The Socio-Spatial Dynamics and Roots of America’s Modern Black Creative Genius

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ABSTRACT

In the past century, first jazz and then hip-hop emerged as some of America’s pre-eminent styles of musical expression. As traditionally African-American art forms, they are also products of historical racial oppression. Though the association between black societal subjugation and its resultant creative genius has previously been attributed to economic, social, political, aesthetic, and cultural reasons, there has been little analysis of geography. Drawing heavily on critical urban theory and America’s racial and cultural history, this article examines the socio-spatial origins of America’s black creative genius and the ways that geography can imbue certain areas with the potential for brilliant cultural production while suppressing such innovation in others. This article also applies Edward Soja’s argument from the essay “Writing the City Spatially” to the cultural divergence between cities and suburbs. It then discusses the historical spatial segregation between black and white Americans, positing that dense urban agglomeration can lead to enhanced cultural capabilities. Finally, the author concludes with an analysis of why white middle-class America is infatuated with black urban culture. This article aims to illuminate space’s overlooked yet crucial role in artistic and cultural invention.

Keywords: Baldwin, Jazz, Soja, spatial, synekism
There is a paradox that goes back to Louis Armstrong . . . American mainstream is obsessed with black creative genius – be it music, walk, style – but at the same time puts a low priority on the black social misery which is the very context out of which that creativity flows. So hip hop itself emerges out of the American ice age, its Reaganism, its obsession with material toys, its being indifferent to the suffering of the most vulnerable among us. It is precisely from that most vulnerable among us that this genius emerges out of the Bronx.

— Cornel West, 2006 Princeton University Hip-Hop Symposium

Twentieth century America saw the emergence of two of its most innovative and influential musical art forms: jazz and hip-hop. Jazz was born after World War I in New Orleans and quickly gained popularity in northern cities, peaking in popularity immediately after World War II. Hip-hop began in the early 1970s in New York City’s South Bronx, and its popularity has continually grown throughout the present day. In both trajectories, the genres’ birthplaces and spatial upbringings fundamentally shaped their style, influence, and community. Though jazz and hip-hop are historically black art movements, white Americans have been (and continue to be) among their largest consumers. Some scholars and historians, like Cornel West, would even argue that white Americans, particularly those in middle-class and suburban areas, are infatuated with black culture and its creative genius. Why, however, did these musical revolutions in particular arise out of the post-WWI and post-WWII eras and from black Americans? Why could white America not produce such brilliant, innovative art of the same caliber? Such inquiries implicate not only musical history, but also America’s dichotomizing cultural constructions of blackness and whiteness. James Baldwin argues that, just as black identity is formed in contrast to white identity, American whiteness was founded on black oppression: “America became white – the people who, as they claim, ‘settled’ the country became white – because of the necessity of denying the Black presence, and justifying the Black subjugation . . . White men – from Norway, for example, where they are Norwegians – became white: by slaughtering the cattle, poisoning the wells, torching the houses, massacring Native Americans, raping Black women.”

Such analyses are often employed to delineate the invention and impetus of jazz and hip-hop, along with social, cultural, political, economic, racial, sexual, and aesthetic explanations. I argue that an equally salient yet highly overlooked reason for these musical and cultural phenomena is that of space. Jazz and hip-hop have an ethno-racial epistemology as well as a comparably important ethno-spatial epistemology. They are black musical genres, but they are also significantly urban genres, especially when considering the relation between 1950s urban redlining and black culture. Using urban scholar Edward Soja’s theory of synekism, I illustrate why it is important to recognize jazz and hip-hop’s spatial context in the densely populated environments that stemmed from historical forced urban agglomeration and segregation of black peoples.

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Synekism and Spatial Culture

In his essay “Writing the City Spatially,” Soja draws on ideas from urbanists Henri Lefebvre and Jane Jacobs to argue that cities are not created because of advanced civilization; conversely, he claims that the initial formation of cities spawned societal evolution and innovation. Soja expounds that urban density incubates more innovation than more sparsely populated areas; urban agglomeration per se led to economic and cultural changes that revolutionized contemporary human life. He writes “cities in themselves have a causal impact on social life, that the historical development of human societies does not just take place in cities but is also, in significant ways, generated FROM cities, and more specifically from the stimulus of urban agglomeration.” This powerful, social urban force is the outcome of “synekism,” an organic mechanism Soja describes as:

A continuous and highly politicized process of urban growth and development, a dynamic process that provides a constantly evolving source of stimulating social synergy and is part of the very essence of urban life. Formulated this way, synekism involves the creativity, innovation, territorial identity, political consciousness and societal development that arise from living together in dense and heterogeneous urban regions.

Synekism connects the stimulus of urban density with the spatial specificity of urbanism. In other words, synekism is the creative, innovative energy and efforts that emerge from the intensified interactions between diverse communities in cities’ dense, urban geography.

Soja also attributes fine arts and “high culture” to synekism: “The arts and literature have always been about synekism in one way or another, even if it is not explicitly acknowledged.” Cities are most often the cultural and artistic centers of modern civilization. Consider New York City, for instance – compare New York City to its sprawling peripheral metropolitan region. The New York metropolitan area is America’s most populous urban agglomeration with approximately 12 million inhabitants who populate about 13,013 square miles (approximately 922 people per square mile). New York City, in comparison, has only about 8 million residents who populate about 305 square miles (approximately 26,230 people per square mile). Despite the population gap, the city has a larger number of world-renowned cultural hubs than that of the suburbs, in addition to almost every other social or commercial facet; one might attribute this to the density differential. New York City is home to the Metropolitan Museum of Art (considered the world’s most encyclopedic art museum), the world-renowned Museum of Modern Art, the famed performance space Carnegie Hall, the inimitable Broadway theatre district, nearly 1,000 of the globe’s finest and most diverse haute cuisine restaurants (according to Michelin), and so on and so forth. Historically, New York City was the fulcrum of the Harlem Renaissance, the 1950s abstract expressionist art movement, hip-hop’s rise in the 1970s, Jewish American literature, and numerous major national (and often international) fashion trends.

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4 Soja, “Writing the City Spatially,” 275.
5 Ibid, 274.
6 Ibid, 275.
When the city is compared with New York’s suburbs and exurbs, a cultural divergence becomes apparent. A seldom-considered explanation for this schism is synekism (and its interaction with whiteness versus blackness, which will be analyzed in the next section). Referencing Jane Jacobs, Soja asserts that

*Every major innovation, every significant transformation in human society, came from inherent synergies and creative time-saving efficiencies obtained through living in dense and focused urban settlements... This may appear to some as merely recognizing that cities have always tended to be centres of innovation and creativity. But it is much more than this. It is a profound example of using urban spatiality to better understand the entire history of societal development and social change. It opens up the possibilities by identifying a specific dynamic force arising from the very nature – or essence – of cityness.*

This “cityness” produces social, cultural, and political changes that are unique to modern, urban human history. Many scholars argue over the degree to which urban density and societal evolution are correlated; urban designers often propose that city districts should be as dense as possible. I do not mean to imply that density imbues cities with unparalleled cultural and artistic power, whereas suburban and rural areas are inferior; there are numerous examples of great social changes and cultural innovations that occurred in sparsely populated regions. I do contend, however, that social, cultural, and artistic collaboration and mutual influence between and among talented and passionate individuals are more efficiently fostered and synthesized in urban environments.

**The Two Americas: Black City and White Suburb**

One can consider possible parallels between the aforementioned city-suburb divergence, America’s 1950s demographic and geographical migrations, and the era’s simultaneous flourishing of black urban creativity and paucity of white middle-class suburban art. Post-WWII white America dramatically and swiftly became suburbanized. White families moved out of cities into sprawling, rapidly growing suburbs while black people were forced into dense innercity cores by structurally racist housing policies. For white America, the Baby Boom commenced, Levittown was manufactured and erected practically overnight, *I Love Lucy* and *Leave it to Beaver* compelled white audiences nationwide, and the idyllically picturesque suburban lifestyle became socially normative and standardized. For black America, residual Jim Crow structural racism lingered, white flight drained public municipal funding and resources, real estate redlining and institutional discrimination segregated black people into the densest and least desirable urban neighborhoods with unequal educational and employment opportunities, and the Great Migration of black folk from the rural agricultural South into the industrial urban North gradually ended.

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7 Ibid, 277.
Black Music and Spatial Injustice

Although black music in America has only recently epitomized urbanity, it has always reflected fugitive innovation. Before analyzing jazz and hip-hop, it is essential to unpack the spatial influence of their musical and spiritual predecessor, the blues.

In Blues People, music critic Amiri Baraka traces the origins of blues music: Blues [began] in slavery, and it is from that “peculiar institution,” as it was known euphemistically, that blues did find its particular form. And if slavery dictated certain aspects of blues form and content, so did the so-called Emancipation and its subsequent problems dictate the path blues would take.”

The resistive mentality always permeates African-American identity. In black literature, music, dance and other art forms, the resistive spirit beckons the artist to reinvent and reimagine possibilities for escape – transcendence through creation. As Zora Neale Hurston writes, “the Negro is a very original being. While he lives and moves in the midst of a white civilization, everything he touches is reinterpreted for his own use.” Just as individual European ethnicities became “white” when they immigrated to America, Africans likewise became defined as “black” upon entrance to the country. African-Americans have since bred an identity and culture out of resistance to the periodically remade confines of racist American public policy.

A stream of the African-American historical literature argues that though black people were freed from slavery after the Civil War, slavery never actually ended – rather, it reformed into new, equally oppressive racial institutions. Slavery turned into Jim Crow, which eventually became urban housing segregation, and currently takes the form of mass incarceration. In all four eras, space is unjustly racialized; living in any transient or adverse state, one must innovate to survive. This resistive spirit of slavery that bore black folk music and the blues thus persists and has manifested in jazz and hip-hop. Just as the Jim Crow South elicited the resistive ingenuity of the blues, it can be argued that 20th century urban displacement likewise confined black people into a breeding ground for jazz. The same concept applies to hip-hop – mass incarceration is the contemporary semblance of slavery. In every subaltern era, as poet and critical theorist Nathaniel Mackey writes,

Artistic othering has to do with innovation, invention, and change, upon which cultural health and diversity depend and thrive . . . Impeded speech finds its voice, the way Thelonious Monk makes hesitation eloquent or the way a scat singer makes inarticulacy speak. This places his work in the New World African tradition of troubled eloquence, othered eloquence.

In addition to the blues, jazz, and hip-hop, the resistive spirit manifests in African-American literature, dance, theatre, film, and visual art. The black creative genius is not limited to the city

9 Zora Neale Hurston, The Sanctified Church (Berkeley: Turtle Island, 1981), 49.
10 Nathaniel Mackey, Discrepant Engagement: Dissonance, Cross-Culturality, and Experimental Writing (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 265.
or captivity per se – it is a culturally inherited ethos that is essential to African-American life. A freed slave can therefore still engage fugitive spirit though one is not actively imprisoned; past experience imparts the resistive mindset.

The socio-spatial reorganization in the second half of the 20th century influenced the invention of hip-hop, modern jazz (late be-bop, post-bop, John Coltrane, Thelonious Monk and Miles Davis, contrasted with early swing, ragtime, and boogie woogie styles), and the American urban black creative genius. The city’s synekistic forces, less present in suburbia, empowered marginalized black urbanites to engage in innovative, culturally revolutionary art. Excluded from white social life, black musicians were forced to collaborate intra-racially. Interacting artistically with mostly other black people, though this is a particularly generative collaboration because of urban agglomeration’s synekism, these musicians dreamed up remarkable new styles. This is not to imply that black people exclusively interacted with their own race, but that communications with white people were founded separately upon racial contrast, spatial segregation, and social hierarchy.

Negro folk spirituals cultivated the blues; the blues evolved into jazz; and jazz in turn influenced the development of hip-hop. Other genres birthed, died, and guided those styles along the way, like house, funk, and soul. Blues, jazz and hip-hop, however, sustained major influence and popularity in their respective eras. Throughout American history, black people have been innovative in art and culture, especially with music. This ingenuity stems from the social, cultural, economic and socio-spatial subjugation that individuals with political power impress upon black America. In his treatise The Archaeology of Knowledge, Michel Foucault observes “Continuous history is the indispensable correlative of the founding function of the subject: the guarantee that everything that has eluded him may be restored to him . . . the promise that one day the subject – in the form of historical consciousness – will once again be able to appropriate, to bring back under his sway, all those things that are kept at a distance by difference, and find them in what might be called his abode.”

History is constructed around the Other’s conceptual existence. Normative western epistemologies deny the subject, in this case African-Americans, a sovereignty of consciousness. In other words, resistive innovation reclaims and fills the African-American void in white-centric history and common knowledge. To reform popular discourses on American identity, on the normative and the Other, the black creative genius is inherently rebellious and independently imagined.

I argue that what makes jazz and hip-hop more aesthetically sophisticated and appealing to white America is their urbanity. Discussing spatial marginalization, Soja writes, “for the past two centuries or so, persistently urban industrial capitalism has gone through many rounds of crisis generated restructuring, each in part a response to a particular form of synekism that arose with the unprecedented concentration of the working class in the city core.” The same mentality manifests in American black urban communities. Norman Mailer’s
lyric essay “The White Negro: Superficial Reflections on the Hipster” analyzes the young white bohemian’s perception of black jazz music in the late 1950s. Mailer illustrates the dynamic between black jazz musicians and white listeners in American cities like New York (specifically Greenwich Village), New Orleans, Chicago, San Francisco, and Los Angeles:

In this wedding of the white and the black it was the Negro who brought the cultural dowry. Any Negro who wishes to live must live with danger from his first day, and no experience can ever be casual to him, no Negro can saunter down a street with any real certainty that violence will not visit him on his walk . . . In his music he gave voice to the character and quality of his existence, to his rage and the infinite variations of [his orgasm] . . . [Jazz] spoke in no matter what laundered popular way of instantaneous existential states to which some whites could respond, it was indeed a communication of art because it said, “I feel this, and now you do too.”

The black urban creative genius, jazz and hip-hop, conveys how it feels to be a problem, as W.E.B. DuBois would say. Black music is a reflection of racial strife and urban spatial oppression. Redlined into small, condensed wards, black folk were suppressed while simultaneously engaging in synekism’s socio-geographical magic. According to the theory of synekism, a space’s “cityness” and high-density determines its potential for societal growth. Black peoples’ mandatory inhabitance of denser space caused substantial synekistic innovation: jazz, hip-hop, and the black creative genius.

In his book How Racism Takes Place, African American studies scholar George Lipsitz elucidates the impact of 20th century America’s spatial transformation on black social and cultural life. He recounts America’s history of racialized space and its modern implications:

Spatial control, displacement, dispossession, and exclusion have been linked to racial subordination and exploitation in decisive ways . . . Although all communities of color have experienced social subordination in the form of spatial regulation, the particular contours of slavery, sharecropping, and [urban ghetto] segregation in the United States have inflected the African American encounter with the racialization of space and the spatialization of race in unique ways . . . [For example,] African American artists and intellectuals have created a distinct spatial imaginary in a broad range of cultural expressions, from the migration narrative that Farah Jasmine Griffin identifies as the core trope within Black literature, music, and art, to the celebration of city streets in the imagery and iconography of hip-hop where streets become performance spaces for graffiti writing, mural art, and break dancing.

Racialized space, and the intra-racial communication that it elicits, is intrinsic to African American history and culture. Innovative black culture flourished in the tight-knit, communal geographies of urban ghettos.

To complement this analysis, it is necessary to also consider the contrapuntal influences, not directly involved in but related, to black resistive innovation that helped found early jazz. Throughout this article, jazz is described as fully realizing its creative genius and greatest popularity after WWII. Some jazz scholars might argue, however, that jazz did not reach its artistic apex in the post-WWII era because it gained massive popularity after WWI. These spatial-temporal discrepancies are reconciled by the chronological congruency between the Great Migration and jazz’s post-WWI progression; from the 1920s until the early 1950s, jazz’s popularity grew in concert with black people’s increasing migration to northern cities. Urbanization thus intensified the synekistic forces that spurred black creative genius. In the 1920s, New Orleans’ diverse urban cultures sparked and nurtured early jazz. What were the specific cultural elements that shaped jazz’s stylistic origins?

In “Towards Identification of African Traits in Early Jazz,” musicologists Mark Gridley and Wallace Rave examine the European and African influences on early jazz:

The elements of jazz most directly traceable to African origins are the emphasis on percussion, the penchant for particular tone-quality manipulation, the prevalence of blue notes, and the tendency to make extensive use of short-pattern repetition. The elements of jazz that appear to represent a blending of African and European traditions are improvisation, preference for steady tempos, use of the call-and-response format, and the practice of pitch decoration.16

In addition to recognizing the interplay between jazz and urban black resistive innovation, historic context must also be considered. As poet T.S. Eliot observes about tradition, it incorporates “the historical sense . . . [which] involves a perception, not only of the past, but of its presence; the historical sense compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that . . . the literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order.”17 Applied to jazz, a culture’s musical traditions always inform one’s present artistic vision, and it is through this inspired temporal coexistence that musicians spark original aesthetic ideas and decide to write their own history. Early twentieth century New Orleans, often considered jazz’s birthplace, was culturally rich with African and European musicians who played in traditional ethnic ensembles and classical marching bands, respectively.18 Thus, jazz’s stylistic origins in both African and European music engage cultural heritage to creatively re-appropriate sounds and sentiments into innovative art. During the Great Migration to northern cities, black jazz musicians developed their own jazz styles out of these African and European musical roots.

Although I focus on black communities’ insular creativity, it is essential to also recognize the ways that white musicians contributed to jazz’s invention. In a dense, heterogeneous built environment, black people were not completely isolated from other races, classes, cultures,

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and ideologies despite spatial ghettoizing. This reality of urban interaction and collaboration furthers the argument that jazz and hip-hop are more importantly urban rather than solely black creations. In *Lost Chords: White Musicians and Their Contribution to Jazz*, music scholar Richard Sudhalter posits that even though jazz is often construed as a fundamentally black art form, white musicians were intrinsic to its early development:

> Mounting scholarly evidence indicates that a distinct, significant, and creative white presence has existed in jazz from its first days; at almost every stage of the music’s history the matter of ‘influence,’ so highly valued by jazz scholars, has been incontrovertibly two-way.  

Sudhalter further inquires if perceptions of African-American musical history could benefit from the recognition of multicultural, combined efforts between blacks and whites that re-conceived music’s expressive and artistic potential. Because jazz is often viewed as a principally black art form, Sudhalter’s research is imperative to consider in the study of black oppression and its relation to jazz. With regard to the argument put forth in this article, it reinforces the notion that city space – in this case, the mixed interactions between urban groups – is as considerable a cause of black America’s creative genius as are race, politics, class, social life, and the ways that these identities are intersectional. In her short essay “There is No Hierarchy of Oppressions,” civil rights activist Audre Lorde asserts that, “oppression and the intolerance of difference come in all shapes and sizes and colors and sexualities; and that among those of us who share the goals of liberation and a workable future for our children, there can be no hierarchies of oppression.”

Subjection of any identity, whether of race, class, gender, sexuality, religion or ideology, concerns all people who are oppressed. Liberation movements must be in concert because of intersectional identities, histories, and goals. In the heterogeneous urban environment, people of all different backgrounds must be united to not only live together prosperously but also create equality and justice for all.

**White America’s Obsession with Black Music**

The socio-spatial divergence between the suburban white and urban black Americas renewed a national artistic and cultural dynamic: the white captivation with the black aesthetic. This cultural envy and appropriation dates back to antebellum America’s practice of blackface, minstrelsy, and coon performance. In the book *Wages of Whiteness*, David Roediger recounts the ways that white people of the new industrial working class projected their anxieties onto black people through impersonation:

> Blacked-up [maskers] both admired what they imagined blackness to symbolize and hated themselves for doing so. In a backhanded way, the very insistence on excluding Blacks from a range of public celebrations may have reflected a perception that African-

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American style, music and dance would have dominated mixed celebrations . . . [The] reminder that many slaves came from areas more aesthetically inclined, and perhaps accomplished, than was the society of their owners is a fascinating one . . . What is certain is that many urban whites at the time credited Blacks with tremendous expressive power.\textsuperscript{21}

As the white working class struggled to establish its lifestyle as America’s first capitalist industrial generation, it founded its recreational and cultural pastimes on black mockery. Both racial subjugation and cultural envy are implicated in vicious mimicry. This early covetous tradition is reflected in contemporary musical appropriation.

Though this allure is typically explained as a racial difference, its modern incarnation should also be conflated with spatial difference. White people’s enchantment with black culture is rooted in a suburban malaise coupled with an urban fetishism. Suburbia’s model has been regularized and mass-produced throughout almost every major American metropolitan area. There are enclosed neighborhoods with residential streets where there are similarly sized single-family homes, each typically built with two stories, a kitchen on the ground floor, a garage to hold approximately two cars, and medium-sized front and back yards, inhabited by two parents and about 2.3 children, and sometimes a pet dog or cat. The husband commutes to work in the city five days a week to earn the family’s primary income while the wife pursues other employment or stays home to care for the children; the children are in school five days a week and eventually graduate and attend college so they can pass down the same traditions in full circle.\textsuperscript{22}

This suburban culture is the result of a geographic sprawl that does not engender synekism. The urban lifestyle and habitat, on the other hand, is invigorating and fundamentally seeped in variety. The heterogeneous American cosmopolitan city is defined by not being defined by anything. For marginalized black communities in particular, there is a perspective to be shared that is practically alien to white middle-class suburbanites; their lives’ spatial, racial, social, political and economic dimensions are often polar opposites. White middle-class suburbanites, moreover, do not need to be cognizant of their identity and the way that it is constructed in contrast to blackness. Black urbanites, on the other hand, must be always conscious of their race, class, and status – while walking in a racially mixed neighborhood, a black person’s contrast to whiteness is immediately evident. Mailer portrays this contextual difference in relation to civil rights:

\textit{Since the Negro knows more about the ugliness and danger of life than the White, it is probable that if the Negro can win his equality, he will possess a potential superiority, a superiority so feared that the fear itself has become the underground drama of domestic politics. Like all conservative political fear it is the fear of unforeseeable consequences, for the Negro’s equality would tear a profound shift into the psychology, the sexuality, and the moral imagination of every White alive.\textsuperscript{23}}

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\item \textsuperscript{22} Becky Nicolaides and Andrew Wiese, \textit{The Suburb Reader} (New York: Routledge, 2006).
\item \textsuperscript{23} Ibid, 291.
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The white fascination with urban black culture raises the question of motivation. Urban black music, especially hip-hop with its personal emotional narratives of black urban life, is an escape for both black and white people: for black people, it is an escape through expression, whereas for whites it is an escape through delusion. This difference plays into the hypocrisy that white people enjoy consuming black culture and simultaneously disregard the history that both created that black art and privileged whites’ livelihoods. In his essay “White Man’s Guilt,” James Baldwin explains that white Americans are “dimly, or vividly, aware that the history they have fed themselves is mainly a lie, but they do not know how to release themselves from it, and they suffer enormously from the resulting personal incoherence . . . On the same day [as one pleas with the black conscience], the white American remains proud of that history for which he does not wish to pay, and from which, materially, he has profited so much.”24 This neglect of history manifests in numerous musical genres. White peoples’ spatial existence, moreover, did not incite an impulse for innovation. In early jazz, for instance, “the white appropriation and commercialization of swing resulted in a music that was less improvisatory, less dependent upon the inventiveness of soloists. The increased reliance upon arrangements . . . led to a sameness of sound and style among the various bands.”25 Despite a less inventive sound, black music is most profitable when appropriated and performed by white artists. Clarinetist and bandleader Benny Goodman was considered the 1930’s leading jazz musician as he was nicknamed the “King of Swing.” Despite rock music’s alleged invention by Chuck Berry, Elvis Presley was considered the “King of Rock N Roll” in the 1950s. In hip-hop, the most profitable rapper of all time is Eminem (Marshall Mathers).

I consequently ask, if black people have always been creating revolutionary, alternative music that arises out of their racial and societal subjugation, why was white America only first impressed by and enamored with black music in the 1920s (early jazz) and peak popularity immediately after WWII? Why has hip-hop reinvigorated white America’s affinity for black music? A recent article about irony in modern American culture provides a possible explanation: “In the history of this country, no artistic tradition has done more to elevate the human spirit than black American music. If one wanted to write a book that advanced the novelistic tradition and the possibilities for humankind, one could learn something critical from studying, for example, ‘Nobody Knows the Trouble I’ve Seen.’”26 This black folk choral spiritual repeats various lines similar to its title and then says Glory Hallelujah. Its sentiment persists though transmogrifies with each subsequent black musical revolution. I posit that white America only begins to appreciate this social tenacity and artistic manifestation when jazz flourishes because it is the first urban black musical form.

America’s black creative genius, embodied through jazz and hip-hop, is aesthetically magnificent because of its urbanity. According to Soja’s theory of synekism and his interpretation of Lefebvre,

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human society, indeed all forms of social relations and social life, originate, evolve, develop and change in the materially real and socially imagined contexts of cities. They do so through [the] social production of urban space, a continuous and contentious process that is filled with politics and ideology, creativity and destruction, and with the unpredictable interplay of space, knowledge, and power.27

The late 20th century’s socio-spatial forces of racial segregation and urban agglomeration thus helped foster African-American artistic innovation. White suburban America continues to be enraptured by black creativity, making cultural appropriation and commercialization a prevalent discussion. White America continues to hypocritically devour black ingenuity while not prioritizing social justice and equality for African-Americans. Nevertheless, music can provide a glorious respite. In the words of Cornel West, “Music at its best...is the grand archeology into and transfiguration of our guttural cry, the great human effort to grasp in time our deepest passions and yearnings as prisoners of time. Profound music leads us – beyond language – to the dark roots of our scream and the celestial heights of our silence.”28

27 Ibid, 275.
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