it might seem. Some have suggested that the official objections to Ellington were masks for racism (Gourse 1999, p. 266, for example). However, it is relevant that the Pulitzer committee had never before considered candidates whose works were not thoroughly compositional in character. Either way, the criteria were clearly relaxed by 1997, when the honour was awarded to Marsalis for *Blood on the Fields*, which also notably places limits on improvisation.

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While Baraka does not directly debate the improvisation vs composition issue, we can interpolate in order to make suitable comparisons. The jazz Baraka called the 'New Music' put great stress on improvisation. (Consider John Coltrane and Ornette Coleman, for instance). However, Baraka and Marsalis diverge strikingly when it comes to the kind of avant-garde jazz that Coltrane and Coleman represent. While Baraka energetically supported this music, with qualifications to be addressed later, Marsalis has certainly not done so, as was evident in the Burns documentary. Although most figures in the Burns film are treated with respect or reverence, the rhetoric becomes shrill when the narrative addresses the avant-gardists. Instead of explaining what Ornette Coleman meant by 'free jazz', Marsalis's mentor Albert Murray tells us that jazz is, by definition, free music – and by implication, that Coleman's concept must be fatuous. And Marsalis has elsewhere complained about a jazz avant-garde retreat into what he calls 'a labyrinth of increasingly indecipherable James Joyce-ian language . . . that nobody's gonna want to read' (Milkowsky 2000, p. 36). This fits Marsalis's privileging of composition over improvisation. To put it succinctly, what's wrong with the avant-garde is its unruly improvisational freedom. For Baraka, that is one of its salient, positive features.

Revolutionaries or reactionaries?

In the words of one sympathetic critic, Marsalis's vision of jazz has been as 'deeply conservative' as it has been 'radical' (Watrous 2000, p. 1). But, if Marsalis's scales seem tipped uncomfortably in the direction of a reactionary institutionalism, Baraka has his own brand of conservativism. His diatribe against the white denaturing of black music is fairly well known – so conspicuous, in fact, that it is liable to eclipse the complementary negative statements on African-American music itself. Indeed, he reserves some of his shrillest commentary for the latter.

The 'Negro', he says, has 'abandoned too much of his own musical tradition in favour of a more formalised, less spontaneous concept of music' (Baraka 1963, p. 90). Beginning with the 'coon shout' and the Delta blues, it continually exhibits cultural wounds when examined through Baraka's lens. Bessie Smith – a classic figure, most would have supposed – has deficits, because her music represented a 'professionalization' of the blues derived from theatre music (Baraka 1963, pp. 87, 161). Turning to the country blues of the Mississippi Delta, Baraka remains intransigent. That music too represents a compromise, on the grounds that it achieves a universality that white people can understand (Baraka 1963, p. 87). In both early and later writings, Baraka writes with deep feeling about the era of bebop jazz, which would have been thriving still during his Greenwich Village days. In Baraka's view, this music rescued African-American music from the corruptions of white New Orleans revival jazz, 'Dixieland', and effete big band swing. However, by 1960 jazz modernism found itself increasingly chilled by the white icebox of 1950s 'cool' jazz (Baraka 1963, pp. 208, 216–17; Baraka and Baraka 1987, p. 294).

The music reconnected with its roots with the help of 'hard' bop, which drew upon sources from rhythm and blues figures and gospel music. But the hard bop movement – as exemplified by Cannonball Adderley – tended to calcify its blues within a new formalism (Baraka 1963, pp. 217–18). Hard bop was also a forerunner of another movement Baraka regards as degenerate, namely jazz-fusion, which Baraka calls 'dollar sign' music (Baraka and Baraka 1987, pp. 177, 302–3). It is worth noting that when Baraka speaks of jazz-fusion, he is thinking of its relatively bold early

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versions, as played by Weather Report, for instance. He would surely view the ubiquitous 'smooth jazz' that has evolved from fusion with an even more jaundiced eye.

In two respects, Miles Davis's contributions to jazz put Baraka's admiration for him to the test. It might be supposed that the late 1940s movement known as 'cool jazz' was a white movement, associated with musicians such as Gerry Mulligan and Chet Baker. However, Davis was involved in the seminal recorded performances of cool jazz, collected and continually reissued under the title *Birth of the Cool*. Baraka is aware of this anomaly (Baraka 1963, pp. 216–17; 1987, p. 294). Two decades later, the fusion movement put additional strain on his admiration for Davis, whose record releases in his 'electric' period helped fire the new movement (Baraka and Baraka 1987, p. 178). However, in one long highly analytical essay on Davis, Baraka's criticism is muted, presumably because he cannot help but admire the total phenomenon that Miles Davis was. The essay is sub-titled 'One of the Great Mother Fuckers' (Baraka and Baraka 1987, pp. 286–316).

Baraka saw hope for the rejuvenation of music during the 1960s, when the black jazz avant-garde began to make itself felt in the playing of Ornette Coleman, John Coltrane, Cecil Taylor, and Sun Ra. For Baraka, this 'New Music', as he terms it, stood for spiritual renewal. Unlike Marsalis, he saw it not only as effecting a liberating break with inauthentic forms of jazz, but also as being a metaphor for a break-out from social bondage. His book *Black Music* is dedicated to one of its major figures, John Coltrane. And many of his strongest critical essays are devoted to the period (*Baraka*, 1967).

Baraka has stood by this music, as it has been extended and sustained by such musicians as Pharaoh Sanders and David Murray. However, even here, a close reader will find qualifications. For instance, Baraka worries about the New Music being 'cooled off' by what he calls its 'blank, any place ''universal'' humbug' (Baraka 1967, p. 198). Of what is he speaking? The more and more introspective music of the later Coltrane? Or of his protégés? It is hard to say. At any rate, it appears that even with the New Music, deficits lurk. More importantly, how has it fared in the long run? In 2004, it is hardly a hive of commercial activity. Of course, Baraka has an all-too-handy, general explanation for any such failure, namely, the influence of uncomprehending, racist journalists.

However, Baraka's chronicle of African-American music is no success story. His diagnosis carries great rhetorical force. But every attempt to reverse the process of musical degeneration, as measured by his criteria, seems almost destined to be undone. Part of the reason is that he sets the bar so high that much of the music we know as African-American simply cannot pass muster.

In fact, the severe implications of Baraka's position suggest a qualified but ironic parallel between his perspective and a favoured view of the French *white* jazz intelligentsia of the 1930s and 1940s, who authored some of the first books that treated jazz as a serious subject. Like Baraka's, this brand of criticism despised the watered-down music of Whiteman (Panassié 1936, pp. 19–20, 29–30, for instance). Of course, there are differences. Unlike Baraka, these authors were no friends of modernism. Even as early as the swing era, they criticised 'modern' jazz for its putative loss of melodic invention, appropriate rhythm and overall naturalism (Panassié 1946, Ch. XVII). But even here, we note partial correspondences. These writers regarded the most intuitive, least Europeanised versions of the music as the most authentic.[12] In such music, they believed, execution counted over conception, nature over tutelage.

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In retrospect, this 'Afro-primitivist' perspective – as one might term it – seems embarrassingly sentimental and implicitly racist. Furthermore, these critics were surely muddled from a conceptual point of view (Brown 1999). To be consistent, such a perspective should wish for the elimination of *all* the harmonic machinery of jazz borrowed from European music, including harmonic motion – even chords themselves. The resulting music, of course, would be simply *African*. It would be ironic to see Baraka fall even partly into line with the confusions of this position. However, the similarities do not appear to be superficial.

Consider Baraka's account of one of the fundamental characteristics of jazz, namely 'blue' tonality – that is, the tendency to flatten notes at the third, seventh, and sometimes fifth intervals of the Western tempered scale. Baraka asserts, correctly of course, that deviations from 'concert pitch' in the blues are not the result of an 'inability to sing or play in tune' (Baraka 1963, p. 24).[13] But in the details, he appears to maintain *either* that blue tonality can be found intact in African music *or* that (non-blue) African tonality is the authentic black tonality, and that therefore *all* its African-American versions are degenerate (Baraka 1963, pp. 24–5). Neither option seems defensible. But either view would be in keeping with the spirit of a primitivism bold enough to be consistent.

Second, consider the fact that Baraka rejects any approach to the issue of ethnic authenticity based on considerations of musical *form*. He uses the pejorative term *formalist* to label such approaches; alternatively, he describes them as assigning a misguided emphasis to mere *style* (Baraka 1963, pp. 68–9, 89–90; Baraka and Baraka 1987, p. 319). (In this connection, Baraka regards his vaunted New Music as *anti*-formalist.) Similarly, the primitivists stressed the thought that jazz authenticity is never a matter of musical form. It fits that they privileged the *lack* of schooled musical training.

Finally, Baraka's very rhetoric harks back to the primitivists. Citing Louis Armstrong as an example, Hugues Panassié states that we can directly feel the soul of an authentic jazz musician through his horn (Panassié 1971, p. 53). Robert Goffin describes authentic jazz players as falling into trance-like states, or as whipping themselves into frenzies while playing. He professes that he knows of no white musician capable of such intensity (Goffin 1944, p. 124). In his *Histoire du Jazz*, Goffin labels every jazz artist he describes as either 'black' or 'white' (Goffin 1945) and it is no doubt which type he regards as superior, and why.[14] For his part, Baraka routinely and enthusiastically describes something he calls jazz 'frenzy, what we called ''getting happy'' in the Baptist Church' or 'possession by the spirit' (Baraka and Baraka 1987, p. 269; Baraka 1990, p. 59). Baraka characterises this phenomenon as the 'highest religious expression – becoming animated by the divinity of life force' (Baraka 1990, p. 59).

As noted already, there are differences between Baraka's views and those of the primitivists. The primitivists would not follow Baraka in his stress on the religious significance of his jazz 'frenzies'. And, as noted, the primitivists were no friends of jazz modernism. However, once we catch the drift of Baraka's thinking, we can see how, for him, there might be no inconsistency between privileging the roots of jazz and its black avant-garde forms. For him, the latter might be seen as rejoining the former – like a circle, so to say. The primitivists, of course, did not conjure with any such picture.

Clearly, Baraka's conservativism cuts the pie along different lines than does Marsalis's. It should be noted, however, that even in the latter's perspective, we can

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detect an echo of primitivism – although one that runs along a different line. Of course, Marsalis would never disparage schooled musicianship. However, like the primitivist critics, he honours key black figures of the older schools. For him, the styles perfected before the 1960s exemplified the right approach, and later innovations took a wrong path. In this respect, his view parallels the primitivists' scorn for earlier forms of modernism.

Larger issues

A survey of the views of Marsalis and Baraka raises deeper issues that go beyond matters of historical or sociological fact – philosophical questions, in effect. One of these concerns is about the appropriation – or misappropriation – of cultural material by other cultures or sub-cultures. Commentators such as Charles Keil have generalised the problem: Exploitation naturally follows any appropriation of traditional collective musical forms (Keil 1994, 'Dialogue three'). Baraka could hardly disagree. But the exploitation can be subtle. Let us consider a thesis that represents a generalised form of one of Baraka's main thoughts: An adapted idiom will inevitably fail to embody the ideas of the community from which it has been derived. When black jazz, for instance, was converted in the 1930s into the white culture of bobby sox and jitterbug dancing, it no longer embodied the ideas, feelings and values of the original. The same can be said about the Rolling Stones' derivation of their early music from the blues of Muddy Waters. Of course, Baraka believes that, with such changes, damage is done. Put otherwise, in a context in which there are unequal power relations, a deleterious homogenisation seems likely, if not inevitable. Now, let us reflect on this argument, with the help of the philosopher Theodore Gracyk (Gracyk 2001, Ch. IV).

By the very terms of the foregoing analysis, the appropriated material *is* derivative; that is, something *different* from its sources. But if that is the case, it requires some effort to explain in what the damage consists. The original remains what it is; and the derivative form is something else. Note too, that such transformations run in many directions, sometimes from black to white, sometimes from white to black, but also from black to black. Consider Ray Charles' admission that in early years he paid attention to white swing bandleader Artie Shaw (Guralnick 1976, p. 110). Charles also heeded country music, as some of his major hits prove, e.g. 'Your Cheating Heart'. And Muddy Waters could hardly deny that his electrified version of Delta blues was derivative from *black* music. While emulating Robert Johnson, Muddy Waters changed the music no less than Benny Goodman, in the swing era, changed the African-American sources of his music.

No doubt, 'cultural gatekeepers', as Gracyk calls them, are sometimes appointed – or self-appointed – to block or direct the flow of cultural influence. A policy of pushing white rock music dominated the early days of American MTV, for example. In the early years of rock, ASCAP, the main American implement for registering and licensing music, put up an intense struggle against rock music in general (Gracyk 2001, p. 115). So did prominent black voices, it should be added. Such agendas were a reprise of similar agendas in the early years of jazz. The authority of these gatekeepers can, of course, be challenged. Furthermore, it is important to make a distinction between such cases and the more general phenomenon of cultural appropriation. Baraka makes hardly any attempt to do so.

A second general issue concerns essentialism. Both Marsalis and Baraka force us to raise doubts about the most basic issue of all here – the rhetorical strategies that

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persist in packaging cultural material of the sort we have been addressing in terms of the 'authentic' or the 'essential'. When deployed in the name of white culture, these strategies have fortunately fallen somewhat out of favour. But whether in defence of whiteness or otherwise, cultural essentialism seems more than an attempt to play the role of cultural gatekeeper. Consider the case of Marsalis, in light of the plurality of jazz styles that has passed in review in the twentieth century: New Orleans jazz and its revival forms; Dixieland, nurtured nowadays mainly at specialised festivals: repertory big band music in the Kenton-Herman-Basie tradition; 'mainstream' bop; Afro-avant jazz, in the style of Oliver Lake and David Murray; Latin jazz, in the style of Paquito d'Rivera; Chicago-style Afro-avant, typified by the late Lester Bowie; contemporary Chicago free form jazz, à la Ken Vandermark; electro-funk; nouveau swing; and 'smooth' fusion jazz. It is hard to see Marsalis's use of 'classical' except as a way of privileging his favoured versions of jazz.

Finally, a consideration of the two foregoing issues shows that they converge. What is the function of an appeal to essentialism and authenticity except to provide one with a tool for playing the role of self-appointed gatekeeper? In this respect, Baraka and Marsalis's positions seem to be on much the same footing.

Epilogue

In the early years of the new century, Baraka's literary activities have attracted more attention than his music criticism has. After New York's twin towers fell in September 2001, Baraka penned a poem entitled 'Somebody Blew Up America', in which he suggests that Israel knew about the attack before it occurred. As a result, an attempt was made to unseat Baraka from his position as New Jersey's poet laureate, by abolishing the position itself, if necessary.[15]

However, Baraka's views on music have continued to evolve, or at least to mutate, since 1974, when he dramatically reversed his position by declaring in the *New York Times* that the policy that 'all non-blacks are our enemies' is a form of 'fascism' (Cited by Harris 1991). Instead of speaking of a racial cultural war, Baraka began to employ the conceptual apparatus of Marxism, e.g. capitalist imperialism, base-and-superstructure, and class conflict. His new perspective – which he terms 'third world socialism', dominates 'Jazz & the white critic: thirty years later' (henceforth, referred to here as 'White critic'), an essay that Baraka posts on his website.[16]

In many respects, Baraka's career exemplifies Paul Gilroy's thesis in *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (1993) that black populations around the Atlantic basin cannot be understood as merely adjectival to the national cultures to which they officially belong. By taking up a position in regard to the philosophers of modernity – Marx, for instance – Baraka increasingly links his thinking to a trans-national frame. Significantly, in 1972, Baraka edited and published a documentary of the first modern pan-African congress (Baraka 1972). In spite of Mehldau's sarcastic reference to 'Hegel/Marx', the same cannot be said of Marsalis, who is hardly a paradigm example of the type Gilroy identifies. While Marsalis plays European venues regularly, he is no philosopher; and the focus of his thinking is the North American scene almost exclusively.

Another gradual shift in Baraka's writing is his increasing stress on the written history and criticism of the music, particularly in the hands of people he regards as racist. Typical targets in 'White critic' are James Lincoln Collier, author of *Duke Ellington* (1991) and Richard Sudhalter, the author of *Lost Chords: White Musicians and*

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Their Contribution to Jazz, 1915–1945 (1999). The latter work is a celebration of *white* jazz musicians who, in Sudhalter's opinion, have been unreasonably eclipsed. The former is a study of Ellington that Baraka finds particularly obnoxious.

And here we notice another apparent revision of Baraka's earlier perspective. In 'White critic', Baraka complains that Collier unflatteringly treats Ellington's music as a mere imitation of European concert music. Ironically, this is not far from Baraka's own earlier view. A cynical interpretation of the switch would be that although Baraka allows himself to express caveats about Ellington's music, he cannot stomach a white author's doing likewise. A more serious explanation is that Baraka could not help but champion Ellington's music after the 1967 Pulitzer fiasco – which he interpreted as a boycott by the white establishment. In 'White critic', Baraka makes much of the issue.

Finally, in this essay, we have explicit – and somewhat surprising – statements from Baraka about Marsalis, Lincoln Center, and the Burns documentary. Baraka expresses moderate approval of Lincoln Center's agenda of archiving classic jazz figures with the kind of respect that classical composers receive in, say, 'Mostly Mozart' concerts. This is hardly what we would expect Baraka to say, given his main position. What can be said by way of explanation? It is arguable, from Baraka's point of view, that – while hewing to basic convictions – he sees his discourse as responsive to a shifting picture. Thus, Baraka might regard Marsalis's agenda as appropriate for a different set of circumstances. Consider too, that Baraka cannot help but see Marsalis as fending off an apparent horde of reactionary white journalists. It may seem clear to him which side he must take.

The same source articulates Baraka's opinion of the Burns film, in which he regards Marsalis's charismatic on-camera contribution to the film as one of its few virtues. Some of his complaints against it are those that non-partisan viewers could easily share – that Burns himself knows nothing about jazz, that the talking heads are uninformative and intrusive, etc. But this alone does not account for the overall acidity of his remarks. Many possibilities suggest themselves: Burns is white. Much of the film's funding came from the corporate establishment. But one sore point stands out – namely, the major role played by Stanley Crouch in the Burns project. Not to put too fine a point on it, there is bad blood between the two.

A 1990 exchange between them is revealing. On that occasion, Crouch – who insisted on referring to Baraka as 'LeRoi Jones' – spoke contemptuously of the latter's contribution to their symposium, which he describes as 'sloppy', 'political pulp', and 'lazy bravado' (Crouch 1990, p. 71). Crouch clearly regards Baraka's talk about jazz in terms of religious 'possession' with distaste (Crouch 1990, p. 72). Too, Crouch's politics stands at some distance from Baraka's Marxist brand of Afrocentrism. However we weigh the factors, there is an almost palpable rancour between the two.

While Crouch's tone is hard to excuse, he scores one conceptual point about an issue in Baraka's thinking mentioned earlier – namely the latter's anti-formalism, which surfaces again in the symposium cited here (Baraka 1990, p. 61). It is surely a mistake, Crouch reasonably argues, to disparage musical form on the assumption that concern for it is just 'Western imperialism, dressed in aesthetic armour' (Crouch 1990, p. 78). And it is hard not to conclude that Baraka does tend to identify form in general with *European* form.

Marsalis's Afrocentric agenda is less strident nowadays than it was formerly. In recent seasons, Lincoln Center has scheduled programmes featuring jazz associated with white musicians, e.g. Benny Goodman in 2002. (Of course, Marsalis would be

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the first one to remind us that much of Goodman's swing style depended upon arrangements written by great black musicians such as Fletcher Henderson.) One likely reason for Marsalis's more diplomatic approach is his determination both to influence and to benefit from American programmes in jazz education. Each year Lincoln Center hosts a jazz competition at which finalists from American high schools perform for and with Marsalis. In short, Marsalis wants to draw upon the resources of the American educational system to perpetuate the kind of jazz Lincoln Center supports. A recent issue of the *New York Times* documented the 2003 version of the event with a photograph showing Marsalis standing alongside the winning musicians of Seattle's Garfield High School Jazz Ensemble.[17] The photo speaks volumes, for all the students appear to be white. Marsalis's shrill early statements would hardly serve his current pedagogical agenda.

However, Marsalis's mentor, Stanley Crouch, continues to play the 'bad cop' role on behalf of Marsalis. His increasingly offensive rhetoric reached the nadir when he was quoted to the effect that music critics unsympathetic to Marsalis's agenda were most likely jealous of the star's 'access to a far higher quality of female than any of them could ever imagine'.[18] In his *JazzTimes* column, Crouch repeats the claim that black musicians invented jazz and are therefore the best players of it. He applies his thesis to the work of a leading white trumpet player and composer. Dave Douglas, says Crouch, will never equal the 'black masters of the idiom', who could, he adds, turn Douglas 'into a puddle on the bandstand' (Crouch 2003, p. 28).

Crouch's relationship with *JazzTimes* has since been discontinued. The huge number of letters to the magazine, both in support of and opposed to its decision, is a strong indicator that in a time of smaller commercial market share for jazz, a treaty to this culture war is not likely to be signed very soon. Enemies on the field of battle can be counted on to martial competing versions of essentialism, however philosophically bankrupt they all are.

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Endnotes

1. *Jazz, a film by Ken Burns*, was directed by Ken Burns and written by Geoffrey C. Ward. It was first seen on American Public Television in 2001, and several times since.
2. *The New Yorker*, 20–27 August 2001.
3. As in a personal appearance at a high school in Columbus, Ohio, as reported by Geoffrey Dutton in *The Columbus Dispatch*, Saturday, 9 March 2002.
4. Lees is citing Marsalis's words as quoted in the December 1984 issue of *Keynote Magazine*, a publication of radio station WNCN. Lees cannot restrain himself from stamping the statement 'nonsense'.
5. Lees is citing a telephone interview with Marsalis by Tom Moon of *The Detroit Free Press*.
6. Wynton Marsalis, as interviewed by the American Academy of Achievement, 8 January 1991, as documented on this website: http://www.achievement.org/autodoc/page/mar0int-1
7. 'Art, Commerce and Race: The Controversial Debate on Music and Violence', a statement by Michael Eric Dyson before the Committee on Commerce, Science & Transportation, United States Senate, 13 September 2000, as documented on the following website: http://www.senate.gov/commerce/hearings/0913dys.pdf
8. The transcript of a Wynton Marsalis interview with Billy Taylor, 29 June 1998, from the NPR series, 'Billy Taylor's Jazz at the Kennedy Center', as documented on the following website: http://www.npr.org/programs/btaylor/archive/marsalis_w.html
9. For example, the unfavourable review by this author of a performance of *Blood on the Fields*:

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'David Murray Week Outdoes Marsalis, CJO', *The Other Paper*, 20–26 February 1997, Columbus, Ohio.

10. However, it is arguable that Lincoln Center players have gradually found voices of their own since the beginning of the LCJO era.
11. For such a view, see Hodeir (1956, p. 236).
12. This perspective has been nicely if briefly characterised (Gioia 1988, Chapter II). In an apparent paradox, these authors often correlated jazz with modernist art, e.g. surrealism. Thus Robert Goffin states 'jazz was the first form of surrealism' (Goffin 1944, p. 3). The oddity is partly dispelled once we reckon with the fact that intellectuals of the era often thought of modernist art, particularly surrealism, in terms of a release of the primitive, that is, the unconscious.
13. Baraka is here citing an earlier discussion of the matter (Finkelstein 1948, p. 68).
14. The primitivists do sometimes praise white jazz musicians, but almost invariably with qualifications. Thus Panassié praises white musicians – Red Nichols is the example – whose model for jazz was 'more orderly, more subtle, and more sophisticated'. But he adds that the black musicians – Louis Armstrong is the other example – are still 'infinitely better' (Panassié 1936, p. 29).
15. As chronicled by the editorial board of *Poetry International* on their website: http://www.poetryinternational.org/cwolk/view/18978
16. The website, which he titles 'Dis/Patches from Baraka', is at http://www.amiribaraka.com/. The essay itself is located at http://www.amiribaraka.com/jazzwhite.html
17. Ben Ratliff, 'Ellington and Marsalis, inspiring and aspiring', *New York Times*, 21 May 2003, Section: E, p. 5.
18. In reported conversation (Hajdu 2003, p. 50).

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