Black Joy: African Diasporic Religious Expression in Popular Culture

Vanessa K. Valdés

Blog post published October 22, 2018 in *Sounding Out!*
https://doi.org/10.59350/n5raj-rem14

Abstract

Inspired by the recent Black Perspectives "W.E.B. Du Bois @ 150" Online Forum, SO!'s "W.E.B. Du Bois at 150" amplifies the commemoration of the occasion of the 150th anniversary of Du Bois's birth in 2018 by examining his all-too-often and all-too-long unacknowledged role in developing, furthering, challenging, and shaping what we now know as "sound studies." It has been an abundant [...]

Keywords

Music (Subfield), Amplifying Du Bois Forum, Article, Black Studies, Caribbean Studies, Cultural Studies

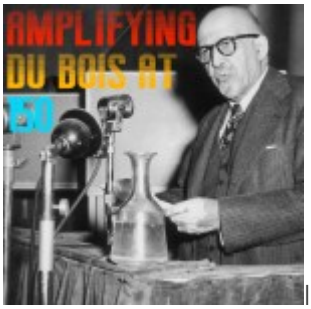


Recommended citation

Valdés, V. K. (2018, October 22). Black Joy: African Diasporic Religious Expression in Popular Culture. *Sounding Out!*. https://doi.org/10.59350/n5raj-rem14

Copyright

Copyright © Vanessa K. Valdés 2018. Distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.



Inspired by the recent Black Perspectives "W.E.B. Du Bois @ 150" Online Forum, SO!'s "W.E.B. Du Bois at 150" amplifies the commemoration of the occasion of the 150th anniversary of Du Bois's birth in 2018 by examining his all-too-often and all-too-long unacknowledged role in developing, furthering, challenging, and shaping what we now know as "sound studies."

It has been an abundant decade-plus (!!!) since Alexander Weheliye's *Phonographies* "link[ed] the formal structure of W.E.B. Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folk* to the contemporary mixing practices of DJs" (13) and we want to know how folks have thought about and listened with Du Bois in their work in the intervening years. How does Du Bois as DJ remix both the historiography *and* the contemporary praxis of sound studies? How does attention to Du Bois's theories of race and sound encourage us to challenge the ways in which white supremacy has historically shaped American institutions, sensory orientations, and fields of study? What new futures emerge when we listen to Du Bois as a thinker and agent of sound?

Over the last two months, we have shared work that reimagines sound studies with Du Bois at the center. Pieces by Phillip Luke Sinitiere, Kristin Moriah, Aaron Carter-Énylì, Austin Richey and Julie Beth Napolin move us toward a decolonized understanding and history of sound studies, showing us how has Du Bois been urging us to attune ourselves to it. To start the series from the beginning, click here.

Readers, today's post by **Vanessa Valdés** closes our series: she explores the limits of Du Bois' echo chamber metaphor within the context of a Black diaspora that looks past the white gaze and within its spiritual practices for recognition.

–Jennifer Lynn Stoever and Liana Silva, Eds.

In "The Concept of Race," the fifth chapter of his autobiography *Dawn of Dusk* (1940), W. E. B. Du Bois theorizes the psychological damage of caste segregation using the metaphor of the echo chamber. He writes of being imprisoned within a mountain, looking out, speaking "courteously" and yet remaining unnoticed: "the passing throng does not even turn its head, or if it does, glances curiously and walks on" (66). As per Du Bois's imagery, white supremacist segregation renders Black subjects ultimately unintelligible, even to themselves, as they "may scream and hurl themselves against the barriers, hardly realizing in their bewilderment that they are screaming in a vacuum unheard and that their antics may actually seem funny to those outside looking in" (66). Du Bois railed against the irreparable harm that results from legal and cultural separation of people on the basis of race; he focuses on the interactions between Black communities and a dominant white supremacist society, highlighting the damage inflicted by Black peoples upon

Black peoples themselves when they continually attempt to prove their humanity to a white supremacist capitalist heteropatriarchal imperialist population in control of socioeconomic political systems within the United States and in fact throughout the Americas.

What then? Du Bois presents a vision in which there is no room, literal or figurative, for resistance to this seemingly pervasive surveillance that, in the words of Jennifer Stoever in *The Sonic Color Line: Race and the Cultural Politics of Listening* (2016), renders peoples of African descent "soundproofed yet hypervisible, constantly on display for the curiosity of the white gaze" (260). If there continues to be a search for acceptance, for recognition and acknowledgement of one's humanity on behalf of "the white gaze," what happens when it does not come? This essay presents a select history of musicians who, irrespective of a white audience, and in the face of a seemingly flattened definition of Blackness that is limited to an adherence to the Black (Christian) Church here in the United States, instead channel their multiple identities by invoking the orishas of the religion of Regla de Ocha. In it are aspects of Black culture that remain, in the words of E. Patrick Johnson in "Black Performance Studies: Genealogies, Politics, Futures," "illegible and unintelligible to the undiscerning eyes and ears, and perhaps minds, of some scholars." These artists resist the urge to explain, defying an unspoken dictate that their art must be completely comprehensible to all who interact with it. They draw from source material that for millions internationally is a viable source of inspiration on its own terms, without elucidation.



"Diasporic Genius Apprenticeship Program (D-GAP)" by Flickr user Diasporic Genius, CC BY-NC-ND 2.0

Known alternately as Santería, Yoruba, Lucumí, and Ifa, this religion, like others of the African diaspora in the Americas, call for their practitioners—formal initiates or simply those who show respect and affinity—to achieve balance on the paths to their destiny. According to Regla de Ocha, human beings, like the nature that surrounds us, are sparks of the divine made manifest;

practitioners interact with the environment in order to reach said equilibrium through intoned supplications. While associated primarily with Black populations of the Hispanic Caribbean, those who are faithful are found throughout the hemisphere and in fact, throughout the world.

In the anglophone world of Black music here in the United States, critics have written about the multiple influences of gospel on the development of rhythm and blues and other musical genres, as made patently evident in Aretha Franklin's homegoing services as well as Peter Guralnick's *Sweet Soul Music: Rhythm and Blues and the Southern Dream of Freedom* (1986). Within the luso-hispanophone audiences in this hemisphere, there has been a similar inclusion of African diasporic religious music within popular genres. Prayers and chants within popular music and literature reflect systems of knowledge that have undergirded communities of African descent for centuries on both sides of the Atlantic and throughout this hemisphere. Those who know, who can see and hear those resonances, for them, there is no regard for the understanding of a dominant white audience; it is simply not for them. And it is here, in the knowledge that these works invoke systems of being that are inaudible and unappetizing to mass consumption, where one can wrestle out of the echo chamber.



"Gospel singers" by Flickr user Elin B, CC BY 2.0

In this series for *Sounding Out!*, Aaron Carter-Ényì has written about Du Bois's theories on sound; on his musical transcriptions in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903); the African retentions of the Gullah-Geechee population (1903); and the resonance of the drum within African music itself *The World and Africa* (1947). However, Du Bois did not look to a growing Spanish-speaking population that had migrated from the Hispanic Caribbean, particularly Cuba and Puerto Rico, that would also provide him evidence of the continued African heritage. As historian Nancy Raquel Mirabal writes in *Suspect Freedoms: The Racial and Sexual Politics of Cubanidad in New York, 1823-1957* (2017), these men and women were working-class economic migrants, the majority of whom were of African descent: Black Cubans and Puerto Ricans arrived in the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s, immediately impacted the musical scene. This would give way to the explosion of musical forms popularized here, including conga, mambo, rumba, cha-cha-cha, and later, salsa. (See César Miguel Rondón, *The Book of Salsa: A Chronicle of Urban Music from the Caribbean to New York City*, 2008.)

All of these musical forms grow out of religious African music; the rhythms of religious ceremonies provide the literal foundation out of which these genres flourish. Practitioners can parse out these inflections; those without this knowledge simply engage. Those who know, know; those who make the music do so without consideration for exposition.

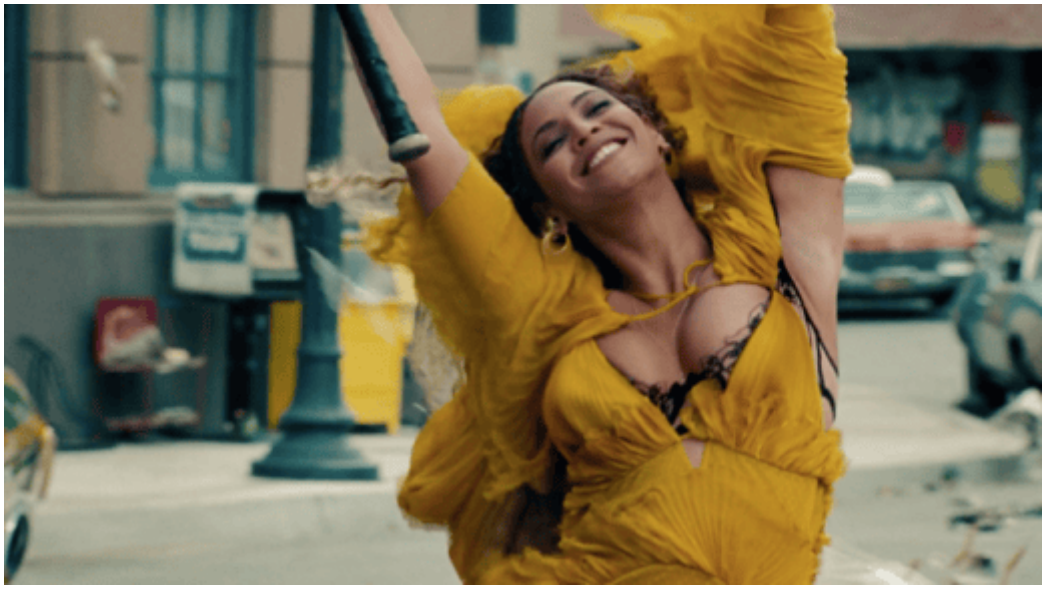
A 1950s U.S. audience witnessed Lucy Ricardo visit her husband Ricky at the club and sing "Babalu"; backed by his orchestra, it was originally a hit for Desi Arnaz in 1947 on RCA Victor records. In a later episode, Ricky would be backed by his young son, in an effort to demonstrate the continued influence of his Cuban heritage. Hector Lavoe's "Aguanile" (1978) remains a classic both within his catalog as well as the larger genre of Salsa's golden era of the 1970s; his labelmate Celia Cruz's "A Santa Barbara" is a remake of Celina González and Reutilio Jr.'s 1949 hit of the same name. In this century, Carlinhos Brown released "Aganjú" in 2003, a year after his compatriot, Bebel Gilberto found success with her version in Brazil. In the United States, a remix of Gilberto's adaptation was featured on the soundtrack of the HBO show *Six Feet Under*. In the last minute of their first hit, "River" (2015), the Ibeyi break their allegorical ode to the Oshun by making plain the entity to which they sing. On the same release, they sing to the entity associated with transformation in a song of her name, "Oya." Daymé Arocena begins her 2017 release, *Cubafonía*, with "Eleggua," he of the crossroads. Beginning with their 2015 debut "3 Mujeres" Ìlé have consistently brought together religious music with current soul and hip hop to larger audiences.



https://youtu.be/rAV3bOJaQuY

As these examples attest, there is at play an ethics of representation that is often misunderstood by non-practitioners of these religions; it is one that privileges confidentiality over explication. In a post-Enlightenment world that places emphasis on logic and reason, there exists a demand that everything be explained, be made legible. And yet, not everything is for everybody. Matters of spirit do not easily co-exist within Cartesian epistemological systems that demand bifurcation between the head and the heart. Within African diasporic religions – not only the ones mentioned here but also others including Palo Monte, Vodou, Obeah, Macumba, Candomblé – there is respect for the seemingly inexplicable. There is room for the miraculous, for that which can be found outside the realms of what has been deemed reasonable by systems of European thought. There

is room for faith. And it is this kind of faith that practitioners of these Black religions – artists and scholars alike – respect when they refuse to explain the source of their joy, a joy I like to call "Black joy."



Beyoncé's *Lemonade* (2016) fits into this oeuvre; here, the world's biggest pop star produced a work of art grounded in Black experiences of the Caribbean basin, including her family's U.S. Southern Black heritage in Texas and Louisiana. While notable for a great many features, for some the most invigorating part was the incorporation of visual allusions to sacred entities well-known to and easily recognized by practitioners of West African and African diasporic religions throughout the Americas. (For a sample of the analyses that emerged, see here, here, and here.) The inclusion of these markers situated Beyoncé firmly within this long tradition of the ability of Black artists in this hemisphere to employ imagery, particularly that related to religious traditions outside of orthodox Christianity, as a means by which to invoke more full, three-dimensional expressions of racial, gendered, and sexual identities. In *Oshun's Daughters: The Search for Womanhood in the Americas* (2014), I wrote about how women writers from United States, Cuba, and Brazil, writers such as Audre Lorde, Ntozake Shange, Cristina García, Nancy Morejón, and Conceição Evaristo, among others, all reference entities from these religions as a means by which to include complex portraits of womanhood in their work.

https://doi.org/10.59350/n5raj-rem14



"Gospel" by Flickr user Geoffrey Froment, CC BY-NC-ND 2.0

To return to Du Bois's echo chamber, the invocation of these entities allows practitioners to leave the mountain; there is no gazing to a mainstream culture for whom these prayers may be unintelligible. There is little consideration of explaining every element; again, those who know, know. They recognize a greater significance of the images, and are able to acknowledge allusions to whole systems of thought that are foundational to Black expressive cultures. These artists move forward accordingly. In 1926, *The Nation* published Langston Hughes's "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain," and his words continue to resonate: "We younger Negro artists who create now intend to express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear to shame. If white people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, it doesn't matter. [..] We build our temples for tomorrow, strong as we know how, and we stand on top of the mountain, free within ourselves." The white gaze of which Du Bois writes has no power in this formulation; instead, there is a turn away from the dominant white supremacist culture toward the richness that Black cultures offer. There is no flinging up against the metaphorical glass, no exhaustion in continued attempts to get them to acknowledge our humanity. They simply do not matter.

In her first novel, *Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo* (1982), Ntozake Shange writes: "Drums and chanting ran thru the lush backwoods of Louisiana. Sassafras liked to think the slaves would have been singing like that, if the white folks hadn't stolen our gods. Made our gods foreign to us [...]" (214). The work of these artists suggests that These gods open up so many other possibilities for Black lives in the United States. These entities remain with those who choose to see, hear, and feel their presence, and even with those who don't. They tried to make our gods foreign to us: they failed.

—

Featured image: "Woman dancing African dance in the street, São Paulo downtown" By The Photographer [CC BY-SA 4.0], from Wikimedia Commons

—

***Vanessa K. Valdés** is associate professor of Spanish and Portuguese at The City College of New York; she is the editor of Let Spirit Speak! Cultural Journeys through the African Diaspora (2012) and The Future Is Now: A New Look at African Diaspora Studies (2012) and the book review editor of sx salon. She is the author of Oshun's Daughters: The Search for Womanhood in the Americas (2014).*

—

***REWIND! . . .***If you liked this post, you may also dig:

Spaces of Sounds: The Peoples of the African Diaspora and Protest in the United States–Vanessa Valdes

"I Love to Praise His Name": Shouting as Feminine Disruption, Public Ecstasy, and Audio-Visual Pleasure–Shakira Holt

https://doi.org/10.59350/n5raj-rem14