

## Revealing Race, History and Identity in Music: Reggaeton, Jazz, Disco, Gospel and Opera

### Panelists:

- ❖ **Zaire Dinzey-Flores (Sociology, Rutgers-NB)**
- ❖ **Alice Echols (American Studies, Rutgers-NB)**
- ❖ **Mark A. Miller (Practice of Sacred Music, Drew University/Yale University)**
- ❖ **Nancy Yunhwa Rao (Music Theory, Mason Gross School of Art, Rutgers-NB)**

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*How are racial and ethnic identities revealed in musical forms and traditions? At a spring CRE roundtable, music scholars and practitioners convened to assess the role of musical forms in developing identity and community-- and to explore how music might offer a unique space for facilitating communication among otherwise polarized racial and ethnic groups. Discussing forms as diverse as Reggaeton, Disco, Chinese Opera and Gospel, panelists demonstrated how the trajectories of musical genres are tied to specific cultural or ethnic communities and often emerge as a subversion of dominant cultural forms. In addition to launching a lively conversation, panelists shared examples of musical renditions representative of their research, thus allowing participants to immerse themselves in the sonority of their scholarship.*

#### **THE CONVERGENCE OF CULTURE IN SOUND**

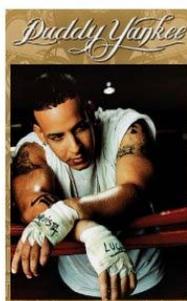
Although the genres of music discussed by the panelists originated at different moments in time, they could all be described as products of converging cultures. Gospel music, which combines indigenous African rhythms and Protestant hymn, arose against the backdrop of early North American slavery; while reggaeton--a blending of Latin rhythms with Jamaican dancehall music--emerged out of the barrios of Puerto Rico in the 1980s. Even a musical form such as disco is a hybrid one, growing out of the sonic experimentation of R&B producers and musicians, which were then appropriated by producers around the globe, a complex circuitry that made disco the true "world music." In Alice Echols's words, "disco hijacked sixties soul music, which had prized spontaneity and grittiness, and transformed it into symphonic soul music where the premium was upon sophistication." Challenging our assumptions about what constituted modern American music, Nancy Rao discussed how the Chinese Opera form influenced modern American composers. Rao spoke in particular of how in the 1920s, Chinese opera contributed to San Francisco's unique "sonic bank," or wealth of diverse sonorities and musical traditions. By reminding us of the complex origins of these

musical forms, panelists invited us to go beyond thinking about these genres in purist terms.

#### **SONIC SPACES: FROM THE BARRIO TO THE THEATER**

How does space impact the development of musical forms? Speaking of the globally popular genre of reggaeton, Zaire Dinzey-Flores identified three spaces that were sites of emergence and also prominent themes within reggaeton music: the barrio, the discotheque and the street. The barrio is a space that concurrently allows for the legitimization and stigmatization of reggaetonaros, for it promotes a

within reggaeton songs, for it identifies the performer as a sincere and authentic community representative. Dinzey-Flores remarked that where images of public housing in Puerto Rico were hitherto rarely discussed-- except in the news where they were likely to be pathologized-- reggaetonaros have forever changed popular understandings of life in the Puerto Rican barrio. These performers have, in effect, become "political ambassadors" for their communities.



sense of pride and belonging while at the same time positioning them in a subculture colored by the oppression of poverty and violence. The discotheque, meanwhile, is treated as not merely a space for partying, but also as potentially empowering, allowing reggaetonaros to escape the confinements associated with being poor and black. Finally, the street figures prominently



*Zaire Dinzey-Flores, assistant professor of sociology, Rutgers-NB*



*Nancy Rao, Professor of Music Theory, Mason Gross School of the Arts, Rutgers-NB*

While space is crucial to the development of musical forms, particular spaces associated with musical forms can also get racialized or treated as “other.” Nancy Rao noted that, in the early twentieth century, Chinese opera theaters were vibrant spaces in cities like New York, San Francisco and Vancouver; however, they were often “orientalized” and considered ethnic enclaves without much impact on the majority culture. Countering this orientalizing, Rao showed how these theaters played an important part in producing the “cultural fusion” that so characterizes U.S. urban landscapes.

Space might be considered not just physical but also temporal and historical. While gospel music found its voice and meaning in the context of the oppressive institution of slavery, disco was animated by the Civil Rights movement



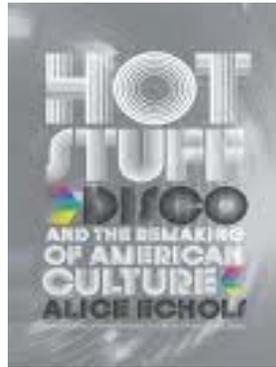
Alice Echols, *American Studies*, Rutgers-NB

that preceded it. As Echols noted, disco artists like Barry White, products of the Civil Rights movement, were not merely creating a sound. Rather, their musical work was part of a broader refusal to accede to prevailing social stereotypes and was therefore crucial in shaping a dialogue about social change in America.

### MUSICAL RECEPTION AND CRITICISM

Each of the panelists discussed how standards of judgment dominate musical reception and criticism, often in detrimental ways. Disco’s aural moves—its refusal to sound like so much sixties

soul music—were made possible through the black freedom movement. Indeed, some of its artists, including Chaka Khan and Nile Rodgers of Chic, had been involved with the Panthers. Its refusal to cede sophistication and elegance to Euro-American artists was in itself a transgressive move, and one that provoked heated discussions about what constitutes “soul.”



*Hot Stuff: Disco and the Remaking of American Culture*, by Alice Echols, published in April 2010.

Reggaeton was also met with resistance in Puerto Rico, where it represented an underbelly of Puerto Rican life. According to Zaire Dinzey-Flores, “there was a lot of pressure to stop reggaeton,” and it was dismissed as superficial, vacuous, or as lacking in social consciousness. As opposed to those who dismiss reggaeton in this manner, Dinzey-Flores’s work explores how this music is a vital form of expression for many growing up in Puerto Rico’s barrios and how it in fact shares many affinities with the socially conscious Rap music of the 1980s. As she suggested, the harshly criticized flashy or “bling-bling aesthetic” of the male reggaetoneros can be seen not only as reflective of their reaction to the experience of social marginalization but also as something that allows these young men to rearticulate their identities as powerful.

Rao and Mark A. Miller (Drew University) also challenged the ways that European and other cultural traditions are treated as somehow separate and impenetrable. While Miller wrestled with traditional conceptions of gospel music via his attempts to fuse Bach and Gospel, Rao questioned the tendency to treat American musical history as predominantly an extension of a European tradition, with East Asian musical influences being seen as merely marginal.

### MUSIC AND SOCIAL CHANGE: KNOWING THE OTHER THROUGH MUSIC

“Music gives us tools to resist oppression,” noted Miller. According to Miller, the history of African American church music is a form of resistance as well as a way to assert claims to joy in a climate of oppression. Further, Miller also pointed out that music has the ability to forge community and to bring together disparate groups, thereby disrupting rigid constructions of identity. “The other is not the other; we can know one another through music,” he noted.

Both Miller and Echols emphasized the significance of embodied aspects of musical performance for enacting social change. In a powerful personal biography, Miller described how his experience of learning and performing gospel music compelled him to learn how to embody the music. Raised with an early love of Bach and the pipe organ, Miller came to gospel music relatively late in his musical training, which required him to discover how to “let go.” Echols similarly contends that with disco we see a concrete example of something that musicologists such as Susan McClary and Simon Frith have long argued, that “music socializes us and teaches us about our bodies and our desires. Music not only reflects change, but also enacts change.” In order to realize this capacity of music to enact social change and bridge

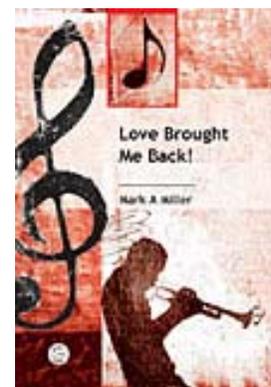
cultural divides, however, we need to be wary of how musical judgment can often compartmentalize musical traditions and treat some genres as “other.” Instead, we need to learn, as Rao put it, to take on the perspective of the other and then complicate this other “from within.”

### CONCLUSION

Through the course of this soulful and spirited discussion—one that combined both speech and music—panelists revealed the many ways in which racial and ethnic histories and identities influence and are influenced by musical expression. While music can give voice to, and shape the identities of, racialized or ethnic communities, it can also bring together people from across communities and thereby challenge the formation of stereotypes and rigid social categorizations. To truly realize and embrace the radical potential of music would mean retraining our bodies so that we can listen to the unfamiliar and practice letting go.



Mark A. Miller, composer and lecturer in the *Practice of Sacred Music*, Yale University and Drew University



*Love Brought Me Back*, a gospel composition by Mark A. Miller

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- Identifying critical areas for future research and supporting race and ethnicity research and policy development.

