Black Music in America: The Rise and Fallout of “Sorrow Songs”

Yende Mangum

AAS 201/PHI 291: African American Studies and The Philosophy of Race

Professor Eddie S. Glaude

14 October 2021

*“A thousand miles from home*

*I need a new n\*gga for this black cloud to follow*

*‘Cause while it’s over me, it’s too dark to see tomorrow”*

Nas – “The World Is Yours”

Music is a form of language that allows for the communication and interpretation of lived experiences (dreams included). W.E.B. Du Bois chronicles American racism through lived experiences in *The Souls of Black Folk,* in which he educates on the roles of music and other constructs in Black life. In this collection of essays, he introduces the concept of “the Veil,” which shrouds Black American life from the white American point of view, and vice versa. He also coins the term “Sorrow Songs,” used to describe the music of Black individuals robbed of personhood on American soil. While he was not musically inclined, nor particularly fond of the sonic palette of Black music, Du Bois’ teachings allow for a clear view into all elements of Black life in the American past. Masterfully set in the same era, Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* is a fictional adaptation of the story of Margaret Garner, an enslaved woman who murdered her own children to shield them from the trauma of slavery. Events identical to those mirrored in *Beloved* took place frequently in American history, thus I will use *Beloved* to provide realistic examples of the ideas Du Bois brings to light in *Souls*. As he points out, there is much to be gleaned in Black music that speaks to self-creation and social identity formation; findings within the music attest to the incomprehensible suffering experienced by slaves. By examining *Souls* and *Beloved,* we can see Black music’s inward and outward-facing enhancements of life, which evidence the Black artist’s role as fundamental to the orchestration of American freedom.

Black music gifts a voice to the voiceless, illuminating the constraints placed upon Black life and creation. Black Americans have been dictated few options in terms of activity, manifesting legally in the slave codes of yore. Speaking artistically, constraints spur creativity, and slaves were not permitted to know much in the way of music theory. In response, they constructed the “blues” scale, a melodic arrangement of pitches that features unique dissonance and intervallic structure, as these notes are mere guesses at the correct notes of a major scale. Du Bois attests to this within *Souls*, mentioning that the “black bards caught new notes, and sometimes even dared to sing.”[[1]](#footnote-1) In addition to this melodic deconstruction, Du Bois presents a lyrical analysis of slave music: “the words that are left to us are not without interest, and, cleared of evident dross, they conceal much of real poetry and meaning beneath conventional theology and unmeaning rhapsody. Like all primitive folk, the slave stood near to Nature's heart.”[[2]](#footnote-2) I agree that it is in America’s best interest to heed slave music, yet I disagree that the slave was primitive, arguing that musically, slaves were revolutionary and resourceful in encoding meaning in their music. The incorporation of nature, both human and earthen, in the work of slaves allows their music to resonate as what Du Bois calls “the most beautiful expression of human experience born this side the seas.”[[3]](#footnote-3) Additionally, this music provided a form of documentation for slaves, who were forbidden from keeping personal records (or learning how to read or write). Du Bois calls these songs “the articulate message of the slave to the world.”[[4]](#footnote-4) Using Paul D’s imprisonment in Alfred, Georgia as an example of this message, slaves “sang it out and beat it up, garbling the words so they could not be understood; tricking the words so their syllables yielded up other meanings. They sang the women they knew; the children they had been; the animals they had tamed themselves or seen others tame. They sang of bosses and masters and misses; of mules and dogs and the shamelessness of life. They sang lovingly of graveyards and sisters long gone.”[[5]](#footnote-5) As Morrison details extensively, the slaves sang purely of their existence, creating novelty from within their severely limited means.

Artists create that which often relates closely to their own personal experience, which allows individuals to locate a sense of self and purpose in art that resonates with them. Du Bois embraces this philosophy in *Souls*, asking whether the “Sorrow Songs” sing true to lived Black experiences given the context of slavery.[[6]](#footnote-6) Toni Morrison offers a response to Du Bois’s question in *Beloved,* when Sethe asks Paul D about the iron mouthpiece he was forced to wear. Although it is referenced throughout the novel as the most painful, dehumanizing, and insanity-inducing form of punishment, he responds with a mere “I don’t know. I never have talked about it. Not to a soul. Sang it sometimes, but I never told a soul.”[[7]](#footnote-7) Here, one may perceive a human connection to music that holds stronger than any interpersonal connection, yet that which presents is an effect of slavery’s destruction of the human ability to form, maintain, and salvage relationships, including one’s relationship with the self. Enslavement has rendered Paul D unable to recognize his own soul, unable to realize that he was, in truth, singing to himself. He is and has no listener, no one to recognize the humanity within his song. This is slavery’s most devastating toll: the confiscation of self. The connection between the artist and audience hinges upon the locus of self.

American disregard of Black music is self-subjugation. Of the singers of slave songs, Du Bois writes, “their appearance was uncouth, their language funny, but their hearts were human and their singing stirred men with a mighty power.”[[8]](#footnote-8) According to “a Black woman” he encounters along his travels, these songs “can’t be sung without a full heart and a troubled sperrit.”[[9]](#footnote-9) The experience of this partially-defined listener is perhaps best described using discourse on 19th-century English poetry, in which John Keats writes that “we read fine things, but never feel them to the full until we have gone the same steps as the author.”[[10]](#footnote-10) These parallels extend into broader discussion of life and art, examples of which can be found in *Beloved*. The singing of Amy Denver navigates Sethe through a seemingly insurmountable episode of pain, the two of whom share human experiences despite differences in pigmentation.[[11]](#footnote-11) The defining tension of the book is Beloved’s overwhelming presence in human and ghost form—with her identity largely unknown to those around her. Sethe only makes the connection that Beloved is the reincarnation of her daughter when she reencounters the song she gave Beloved in her infancy.[[12]](#footnote-12) It was only once she stopped singing and listened that she detected the obvious. Applied broadly, this serves to justify the need for America to stop dictating the Black experience. In listening to its Black individuals, America may reclaim that which was once a part of itself—a part it killed.

Black American music is an excellent entry point into the study of the human condition, miraculous in that it exists as a direct product of human suffering. Whereas typical drivers of musical innovation include advancements in technology or musical discoveries for the sake of music’s progression, the sole cause of Black music’s existence is the unbearable oppression that African Americans face. According to Du Bois, the music tells “in word and music of trouble and exile, of strife and hiding; they grope toward some unseen power and sigh for rest in the End.”[[13]](#footnote-13) It builds off lived hardship to envision solace for its proponents, an unsolicited desire to end the pain that provokes it, prompting African Americans to strive toward future justice and create possibility where emptiness lied. Du Bois agrees, writing that it is “the music of an unhappy people, of the children of disappointment; they tell of death and suffering and unvoiced longing toward a truer world.”[[14]](#footnote-14) Slave music cries of the widespread pain and disregard of the forgotten, the minimized: “our song, our toil, our cheer, and warning have been given to this nation in blood-brotherhood.”[[15]](#footnote-15) In the same way that suffering unifies an oppressed population, the music of suffering unites this country. Revisiting Alfred, Georgia in *Beloved* gives us a different vantage point on this phenomenon. Paul D and fellow slave-prisoners figuratively smash the head of “Mr. Death” while singing love songs to him.[[16]](#footnote-16) They use song as a group weapon, tormenting life for toying with them while longing for release from its bondage. The resourcefulness exhibited in the slaves’ repurposing of song adds a layer to the music’s defense of the slave’s humanity. Even Sethe recalls nothing of her enslaved life prior to Sweet Home besides singing and dancing.[[17]](#footnote-17) While this may owe in part to her human nostalgia subconsciously pushing out certain memories in favor of the most tolerable ones, it speaks to the presence of music during the suffering of slavery. The slaves’ transformation of cruel circumstances into memorable melody is a feat only achievable by humans.

According to Du Bois, “there is no true American music but the wild sweet melodies of the Negro slave.”[[18]](#footnote-18) This is accurate both technically and historically: Black music aligns with ideals of freedom, agency, and rebellion that America fought for in its own revolution, excepting the perspective from which it stems. It was born melodically and structurally on American soil without external influence during conception, whereas most other music attributed to America has harmonic input from Europe. (The only foreign involvement in Black American music occurred long before it was dreamt, a notion I will explore further on.) On the other side of my earlier statement lies the truth within Black music’s subject matter. The slave song told of slave life; it remains the most truthful account of the reality of this often-overstated country. Concerning the American exploitation of Black music, Du Bois writes that “the mass of "gospel" hymns which has swept through American churches and well-nigh ruined our sense of song consists largely of debased imitations of Negro melodies made by ears that caught the jingle but not the music, the body but not the soul, of the Jubilee songs.”[[19]](#footnote-19) In trying to incorporate these songs into the Church, appropriators neglect the meaning of the music, unable to truly grasp at the (inner) life it conveys, ensnaring only the surface appeal. Regarding Beloved’s singing, Sethe and Denver “had not got used to the gravelly voice and the song that seemed to lie in it. Just outside music it lay, with a cadence not like theirs.”[[20]](#footnote-20) The individuality of Beloved’s tone speaks to her own lived (or died) experiences, causing Sethe and Denver to misplace it as alien to the construct they know music to be. Their inability to recognize her song shows that they do not recognize her inner being. This mirrors America’s treatment of Black music; the failure to recognize its reality and internal focus leads to its complete misjudging.

One of the hallmarks of slavery was the denial of the “inner life” of African Americans, the space of reflection within the mind that nurtures creativity and wholeness. Black inner life is available for white American view through Black music, despite its vehement rejection and subsequent suppression. I will reiterate: despite living conditions that beat one’s humanity into submission, the very essence of humanity of the Black individual is still found in one’s music. The vitality of the connection between music and Black inner life is difficult to overstate, perhaps best illustrated in *Beloved* when Baby Suggs asks herself, “Could she sing? (Was it nice to hear when she did?)”[[21]](#footnote-21) The layering of her reflection shows the significance of this construct within her inner life—the fact that internal and external validation of her musical ability determine her state of being. Returning to Du Bois, one finds that “through all the sorrow of the Sorrow Songs there breathes a hope—a faith in the ultimate justice of things. The minor cadences of despair change often to triumph and calm confidence. Sometimes it is faith in life, sometimes a faith in death, sometimes assurance of boundless justice in some fair world beyond. But whichever it is, the meaning is always clear: that sometime, somewhere, men will judge men by their souls and not by their skins.”[[22]](#footnote-22) Black music is a manifestation of the faith found in the inner life of the Black individual—an inner life previously invisible to white America due to blind ignorance of Black humanity.

Dr. Cornel West spoke of the crucial role of artists as the “vanguard of the species,”[[23]](#footnote-23) or the leaders driving a school of thought. I shall extend this pronouncement to the role of any human who identifies as a creative. Not only does this rule apply generally to the human race, but it is best seen in the expansion of Black life and culture through Black music. Du Bois outlines the steps in development and progression of the slave song: “The first is African music, the second Afro-American, while the third is a blending of Negro music with the music heard in the foster land. The result is still distinctively Negro and the method of blending original, but the elements are both Negro and Caucasian. One might go further and find a fourth step in this development, where the songs of white America have been distinctively influenced by the slave songs or have incorporated whole phrases of Negro melody.”[[24]](#footnote-24) In this mapping, we can see the assembly of novelty from a limited selection of existing creations, as is the case with most Black inventions outside the realm of music. The originality in craftmanship is what gives the music its edge, even though its components are not distinctly slave. Du Bois illuminates the causal relationship between the internal development of this music and the external development of America over time. “The songs are indeed the siftings of centuries; the music is far more ancient than the words, and in it we can trace here and there signs of development.”[[25]](#footnote-25) He asks, “would America have been America without her Negro people,”[[26]](#footnote-26) to which I answer an emphatic, layered “no.” No, musically, in the sense that the rhythmic, harmonic, and melodic structural advancements of American music hinge upon the discoveries of slaves. No, physically, in the sense that many of the structures in this country were built and sustained by slaves and cheap African American labor. No, ideologically, in that many of the inventions accredited to white Americans were, in fact, products of Black imagination. No, systemically, in that America could not carry out its latent systematic racism without the presence of the Black individual. It can thus be said that Black artists are the “vanguard” of both Black and American culture, the latter of which cannot exist without the former.

Black contributions to American society rarely prioritize the Black individual, yet admirably, Black music contributes to America in ways that also benefit Black life in this nation. The music serves as a proposition of the intrinsic value of Black lives, a point whose necessity to be made reflects the grave condition of our racist nation. Of the Sorrow Songs, Du Bois writes, “Thomas Wentworth Higginson hastened to tell of these songs, and Miss McKim and others urged upon the world their rare beauty. But the world listened only half credulously until the Fisk Jubilee Singers sang the slave songs so deeply into the world's heart that it can never wholly forget them again.”[[27]](#footnote-27) Only after listening to Black music do White people see Black individuals as having intellectual value. This emphasizes the hypocrisy within the white conception of the Black individual, which denies the humanity of a person while relating to the authentic humanity portrayed in the same person’s art. Taken further, they shamelessly appropriate the music as their own, incorporating it into their own semblant culture. This contradiction is Du Bois’ Veil in its entirety—only once white Americans envision a future in Black music do they acknowledge African American intellectual contribution, which demands the respect of their capability as individuals. Unfortunately, given limited alternatives, African Americans embrace this, forced to jump at even the slightest bit of opportunity America provides. Du Bois reiterates, “Are not these gifts worth the giving? Is not this work and striving?”[[28]](#footnote-28) These are frequent contemplations of the Black artist, born from a desire to satisfy the perception of external authority. Here, Du Bois refers to Black musicians’ generous presentation of Black music to a culturally empty white society. “It has been neglected, it has been, and is, half despised, and above all it has been persistently mistaken and misunderstood; but notwithstanding, it still remains as the singular spiritual heritage of the nation and the greatest gift of the Negro people.”[[29]](#footnote-29) Black music provided a country of adopted tradition with its first distinct cultural element, which in turn provided Black individuals the opportunity to be seen and heard as humans for first time on American soil.

As in times of slavery, Black music continues in modernity to lift the Veil both on and of white hypocrisy. Contemporary “Sorrow Songs” such as Nas’ “The World Is Yours” remain at the mainstream of American culture, whose roots lie in the melodies of the enslaved Black individual. The influx of ideas given rise by Black minds owe their opportunities to be seen and heard to the forebearers of Black music; when they gave America Black music, they gave themselves agency. Morrison in *Beloved* showcases the depth of the connection between music and Black inner life, which Du Bois introduces in *Souls*. The music has both inward and outward-acting positive effects on the world around it, unexpected in that it stems from the most brutal subjugation in human history. It shows the value of the individual Black mind even when it is unable to recognize itself as human, born into a nation that prescribed inherent Black mental value only to be found either in manual labor or in collectivity, with no potential for individual decisions and agency. Mystery caused by ignorance is a burden, especially as it pertains to knowledge of the self—a burden Black music frees America from by allowing the nation to understand itself through its constituents. Most of all, the music offers us yet another instance of the implications of racism falling on chained Black hands to undo.

This paper represents my own work in accordance with University regulations.

Yende Mangum 6 December 2021

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