

Polyrhythm and the Valorization of Time in Three Movements¹

Dylon Robbins²

[W]hatever meaning there is in music is to be found in [the] act rather than in the actual works themselves, and it is therefore of the musical event rather than of the musical work that we should ask our questions [...]—Christopher Small *Music of the Common Tongue: Survival and Celebration in Afro-American Music*

[A] *síncopa* [é] a alternância entremeada de dois pulsos jogando entre o tempo e o contratempo, e chamando o corpo a ocupar esse intervalo que os diferencia através da dança. Com isso, ele se investe do seu poder de aliar o corporal e o espiritual, e de chegar no limiar entre o tempo e o contratempo, o simétrico e o assimétrico, à fronteira entre a percepção consciente e a inconsciente. Onde faz jus ao que se dia dele: o ritmo não é meramente uma sucessão linear e progressiva de tempos longos e breves, mas a oscilação de diferentes valores de tempo em torno de um centro que se afirma pela repetição regular e que se desloca pela sobreposição assimétrica dos pulsos e pela interferência de irregularidades, um centro que se manifesta e se ausenta como se estivesse fora do tempo—um tempo virtual, um tempo *outro*.—José Miguel Wisnik *O som e o sentido: uma outra história das músicas*

¹ This essay was written in response to the invitations of André Botelho, Maurício Hoelz, Bryan McCann, and Pedro Meira Monteiro to participate in the two events that they organized for BRASA 2014, and for the dedicated symposium *Sincopação do mundo: dinâmicas da música e da cultura*, held at the Instituto de Filosofia e Ciências Sociais (IFCS) at the Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro (UFRJ), July 29-31, 2015. I am especially grateful for their invitation and for the stimulating conversation that I participated in on both occasions, particularly for the comments and suggestions of Elide Rugai Bastos and Jorge Meyers. Many of the concerns that I explore here grew from a graduate course and lecture series I organized through the Center for Latin American and Caribbean Studies (CLACS) at New York University in the fall of 2013. I would also like to thank Jill Lane for her invitation and support in hosting several musicians and scholars with whom I was able to dialogue that semester, among them Obsesión (Alexey and Magia), Joe Bataan, Cyro Baptista, Arcadio Díaz Quiñones, DJARARA, Christopher Dunn, Sujatha Fernandes, Donald Harrison, Ned Sublette, and Miguel Zenón with Luis Perdomo, and last, but certainly not least, the late Juan Flores (1943-2014), who not only presented, but also attended most of the events with his unforgettable charm, wit, and warm spirit. This essay is a humble tribute to his memory and a small token of my gratitude for his generous and lasting contributions to a number of fields.

² New York University.

Syncopation is possibly a matter of frame of reference. It situates beats. It organizes time. It characterizes rhythmic figures by insisting upon their exceptionality, upon their unexpectedness, and upon their capacity to disrupt, disorient, and misalign. In this regard, syncopation in its classical uses conceptually speaks to a theory of rhythm and time that is regular and monorhythmic. It is, thus, an unwittingly normative concept that pulls us back to a presumably predominant monorhythm. When limited to an analysis of the Western European classical tradition, it is a concept that is arguably largely coherent with many of its tenets and principles. However, when brought to bear upon other types of musical traditions it creates interesting and productive tensions that point to the difficulties in translating different musics into the same epistemological framework. Indeed, syncopation, as Sandroni (2001) and others have suggested, while useful in describing features and signaling rhythmic figures, complicates approaches to musical practices immersed in polyrhythm and necessitate that we qualify it so as to align it with the specific social and historical circumstances of music in the Americas.

It is arguably the rhythmic sophistication of polyrhythm that accounts for much of the syncopation associated with Afro-diasporic musics.³ The isolated stops, pops, and

³ While contemporary music theory resources regarding polyrhythm (Grove; Oxford) tend to agree on the concept, i.e. as the superposition of different meters, some of the sources analyzed in this discussion call upon the term to describe, in fact, other musical concepts. Mário de Andrade, for example, uses it to describe, among other phenomena, a pulse approach to meter comprised of one beat measures that facilitate a more fluid alternation between time signatures. Quintero Rivera uses polyrhythm to describe musical forms that simultaneously employ rhythms from different traditions creating otherwise “hybrid” song forms embodying different regional practices. However, as should be evident in the following discussion, my use of the term “polyrhythm” follows that set out in Arom (1991) as “different patterns of accent [that] are superposed in the same work” (205). His discussion of the concept of “syncopation” (207-208), which builds upon Kolinski’s (1973) call to address the cultural specificity of categories of rhythmic analysis and which is further developed by Sandroni (2001), suggests that it is insufficient for understanding accentuation regimes in polyrhythmic musics, positing alternatively the implementation of Kolinski’s concepts of “commetric” and “contrametric” to describe a given beat’s relationship to rhythmic forms that do not distinguish between strong and weak beats. The extent to which the rhythmic traditions alluded to in this article are “truly” polyrhythmic is the subject of a debate that I will largely circumvent here by working—in the first and second cases—with others’ notions of polyrhythm. However, the degree of the polyrhythmic character of some related musics is addressed in Abel (2014, 31-42) and Danielsen (2006).

breaks that interrupt the smooth and steady marking of time can be understood as emerging from undercurrents of overlapping rhythms, also referred to as cross-rhythms. Whereas on the surface a march may appear to be in a steady 2/4, if we subdivide and regroup appropriately it will allow us to seamlessly count three over this two, making the last two beats of the three inevitably syncopated. This figure, also known as the *tresillo*, forms one of the constitutive elements of Afro-diasporic musics throughout the continents, finding different manifestations in Caribbean clave patterns and their derivatives like the *habanera*, in the handclaps of *samba de roda* (among several other Brazilian variants), and even in the basic backbeat, or *bamboula*, of some of the traditional songs of the Mardi Gras Indians.⁴ It is, in fact, a rhythm that maps out an audible geography of movement and migration coinciding with the successive arrivals of sub-Saharan Africans of different ethnicities to the Americas. As especially Agawu (1995) and others (Arom 1991; Kimberlin and Euba 2005) have noted, the polyrhythmic bases of these different West and Central African musical traditions evidences modes of sociability and epistemologies that are extra-musical. One of my hypotheses here is that the reappearance of variants of this polyrhythmic unit maps out networks of belonging that traverse prior ethnic divisions and current political and linguistic boundaries. It is evidence, therefore, of a geography that obscures in many regards the distinctions between West African and Central African traditions in the Americas, while at the same

⁴ This is the geography, at least in part, implied in the Melville and Frances Herskovits recording project (1956) entitled *African & Afro-American Drums* (Ethnic Folkways Library FE 4502). See especially the liner notes by Harold Courlander. Sublette (2004) compactly describes a similar geography based upon the rhythmic cell comprising the *habanera*, one which he hears as similarly spread throughout the continent, but including also Haiti (132-135). Likewise, Quintero Rivera (2009) describes a geography of rhythmic similarity as related through dance with greater care and precision than could be included in this brief discussion in his “Breve historia social de las bailables músicas ‘mulatas.’” It is also interesting to note, as presumably others have, that the *bamboula* rhythm as played in Southern Louisiana is identical to the handclaps in *Samba de roda*, sharing as they may Congolese origins. That said, this is not a geography of one-way movements, or that would, otherwise, imply a denial of coevalness. On the contrary, this is a geography of resonances and exchanges over time.

time obscuring contemporary distinctions between the “national” traditions for which these have become, at least partially, emblematic.⁵

The monorhythmic notion of syncopation, i.e. as “interruption,” has contributed to notions of the valorization of time, as well as corresponded to modes of sociability and community formation. Imagine, for a moment, the asynchronous behavior of Charlie Chaplin in *Modern Times* as he fails in his efforts to conform to the rhythm and tempo of the Fordist assembly line, as well as its suggested proliferation into other areas of the social. His asynchrony is disruptive and undesirable as it syncopates the flow of production, provoking his expulsion from the factory and his eventual relegation to the fringes of society. And indeed, in a musical context, this sense of out-of-placeness has likewise served as the musical analogue for the ambivalent specificity of Africans, and Afro-descended peoples in multi-ethnic societies in the Americas, that is, as regionally or nationally emblematic, and yet socially marginalized. Indeed, rhythm is not the only place from which to think about extra-musical social relationships through musical features. Tonality is another terrain in which these relationships of difference may manifest. It is a commonplace of jazz historians, for instance, to remark upon the centrality of “blue notes” in defining part of the musical specificity of Blues and Jazz. Alejo Carpentier would sing the praises of the “lacras” and the dimension that he saw them adding to Afro-Cuban music (1985, 253). Likewise, Mário de Andrade would describe not only a rhythmic, but also a tonal tension stemming from the “African” influence in Catimbó music (1963). As such, they are tonalities that are essentially unrepresentable from within the normalized structures of Western music. One might

⁵ There are numerous examples, and not only musical ones, of some of these elisions, take, for example, the incorporation of Congolese and Fon elements into the oft-asserted “Yoruban” traditions of Candomblé. Several sources cite this slippage in particular, and Fryer (2000, 13-23) synthesizes many of them succinctly, noting among other examples songs sung in both Yoruba and Fon, as included in Gerard Béhague’s classic *Afro-Brazilian Religious Songs*.

imagine notes that are between two neighboring keys on the piano, not unlike the otherwise syncopated beats falling outside the regime of accentuation characterizing monorhythmic time. Max Weber (1958) has explored how the organization of Western musical theory—and specifically with regards to harmony—conforms to an extra-musical campaign of increasing rationalization in culture, which we could furthermore identify as paralleling the expansion of capitalism and the quantification of human experience through the valorization of time.⁶ And, indeed, it is but a small step to suggest how musical features falling outside these conventions can appeal to notions of “irrationality” due to the complications of their translation into that order. Taking Fred Moten’s (2003) work on the scream as an example, the task, then, is to ask how features that speak to misplacement, like polyrhythm, may appeal to other logics, ones situated, perhaps, beyond the fold of convention. Indeed, if music, as Abel (2014, 3) reminds us, “represents a way of hearing time,” polyrhythm, then, speaks to distinct valorizations of time.

Here, I shall touch upon, however, imperfectly and provisionally, different approaches to polyrhythm and the resulting “syncopations” that arise from it, in order to draw out how similar or related musical phenomena have been interpreted in diverse ways, and how they may also harbor views upon other epistemologies and valorizations of time. I will visit three different regions, three different periods, and three different practices in an effort to explore analogical relationships and to suggest a geography that

⁶ Weber’s (1958, 39) discussion, albeit self-consciously incomprehensive in scope, focuses exclusively on the social implications of tonality, and does not address even peripherally rhythm. And interestingly, on one of the few occasions that he addresses dance, it is to comment upon how changes in musical instruments have “affected the melodicism of dance songs.” Although it is likely largely apparent to the reader of this discussion, this, of course, is not really a fault in Weber’s approach to music, but rather evidence of how the musical tradition within which he is operating is one for which tonality—and not rhythm—is increasingly complex, further justification for the problematization of analytical categories for rhythm rooted in that tradition, e.g. syncopation.

complicates some of our assumptions regarding the coherence and integrity of “national” traditions when rooted in the practices diasporic populations.

Polyrhythm and work

Mário de Andrade’s *Ensaio sobre a música brasileira* (1928, 29) begins with a discussion of rhythm, noting that syncopation is his primary concern. And yet “syncopation” according to Mário is frequently invoked to describe musical phenomena that are not in fact syncopation. He suggests that its classical definition as evident in “the books on rhythm”(30) better corresponds to how these rhythms are notated, rather than how they are “executed”(37) or performed. He asserts, then, that “o nosso populário musical constata que muitos movimentos chamados de sincopados não são síncopa. São polirritmia ou são ritmos livres [...]”(33). And indeed, it is this notion of “free” rhythm that is most characteristically “Brazilian” for Mário, and which should be distinguished from the “directly musical rhythm” of the Portuguese, the “prosodic” rhythm of the Amerindians, or the “constant” rhythm of the Africans(31). Thus, “polyrhythm” not only accounts for the true nature of the “syncopations” in Brazilian popular music as it is performed, but it also becomes an embodiment of Brazilian ethnic specificity, and one that facilitates a “freedom” of musical expression in the improvisatory spirit of the fantasia(32). It is important to clarify, therefore, that Mário’s notion of polyrhythm does not necessarily limit itself to the superposition of even and odd meters it generally invokes, but rather to another class of musical phenomena whose values are rooted in his theorization of a nationalist musical modernism.⁷ Among his conclusions, he

⁷ Wisnik (1977) notes the many problems with the essay’s “ideological platform” and “emergent nationalism” (181) that complicates Mário’s own call to engage with popular culture and to employ its rhythmic or other features in the formulation of a “national” sound. Santos (2004) describes Mário’s nationalist program and how it relates to the period’s conflation of race, culture, and people, emphasizing, furthermore, how the frankly manifesto-like character

suggests seeing in polyrhythm a musical analogue for the synthesis of a multiethnic society, arguably a formal characteristic that would embody the type of “national race” he identified in Brazilian popular music, and which would conform to his utopian vision of national cohesion as manifest in the popular.

And yet, it is important to contextualize Andrade’s polyrhythm metaphor and to question the specificity that he attributes to it. There are possibly some complications in Mário’s reading, owing in part to his particular use of the term. Polyrhythm, as the superposition of different meters, is one of the defining and overriding characteristics of traditional West African musics (Agawu 1995; Arom 1991; Kimberlin and Euba 2005). It is also a prominent feature in some popular Iberian traditions, as in the *palmas* patterns in flamenco. It is significant that, despite this, Andrade prefers to see in its use in Brazil a possible wellspring of local authenticity, when it speaks strongly of West and Central African and other influences in popular music. It is perhaps in polyrhythm’s power to capture metaphorically more macroscopic social features that Andrade finds his purchase. But difficulties arise when we examine the complex relationships by which a formal musical characteristic—like polyrhythm for example—imparts its particularity. In attempting to isolate any of the many ways in which music may signify, I would like to recall here Marx’s iconic example of the table in his discussion of the fetish character of commodities and particularly in his suggestion to see in the valorization of

of the text sought to shift perspectives regarding the nature and relevance of popular music traditions (13-40). It is in this regard that, as Botelho (2012) has noted, we should appreciate Mário’s unique approach to bridging different fields, bringing together music history, musicology, and most interestingly a fieldwork-driven ethnomusicology (26). His copious poetry embodies, as well, a sincere engagement with putting into practice other musical concepts related to this unique intersection of fields in his work (Botelho 2012, 55). His use of the term polyrhythm should be regarded in this unique, trans-disciplinary light, and considered, as well, as reflecting the early slippery usage of the term, whose present meaning would not come to be established until more recent decades. See, for example, the discussion of the ethnomusicologist Richard Waterman’s own slippage with regards to “polyrhythm” and “polymer” (Iyanaga 2015, 196).

commodities how a society projects its social values upon objects that otherwise bare no tangible trace of them.

It is in this sense that we could note, in reality, Mário's reading of polyrhythm self-consciously groups different phenomena under the term, including not only the superposition of even and odd meters, but also the subdivision of accented beats characterizing compound time, and interestingly the asymmetrical phrasing by which a melodic or harmonic structure may resolve at unexpected junctures within a song form, stretching musical phrases beyond the bar lines separating symmetrical groups of measures. He appears to be most taken by this last manifestation, seeing in it a type of corporality infused into musical form as these asymmetrical resolutions arise from the "fadiga" or fatigue of the singer who must stretch and compress a musical phrase to accommodate for the need to breathe (36). He sees in this the subjugation of rationalized musical form to the corporeal, physiological realities of the popular performer. We could take this further and suggest that he is marveling at the primacy of positive factors over normative factors in shaping musical form. We could also recall Simon Frith's notion of how the voice's characteristics—the timbre, granularity, inflection—encourages the listener to imagine a body and its features, arguably tapping into a social imaginary in the process (1998, 183-202). Yet here for Mário it is in the limitations of the body, for it is fatigue that is the shaping constraint in the musical form that he is identifying as best embodying the "Brazilian race." One should recall as well how "preguiça" or laziness is a structuring concern in *Macunaíma*—one that reoccurs throughout Mário's thought, for he also uses it to explain Brazilian composers' disconnect with popular traditions. It is their "laziness" that keeps them from exploring the popular traditions that surround them. "Laziness" has shaped negatively the status of Brazilian classical music by creating the inhibition to incorporate particularizing features from popular traditions, whereas "fatigue" has defined those popular

traditions' national particularity. It is also interesting how the value of work and industry is inscribed in this primacy of "fatigue" over "laziness," as the former implies its antecedent "esforço" or effort, and laziness is not part of a cycle of expense and recuperation, but rather, for Mário at least, an idiopathic condition which he explains in another part of his discussion via a "malinconia tropical" or tropical melancholy(71). Therefore, fatigue ennobles musical form for Mário by evidencing effort. And, indeed, it is important to note how his valuation of fatigue is centered upon the musician and not the listener or spectator. It is an interpretive framework, then, that continues to situate the performing artist in a regime of production, and polyrhythm, at least according to his very idiosyncratic theorization, is about work. What he says about the consumers, i.e. the listeners, and the role of rhythm in shaping their places in a regime of production and consumption serves as a revealing counterbalance to his notion of polyrhythm and work.

Mário will touch upon many similar concerns regarding rhythm in his discussion of Catimbó music in his *Música de feitiçaria no Brasil* (1933). There, he relates his experiences attending a ceremony in a remote area near Belém. Faced with the impossibility of notating one of the rhythms he heard, he reflects upon the rhythmic sophistication of the chants and their fluid structures, allowing for sequential alteration between measures of even and odd meters(42). They constitute, for Mário, a pulse-oriented rhythmic base with no set duration for measures that is governed only by the melodic flights of fancy of the vocalists(42-43). However, this time it is an instance of singers shaping musical form not by the limitation of their breaths, but by their implied "freedom" in rendering a "melodic fantasy"(43). But while the underlying rhythmic structure allows for this productive play for musicians, its "monotony" weighs upon the dancing listener with an "excesso de música entorpecente"(39). Mário asserts: "[O] destino principal da música que a torna companheira inseparável da feitiçaria [é] a sua

força hipnótica”(39). It is a music whose rhythm acts “poderosamente sobre o físico, entorpecendo, dionisiando, tanto conseguindo nos colocar em estados largados de corpo fraco e espírito cismarento, como nos estados violentos de fúria”(39). Its rhythmic intensity—here more polymetric than polyrhythmic—is one whose excess brings dancers and listeners to a state of implied exhaustion and sustained passivity, which would appear to differ in scope and import to the type of fatigue that he would look upon favorably as shaping national specificity. It is interesting to note, as well, that harmonically, Mário will suggest that the vocalists’ use of quartertones and other “voluntary dissonances”(45) falling outside of conventional Western tonality work to further destabilize consciousness by leaving both the singer, now, and the listener in a state of “indecisão pasmosa.” This “hypnotic” state of dancing and listening, however, beyond its deleterious effects, fulfills, for Mário, the music’s basic social function:

Nossa gente em numerosos gêneros e formas de sua música principalmente rural, cocos, sambas, modas, cururus, etc., busca a embriaguez sonora. A música é utilizada numerosas vezes pelo nosso povo, não apenas na feitiçaria mas nas suas cantigas profanas, especialmente, coreográficas, como um legítimo estupefaciente. Da mesma forma que o Huitota ou o neto do Inca decaído traz sempre na boca as folhas de coca, o homem brasileiro traz na boca a melodia dançada que lhe entorpece e insensibiliza todo o ser. Ela não é apenas uma evasão sexual do indivíduo ou uma expressão dos interesses sociais do grupo. É um estupefaciente, um elemento de insensibilização e bebedice que provoca, além da fadiga, uma consunção temporânea, e talvez da vida inteira, ai que preguiça! (45)

Thus, according to Mário, the Brazilian listener languishes in a consumptive adoration of song like a lotus-eater. Polyrhythm accompanies, then, a more pervasive concern with work and production, and the conflicted place of pleasure and enjoyment that these entail.⁸ It is as if not all musical pleasures are the same for Mário, and that those paralyzing pleasures that approximate laziness are cause for concern. But the politics of pleasure have a history of being exceptionally complicated, and the theorization of a right to laziness would coalesce tellingly in the works of Rimbaud and Lafargue in the wake of the Paris Commune (Ross, 2008). And indeed, Mário's own rhapsodic incantation of a right to laziness in *Macunaíma* resonates with these other more explicit politicizations of laziness and the refusal to work or to produce (Dieleke, 2007). Coincidentally, polyrhythm has also been described as the companion of pleasure.

Polyrhythm and pleasure

Sixty years later and thousands of miles to the North, Antonio Benítez Rojo from the wintry confines of an exile in Massachusetts, will theorize the Caribbean in the introductory essay to his *La isla que se repite*.⁹ For Benítez Rojo, the Caribbean is a latent order in an archipelagic chaos. The Caribbean's island topography becomes a geographic analogue to other similar structures, among them rhythmic structures that

⁸ Mário (1972) will explore similar somatic effects of rhythm in his "Terapéutica musical" in *Namoros com a medicina*. For a more careful consideration of the oft-cited points of contact between this specific dimension of Mário de Andrade's work and that of Luís da Câmara Cascudo, see Camargo (2011). As Coli (1998, 21) notes, as well, Mário's theories regarding the effects of music upon behavior will be further developed in a series of journalistic pieces entitled "Músicas políticas."

⁹ See Díaz Quiñones (2007), for an extensive exploration of exile in Benítez Rojo's essay, including, as well, insights regarding rhythm and its relationship to repetition, connecting, thus, with one of the other important Deleuzian features of Benítez Rojo's essay, and echoing Díaz Quiñones' (2006) ongoing concern with beginnings and the rhetorical device of *principio* (26). Burns (2012, 23-26), situates Benítez Rojo, as well, in a series of productive reworkings of the Deleuzian machine among other Caribbean writers, with repetition forming the basis of different approaches to Colonialism, one might add, thus, as an exploration of the historical rhythm of colonialism.

within a densely textured web of percussive hits and breaks, contain a cyclical regularity that is indefinitely bounded in time. The Caribbean, he would say, is not cataclysmic and therefore conclusive. And the way people walk “there,” the way they sing, and the way they dance embodies a notion of time that refuses to cease definitively, and which engrains within the practice of everyday life “ancestral” epistemologies.¹⁰ Thus, whereas Mário’s polyrhythm becomes a model of multiple ethnicities or of the audible evidence of a laboring body, for Benítez Rojo it is a structuring principle that masks order as chaos. The implied multiplicity of rhythmic registers characterizing polyrhythm also serves as an opportunity for reflecting upon the continuities between an Afro-Caribbean performance practice and a literary Baroque aesthetics. Furthermore, as a generalized concept originating in music and yet finding resonance in a range of practices, polyrhythm, for Benítez Rojo becomes the essential ingredient in understanding a more diffuse sense of Caribbean performance practices that, according to him, seek to avert violence through a pursuit of enjoyment or pleasure, what is also referred to frequently within his musical context as *el goce*. He suggests:

[L]a noción de polirritmo [...] si se lleva a un punto en que el ritmo inicial es desplazado por otros ritmos de modo que éste ya no fije un ritmo dominante y trascienda a una forma de flujo, expresa bastante bien el *performance* propio de la máquina cultural caribeña.[...] Esto para decir que el ritmo, en los códigos del Caribe, precede a la música, incluso a la misma percusión. Es algo que ya estaba ahí, en medio del

¹⁰ Monteiro (2007) has explored similar displacements and erasures of history involving Afro-Brazilian music and its representations and sublimations, suggesting interestingly that “it is fundamental that the origin appears as natural or mythical because then the traces of the writing itself, that (re)created its naturalness or mythical nature, can be forgotten”(14). Indeed, we could approach Benítez Rojo’s own analysis as an attempt to recover that “lost” writing by identifying its presence in the everyday, thus, de-mythologizing it.

ruido, algo antiquísimo y oscuro a lo cual se conecta en un momento dado la mano del tamborero y el cuero del tambor[...]. Pero sería un error pensar que el ritmo caribeño solo se conecta a la percusión. En realidad, se trata de un meta-ritmo al cual se puede llegar por vía de cualquier sistema de signos, llámese éste música, lenguaje, arte, texto, danza, etc. Digamos uno empieza a caminar y de repente se da cuenta de que está caminando “bien”, es decir, no solo con los pies, sino con otras partes del cuerpo; cada músculo se mueve sin esfuerzo, a un ritmo dado, y que sin embargo se ajusta admirablemente al ritmo de los pasos. Es muy posible que el caminante experimente en esta circunstancia una tibia y risueña sensación de bienestar, y sin embargo no hay nada específicamente caribeño en esto, solo se está caminando dentro de la noción convencional del polirritmo, la cual supone un ritmo central [...]. No obstante, es posible que uno quiera caminar no solo con los pies, y para ello imprima a los músculos del cuello, de la espalda, del abdomen, de los brazos, en fin, a todos los músculos, su ritmo propio, distinto al ritmo de los pasos, el cual ya no dominaría. Si esto llegara a ocurrir—lo cual, *performance* al fin y al cabo, sería siempre una experiencia transitoria—, se estaría caminando como las ancianas anti-apocalípticas. Lo que ha sucedido es que el centro de conjunto rítmico que forman los pasos ha sido des-centrado, y ahora corre de músculo a músculo, posándose aquí y allá e iluminando en sucesión intermitente, como una luciérnaga, cada foco rítmico del cuerpo. (xxv-xxvi)

Benítez Rojo's reflections explicitly work toward theorizing the Caribbean, which as Díaz Quiñones (2007) has suggested, envisioned a network of belonging that served to

counter authoritarian nationalisms and situate, rather, the circumstances of exile and migration as one of its emblematic experiences. His reflections also serve to theorize abstract relationships between rhythm and daily life. Indeed, rhythm precedes musicality, for, we could furthermore assert, it corresponds to a notion of time that is extramusical and yet which finds a manifestation in music. His notion of repetition and the paradigms of repeatability, while hitching to that decade's discussions of fractals and Chaos theory, can be seen as well as an attempt to work through musicality in the abstract and explore how it may serve as the source of different models of time that break with linear, or mono-rhythmic notions and which permeate lived experience. Indeed, this latent "rhythm" manifests, among other places, in walking, as well as in dancing, boxing, speech, and, as evidenced in his essay, in thought. And the "ancianas anti-apocalípticas" refers to two "negras" whom he contemplates walking "polyrhythmically" through the city amidst the growing tensions of the Cuban missile crisis and the imminent threat of nuclear annihilation. Their steady gait embodies for Benítez Rojo not only the performed memory of the their ancestors' forced migration, but also a transperiodic vision of history and historical transformation that breaks with the linear and teleological rationale propelling history "toward" its conclusion, catastrophic or otherwise.¹¹

¹¹ Chakrabarty (2000) has derived other compelling implications from this notion of time, arguing that one of the shortcomings of developmentalist approaches to history and modernity rely upon notions of human existence "in a frame of a singular and secular historical time that envelops other kinds of time"(16), which also forms part of a wider initiative to call upon "plural or conjoined genealogies for our analytical categories" (20). His critique of historiography and intellectual history is rooted in notions of cultures rather than a singular Culture as it attempts to challenge those traditions that analyze self in the name of the universal, while failing to address their own locality, specificity, or historicity. Effectively, he implements lessons gleaned from Anthropology and brought to bear upon disciplines or traditions that have a history of difficulties addressing how their categories and rubrics of analysis are shaped by their own historical experience. It is possibly not surprising, then, that Kolinski's (1973) classic discussion of categories of rhythmic analysis make similar critiques of musicology's own use of rhythmic concepts rooted in a Western tradition, like syncopation. An important difference, however, between notions of time in Chakrabarty and Kolinski is in terms of scale: historical time is an abstract notion spanning beyond the limits of lived experience, whereas musical time is reduced to the level of immediate consciousness. We could likewise ask that both Chakrabarth and Kolinski guide a wider theorization of rhythm as a conception of time—of its proportions, of its textures, of its metrics—which makes the stakes in such a consideration stretch well beyond music.

Furthermore, it functions as a vehicle for achieving a state of being that he describes as “*de cierta manera*” or “this particular way.” Now, it is certainly coherent with Benítez Rojo’s neo-Baroque concerns that we may recognize in this formulation of “*de cierta manera*” a notion of transcendent aesthetic experience resonant with Baltasar Gracián’s (1601-1658) own Baroque formulation of Grace as a guiding principle in thought and action, one that “beguiles the intelligence and flees from explanation” (1996, 40) and yet which constitutes “the soul of beauty”(41). It is, otherwise, an imprecise characteristic that escapes enunciation, and yet which is immediately recognizable. A period translator of Gracián would suggest “*je ne sais quois*” or “I know not what” as the more appropriate description pinpointing the elusiveness of the principle. Both, indeed, signal a type of enjoyable experience found beyond the limits of language and perception, and, in the particular case of Benítez Rojo, it is one situated in a musical context in which “*para gozar*” or “to enjoy,” as well as “*el goce*,” would comprise a recurring musical refrain from later forms of *son* through mambo and *bugalú* and well into salsa and *timba*. Yet, whereas grace is marked by a delicateness, whose excess manifests through inversion, *el goce* is straightforwardly transcendent. Indeed, although it is certainly unnecessary to point out to most listeners, it is nonetheless essential to recall here that, if we were to limit ourselves to only lyrics, there is a consistent discourse of enjoyment and its accompanying imaginary and vocabulary of metaphor and innuendo in many of the Afro-Hispanic musical traditions in the Caribbean.¹² Recent scholarship regarding *salsa*, in particular, has noted how this “enjoyment” either reinscribes gender iniquities and models of problematic models of masculinity (Aparicio 1998) or remaps Deleuzian flows of desire (Quintero Herencia

¹² One could similarly identify the tendency in the Blues (Bessie Smith and Robert Johnson, among several others), which is interestingly absent from the *lyrics*—but certainly not the dances—of Jazz, Samba, or Choro.

2004). What is interesting, however, in Benítez Rojo's theorization is the relationship he suggests specifically between the rhythmic feel of polyrhythm and its ability to define and provoke a type of aesthetic pleasure and enjoyment. And, indeed, polyrhythm is noted as one of the essential features of *salsa* by which it conforms musically—that is, not necessarily verbally—to “principles of spontaneity and liberty” (Quintero Rivera 314). It is a type of active engagement with enjoyment pervasive in daily life that demands, furthermore, that we revisit Audre Lorde's (1978) foundational, but nonetheless pressing, notion of the erotic, as a model for liberating and collaborative enjoyment.

And while Black Feminist and Queer politicizations of pleasure respond convincingly to a need to theorize *and* enact other modalities of being that radically revise conventional notions of agency and selfhood, some may have been, rather, dancing their ways through similar problems.

Polyrhythm and “funky butt”

Thought I heard Buddy Bolden say
You nasty bunch a' dirty, take it away
You terrible, you awful, take it away
I thought I heard him say...

I thought I heard Buddy Bolden shout
Open up that window and let that bad air out
Open up that window and let that foul air out
Yes I thought I heard Buddy Bolden say
—“I Thought I Heard Buddy Bolden Say”
Jelly Roll Morton's New Orleans Jazzmen

And so why did Jelly Roll Morton think that he heard Buddy Bolden shout “open up the window, and let that bad air out”? Is this just another loaded metaphor among the many others inhabiting the early oral history of Jazz—a music whose name, we should recall, was a synonym for ejaculation and even initially censored in print? The “bad air” in this case was a reference to a term used in the period, that is, to “funky butt,” otherwise the smell of sweaty dancers. And indeed, the potentially scandalous implications of the term “funky butt” assured that it would be only obliquely referenced in this 1939 RCA recording through its complementary association of “bad air.”¹³

Of the many myths and distortions characterizing the oral histories of that lamentably unrecorded moment, the idea of “funky butt” is certainly one of the more complex and multifaceted. Historians have alternatively suggested that the term speaks to the unbathed, working-class clientele of the Union Sons Hall that was one of the preferred venues for Buddy Bolden and his group.¹⁴ Although there are earlier instances of “funk” being used to speak of odors,¹⁵ the inception of the concept of “funky butt” is the earliest known instance of funk’s affiliation with music. The dancer’s body was the

¹³ It is relevant that the actual song referring explicitly to “funky butt” only be recorded in 1938, as part of the scandalously frank and candid interviews and oral histories that Jelly Roll Morton would make with Alan Lomax for the Library of Congress. “Funky,” in the period, was clearly not a “public” topic. It is, furthermore, telling that even as late as 1952, Lester Young (1997) would respond to a studio technician’s use of the term in reference to his interpretation of “Two to Tango” with some initial, although lighthearted, reserve.

¹⁴ Marquis (2005, 109-111) offers the most comprehensive and thorough engagement with the archives regarding the figure and context of Bolden. His discussion of the song “Funky Butt” suggests links to other popular compositions from the mid-nineteenth century onward that speak little of smells, much less the funky ones (109-111). Luc Sante’s (2005) vivid imagination of the space is particularly intriguing in how it foregrounds the many smells it may have hosted, and how the tragic figure of Bolden may have reflected and responded to the context. Danny Barker’s written memoir (1998, 21-22) reproduces a first-hand account of the smell of the crowd at a Bolden performance. I owe reference to this particular account to Ned Sublette.

¹⁵ For a gloss of its different meanings see Sublette (2008, 66-67) and for a hypothesis regarding the word’s possible Ki-Kongo root see Thompson (1983, 104-105), who argues that the term’s phonetic proximity to the Ki-Kongo expression *lu-fuki* accounts for the catachrestic slippage from funk’s earlier meaning of “spark” to the later one related to smell. It is also important to note, as Thompson suggests, how the Ki-Kongo term, *lu-fuki*, inhabits an imaginary of related terms including *dinza*, meaning “ejaculation” and which is also possibly the root of the English term “jism” and, by relation, of “jazz.”

conduit through which smell and music came to be related. These movements of the body, furthermore, constituted the embodiment of what has been described in another context as a “sonic sensibility” (Feld 1996, 97). It is, therefore, a corporal engagement with music that is rich with meaning and constitutive of a discursive register open to sustained analysis. And in the warm and humid, un-airconditioned spaces in which this music was played and performed, the smell of the sweaty dancers as they moved relentlessly throughout the evening may also be understood as evidence of the rhythmic intensity of the music that they danced to. More specifically, in the case of the early innovator Buddy Bolden and later for Jelly Roll Morton, the smell most certainly accompanied, not just the feel of a performance, but also the use of “syncopations” to anticipate certain downbeats that comprised parts of a more complex polyrhythmic musical sense. “Funky butt” may also be understood as evidence of an informed response to polyrhythm. It is, therefore, a modality of listening—one that resituates the body and its efforts in a context beyond the rationale of production and accumulation. It is a window upon a corporally realized sonic sensibility that reinforces dance in an economy of pleasure and enjoyment. This was arguably at odds with the tenets of a post-agrarian industrialized society and its concomitant commodification of the body through the valuation of a regularly intervalled, linear time that is the analogue of the normative monorhythm premising the “deviant” departures of syncopation.

In an interview recorded shortly before his death, the guitarist Danny Barker would recall Jelly Roll Morton’s waning success in New York City. He made the following relevant remarks regarding the rhythmic feel of this music and its effects upon the body of the listener:

[Jelly Roll Morton would] brag around the rhythm club because they had these other bandleaders and some of them were successful like

Fletcher [Henderson] and Chick Webb, and Claude Hopkins and Charlie Johnson, Noble Sissle... They were successful. He wasn't [as successful] as a bandleader in New York because the music he played was raunchy, and it would give...make people want to shake their bodies, rub their bodies together, see? And people'd get this music in their... it'd make them feel, if you was from the South, want to do that kind of carrying on, but it wasn't practical. So the music, I think, it was one of his misgivings, the music was too raunchy.

As Barker certainly noted, the "raunchiness" of, in this case, Jelly Roll Morton's music, was at odds with the seemingly more "practical" dimensions offered by other styles. The counterpoint of raunchiness and practicality is a familiar one, whose contours certainly follow the binge and purge cycles of accumulation and expense that structure carnival, potlatch, and celebration. However, it is an odd one to apply to the characterization of dance and music in what was, for the dancers to whom he refers, a leisurely setting. Certainly "raunchy" here triggers "salaciousness" and "licentiousness." And if we were to root Barker's use of "practicality" through its etymology in its origins—and we should do so only cautiously—we might be inclined to conclude that his notion of "practicality" was one grounded in "practice" and "action." However, his inflection in saying "practical" speaks more to an implication of "feasibility." The type of dancing provoked by the rhythmic feel was not "feasible" or "viable," i.e., it was not appropriately possible in the context. Barker does not make explicit the nature of this incompatibility here. However, we may hypothesize, for Barker would seem to identify in the inevitable corporal response to this rhythmic feel a

type of tendency toward excess—an excess of salaciousness and licentiousness, an excess of unproductive desire and pleasure.¹⁶

And all of this, it should be emphasized, is the essential element of the corporal response to a particular rhythmic feel, an embodied sonic sensibility that finds in this music the impetus to counter the body's insertion into a leaner regime of production and accumulation. And yet funk's initial pleasurable excess will find itself compellingly inverted by the 1960s within the formation of the formalized genre, Funk, an altogether very different music than that which would give rise to the funky butt, as it is reabsorbed into a regime of expense and accumulation for which work and commerce would serve to "legitimate"—albeit ambiguously—musical practices. It is a genre characterized by ebullient eruptions of syncopated sixteenth note figures, consistently locked within a steady and unyielding beat. This would lead to its eventual association with what Ramsey (2003, 154) has called the "division of sonic labor" an otherwise tightly organized array of musical parts fitting within a single groove, features more clearly characteristic of the classic Funk genre of James Brown.

Conclusions:

Olha, esta mulata quando dança,
É luxo só!
Quando todo seu corpo se balança,
É luxo só...
Tem um não sei quê que faz a confusão;
O que ela não tem, meu deus, é compaixão.
Eta, mulata bamba!

¹⁶ Ramos (2010) has mapped out different facets of acoustic excess, tracing the points of continuity between interruptions of consciousness, porousness of self, how the acoustic lends itself to exploitation as a powerful mechanism of control, and, certainly, the fetishization of rhythm in, among others, Benítez Rojo.

Olha, esta mulata quando dança,
É luxo só!
Quando todo seu corpo se balança,
É luxo só...
—“É luxo só” by Ary Barroso

“Samba, samba, sem te-lec-tec, não é samba,” or so begins Ary Barroso’s 1957 composition “É luxo só” or “it’s just luxurious.”¹⁷ According to the prolific vocalist Elizeth Cardoso, Barroso composed the song especially for her. Her particular rendition is a lively, *samba de gafieira* style including lavish horn arrangements and intense, full ensemble soli. The “te lec tec” of the opening chant—telling absent from the more understated Bossa Nova versions of the composition—is a reference to the rhythmic figure forming the basic back beat of samba and comprised of a syncopated sixteenth note figure—one that approximates significantly the polyrhythmic *tresillo* mentioned above, and which, we should recall, defines a geography spanning across several political and linguistic boundaries. It is interesting, then, that the lyrics speak of a dancing body—a *mulata*, to be precise and one whose movements stimulate the adoration of the presumed spectator and listener who contemplates her “rowdy” (*bamba*) movements as, presumably, “he” is “ruthlessly” seduced by her “luxuriousness,” by her excess. It is an image that encapsulates rhythm, the body, dance, and their presumed valorization. It is a depiction of a scene in which dance is called upon to signify, and its rhythm is relevant.

In his re-readings of Nietzsche and Mallarmé, Badiou (2005) has asked that we think about dance “not as a thought caught in a body, but as a body that thinks” (70). Indeed, the “thought-body.” And while his discussion obliquely reveals that the dance

¹⁷ McCann (2004, 67-78) summarizes the critical periods in Barroso’s career, marked not only by his most well known composition, *Aquarela do Brasil*, but also by his significant presence on radio and using his show as a vehicle to publicize subsequent generations of popular artists.

that he is specifically theorizing from is ballet, he orients us to the more general terrain of embodied knowledges, blurring the boundaries between theory and practice, and demanding a careful consideration, in this case, of the body as a window upon how rhythms may signify. Browning (1995), for example, has entertained a notion of dance that asks that we see in its movements an ephemeral writing, a type of evasive inscription that serves to paradoxically solidify thought through its performance. Those thoughts, in the case of samba, for example, have the capacity to “narrate a story of racial contact, conflict, and resistance, not just mimetically across a span of musical time but also synchronically, in the depth of a single measure” (2). Indeed, this multiplicity of registers speaks to some of the ways in which polyrhythm may model temporality or other non-musical concepts by situating a notion of time that is dense and varied. And yet for Travassos (2004, 228-229) dance presents a hermeneutic paradox that reinforces the slippery distinctions between dance as analogy and mimesis shaped by social forces upon the body, and dance as a lived experience through which dancers engage with possibly deeply subjective and somatic experiences.

Dance may also be approached as the expense of effort in a presumably materially “non-productive” activity, but one that, nonetheless, tends toward excess. It is, certainly, the moving “thought-body” but it is, also, the corporalization of notions of time, of distinctions between meter and rhythm, and of how these concepts are historically and socially inflected. And if that notion of time is polyrhythmic—that is, if it is heterogeneous, simultaneous, and contradictory—then it alludes to the body’s insertion in a present that is fundamentally at odds with integral notions of culture and history. Indeed, Mário’s theory of the body’s relationship to polyrhythm is one traversed by concerns with work and production that reveal a valorization of time, not as an analog model of time, but rather as a modality of time as lived experience. It is one that is inherently limited by the irregular temporal intervals of fatigue, creating an

aesthetics of unrealized desire, of culture as imperfection and disequilibrium. And yet, for Benítez Rojo, polyrhythm approximates grace—not unlike the grace that Maya Deren (1976, 195) would describe among possessed dancers in Haiti as a paradoxically effacing feature. It is also an engagement with pleasure, and not with a presumably apolitical aesthetic pleasure, but one in which pleasure may be identified as defining a network of belonging traversing past and present, near and far—a collective “misbehavior” in the face of ordered and historical regimes of time. But the body’s engagement with polyrhythm is also an opportunity to exhibit and experience a sonic sensibility that reveals music’s ability—through the sophistication of performance practices—to render a type of immaterial luxuriousness.

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