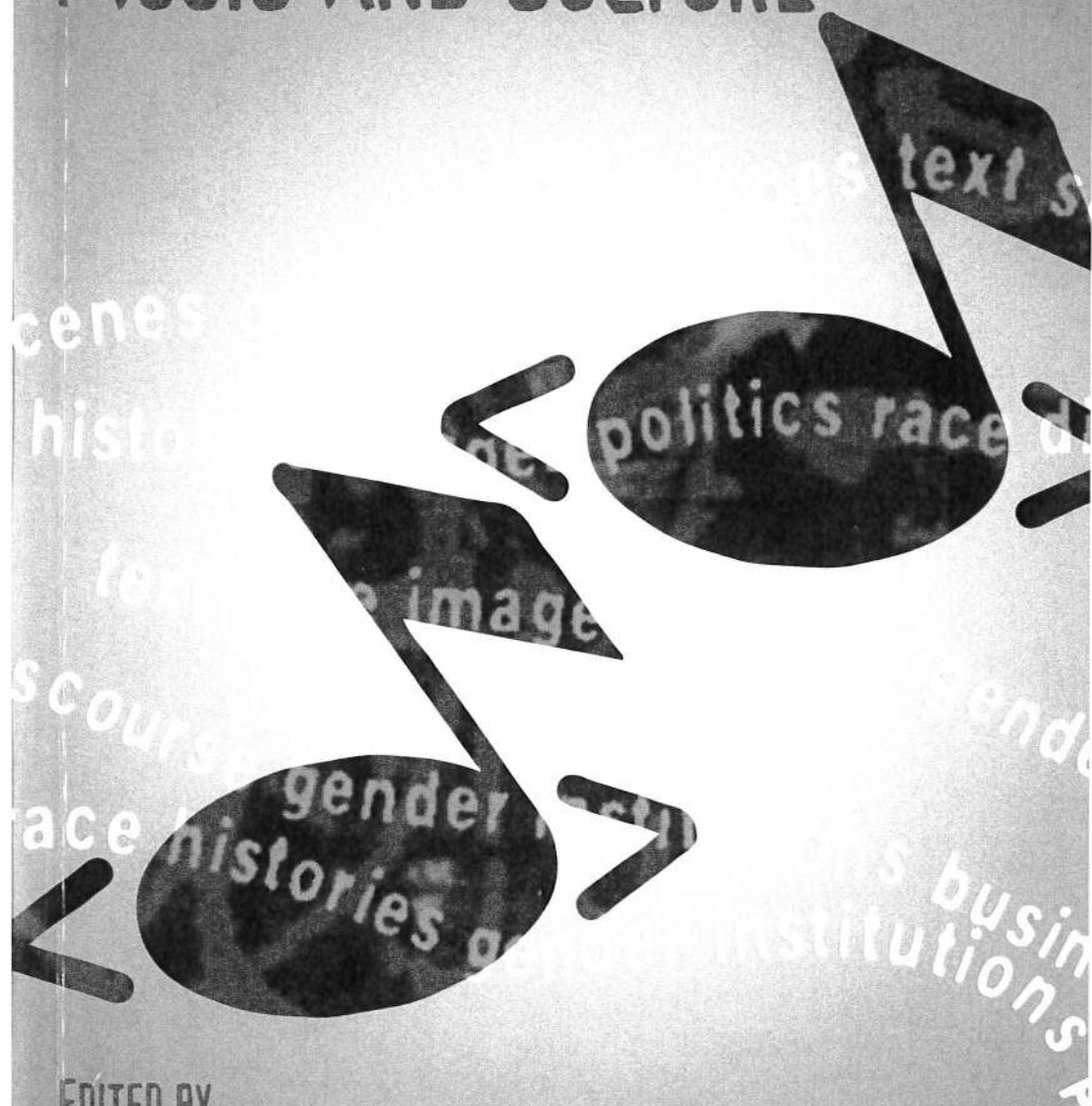


KEY TERMS IN POPULAR MUSIC AND CULTURE



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5

Politics

Robin Balliger

In what ways, I wondered, did the popularity of reggae and hip-hop music signal a diasporic identification for Afro-Trinidadians or relate to poverty in Trinidad's economic downturn?

"Politics" in popular music is commonly understood to mean "political songs" – songs which either serve or struggle against dominant institutions like the state and economic system. For example, the national anthem or songs in many advertisements use music to reinforce nationalism and normative consumption, while political songs that "rage against the machine" suggest forms of resistance. In this chapter, I consider certain assumptions about what constitutes both political struggle and political meaning in popular music by tracing a definition of politics that moves from formal political structures to power relations in everyday activities.

One view of politics in society contends that political processes occur mainly through state political institutions and practices (such as voting). This view often leads to a certain approach to political struggle aimed at either reinforcing or changing those structures. For example, major labels are part of an entertainment industry that controls global music production and circulation, and many would argue that in addition to benefiting monetarily, it is in the political interest of these corporations to produce music content that reinforces their dominant market position. Independent labels and non-commercial radio, on the other hand, arose in opposition to corporate control of music – by controlling the means of production, some felt, artists would have greater control over political meaning. Recently, at the college radio station where I work, a young politically minded DJ was pulling CDs out of the current rotation file and mentioned that he wasn't playing anything with a barcode! But whether one appreciates his uncompromising anti-industry stance or finds it

frighteningly rigid, there is more to the politics of popular music than structures of cultural production.

For example, many recent arguments regarding cultural imperialism assume that the structure of cultural production determines meaning. Cultural imperialism is understood as the domination of the world by the USA and Europe, not only through overt military, political, and economic means, but also by promoting Eurocentric norms through education, language, and cultural products (like music and MTV). But if the centralized control of cultural production supports "First World" domination, some theorists argue, the development of inexpensive recording equipment and cassette technology in the 1980s made the means of production widely available – and therefore democratized expression. While it is generally salutary that more people can produce music, the proliferation of recording also reproduces ideologies which have little relation to a progressive agenda.

Cultural imperialism and the entertainment industry represent forms of politics exercised through the market; state intervention constitutes another form of structural control over cultural production. States legislate cultural policy to maintain social relations by fostering national identity and common values, but cultural policy is often highly contested because nation-states usually lack homogeneity on the basis of race, class, religion, or political ideology. Many countries use the state apparatus to ban music because of its political content, and US-based groups like the Parents Music Resource Center (PMRC) lobby for labeling or banning music for ostensibly moral reasons. In an extreme case, Nazi Germany's promotion of Aryan culture was as important in state cultural policy as in genetic engineering. While theorists tend to focus on either the state or the market, the two reinforce each other in the modern era.

In contrast to these structural views, some theorists argue that politics occurs not only in formal institutions but also in everyday practices not specifically labeled "political." Antonio Gramsci's concept of hegemony, for example, breaks with the idea of rule as enacted through purely state political forms because, in his view, domination saturates the whole social process. Opening the terrain of "the political" in this way means that the arenas of "art" or "the private" are not outside the political. Contestation occurs in and through these arenas. Hegemony, while saturating all arenas, is, however, never complete because oppositional practices affect and shape the hegemonic process. Gramsci thus counters the determinism of structuralist approaches by arguing that new technologies and structures of control by the state and entertainment industries also *generate* new

forms of cultural and political opposition – this is a dialectical view of cultural struggle.

Michel Foucault's notion of "governmentality" elaborates on these concepts. In contrast to earlier forms of power exercised directly by a sovereign over his subjects, in modern society "governance" occurs through informal "management" (including the disciplining of bodies in education and the workplace). Rather than coercion, participation in modern capitalist society is garnered through consent and the internal exercise of "free will." Foucault also focused on the politics of representation, and argued that aspects of daily life that are *not* considered political are often the *most* politicized – because what counts as political or not is already a strategy of domination. For instance, in some societies popular music is considered a powerful social force, whereas in the West the division between high and low culture represents popular music as meaningless entertainment in order to devalue popular expression and its political content. This is also referred to as *naturalization*, as it is in the interest of dominant forces in society to present certain concepts as universal and unchanging, rather than produced by a political system in a particular historical moment and therefore vulnerable to change.

If we accept the expansion of "politics" to include not only state and economic structures but also power relations in everyday life, then in approaching the politics of popular music we need to address not only the structural position of its production, and not only the content of its lyrics, but also its sound and reception in particular contexts. Instead of political songs, we might best think about music and politics by approaching music as an activity embedded in relations of power. This is not to shift entirely away from analyzing structures or to valorize reception. Such a shift can be politically dangerous because it nullifies structural inequalities: if we all interpret texts freely, then why would the control of production matter at all? In my view, to thoroughly address the politics of music in society, one should consider the structure of cultural production *and* how music is received in particular situations and moments. The following sections provide more historical details and examples, before addressing the politics of music in relation to contemporary globalization.

MASS CULTURE

The arrival of "mass media" in the twentieth century brought about significant changes in music, politics and society. With the advent of

recording technology, and control over the production of most recordings by a centralized entertainment industry, many political theorists feared that mass-produced entertainment would be the state's ultimate ideological weapon – think of George Orwell's vision in 1984. Others believed that mass forms also had the potential to communicate radical messages and be powerful tools for promoting social justice. The issue of whether mass-produced music can only serve dominant interests, or whether it is possible that this music can have radical content, is highly contested even today. Below I consider a few important moments in the debate over mass culture and its relationship to popular music.

Walter Benjamin's essay "The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction" (originally published in 1936) describes how the development of photography, film, and recorded sound impacts culture, knowledge, and power. He argues that the mass reproduction of art disrupts the sense of fixity and the "aura" of the original. Because multiple copies allow for the altering of images in the process of reproduction, a person's relationship to these objects is displaced spatially and temporally. For example, by the time Benjamin was writing, many people no longer had to go the symphony to hear classical music – they could listen to it on a phonograph in the living room at any time. People began to know the world less by direct experience and increasingly through mechanically reproduced representations of reality.

Like Benjamin, Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno of the Frankfurt School made important observations about the meaning of these changes for society. They argued, however, that mass culture could only serve reactionary politics and dominant economic interests. Their writings in the early 1940s were heavily influenced by their experiences in Germany and the instrumental use of mass media (and especially the "loud-speaker") in Nazi cultural policy. After relocating to Los Angeles, these writers witnessed the emerging entertainment industry and its power to shape consciousness on a mass scale. Adorno argued that standardized rhythms in popular music served capitalism by shaping the proletariat into a "mechanized collectivity" of worker/consumers. Ironically, even though Adorno was politically radical, his contempt for popular music led him to favor classical music and elite forms of art.

In contrast, Benjamin believed that the reproducibility of art could intervene in bourgeois conceptions of high art and develop the social function of art for the masses. Moreover, he argued that while music can manipulate its audience, it also places the audience in the position of critic. Benjamin's dialectical position counters the determinism of

Horkheimer and Adorno's argument and foreshadows reception theory. Reception-oriented approaches to mass culture argue that audiences do not passively absorb messages. Instead, cultural texts (like music) are actively "decoded" and will always have multiple meanings. In addition, because people exist in many different relationships to the dominant culture (e.g. by race, class, gender), people will interpret messages differently, sometimes even in opposition to the "intended" messages. Often, critics who emphasize production are labeled "cultural pessimists" because the industry dominates the audience, while reception theorists are thought of as "cultural optimists" because audiences control meaning.

The fact that popular music has been a powerful force in radical causes worldwide seems to underscore Benjamin's belief that mass art can be a form of resistance. Popular music played an important role in anti-colonial struggles and in civil rights and counterculture movements in the 1960s and early 1970s. Among many possible examples, Gil Scott Heron's "The Revolution Will Not Be Televised" and Bob Marley's "Stand Up for Your Rights" galvanized sentiment along broad political lines and across divided geographies. While forms of rhythm poetry are part of a long history of struggle in African-American music, in the 1980s rap emerged as a mass form. Overtly political songs like Public Enemy's "Fight the Power" sold millions as their anti-racist stance resonated with people worldwide. More than providing a "voice," mass political music reinforces solidarity because the music becomes a vehicle through which the oppressed recognize each other and become more aware of their subordination.

The songs mentioned above had political force not because they have political lyrics, but because the music was understood in particular contexts of struggle. To illustrate how political meanings change according to context, consider that songs which once marked the radical impulse of a generation, like John Lennon's "Imagine," have recently been employed by Britain's Conservative Party; Allen Ginsberg's image lends counterculture chic to Gap ads; and mass entertainment like MTV markets itself as "underground." Moreover, while the power of mass political music appears undeniable, some would argue that when radical artists achieve mass popularity, it actually means they have been co-opted or brought under control by the very institutions they are fighting. The entertainment industry makes money when artists sell, no matter what the message, so even radical artists participate in a broader system of exploitation. These negative views about mass culture have led some to conclude that the only possible site for cultural resistance exists at the margins of society.

SUBCULTURES AND IDENTITY POLITICS

Following on the work of Gramsci (and culturally informed Marxists like E. P. Thompson and Raymond Williams), British cultural studies began in the early 1970s to analyze processes of political control. Simply put, a number of scholars were motivated by the following questions. If capitalism exploits the majority of the population, why don't people rebel? Has the dominant system developed techniques to generate allegiance to it even when it is not in a person's "objective" interest? Or, perhaps people *are* resisting the system, but not through overt political means. These questions led Stuart Hall and others to look more carefully at cultural practices in the reproduction or disruption of class relations. Many of these same questions were taken up around issues of race and gender, especially in the USA, as scholars focused on cultural resistance through identity politics.

British cultural studies focused on media as an important ideological tool of the state in post-war Britain, and took a serious interest in emergent music subcultures like the Teds, Mods, and Skinheads. Researchers found that the scenes created by these groups often provided an avenue through which to carve out social space and practice forms of conduct in opposition to dominant values. While some youth subcultures resisted working-class culture, in other cases the rejection of middle-class norms actually reinforced working-class values, thus perpetuating their working-class subordination. Later work on music subcultures such as punk or Riot Grrrl emphasizes counter-hegemonic practice through style – a “do it yourself” refusal of dominant values and gender norms supported by scenes, zines, and underground networks. Critics of subcultural analysis, however, argue that these cultures reproduce dominant values through the accumulation of “subcultural capital” and are not oppositional simply by virtue of their structural position in society.

Black, Chicano, and Asian cultural critics have shown that music and expressive culture are ways in which oppressed groups construct community, preserve collective memory, and narrate diaspora. Beyond political lyrics, musically defined spaces temporarily suspend the dominant temporal and spatial order. An important contribution to this line of thought, supplied by feminist critics, is the argument that culturally affirming social practices provide sites in which alternative subjectivities are embodied. At the same time, oppositional genres (like rap or punk) require a nuanced, contextualized analysis, because “genres” often resist some forms of domination and reinforce others (e.g. male dominance).

Since I have been involved in subcultural music activities for my entire adult life, let me elaborate some of these issues through a personal narrative. In music school I was involved in improvised music (contemporary classical and free jazz), and thoroughly believed that radical music existed only at the edges of society, in music that was “noise” by dominant definitions and had clearly not “sold out.” After hearing the Sex Pistols in 1978 and being inspired by their energy and in-your-face politics, I left school and dropped the flute to play electric bass in the “alternative” music scene. But I soon observed the process by which this subculture was marginalized even as elements of its dress and language were repackaged and sold as post-apocalyptic high fashion and cyberpunk entertainment. For me, the creativity of this scene waned as early as 1982. In college radio, I also witnessed the transformation of “alternative” as *oppositional* to “alternative” as a marketing category. College radio became a farm-school for major label A&R (artists and repertoire) reps.

About this time, the two-tone movement and “world music” were emerging, emphasizing anti-racism as a response to the reactionary political climate of the 1980s. I formed an original, racially mixed band that was influenced by the Afro-beat music and radical politics of Nigerian musician Fela Kuti. The “world beat” movement had an idealistic, but politically naive, strategy of targeting mass culture in order to subvert racist and reactionary discourses. World beat was attacked for reasons ranging from “cultural imperialism” to “Madison Avenue Marxism” (because we were doing radical politics in a pop format). While some of this criticism was deserved, I would argue for a more sympathetic reading as world beat overtly confronted the reactionary politics of the Thatcher and Reagan era, the “culture wars,” homophobia surrounding the AIDS crisis, and the covert war in Central America.

Learning from these experiences, I became one of a diverse group of artists and musicians who embarked upon a new strategy of engagement. Remaining committed to an anti-capitalist stance and a subcultural, “do-it-yourself” attitude, we created Komotion, an alternative cultural center in San Francisco. I was the director of programming for Komotion activities, which included a performance space, art gallery, and “sound magazine” with international distribution. Komotion’s events included Middle Eastern, African, and “alternative” music nights (including touring artists like Chumbawamba, Zvuki Mu, John Trudell, Hakim Bey, and many others). We produced hundreds of benefits that raised awareness and money in support of soup kitchens, environmental groups, battered women’s shelters, and US political prisoners like Leonard Peltier. Komotion

also housed a recording studio for educational projects, such as middle-school students performing an “eco-rap” about environmental racism. As a collective, we took it upon ourselves to create a lively, safe environment for performers and audiences, but Komotion was finally shut down after ten years for minor permit violations. Building and fire codes are designed to protect the public, but they are also a means for controlling cultural and political expression. I returned to graduate school in the early 1990s to develop my understanding of music as a political force, especially in the changed conditions of global capitalism.

GLOBALIZATION

As I have discussed, much criticism on popular music ascribes a stable political content to music based on the point of production. Put bluntly, in this criticism “big is bad, small is good,” because “big” supposedly represents domination while “small” represents resistance. Similar arguments that the West dominates the cultures of less powerful nations give a spatial dimension to cultural domination and resistance. But it is precisely these spatial dimensions that critics have now begun to question because of the increasing globalization of the political economy and media.

Like Walter Benjamin writing on the effects of media technologies in the first half of the twentieth century, scholars from diverse disciplines have recently argued that technological advances are having a profound impact on our relationship to the world. While there are many competing definitions of globalization, the general argument is that since the 1970s, changes in capitalist production and media technologies are disrupting center-periphery power relations associated with European hegemony of the past five hundred years. For example, rather than the West being the fixed center of wealth, power, and ideas, transnational corporations span the globe in networks; non-Western nations increasingly challenge the economic, political, and cultural power of the West; the deindustrialization of the “First World” creates “Third World” conditions in some areas of the West; the new international division of labor fuels mass migrations of people, disrupting culture and place; and rapid transnational media flows affect our sense of distance, time, and space.

The effects of globalization compel us to rethink cultural imperialism and definitions of “national” or “local” culture. In the West, it is commonly asserted that, even if “our” culture has been corrupted by mass culture industries, authentic native culture still exists in the “Third World.”

However, in globalization, “local” cultural production becomes more commodified and increasingly benefits a particular class (even in less industrialized states). When a large segment of the population becomes excluded from “its” culture’s expressions and profits, what then constitutes community?

George Lipsitz has suggested that with similar kinds of austerity and inequality occurring worldwide, transnational cultural production may facilitate “poly-lateral dialogue” among aggrieved communities – raising interesting questions about the relationship of culture to changed material and political conditions. Rather than the politics of music being strongly associated with a place, racial identity, or national origin, music once associated with distinct places is being taken up by musicians and audiences in many locations – and for many different reasons. New technologies of music circulation and dialogue, like the Internet, create virtual music communities among listeners dispersed in space. (But because digital technology is easy to copy, nations are being coerced by international law to enforce copyright; e.g. China recently shut down twelve pirate CD factories.)

At the same time, mass migrations of labor also place diverse peoples in closer proximity than ever before, and music often functions as a meta-language for people from different backgrounds. In these conditions, popular music as a meaningful transnational discourse has much to tell us about the changed conditions of people’s lives in particular locations. New alliances are based not only on feelings of affiliation through music, but on the fact that people are literally being repositioned by global capitalism and its changing socio-economic landscape. Finally, while some are quick to celebrate the decline of homogeneity in nations (e.g. British culture as wholly white), hybrid identities may efface actual racial violence, and hybridity in music provides another site of consumption for a market requiring continual novelty.

CASE STUDY: THE POLITICS OF LOVE SONGS

Expressive culture was a crucial site of struggle against slavery and colonialism in the Caribbean, but how is globalization affecting the politics of music? I did research in Trinidad and Tobago, a post-colonial, multiethnic, media-saturated state, looking at how genres of popular music (both local and foreign) mapped onto different race and class positions. By analyzing social fragmentation through popular music consumption, I hoped to gain

an understanding of how communities and contestation were being transformed. Foreign musics like dancehall reggae and hip-hop are immensely popular in Trinidad. In what ways, I wondered, did these musics signal a diasporic identification for Afro-Trinidadians or relate to poverty in Trinidad's economic downturn? Was an avoidance of national cultural forms like calypso music evidence of the influence of US cultural imperialism and the recent introduction of MTV, or was the adoption of foreign music (including aspects of its speech, gesture, ideology, and dress) a way to protest the dominant culture and policies blamed for increased suffering?

Below, I discuss a small part of this research which focuses on the popularity of American rhythm and blues ballads (or "slows" as they are called in Trinidad) among young women. While ballads are also popular with African-Americans and women generally in the USA, very little criticism has focused on this music. Ballads are usually ignored, seen as a form of mass distraction, or condemned as pabulum. As Anahid Kassabian suggests in chapter 9 of this volume, this neglect may result from critics looking for political content in song lyrics alone, rather than situating music like love songs in the lives of listeners. My approach was to analyze mass music in a specific social context and critically engage its popularity.

Music consumption is highly divided by race and class in Trinidad, but I learned that slows were popular among working-class and poor young women across racial lines. Importantly, these songs were meaningful to women in relation to social disintegration and domestic violence. Youth and women have been hit hardest by Trinidad's economic downturn since the mid-1980s, and form the "new poor" identified in World Bank reports. Macroeconomic forces produce increased suffering expressed in the domestic sphere of the household – the abstract violence of a system translated into immediate domestic relationships with incredible brutality – especially as men experience job loss as emasculation. In the supposed sanctity of the "private" sphere, where can women turn for safety and comfort? The comments below are from four young women, discussing how slows help them get through bad times:

Sometimes music is the only thing to hold onto . . . it can't talk back.

When I feelin' down I listen to slows. Music is very important and at certain times in my life, keeps me going, it helps to lift your spirits.

Slows are my favorite music, I love Celine Dion, Mariah Carey, Whitney Houston. I like the meaning, it's very touching, it makes you think, it helps

you to relax. I like R. Kelly, "I Believe I Can Fly," Celine Dion latest "All By Myself." I try to understand these lyrics by writing them down, going through them slowly, playing the cassette over and over. . . . Most women listen to slows, some men do to.

Sometimes I would be in a sort of mood, like down-spirited, and I turn on the radio and a certain song would cheer me up. I like R. Kelly, Boyz II Men. Most of these artists sing songs based on reality and things that actually happen to them, and the same thing that might be happening to you as well. . . . They have a line that would say things will be better.

For these young women, slows cannot be reduced to foreign commercial products; they are a lifeline. With increased crime and social instability, these songs represent a constant, reliable source of security. From audience interviews, I learned that women relate to female vocalists as peers and trusted voices for counsel, sometimes more trustworthy than family or friends. Much of the soothing effect occurs in the sonic qualities of the music, in soft tones and rhythms, emotional tension release achieved through complex chord progressions, soaring vocal lines, and the "grain of the voice." Drawing on the language of geography and music, slows also produce a "soothing space," as the bedroom becomes a temporary refuge against a larger social assault.

While it is possible to argue that these songs are a form of acquiescence, victimization, and defeat, a situated textual analysis suggests that slows are rarely about defeat, and instead foster female empowerment at a time of heightened socio-economic and gender oppression for women. In contrast to the aggressive bravado of male singers in many popular music genres, for example, in slows the position of power is reversed: men are vulnerable in love, a woman's love becomes necessary for the man's completeness, women hold the power to bestow love, to forgive, or to produce emotional anguish in men. In slows, sexual boasting by male vocalists usually takes the form of claims about the man's ability to please a woman, as opposed to rap and hard rock, where women exist as objects for male pleasure.

Not all times are revolutionary, even if they should be. And the ways of "speaking struggle" depend on the social and historical context. For me, slows are indicative of a fundamental contradiction of globalization – as sources of oppression become more complex, diffuse, and unlocatable – people experience oppression in more immediate material, emotional, and intimate spaces. In response, slows construct a soothing world in which

personal relationships embody caring, lasting support and love, something to hold onto beyond any individual or society, a quiet way of surviving the everyday "state of emergency" experienced by many.

My brief discussion of slows illustrates how popular music marks new sites of meaning, identification, and struggle for audiences in relation to globalization. We can link the violence of structural adjustment policies administered at the international level with specifically gendered, personal experiences of violence in the "private sphere" by situating the politics and meaning of popular music consumption among a community of participants. While foreign mass music has become meaningful for women in this particular place and moment, meanings in popular music are always multiple and contested. And even with the disruption of social, cultural, and political space in global capitalism, it is important to remain mindful of continued metropolitan dominance in cultural production. Rather than forcing popular music into a predefined politics of resistance or domination, a situated analysis of popular music consumption aids in defining "politics" in this historical moment.

CONCLUSIONS

From the exhilaration of attending a concert with thousands of screaming fans to the intimacy of slow dancing in a dimly lit nightclub or listening alone in one's bedroom, popular music is a complex practice that gains meaning in specific social landscapes. Understanding the politics of popular music through decontextualized readings of lyrics may be misleading, since the "politics" in music frequently works through the clash of words and sound, or when the noise in music *is* the message – social noise, for example, employed as confrontation or interference, as David Brackett suggests in chapter 10 of this volume. Popular music may operate in the reproduction of dominant social relations, or it may be resignified or appropriated by different communities of listeners. For example, as club music travels within social spaces marked by class, race, or sexuality, it may be understood as vapid, commodified entertainment by some and as dance floor euphoric liberation for others. And as it travels internationally, it may signify Western decadence and/or freedom against oppressive regimes.

In short, musical activity as political activity is embedded in historically constituted relations of power. Politics doesn't occur simply through coercion, consciousness, or formal political mechanisms, but in informal

processes of socialization. Therefore, domination can also be resisted through informal means, including cultural practices like music. Meaning does not reside in music texts themselves but in their articulation with society. Context is crucial, as music consumption by different social groups and in different locations and times may completely change music's political meaning. Since the politics of music involves struggles over subject-producing practices which gain meaning in specific contexts and moments, rhythms, sounds, and collective spaces may affirm ways of being and produce embodiment in opposition to dominant society. Finally, it is important to consider the politics of music in a changed world system – one marked by increased transnational labor and cultural flows, the disruption of stable spatialized inequalities, and the heightened commodification and politicization of everyday life.

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6 Race

Russell A. Potter

Hip-hop backbeats have supported vocalists as far-flung as Bruce Springsteen and Sinéad O'Connor, and digital samples have crossed over still more unexpected territory.

INTRODUCTION

In the history of popular music, perhaps no concept has been as vexed as that of race. From the "race" records of the 1920s to the political reception of rap music in the 1980s, race has been both calling card and wild card, draw and repulsion, essence and pose. No history of popular music or study of its contemporary formations can afford to neglect the issue of race, yet "race" as such has been continually elided, both within the music industry's discourse on its own modes of production and consumption, and by many of music's self-appointed critics. For even as popular music embodies and evokes a mosaic of racial identities and histories, its relationship with identity has never been as deterministic as those who see race as an essence have tried to construe it. "Black" music has always drawn "white" audiences, and indeed often drawn from "white" musical traditions.

Thus, there is no absolute test of authenticity to which either musicians or critics can turn – yet this has never prevented people from trying. Whether in the Afrocentric jazz genealogies of Amiri Baraka or Andrew Ross's postmodern celebrations of cultural indeterminacy, the question of the cultural authenticity of music has survived numerous attempts to reduce it to either bluntly racial fundamentalism or an ironic politics of pastiche. The reasons for this are caught up in the specific histories of the music business, the cultural politics of consumption, and the shifting technologies by which audiences have been interpellated. In the process of entering into the subjectivities of musical space, each listener must

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