Dissonant Dissent: Du Bois and the Terrible Beauty of Rap Music

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Abstract:

This paper argues for the necessity of a certain dissonant dissent as a condition of public responsibility (Du Bois) and public intelligence (Dewey). This can take the form today of rap music. There is no pure public sphere, there are no ideal conditions for communicative discourse; the nation state of America is not equitable in its provision of the conditions of what Du Bois calls "social uplift". The music of rap both discloses these claims and affirms them, and this is part-constitutive of its strength as an expression of creative dissent. I am sympathetic to Gooding-Williams' proposal of an affective turn, when he says that for Du Bois racial inequality must be attacked with weapons of sudden and immediate assault, and that principal among these is beauty. But rather than confront racism with another picture, another representation, I argue that we would do better to disturb the picture by creating and exploiting spaces and surfaces within it. After all, theories of aesthetics and taste are racially loaded from the start. Better, I say, to introduce dissonance into the picture. Not so much by offering another content of dissent, but by performing an irresponsibility towards the material of its medium.

Keywords: W. E. B. Du Bois, John Dewey, Robert Gooding-Williams, Tommie Shelby, Rap music, Beauty, Dissent, Dissonance, Responsibility, Irresponsibility

> "Our watch word today must be Social Solidarity—Social Responsibility" (Du Bois 1900, 155).

Public responsibility

It is striking the degree to which in his Editorial for the first issue of *The Crisis* (1910) confronting the problem of segregation W.E.B. Du Bois appeals to the notion of a public responsibility. The demand for segregation, he says, "is almost always a shirking of *responsibility on the part of the public* – a desire to put off on somebody else the work of social uplift... an attempt to shift *public responsibility* from the shoulders of the public to the shoulders of some class who are unable to defend themselves" (my emph.), by which he means "Negro children who are above average" (Du Bois 1910, 10-11). Du Bois does not differentiate between the public and the community, nor does he specify which community he is holding to account. But this first editorial is a manifesto for *The Crisis*, standing for "the rights of men, irrespective of color or race." Du Bois is addressing the public at large, the responsible community is all those who are segregated one from the other, whites as well as blacks.

Part of what makes this petition for a public responsibility so notable is its opposition to an individualistic responsibility, against which Du Bois had for years directed his thinking: "individual responsibility... led inevitably to a doctrine which interpreted the whole universe in the terms of single men... This individualistic regime still wields vast power over minds today especially in the American business and social world" (Du Bois, 1900, 139-40). It is only through culture that individualistic responsibility and its nefarious consequences can be countered. By culture is poverty measured. The year of the launch of *The Crisis* also saw the publication of John Dewey's *The Influence of Darwin*, which includes the essay 'Intelligence and Morals' where Dewey writes of an intelligence of the social body rather than of the individual. Conceiving intelligence collectively leads to an "increase of responsibility for its equitable direction toward fuller good" (Dewey 1910, 73). What Du Bois and Dewey are calling for is an understanding of the subject as a collective and social body, an overthrow of the model of essentially individualistic responsibility favoured by moral theory at that time, and made of "unfructified and irresponsible reason" (*ibid*, 49).

Noticeable too in this first edition of *The Crisis*, on the inside front cover, page 2, is a full-page advertisement for The Toussaint Conservatory of Art and Music in New York City, "under the supervision of Mme. E. Touissant Welcome, The Foremost Female Artist of the Race," adverting that to take a course there is "One of the surest ways to succeed in life." We are aware that music, along with the military and sport, is one of the "surest ways to succeed in life" today for black people in the US. Yet not by having gone to music school. Neither art nor music is mentioned in Du Bois's Editorial, but *The Crisis* would go on to become, in the words of Russ Castronovo, "an agent of black print culture push[ing] a confrontational aesthetics that revalued traditional categories of the beautiful" (Castronovo 2006, 1443).

By the time of *The Crisis*, the attainment of culture had long been, for Du Bois, a necessary requirement for the social uplift of his people, with an especial emphasis laid on music. As he put it in 1903: the achievement of the 'Negro folk-song' could not be greater: "the most beautiful expression of human experience born this side the seas... the singular spiritual heritage of the nation and greatest gift of the Negro people" (Du Bois, 1903, 168). It's the description he gives of the experience of this music which is of interest here: "And so most striking to me, as I approached the village and the little plain church perched aloft, was the air of intense excitement that possessed that mass of black folk. A sort of suppressed terror hung in the air and seemed to seize us, — a pythian madness, a demoniac possession, that lent terrible reality to song and word" (*ibid*, 128-9). A terrible reality embodied in song, what strikes Du Bois with such force is, we might say, the terrible beauty of music.

I want to suggest that music's ability to embody the terrible is a form of dissonant dissent, that such dissent has always been necessary as a provocation of collective intelligence, and that if public responsibility is to be realized then it needs to be disturbed, to the extent that a certain kind of irresponsibility is required. That dissent takes the form today of rap music. During the

time of the civil rights protests of the 1960s it was free jazz which intensified the cultural expression of dissonant dissent. In Du Bois's time it was folk song, what he calls "the sorrow songs", the "weird old songs in which the soul of the black slave spoke to men" (*ibid*, 167). Today it is the disturbing dissonance of rap music which dissents in the public sphere to the furtherance of public responsibility.

Terrible beauty

In a lecture given recently on Du Bois, Robert Gooding-Williams proposes that for Du Bois segregation must be attacked with weapons of sudden and immediate assault, and that principal among these is beauty (Gooding-Williams 2021). Reason is not enough to unsettle the moral psychology of white supremacy, the habits of mind of white christians are too entrenched to be apt for reason's self-questioning critique, too fixed to be receptive to revision by science or logic. Beauty, though, with its power to astonish through its unfamiliarity, can play the critical role. It can develop a responsiveness on the part of the people to feeling, thought and action that strikes them as strange or remote, and in so doing cultivate a democratic civic virtue. This shift from the rational to the affective presupposes a differentiation of the public. Gooding-Williams reminds us of Du Bois's beautiful proposition: "The meaning of America is the beginning of the discovery of the Crowd" (Du Bois 1920, 103). Du Bois distinguishes between the crowd, a body of democratic culture, and the mob, which practices democratic despotism. Beauty's power over the crowd, according to Gooding-Williams's Du Bois, is twofold. It nurtures democratic culture, but also it can give a view of a possible resistance, a perception that the social body has not after all foreclosed the possibility of subverting racial discrimination, and this can aid those black citizens who despair at the possibility of undermining racial oppression. That perception is offered by the figure of the black stranger, for Du Bois the Negro is the paradigmatic American stranger.

There is one obvious objection to this two-fold thesis, and it's a paradox of democracy: the mob too claims for itself democratic validity. What is so troubling about last year's sacking of the Capitol, the seat of American democracy, is that in the very act of violating it, the attackers asserted that they were the protectors of democracy. The mob of overwhelmingly white men declared a sovereignty purporting to transcend the rule of law in the name of a greater public good and a higher law. Such a doctrine of sovereignty is a derogation of political responsibility. The troubling fact is that if today in the United States the distinction between a democratic polity of the crowd and a despotic democracy of the mob is increasingly under threat from Republican and right-wing demagoguery, it is because white supremacy is itself a form of democracy. Indeed, as Cristina Beltrán points out in her response to Gooding-Williams, American conceptions of democracy have historically been constituted through white supremacy, and the experience of democracy in the U.S. cannot be detached from its historico-political project of whiteness, the two are mutually constitutive. Beltrán is right, I think, to say that the task in the U.S. is to detach democracy from the political project of whiteness. Or at

least, if not to disjoin the two then loosen them by enacting or forcing a space between them.

This is where music comes in, the music of rap and the ethos of hip hop. And it addresses other hesitations voiced to Gooding-Williams's thesis, by Linda Zerilli and Ernesto Grassi respectively. Zerilli: the white supremacist's belief is so recalcitrant to rational revision that the thought that they may be wrong is not even momentarily entertained, so how can beauty make any headway against it? Grassi: the basis of rational speech is and must be an imaginative language. Belief is groundless, based less on reasoned argument than on a picture, and it's this picture that we must resist. And the only way to counter that picture is with another, a politics with an aesthetic basis. Gooding-Williams thinks that, for Du Bois, we can do both by presenting the white supremacist with a different picture, for instance a different picture of what Christianity is. But my view is that we can approach the task differently than giving another picture; rather we must disturb the picture. I'm not sure that Steve McQueen's 2020 film *Lovers Rock*, for all its liquidity of space its embrace of freedom and its tensing of the beauty of the black community of West London in 1980, rightly affirmed by Gooding-Williams as an example of a non-austere aesthetics of loving black sociology, is a picture "astonishing", "sudden" or forceful enough to disturb the preconceptions of white supremacism. Or at least, not by itself. If it were shown in a double-bill with a film shot in South London during the time in question, *Babylon* by Franco Rosso (1980), or a triple with Charlie Ahearn's *Wild Style* (1983), shot in the Bronx a year later, then maybe, maybe white viewers might come to question how such music, respectively lovers rock, sound system dub reggae and hip hop, could have been made given the institutional and public racism, overt, casual and complacent, so rife in the U.K. and U.S. at the time. Taken together, these three films might begin to disturb the picture.

Yet the need is to open the picture, not to present other closed pictures, for closed is what representations tend to be. Instead the picture must be disturbed, by creating and exploiting spaces and surfaces within it, in which other voices and types of voices may be allowed to be heard. We do not need any convincing of how representations of beauty, and the concomitant theories justifying them, theories of "aesthetics" and "taste", with their supposed disinterestedness and supposed *sensus communis* and supposed universalism, have excluded and harmed black people. *Pace* Du Bois, who believed in a certain universalism of the value of beauty – "I do not doubt that the ultimate art coming from black folk is going to be just as beautiful, and beautiful largely in the same ways, as the art that comes from white folk, or yellow, or red" (Du Bois 1926, 297), which I think has more to do with equality of entitlement to and access to the judgement than the content of it – we contend that the concept of beauty itself was racially loaded from the start. If there is to be a revaluation of the value of the beautiful, then it will need to contest the ways in which representations of beauty are completed, ended, presented as 'it couldn't be otherwise', for such are closed representations. Rap's terrible beauty breaks open that space. Such breaking open is a precondition for democracy. When Dewey, speaking contemporaneously as Du Bois, affirms that democracy "is not a fact and never will be", he means that democracy is

only ever 'to come' (Dewey 1927, 148). The idea of democracy is the idea of community itself. It may tend toward an ideal limit, but it will never attain it. Democracy can have no end "until experience itself comes to an end", and the task of democracy is "forever that of creation of a freer... experience" (Dewey 1940, 228). Experience is an ongoing process. Breaking open the fixities and finalities of representations of experience, contesting the processes of exclusion at the borders of every community, these are the essential creative workings of a democratic culture which would seek to keep open the road of democracy.

Public irresponsibility

The final section header of the inaugural *Crisis* editorial is AGITATION. Du Bois contends that those for whom agitation impacts negatively upon the cause mistake its usefulness. Agitation is necessary for it signals to the body of the social its decay and suffering. He analogises it with pain. Pain may not be good, but it is necessary, and it is for this reason that the association for which *The Crisis* advocates, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), will agitate. Not by causing pain, but by showing how pain is the outcome of suffering aggravated by racial prejudice (Du Bois 1910, 11).

In my perception, this is what rap music and the culture of hip hop can do: agitate by being the occasion of pain. One way to understand this is to consider it as music. A music no different from Du Bois's sorrow songs in that it embodies "the soul of the black slave" speaking, but speaking not to its fellow humans, but in the stead of its fellow humans. The language rap speaks is not the propositional content to which its lyrics can be reduced, as they so often are by both its detractors and defenders, nor is it the language of suffering articulated so terrorfully and beautifully by the 'negro spiritual'. Rap is the disturbing language of an ethos and a way of life which is no longer waiting for or arguing for equality, but declaring it, asserting it, owning it by wrenching it into the open where it has always been from the start. Rap does not shirk responsibility in the sense of waiting for the community or the public to facilitate social uplift. Rather, it faces head on the quietist tendencies of the public, it confronts the community's willingness to defer social change to the efforts of others. It does this by how it puts to use the materiality of hip hop's ethos. In doing so, it takes on an irresponsibility.

The culture of hip hop sampling is not simply the use or re-use, the appropriation, of part of a pre-existing recording in another recording, it is the appropriation of parts of arguments or claims or propositions or provocations. The lyrics are closer to propaganda than proposition, propaganda in the sense given it by Du Bois' in his "Criteria of Negro art" published in *The Crisis* in 1926: "I do not care a damn for any art that is not used for propaganda. But I do care when propaganda is confined to one side while the other is stripped and silent" (Du Bois 1926, 296). This appropriation and mixing can lead to seeming contradiction or inconsistency, but this is a problem only if you hear the music in terms of a propositional content to the lyrics. If, on the other hand, you listen to the track as a mix, an affective mix, of groove rhythm break, sound lyric

look, beat phrasing syncopation, and are open to how it moves or shakes you, urges or speeds you, then the lyrics, its form of words, will be but one part which disturbs the picture. And if you do hear its word you will hear it differently because of its situatedness. The word spoken sung and sprung is just one part of the material with which the hip hop artist gives form to their music, no less a material part of the flow than any other, given more or less emphasis or directedness in the flow. The other elements in the mix, each occasioning an affective response or giving rise to passional feelings, may encourage or aid understanding of the lyric, or contradict it, and may themselves be embodied forms of understanding.

As is well-known, in *Souls of Black Folk* Du Bois writes of a cognitive and affective doubling of the black self, in which "true self-consciousness" can never be attained because the black self sees itself, is only ever allowed to see itself, "through the eyes of others", namely the white man (Du Bois 1903, 8-9). I think part of what makes white people so aversive to rap music (even allowing for a lessening of this over time, rap music has always been objectionable) is that they do not care to see themselves through the eyes of others, for instance through the affective dissonance of black rap musicians. To do so would not only allow in to the white body an ideal at war with it, it would be to bring in to question the self-sufficiency of the autonomous individualism which so informs western notions of responsibility. But for Du Bois, this doubling of consciousness has also a positive strength, for in striving to reconcile or merge these two 'selves', neither would be lost. In the later notion of a "double environment", blacks have the advantage over whites in that they have both the "white surrounding world", and the environment which is furnished by their own colour, which usually touches them "much more nearly and compellingly" (Du Bois 1940, 88).

I would argue that the white person who rejects an environment of a colour other than their own, is not touched, affectively, as nearly or compellingly by their 'own' environment as they might be. One way, I think, Du Bois himself in his own work tried to stage this is by juxtaposition, or radical montage. *The Crisis* ran a regular column 'Music and art', which was sometimes laid out alongside one on "Lynching": "The geography of beauty in the *Crisis* invites dissonance" (Castronovo 2006, 1452). His 1920 work *Darkwater* alternated sections of literary writing with autobiographical accounts and poetry. These are dissenting ways of staging dissonant encounters with environments and bodies culturally other than one's own. It's a question of the apprehension of nature, as Dewey puts it when writing of the encounter with "Negro art": by "install[ing] ourselves in modes of apprehending nature that are at first are strange to us... our own experience is reorientated. Barriers are dissolved, limiting prejudices melt away" (Dewey 1934, 334). It is a matter of changing attitudes. The displacements effected by attitude becoming form are far more productive than acquiring knowledge of conditions of production or enjoining the communicative fallacy of reasoning.

We might agree with an argument which says that the political dissent of rap is an expression of solidarity with the oppressed, a positive expression of loyalty and association, rather

than a commitment to the belief that meaningful change is possible, rejecting as we do the idea that there are shared grounds for dissenting, an argument advanced by, for instance, Tommie Shelby in his *Dark Ghettos*. But if we do agree it is not because "the *content* of the dissent is what is being communicated" (Shelby 2016, 269). The reduction of rap to content, to the propositional content of its lyric, is a profound deafness to its music, its being music and what makes it music. This is why the term Shelby coins for rap's dissent, "impure dissent", is so misleading, if not objectionable. Who has ever voiced pure dissent? Rap's dissensual force comes not from its content, its "message", its… reasoning, or not simply or primarily from that, but from its material and how it assembles and forms that material, from its pressure of attitude, and from the affective force generated by the conjoinings of these. Listen again to Du Bois' description of the Negro folk spiritual: there is nothing about what is said, it is not about persuading with argument, it is an affective persuasiveness: "It varied in expression from the silent rapt countenance or the low murmur and moan to the mad abandon of physical fervor, — the stamping, shrieking, and shouting, the rushing to and fro and wild waving of arms, the weeping and laughing, the vision and the trance" (Du Bois 1903, 129). Of course, the white christian has always felt threatened by such affective expression. That these expressions should take place in the church! The singer, the preacher, the uniqueness of its identity is its multiplicity: "the most unique personality developed by the Negro on American soil. A leader, a politician, an orator, a "boss," an intriguer, an idealist, — all these he is" (*ibid*).

To accentuate its dissensual power art must perform an irresponsibility towards its material, and it must respond to the irresponsibility of its medium. Language has an involuntary power, a power which eludes the possession of the individual subject, and the rap artist can do no more than try to direct this or channel it, whilst seeking their own voice in it. They do so in the face of those who seek to impose the responsibility of meaning, or who try to hold them accountable to a prior responsibility determined by the very political bodies and institutionalised ideologies that have always done everything possible, whatever they can get away with (this is what characterises a Donald Trump and the mob and supremacists inspired by him), to deny them a voice in the first place and which still seek to deny space for that voice. The nation state of America is not and never has been equitable in its provision of the conditions of what Du Bois calls "social uplift", witness the renewed diminishments of the processes of democracy since the last election by those who are determined, at the limits of legality, to restrict the vote of minorities of colour, an act repeated throughout the history of the United States, in the hope of conserving their white majority and the supremacy of whiteness. There is no pure public sphere in which the lines of rap can be deemed impure.

If theory is to become, as it ever should be, "responsible to the practices that have generated it" (Dewey 1910, 55), then it must not seek to purify social responsibility of a necessary irresponsibility towards representations which would fix social relations according to the vested interests of powerful white constituencies. Instead theory, emerging from progressive practices,

must become responsible to social intelligence. To the injunctions of white democracy the artist has a duty of irresponsibility. Only then will the collective intelligence of a different kind of democratic polity be formed. Indeed, we might go further and say that this refusal or resistance is perhaps the utmost responsibility of the artist. If rappers appear to be rejecting ethical norms it is not because they are being unethical, or voicing an impure dissent, it is because they dissent the right of white democracy to claim such language as its own, it is a dissensual appropriation of language by and into mouths white democracy has tried to stop. The performative dissent of the personae who rap will always elude the intelligence of a whiteness which prides itself on an identity with democracy.

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