



THEORIZING THEORY, THEORIZING BLACKNESS

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This essay was originally presented as the keynote address at the inaugural Theorizing African American Music conference which was held in June 2022 at Case Western Reserve University. It problematizes both the concepts of music theory and “African American.” It examines the goals, intent, and function of music theory as it presently is practiced and considers the intersection of identities, aesthetics, and music theory. The new foreword speaks to the dramatic developments that have taken place since the original presentation. This polemic seeks to challenge contemporary music theory as practiced and reveal the potential for an evolved dialogue about race, identity, and music theory.

*I dedicate this talk to the spirits and ancestors
who created the ground on which I stand.*

Foreword

This essay was originally presented as the keynote address at the inaugural Theorizing African American Music Conference, which was held in June of 2022 at Case Western Reserve University. It is presented here with minor edits given the change of format from address to essay. This foreword addresses the dramatic circumstances that have occurred since its presentation and places this address in context of the present moment in which the very idea of diversity, equity, and inclusion is being challenged and eradicated in all aspects of our society. The realm of music theory is not immune.

Reading this essay while considering the present tumult of our nation and world is sobering. The excitement of the first conference and the subsequent conferences in Denver (2023) and Atlanta (June 2025) is tempered by

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the administration's assault on dissent of any kind and in every quarter of our society.

This false "anti-intellectualism" represents a poorly veiled attempt to silence other voices. Particularly disturbing are the attacks on intellectual/academic freedom and education—fundamental and foundational to our democracy. Our universities are under siege and this very essay would come under very different scrutiny today. Some colleges and universities might even be reticent to host a Theorizing African American Music Conference if it were to be held today. This moment in our world calls for courage, clarity, and purposefulness. Now is an opportune time to recall what drew us to the academy in the first place.

Good evening. I want to begin by thanking the Program Committee for the kind invitation to offer this keynote at this important conference considering Theorizing African American Music. I am grateful for this special opportunity to address my theory colleagues on the direction and challenges of our discipline at this point in time. I would like to congratulate the conveners for bringing this meeting to fruition and also offer a word of gratitude to the impressive presenters who by their very presence illuminate some of the wonderful possibilities that lie before us. I have already been inspired by the papers that I heard earlier today, and I anticipate that tomorrow will bring more rich conversation. This conference and our coming together is already a significant response to the present moment.

Perhaps not since the 1960s has America experienced the social, racial, political, and economic upheaval we are experiencing today. The complicated decade of the 1960s, with the riots; assassinations of the Kennedys, Martin Luther King, and Malcolm X; and the Vietnam war, hit our country like the atom bomb we feared. For many Americans in the 1960s, both Black and White, seeing the White police and the National Guard in the South with their water hoses, dogs, and billy clubs on the evening news forced them to confront the reality of the rabid racism of the time. Similarly, watching the Vietnam war from our dens and living rooms brought the brutal realities and human toll of war uncomfortably home. In some ways we are where we are in America because we never fully dealt with the contradictions and convulsions of that time.

Today we are confronted with the murders of George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, Eric Garner, Trayvon Martin, Tamir Rice, Breonna Taylor, and so many others. Seeing another White police officer with his knee on George Floyd's neck for nine minutes and twenty-nine seconds, until he died, horrified and outraged many of us. For many it was time to just scream: "Enough is enough." It seems that another racial reckoning season has come to America, but it comes at a time when crises are coming at us from all directions: the trauma of a global

pandemic, the Russian invasion of Ukraine, mass shootings and gun violence of every stripe, the domestic terrorist threat from insurrectionists hell-bent on seizing power not *for* the people but *from* the people, all while declaring they are taking our nation back. Taking it back indeed.

The racial reckoning and reality check has even crept into the seemingly genteel and sanitary discipline of music theory and has shaken it to its core. The venom and vicious attacks on African American music theorist Philip Ewell, who dared to suggest that some of our theoretical assumptions have embedded within them racial and racist understandings, drew the ire of a stunning number of colleagues. As if he had desecrated the holy temple of music theory. He clearly touched a nerve but did not deserve the treatment he received. Thankfully, others saw this assault as a wake-up call to conscience.

All of these eruptions have contributed to our being here this week. This conference is an acknowledgment of a problem that we can and must address. It is a problem of white privilege, power, and systems in our society that affect us all. This very conference is a powerful real-time response to the long-standing realities of racism in America, the academy, and in the discipline of music theory. This conference is now a part of the long history of efforts to assert a rightful place at the table for African American musicians, theorists, and creatives.

In 1969, the Indiana University School of Music sponsored a five-day seminar on the subject “Black Music in College and University Curricula.” Thought leaders in the field, both Black and White, attended the conference from all over the nation. Composers, performers, publishers, scholars, and educators sought to find a way forward to address the common problems of the day regarding Black music in the college setting. The event was organized by the Black Music Committee of Indiana University. Note that the term *African American* had not yet come into vogue. The committee comprised David Baker, Austin Caswell, and Dominique-René de Lerma.

One session that was particularly germane to our conversation was entitled “Black Composers and the Avant-Garde.” The participants in this session were T. J. Anderson, Hale Smith, and Olly Wilson. Each of these composers and teachers are members of the pantheon of twentieth-century African American musical expression. They trained and mentored generations of composers and theorists active in our field today. I certainly acknowledge their importance in my own career. Olly Wilson was the first African American theorist and composer I ever met in person. That experience was life-changing. My subsequent relationships with Hale Smith and T. J. Anderson continued to inform my work and the perspective I share with you today.

During the “Black Composers and the Avant-Garde” session, Anderson quoted Shirley Graham Du Bois, the widow of W. E. B. Du Bois, and her 1936 “Spirituals to Symphonies” essay: “We stood on the threshold...of a renaissance period in which

Black artists [like Florence Price, William Dawson, and Nathaniel Dett] would move into the society and greatly enrich the cultural heritage of the country.”¹ To Graham Du Bois’s remarks, Anderson replied at the 1969 conference that “it is ironic that some thirty-three years later, we’re standing on that threshold!”²

There have been many important conferences and symposia on Black music since then. In 1985, Willis Patterson at the University of Michigan presented a major exploration of Black American music across all of the genres one could imagine. In 2005, when Emory University received the papers and manuscripts of William Dawson, I curated a National Conference on African American Music and Identity at the Dawn of the Twenty-First Century. And there have been many more that could be mentioned. This conference, however, is the first to my knowledge in which music theory is the point of departure. Given the rich array of research topics being presented this weekend, this Theorizing African American Music Conference represents historical continuity in the struggle for equity and inclusion of Black music and the added dimension of a theory-centered focus within this enterprise. In the words of Sam Cooke, a change *is* gonna come!

My remarks are based on my experience as a musician, music theorist, and African American man. These three strands of experience are interwoven and inextricably linked for me so it will be helpful to share a bit of my background. My first experience with music theory came relatively early on. I attended an arts and science high school in Detroit Michigan called Cass Technical High School. As a vocational music major, theory and ear training courses were a required part of a rigorous curriculum in which performance was only a part. It was unashamedly representative of Western European art culture. No jazz, no doo-wop, no R&B. I can still remember some of the rhythmic exercises from Paul Hindemith’s *Elementary Training for Musicians*.³ Cass Tech had an excellent symphonic band and orchestra, and I would encounter the repertoire I performed there again in college at the University of Michigan School of Music. It is important to share this personal background to give you a sense of my perspective about music. As a young musician I thrived on every musical opportunity that came my way. From playing rock ‘n’ roll and funk to playing clarinet in a biergarten band on the back of a wagon complete with my lederhosen—seeing my skinny legs in lederhosen was not a pretty sight, but it was all music to me—and I loved it! It never occurred to me that my involvement in these musical traditions violated some racial or cultural border that I should not cross. Hearing

1. T. J. Anderson, “From Black Composers and the Avant-Garde,” in Eileen Southern, *Readings in Black American Music*, 2nd ed. (W. W. Norton, [1971] 1983), 319. The article that Anderson cites is Shirley Graham Du Bois, “Spirituals to Symphonies,” *Etude* (1936): 691.

2. T. J. Anderson, “Black Composers and the Avant-Garde,” in *Black Music in Our Culture*, ed. Dominique Rene de Lerma (Kent State University Press, 1970), 63.

3. See Paul Hindemith, *Elementary Training for Musicians*, 2nd ed. (Schott, 1946).

Stravinsky's "Dumbarton Oaks" at Cass Tech and playing his "Soldier's Tale" and "Petrushka" there was mind-blowing. I felt a little like Dizzy Gillespie when he first heard Charlie Parker. Diz said, "Now that's how music should sound!" My enthusiasm for music—all types of music, and especially Stravinsky's music—gave me a Dizzy Gillespie moment. "That's how music should sound!"

But just as my love affair with all kinds of music was beginning at Cass Tech and in the vibrant cultural center that was Detroit, another reality set in. It was spring of 1968, and Martin Luther King had just been assassinated in Memphis, Tennessee. My initial response was more of bewilderment than grief. Like most teenagers of the day, I was more aware of the latest Motown and Beatles hits than I was of the civil rights movement. The subsequent race riots in Detroit changed the city forever—that was my introduction to the racial terrain that I had been oblivious to through my adolescence. Seeing the tanks and troops roll down my quiet residential street made it seem like we were in the midst of a military occupation. It *was* a military occupation. In some ways, Detroit never fully recovered from 1968. It certainly does not bear much of a resemblance to the vibrant multicultural, multiethnic arts-rich city that I grew up in. It was a kaleidoscope of ethnic cultures that we all reveled in.

Did racism exist in Detroit in 1968? Of course it did, but I think many in my generation had been shielded from the overt acts of racism by our parents and our elders because it was their hope that *our* sense of possibility, promise, and optimism would not be jaded by their experiences or by the experiences of my grandparents. We speak of the Great Migration today as a simple sociohistorical fact, but my grandfather, who was a part of that Great Migration, never spoke of it. He saw no utility in sharing with us the realities of lynching, Jim Crow racism, or sharecropping that he had escaped by coming north. In Amiri Baraka's *Blues People: Negro Music in White America*, he says folks like my granddad saw Henry Ford and the Ford Motor Company as synonymous with "northern opportunity." Cheap unskilled labor was necessary for the burgeoning auto industry and poor Blacks filled a labor shortage because of the 1914 restriction of unskilled laborers from Europe. Why is this important? Because the rise of the Black middle class was built in Detroit by people like my grandfather seeking a better life. What some called "northern opportunity," my parents were raised to see simply as "opportunity." I was the next iteration of that opportunity and promise and the public education I received was my passport.

I attended the University of Michigan as a clarinet and woodwind student. I wanted to play woodwinds because as an adolescent, I had heard Yusef Lateef playing bassoon, flute, oboe, and tenor saxophone at a Sunday matinee. That image of a giant of a man stayed in my head. At Michigan I practiced and did my best to compete in a frightfully competitive conservatory environment. I loved the competition, but I hated music theory courses. They seemed irrelevant to the music I

was interested in. The theory teachers, many of them good musicians, successfully managed to keep their musician skills a secret from us. But the one aspect of theory I enjoyed was ear training and dictation and my high school years of formal training and writing charts for my soul band really paid off. I came to music theory first as a lover of music. Theory provided me with the tools to codify and explain what I heard and to better understand the practice not as one style or genre of tonal music but all music. I was drawn by the explanations of musical organization and principles I could actually hear. The abstractions, in many instances, were confirmed by my own listening and performing practices. I was drawn to music theory because it gave me a way to formalize much of my experience with music as a player—the harmonies and rhythms of a Stravinsky, the note-against-note concepts of species counterpoint, and even the idea of structural levels made musical sense to my ear. Music theory confirmed my musical experience. It did not contradict it.

I came to graduate school at Yale University not as a music theory student but as a musicology student. I became a theory student after surviving one semester of a “Renaissance Theory and Aesthetics” seminar from a senior musicologist who, “to protect the innocent,” shall remain nameless. That seminar almost killed me! By God’s grace and with the eventual support of Allen Forte and David Lewin I completed a theory dissertation on pitch and rhythm in the early music of Igor Stravinsky. I think I was the first African American to complete the music theory program at Yale. I am pleased to say I was not the last. Yay Phil Ewell and Clifton Boyd!

With these notes as a background and context, I will now share a few thoughts on the topic “Theorizing Theory, Theorizing Blackness.” This reflects my own “spiritual strivings,” as W. E. B. Du Bois would say, and, to quote his nemesis Booker T. Washington, this is where I have chosen to “cast down your bucket where you are.”⁴ Through our intentional and critical efforts together, I believe we as theorists, scholars, and musicians can be the change we seek at this critical moment in the life of our discipline and of our world.

Now I will address three central questions: (1) What is Blackness, (2) what is African American music, and (3) what does theorizing African American music look like going forward?

What Is Blackness?

I begin this part of my talk by acknowledging the growing importance of “identity” in our individual and corporate self-understanding. The emergence of

4. Booker T. Washington, “Cast Down Your Bucket Where You Are,” National Park Service, 2019, <https://www.nps.gov/bowa/learn/education/upload/Cast-Down-Your-Bucket.PDF>.

gender and sexuality studies, the maturation of women's studies, and the expansion of LGBTQ+ studies are all having tremendous influences on the ways we study music and reflect on all aspects of our lives. My focus today on identity is necessarily much narrower in scope. Deciphering the ways that many of us assert "multiple" identities at once represents a new frontier and the intersection of these identities makes this work all the more important.

Before we can theorize African American music, we must first decide what African American music *is*. To frame that, we must first say what we mean by African American, or shall we say Black? I purposefully titled my paper "Theorizing Blackness" because I wanted to interrogate what we mean by the term *Black*. What is Blackness? What is Black? We know it is a powerful word with great racial weight. For some the word is a racial slur, for others it is a term of endearment. We know that descriptions and labels for African Americans is a storied history in its own right.

Since 1619, we have been called by many names: African, Negro, Colored, Ethiopian, Afro American, Black, and African American. The term *Black* is significant in that its emergence during the 1960s denoted the intention of self-definition. This was a name chosen by Black people, to be used by and for Black people. It was not coincidental that it was a term in direct opposition to *Whiteness* or the white oppressor. One must understand the self-naming as an act of defiance as well as of independence. And as with all things American it came with contradictory impulses. With the color caste stigma so firmly implanted in African American consciousness, there was a time when, if an African American called another African American "Black," it was an insult. This is a part of the internalization of the racial frame of white privilege put upon the Black person.

On the other hand, many of us have used the terms *African American* and *Black* interchangeably for decades. Consider, for example, Eileen Southern's *Music of Black Americans*, Samuel Floyd's *The Power of Black Music*, or Amiri Baraka's *Black Music*. For African American writers, artists, and intellectuals, the term *Black* was important enough to name an entire movement around it. The Black Arts Movement, along with its adherents, was a major literary and cultural force in the 1960s and early 1970s. Its leaders included Amiri Baraka, Jeff Donaldson, Nikki Giovanni, Larry Neal, and Sonia Sanchez.

On the third hand, even within the Black community of Black intellectuals, creatives, and aesthetes, the term *Black* has not always been universally embraced. And when it was embraced, it did not always mean the same thing. George Walker disliked the label "Black composer," both philosophically and professionally. In spite of being the first African American to win the Pulitzer Prize for music, he felt the stigma of being labelled a Black composer prevented him from reaping the benefits of his achievements. Hale Smith, in a provocative essay entitled "Here I Stand" writes:

I must admit to being largely unconvinced as far as the current emphasis on things black is concerned, because a major characteristic of American cultural life has always been the setting aside of creative efforts of Afro-Americans in “race” categories where they have rarely been considered on the same basis as the works of Europeans and white Americans. I view the black syndrome as yet another means of evading the issue—but this time with the best of ostensible motives, and with the enthusiastic aid and support of black artists, who probably feel that any way of being seen and heard is better than *no* way.⁵

We may all agree that the idea of race is a social and human construct, but that does not fully speak to the way in which race is formulated in America, in Black and White. Only in the last half century have we expanded the oppositional structure of Black and White to include Brown or Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) peoples—but in America the bipolar framework remains the same: White versus non-White. Ironically, even “Whiteness” is not a fixed concept. In America, immigrant populations have at various points in our history become “White” for very specific purposes and outcomes. Thus Jews, Italians, Poles, and others have assimilated and become White for some intents and purposes. But for African Americans, becoming White has simply not been an option because of the way race is structured in America.

I purposely framed this part of my talk around Blackness and not African Americanness. Why? Because I want to understand what we mean. My concern is not about the interchangeability of the two terms but the specificity of meaning if we are to “theorize African American music.” Here are some relevant questions:

- If *Black* and *African American* are interchangeable, does it follow the Black music and African American music are interchangeable? Is this just a matter of semantics or is there more at stake here?
- Is all African American music Black? Is all Black music African American?
- Where does (continental) African music fit in? Most would agree that African music is Black but *not* African American.
- Although Black is a racial term, what is its proper place in theorizing the music? Can someone who is not Black participate in Black music?
- What if someone is externally racially identified as Black under our problematic method of racial designations with its own racist history but self-identifies as not Black? What happens? Is the music Black whether the creator says it is or not? How does the intentionality of the artist fit into this schema?

5. Hale Smith, “Here I Stand,” in Southern, *Readings in Black American Music*, 323.

I think you can see some of the dilemmas here. The racialized way we think of Black and African American is perhaps too limited for the type of broad-based, inclusive way we want to understand the music. Perhaps neither term is useful. Perhaps *African diasporic music* in its breadth of definition is actually more precise.

In addition, we must resist the temptation of seeing race as one-directional—an imprint on the oppressed by the oppressor. Racism affects us all, but in different ways. Again, consider how systemic racism has been internalized within the African American community. For example, we know that so-called Negro concert spirituals are a recasting of African American folk melodies. But internally it also represented the aspirations of formerly enslaved people, newly equipped with an education to participate more fully in the democracy and the culture to which they had been introduced. The Fisk Jubilee Singers and the other Jubilee ensembles, such as at Hampton and Tuskegee Universities, sought to participate in a White world that ultimately despised them. This of course did not diminish the artistic achievements of these groups nor the myriad musical expressions that would follow for the next half century—I'm thinking of the compositions of Harry T. Burleigh, Nathaniel Dett, William Dawson, and others. Just as the performances of the Fisk Jubilee Singers sought to deconstruct the racist notions and expectations about what it meant to be a "Negro," their performances sought to demonstrate and to prove Black potential and competence in a White world. This was not simply a projection to the outside world; it was an internal reflection of Black aspiration and the politics of respectability. The fully notated concert versions of the choral and art-song arrangements of the spirituals emerged against the backdrop of Reconstruction and widespread violence against Blacks in the South and foreshadowed the rise of a Black bourgeoisie and the Harlem Renaissance.

What Is African American Music?

Let's add to this conundrum the question of what Black or African American music is. I teach an undergraduate course entitled Black Music: Culture, Commerce, and the Racial Imagination. On the first day of class I ask my students, "How many here believe there is something called Black Music?" Invariably, every student rapidly responds in the affirmative. I then ask, "So, what is Black music?" You can probably imagine the responses from your own experience. The students gleefully share their answers—Black music is the blues, gospel, hip-hop, jazz, R&B, and soul. There is usually one student who is deeply immersed in trap or crunk, a student who impresses us all with their erudition. I then play the first movement of William Grant Still's "Afro American Symphony," and the room goes silent. I ask, "Is this Black music?" The class seems stumped. And they are not alone.

I think if we are to theorize African American music, we will need to create a rubric or framework broad enough to support the many expressions that reflect the African American musical universe. How can the music of George Walker and the Art Ensemble of Chicago be understood as a part of an “aesthetic unity”? Can jazz, arranged spirituals, and the improvisations of Cecil Taylor be held in dynamic tension? These are first-order questions for theorizing African American music. This rubric needs to push well beyond the racial identity of the performer and participant or the latest “Black” style on Spotify.

What Does Theorizing African American Music Look Like Going Forward?

A theory of African American music could assist in formalizing a set of criteria with which to consider the music. It would consider the basic elements of the music and create tools appropriate to the music under consideration. Present theory tools and methods would not necessarily need to be discarded, but they would be recalibrated as required to consider a music that has a different aesthetic point of departure. The theory would facilitate and create a body of scholarly literature so that the music could be scrutinized and the research shared for an ongoing discourse.

Friends, we have experienced moments of racial awakening before, and while we note that some progress has been made, we must ask if this incremental progress is sufficient to the task. As Nina Simone exclaimed in “Mississippi Goddam,” “Too slow!” We must also ask if the present systems and structures in place can make the substantial change necessary for a different outcome. Not to be cynical, but many of our professional arts institutions are tripping over themselves in an effort to address decades of neglect. Is this repentance sustainable? The opera world has responded to the moment with new commissions and remounts. Consider Terrence Blanchard’s *Fire Shut Up in My Bones* that was staged at New York’s Metropolitan Opera in September 2021 or the series of scheduled performances of Anthony Davis’s *X: The Life and Times of Malcolm X*, also to be performed at the Met. Is this new “Great Awakening” sustainable? How long will we stay woke?

In the area of diversity, equity, and inclusion, one must ask, To what end? We seek to have important African American composers performed, studied, and included, but is this enough? Do we want to be included at the existing table or do we want a new table? This is precisely the question that gave rise to the Black Arts Movement. Black writers and cultural workers agreed that they needed to create separate cultural institutions in order to achieve their goals. In other words, these workers needed new tables, and they built them.

There is an ecology of music study in which the critical establishment, the academy, and the audience play particular roles in putting some repertoire and people at the center and other repertoire at the margin. African American music, in spite of its undeniable influence on music and modernism for the past century, continues to be at the margin of music exploration, at least at the college and university level. There are many reasons for this. The study of Western musical practice is closely aligned with our understanding of Western European history—or mythmaking, as some would describe it. It is a history of colonialism and hegemony. To continue to be complicit in this Eurocentric worldview is intellectually dishonest and simply not right. We are here now because of the racial reckoning that is roaring through our nation, our academic institutions, conservatories, and our arts institutions. We are here because there is an acknowledgment that the confluence of race, racism, power, and white privilege continue to keep true diversity, equity, and inclusion at bay.

Acknowledging that what European theory does is to preserve the status quo, thereby replicating itself, theorizing African American music must reject the status quo as a point of departure and make African American music and its aesthetics the epicenter of its work. This will entail several aspects:

1. Describing musical phenomena, paying particular attention to issues and types of time, both linear and cyclical, temporality, rhythm, and repetition.
2. Formalizing those descriptions with characteristics and functions or behaviors.
3. Identifying common practices within Black American musics. Are their characteristics measurable and quantifiable? What are the characteristics?
4. Codifying and interpreting practice. Here, nothing can be taken for granted, and issues, such as temporality, different concepts of musical time, pulse, meter, and repetition will require serious reevaluation. Codification must be connected to aesthetic underpinnings. We know that many musical practices are shared by other cultures throughout the world. Theorizing African American music's task is to interpret what values are associated specifically to African American music.
5. Acknowledging Black music as cultural expression. It is a racial expression in that it exists in a world framed by race and racism.
6. Improvising as a form of self-affirmation.⁶
7. Measuring significance. For example, we know about the composers who have been routinely excluded from the traditional canon, but who

6. Dwight Andrews, "From Black to Blues: A Blues Aesthetic," *Black Sacred Music: A Journal of Theomusicology* 6, no. 1 (1992), <https://doi.org/10.1215/10439455-6.1.47>.

should be included in this new canon? Or is this canon re-formation? Is there a danger of replacing White geniuses with Black geniuses?

8. Diversifying the repertoire. New tools and methods will need to be developed to deal with this diversity. If we diversify the repertoire, we must diversify the tools.
9. Defining the goal of the music theorist in this new age. Do we even need music theory per se, or is the specialization that has evolved in European music study an appropriate way of thinking for the future? The papers presented at this conference display a breadth and fluidity that suggest to me that the present music theory apparatus is ill-suited to the future.
10. Wanting a seat at the table or wanting a new table. An equally difficult question is, Can the present academic infrastructure accommodate the task of theorizing African American music? Or is such an accommodation at cross purposes with the privilege and power of our music academies? The big issue for many of us is that having a seat at the table might simply not be possible. In Baraka's *Blues People*, he describes a certain impossibility of the Negro experience. He also describes the impossibility of assimilating into the American mainstream because he and his culture would have to "disappear." For Baraka and many others, the price of the ticket is just too high.
11. Unifying musical styles. Given the rich diversity of musical styles and genres of African American music, one must ask what unifying characteristics or practices exist. Is there an aesthetic unity to African American music? Should there be? Why is it necessary? Or is it a necessity because we see an aesthetic unity as being essential?

Musical Examples

I conclude my presentation with two examples to illustrate the rich potential and challenge of theorizing African American music. The potential is to identify or codify what is distinctive about African American musical expression. The challenge is to articulate an aesthetic that could contain the vastly diverse and different musical expressions and forms without essentializing African American music or its creators.

The first example is by noted theorist and composer Olly Wilson (1937–2018). Wilson is regarded by many as an African American trailblazer and pioneer in electronic music. He earned his PhD in 1964 from the University of Iowa, studied experimental and electronic music at the University of Illinois, and taught at the University of California at Berkeley for more than thirty years. Electronic music

was only a part of his expansive output as a composer. He composed orchestral work, works for chorus and orchestra, and works for voices in various configurations. Additionally, Wilson was a prolific essayist, writing on African and African American music aesthetics as well as music theory topics.

This example is an excerpt from his 1976 composition *Sometimes* for voice and tape. It is based on the African American spiritual “Sometimes I Feel like a Motherless Child” (see audio file and first page of score in Figure 1; partial score in Appendix 1) and was composed for the late tenor William Brown. Brown was a fierce advocate for the creation, performance, and commissioning of new works by African American composers. Thus, this piece reflects the contribution of two seminal figures of African American concert music in the second half of the twentieth century. This music provides a useful platform to interrogate a possible framework for considering the nature of African American music. As this entire paper has suggested, the task here is to ask: What is African American music? What are we “theorizing” and to what end? What aspects of this piece might we understand as normative? How should or could a theory of African American music address this work?

I offer no proposal for a theoretical model here. Rather, I offer a few remarks and observations that might point the way *toward* creating a theoretical model. Throughout the work there are clear surface features of African American folk and vernacular musical practice, such as whoops, hollers, falsetto, bent tones, and vocables—that is, using the mouth and the voice to create extramusical sounds and percussive effects. Wilson incorporates other practices commonly used in descriptions of African American music such as call and response but in novel ways. For example, the function of call and response in African American music is often discussed in the context of collective or communal music making. In *Sometimes*, the live performer calls and responds to himself via his own pre-recorded voice in real time. *Sometimes* also requires the performer to improvise, which adds another dimension and further complicates the work of the music theorist. There are many theories of improvisation, but which one might be most appropriate to the task at hand?

Like many African American spirituals, “Sometimes I Feel like a Motherless Child” is based on a pentatonic scale. Wilson uses the spiritual melody as source music, deconstructing it, creating fragments of it into both sound and text. At other points, the melody is presented intact, albeit embedded in a whirlwind of electronic sound effects. Wilson is “signifying” here. Henry Louis Gates Jr., in his book *The Signifyin(g) Monkey: Towards a Theory of Afro American Literary Criticism* (1989), adapted the word as he developed a method of a literary criticism term to demonstrate how African American writers manipulate language or misdirect meanings for those who do not understand the code or the culture. Wilson

signifies in the sense that the more the listener knows the signs, symbols, and tropes of African American culture, the more the listener will be able to glean from the piece itself.

The score is notated on three traditional staves, one for the tenor soloist and two for the prerecorded tape parts and the prerecorded vocal part. The score combines graphic notation with abstract symbols and shapes with traditional pitch-specific notation. The performance is coordinated by a timeline grid at the top of each page. There are written text cues in the score to assist in the coordination of the parts.

The image shows a handwritten musical score for the piece "Sometimes" by Olly Wilson. The score is written on three staves: a Tenor staff, an Electronic staff, and a Tape staff. A timeline grid at the top of each system indicates the duration of the piece in seconds (1 to 15). The score is divided into three systems, each with a timeline grid at the top. The first system (measures 1-15) includes a tenor staff with lyrics "sub high hq" and "SOMETIMES 1", and a tape staff with "A long way, A long way". The second system (measures 16-30) includes a tenor staff with lyrics "Some" and "Some times", and a tape staff with "long way, long way, long way, long way, long way". The third system (measures 31-45) includes a tenor staff with lyrics "pa truhka see" and "some times", and a tape staff with "long way, long way, long way, long way, long way". The score uses traditional musical notation (notes, rests, dynamics) alongside graphic notation (arrows, shapes, text cues).

Figure 1: Olly Wilson, *Sometimes*, William Brown, tenor, <https://open.spotify.com/track/4Uzrdy3MifdAbMSfUoPkkM?si=c052e871d8f54238>.

The full piece is seventeen minutes in duration and offers a fine set of challenges for the music theorist. What is African American or Black in this example? How should or could a theory of African American music address this work? I think this piece is representative of African American music for the following reasons: It contains musical practices that we generally ascribe to African American music, although in the less familiar context of electronic music, such as

- vocalizations, hoops, hollers, and falsetto;
- using the voice as an instrument, especially for its percussive effects;
- segmentation or fragmentation of the text;
- wide expressive use of timbre;
- innovative execution of call and response between the voice and the tape and between the voice and itself via prerecorded loops;
- pentatonic formation of the folk melody, a signification;
- layers of signifying; and
- improvisation in all these parameters.

Now, the *manifestations* of the Black experience are going to vary, even with the spectrum of Blackness, at different times, at different geographical positions, and at different levels of the sociological order. In spite of these variations, all Black people are united because of their Blackness. Wilson accepts both the diversity and the “gradations” or shades of the Black experience that are essential to viewing Black music as existing within *a single aesthetic unity*.

The second example is a short excerpt from the first movement of Tania León’s *A la Par* for piano and percussion (audio file and first page of score in Figure 2; partial score in Appendix 2), which was written in 1986. Tania León (born 1943) is a native of Havana, Cuba. She is a composer, conductor, educator, and arts advocate. Her compositions include works for orchestra, band, chamber ensembles, voice, and solo piano. Her orchestral work, *Stride*, was awarded the 2021 Pulitzer Prize. As you consider this piece, think about the intersections of race, culture, and identity that have been raised throughout this essay. León’s life and career embodies some of the complications we can anticipate in considering a theory of African American music. I had the opportunity to write the liner notes for a recording of *A la Par* some years ago and reprise my brief description here as an introduction:

The opening movement contains the grace and agility of traditional African inspired dance forms found throughout the Black Atlantic. But this music takes on a decidedly modernistic character with complicated shifts of meter and a post-tonal melodic language. León manages to

create a musical sphere that holds the past and the future in dynamic tension. The pointillistic style in the first movement, with its strategic use of registral juxtaposition and tonic accents, creates a contrapuntal writing reminiscent of Bach's cello suites while simultaneously referencing a melodic realm of the present, if not the future.⁷

This *A la Par* excerpt provides an opportunity to amplify the observations above. This work can be considered and analyzed from several different vantage points, cultural, musicological, and theoretical. First, Afro-Cuban and African references abound. The instrumentation for the percussion part includes standard orchestral instruments as well as instruments associated with Afro-Cuban music such as bongos, agogo bells, cowbell, maracas, glass bottles, timbales, claves, conga, and cachiche. Cuban dance rhythms such as the habanera are also alluded to throughout the movement and the entire piece. And yet these traditional Afro-Cuban instrumental sounds and rhythmic references exist here in a decidedly modern, post-tonal context.

The work is carefully constructed as to both pitch and interval class. But Leon's adherence to motivic and cell structures here suggests that traditional pitch class set analysis and its assumptions of unordered sets will bear little fruit. An atonal analysis could account for *some* of the structures, but it is Leon's integration of pitch and rhythm, timbre and texture, which create the vitality and character of the piece. Moreover, the abstraction of identifying source collections tells us little about the actual piece. It is the ear that readily recognizes the primacy of pitches, order, and pitch hierarchies by the decidedly friendly aural means of repetition, gesture, and register.

This movement also serves as an object lesson in Leon's compositional language and can serve as musical model for important theoretical topics of musical time such as periodicity, meter, and musical expectation and disruption. *A la Par* provides a useful point of entry for all these subjects. Cultural retention practices such as the presence of cross rhythms and the clave rhythm are also relevant to a discussion of Leon's rhythmic language and would require some degree of cultural competence on the part of the analyst to produce an integrative inquiry of temporality in this "blended" work.

The opening few measures introduce important gestures that will be seminal to the entire movement. Leon deftly integrates some of the melodic/motivic gestures of the piano into the shapes of the tom-tom and pitched percussion parts. The opening interplay between the piano and percussion parts asserts an imitative, canonic character—a call and response and recollection of other

7. Dwight Andrews, liner notes to *A City Called Heaven*, performed by Thamyras, ACA Digital 20064, 2003, CD.

A la Par
I.

Tania León

♩ = 96

Antecedent *Consequent*

Piano

f

♩ = 96

[3 tom-toms, 2 bongos, snare drum (snares off)]

Percussion

mp

Pno.

mf *f*

Perc.

p *to hands* *with hands* *mp cresc.*

Figure 2: Tania León, *A la Par*, for piano and percussion, <https://open.spotify.com/track/4blhmDbpfVyOLNmqWVvFWJ?si=dd61e717381a494c>.

musical traditions and other periods. In addition, the opening measures establish the periodicity of the piece, which will, at times, be disrupted and attenuated. The importance of rhythmic accents operates on multiple levels simultaneously. For example, the opening four-note motive with its two-note up and two-note down pattern creates the basic vocabulary of the opening. The

accents on the first and third sixteenth notes emphasize the “up and down” character of the motive. The accent on the last eighth note of measures 1 and 2 also reinforces the bar phrase structure that will soon be interrupted by the 2/4 bar “Habanera” gesture in measure 3. In measure 4 the accents intensify with the accented duple groupings being maintained while the three-note motivic pattern is juxtaposed against it. The re-beaming below demonstrates the “two against three” feel that is created here.

There is not sufficient space here to discuss the pitch organization of this piece. As I mentioned, the aurality of this work makes it readily intelligible by ear. Useful theoretical insights could help us understand and confirm our “hearing.”

From these two examples we can see and hear the challenge and opportunity to create an aesthetic framework with the breadth and capacity to encompass the wide world of African American music. On one level, the contrast between Olly Wilson’s *Sometimes* and Tania Leon’s *A la Par* could not be starker. While we might agree that both composers are African American, what are the aesthetic or sonic practices that connects these pieces together? Is it more than the race or ethnicity of the composers? This is the task in forming a theory of African American music. At the very least, we can agree that these two African American composers are heirs to multiple ethnic and cultural legacies. They are, by definition, musically multilingual. Their fluency in the many musical and cultural traditions in which they were raised and nurtured is part and parcel of what it means to be African American. More than a century ago W. E. B. Du Bois spoke of “double consciousness.” One wonders if the binary nature of Du Bois’s double consciousness adequately express African American identity in a way can that is useful.

Conclusion

In 2022, some eighty-six years after Shirley Graham Du Bois’s 1936 declaration that we are on the threshold of a renaissance of Black music, some might say we are still standing at that threshold. It’s clear that African Americans have been excluded and placed at the periphery of twentieth-century music when we should be, in fact, at the center of modern Western music. It is impossible to speak of modernism without putting African American expression at its core. It is no accident that many of our most influential writers and literary scholars have viewed Black music as a source of inspiration and self-understanding. Amiri Baraka, James Baldwin, Toni Morrison, and Maya Angelou have referred to Black music as both a refuge and a source of strength. We must advocate for the ongoing engagement of the conversation between our writers, scholars, and

creatives whose work has been shaped by Black music. It is no accident that literary scholars, such as Henry Louis Gates Jr., predicated aspects of literary theory on Black music. Musicologists, such as Samuel A. Floyd Jr., viewed, in turn, Gates's work on "signifying" as useful to his formulations on the power of Black music.

In recognizing that a new ecology of Black music must be created, a few issues need to be addressed to sustain African American theoretical study going forward. I jokingly call it my "Twelve-Step Program for Recovering Music Theorists":

1. Listen! To the music and to the words of those who create it. We must frame African American praxis not only as the sounding object but also as a sonic expression of an aesthetic and intellectual unity. Black intellectual history is often relegated to the margin of Black music. Yet our musicians are also thinking and intellectual beings. Our history is one of music makers who are also philosophers, aesthetes, and spiritual seekers. In our increasingly secular world, we should not dismiss those who have such spiritualist leanings because we do not share the same point of view. The "why" a composer takes a certain musical approach is not ancillary to our musical understanding—it should be central to our musical understanding. In fact, here is precisely where the theorist's proper tools and tool kit can infer, extrapolate, and model their observations and make connections that perhaps even the composer is unaware of.
2. Establish aesthetic criteria.
3. Put race in its proper place.
4. Interrogate the idea of canon. We must formulate a narrative that addresses our interest and participation in European concert music and find a way to calibrate the narrative within the sphere of African American music and culture. This is not an easy task, but our intellectual integrity rests upon an honest conversation about where the African Americanness lies in the post-tonal, atonal, or serial-influenced music of a George Walker, an Anthony Braxton, or a T. J. Anderson.
5. Advocate for the performance, review, and study of music understanding as it exists in multiple domains at once. Live, recorded, notated, digitized, etc.
6. Theorize diversity within the music and culture. That is, how do we interpret difference?
7. Push for access and information about where the music is. Establish repositories of the music. Access to the music is critical.

8. Train colleagues. We must better train our colleagues for this work. If we feel that African American musical culture should be a core competency in our discipline, we must help all our colleagues in the discipline to be better prepared to examine and to teach it. Great harm has been done by well-trained and well-meaning colleagues who are ill-informed or under-prepared to take on a subject in which they have little training. This raises important questions for our institutions. Develop new pedagogies. And ask, "What can be integrated into existing curriculum?"
9. Create and support networks and communities. What replaces the Center for Black Music research, for instance?
10. Hold our professional guilds accountable.
11. Advocate for institutional structures inside or outside of academies for the curation, preservation, and study of this music.
12. Do no harm! Both musicology and music theory have been guilty of objectifying and dismembering music from the people who create it. This is certainly true when it comes to popular music. Such separation extends the impact of the white privilege narrative by appearing to appreciate the music without taking any responsibility for the racism that helped to forge it. I am thinking about the blues as an example here. There is the tendency to discuss the blues, hip-hop, or jazz without discussing the context from which they emerged. Such cultural dismemberment and erasure are problematic and are the expression of privilege. This privilege seeks to be enamored and enthralled with the blues, for instance, without being held responsible for the conditions that created the blues.

One of the big heartbreaks of my life is witnessing how our musical world has become so small, the ways in which we even describe music in relationship to imbricated terms not of endearment but of identity. I did not find my identity—racial or cultural—challenged when playing music of composers whose identity I did not share. Important struggles such as this are not short term or for the faint of heart. They can have short-term tactical strategies, but the radical transformative and liberating goals that we seek will require long-term, if not lifetime, commitments. And even then, we recognize that such progress is never permanent, and that change comes slowly. Yet as Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. said, "The time is always right to do right." Or as Spike Lee said, "Do the right thing!" I thank you for your time and attention and I look forward to working with you as we fashion the future we envision together, here and now.

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The image displays a handwritten musical score, likely for a song, organized into three systems of staves. The notation is in a style characteristic of early 20th-century African American musical manuscripts, often found in the Fisk Jubilee Singers' repertoire.

System 1 (Measures 16-30): The top staff is labeled "Tensr" (likely a typo for "Tenor") and the bottom staff is labeled "Type" (likely a typo for "Bass"). The lyrics include "mf 8/15", "Kachic", "Kachic Kachic", "I feel", and "I feel". The musical notation includes various notes, rests, and dynamic markings.

System 2 (Measures 1-15): The lyrics include "I feel" and "some". The musical notation continues with various notes and rests.

System 3 (Measures 16-30): The lyrics include "Some - times", "Some", and "some". The musical notation includes various notes, rests, and dynamic markings.

The score is written on a single page with a large margin at the bottom. The handwriting is in ink, and the paper shows signs of age and wear.

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Handwritten musical score for piano, marimba, and agogo bells. The score is divided into three systems. The first system (measures 9-11) features piano and marimba parts with dynamic markings like *mp*, *p*, and *sf*, and includes handwritten notes like "more" and "2 4". The second system (measures 12-14) includes piano, marimba, and agogo bells parts, with dynamic markings like *mf*, *cresc.*, and *ped.*, and handwritten notes like "LO TOM TOM" and "8vb". The third system (measures 15-17) continues the piano and marimba parts, with dynamic markings like *f*, *mf*, and *loco*, and handwritten notes like "take 3 mallets" and "8vb". The score is heavily annotated with handwritten notes, including "2 4", "5 4", "3 4", "2+1 4 8", "4 8", "8vb", and "loco".

~3~