
Scholars of music have for some time remarked on how, in the Americas, racial identifications and music have been connected, with the prominence of rhythm frequently associated by different observers with blackness, and linked (often, but not only, by non-black observers), to threat, immorality and primitiveness. Munro, a specialist in Francophone Caribbean literatures who has published extensively on Haiti, uses rhythm as a route through the racialized histories of Haiti, Trinidad, the French Caribbean, and mid-century U.S. funk. In four central chapters, he traces how black people in each context developed musical forms, with rhythm as a central element, which both reflected and stimulated social processes.

In Haiti, after the revolution, black music was initially rejected and repressed by new black and mulatto elites, who distanced themselves from its perceived primitiveness and links to Vodou religion. Later, in the context of U.S. occupation (1915-34), Haitian indigenism flowered and valorized music seen as authentically national. In Trinidad, the more typically colonial regime led to the consistent repression of working-class black music by colonial authorities, with carnival as the main battleground, until after independence, when certain working-class styles, such as calypso, again became part of a nationalist agenda. In Guadeloupe and Martinique, the négritude movement, which started in the 1930s, attempted to link blackness to a natural rhythmic musicality, but this did not manage to become part of a nationalist appropriation; instead it was subjected to critiques by other black intellectuals, such as Frantz Fanon, and novelists, such as Édouard Glissant, who integrated music and rhythm in less essentialist ways into their representations of everyday life on the islands. Finally, James Brown’s funk revolution was read by black cultural nationalists—Munro focuses on Amiri Baraka—as reflecting the essence of blackness, but, Munro argues, not only was this essentialism critiqued by others such as Ralph Ellison, but Brown and his music escaped the confines of essentialism, partly through their global appeal.

In his introduction, Munro makes the important point that rhythm was a central part of vernacular culture in European societies before the Discoveries and that the powerful association of blackness with rhythm emerged in the context of New World slavery and racial dynamics. His conclusion
argues for an auditory sensibility in history, to complement the current interest in visuality, and usefully draws together the four central chapters. Here I would have liked to see some more attention to what “rhythm” is and what its relationship is to “repetition”—terms that Munro tends to conflate.

Although rhythm forms the book’s guiding thread, the chapters themselves are rather uneven. The account of Haiti smacks of a potted history—familiar to readers of Michael Dash, David Nicholls, Michael Largey, and Gage Averill—with a section on nineteenth-century poetry thrown in. The Trinidad chapter runs through a social history of carnival, heavily reliant on secondary sources, with some attention given to calypso lyrics. There is a sudden gear-change with the Francophone Caribbean, as Munro analyzes in depth the verse of Aimé Césaire and other négritude poets, and then novels by Joseph Zobel, Édouard Glissant and Daniel Maximin. I felt that Munro was more in his element on this literary terrain, as he brings out with great skill the way race and rhythm figure in these writers’ works. The chapter on James Brown gets to grips, finally, with rhythm in a more musicological mode, as Munro is able to use sources that tackle this aspect in detail. The account of how Baraka and others perceived Brown is also nicely handled.

Despite this unevenness—which some readers may see as a strength, addressing rhythm and race from different angles, using different sources—Munro has produced a good book, which convinces in the end. Its strength lies in its historical depth and geographical range (including the Hispanic Caribbean would have been a nice idea, but possibly a bridge too far). Munro manages to bring out the temporal durability and diasporic connectivity of ideas and practices of rhythm—particularly percussion and especially the drum—and how they have related to ideas about racial identity. In doing this, there is always the danger that the book will, despite best intentions, reinforce a link between blackness and rhythmicity—a danger that perhaps looms largest in the chapter on Trinidad. But generally, Munro avoids this, partly by addressing head-on the question of essentialism and naturalization (especially in the chapters on the French Caribbean and James Brown), but also by focusing the overall narrative of the book on the idea that the association of blackness with rhythm is a New World construction.