

Glocal Imaginaries and Musical Displacements in the Work of Richards Powers

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In the novel *The Time of Our Singing* (2003) by American novelist Richard Powers, the glocal—the dynamic interaction between the local and the global—is addressed not so much through place per se, but through the tension between two musical traditions with vastly different origins and diasporas: the African American and the European classical tradition. I argue that in Powers's novel the tension between the two musical traditions is used to explore the issue of racial identity and cultural belonging from many different, sometimes opposing, angles. To aid my discussion I use three concepts with musical connotations: contrary motion, musical miscegenation and resonances.

The main focus of *The Time of Our Singing* is the predicament of African American musicians who choose European classical music as a profession. David Yaffe argues the novel “represents a particular phenomenon that has never found its way into American fiction: the black (or at least part black) classical music prodigy” (53). At the same time the novel can, in some respects, be seen as a rewriting of James Weldon Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-coloured Man* (1912), in which the central character turns away from African American music to embrace Chopin and Beethoven. In *The Time of Our Singing* biracial identity is used as a metaphor for the cultural tension between European classical and African American music.

The story centres on two biracial brothers—Jonah, a singer, and Joseph, a pianist who is the main narrator of the story. Born in New York in 1941 and 1942 respectively, they are raised to love western classical music by their African-American mother, Delia Daley, and their European Jewish physicist father David Strom. Jonah and Joseph's parents share a love of music, and the family singing game, “crazed quotations,” involves improvising collectively on classical music, jazz standards, spirituals and popular genres. Despite the opprobrium they incur as a result of their mixed-race marriage, Delia and David Strom wish to raise their boys “beyond race,” a pre-civil rights position which anticipates contemporary ideas of post-racial identity. But this proves premature in the post-war period, where “beyond race” can mean both subordination to white culture and submission to racism. In fact they are frequently subject to racial condescension, and the school and conservatorium where they train—

Boylston Academy of Music in Boston and The Julliard School in New York—are elitist and white. In addition, their mother Delia dies in a fire in what appears likely to have been racist sabotage; this casts a shadow over the rest of their lives and incites their sister Ruth to join the Black Panthers. Nevertheless, both Joseph and Jonah persist as classical musicians, at first working together, then apart. Jonah becomes highly successful, partly through his migration to East Germany, though he dies prematurely after the 1992 Los Angeles race riots. Joseph finds his greatest musical satisfaction in middle age, teaching largely hybrid music in an experimental school for African-American children set up by Ruth. The relationship between the boys is complex, containing elements of dependency and exploitation, intense love and distance.

The eclectic theoretical approach of this essay weds together overlapping concepts and debates drawn from postcolonial theory, American studies, globalisation theory and musicology to analyse how the novel negotiates ideas about racial identity and cultural heritage. Particularly pertinent is the relationship between postcolonial theory and American race discourse because, as Gruesser points out, postcolonial critics have not tended to fully explore the ways that colonialism, displacement and syncretism have impacted on African-American history (3). The convergence of postcolonialism and American race discourse, however, is extremely relevant to this essay which focuses on Powers's representation of race relations in America through the grip of the Eurocentric and colonialist classical musical tradition. Similarly, the concept of glocalisation—drawn from globalisation theory—is in some respects a transformation of postcolonial theory since, as Ashcroft says, globalisation can be viewed as “the radical transformation of imperialism, continually reconstituted and interesting precisely because it stems from no obvious imperial centre” (213). A unifying factor amidst these diverging but also converging approaches is the work of Paul Gilroy, whose theoretical trajectory brings together aspects of postcolonial theory and American race discourse in the concept of the Black Atlantic. In addition, Gilroy's attitude towards racial identity steers a middle course between essentialist and non-essentialist attitudes toward ethnicity, while his emphasis on transnationality, and the productive tension between the global and the local, anticipates the concept of the glocal. The relevance of Gilroy's work to Powers's novel is also specific, because he sees the hybridity of African American music as central to an understanding of the black diaspora.

African Americans within Classical Music

The Time of Our Singing persistently raises the question, particularly with regard to post-1945 America: are black musicians working within the western classical tradition displaced and subordinated within it, or can they successfully manage to appropriate and revise those traditions in ways relevant to African American identity? Put another way, can African

American identity only be expressed in African influenced culture, which is the position adopted by the 1960s Black Arts Movement? Fundamental to this whole issue in the novel is also the question of whether music can transcend the social, or is inescapably embedded in it. When Powers evokes the musical sublime, he seems to imply that music can exceed discourse and is the ultimate transcultural vehicle—for example, “While he sang, nothing else mattered” (306), “The rage of 1968 fuelled him and fell away, amazed by the place he made of it” (402), and “How many people, trapped in time’s stream, get to feel, even for an instant, that they’ve climbed up out of the current and onto the banks?” (534). But at other points in the novel this universalism is severely challenged, particularly by the representation of racism as endemic in the musical profession. So Jonah’s career advancement takes the form of migrating to East Germany in the late sixties. “Music was supposed to be cosmopolitan—free travel across all borders. But it could get him into the last Stalinist state more easily than it could get him into midtown” (405).

The Time of Our Singing, therefore, narrativises, through representations of music and musical performance, debates about the essentialism or non-essentialism of racial identity, and the degree to which it can be regarded as performative. Biraciality is central to the novel, and racial performativity is heightened by biraciality, because biracial subjects tend to be called upon to alternate between different racial performances. Performativity is also foregrounded by musical performance, which projects a plethora of performative selves, though this does not suggest a total loss of any definable self. As Joseph says in *The Time of Our Singing*, “That’s music. That’s his job. To be someone else, someone not him. If you can’t be someone more than yourself, don’t even think about walking out on-stage” (255). For Paul Gilroy, music is a place where essentialist and non-essentialist concepts of race can meld: “Music and its rituals can be used to create a model whereby identity can be understood neither as a fixed essence nor as a vague and utterly contingent construction to be reinvented by the will and whim of aesthetes, symbolists and language gamers” (102). *The Time of Our Singing*, similarly, works round the claims of cultural identity from opposing standpoints and historical perspectives. On the one hand, it shows that black or biracial musicians performing classical music in the post-war period could easily become caught up in what a critic writing about one of Jonah’s performances refers to as “the white culture game” (106), and implies that they were creatively and socially diminished by it; on the other hand, it suggests that they sometimes managed to appropriate the classical tradition to their own ends. These problems are historically cast in the novel but have continuing relevance. The novel also retains its own performativity, raising questions rather than answering them.

African American and European Classical Music

Fundamental to the tension between the two cultures are two types of music, African-American and European classical music. Although it is important to distinguish between them, it is equally crucial to recognise that they are heterogeneous, continuously evolving, symbiotic and overlapping. Nor can the tension between them be reduced to a simple global versus local, or western versus non-western, opposition. Classical music, though Eurocentric and owing its worldwide influence to western imperialism, initially underwent influences from Africa and Asia, while African American music is both local and diasporic, and is now a globally disseminated phenomenon.

Having said that, however, it is important to note that there are salient differences between the two traditions. Most significantly, the relationship between form and process is distinctive in each case. In the African American tradition—of which jazz is a particularly significant example—the key distinguishing feature can be said to be improvisation, whereas the classical tradition is more usually distinguished by composition. Improvisation puts more creative responsibility on the performer, while the role of the performer in classical music is usually interpretative. Distinguishing between the two traditions on the grounds of specific musical features is more complex. Nevertheless, in general and simplified terms, jazz has tended to be more rhythmically centred and European music more harmonically driven. Modulation between key centres is very important in European classical music, but almost non-existent in jazz. Rhythmic intensity, syncopation, accentuation and polyrhythmicity are much more central to the jazz idiom than to most classical music idioms.

This bifurcation between the two kinds of music is also fundamental to their historical and political bases: classical music tended to be linked to power and privilege; its global reach came about as the result of colonialism often disguised under claims for music's universality. African American music has its origins in slavery and the prohibition on literacy, what Gilroy calls "the topos of unsayability produced from the slaves' experiences of racial terror" (74). In the battle for civil rights, jazz became a political weapon in the hands of musicians such as Archie Shepp, while the world of classical music has tended (with some exceptions) to be more politically conservative. Ideas of subjectivity and referentiality are also different in the two spheres: George Lewis argues that Afrological as opposed to Eurological improvisation is closely related to personal storytelling; this is distinct from the cult of personality to be found in the performance of classical music.

Musical institutions, orchestras and conservatoria historically tended to uphold the hegemony of European music, a point made repeatedly in *The Time of Our Singing*. Joseph says, "Julliard still dwelled in the tiny diamond between London, Paris, Rome and Berlin. Music meant the big Teutonic *B's*, those names chiselled into the marble pediment, the old imperial dream of coherence that haunted the continent ... That this

country *had* a music—spectacularly reinventing itself every three years ... a music that had taken over the world while the classical masters were looking the other way—had not yet dawned on these Europe-reverting halls”(177). At best, the attitude of the conservatoria was Eurocentric, at worst, downright racist: “Julliard’s highest talent thought of themselves as color-blind, that plea bargain that high culture employs to get all charges against it dropped” (179).

Powers, therefore, continually points out the racial prejudice inherent in the institutions that constitute European classical music making, and the predicament of African-American musicians who wished to be professional musicians. Nevertheless, one of the paradoxes of the novel is that Powers is more intense and detailed in his depictions of European classical music than of African American music. It seems highly likely that his own preference is classical music, and it could be argued that the novel reinforces a Eurocentric status quo by repeatedly implying that classical music has a power beyond both place and politics. I would suggest, however, that this is more than offset by the convincing representation of Jonah and Joseph’s growing need to incorporate some aspects of African American music-making into their own performances, and by the powerful depiction of European music as socially and historically tainted by racism.

Biracial identities, African Americans, Jews

Through the tension between jazz and classical music, Powers draws out some of the complexities of a biracial identity, which is also explored in contemporary novels such as Danzy Senna’s *Caucasia* (1998) and Rosellen Brown’s *Half a Heart* (2000). Romano, Zack, Root and Piper all see biraciality as an undertheorised, underhistoricised form of subjectivity, and Ibrahim refers to it as “a distinct mode of subjecthood” (157). Biracial subjects have a rich heritage that in theory allows them to identify with both black and white communities. But as Romano, Zack, Fundaberg, Root and Piper all suggest, they can be alienated from both, can be accused of passing for white or black, and may feel under pressure to perform different identities to fit different environments. Romano and Zack also remind us that being biracial in the pre-civil rights era resulted in being treated as black by whites, because the “one-drop rule” meant that to have a black ancestor was to be designated as black. Consequently, many biracial subjects tried to pass as white because of the social advantages it bestowed. In *The Time of Our Singing* the complexity arises because Jonah and Joseph tend to identify with African American culture socially, but musically are entirely groomed in European culture. As Sauerberg says, “trapped between multiple claims to the ownership of music, the brothers are clearly caught up in a no-win situation. Even if they had decided to opt for a variety of jazz, they would have been accused of neglecting their Jewish heritage and its commitment to the folk and classical traditions of Jewish communities in Europe” (13).

For Joseph and Jonah, then, African American identity is mixed with Jewish identity: the relationship between these two ethnicities is also narrativised in Senna's *Caucasia* and Brown's *Half a Heart*. The African and Jewish diasporic communities have, as Paul Gilroy and Ethan Goffman suggest, much in common. Both, Goffman points out, have been subject to what DuBois calls double consciousness, "this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the standards of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity"(8). Historically, Jews have not always been considered to be white, and there have at times been co-operations and alliances between blacks and Jews, for example in the strong Jewish involvement in the National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People (NAACP) and in the Civil Rights Movement. But there have also been antagonisms and estrangements too, partly because of the more privileged economic and social situation of Jews. Zack charts the decline in relations between African-Americans and Jews in the late 1960s:

During the late 1960s some black leaders began to advocate violent revolutionary action against all whites, including Jews. Afrocentric spokespersons, in identifying African Americans with non-white inhabitants of the Third World, began to denounce Israel's actions against the Palestinians as racist. The response was a decrease in organized Jewish interest in the problems of black Americans. Moderate to radical blacks in turn accused American Jews of racism, and found narrow self-interest behind their previous assistance. Black extremist ideologies began to resurrect old European and Nazi myths and stereotypes of Jewish financial exploitation and international conspiracy. Meanwhile, throughout the 1970s and 1980s, American Jewish neo-conservatives supported tougher anticrime policies and attacked affirmative action and social welfare programs with predominantly black client bases. (145)

The Time of Our Singing takes on this complex relationship, particularly in terms of Jonah and Joseph's parents and their family history. The destruction of David Strom's family in the Holocaust, juxtaposed against discrimination of blacks in the US, highlights the way in which both communities have been persecuted and marginalised. At the same time, the novel foregrounds antagonisms between the two groups. David Strom, though German born, is in some ways more accepted within American mainstream society than his wife, Delia, who is African American (43). On the other hand, David's Jewish ethnicity proves unacceptable to Delia's family. Jonah and Joseph's sister, Ruth, is emphatic from an early age that there is an irreconcilable division between African Americans and Jews. She says emphatically: "The Jews can't help us...It's not their fight". When her father retorts, "If one drop makes *Schwarze*, then ... we're all *Schwarzen*," she replies, "Not all of us"(305).

In the novel biraciality, and the tension between different ethnic groupings, is explored metaphorically through Jonah and Joseph's alignment with the classical and African American musical traditions. Although they acknowledge and celebrate their black identities, Jonah and Joseph have been more fully acculturated to the European classical

tradition. They sense the importance of improvised music, but it requires techniques and attitudes that are not part of their training. It is therefore in what music they play and sing—and how—that the complexity of Jonah and Joseph’s sense of belonging, and not belonging, is most powerfully represented.

Contrary Motion: musical placement and displacement

Throughout the novel, the question of whether Jonah and Joseph are displaced and disempowered within the European musical tradition, or can adapt it to their own ends, is continuously raised, but any answer only raises another question. My argument here is that in *The Time of Our Singing* Powers uses a literary technique that is analogous to the musical technique of contrary motion to mobilise this issue. In music, contrary motion is the movement of two melodic lines in opposite directions; in the novel it is the simultaneous fictionalisation of conflicting viewpoints about the relationship between racial identity and musical identity. In the terms of this analogy, one melodic line is Jonah and Joseph’s immersion in, and identification with, the classical music tradition; the other melodic line is their awareness of the importance and relevance of the African American tradition. But each perspective also harbours its own inner critique. So these lines run in contrary motion to each other, with the added complexity that they are not themselves unidirectional. They can twist and turn, requiring shifts and adaptations in the other melodic line if the contrary motion is to be sustained.

On the one hand, then, the novel shows the total immersion of Jonah and Joseph in classical music and their mastery of classical techniques. Their musical education at Boylston and Julliard is geared entirely towards the classical tradition and playing notated western music to the highest standards. Their cultural life is directed towards European culture, as their singing teacher at Bolyston tells them: “To prepare yourself to perform the *Missa Solemnis* or the Mass in B Minor—those summae of Western art—you must start to read all the European poetry and philosophy you can lay your hands on” (113).

But while the novel shows Jonah and Joseph’s immersion in classical music, and celebrates the results, it also exposes and critiques their dedication to classical music as cultural mimicry (in terms of the musical analogy, this constitutes a change of direction of the melodic line). As their cousin Delia Banks says to them in the 1990s, “You were raised when we still thought the way to get what they got is to copy their stuff” (575). Although they love classical music, it also seems to have a constraining, even castrating, effect: Joseph, in particular, appears somewhat stunted musically within the classical tradition, and this is paralleled by his failure in sexual relationships. He admires his African American friend Wilson Hart because he can improvise, but finds it difficult to realise his own potential as a jazz musician: “I’d never learned the rules, the laws of freedom that kept these improvisations aloft, just out

of reach of a clean conservatory death” (186). He even feels (probably somewhat misguided) that his classical technique is an impediment: “Every shred of technique I’d ever mastered held me shackled to the block” (188). Metaphors of displacement are used to reinforce this: referring to jazz, he says, “It was never really ours, not like the stuff we sang every other day. Never home to us; more like a wild two-week summer rental on the Strip” (199). Nevertheless, the realisation that performing classical music has creative limits, because it is a largely interpretative activity, only comes later to Joseph: “I couldn’t hear it then, the re-creation in our recreation” (199). Jonah is much more successful professionally than Joseph, but he is equally confused about the relationship between his musical and cultural heritage. When the critic accuses Jonah of playing the white culture game Joseph says:

He cancelled two weeks of engagements, claiming the flu. Truth was, he was afraid to show his face in public. He no longer knew what that face looked like to his audience. Not that he’d ever much cared how others saw him. Music was that place where look fell away and sightless sound was all. But here was someone insisting the opposite: Music was just what we put on, after we put on ourselves. How a piece sounded to its listeners had everything to do with who was up there making the sounds. (381)

Jonah then tries to turn this to his advantage, to be spurred on by it: “he turned the formula over and over. Then, in the kind of modulation he excelled in, he threw a switch in himself. After days of chafing at the label, Jonah decided to revel in it” (381). But the result, according to Joseph (and he contradicts this at other points in the book), is that “Jonah turned his back on the whole time frame of earthly politics, and I could no longer call him back” (398).

Another aspect of the critique of Jonah and Joseph’s immersion in the classical tradition is their apparent passivity with regard to social activism. At one point Joseph says, “We hid in the concert hall, sanctuary from the world’s real sound” (552); at another point he claims “nothing Jonah would sing would ever have a bearing on the cause” (391). The implication is that their entanglement in European music blunted their sense of the social repression of blacks. After the trial of Emmett Till’s murderers in 1955, in which the killers are set free, Joseph says, “Jonah and I didn’t hear this outcome. We’re back at our private conservatory, growing our new voices, learning the lower lines in a vast choral fantasy about how all men are brothers” (105). Metaphors of burial and insulation abound in relation to this: “We’ve spent our adolescence underground just for this, this *winning*, dragging the prize back to the light of day” (214, original emphasis). On one occasion Jonah even claims, more generally, that music cannot have a social impact: “You think there’s a single opera goer who’s going to think differently about herself because of *music*? They’re not listening to themselves, Joey. They’re listening to the performance” (392, original emphasis).

The novel therefore shows the immersion (but also imprisonment) of Jonah and Joseph in the European classical tradition, and in terms of the

musical analogy this constitutes one of the melodic lines that comprise the contrary motion. The opposing melodic line is the importance to the brothers of their African American identity. Jonah appears proud of his part-blackness and does not try to pass as white as a form of social advancement. He is under no illusions about the importance of race: "Race trumps family. It's bigger than anything. Bigger than husband and wife. Bigger than brother and sister" (386). He is also extremely sensitive to (and keen to retaliate against) racial condescension: when he and Jonah perform for the competition "America's Next Voices" he says to Joseph, "Why do you suppose they love us, Joey? Can we really sound that much better than the others? Or are the judges just grateful we're the kind of Negroes who won't beat the shit out of them on the street?" (211).

When Jonah emigrates to East Germany, he decides that he will only perform early classical music, that is, music written before the rise of slavery. He uses this as a means to mark obliquely, but staunchly, his solidarity with the history of African American oppression. According to Joseph, Jonah "was after an entirely new style, so old that it had passed out of collective memory. Nobody knew how to sing this stuff yet; they were all improvising" (514). Jonah stresses, though humorously, the political dimension to his actions: "Imperialism's over, Mule. We're going back to a world *before* domination. We're learning to sing like ancient instruments. Organs of God's thoughts" (514).

However, the novel never settles into the position that African-American musicians can only express their culture through African-American music (again this melodic line does not just move in only one direction). Jonah asserts passionately that nobody owns a particular musical tradition, and he hates racial stereotyping or any attempt to fix identity. When, in the mid-sixties, he is offered the part of "the negro" in Gunter Schuller's opera *The Visitations*, he turns it down even though it is about civil rights, because he sees the offer as profoundly patronising. In response he retorts, "I don't mind being a Negro. I refuse to be a Negro tenor" (393). At various points in the novel he argues for musical autonomy and universalism: "you think that because somebody dragged our great-great-great grandfather onto a European ship against his will, a thousand years of music is off limits" (302). When, at the end of the novel, Joseph talks about giving the African American children he is teaching "their music, their identity", Jonah retorts: "Only thing you are identical to is yourself, and that only on good days. Stereotyping. That's what you're giving them" (600). He also claims that being black means "not knowing." He insists that they will never solve the mystery of their mother's death: "Sure of what killed her? You'll never know. That's blackness. Mule. Never knowing. That's how you know who you really are" (386).

Throughout the novel, therefore, any attitude to racial identity is both narrativised and deconstructed through Jonah and Joseph's ambivalent identification with the two different musical traditions. One way to conceptualise this, which has been developed here, is through the musical

analogy of melodic lines that not only run in contrary motion to each other, but also change direction themselves.

Musical Glocalisation/Musical Miscegenation

It is because they are caught in these ambivalent identifications that Jonah and Joseph manage to give expression to their fluid racial identities through various forms of musical mixing. In other words, they both engage with cultural glocalisation by employing what I call here musical miscegenation, a concept that adapts Homi Bhabha's formulation of hybridity. More recent work on hybridity, like for example the work of Kuortti and Nyman, has further nuanced this concept, and demonstrated the unequal power relationships that are sometimes at work in it, as well as the advantages it can bestow. In *The Time of Our Singing* such mixing seems to be viewed cautiously but optimistically in the contemporary era, as a way forward that neither falls back into racial essentialism nor surrenders to racial assimilation.

Throughout the book, cultural mixing as miscegenation is alluded to in an old Jewish proverb, "the bird and fish can fall in love, but where they gonna build their nest?" (630). But the difficulties and rewards of mixed marriage can be translated into musical mixing. Early on in the novel we are told that Joseph's friend Wilson Hart wanted "to bridge Gibraltar, to reunite Africa and Iberia, those twins separated at birth" (176). Hart's improvisations are themselves a mix: "Snippets of familiar songs bubbled up to the surface of his bouillabaisse, hints of anthems I recognised by reflex, tunes I knew everything about except their names" (187). Music is portrayed as inescapably mixed, "birthing jazz and its countless half-breed descendants" (177). At another point it is suggested that "music, that vampire, floating around for centuries, undead, wasn't at all picky about whose jugular it sucked. Any old blood line would do, any transfusion that kept it kicking for another year" (200). Jonah and Joseph make some tentative inroads into such mixing, but by the 1990s, in an increasingly globalised world, it has become commonplace. Their nephew Kwame, for example, revels in hip-hop, a musical genre consisting of cultural cross-overs, whose synthesising and sampling techniques are a form of collaging and mixing. Historically, *The Time of Our Singing* depicts musical miscegenation as the eventual outcome of the 1970s "war" on music:

This was the early 1970s, still the waning heyday of live music, and the music I played offended no one but me. There was a war going on. Not capitalism versus socialism, the United States versus Vietnam, students against their parents, North America versus the rest of the known continents. I mean the war of consonance against dissonance, electric against acoustic, written against improvised, rhythm against melody, shock against decency, long hair against longhair, past against future, rock against folk against jazz against metal against funk against blues against pop against gospel against country, black against white. Everybody had to choose, and music was your flag. (489)

When, as a student, Joseph plays piano duets with Wilson Hart, improvisation and composition meet, with the result that “the music for writing down and the music for letting loose found a way to share a nest” (205). Later, when Joseph is a pianist at the Glimmer club in Atlantic City in the late sixties, he plays a pastiche-laden but hybrid music, shifting between popular and classical tunes, improvising and inserting quotations. It is in the Glimmer Club that Joseph realises that:

[T]he thing about music is that its tool kit is so small. Everything comes from everywhere. No two songs are further apart than half-cousins by incest. A raised third or an augmented fifth, an added flat ninth, a little short-leg syncopation, an off-the-beat eighth note, and any tune could pass over the line. Music at night in a noisy bar didn't stop at two colours; it had more shades than would fit into the wildest paint box. If the Supremes could do the Anna Magdalena Bach notebook, even I could do the Supremes. (433)

But Joseph most obviously makes musical miscegenation central when he teaches music to African American children and amalgamates the classical and African American traditions. Though still rooted in classical music, he encourages his students to lay down a pulse, solo, and draw on popular genres. Similarly, although Jonah is wedded solely to the European classical repertoire, there are cultural crossovers (elements of musical miscegenation) in his attitude toward performance. We are told that he “had a thing against the permanent, a hatred of being fixed that’s audible in every note he ever laid down,” implying that he had at least an improvisatory approach to interpretation. Throughout the book, special attention is drawn to the unique quality of Jonah’s voice, the implication being that it drew a great deal from his African lineage and that it carried with it a strong sense of racial awareness: “that voice was so pure it could make heads of state repent. But it sang knowing just what shape rode along behind it” (8). And the ensemble, *Voces Antiquae*, that Jonah founds in Europe, has an innovative, possibly African American influenced, approach to the performance of classical music, one which is permeated by an improvisatory aesthetic. This approach is described by Joseph who, for a short period, is a member of the group: “‘All music is contemporary,’ Jonah said. And that’s how he wanted us to sing: as if the world would never abandon this instant” (539). The singers perform from memory: “Jonah insisted that we abandon the safety of the page. We lived, ate, and breathed the printed instructions until they vanished, until we composed the written-out invention afresh, in the moment of our repeat performance. He wanted us to stand onstage, open our mouths, and have the notes just there, like a medium possessed by the soul she channels” (538). They also adopt a movement-based approach to singing and are described by Jonah as “a synchronised underwater ballet” (535). The group is multi-ethnic and its performance is described by one critic as “polychromal, polytonality.” Hence the performance style of the group is itself a mixing of African American and classical approaches.

The African American aesthetic and the structure of the novel Thematically, then, the novel points towards musical miscegenation as a possible way of resolving the tension between the two different cultural traditions. But it might also be argued that the structure of the novel reflects this cultural mix. In one way we can see the novel as a typically postmodern novel in its multiple juxtapositions and multi-layering, and in its disruptions of perspective, linear narrative, character, time and space. The first narrative strand narrated by Joseph, about Jonah and himself, projects the history of race and racism from 1940 to 1990 in the US, including the murder of the African American boy Emmett Till by white bigots, Rosa Parks's refusal to give up her seat on a segregated bus, two sets of race riots in Los Angeles, the murder of Martin Luther King and the beating of Rodney King. The second strand of the narrative returns to an earlier period, and is told by an omniscient narrator but focalised through various characters. It begins with the meeting between Jonah and Joseph's parents at Marian Anderson's concert on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial in 1939 (when Anderson was excluded from performing at Constitution Hall because she was African American) and develops with their subsequent marriage. Thirdly, some sections of the narrative are retellings of historical events by an omniscient narrator. None of the storylines are purely chronological or separate, however, and there are many abrupt changes of time and place.

At the same time, frequent reiterations, circularities and transformations (including the multiple layers of contrary motion discussed earlier) suggest the influence of an African American musical aesthetic (although Powers himself is not African American). Relevant here is what musicologist Ronald Radano calls "resonances," a term he uses to talk about the history of African American music. For Radano, "Resonance established authenticity not as a clarion purity but as what Walter Benjamin called in his meditation on translation 'the echo of the original': the sound of that which has already sounded" (53). Radano argues that "Resonances consist in sound as waves, and waves project, at once, from all points, as rings or circles" (53). Resonance does not convey pure sound, but "the sound of that which has already sounded... Each portion of a particular ring 'sounds' simultaneously ... When multiple circles or resonances appear, they intersect while also remaining discrete" (53).

For Radano, therefore, resonance implies not simply circles, but also intersecting circles and the blurring of origins; repetition, but always repetition with difference. Radano's aim is "to tell the story of the circle so as to resist claims of continuity and uncomplicated racial wholeness while at the same time recognizing socially generated coherences that emerge within the logic of race. Rethinking the circle means paying close attention to what is missing in the past as that past comes into focus before us" (55).

Similarly, for James Snead, a black musical aesthetic is characterised by repetition with difference and also by the cut—a concept he takes from jazz to refer to abrupt transitions that nevertheless constitute a return to earlier material. Snead argues that, “In European culture, repetition must be seen to be not just circulation and flow but accumulation and growth” (67). According to Snead:

in black culture, the thing (the ritual, the dance, the beat) is ‘there for you to pick up when you come back to get it.’ If there is a goal (Zweck) in such a culture, it is always deferred; it continually ‘cuts’ back to the start, in the musical meaning of ‘cut’ as an abrupt, seemingly unmotivated break (an accidental *da capo*) with a series already in progress and a willed return to a prior series (67).

Snead also argues that there has also been a foregrounding of repetition and the cut in contemporary European music and literature, and that this is influenced by black culture.

In *The Time of Our Singing*, events are often repeated with differences, for example the opening scene is repeated a third of the way through the book (215). Riots, demonstrations and gatherings arguably form riffs through the books that, though taking place in different historical periods, are repetitions of each other—so the 1963 march at the Lincoln Memorial (269) repeats (with transformation) the gathering of the crowds at the Marion Anderson concert (44-48). Interwoven throughout are ideas about the non-linearity of time, partly filtered through the consciousness of David Strom who is a physicist, and partly filtered through the narration. For example, when David Strom attends the 1963 civil rights march and recollects the Marion Anderson concert where he met his wife in 1939, we are told, “That prior day is here completed, brought forward to this moment, the one it was already signalling a quarter century before. Time is not a trace that moves through a collection of moments. Time is a moment that collects all moving traces” (271).

Another manifestation of repetition with variation in the novel comes through Powers’s structuring of the characters, who are often superimposed in ways which fuse the fictional, historical and allegorical. There are continuous transformations: Delia, the mother, morphs into the unknown woman in a navy dress who becomes an object of desire for Joseph, and into the mother of Emmett Till. At a symbolic level we might also see her as “the real” of musical meaning, an ultimate and transcendental musical meaning which will always be pursued but can never be attained (see my discussion of the real of musical meaning in relation to Vikram Seth’s *An Equal Music*). Similarly, Jonah and Joseph’s nephew, Robert, transforms into the mythical Ode who brought David and Delia Strom together, who also overlaps with Emmett Till, and who again symbolises the possibility of a post-racial (or post-racist) understanding: “the boy understood, better than they” (225). Marian Anderson’s voice re-emerges as both Delia and Jonah’s voice: Delia mouths silently while Anderson sings, Joseph often hears the memory of his mother’s voice in Jonah. Events happen over again to the different generations: Delia’s

failed audition for the conservatory, resulting entirely from racism and bringing an end to her hopes of a career in music, foreshadows Jonah's own exclusion from a top conservatory preparatory program. The general effect in the novel, in terms of a musical analogy, is one of polytonality and polyrhythmicity, that is, of many tonal centres and rhythmic structures working at once. Such transformations and multiplicities are found in postmodernist fiction too, however, and the structure of the novel is perhaps best characterised as a fusion of a postmodern literary and an African American musical aesthetic.

In conclusion, *The Time of our Singing* mobilises essentialist and non-essentialist positions with regard to racial identity through the tensions between two great musical traditions, but without ever reaching an endpoint. These different positions towards racial identity are evident synchronically throughout the novel, but *The Time of our Singing* also has an enormous historical sweep, which takes us diachronically through many different stages of racial prejudice and resistance throughout the twentieth century. It demonstrates how the stance of Jonah and Joseph's parents in the 1940s, that race didn't matter, was premature, because such attitudes could not counteract racism. But it shows powerfully, too, how even in the 1990s—where a variety of attitudes to racial identity co-exist and where racial intermixing is the order of the day—racism and racial privilege still persist. In particular, it is a devastating critique of racism in the professional world of classical music, which even in 2011 is short on representation of black musicians. In addition, the novel continuously raises questions about musical meaning and the relationship between racial identity and culture: to what extent can racial identity cross cultural boundaries? Can music accomplish this more easily than literature, since it is a less referential medium? Can music ever escape the social? These issues always remain at the level of questions, because as soon as the novel posits an answer, it immediately contradicts it or poses it again as a question. Consequently, if music gives the fleeting (and illusory) impression of escaping social constraints at one moment, at the next moment it appears deeply rooted in them, because the pull of the social is inescapable. The structure of *The Time of Our Singing*, then, is highly reflexive, but it is also a self-reflexive novel in that it sets its own author (who is neither black, Jewish, nor a musician) on trial. The accusation that Jonah is playing the white culture game is easily turned back on the author, who can be charged with trying to pass as black in order to write the novel. Powers can never entirely escape from this accusation, which reflects back and reverses the issues about racial identification raised by him, but he at least displays self-awareness of this disconcerting conundrum.

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