

The consequences of the gentrification & commodification of African Aurality

Art is the epitome of human life, the truest record of insight and feeling. At our very core, there is an innate need to create, regardless of its tangibility, meaning, and sensuous value. Art is an extension of oneself. It is a portrayal of the amalgamation of one's experience, perspective, and perception of the world around them. Art has been and will forever be vital to the human experience.

Is it still art if the spectators of the art can no longer extrapolate the viewpoint of the artist? Does the art still serve the same purpose if the community that initially created it no longer relates to the imitations? If the imitated art surpasses the reach of the original art, can the community still connect to the art? What is art if it no longer encapsulates the soul?

In his book, *The Souls of Black Folks*, William Edward Burghardt Du Bois puts forth an account, based on personal experience and general observation, of how Sorrow Songs (alternatively Slave Songs or Spirituals) have permeated through time, yet retain their ability to resonate with the community. In Chapter fourteen, titled "Our Sorrow Songs," Du Bois showcases the idea with an anecdote, "My grandfather's grandmother was seized by an evil Dutch trader two centuries ago. Coming to the valleys of the Hudson and Housatonic, black, little, and lithe, she shivered and shrank in the harsh north winds, looked longingly at the hills, and often crooned a heathen melody to the child between her knees, thus: The child sang it to his children and they to their children's children, and so two hundred years it has traveled down to us and we sing it to our children, knowing as little as our fathers what its words may mean, but

knowing well the meaning of its music.¹” Du Bois so poignantly describes the conjunction between these songs and himself and the community at large as “they came out of the South unknown to me, one by one, and yet at once I knew them as of me and of mine.”

Although W.E.B Du Bois claimed to have known very little of music, one can see in his writings provide a deep insight into aurality, through connecting language, music, sonic ideas, and aural communication. In fact, his affinity for music is on display throughout the entirety of *The Souls of Black Folk*, as he puts forth epigraphs that set an unprecedented blend of music and language. Furthermore, to hone in on this idea of presenting the epigraphs as only musical notes and not with their accompanying lyrics, Du Bois writes, “the music is far more ancient than the words”.

The most idiosyncratic element of any piece of music will always be the melody, rather than the lyrics, as the language can fall victim to diaspora, while the melody will remain forever. Nevertheless, “Words and music have lost each other and new and cant phrases of a dimly understood theology have displaced the older sentiment.”

Du Bois' unflinching affinity for Sorrow Songs is at the forefront of the chapter. With an unwavering confidence in his pen, he states that the Negro folk song is the most beautiful artistic expression and experience that was birth on this side of the sea. However, beyond his flattering love for 'the singular spiritual heritage of the nation and the greatest gift bestowed by the African-American community,' he appears to have a peculiar disdain for the land on this side of the sea, almost as if there is something fundamentally wrong with the very humanity here. He

¹ B., Du Bois W E, and Brent Hayes Edwards. *The Souls of Black Folk*. Oxford University Press, 2007.

describes this contrast by highlighting the western world's imperative thirst for vigor and ingenuity rather than beauty.

In fact, his love for his culture and people extends so far that he starts to question the contributions of the colonizers to the idea of America while they 'have woven ourselves with the very warp and woof of this nation.' Du Bois mentions that they introduced "a gift of story and song," "the gift of sweat and brawn," and "gift of the Spirit," which has been given to the nation in blood-brotherhood.

However, arguably the largest contributor to these sentiments is the gentrification of Slave songs. He puts straightforwardly, they initially begin as African Music, eventually morphing into Afro-American music, "while the third is a blending of Negro music with the music heard in the foster land." Nonetheless, the result of the blend, although original, is distinctly Negro, yet manages to borrow elements from both Negro and Caucasian music. Du Bois does state there is an additional step in this development of Sorrow Songs, where the songs of white America, the ones ringing in the streets of the suburbs, "have been distinctively influenced by the slave songs or have incorporated whole phrases of Negro melody."

However, to believe that Du Bois was the only individual to string together such an intricate web of thoughts would not only be a disservice to the other African American academics but entirely misguided. As Buell Gallagher of Talladega College so eloquently put it, "The Negro American wishes to be an American, fully and richly so. But let us not lose sight of the fact this America of which the Negro is a part will be poorer, inestimably poorer, the moment it loses the Negro's

contribution in the melodies and other forms of culture. In the very act of cutting off his Negro heritage in order to be accepted more fully into American life, the young Negro impoverishes the culture he is trying to share.²” In a similar vein, Du Bois writes off these imitations of these Sorrow songs as ‘caricatures,’ and describes these ‘caricatures have sought again to spoil the quaint beauty of the music, and has filled the air with many debased melodies which vulgar ears scarce know from the real.’

But how could these imitations stand up to the original? For the life they had lived cannot even be imagined let alone be explained. As Du Bois so heartwrenchingly puts it, “Of death the Negro showed little fear, but talked of it familiarly and even fondly as simply a crossing of the waters, perhaps—who knows?—back to his ancient forests again.” How can music that is so intertwined with the unhappiness of its people, ‘of the children of disappointment,’ and “they tell of death and suffering and unvoiced longing toward a truer world, of misty wanderings and hidden ways,” be replicated?

“The analogy of gentrification can be applied to the music scene in order to understand the ways that Black art and music are interpreted and consumed by white audiences, and how this can potentially lead to Black fans feeling alienated and being uprooted from communities that are created to make them feel seen and that aim to center them and their voices.³”

² Du Bois, W. E. B. (William Edward Burghardt), 1868-1963. As the crow flies, December 23, 1939. W. E. B. Du Bois Papers (MS 312). Special Collections and University Archives, University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries

³ Morris, Wesley. “Why Is Everyone Always Stealing Black Music?” The New York Times, The New York Times, 14 Aug. 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/08/14/magazine/music-black-culture-appropriation.html>

Although the streets of predominantly African American communities no longer ring of Sorrow Songs, it has and will always find a worthy successor, like jazz, rock, or hip-hop. Regardless of the times, we will always find a form of escapism in the arts, whether it is about trauma, sorrow, or distress. Looking at the inception of rock and hip-hop, a commonality arises: an unequivocal distaste for the current system and the incomparable hardships the African American community must endure and conquer. Yet, it also raises an unquestionable sense of joy as displays that even in the face of constant despair, they will not stand down.

As stated by Jared Ball, a professor at Morgan State University, “The idea is just simply that to the extent there is a black community or a black nation, it is colonized internally in the United States. Then in the context of hip hop or music or cultural expression, the same processes exist, that a black community here that is socially and physically segregated, still, to this day, has its cultural production mined like any other natural resource, packaged, produced, owned and redistributed, sold by a dominant mother country.”⁴

Nevertheless, it has been decades since the birth of jazz, rock, and hip-hop and according to De Bois’ four steps, they should now unequivocally be songs of White America. Furthermore, doing a surface-level inspection of these musical genres, there is a common trope that appears: some of the most renowned figures in the genre are all Caucasian, without any ties to the African American community.

⁴ 1919. “The Gentrification of Black Music and Media and the Myth of Black Buying Power with Dr Jared Ball.” 1919, 1919, 16 June 2021, <https://1919mag.com/1919-radio/2021/4/24/the-gentrification-of-black-music-and-media-and-the-myth-of-black-buying-power-with-dr-jared-ball>

As a result, the most accessible pieces of the genre have been “white-washed” and have effectively lost the undertones and the intent of the music of the original. Sure the melodies can be perfectly replicated by anyone, given enough time, but the context of the melody is lighting in a bottle. The melodies recorded in a million-dollar studio funded by a billion dollar, waiting for approval by a board of business executives falls flat to the music that captures the heart and the soul of the African American community. These are the songs perpetually ringing through the streets of the American suburbs.

The melodies portrayed are stripped of any emotional latitude and no longer resonate with any demographic, beyond an aesthetic level. Creating the music in such a manufactured environment, no longer can generations understand it based on the melodies or even lyrics.

However, under the guise of Du Bois’ train of thought ultimately the notion of hip-hop is not tainted. There are still men who can tell the tale of the creation of hip-hop in the 1970s, recalling all that it encapsulates to future generations, regardless of whether or not the music propagates the same experiences. And as Du Bois so concisely put it, the music is far more ancient than the words.

No matter what medium or form the art of the African American community takes, it still eerily and depressingly revolves around the same concepts. It breathes a hope: a faith in the ultimate justice of things. “The melodies portrayed are stripped of any emotional latitude and no longer resonate with any demographic, beyond an aesthetic level. Creating the music in such a

manufactured environment, no longer can generations understand it based on the melodies or even lyrics.”

Do the Sorrow Songs sing true?

Would America have been America without her Negro people?