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The World According to Marsalis: Difference and Sameness in Wynton Marsalis's *From the Plantation to the Penitentiary*

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> You've got to speak the language the people are speaking
> 'Specially when you see the havoc it's wreaking
> Even the rap game started out critiquing
> Now it's all about killing and freaking.
>
> (Wynton Marsalis, lyrics to "Where Y'All At?"
> from the album *From the Plantation to the Penitentiary*)

Ever since he appeared on the scene as a member of Art Blakey's Jazz Messengers in 1980, trumpeter Wynton Marsalis has been among the most visible of contemporary jazz musicians, appearing on television, at awards ceremonies, in advertisements, and on magazine covers. The jazz community has never been at a loss for opinionated and talented individuals, but through his frequent media appearances, his writings, his position as artistic director of Jazz at Lincoln Center, and his guiding role as senior creative consultant to Ken Burns's 10-part PBS documentary *Jazz*, Marsalis has been tireless as an advocate for the importance of jazz. He has been a custodian of its history, a policeman of its boundaries, and a critic of its excesses, and he is perhaps the most public of jazz's public intellectuals.[1] But while Marsalis has often expressed strong political views in interviews, his 2007 album *From the Plantation to the Penitentiary* is one of only a few times in his career when Marsalis has presented his critique of contemporary American culture so self-consciously in his music itself—and not just in his writings and public appearances. My essay will look briefly at the track "Supercapitalism" and more thoroughly at the album's most notable track, "Where Y'All At?"—in which Marsalis performs his version of a "rap"—in order to discuss how Marsalis goes about communicating his political meaning and message in musical form and to examine Marsalis's relationship

with other forms of black culture, particularly hip-hop. Ultimately, I suggest that Marsalis's political—and musical—critiques center around the question of difference and sameness, and that his well-known dislike of hip-hop is based at least as much on the ideology of difference that hip-hop represents as it is on hip-hop's supposed musical deficiencies. Rather than condemn Marsalis for hewing to a narrow or conservative view of musical worth or the jazz tradition, this article seeks to understand the roots of Marsalis's influential ideas and place them within the realm of other contemporary black thinkers like Shelby Steele, John McWhorter, Bill Cosby, and, perhaps most interestingly, Angela Davis.

Released on 6 March 2007 on Blue Note Records (a subsidiary of EMI), *From the Plantation to the Penitentiary* is made up of seven of Marsalis's own original compositions, six of which are vocal tracks featuring either vocalist Jennifer Sanon or Marsalis himself. As has been customary on Marsalis's albums, Marsalis himself does not write the liner notes, but leaves any explanation or commentary such notes usually provide to his close associate, the writer Stanley Crouch, who was also heavily featured in Burns's documentary and serves with Marsalis on the board of Jazz at Lincoln Center. In the liner notes, Crouch praises Marsalis by comparing him to famed early jazz trumpeter Buddy Bolden: "Like Bolden, this contemporary son of New Orleans made a name for himself by 'calling the children home'" (Crouch 2007). Crouch also includes a long quotation from Abraham Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address in his essay, perhaps meaning to suggest that the "heroic and collective sense of democracy" that he finds expressed in that speech can also be heard on the present recording. The album cover features a painting by artist Jessica Benjamin depicting a young black man wearing a thick yellow/gold-colored chain and staring blankly ahead at the observer. The painting is titled *Rapper (Tragedy)* and comes from Benjamin's series of paintings *The Americans*; other equally stark and provocative images from this series (such as *Politician*, *General*, and *Katrina Victim*) are reproduced in the CD insert booklet. These two elements of the packaging convey a sense of seriousness and importance to the album, but still, Marsalis was not content to let the album artwork by Benjamin, the liner notes by Crouch, the music, or its lyrics "speak for themselves." He made a number of media appearances—in venues as diverse as *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, *This Week with George Stephanopoulos*, the CBS *Early Show*, *Jazz Times* magazine, *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, *The Guardian*, *The Boston Herald*, and *The San Diego Union-Tribune*—to discuss, promote, and condition the reception of this album.[2]

Marsalis is one of the few contemporary jazz musicians with much name recognition outside of the jazz community, but a new release by him, famous or controversial as he may be in jazz circles, does not usually receive this kind of intense attention from the so-called "mainstream media," which largely ignores jazz. *From the Plantation to the Penitentiary* has received such attention because Marsalis (and his publicity staff) have made it clear that this record is not just a regular jazz album. The discourse both from Marsalis and his journalistic interlocutors—not to mention the album title, artwork, and liner notes discussed above—makes it clear that he intends this album to be received as a major artistic and political statement, one which addresses the current state of affairs in the United States, the plight of African Americans, relations between men and women, and the failures of the US government and the Bush administration from Katrina to Iraq to Guantánamo Bay. Indeed, a full four months before the album was to be released, the Associated Press had a brief story proclaiming its "political" nature (Moody).

Marsalis has often voiced his opinions about the state of American and African-American culture, but his critiques have usually been most highly concentrated in his extra-musical production: for example, in the interviews, writings, and television appearances that have made him, as I noted above, one of the most visible figures in contemporary jazz.[3] However, there are other instances, in addition to *From the Plantation to the Penitentiary*, where Marsalis has addressed social and political issues within his music itself, including, most notably, his Pulitzer Prize-winning 1995 oratorio about slavery, *Blood on the Fields*. But, as Eric Porter notes in his discussion of *Blood on the Fields*, Marsalis presents slavery less as a calculated injustice systematically perpetrated on people of African descent than as both a personal tragedy for specific individuals sold into slavery and a part of history that has universal relevance for all of humanity, regardless of color or nationality.[4] In the liner notes to the 1997 CD release of *Blood on the Fields*, Stanley Crouch sums up this sentiment concisely with a quotation from Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*: "Who ain't a slave?" Indeed, these ideas of universalism and individuality, along with the eschewing of politics based on identity and difference, form a key component of the social and aesthetic philosophy of Crouch and Marsalis. These sentiments also find expression in *From the Plantation to the Penitentiary*.

From the Plantation to the Penitentiary is perhaps Marsalis's most striking—and, as evidenced by the amount of media attention it has received, his most high-profile—project mixing the political and the musical to date.

After thirty years in the public eye, Marsalis's critique has stayed relatively consistent. The musical, social, and political context of his critique, however, certainly has changed, which is why his ideas are worth our attention again now. Indeed, just the last few years have witnessed something of a sea change in black cultural politics—the increasing visibility of black conservatives, the backlash against the use of the word "nigger" in hip-hop led by Russell Simmons, not to mention the election of Barack Obama, who declared his candidacy for the presidency just one month before *From the Plantation to the Penitentiary* was released—and Marsalis's ideas take on new meaning and relevance in this context.

Marsalis's musical, political, and social views have been greatly influenced by Stanley Crouch, Albert Murray, and Ralph Ellison, an inheritance which has been widely discussed by scholars such as Eric Porter and John Gennari. Marsalis believes strongly in the musical superiority of acoustic jazz musicians relative to fusion, funk, rock, and hip-hop artists; he colorfully describes the contemporary popular music scene as "Heavy doses of bullshit made by nonmusicians" (Marsalis and Hinds 83). He sees jazz musicians as providing an authentic—and not commercially co-opted or exploitative—experience of African-American culture, which is to say, for him, American culture. Hip-hop and funk musicians, along with the musics they play, are dismissed because they are seen as not having adequate technical skills. Hip-hop is especially singled out for critique by Marsalis because of the misogyny and legacy of minstrelsy he hears and sees in it. For example, Marsalis's lyrics for *From the Plantation to the Penitentiary*'s "Love and Broken Hearts," before developing into a plea for conventional gestures of romance, take time out to condemn several of what he views as the worst aspects of hip-hop culture:

> I ain't your bitch I ain't your ho,
> And public niggerin' has got to go.
> Oh safari seekers and thug life coons,
> You modern day minstrels and your songless tunes.

Marsalis argues for a vision of African-American culture that places its geniuses and their works squarely within the American—indeed, the Western or the global—mainstream. Hip-hop is most harshly damned because, according to Marsalis, it exoticizes, minstrelizes, and "others" African-American culture, for the consumption of blacks and whites alike.

Selected elements of the type of political critique Marsalis has employed throughout his career appear in this album.[5] He is aided in transmitting this message by his decision to compose lyrics for the songs that make up this album. Indeed, not only are there lyrics for six of the seven tracks on the album, but these lyrics are re-printed in the liner notes for ease of reference, one more layer of redundancy to make sure the listener gets the message.

"Gimme that, Gimme this, Gimme that"

Marsalis makes little effort on five of the album's six vocal tracks (leaving aside the entirely instrumental track "Doin' (Y)Our Thing) to match the literal meaning of the lyrics to their musical setting. The text of the track "Supercapitalism," however, is about being overwhelmed with too many possibilities, and the brisk tempo and staccato delivery by singer Jennifer Sanon is certainly overwhelming. The style of presentation here is none too subtle, but perhaps this is intended, for the sentiment conveyed is not aiming at subtlety. As composer and lyricist, Marsalis presents us with a musical portrait of a greedy person who cannot get enough of what he or she wants—according to the song's lyrics, "a lot of stuff, expensive fluff." The song's middle-section lament, "There's never enough," is a modified slow blues in 3/4 time, while its outer, repeated exhortations to "Gimme that, Gimme this, Gimme that," are musically presented here in rapid-fire sixteenth notes at the already brisk tempo of 184 beats per minute. The text-setting in "Supercapitalism" imitates what the text itself signifies: the greedy person depicted by the lyrics—alternating between highs of manic consumerist desire and lows of ennui when these purchases fail to satisfy—might not sound very different at all from how Marsalis's vocalist Jennifer Sanon sounds here.

It may be useful to revisit the album's cover painting by Jessica Benjamin, *Rapper (Tragedy)*, in light of the preceding discussion of the track "Supercapitalism." In email correspondence with the author, Benjamin explained the creation of this cover image and its counterpart, *Rapper (Comedy*), which is found inside the CD liner note booklet:

> These images came from listening to the album and being aware of Wynton's ideas of the predominant commercial music scene that exists in the United States and the propagation of stereotypes that have been created to promote and sell product. In these two paintings

> I wanted to depict this cultural stereotype specifically but since I didn't want the paintings to read as portraits I used two faces to create an image of a person that does not exist.

The album cover of *From the Plantation to the Penitentiary*, *Rapper (Tragedy)*, is a composite image of a slave child and the rapper Method Man, a meld which seems to suggest some sort of link between their two eras, a link also posited with the first two lines of the album's title track: "From the plantation to the penitentiary/From the yassuh boss to the ghetto minstrelsy." Other commentators and critics have adopted this reading of the album cover, suggesting that the painting "shows a young African-American man whose gold neck chain seems to represent both a lust for bling and shackle that can't be broken" (Varga). In this reading, consumerism itself—particularly the kind celebrated in hip-hop—acts as a kind of slave master.[6]

Both the album cover and the track "Supercapitalism" suggest some kind of relationship between slavery and consumerism: the cover, through its visual punning of a gold necklace and shackles, and the track, through its musical depiction of a person enslaved by his or her desire for consumer products. "Supercapitalism" is, in this regard, perhaps a rather unremarkable example of word-music relations, but it is notable for being one of a few instances on the album in which—to speak in reductive terms—the content of the message transmitted (Marsalis's critique of American culture) is greatly influenced by the form of the message (the fact that it is being transmitted not through ordinary speech or text but through musical declamation). For other tracks on the album, the fact that the words are presented in song is almost incidental; Marsalis could have published these lyrics as poetry, as an essay, or as an op-ed, and little of their political message would have been lost. Indeed, as I suggested above, it is mostly in newspaper articles and interviews where Marsalis has previously expressed his political and social views. In this paper, I am chiefly concerned with what happens when he self-consciously chooses to express political and social views in a musical context. It is only on "Supercapitalism"—in which the alternation between passages of rapid, declamatory sixteenth notes and a slow blues lament seems to mimic consumer desire—and "Where Y'All At?"—in which the form of the song's vocal delivery seems to very much be a part of its message—that the unique signifying capabilities of music, whatever they may be to each of us as listeners and performers, are exploited fully.[7]

"It's Rapping, But It Ain't Hip-Hop"

"Where Y'All At?," then, is perhaps the album's most important track in this regard, and certainly one of the most unusual performances in recent jazz history. All of the album's tracks are labeled on the CD's back cover with a description of their (sometimes multiple) feel(s). For example, "Supercapitalism" is a "fast swing, Charleston, cha-cha, slow shuffle," the track "Find Me" is a "modern Habanera," and "Doin' (Y)Our Thing" is an "alternating 2-beat country groove, soca, cumbia, swing." "Where Y'All At?" is described as a "2nd-line swing with Motown vamp," but that description misses what I take to be the most important formal element of this piece: the fact that the text is not sung by Marsalis's vocalist Jennifer Sanon (who sings on all of the other vocal tracks on the album, including "Supercapitalism"), but delivered in a "rap" by Marsalis himself.

The song alternates verses rapped by Marsalis with choruses featuring a group-sung repeat of the title of the song, overdubbed with Marsalis's muted trumpet lines in a kind of call-and-response. This all takes place over a simple, 4-bar bass riff in A-flat which underpins the entire song, except for an 8-bar section in the middle. The song's groove hardly changes at all between verse and chorus, save for the addition of tambourine on beats 1 and 3 in the chorus. This seems like hardly a coincidence, since the tambourine is a strong sonic signifier of the black church and the chorus's group vocal aesthetic seems to be referencing the black church or black folk expression more generally, as if Marsalis and his group represent the "authentic" black community, calling out to "y'all" who have let them down. Saxophonist Walter Blanding takes the song's only extended improvised solo, for 24 bars between verses and 9 and 10 and 8 more bars before the final verse. This relative lack of instrumental solos marks something of a departure for Marsalis; even the other tracks with vocals on this album all devote ample space to solos. Their absence here suggests that the burden of carrying the weight of the song rests more heavily on the words and Marsalis's performance of them.

Madrigalism or other conventional text-music relationships as such are not at play in the text setting of "Where Y'All At?"—with the possible exception of the song's opening invocation, "You've got to speak the language the people are speaking/'Specially when you see the havoc it's wreaking." More interesting than the text-music relationships in "Supercapitalism" is what rap music as a cultural practice—distinct from any particular rap performance—signifies for Marsalis and what he would like it to signify for his audience as well, especially vis-à-vis jazz. This is what

makes Marsalis's rap so noteworthy, and perhaps is why many of the articles about the album mention "Where Y'All At?"; indeed, nearly every reporter he talked to while promoting the album asked him about it. In response to these queries, Marsalis seems to have essentially the same conversation with each interviewer—just like our contemporary media-savvy politicians, Marsalis stays "on message," and he clearly has his talking points down. The interviewer poses a question similar to the one asked by the *Philadelphia Inquirer*'s Dan DeLuca: "And yet, there's a song on *From the Plantation* called 'Where Y'All At?' on which you rap, or at least chant." To which, Marsalis will usually reply with a response similar to the one he gave to John Lewis of *The Guardian*, "It's rapping, but it ain't hip-hop. It's the kind of rap we did in New Orleans back in the day. We called it juba juba, you know, 'My grandma said to your grandma/Iko iko uh nay.'"

This statement—"It's rapping, but it ain't hip-hop"—is of interest here for two reasons. First, I would imagine that the reason most of Marsalis's interviewers have focused on this track is because it seems that, at least for the duration of one song, Marsalis is going to try to speak a language he has denounced as corrupt: rap. This mixing of jazz and hip-hop elements in itself is no longer surprising, as open-minded jazz and hip-hop musicians have been dabbling in each other's realms at least since Quincy Jones's 1989 album *Back on the Block*. However, Marsalis's usage of rap techniques is a strange and ironic gesture from someone whose distaste for popular music and popular culture—particularly hip-hop culture and rap music—is well-known and has been a consistent theme throughout his career.[8] His rap performance begins to look less strange when he insists that it is rooted in the New Orleans cultural traditions of his youth and not in the globally pervasive African-American musical practices (i.e., hip-hop) of his adulthood. But then, we are left with the conflict between the opening lines of "Where Y'All At?" and his statement that his performance is "rapping, but it ain't hip-hop." What are we to make of the relationship between these two languages? How is it possible for Marsalis to communicate in New Orleans rap and have it understood by an audience that only knows contemporary hip-hop? Are they mutually intelligible? Is "Where Y'All At?" communicating in one of these languages, both, or neither?

These comments from Marsalis contradict or weaken the first two lines of the song, the invocation I mentioned above: "You've got to speak the language the people are speaking/'Specially when you see the havoc it's wreaking." In these two lines, Marsalis seems to be justifying the musical performance that follows. The language the people are speaking, whether

Marsalis likes it or not, is hip-hop, but he will only speak it here because his message is too important to be misunderstood. Not only that, but, according to these lines from Marsalis, it is *the language itself* that is causing problems; it is the thing that is wreaking havoc. So already in the first two lines of the song, Marsalis has set up quite a complicated task for himself. Marsalis is going to give us his message that hip-hop is dangerous in the very form of hip-hop because hip-hop is a language that the community understands. Indeed—no doubt to his chagrin—some of the very people that Marsalis is ostensibly trying to reach have been termed by author Bakari Kitwana "the hip-hop generation."

Second, Marsalis' statement "It's rapping, but it ain't hip-hop," is noteworthy because it mirrors a debate about the parentage of verbal art in African-American culture that is taking place on the other side of the wall from Marsalis, from the burgeoning field of hip-hop studies. Somewhat prophetically, Tricia Rose, writing in her seminal 1994 book *Black Noise*, warns against attempts to read rap (only) as a logical development out of earlier forms of black expressive culture (such as oral poetry, the blues, and jazz): forms that have recently gained some measure of legitimacy in the academy and in the larger cultural world. To read jazz, the blues, or oral poetic traditions into rap—however warranted—is often primarily a legitimating gesture and only secondarily an argument about ancestry. We should beware of these attempts to link rap to canonized genres, to "make a lady out of" rap because of the very significant elements of rap these accounts conveniently write out or gloss over. Rose argues:

> In an attempt to rescue rap from its identity as postindustrial commercial product and situate it in the history of respected black cultural practices, many historical accounts of rap's roots consider it a direct extension of African-American oral, poetic, and protest traditions, to which is it clearly and substantially indebted. . . . Clearly, rap's oral and protest roots, its use of toasting, signifying, boasting, and black folklore are vitally important; however these influences are only one facet of the context for rap's emergence. Rap's primary context for development is hip-hop culture, the Afrodiasporic traditions it extends and revises, *and* the New York urban terrain in the 1970s. (25–26).

It is important, then, for scholars like Rose to locate the origins of rap in a specific political, postindustrial, and commercial environment

and not as (exclusively) the organic outgrowth of earlier African American folk traditions, such as Marsalis's New Orleans rap. However, this position has by no means been unanimously accepted either within the academy or outside it. Other scholars (e.g., Ramsey) have preferred to draw connections between black American musical styles in the twentieth century, focusing on the continuities in production and reception of these styles rather than on constructing boundaries between them. Such scholars are perhaps taking their cue from Amiri Baraka, who viewed the seemingly disparate genres of R&B and avant garde jazz as participating in what he termed "the changing same" (Baraka 180–211). Indeed, some recent scholarship has re-asserted the link between earlier black traditions and contemporary rap. Kyra Gaunt's study of musical children's games, *The Games Black Girls Play*, argues: "Handclapping games often feature a melodic tune, or chanted lyrics, that resemble an approach to rapping not only prominent in hip-hop culture, but one that has existed in African American music-making since slavery" (Gaunt 21). Even Rose, while arguing for a view of hip-hop that sees it as coming out of the utterly unique postindustrial environment of New York in the 1970s, also urges us to hold onto "the necessary tension between the historical specificity of hip-hop's emergence and the points of continuity between hip-hop and several Afrodiasporic forms, traditions, and practices" (Rose 25).[9] Marsalis himself is perhaps an unwitting participant in this debate by asserting a strict separation between contemporary hip-hop and the vocal technique he uses on "Where Y'All At?" which is, in his words, "rapping, but it ain't hip-hop." However, Marsalis's most important difference with these academics is in the relatively positive views of many forms of African-American popular music these scholars express, including both jazz and hip-hop, a pluralism that Marsalis does not share. The consequences of Marsalis's position against hip-hop are significant, for if jazz signifies a particular version of democracy, "a heroic and collective sense of democracy," in Stanley Crouch's words, what is rap to signify?

Difference and Sameness

Marsalis and his intellectual forebears (Crouch, Murray, and Ellison, primarily) view African-American culture as an integral part of larger American culture.[10] For all four of these men, jazz music in particular assumes a privileged place in their writing and thought as something born out of a unique African-American experience but that has now transcended those roots to become an art form with relevance for all Americans, indeed

for all of humanity. It should also be noted here that just as Marsalis has been influenced by Ellison, Murray, and Crouch, these men in turn can be seen as participants in a debate about the proper content and place of black art that stretches back, at least, to the early decades of the twentieth century and to the ideas of figures as diverse as W.E.B. Du Bois, Alain Locke, Langston Hughes, and Zora Neale Hurston.[11] Marsalis and Crouch, roughly speaking, can be seen as the intellectual descendants of the aesthetic thought of Locke and Du Bois, thinkers who valued the "elevation" of black high cultural forms over and against folk and popular art. In the contemporary iteration of this view as subscribed to by Marsalis and Crouch, jazz is claimed to be universal, uncorrupted, and culturally-rooted while rap music, on the other hand, is viewed as all that is parochial, provincial, commercial, and rootless in black America.

But most importantly, I would argue that their opposition to rap is based on the question of difference and otherness. Eric Porter notes that Albert Murray's book *The Omni-Americans* argues specifically against people or policies which "exaggerate ethnic differences and distance black people from the American mainstream" (Porter 294). This is an important point which leads to a common thread in the political and aesthetic thought of Murray, Ellison, Crouch, and Marsalis: these men live in a liberal humanist world where specific ethnic experiences can be mined for art's sake, but all people, regardless of their background or upbringing, have the opportunity to create and appreciate works on the same elevated plane of pure aesthetic experience. This is where Crouch's notion of a "heroic and collective sense of democracy" takes artistic shape, for under this vision, ideal works of art are those created by "geniuses" or "heroes" but have universal relevance for all of mankind.[12] An irony must be noted here: men so committed to being prophets (and, indeed, exponents) of an African-American/American sensibility are, in fact, heavily indebted to a nineteenth-century European ideology of individual genius. It is perhaps no surprise, then, that Marsalis and Crouch have found such a comfortable home at Lincoln Center, for their aesthetic philosophy of jazz is similar to that which has traditionally underpinned the performance and reception of European classical music.[13]

Theirs is what I would term an ideology of sameness and equality: an ideology that posits that we are all the same and governed by the same set of objective universal standards and rules, be they aesthetic or legal. Perhaps this is why hip-hop has been such a persistent target for Marsalis and Crouch, for nothing is more threatening to an ideology which posits universal humanity and sameness than the sign of difference and otherness.

Rap presents a world that is "other" than and "different" from the world conjured by Marsalis and company, and I would argue that they perceive it as dangerous and have spent so much time and energy to critique it not because of its formal qualities or alleged aesthetic failings, not because it is "bullshit made by nonmusicians," but because it presents a vision of black America that is antithetical to their own. In contrast to their vision of aesthetic universalism, hip-hop is a music which constantly re-asserts its connections to local histories and networks and its refusal to abide by "universal" (read: Eurocentric) standards.[14] Yet hip-hop today finds itself, paradoxically, far more universally popular than the music championed by Ellison, Murray, Crouch, and Marsalis. Against the criticism of consumerism found in the track "Supercapitalism," hip-hop is a world of Benjamins, bling, and black Lincoln Navigators. Alternately, it is a world of ethnic pride, music-inspired agitation against racial injustices, and stinging critique of the white-dominated power structure from a position outside of or alienated from it. Whichever scenario fits your own personal views of rap music, the hip-hop movement, and black culture in general, it is decidedly a long distance from here to the mainstream America of which Marsalis, Crouch, Murray, and Ellison claim African Americans are rightfully full citizens and co-equal partners.[15]

It is surprising, then, that Marsalis has given the seemingly radical title of *From the Plantation to the Penitentiary* to this release, especially since the title calls to mind the work of Angela Davis, the black radical philosopher and activist. Davis has been studying, writing, and lecturing about prisons for several decades now, following her own imprisonment in 1970. Most importantly for our discussion here of *From the Plantation to the Penitentiary*, Davis has recently focused her attention on the links between slavery and the contemporary American penal system in which, according to a 2008 report from the Pew Center, blacks are nearly seven times as likely as whites to be incarcerated and black males between the ages of 20 and 39 are ten times as likely as their white male counterparts to be in prison. In Davis's analysis, people of color, particularly young black men, are the surplus population of global capitalism. Since capitalism does not have a place for them, they are put in prison. The modern American penal system—especially the death penalty—can be seen as an extension of slavery in that it is a technology of control and punishment far more likely to ensnare people of color than whites. In a recent interview collected in the book *Abolition Democracy*, Davis, who ran for vice president on the Communist Party ticket in 1980 and 1984, presents a Marxist-influenced

take on the same social realities that inspired the title—*From the Plantation to the Penitentiary*—of Marsalis's album:

> There is a direct connection with slavery: when slavery was abolished, black people were set free, but they lacked access to the material resources that would enable them to fashion new, free lives. Prisons have thrived over the last century precisely because of the absence of those resources and the persistence of some of the deep structures of slavery. They cannot, therefore, be eliminated unless new institutions and resources are made available to those communities that provide, in large part, the human beings that make up the prison population (Davis 96–97).

Marsalis and Davis may both see a link between slavery and the contemporary incarceration of blacks in the United States, but if Marsalis is vague about how we have reached such a position, Davis is not. Indeed, the same ideas of universalism and liberal individualism that Marsalis and Crouch are championing as liberating in the aesthetic realm are, for Davis, the very opposite of liberating in the judicial system. Davis argues explicitly against what I earlier termed the ideology of sameness, the ideology which is now enshrined in our civil rights laws and forms a key part of the American democracy, to which paeans flow freely from the pen of Crouch and the trumpet of Marsalis. Against this vision, Davis writes:

> The grand achievement of civil rights was to purge the law of its references to specific kinds of bodies, thus enabling racial equality before the law. But at the same time this process enabled racial inequality in the sense that the law was deprived of its capacity to acknowledge people as being racialized, as coming from racialized communities. Because the person that stands before the law is an abstract, rights-bearing subject, the law is unable to apprehend the unjust social realities in which many people live (Davis 93).

How then are we to place what Marsalis is up to here in the context of other thinkers about contemporary black social realities or in the context of general political debates in the United States? The critiques mounted here by Marsalis are hard to pin down and place on the political spectrum, on our right and left wings, on our now-ubiquitous map of red and blue states. In some sense, it is very simply a conservative critique, a critique that looks

at the contemporary situation and laments that society has been degraded and encourages us to hold on to what we still retain from the values of the past. Similar to black conservatives Shelby Steele and John McWhorter, both of whom use their status as respected intellectuals (Steele as a senior fellow at the Hoover Institution and McWhorter as a professor of linguistics and senior fellow at the Manhattan Institute) to gain an audience for their critiques of contemporary African-American culture, Marsalis has used his prestige as a well-known jazz musician and head of Jazz at Lincoln Center to issue negative proclamations about hip-hop's musical characteristics and cultural stance. Marsalis's critiques also echo those of Bill Cosby, whose decades as a beloved actor and comedian may have been overshadowed by his recent harsh attacks on the black lower class. Michael Eric Dyson describes Cosby as a member of the "Afristocracy," a group he defines as being made up of "upper-middle-class blacks and the black elite who rain down fire and brimstone upon poor blacks for their deviance and pathology, and for their lack of couth and culture" (xiii–xiv). On this album and throughout his career, this definition would apply equally well to Marsalis. Indeed, Marsalis does Cosby one better, proclaiming, "I was speaking out about it long before Bill Cosby" on the cover of the April 2007 issue of *Jazz Times*, an issue which came out right as *From the Plantation to the Penitentiary* was being released. It makes sense that many of these contemporary attacks on the black lower class have persistently targeted musical expression for, as Ramsey argues:

> Public activities like entertainment (especially musical performance) have historically constituted an arena of diligent moral surveillance. . . . Historically, the black middle class has leveled the most sustained (but by no means exclusive) critique of black expressive culture in this regard. It sought for much of the twentieth century to shape and reshape the broader American public's images of African American people and their cultural practices. (44)

Significantly, the conservative tone of *From the Plantation to the Penitentiary* differentiates it from earlier jazz protest albums such as Max Roach's *Freedom Now Suite* and Don Byron's *Nu Blaxploitation*, albums which decried racism and can be seen as attacks on the dominant power structure in unambiguous terms. But at times, Marsalis is deeply skeptical of conservatism, at least as it manifests itself today in the Republican party. "It all can't be blamed on the party of Lincoln," he raps in "Where Y'All

At?" Yet later in the song, he includes a critique of the handling of the "war on terror" by the Bush administration: "We runnin' all over the world with a blunderbuss/And the Constitution all but forgot in the fuss." And while the lyrics seem to support tenets of supply-side economics ("Taxes, that's your real inalienable right," he raps), it would also be incredibly difficult for Marsalis, a native of New Orleans, not to criticize the Bush administration and its bungling of Hurricane Katrina.[16] However, Marsalis is certainly no liberal, either. While addressing feminists, Marsalis raps: "I guess you'd pimp your daughters if you had your druthers," and, earlier in the track, he expresses his dissatisfaction with the leadership of "60s radicals and world beaters/Righteous revolutionaries and Camus readers/Liberal students and equal rights pleaders"—in other words, people like Angela Davis.

I would like to suggest that Marsalis's politics as presented in *From the Plantation to the Penitentiary* and throughout his career are not best described in the usual Manichean sense that sees left and right, red states and blue states, conservative and liberal as antithetically opposed to each other. Both of these ideologies, at least as manifested in contemporary American political discourse, still admit to otherness and difference. Indeed, however much they might disagree philosophically, liberals and conservatives both use difference and otherness as key elements of their political and rhetorical strategies. In the increasingly polarized political climate of the United States and in the "Us vs. Them" rhetoric that characterized much political debate after the 9/11 attacks, Marsalis and his listeners are perhaps all too aware of difference and otherness. But in Marsalis's vision, our varied ethnic, religious, and political differences dissolve in the face of our shared humanity and our shared acknowledgement of aesthetic genius that transcends boundaries of race, time, and genre: genius that is, as is said of Duke Ellington, "beyond category." Marsalis, throughout his career and in *From the Plantation to the Penitentiary* in particular, presents us with an attractive world, no doubt, but it would be all the more livable if only we could stop the rattle of our ceiling from that damned racket of otherness and difference, pounding from the subwoofers of the neighbors upstairs.

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Notes

1. That jazz musicians function as public intellectuals has received its most extensive discussion in Eric Porter's *What Is This Thing Called Jazz? African American Musicians as Artists, Critics, and Activists*.

2. The album was also extensively reviewed in the media. See, for example, Chinen, Francis, Davis, Garelick, and Reich. For a perceptive review of this album by an academic, see Givan.

3. For a classic example of Marsalis passionately articulating his ideas about music and society in an interview, see Zabor and Gambarini.

4. See Porter: 287–334.

5. Another example of Marsalis using his music to express specific social or political ideas might be his 1985 album *Black Codes (From the Underground)*. However, unlike *Blood on the Fields* or *From the Plantation to the Penitentiary*, *Black Codes (From the Underground)* is an entirely instrumental album, and the social and political relevance of the album has to be read mostly from the liner notes by Stanley Crouch and the quotations from Marsalis they contain.

6. Several critics have mentioned that Marsalis's denunciation of materialism in "Supercapitalism" is a bit hypocritical. The new Jazz at Lincoln Center complex sits atop a mall of high-end shops, and Marsalis himself is featured in advertisements for pricey Movado watches.

7. There is also an obvious relationship between the words and music of the track "Love and Broken Hearts." The lyrics state, "It's time for the return of romance/It's time for you and me to slow dance," and the music obliges with a suitable accompaniment.

8. For example, Marsalis's books *Sweet Swing Blues on the Road*, *Letters to a Young Jazz Musician*, *Jazz in the Bittersweet Blues of Life*, and *Moving to a Higher Ground* all contain passages critical of hip-hop.

9. One of the benefits of Rose's focus on the specific 1970s origins of hip-hop is that it draws our attention to the key presence of Jamaican immigrants and Latinos—in addition to African Americans—in the New York community that produced hip-hop. For more on this topic, see Rivera and Chang.

10. Key sources for the musical and social thoughts of Crouch, Murray, and Ellison include: Crouch (2006), Murray (1970, 1976, 1996) and Ellison (2001).

11. These early twentieth century debates over the place of black music have been much discussed in scholarly literature, see especially Floyd and Anderson.

These debates also receive coverage in more general discussions of the period by Ann Douglas and David Levering Lewis.

12. In fact, books by Murray (*The Hero and the Blues*) and Crouch (*Considering Genius: Writings on Jazz*) engage this set of ideas even in their titles.

13. See Janet Wolff's essay "The Ideology of Autonomous Art" and Scott Burnham's *Beethoven Hero* for further discussion of how this ideology works in European classical music.

14. On the topic of localism in hip-hop, see Rose's insistence (quoted above) on grounding rap in the specific context of postindustrial New York and Murray Forman's *The 'Hood Comes First: Race, Space, and Place in Rap and Hip-Hop*.

15. Indeed, Marsalis and company have walked a fine line, attempting to balance their universalist rhetoric about the power, importance, and relevance of jazz with a rather strictly defined male African-American exceptionalism—particularly in their programming and hiring decisions for Jazz at Lincoln Center, which have been criticized by a number of white critics, avant garde musicians, and feminist writers (see Pellegrinelli).

16. On this topic, it is certainly unlikely that Jessica Benjamin's usage of Dick Cheney and former FEMA director Michael Brown as the basis for her painting "Politician" (reproduced in the album liner notes) is meant to evoke positive connotations.

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